

# Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues

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Epistemological challenges of engaging humanities-led cross-disciplinary migration research issues

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on the methodological, conceptual and epistemological challenges of engaging in humanities-led cross-disciplinary research on migration. It elaborates on concrete examples as regards tackling migration as a domain that ignites a dialogue between very different disciplines such as sociology, narratology, media-studies, ICT, political science, social psychology, religious studies, economics, human rights, cultural heritage, museum studies, civil society organisations while using data available through research infrastructures, computational social science and digital humanities. As we know, migration accompanies the whole history of civilisations, involving continuous relations and exchanges among cultures, hence translations through different linguistic, economic, political and cultural contexts. Today, migration researchers are obviously using platforms of all kinds, however, they are also using established research infrastructures such as ESFRI landmarks, projects and high potential areas. If it is true there is to date no dedicated ESFRI project for migration, it is also true this makes it more interesting to see how to really engage in a dialogue between very different disciplines while avoiding just addressing a societal topic from different angles without creating truly integrated knowledge. Migration offers compelling examples for the impact of cultural innovation because it implies transfers of cultures, knowledge and competencies. The epistemological challenges related to humanities-led cross-disciplinary migration issues are based on the aim of contributing to a change in the mindset as regards a culture of inclusion and reflection in target groups active in social infrastructures such as education, life-long learning, healthcare, urban development and regeneration.

## Introduction

*This paper reflects on the methodological, conceptual and epistemological challenges of engaging in humanities-led cross-disciplinary research on migration issues. It elaborates on concrete examples as regards tackling migration as a domain that ignites a dialogue between very different disciplines such as sociology, narratology, media-studies, ICT, political science, social psychology, religious studies, economics, human rights, cultural heritage, museum studies, civil society organisations while using data available through research infrastructures, computational social science and digital humanities.*

Insisting on humanities-led reflexivity helps raising awareness for the importance of framing issues around engaging with science and society, identifying problems and defining solutions in terms of *social and cultural innovation* (ESFRI 2018, pp. 106-115). The notion of *social innovation* has evolved as the development of new products, processes, organizations or services that tackle unmet social needs and very often are developed through a bottom-up process by the prospective users and beneficiaries (Moulaert et al., 2017). *Cultural innovation* sounds like an oxymoron. It is not, though. It is something real that complements and enhances social and technological innovation. Items of cultural innovation are: content providers such as museums, science centres and libraries as well as processes triggered by issues such as cosmopolitanism, inclusiveness, mobility, migration, heritage and creativity (Pozzo and Virgili, 2017).

### **A cross-disciplinary approach in recognition of migration as integral to human civilization**

*Migration accompanies the whole history of civilisations, involving continuous relations and exchanges among cultures, hence translations through different linguistic, economic, political and cultural contexts.* In recent years, there has been a surge of humanities-led migration studies, beginning with genuine attempts at providing an overall philosophy of migration (Arendt, 1943; Agamben, 1979; Di Cesare, 2017), even specifically on Immanuel Kant on migration (Reinhardt, 2019), or specific contribution on the ethics and politics of migration (Wellman and Cole, 2012; Carens, 2014; Sager, 2016; Mendoza 2017), on space, place, border, and territory (Appadurai, 1996; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003; Moore, 2015; Nail, 2016), displacement and legal constraints (Penz et al., 2011; Pevnik, 2011) as well as on narratives of migration (White, 2014; Gomez-Estern, 2013; De Fina and Tseng, 2017).

The methodological approach we are looking into, however, is different from the one pursued in the studies quoted above which are all defined by disciplinary methodologies. The approach we are considering is cross-disciplinary and has been experimented during the now eleven-year lifetime of the *CNR-Migration Project*, which goes back to 2008, when the National Research Council of Italy proposed it for adoption by the twenty institutes of the CNR-DSU (2019), the *Dipartimento Scienze Umane e*



*Sociali, Patrimonio Culturale*. The project has involved researchers who are historians, intellectual historians, sociologists, scholars of literature, media studies, religious studies, museum studies, political scientists, legal scientists, social psychologists, economists, heritage scientists and obviously ICT experts, for all of them have been using data available through research infrastructures in computational social science and digital humanities.

The idea is that research on migration ought not to be reduced to the emigration or immigration processes of populations or ethnical groups. The *Migration Project* is humanities-led in as far as it encompasses the whole history of civilization, while considering continuous relations and reciprocal exchanges among diverse cultures, and thus translations (in their widest sense) of texts and modules from one to another context, be it linguistic, economic, political or cultural (Gregory, 2012).

Migrations are first and foremost transfers of cognitions and cultural experiences, of books, authors, translations, transcriptions into contexts that are always new. The issues regarding acculturation that migrations bring about in all their sociological, psychological, juridical, and educative aspects are all part of a wider domain, for we are always talking about particular aspects of the more general relations, and clashes, among diverse cultural experiences, in which the linguistic element (the transfer of texts and models) is essential (Sgarbi, 2012).

One might say, then, that the *Migration Project* of CNR has been shedding light upon the historical-cultural and linguistic aspects of migrations, thus offering a new historical and methodological framework for researches delving into law, demography, sociology and education.

### **The potential of infrastructures in support of cross-disciplinary research**

#### *Integrating data*

*Today, migration researchers are using platforms of all kinds. However, they are also using established research infrastructures such as ESFRI (the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures) landmarks, projects and high potential areas. It is true there is to date no dedicated ESFRI project for migration, but this makes it more interesting to see how to really engage in a dialogue between very different disciplines while avoiding just addressing a societal topic from different angles without creating truly integrated knowledge (ESFRI, 2018).*

A considerable challenge is represented by the passage from *data science* to *data humanities*. As a matter of fact, researchers in the social sciences and humanities are confronted with increasingly complex and large amounts of data in highly interdisciplinary settings. Required are: qualitative and quantitative data on the portrayal of migration and migrants in the media and in political and public discourses; quantitative



and qualitative media analysis (data collection and analysis, which can be integrated by automated content harvesting online); analysis of the processes of policy development and negotiation, with a focus on how migration influences the scope of options that are taken into consideration; qualitative and quantitative data on how migration dynamics affect the social, economic and cultural integration of migrants.

Research infrastructures are *common goods*. They are planned, built and managed for serving vast research communities which operate in diversified sectors on the principles of open access and competition. Currently, six ESFRI research infrastructures for *cultural innovation* are up and running.

**CLARIN ERIC**-Common Language Resources and Technology Infrastructure  
**DARIAH ERIC**-Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities  
**EHRI**-European Holocaust Research Infrastructure  
**E-RIHS**-European Research Infrastructure for Heritage Science  
**OPERAS**-Design for Open access Publications in European Research Area for Social Sciences and Humanities  
**REIRES**-Research Infrastructure on Religious Studies (ESFRI 2018, pp. 106-115)

In sum, it cannot be denied that also social sciences and humanities researchers are confronted with huge amounts and an increasing complexity of data in highly interdisciplinary settings. Research infrastructures go well beyond their hardware and constitute a Virtual Research Environment, on which very large datasets are run. Experimentalists are engaging thousands of informants via mobile devices which will in a very few years amount to 1 TB of data per day. These scenarios do not have the format of forecasts. They have instead the form of an interaction model that can project what happens if a specific interaction occurs between drivers, infrastructures, flows and policies. For instance, what flows could emerge if a specific configuration of migration infrastructure (such as a new route, a new information source, or a new border strategy) is put in place given the existence of specific migration drivers (such as poverty, geopolitical instability, climate change, etc.).

As to the *CNR-Migration Project*, the challenge lies in considering the linguistic aspects of migrations, the ties of migrant communities to their countries of origin, cultural and religious diversity, intercultural dialogue in its various and complex forms and the acquisition of a shared vision of the history of the Mediterranean, in the framework of a diachronic reconstruction of living together, integration and interculturality. Migration is the lever for intercultural and interregional dialogue, especially in the dimension of the Mediterranean *translatio studiorum*, which has constructed its *modus vivendi* on the



passage of cultures across and alongside the sea. Finally, migration has caused various phenomena of social aggregation finalized to giving value to cultural, religious and political diversity both at the level of systems and at the level of personal convictions (Gregory, 2012).

### *Cultural innovation*

*Migration offers compelling examples for the impact of cultural innovation because it implies transfers of cultures, knowledge and competencies.*

Migration is occasion of encounters as well as of misunderstandings and conflicts (Cousins and Daley, 2017). At the regional level, cultural innovation has two main areas of impact as regards inclusion, namely by (1) conceptualizing reasons, needs, challenges, and keys of changes under diverse backgrounds; (2) co-designing, testing and practicing integration-related issues. Current trends of radicalization versus integration have made it clear with an extraordinary force that a most urgent objective is to work towards societies that are reflective, inclusive, and attentive to the effects that migration is having on security and health, environment and biodiversity, and especially on society and culture. For this reason, the biggest challenge is assessing the *impact of innovation in migration research*. Let me put forward a first case-study.

Imagine a second-generation Sino-Italian teen-ager who attends a humanities secondary school in Italy. At a certain point, s/he might be asked to read a text by Plato, possibly the *Apology of Socrates* – first in Italian, then perhaps in the Greek original or in the Renaissance Latin rendering of Marsilius Ficinus. Students today delve easily into multi-layered, multilingual hypertexts, and they do so on the basis of the reciprocal guidance made possible by social reading tools (Roncaglia, 2018). Our student ought to be able to read the same text in modern unified Chinese as well, so that s/he might start a discussion on Socrates in his/her Chinese-speaking family. Inversely, schoolmates might appropriate, say, Confucius' *Analects* through the conceptual references indicated by our student. Together they might start a discussion on 动 (dòng, movement), 静 (jìng, rest), 人际 (rénjì, human being), 仁 (rén, humaneness), and eventually come to grasp some key tenets of Neo-Confucianism, such as the dictum “restoring the Heavenly Principle and diminishing human desires” (Tu Weiming, 2010).

An analysis of this case study allows a coherent application of the processes set forth in the previous section: access, participation, use, reflection and inclusion. It is clear that the students are delving in and for an *institution*, their school. They do what they do because they have gained *access*, possibly through



the research infrastructure DARIAH (2019), to common goods, and they are ready to set a community of practice in which others might ask to *participate*, while leaving *digital flows*, which can be either manifest or hidden, in order to individually *reflect* on diversity, and eventually share *inclusion* at the social level.

An additional example is the line of research on *religious innovation* carried out at the Centre for Religious Studies of Fondazione Bruno Kessler.

FBK-ISR pays particular attention to the dynamic texture of religious communities and traditions as well as to the contextuality of social, cultural, and technological innovations, thus avoiding reductive definitions of either religion or innovation. Following an action-research approach, the centre's work focuses on the role of digital technologies in processes of social change. It explores the potentials of technology-assisted and technology-enabled social innovation in collaboration with researchers in ICT (FBK-ISR, 2019).

The analysis of religious innovation confirms the validity of the processes constituting cultural innovation. New religious groups *access* cultural legacies and constitute *communities of practice* while elaborating on them, while leaving traces in form of *user data*, in order to individually *reflect* on common goods, and eventually achieve social *inclusion* by sharing experiences.

### **Conclusion**

*The epistemological challenges related to humanities-led cross-disciplinary migration issues are based on the aim of contributing to a change in the mindset as regards a culture of inclusion and reflection in target groups active in social infrastructures such as education, life-long learning, healthcare, urban development and regeneration.*

We take it that policymakers and researchers would want to know more about cultural innovation, a notion that finds its origin in the domain of cultural economics, innovation economics and social innovation studies. Today, the biggest challenge is given by the lack of a shared conceptualization which is preventing the development of indicators to measure it which are crucial to plan, monitor and evaluate policies. For migrants settling down in adopted home countries, lack of inclusion and recognition, together with discrimination and racism, make inclusion processes challenging. Striving toward an ideal of unity in diversity in democracies necessitates an approach in which those one disagrees with are seen as legitimate others, not as enemies. Culture cannot be but plural, changing, adaptable, constructed. Inclusion and reflection are constructed whenever we are in contact with other human beings, regardless of where they come from.



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