Suspicious Minds and Unwelcome Researchers: Obstacles Encountered When Researching Forced Return in Sweden

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Guest post by Daniela DeBono, Sofia Rönnqvist, and Karin Magnusson, research fellows at Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare, Sweden. In this post, Daniela, Karin, and Sofia address the challenges they faced while conducting field research for the project Migrants’ Experiences of Involuntary Return, funded by the European Return Fund. This post is the second instalment of the Border Criminologies Themed Week on Research Methodologies, organised by Prof Mary Bosworth.

Forced return in Sweden is characterized by heavy politicization, systemic fragmentation and is shrouded in a veil of securitization. Forced return is both an organized activity, with different state and non-state authorities involved, and an activity that seeks to end a relationship of responsibility between the state and the non-citizen. The forced return migration process is generally not conceptualised as a comprehensive process by policy-makers or practitioners but rather as a loosely linked series of activities that eventually lead to the return of the migrant. This is possibly due to the disparate institutional actors involved. For migrants however, the actual “end threat” of removal to their country of origin is very real and hangs like a dark shadow on their existence for as long as they hold temporary permits of residence. This dark shadow of deportation takes on new and tangible proportions through the institutional forms and practices that migrants, who have either failed their application for asylum or who have no other lawful permit to remain in the country, encounter. Our project attempts to start filling a knowledge gap by exploring migrants’ own experiences of this particular forced return process conceptualised as a social, cultural and political phenomenon. Access and contact with migrants is therefore of utmost importance to our project.
The original plan at the start of this 18-month project was to first obtain access to one or more of Sweden’s five immigration detention centres where we would spend time, through regular visits, with migrants at risk of deportation. This would have enabled regular contact with migrants since we were aware that meeting migrants at risk of deportation out in the community would be very difficult. Indeed, as our own study came to confirm, in Sweden migrants at risk of deportation out in the community are difficult to identify since they (understandably) do not share widely their legal status, partly to avoid stigma, but mostly because it increases their precariousness in various settings. We now know that migrants, particularly those who do not opt for voluntary return, take time or even refuse to consider the real eventuality of return, and therefore would also not identify themselves as potential deportees.

The second part of our original strategy was to seek the collaboration of entities who are regularly in touch with migrants at risk of deportation—institutional entities such as the police, non-governmental organisations who offer services to migrants, including those at risk of deportation, and activist organisations whom migrants contact for help usually as a last resort. This strategy would have neatly given us several points of access and contact with migrants, it would have allowed us to carry ethnographic research in various settings and sites, and would therefore have made it possible for us to capture elements and patterns in migrants’ experiences of forced return.

However, neat strategies on paper seldom work out as planned in irregular migrant settings, and ours was no exception. As a research group, and based on our previous experiences in conducting research with migrants, we expected challenges but thought we were well-prepared. We had spent time discussing alternative strategies, and possible problems that could arise from institutions who fear scrutiny. So how did we end up in a situation, which could possibly only be described as “internalized stalemate”? In other words, why did we—the researchers—ended up in a situation where we felt immobilized, afraid to take initiative and under attack from every angle? What was the cause of our troubles? And how could we minimize the impact that these struggles are bound to have on the research that we were conducting, and on the production of knowledge?

The simplest answer to the above questions is that we, both as researchers and persons, were
often caught in crossfire(s). The highly politicized nature of the field, broadly understood as the various institutions, service/providers and NGOs, meant that we were questioned and subject to scrutiny ourselves not just as researchers but also from a moral aspect, as persons. The field is imbued with front lines. One of the most apparent is the contrasting ideologies. For example, authorities like the Border Police and the Migration Board (responsible for running detention centres) have very little in common with activist networks. Differences in ideology, morality and political tendencies were evidenced in the use of different terminology. As researchers one of our first hurdles was to learn how to navigate these different language/terminology-groups in an attempt of not being labelled. At a later stage we were familiar enough with the different terminologies to use them intentionally.

Surprisingly although the entities we encountered in the beginning of our project were of a very different nature, we were often met with similar responses. For example, many times our phone calls and e-mails were met with silence and no replies. We found it hard to interpret the lack of communication: was it due to lack of time, or did they simply not want to be in touch with us, and if so, why was this? Persistence is one of the sacred traits of researchers. But when we did manage to get in touch we often found that the interactions were imbued with suspicion and distrust, at times leading to sudden changes in their attitudes, which we found hard to understand. A classical example was when we established what we thought was a clear contact and an uncomplicated interaction, with one of the gatekeeper institutions, which would enable us to obtain regular contact with migrants. The tables turned very quickly when someone in the institution requested our original research plan. We were then denied access for “having too many faults and unclarities in our research plan.” The communication with us was stopped and the institution contacted the funding agency with the complaints. Complaints which were ambiguous and far from clear to say the least. Various attempts were made by us and by the funding agency (which is also a government entity) to try to get to the bottom of this, in a genuine bid to understand the problem. After several unsuccessful efforts to establish dialogue over a period of a six week period we decided to drop it.

Another example of being met with distrust and suspicion came from the NGO side, where we had some prior contacts and had established, again what we thought was, a good relationship. In fact we were invited to spend time in their facilities, which migrants use to relax and to get in touch with the NGO for help. In this case we were wrongly accused of omitting information about were the funding was coming from. The European Return Fund is linked to the EU Return Directive and this civil organisation had a strong ideological position against both. Accusations flew high and low. Our morality and integrity as researchers and persons were put into question. Attempts to break through this impasse left us in a state of frustration, despair and confusion. It seemed impossible
for anyone to understand that we genuinely wanted to understand how migrants experience the forced return process. We did not have ulterior political motives and did not want to align ourselves with any of the actors. Irrespective of this we were constantly labelled, re-labelled, positioned and repositioned by the different actors themselves. The common motive, or least outcome of this, was that we were excluded from the field and contact with migrants was made directly or indirectly extremely difficult.

Rays of light kept us going in the difficult periods. We had a few contacts, often individual and undercover, who were extremely helpful. Slowly new doors opened here and there as people of different affiliations and institutions agreed to help us in significant ways. Although to be honest, it was and still is, quite hard to really understand why some contacts worked and others did not. A possible explanation in our attempts to understand and make sense of our interactions with different gatekeepers or middlemen are Bourdieu’s concepts of the ‘field’ and ‘symbolic capital.’ This field of activity of deportation is clearly not heterogeneous, and practices that are connected to different fields (bureaucracies such as the police and the Migration Board, activist groups, voluntary organisations) have their own separate rules of access and power structures. The researcher thus requires different symbolic capital to gain trust and legitimacy in these different fields. From this point of view, although this of course is only a part explanation of what was going on, we, the three researchers, lacked enough symbolic capital in these different gatekeeping fields to enable us to access them.

We are aware that our frustration is coming from trying to establish contact or fruitful interaction with gatekeepers, when the people we really wanted to meet, the migrants, were ironically the easiest to speak to. Reaching the migrants meant that we needed to change our original strategy. We worked hard with the principle of “the strength of weak ties” made popular by several anthropologists and social network analysts, and we spent time outside places that accommodate migrants at risk of deportation and circulated information posters about the project. Needless to say, trying to map the field and getting in touch with migrants was an extremely time consuming, tedious and gruelling business. In itself however, and this is where methodological self-reflexivity for the researcher turned out to be critical for our project, we did gain a lot of insights about the institutional and political forces that shape this field. We also understood that, when doing research in a field like this, the way researchers are perceived by others may have little to do what they actually say or do, and that researchers may have few or no real means to control this process.

**Themed Week on Research Methodologies:**

- **Monday:** *Thinking and Talking about Research Methodologies: Why Should we Bother?* (M. Bosworth)
• **Tuesday:** Suspicious Minds and Unwelcome Researchers: Obstacles Encountered When Researching Forced Return in Sweden (D. DeBono, S. Rönnqvist, and K. Magnusson)

• **Wednesday:** Helping Ourselves to Deal with the Pain of Others: Secondary Traumatization Syndrome and Vicarious Traumatization (S. Weiss-Dagan)

• **Thursday:** Is it Ethical to Carry Keys for Research in Immigration Detention Centres? (S. Turnbull)

• **Friday:** Oh the Pains, Frustrations, and Dilemmas of Field Research! If Only We Could Share Them… (I. Hasselberg)

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