

Bridging the 'Evidence' Divide? Critical Reflections on Arts and Social Sciences Interventions in Global Migration Research

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Introduction: The Global Migration Conversations

In recent years, large-scale forced migration movements globally, coupled with a poorly managed and increasingly militarized response by receiving states to respond effectively to mixed migration flows, has reinvigorated calls for more and better ‘evidence’ on the drivers, dynamics and impacts of migration. While there is healthy skepticism about the ways in which evidence – and big data – is used to monitor, manage and control refugees, there is also consensus that evidence should inform and influence policy and practice to bring about positive results that could help facilitate safe and constructive decisions about migration, inform more positive experiences of movement, and lead to the creation of viable alternatives for those who cannot or prefer not to move.

Yet, questions as to what constitutes evidence, and whose evidence should count, must continue to be addressed. This is vital given an increasingly crowded field populated by diverse stakeholders ranging from multi-disciplinary academics to third sector practitioners, policy makers, citizens and refugees, and a broad range of methods and types of data capture which speak to different audiences and/or make competing claims. Of interest is the apparent lack of connection between the more experiential evidence produced through the arts and cultural sectors (such as films, storytelling, poetic interventions), and quantitative and qualitative approaches derived from the social sciences (quantitative data, oral histories, ethnographies, etc.) which are potentially more likely to underpin policy.

This report presents insights from scholars and artists regarding the relationship between the arts and social sciences interventions in refugee studies and migration research. It derives from an interactive panel discussion which took place in Thessaloniki as part of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM)’s biannual conference on 26th July 2018. The Thessaloniki workshop was one of a series of thematic Global Migration Conversations that are being held in 2018 and 2019 in locations including Nairobi, Delhi, New York, London, Beirut and Brussels. They are organised by the London International Development Centre Migration Leadership Team (LIDC-MLT), a team of researchers that has been formed to develop a shared strategy for funding and supporting migration research by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

The Global Migration Conversations adopt an inclusive, consultative approach to assessing the scope, achievements and challenges of the existing portfolio of migration research to identify strategic opportunities and priorities for further research and to highlight best practice in impact.¹ The observations provided in this report thus do not seek to be exhaustive, but rather to identify some key themes which will feed into a broader ‘global’ migration research agenda. The full outputs of this process will be published in 2019. This report aims to stimulate ongoing discussions among participants and to feed into future Migration Conversations.

¹ For more information on the team and its methodology and to join the conversation, see the project website (www.soas.ac.uk/lidc-mlt).

The Thessaloniki workshop convened by the LIDC-MLT, involved four panellists representing the artistic and academic communities. It brought together twenty researchers and artists, working across the global north and south. As it was organised under the auspices of the IASFM, the conversation was focused on forced displacement rather than on migration more broadly.

Drawing on data gathered during this and previous events, this report highlights thematic and practical avenues for future mapping, research, public engagement and impact in relation to the arts and social sciences in migration research. The events took place under Chatham House rules. As such, all references are generalised.

The Problem of Using Art as ‘Evidence’?

It is important to recognise that there are different types of evidence and the ways in which they are valued are inherently political. For example, evidence generated by the Home Office on detentions and removals is given much more importance and credence than any qualitative in-depth study that researchers do. Art can be seen as a process of bearing witness and documenting experience for advocacy and other purposes. As such, art can migrate images and voices to places where individuals cannot travel.

This was the case, for example, in the work of a South Asian-based photographer at our Delhi Conversation who had travelled substantially and often put himself at great risk to document atrocities committed against the Rohingya. The recent exhibition of Dorothea Lange which is now travelling the world is another example of how photography and art can stand the test of time and travel to tell stories in places across space and time.

However using art as evidence in research can come with various problems. Unlike researchers, artists do not tend to use the term ‘evidence’, commented one participant in the Thessaloniki Conversation, explaining that ‘it is too solid and definite while also implying commodification and manipulation.’

Moreover, often researchers fetishize the creation of new ‘evidence’ instead of using information that already exists in artistic forms such as in the historic poetry tradition in Afghanistan which documents experiences of mobility and migration.

‘We go out and ask the same people who have already expressed themselves in their own way, to express themselves in our way.’

– Migration scholar

A further problem with seeing art as ‘evidence’ is that someone has already set the question. As one participant articulated it, ‘they’re expecting information in a certain format, not for you to reframe the question’. In this context, panelists questioned the very idea of ‘evidence’, asking whether research was more about processes, relationships, and the ‘interface of how people from different backgrounds relate’. Co-production and co-learning

may offer ways of working across the arts and social sciences rather than trying to 'bridge' a constructed divide.

But how, participants questioned, can we take this discussion of problematizing evidence into 'evidence-based policy' making circles? They expressed hope that the MLT could facilitate spaces to have these conversations with quantitative scholars, economists and even statisticians, since migration is a broad interdisciplinary field and 'big data' can lead to artistic outputs too. Participants reflected on how we might use big data and maps to create new forms of art that visually showcase quantitative and qualitative research.

Art Capturing Absence and Silence

Silence and absence often speak much louder than presence and voice, but this raises the question of how these are evidenced. Sometimes, in situations of forced migration, the 'evidence' is the absence itself. Examples were given of artists who used objects to recreate a sense of absence due to the loss of victims of genocide. We heard of a Bosnian artist who is constructing a moveable monument where she goes to different cities and asks Bosnian diaspora to donate coffee cups where each signifies a victim of the genocide who is missing. Another example is the Budapest Memorial where shoes are left to enable an imagination of loss and horror. Everyone can relate to this, refugee or not, as everyone has lost someone. In this context, art has the potential to provide what one panellist called 'symbolic evidence'.

Another panellist stressed that we also need to be conscious to respect that some people will choose not to speak (see below).

'The idea of giving refugees or any research participants a voice is a very contested one. If you are a researcher, creating questions, writing the paper, taking pictures, then you are shaping that voice, not giving the voice. Art has the potential not to give voice but to develop collaborations between researchers and artists, for example photos or creating a play. The moment you declare that you are 'giving a voice' you've taken people's voice away...'

— Artist

Art as a Practice

Art is commonly seen in migration research as an output rather than part of the research process and practice in itself. Art can nevertheless be understood as a means of 'making meaning' or of 'undoing' hegemonic meanings which are related to refugee and migrant livelihoods. The arts are fundamentally linked to craft, cultural preservation and (gendered) livelihoods among many migrant populations. A range of examples were given from the regional South Asia and Horn of Africa conversations including the example of textile art as craft used by an Afghan woman's cooperative in Delhi as a means of cultural preservation but also as an opportunity for supporting livelihoods. Seeing art as a practice has relevance for other practices relating to food, languages and psychology (for example considerations of intergenerational memory).

By looking at art more holistically across the research cycle, researchers might move towards a more nuanced understanding of the drivers and consequences of migration, as well as the journeys in, and of, themselves. Art is fundamentally connected to the question of mobility and movement. Often artists themselves are individuals ‘on the margins’.

Artistic Integrity and Independence

Participants agreed that it was important to identify the opportunities for bridging the divide between the types of evidence produced by those in the arts and cultural disciplines and evidence created by social scientists and legal theorists. However, independence was also stressed as important and it was pointed out that there was a real risk of tokenism in engaging the arts in research, or of collaboration ‘for the sake of it’ with no discernable added value. ‘The arts are a different way of seeing the world and a different approach, not an add-on’, stressed one academic with experience of research collaborations with artists.

There is a tension between migration researchers’ quest to seek answers to questions and art’s fundamental role to unsettle assumptions. ‘We need to be careful’, stressed one participant, ‘not to contaminate artists or to compromise their practice.’ The artist is often a public intellectual who needs to maintain their space, as do academic researchers. Yet, academic researchers and artists have different types of methodologies which may come into conflict. Several participants from past events have, however, shown their ability to work as both artists and scholars.

‘Arts as data do not fit pre-determined research questions.’

– Migration scholar

Sufficient and sustainable funding and respect for artists from the global south is fundamental, stressed one participant, because as it stands, ‘we use different standards for people who are on the move. No one is investing money for artists to produce high quality work, or investing in creating the correct space.’ Artists need training to access support funds and to learn how to display their work. One participant gave the example of how at one academic event, a dancer was asked to perform at lunch amongst tables where people were eating in a way that caused her much offence. ‘Why did the artist not have a concentrated slot in the programme like the scholars?’ she stressed.

Mobility is important for artists and for the circulation of ideas. Indeed, artists like researchers need opportunities to travel and to come together. Institutional settings such as universities provide important incubation spaces for artists and training in research methods which can be useful for their work. However, these need to be properly funded. There is an element of risk in making art about the topic of migration, which is increasingly politicised. Art travels more easily across borders than people, and the impacts of this can have significant resonance over time in producing countries. Refugee artists, such as political satirists consulted in the Nairobi and Delhi conversations, may face a specific risk of persecution and need suitable opportunities for sanctuary abroad. Collaborations with

universities provide a chance for artists to move outside of their area and develop their practice. An example is the ‘artists at risk’ programme (similar to ‘academics at risk’ programmes) which provide safe haven and support for individuals who are forced to leave their homes. Ethics must be rigorously applied to protect research participants engaged in artistic outputs related to research, as with other forms of data.

‘People who come from our background, we recognise each other... we put it to good use.’

– Self-defined ‘refugee artist and scholar’

The Therapeutic Value of Art

Artists often focus on self-identity and self-healing. In this context, art can be related to health and wellbeing and can have significant therapeutic benefits for migrants and refugees who have experienced difficulties associated with forced displacement, including trauma and loss. Participants pointed out that researchers should be wary of extractive models of research which seek to extricate information from research participants via artistic means without paying due attention to the related psycho-social impacts of arts-based interventions. Inter-disciplinary teams such as social scientists working alongside artists and art psychologists, can be valuable in interpreting artistic evidence.

It was stressed that art does not have to be political but can also be about preservation and celebration, including of the everyday. One artist from the Democratic Republic of Congo at the Nairobi Conversation explained that while sometimes he painted political commissions, he did not want to be defined as a ‘refugee artist’. Some of his art depicts natural scenes from the Virunga national park whence he came. ‘When there is war even the animals flee, so in this sense the art is political’, he explained. However, he also explained that he wants to depict the images to pass them on as heritage, and that painting is part of his ‘healing’.

Art and Public Engagement

‘In a context where quantifiable evidence is drawn on by authorities/policy, we know that the arts and particularly visual art connects with people in ways other evidence doesn’t, precisely because it taps into something emotional and is a relationship. Facts don’t get you to that point. It is also about a broadened audience – the arts create spaces to mobilise people.’

– Migration scholar

How can we promote the bridging between arts and social science-based evidence to different audiences? Visual outputs are often more successful in engaging audiences about migration research and evidence, including students, members of the general public and politicians and policy makers. Much can be learnt from south-south collaborations in the

arts where there is a strong tradition of storytelling through visual and oral media with much cross-over, for example, in Afghanistan and Somalia.

Scholars have integrated visual materials into their teaching but more could be done to link up migration studies programmes with public intuitions engaged with the arts such as museums and art galleries. When seen as a form of public engagement (for example, a comic showing the main findings of a research project) the arts should be seen as integral to the research as a whole and properly resourced rather than being ‘tacked on’ to the end of a research project ‘to tick the box of public engagement or impact’. Such involvement is costly. Often funders do not make sufficient resources available for such collaboration and artists are often expected to provide their services for free in a way that makes their work unsustainable.

Archiving

Participants reflected on how much and what types of evidence can become lost, and with what impacts? Where research data is visual in nature, the question is raised as to where it is stored and archived. Given that research reports are increasingly deposited online, what is the role for museums and universities in curating art as evidence in relation to migration? Participants felt that more could be done to archive and curate visual evidence related to migration historically. Collaboration between universities, museums and artists and migrant groups is important for this purpose. Scholars who receive grants from the ESRC are encouraged to deposit their data online. A similar online and/or physical repository is important for artistic evidence and outputs.

The Arts as New Ways of Thinking and Theorizing Mobility

The arts are by their nature connected to questions of philosophy. The arts can therefore be harnessed to help us think about new ways of theorizing mobility. Narratives are often the product of art, stressed another participant, and these are ‘a process not an end result’.

‘Over the last 10 years we’ve been increasingly funnelled into this idea of producing “evidence” in a linear fashion, leading to “impact” – the arts unsettle this idea.’

– Migration scholar

The arts and humanities can help us to reach beyond the noise of everyday politics and draw out broader themes in a non-linear way. They are in this sense important to the process of decentering the debate from hegemonic policy discourses. They present opportunities to engage disciplines such as history and philosophy as well as visual and auditory arts. There is also a role here for normative debate and political philosophy which is difficult in an area which is becoming increasingly politicized.

In a field wrought by bureaucratic labels and discourses of irregularity, art allows us to think beyond the constraints and limitations of semantic divisions and legalistic and policy

discourse divides in migration studies. Through images, we may notice similarities for example between the shelter needs of IDPs and refugees in ways that legalistic bureaucratic labels do not. Art, in the words on one panelist, 'makes fluid that which is stable'. One participant raised the point: if we are producing all these categories at the discipline level (e.g. types of anthropology, social sciences), how does that fit when we are simultaneously trying to undo these categories at the refugee level?

Migrant 'Voice' and Identity

Migrants and refugees are both objects and subjects of research and there are long debates about the ability of subaltern voices to make themselves heard. This in turn has drawn attention to the need to also listen to silences (see above). Art allows us to depict the imagination but also to communicate risks. Art is about becoming but also processes of 'unbecoming', stressed one participant.

Certain participants discussed their positionality as refugee artists and scholars with various identities which they negotiated in different ways. One expressed the view that they felt it impossible to 'bridge the gap' between arts and social sciences because 'I can't, in my own self, see myself as a scholar and an artist.' Another explained that they felt comfortable with this dual identity but that society divided them. 'In our work we always ask people how they define themselves, instead of assuming, as an interaction of respect' stressed one participant.

'When am I a refugee, when am I an artist and when am I a scholar and when am I refugee artist and scholar and who gets to decide which I am in what space? There are many people who are resisting this label, who don't want to be associated with the category because of shame.'

-Self-defined 'refugee artist and scholar'

Information relating to refugees is collected and presented in a range of formats by a range of actors, from films and poems to oral histories and numeric data. The increased emphasis on giving refugees a 'voice' in research concerning them raises several issues for authenticity and ethics. Participants were especially wary of extractive models of research. As one panelist cautioned, 'You can only have "voice" if someone hears and wants to engage on your own terms. Not what a policy maker or researcher wants to hear...' One researcher raised the possibilities of doing a podcast as a way to keep people anonymised, but still get voices out. 'Voice' requires the creation of spaces of listening and audiences as well as summoning the voice itself. Museums and universities are both important spaces for listening.

One participant spoke of the experiences of black artists in Europe who framed their engagement as 'reclaiming our voice'. 'We need to look at other groups reclaiming their presence in society and we need to create connections with these other existing groups', stressed the participant: 'refugees are a particular project, but there are many other projects that are like this.' In drawing attention to the experiences of certain individuals, we must be careful as researchers not to obscure other, less powerful or less visible voices.

‘Refugee art is identity work’, commented one participant, stressing that ‘refugee art’ could connect to an emotion of rootlessness that did not necessarily have to be art by refugees.

Localization

Artistic interventions in research should respect the movement towards ‘localizing’ research stressed one panelist – that is drawing on the heritage and resources of host communities as well as challenging hegemonic global ideas about migration and the arts that have stemmed primarily from the global north. An example given concerned the role of miniatures in transmitting and communicating messages in certain South Asian countries such as Afghanistan.

This raises the question of who owns local knowledge and where the locus of power is situated. Collaborators should ensure that they consider traditions of all concerned communities. One participant explained that the following two quotes guide their work with indigenous Canadian artists: ‘Nothing about us without us’ and ‘always aside or behind, never in front’.

‘We need to be allies and supporters but not leaders.’
-Migration scholar

Perhaps, in this context, said one participant, we should see ourselves as ‘collectors’ of research and not ‘authors’. Collectives, like artistic schools or ‘movements’ are important in this context. But academia is too often caught up with the question of authorship and authority.

Conclusion

This report has presented the key debates emerging from the panel discussion exploring the relationship between the arts and social sciences in migration and forced displacement research. While a range of issues were discussed, there was consensus that art provides a powerful insight into how mobility is experienced, understood and theorized. Interdisciplinary collaborations between social scientists and the arts present vital opportunities for co-learning.