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PADMINI BARUAH, MALD

Padmini is a graduate student of international affairs at The Fletcher School.

Under the Supervision of KIM WILSON, Sr. Lecturer, The Fletcher School

Kim Wilson is a Sr. Lecturer and Sr. Fellow at the Fletcher School, Tufts University. She is the lead author for a series of studies on the financial journey of refugees and migrants.

You and I Are Not Friends The Challenges of Ethnographic Study in the Migration Field

Transnational migration has been one of the most talked-about phenomena of the past decade. With prolonged armed conflict, economic crises, and climate change affecting different parts of the world adversely, it is not a surprise that an estimated 258 million people live in a country that is not the country of their birth.¹ Much news has been generated on this subject, and multiple studies have focused on the macro aspects of this issue. However, equally vital is not losing sight of the fact that while broad patterns and theories can explain the macrophenomenon of transnational migration, each migrant's story is ultimately a subjective and entirely personal lived experience. The powerful contribution of the individual narrative as well as of ethnographic observations to academic studies in this field cannot be overlooked. Over and above adding a rich layer of factual detail to the broad outlines of migration theory, in-depth qualitative research can play a role in generating empathy within readers, causing them to pay much more heed than they would have to a plain factsheet.

In this piece, I write against the backdrop of the ten days I spent along with a team of three in two towns in Colombia, South America, working on migration. Specifically, we were trying to analyze the financial and social journeys of migrants, travelling mostly from South Asia and West Africa to the USA via South America. Over the course of ten days, we interviewed a number of migrants, locals and other stakeholders and were able to acquire a better perspective on their challenges. However, while our research did contribute to an enhanced knowledge pool, getting this information out in usable form was not an easy task. In this piece, I take a closer look at the challenges of conducting ethnographic research in a field as sensitive as migration, especially on extra-legal migration routes. I base this on my own experiences in the towns of Turbo and Capurganá, where I spent ten days between January 4 and 14, 2019, speaking to migrants, local authorities, citizens, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders to create coherent stories of the journeys that migrants undertake. In the first part of this piece, I discuss the scope of our project, the methodology we adopted, and the interviews I did. In the second part, I delve into the challenges

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "The International Migration Report 2017 (Highlights)," December 18, 2017. Accessed February 5, 2019. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/international-migration-report-2017.html>.

that I encountered, as well as the advantages I had, while conducting this research, especially given my status as a female person of color from the developing world. In writing this paper, I hope to shed some light on the nature of the difficulties that inevitably emerge in this field of work, with the aim of informing those who are working or will choose to work in the field in the future.

Project Overview: Financial Journeys of Migrants

The main aim of our four-member team was to conduct interviews that would help shed light on the financial journeys of migrants who aspire to come to the USA from conflict situations in South Asia or West Africa, via South America. Further, we were to try and shed some light on the socio-economic and identity journeys of these migrants. In terms of team composition, we were two men and two women, three Americans and one Indian. Two of us spoke Spanish; one of us spoke French (prevalent in West Africa): and I am fluent in Hindi, Urdu and Bengali and know basic Nepali and French. Needless to say, all of us speak English.

In terms of methodology, we relied on in-person interviews. These were conducted face to face and covered various aspects of migrants' demographic, social, and economic identities. The objective was to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of *why* they elected to move out of their home countries, *what* they were leaving behind, *how* they were financing these journeys, the *routes* they were taking to the USA, and the *challenges* they faced in the process. We also hoped to uncover their aspirations

Figure 1: Darien Gap



from this extremely dangerous journey—not only are they plagued at every step by the fear of being caught by unsympathetic locals or authorities, the journey takes them through the entrails of the dangerous Darién forest in Panama, shown in Figure 1.

This route is fraught with difficulties—smugglers are rumored to have made their homes within the forest, residual extremist radicals also have hideouts there, and issues remain with the indigenous populations who live there. Most migrants we spoke to were about to commence on this trek and spoke of it as the most challenging part of their journey.

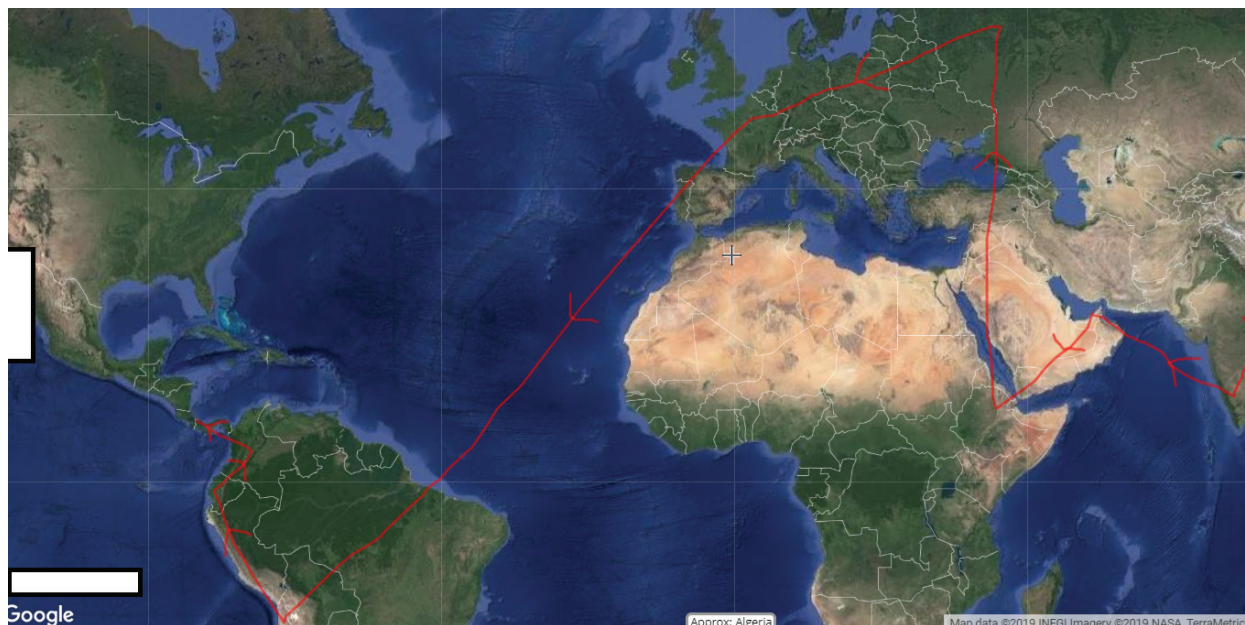
Challenges in Conducting Research

Ethnographic fieldwork as a research method presents certain obvious challenges—first, a gap often clearly exists between the cultural and educational background of the researcher and that of the subject. This was true of our research group—of the four of us, three were American citizens, and I was a legal migrant on a student visa accessing higher education in the United States. This put us in a different position than migrants coming from conflict situations in West Africa or South Asia. Our worldview had an inherent privilege that had to be consciously acknowledged and set aside before meaningful engagement could happen with research subjects.

Second, the nature of the subject matter itself was sensitive since it involved multiple extra-legal components. Most of the migrants we spoke to were unable to enter the United States through regulated means (securing a visa, seeking asylum). Their very presence in most of the countries they travelled through was unlikely to be legal. (See one migrant's journey in Figure 2).

Many migrants use the extra-legal services of intermediaries (smugglers, or in migrants' preferred terminology, "agents"). These intermediaries have formed highly confidential networks of people who have delegated "junior agents" in the countries through which migrants travel. They provide financial and travel assistance to migrants for a price. A key reason migrants are reluctant to discuss their situation is because they hesitate to implicate a person upon whom their existence and survival in strange foreign lands depends.

Figure 2: Journey of Abhas (name changed), a migrant from Nepal



I encountered this first hand, multiple times. Most notably, in Capurganá, I spotted a group of men who looked Indian and were travelling with heavy backpacks. Attempts to strike up a conversation failed—they were evidently in a hurry and passed me by with a suspicious glance or two. Eventually, I found two men standing alone and tentatively began speaking to them in Hindi. Pleased as they were by the familiar language and diction, they were still closed off as far as discussing their travels was concerned. They presented themselves as students taking a backpacking tour of South America after their undergraduate year, though the route they described matched perfectly our existing information on migrant routes. They maintained their story, stating that they were hoping to end up in the United States, and though they exchanged numbers with me, they did not respond to any of my follow-up messages.

Similarly, I was able to relatively easily open conversation with a man from Anglophone Cameroon who appreciated that I too spoke English and was struggling with Spanish. However, as soon as I specified who I was and what work I was doing, he closed down the conversation immediately, reiterating that he was not a migrant, saying, “I am a civil servant with a business of my own in South America. After this, I plan to go back.” He did not share his name. We saw him the next day standing outside the migra-

tion office in Turbo—a clear indication of his being a migrant. Two other West Africans we met repeatedly over the course of a few days, both in Turbo and Capurganá, opened up to us about this on our fourth and final interaction, saying, “You see, at the beginning, you are not friends. We are not comfortable sharing our stories. But now that we have met and spoken so many times, we are more comfortable.” This spoke volumes to the third challenge I identified—that most migrants did not linger in one place for long, and therefore as a researcher, I did not have enough time to immerse and build the kind of connections that are vital to successful ethnographic work.

A fourth barrier to open information sharing comes from the people who run accommodation and shelters specifically for migrants making this kind of journey. For instance, at Turbo I was able to successfully obtain a lengthy, detailed interview with a Nepali migrant. This occurred *despite* the best efforts of the manager of the hostel he was staying at. Despite our repeated attempts, she continued to remain suspicious of us, going so far as to prohibit the migrants she was housing from talking to us. This reluctance was echoed at multiple locations known to provide accommodation for transiting migrants. This is not surprising, considering that the economic transactions they were making were extra-legal. As outsid-

ers, we could not possibly hope to gain their trust within a limited span of two days.

Local authorities were not always open to discussion either, though our experience with this varied. In Turbo, for instance, my colleagues were able to receive useful information from the mayor's office. We were also able to interview a migration officer from Turbo. However, in Capurganá, a migration officer who spotted us on the field was not pleased that we were investigating this sensitive issue and called upon us to depart at the earliest. This perhaps ties in to Colombia's policy regarding migrants. A specific category of migrants—such as Venezuelans—are permitted to stay on and acquire work permits. A second category is allowed entry and passage through Colombia as long as they leave. The process of transition entails securing a travel document, and one of our migrant sources informed us that this process could be fraught with corruption. My hypothesis is that local authorities who are intimately involved in the migration process do not welcome scrutiny from outsiders.

My final note is on how my experience was colored by my specific identity as a queer woman of color from South Asia. I naturally stood out strongly from my colleagues in both appearance and documentation, which led to longer waiting times for me whenever we went through bureaucratic processes. Going through the border between Colombia and Panama, the authorities scrutinized my passport longer, at one point getting out a walkie-talkie and urgently speaking into it, “We have a Hindu! What do we do?” I was eventually allowed to pass through after my colleagues spoke on my behalf. However, in many instances, being a brown woman worked in my favor—I was able to initiate contact with many

migrants and local women who may not have spoken to me had I occupied the traditional patriarchal and hegemonic axis of power associated with being a white man. While my lack of knowledge of Spanish did prove a barrier, knowing Hindi, Urdu, and Nepali proved invaluable. Further, we were able to secure an interview from a transwoman from Venezuela who was working at a beauty parlor, and as a part of our introductions, she was informed that I was queer as well, which may have contributed to a sense of security.

Conclusion

The sense of *insecurity* and *uncertainty* tied to being an illegal immigrant definitely affects the quality of research carried out in this field. I have identified four major challenges through the process of my fieldwork:

1. The unequal power relationship between researcher and subject
2. The extra-legal nature of most migration journeys
3. Time constraints due to the fast transition that most migrants make (in these two towns)
4. Reluctance to share information by local hotel and hostel owners as well as other authorities who are a part of the system and often benefit from it

Further, one's own identity as a researcher can also affect how one is able to engage with subjects, effectively or otherwise. Future work in the field may keep these factors in mind so that the researcher in question is prepared to deal with these difficulties as and when they arise to make for better overall research outcomes.

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