

What Is the Matter with Studying Irregular Migration?

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ARTICLE

Introduction

Research on irregular migration is fraught with methodological constraints and ethical dilemmas. For example, how are researchers expected to generate statistics and trends when the very act of irregular migration is clandestine in nature? Or how can we ensure that our findings will not be misused or misrepresented by third parties, thereby jeopardizing the safety of migrants? Of course, irregular migration research is more than merely an intellectual undertaking but an essential tool to push for policy change that will help alleviate the suffering of the all-too-often exploited irregular migrant. However, researchers must simultaneously balance the value of advancing knowledge against the value of non-interference in the lives of others.

Following this theme, the objective of the article is to highlight such methodological and ethical challenges by drawing upon lessons learned from a study conducted on smuggling and trafficking via irregular border crossings in the Middle East. After a brief background on the field study, the article will review the main methodological challenges faced by the research team as well as the ethical issues that arose during and after the publication of the research findings.

Background: How do Smuggling and Trafficking Operate?

The field research was conducted in order to identify the main trends, issues, actors and activities regarding the operation of human trafficking and smuggling via irregular border crossings in the Middle East by using evidence from fieldwork conducted in Turkey. Acknowledging the sensitivity and complexity of the issue, the research aimed to provide a partial explanation of the intricate terrain of trafficking and smuggling by presenting the very first primary, reliable, and representative narratives from traffickers and smugglers themselves.

After fieldwork and interviews over a five-year period, the study identified seven interconnected and sometimes overlapping categories of smugglers:

1. Local initiating smuggler: organizes the departure of irregular migrants from their localities and takes them from the previous smuggler and hands them over to another one in order to facilitate the illegal border crossing.

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2. Cashier: as an entrusted person, receives and pays out money between the migrants and smugglers in the smuggling operation.
3. Guide: knows the region or the borders very well and accompanies the migrants following the agreement between the smuggler and the migrant.
4. Local transiting smuggler: takes the migrants from the border areas in the transit country and moves them to the departure areas in the transit country.
5. Middleman: takes the migrants from the person who brought them to the departure point to the next smuggler in the chain (usually landman, shipman or airman) who arranges the final trip to the point of destination.
6. Landman, shipman or airman: arranges the irregular border crossings, sea or air passages, and organizes the port from which the migrants will depart and for the bribing of port employees at the point of exit.
7. Other intermediaries, handymen, and other helpers: involved in diverse activities, help all other smugglers and perform secondary roles in human smuggling but not included in the above-mentioned categories.

The results of the study confirmed that the nature of trafficking and smuggling in the Middle East is quite different from similar activities found elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of interpersonal trust relations between traffickers, smugglers and migrants, relying on the existence of national, ethnic, kinship and friendship-based networks spanning countries of origin, transit and destination.

Methodological Problems and Solutions in Studying Irregular Migration in Europe²

The absence of reliable data is inextricably related to the challenges and difficulties of conducting research on irregular migration. In Turkey, in addition to the scarcity of accurate quantitative data owing to the fact that irregular migrants operate incognito, there are also political repercussions of presenting numbers that government officials deem “too high”. As such, statistics on irregular migration in Turkey are not truly representative of the reality on the ground.

Similarly, in a press statement the European Commission claimed that “precise figures” on the size of irregular migration are “difficult to obtain, but recent estimates of illegal migrants in the EU range between 4.5 million and 8 million, with an estimated increase of 350,000 to 500,000 per year.”³ In fact, one of the statistics is just a quotation from an old newspaper article that was quoted and re-quoted until it was called a “recent estimate.”

2. For a comprehensive account of “Methodological Problems and Solutions in Studying Irregular Migration in Europe”, see Final Report Summary - CLANDESTINO (Irregular Migration: Counting the Uncountable. Data and Trends Across Europe), http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/49621_en.html

3. EU Press Statement (IP/07/678 16 May 2007), “Towards a Comprehensive European Migration Policy: Cracking down on employment of illegal immigrants and fostering circular migration and mobility partnerships”. Accessed at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-07-678_en.html

In reality, therefore, all irregular migration researchers begin with a handicap of trying to shed light on a group of people who operate – at times quite literally – in the dark. However, the truth is social scientists can do much better than just recounting a statistic. Although estimates of the size of irregular populations may never reach the degree of accuracy on par with regular populations, there are a variety of methods to estimate the size and structures of irregular migration. However, when reviewing the literature on quality criteria in social research, it became evident that the general criteria of transparent documentation, validity and reliability are non-existent when estimating the size of irregular migrant populations. In fact, very few studies on irregular migration fulfil elementary academic standards. The following categorization into quality classes seeks to capture the key differences between estimates of different quality:

- *High quality* estimates are serious, comprehensive and consistent scientific studies;
- *Medium quality* estimates are well-documented, comprehensive and empirically-founded efforts, even if relying on poor data and/or not fully adequate methods;
- *Low quality* estimates circulate numbers without source and explanation; or are estimates in which quantitatively relevant information on empirical foundations is missing; or are estimates based on clearly inadequate methods or method applications.
- *Low quality* estimates/serious doubts are problematic because the numbers are likely to be misleading.

Main Findings Regarding the Ethical Issues at Stake When Studying Irregular Migration⁴

At the onset of any research, it is essential to select appropriate methods to ensure transparency and accountability that produces data of the highest quality. This implies that qualitative and quantitative data should be double-checked and verified by researchers for accuracy, validity and reliability whilst respecting professionalism and quality standards.

To date, there are no specialized codes of practice or research ethics for those who study irregular migration. Therefore, as part of the project CLANDESTINO *Undocumented Migration: Counting the Uncountable*, researchers prepared the *Ethical Issues in Irregular Migration Research* report, which set out to identify the ethical issues in the qualitative and quantitative research of irregular migration and provide ethical guidelines. The report illustrated a number of varying ethical concerns that may arise from irregular migration research; for example, the implication of the research for participants and the risks involved for the researchers themselves. However, most notably, the report highlights the important ethical issues that arise from the use of research results and their overall dissemination.

As researching irregular migration is somewhat similar to the study of criminology as irregular migrants are involved to varying degrees in unlawful behaviour, it is important to ask whom the

4. For a comprehensive explanation of the “Ethical Issues in Studying Irregular Migration”, see Final Report Summary - CLANDESTINO (Irregular Migration: Counting the Uncountable. Data and Trends Across Europe), http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/49621_en.html

research findings will ultimately benefit. For example, will information on border crossing points be used by law enforcement officials to increase operations in those areas? Or alternatively, will research results be negatively used by the media to further stigmatize irregular migrants? This touches upon the notion that irregular migration research is sensitive and irregular migrants are vulnerable by nature. Sensitivity signifies the potential consequences or implications, either directly for the research subjects or for the research group as a whole (meso-level). While vulnerability is a feature mainly of the research subjects (micro-level) referring to people who are stigmatized, have low social status, very little power or control over their lives, and who live under damaging legal, social or institutional regimes.

As such, research on irregular migration must be conducted and disseminated in a way that prevents enforcement agencies from identifying the whereabouts of individuals or collectives of irregular immigrants. Research must also avoid disclosing information that facilitates enforcement agencies' planning and operations. A useful practice may be to cross-check findings by involving both irregular immigrants and enforcement agencies in the research to verify what is already known. Information which is already known to enforcement agencies can often be disclosed without violating research ethics but the release of new data must go through an ethical review, assessing the potential for harm versus the benefit that these findings will bring.

Research ethics is not free of political bias. Research always has a political dimension and researchers touching on such sensitive issues as irregular migration should openly acknowledge this possibility of having a potential bias. They should be as explicit and as aware as possible of their own views and preferences, acknowledging the fact that their bias will inevitably seep into their research. Researchers also need to always discuss the ethical implications of their research methods, strategies, questions and findings in order to properly justify their choices. What our report shows is that answers are often not clear-cut and there can be no blanket ethical standard applied to all studies or empirical research projects. Researchers must apply their critical spirit and use (or develop) ethical codes to assess the ethical questions involved in their work and take informed decisions safeguarding their subjects' wellbeing (psychological, physical and social) and their own integrity, taking into account the priorities and interests of their funding organizations (ethical implications need to be examined prior to approval of a project by a specific funding organization). Detailed explanations and justification of ethical issues are not necessary in standard reports or scientific journal articles but should certainly be included in the overall documentation of a research project (and/or in a book length publication) and of course should also find their way into the academic literature that focuses on research methods and ethics.