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Ethical Issues in Irregular Migration Research in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Irregular migration attracts considerable political attention and ranks high on national and international policy agendas. Initially, irregular migration in Europe was considered somewhat obscure, but this has changed rapidly now that a growing number of (sometimes policy-driven) studies have been conducted, and numerous papers, articles and books have been published that address irregular migration (e.g. Düvell, 2006). Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge there are as yet no specialised codes of practice or research ethics for those who research irregular migration. This paper considers the ethical issues arising in qualitative and quantitative research and in the processes of disseminating research findings. It draws on the CLANDESTINO research project, funded by the Sixth Framework Programme of the European Commission,1 and also on various qualitative and quantitative research projects conducted by the authors between 1998 and 2009 in the UK, Italy, Greece, Ukraine, Turkey and Germany (see for instance: Triandafyllidou, 2001, 2006; Jordan and Düvell, 2002; Düvell, 2006). In the course of these projects several hundred interviews and surveys were conducted with irregular migrants as well as with other stakeholders (non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public services, enforcement agencies, etc.). The subsequent dissemination of findings amongst academic audiences and other user groups will also be analysed alongside the primary research on which this paper is based.
The paper separately addresses the two main areas of ethical concern in research on irregular migration: firstly, the ethical issues arising during empirical research; and secondly, the use, misuse and dissemination of qualitative and quantitative data. Our focus is on the ethical issues arising when conducting and disseminating research that has irregular migrants as its research subjects. Other social and political actors (including government authorities, employers, migrant organisations, support groups and human smugglers) are considered here only peripherally. Moreover, this paper goes beyond scholarly inquiry and aims to be a tool that can guide future researchers when making their own ethical decisions.

IRREGULAR MIGRATION, RESEARCH

METHODS AND ETHICS

Various approaches have been used to research irregular migration, including face-to-face in-depth interviews (e.g. Jordan and Düvell, 2002; Alt, 2003; Mainwaring, 2010); anonymous questionnaires (e.g. Chiuri et al., 2004); analysis of secondary data including quantitative enforcement agencies’ records (e.g. Jandl, 2007) or police or court interrogation records (Pastore et al., 2006; Neske, 2007); and qualitative interviews with experts or others possessing knowledge (e.g. Bilger et al., 2006). In general, qualitative interviews and participant observation usually produce highly personal and confidential data, and quantitative research data on travelling, living and working patterns (including nodal points of irregular immigration). Police data and interrogation records contain personalised data, and expert interviews may produce detailed quantitative or qualitative data or they may simply reveal migrants’ general perceptions and beliefs.

Each of these approaches presents its own ethical challenges.

Research has been defined as ‘any form of disciplined inquiry that aims to contribute to a body of knowledge or theory’, and research ethics as the ‘moral principles guiding research, from its inception through to completion and publication of results and . . . the curation of data’ (ESRC, 2005: 20). Research ethics is a process of making decisions that are informed from a specific ethical position (Dench et al., 2004). When referring to the investigation of irregular migrants, it has been argued that ‘the prosecutor shares a central cognitive aim with the researchers’ (Pastore et al., 2006: 99). We reject this view and argue that scientific research is fundamentally different from police investigations, both in terms of the different kinds of information sought and the ethics that guide the work of researchers.

One fundamental ethical question is whether irregular migration should in fact be researched at all (Düvell, 1998). Some academics believe that quantitative research on this topic is ‘too problematic and potentially unethical’, leading only to ‘number crunching’ and ‘number games’ (Van Dijk, 1996; Weber, 1998). Black (2003: 45) argues that research questions such as asking how ‘migrants/asylum seekers move when controls are tight’ are problematic because results can ‘serve state interests in clamping down’. In contrast, Sieber and Stanley (1988: 55) suggest that not researching social phenomena and ‘shying away from controversial topics, simply because they are controversial, is an avoidance of responsibility’. Similarly, Humphreys (1970: 173) believes that ‘ignoring the problems of discriminated groups by not researching them adds more to the discrimination than not to investigating’ their problems and, furthermore, research that aims to help overcome ‘superstition and atrocities that characterise previous responses to a certain group, behaviour or phenomenon should be conducted’. Participants of various workshops and conferences that the authors have attended under the auspices of the CLANDESTINO research project and other projects have suggested that quantitative research does serve a purpose because society should be aware of the size of its population as this has implications both for the urgency of the problem of irregular migration and for the solutions that need discussing.

In our various projects, the main ethical question to arise is whether the potential social benefits from research outweigh the potential social harms. To further this question, we tried to identify potential unintended negative consequences and the risks and benefits for all stakeholders, as well as anticipating the potential use of the research, and how to take appropriate precautions against possible misuse of the findings. Thus the aim of our research has not been just to produce a ‘body of knowledge’ but to address the misperceptions and misconceptions surrounding
irregular migration, and to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits, firstly for the researched group and, secondly, for other stakeholders (see Dench et al., 2004: 17–18). We concluded that our professional responsibilities lie in researching irregular migration and informing society about the phenomenon in a manner that does not contribute to discrimination against these groups but, instead, improves understanding.

Research on irregular migration is rarely explained or justified. More commonly, it seems to be taken for granted and we include some of our own previous work within this criticism. Researchers rarely discuss where they should draw ethical lines, in direct contrast (for instance) to medical research where such issues are keenly debated. Exceptions to this can be found in the work of Black (2003), who examined the types of bias in the research of irregular migration that should be avoided; in PICUM (2002) on social work with irregular immigrants; and in Jacobsen and Landau (2003) and Hopkins (2008), all of whom were researching refugees.

The second main ethical issue to consider at the outset is the selection of appropriate methods to ensure that research is transparent, accountable and produces data of the highest quality. This implies that qualitative and quantitative data should be double-checked and verified by researchers for both validity and reliability and that researchers must respect ‘professionalism’ and ‘quality standards’ such as those outlined by the American Statistical Association (1999). The accuracy and validity of qualitative and, in particular, quantitative data, can be difficult to verify, mostly due to a lack of data sources, especially given the non-registered character of the phenomenon.

RISKS, SENSITIVITY AND VULNERABILITY IN IRREGULAR MIGRATION RESEARCH

Any research on human beings carries certain risks for the research subjects (ESRC, 2005). These are identified as:

‘(a) potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress to human participants that a research project might generate or, (b) risk to a subject’s personal social standing, privacy, personal values and beliefs, their links to family and the wider community, and their position within occupational settings, as well as the adverse effects of revealing information that relates to illegal […] or deviant behaviour.

Research which carries no physical risk can be disruptive and damaging to research subjects either as individuals or as whole communities or categories of people.’ (ESRC, 2005: 22)

Furthermore, the ESRC explains that risks of social science research are specific and could be framed as both social risks and those that might generate psychological/physical stress. Research that generally might be considered as involving more than minimal risk includes: research involving vulnerable groups (e.g. ‘individuals in a dependent or unequal relationship’); sensitive topics (e.g. ‘participants’ illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, …or their gender or ethnic status’); groups where a gatekeeper is normally required for initial access (e.g. ‘ethnic or cultural groups’); ‘deception or which is conducted without participants’ full and informed consent’; and in particular, research involving ‘access to records of personal or confidential information … concerning identifiable individuals’ ESRC, 2005: 8–9).

There may also be risks to the researchers resulting from interacting with criminal environments and people in traumatic circumstances. For this reason, Düvell, in his ongoing research on irregular transit migration in Ukraine, avoided discovering or publishing detailed criminal practices, which may have proved important for criminal or journalistic investigations, but were not relevant to explaining the social processes and extent of irregular migration. Similarly, Black (2003: 47) suggests that less emphasis should be placed on describing the how of certain aspects of illegal migration, (routes, costs, contacts, etc.) and that researchers should instead consider why irregular immigrants act in the way that they do (motivations and decision-making processes, options, etc.). Ultimately, however, it is the research subjects who decide what can be researched. In the field, we have often found that irregular migrants refuse to be interviewed or even give misleading answers.

Sensitivity and vulnerability are notions that are crucial for understanding and addressing the ethical questions in social science research and, in particular, in research on irregular migration.
Sensitivity generally refers to the area of research (meso level) while vulnerability is a feature mainly of the research subjects (micro level). Both these concepts and the related concerns are inherently interlinked; therefore, a two-level assessment of the risks in each area is required. Sieber and Stanley (1988: 49) suggest that ‘studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research’, must be considered sensitive. Furthermore, according to Johnson and Clarke (2003: 422), any ‘direct contact with vulnerable people, with whom sensitive and difficult topics are often raised and sometimes raised within difficult contexts’ presents a high degree of sensitivity.

Thus fieldwork that includes interviews, participant observation or personal data in any respect, is considered to be highly sensitive in nature. Renzetti and Lee (1993) explain that sensitive topics are those that seem either threatening, or contain some risk to research subjects, for example, because such research involves potential costs and problems for participants. Lee (1993: 4) further elaborates that sensitive research potentially exposes stigmatising or incriminating information and can cause pain and harm to individuals who are already experiencing oppression. Such research may also be related to politicised issues that are controversial or can even cause social conflict.

Gibson (1996) expands the discussion to consider sensitivity issues that relate to public opinion and the political context of a study. The term ‘vulnerable people’ is used to refer 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 (Clements et al., 1999: 104). They are at risk from various more powerful members of their peer group or other social groups, sometimes from authorities and enforcement agencies, and the scientific community, and may suffer from violations of human rights. The subjects of research on irregular migration meet all these criteria and must therefore be considered sensitive and potentially vulnerable.

The major principles of social research ethics are that any research keeps the potential risk or harm of research in sensitive topics and on vulnerable groups to a minimum for participants and others who are affected by the research (ESRC, 2005: 3), and that the welfare and rights of social groups are protected (Lee, 1993). This implies that some level of risk can be legitimate. Research may be ‘deliberately and legitimately opposed to the interests of the research subjects in cases where the objectives of the research are to reveal and critique fundamental economic, political or cultural disadvantage, or exploitation. Much social science research has a critical role to play in exploring and questioning social, cultural, and economic structures and processes […] and institutional dynamics and regimes that disadvantage some social groups over others.’ (ESRC, 2005: 22)

In the case of irregular migrants such risks include scapegoating, denunciation by subjects’ peer group or wider society and enforcement actions. For example, researching the informalisation of subcontracted cleaning companies working in the public sector may mean revealing that certain cleaners lack an appropriate immigration status (Maroukis, 2008). As well as exposing individuals to stigmatisation and incrimination, the company may fear exposure and may even fire these workers. In this case participant observation was done covertly without the consent of any party and interviews were conducted in complete privacy in order to avoid these risks (Maroukis, 2008).

The Thematic and Cultural Sensitivity of Irregular Migration Research

Fieldwork on irregular migrants involves individuals who are violating the law and attempts to elicit information on their mode of travel, employment, residence and access to public and private services. The networks of the subjects may also touch upon wider criminal structures, including human smuggling, facilitating irregular entry/stay and corruption. Even if such research aims at better understanding of the mechanisms and processes of irregular migration, it inevitably risks being intrusive and interrogative. Since irregular migration is often interwoven with rights violations, research activities might put participants at risk (Beyrer and Kass, 2002). The researcher is commonly faced with people suffering harsh living and working conditions and who are afraid of exposure and victimisation.
conditions, and this may well raise ethical dilemmas such as the researcher’s own emotional engagement and, potentially, even the need to intervene.

Moreover, if some research findings become known to enforcement agencies this could have far-reaching consequences for irregular migrants. Research can discover places and employers, patterns and strategies that could inform enforcement operations. Information produced during research on immigration potentially involves risks for the research subjects. Thus, in our own research the ethical concerns we faced were related to the fact that the research could easily harm its subjects and that ‘social knowledge’ might be translated into ‘investigative knowledge’ (O’Hara and O’Hara, 1994).

Our experiences from research into irregular migrant workers suggest that enforcement agencies are often aware of irregular entry, stay or employment strategies of migrants, but have their own priorities as to what to target or indeed to tacitly tolerate (Düvell and Jordan, 2003; Jordan et al., 2003; Düvell, 2006). In our various projects, however, we have sometimes discovered new patterns of irregular migrant activities or have otherwise been positions where the information we produced could have led to a change in the priorities of enforcement agencies. In these circumstances it is important to consider carefully whether the knowledge produced could be of immediate use to enforcement agencies and, if this is the case, to take action to minimise these risks.

A related set of issues arises from the cooperation of researchers with other actors (Vogel, 1999). Often, researchers request NGOs or state agencies to broker access to interviewees or to gain access to official data. In the case of our various research projects, in order to obtain consent from these agencies we had to respect their position. This does not necessarily mean that we contributed to their agendas; rather we remained independent and pursued our own aim, which is namely the production of academic knowledge.

Finally, it should be noted that researchers are often members of an ethnically or socially privileged group, and thus when researching issues related to irregular migration, cultural sensitivity is of paramount importance. In cases such as these, Sieber (1992) argues that: ‘Cultural sensitivity has . . . to do with respect, shared decision-making and effective communication. Too often, researchers ignore the values, the life-style and the cognitive and affective world of the subjects. They impose their own, perhaps in an attempt to reform people whose culture they would like to eradicate, or perhaps simply out of ignorance about the subjects’ reality.’

He suggests that researchers should first learn about their research subjects’ lifestyles, beliefs and values and how to communicate in ways that the individuals understand (Sieber, 1992). From this it follows that issues of respect and trust are crucial in establishing a relationship between researcher and participants. In a study conducted by Kosic and Triandafyllidou (2003), a Polish research assistant was employed to conduct qualitative interviews with undocumented Polish migrants in Italy working as live-in maids in private households. The researcher was able to recruit informants in public meeting spaces such as squares and bus stations, and she took time to establish a friendly relationship with them, creating trust so that they felt they could speak openly with her about their lives and their contact with the authorities (public administration and the police). The researcher invested considerable time in approaching the subjects’ lived realities, and achieved a high level of empathy, which meant she could accomplish the fieldwork in the best possible way and ensure that the informants felt respected and appreciated.

It is also important to keep in touch with the range of opinions circulating in the community about a given study. These may include views about the researcher’s motives and the risks or benefits of participating. Conducting interviews, for instance, in an inner city area of Athens where a large number of refused asylum seekers and irregular migrants have settled in recent years, gave rise to suspicion and fear among research participants. It also carried the potential to increase tensions as some long-term (citizen) residents of the neighbourhood felt that ‘their’ neighbourhood was ‘under siege’ by the ‘newcomers’ (Maroukis, 2008). The response by the researchers was to approach the fieldwork with caution, in order to create trust and avoid raising tensions. Thus while researchers may openly express their views on certain issues (e.g. the increasing
numbers of refused asylum seekers sleeping rough and/or renting substandard accommodation in inner city areas, they may also need to keep an independent stance, without getting involved in local tensions.

The Vulnerability of Irregular Migrants

Vulnerability may be defined as a person’s susceptibility to physical or emotional harm; it denotes inadequate means or ability to protect oneself from external influence. Moore and Miller (1999: 1034) define vulnerable people as being those who ‘lack the ability to make personal life choices, to make personal decisions to maintain independence, and to self-determine’. Others (such as Birman, 2005) point explicitly to the vulnerability of groups of people stemming from their legal status – as is the case for irregular migrants. Subjects of research can be vulnerable both as individuals and as a group. Vulnerable individuals and groups are broadly understood as those who are exposed to greater risks because of certain characteristics. In this context vulnerability is understood as the possibility that participation in research may cause the participants some harm, e.g. by virtue of factors such as age, social status or powerlessness (British Society of Criminology, 2006). The vulnerability of irregular immigrants has multiple facets: if their irregular status is identified (by accident, in course of a police operation or through denunciation) they may be apprehended and/or be subject to persecution (for example, they may be fined, issued with a deportation order, imprisoned or even removed). Research may identify workplaces, NGOs or street corners where irregular migrants gather. The disclosure of such information can increase the vulnerability of irregular migrants as a group.

While irregular migrants live in a variety of conditions and some may live in relatively comfortable, secure and happy circumstances (Jordan and Düvell, 2002) and even with an organised communal voice (e.g. Daskalopoulou and Nodaros, 2008), they may also live in conditions of sheer poverty (Anderson, 1999; Alt, 2003), which are exacerbated by the fact that in most European countries irregular migrants have minimal legal and social rights (Gibney, 2000; Cohen, 2003; PICUM, 2003). Thus they have limited access to assistance from social or political institutions in the host society and it is sometimes nearly impossible for them to join or form civil society organisations.

The insecure situation in which irregular migrants live can lead to chronic stress and anxiety. This is sometimes reinforced by experiences of traumatising journeys and maltreatment (including sexual harassment) by human smugglers, police or others (Goodman, 2004), Exacerbating these problems is the fact that the perceived authority of a researcher can sometimes have an intimidating effect.

Finally, there are some more subtle forms of vulnerability that characterise irregular migrants. Interviewees may be illiterate in their own language and/or that of the host country, limiting their ability to follow public debates, understand the media discourses and assess the risks involved in the research that concerns them. Consequently this can further limit their ability to make informed decisions (Cooper et al., 2004).

The Risks for the Researcher

Researchers can potentially be exposed to harm resulting from the nature of their research subject, and this may make them vulnerable to conflict and distress (Davison, 2004). Researchers of irregular migration often enter a shadowy area where they can be confronted with criminal activities, organised crime and health risks. Those involved in criminal activities – human smugglers, illegal agents and corrupt officials (for example) – can try to stop the researcher from pursuing the study either through warnings or even by force. For example, in Ukraine, Düvell received a discreet warning from the secret service and, for his own security, decided to interrupt his fieldwork and kept a low profile for a while. Furthermore, female and sometimes even male research assistants may be approached with marriage offers. In our case we assessed the risks via in-depth discussions between supervisors and assistants. In particular, we were concerned whether the assistant was overconfident or too risk-tolerant. In these cases, strategies were discussed and precautions taken to prevent the researchers from being exposed to difficult situations. As supervisors we had to be prepared to advise researchers to withdraw if necessary, even if this meant jeopardising the research. In practice, such withdrawal never proved necessary.
We discussed what to do should enforcement agencies approach us demanding enforcement-relevant information. Social science researchers, unlike (for example) medical personnel have no right to refuse witness statements. However, the authors are not aware of any such cases having occurred, and would caution against undue alarm here.

Unpopular or controversial research can have a negative impact on the reputation and career prospects of the researcher. We know of specific cases in which researchers were put under considerable pressure from funding and research-commissioning agencies to change or adapt their conclusions to fit with the political agenda of these bodies. Senior researchers or those in secure positions were able to reject this, but early career researchers or those depending on external research sometimes gave in to such pressure.

ETHICS AT WORK

The fieldwork on irregular migration is one of the most sensitive aspects of the research process as it brings the researcher into direct contact with irregular migrants and their environment. The first challenge lies in identifying where to find irregular migrants and, because migration status has no visible marker, how to identify irregular members. This is a particular challenge if the principle researcher or the assistant do not share certain characteristics with the researched group, or have no intimate knowledge of them and thus may require the use of gatekeepers, experts or key people in the community. To gain access to the research subject group from such gatekeepers trust is critical. As well as convincing the gatekeeper that the study is of no harm to the researched group, sometimes the researcher must go further and demonstrate how the study can be of positive benefit to the researched group. If the gatekeeper is prepared to recommend the researchers, he or she must go back to potential interviewees for their consent before passing on names or making arrangements for a meeting.

Once meetings were agreed, they took place in public areas (for example on a park bench or in a café), in semi-public places (such as a shelter, an NGO or a faith organisation) or a private place (such as the home of the researcher or the interviewee). When the researchers met informants in public or sheltered spaces the interviewees were afterwards able to leave the place of the interview safely. Sometimes, however, researchers were invited to the homes of irregular migrants. This had certain advantages as the informant seemed to feel more comfortable at home and an intimate atmosphere often allowed for an open conversation. However, once the address of an irregular migrant became known this meant that the informant could not easily return to anonymity and also researchers had to consider the potential risks for themselves. This not only demonstrated a high level of trust for the interviewer, it also placed considerable responsibility on them.

Equally relevant is the issue of the type of information that was requested by the researcher and given by the informant. Ideally, the terms of the interview are agreed in advance (see below) and the researcher explains that for the purpose of an academic study no personalised data is relevant, and thus names, addresses or specific locations and dates shall be omitted. In an open, in-depth conversation, informants can disclose names and places or very detailed violations of the law that may well not be relevant to the study. In such instances we usually intervene and explain that this information is not relevant to the study or that it is too sensitive. However, sometimes it is important not to disrupt the flow of the conversation. Thus, as part of our ethical responsibilities, such data was either not recorded or was deleted afterwards.

The Ethical Dimension of Relationships Between Researcher and Irregular Migrant

Researchers and irregular migrants often enter into a complex and unbalanced relationship. We have always aimed at relationships based on a humane approach and on respect. In most countries, irregular migrants are not represented in public and have very little legal or political power, though in some countries self-organisations and support campaigns have successfully challenged this. Irregular migrants will find it difficult to challenge (legally or politically) a researcher who at times may be violating ethical principles or trust or even misrepresenting them. The irregular migrants nevertheless do hold a position of key influence in the research context, namely the ability to decide whether to tell their story and participate in the research or whether...
to refuse to do so. At the same time the interviewees can potentially misinterpret the role of the researcher and believe that researchers can positively influence their situation because they are ‘powerful’.

Another set of issues lies in the level of trust emerging from this encounter and the consequences that this has for both parties. After an interview, an informant may wonder whether the information is actually in safe hands and can consequently experience a period of stress. At the same time, the researcher can sometimes discover information that emotionally distresses them.

We have experienced occasions when the informant wanted to continue the relationship in the hope that the researcher could do something to improve their situation. In general, we felt that we should do whatever was possible to live up to such expectations if such expectations were considered reciprocal and fair and as long as they were not immoral, illegal or disproportionate. Deciding in advance the kind of reciprocity we would consider ethical in our relationship with informants made our position much more tenable.

For example, if the interviewee asked for advice, or to be recommended a lawyer or psychosocial support, we responded. However, no help was offered in finding employment. Sometimes irregular migrants seemed to use such requests as tests to establish whether the researcher understood the ethics of such interactions and whether he or she was a good-hearted and helpful person. In one instance, a destitute single mother in Turkey who received no support from NGOs asked the researcher for help. The researcher bought her necessities, both for his/her own peace of mind and as a basic humanitarian gesture. This considerably changed the position of the researcher who became engaged in welfare/social work. Whilst there were obvious limits to what a researcher could do, leaving an interviewee completely unsupported was simply not an option. Being prepared for such dilemmas, seeking support from trained social workers and striking the balance between research and humanitarian relief became a crucial part of our fieldwork.

Informed Consent

Any research into human beings and human actions takes as a basic principle respect for the moral autonomy of each human being and the subject’s right to make autonomous decisions (Faden and Beauchamp, 1986). Consequently, we have always explained our projects as comprehensively as possible including details such as funding institutions, research methods and dissemination plans, the basis of the interaction, the ground rules and potential risks and benefits, so that the individual could make a voluntary and informed decision about their participation. This principle is known as informed consent (IC) (see Christian, 2005) and normally requires a written or verbal agreement with research subjects.

It is accepted that under certain conditions, (for example, observing a crowd) IC is impracticable (ESRC, 2005: 21). More particularly with reference to irregular migration, written consent, as foreseen by some guidelines (e.g. CUREC, 2008) can contradict the principle of irregular and undocumented strategies. In certain circumstances it can create unnecessary risks for the research subjects, and even provoke the interviewee to use false names or withdraw from the research. We ourselves have never asked for written IC. We have never lied to interviewees and nor have we concealed certain aspects of our projects in order to obtain consent. Finally, we have always made it clear that the interviewee has the right not to take part, not to answer certain questions and to withdraw from the interview altogether.

Sometimes, research assistants may be hired from the same ethnic, cultural, linguistic or gender group as the research subjects. This can create a point of contact and facilitate relationships of trust and familiarity. Such a strategy can improve communication and go some way towards addressing the difference in power and status between interviewer and interviewee. Where we have used such approaches, the researcher in the field explained who they were working for (including the supervisor and institution), and in some cases the senior researcher introduced themselves to the interviewees to ensure there was no doubt about the principal researcher and the nature of the project.

Moving beyond these considerations we have often found that the research subjects can enjoy the interview, and appreciate being listened to, and indeed that interviews sometimes seemed to have a therapeutic effect. Some interviewees have expressed the hope that through the research...
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their voices would be heard, and that research would contribute to the design of solutions to their situation, thus giving the interview a political aspect.

THE ETHICS OF DISSEMINATION

Once a study is finished the next step may be the dissemination of its findings. Such dissemination can potentially reach a variety of audiences, including the scientific community, policymakers, state officials, international organisations, NGOs, the media and the wider public, as well as the research subjects themselves. Some social scientists may prefer not to attract too much media attention to avoid their work being trivialised or sensationalised (Roberts, 1984). On the other hand, institutes such as research centres are required to deal with stakeholders, including the media, in order to make their findings available. Dealing with these competing claims, like the research itself, requires ethical approaches.

It has been claimed that during the dissemination of research findings, it is vital to consider ‘how participants are portrayed’ (Clements et al., 1999: 112). Notably ‘the semantics of power structures’ (Luhmann, 1996) potentially reinforce the exclusion of certain groups, contribute to their stigmatisation and subsequently lead to their exclusion from the realm of moral subjects (Bauman, 1996). Consequently, there has been a demand for researchers to ‘avoid adding to the burden of stigma that vulnerable people bear’ (Clements et al. 1999: 112). In particular, the terminology used is an issue that particularly concerns researchers of irregular migration. Because reference to ‘illegal migrants’ can contribute to the criminalisation of this group and reinforce its stigmatisation, most researchers prefer expressions with less negative connotations, such as irregular and undocumented migrants (see Pinkerton et al., 2004: 1).

As researchers we recognise our responsibility to take an ethical position regarding both the content and timing of our dissemination. For example, we asked ourselves a number of questions such as: Should all or only some results be published? Who is the audience? How will our results be received and discussed at a given time period (in the light of related political and public debates) and how may they be (ab)used? The question also arose as to what extent we can control and influence the (ab)use of our findings. We also considered whether the usual time delay between research and the publication of findings meant that publication would not have an immediate effect on the research subjects, and their locations or businesses.

Qualitative research findings on irregular migration seem to receive comparatively little negative media attention and none of the authors have experienced this. Journalists sometimes conduct their own investigations to find ‘outrageous’ cases and headlines (e.g. ‘Illegal immigrant benefits industry – how this man milked the welfare system’, Daily Mail, 30.6.97; see Düvell, 1998). In contrast, the media and politicians usually seem eager to quote statistics and to quantify social phenomena. Statistics are considered to be hard and simple facts, with considerable symbolic power and they are often used as powerful tools in politics and policy. Therefore, quantitative research is more likely to receive media coverage. Consequently, if numbers are ‘abused, whether through malice or incompetence, genuine harm is done’ (Vardeman and Morris, 2003: 21).

Quantitative data on irregular migrants is particularly prone to abuse by media or politicians. For instance, the Greek Minister of Interior, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, stated in the Greek Parliament on 3 June 2008:

‘We had 112,000 illegal migrants in 2007. We have no cooperation from Turkey. I will accuse [Turkey] on Thursday [5 June 2008] when I go to Luxembourg [for the Justice and Home Affairs summit of EU Ministers] ( . . .) forgive me for the tone. Do not consider it hypocritical or emotional. It is the anxiety that I feel every night when they release all the slave ships at the coasts of Greece, without any control from Turkey, all these people that we have to take care of with respect to their rights and their life.’

The 112,000 irregular migrants mentioned actually refer to apprehensions of aliens for irregular entry or stay in Greece in 2007. Nearly half of these apprehensions took place in the interior of the country, away from the borders. In other words, it is unclear how many of those apprehended were new arrivals. Moreover, of those actually detected on the border, only 35,000 were detected at the Greek–Turkish border, and of

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those 35,000, less than 15,000 were arrested in the Aegean Sea. However, as the statement stands the figure of 112,000 people directly refers to the arrival of irregular migrants (and asylum seekers) on the coasts of the Greek islands in the Aegean. This is an interesting and probably typical example of how data on irregular migration can be misrepresented and misused by simply failing to specify exactly which group of migrants the statistics refer to.

The mass media or press demonise irregular migrants all too frequently with statistics (Greenslade, 2005). Unfortunately, little attention is paid to what the numbers actually represent, how they were produced, by whom and for what purpose. The number of ‘illegal migrants’ presented often conflates border apprehensions with entry refusals and irregular migrant apprehensions within a country’s territories. Statements noting an increase in irregular migration often refer to increases in border apprehensions and could simply reflect tougher enforcement. References to implausibly high figures usually have a certain purpose, for example to cause shock and fuel fear whilst calling for certain – and normally tough – policy responses.

These examples demonstrate the delicate environment in which we planned the dissemination of our work. Before publishing the CLANDESTINO project research findings, the consequences for national or regional discourses on irregular migration were considered; we then took precautions ‘against predictable misinterpretations or misuse’, as advised by the International Statistical Institute (1985). Operating in an environment in which the European Union declared combating irregular migration to be a top priority, we classified the use of bare numbers as verging on the politically dangerous. We decided to combine quantitative data and estimates on irregular migration with appropriate qualitative data that placed the numbers in a suitable context. The project database on irregular migration in Europe classifies the data on the size of irregular migration in each country into low, medium or high quality data estimates. The method used for the classification is documented and readily accessible to users (HWWI, 2009; see also: http://irregular-migration.hwwi.net/).

There are, however, limits to the extent to which we feel we can be held responsible for the risks and benefits of our research. Once the research is in the public domain its use or misuse falls under the specific ethical guidelines for the media, politicians and other user groups.

Taking a Stand?

As researchers engaged in studies on sensitive and politicised issues we often cannot avoid having a polarising effect. The nature of the topic can mean that researchers will be documenting appalling living conditions (Cabbot, 2008). Sometimes, our findings have been of such an explicit nature that it has proved difficult not to take sides and in such cases it has been suggested that researchers ‘should comment upon the [...] circumstances in which their “subjects” were living’ (Clements et al., 1999: 104). We often referred informants to NGOs or religious organisations and/or provided them with information and advice. To give another example, a colleague studying irregular migration in Athens realised that some conational acquaintances of their informants were involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activities. While opposing the biased views of enforcement agencies, the researcher also wanted to understand and explain how irregular migration was linked to such criminal activities. Thus, he had to rethink and expand the research agenda in the light of these interim findings.

Researchers, however, are not primarily advocates or social workers but academics, and they are subject to a set of complex responsibilities for high quality and ethical research. They have responsibilities towards their subjects, their profession, their funding bodies and society at large. In our case this meant we had to negotiate a balanced attitude between contrasting perspectives and opposing aims and interests. The authors of this paper are involved (to varying degrees) in advocacy activities and have adopted different strategies in striking a balance between their roles as researchers and as citizens. Triandafyllidou has decided to use her position as a researcher and university professor to disseminate her findings at conferences, policy forums and on television programmes in order to advocate policy changes. Düvell has decided to engage in advocacy in his capacity as a member of NGOs rather than as an academic. More generally, Oliver (1992) suggests that the relationship of researchers and the researched could be one of mutual respect, partnership and mutual advantage.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ethical issues in irregular migration research are manifold and so are the challenges in the field and in the dissemination of its findings. This paper reflects on and draws some lessons from our experiences. We have learned that answers are often not clear-cut and that there is no one-size-fits-all universal ethical standard. Although we found ethical guidelines useful, they were not sufficient and we would argue that the researcher’s own ethics weigh equally since decisions often have to be taken on a case-by-case basis. We learned that it was important to be able to justify why we were investigating a particular topic. While we assessed the ethical implications when designing and implementing our projects we could not always anticipate the issues that would emerge. Thus, we had to be flexible when new issues arose.

When planning our research projects we considered the potential risks for individual irregular migrants and kept these to a minimum (for example, through the issues we studied and the questions we asked, arranging for safe meeting places, anonymity and safe data storage, etc.). Consent was sought on this basis, though never in writing. The challenge was always to carry out our research whilst ensuring that the potential actual harm to interviewees was kept to a minimum. Precautions were taken to ensure that risks to researchers were also kept to a minimum, and that advance preparations had been made for a change of plans (for example, in location or time) if this would have been in the best interests of the researcher.

Irregular migration research often has a humanitarian dimension, thus we were sometimes drawn into social work and advocacy and had to prepare ourselves for such challenges. We also considered the potential consequences of our research results. The bottom line was that our research was conducted and disseminated in a way that meant enforcement agencies could not identify the whereabouts of individuals or groups of irregular migrants. We avoided disclosing information that would facilitate the planning and operations of enforcement agencies.

Irregular migration research inevitably touches upon sensitive issues and thus clearly has a political dimension. For dissemination purposes this means researchers must act in a morally responsible way, abstain from ideological statements and present results in a balanced and careful manner in order to avoid harming the subjects of research.

NOTES

(1) CLANDESTINO is a Research Project funded by the European Commission, DG Research, under Priority 8, Scientific Support to Policies, for the period 2007–2009. The project has provided an inventory of data and estimates on undocumented migration (stocks and flows) in selected European Union (EU) countries; has analysed these data comparatively; has discussed the ethical and methodological issues involved in the collection of data, the elaboration of estimates and their use; and lastly (but not least), has created a new method for evaluating and classifying data/estimates on undocumented migration in the EU. Twelve EU countries (Greece, Italy, France and Spain in southern Europe; Netherlands, UK, Germany and Austria in Western and Central Europe; Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic in Central Eastern Europe) and three non-EU transit migration countries (Turkey, Ukraine and Morocco) have been under study in this project. The findings of the project, including not only the Project Reports but also the CLANDESTINO database on irregular migration in Europe and the related Research Briefs, are available at http://eliamep.clandestino.gr.

(2) See research web site: Düvell F. At the fringes of Europe: Transit migration in Ukraine. Available at http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/research/dynamics/at-the-fringes-of-europe/.

(3) See note 2.

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