Introduction
Methodological and Ethical Concerns in Research with Vulnerable Migrants

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Recent changes in international migration towards more irregular patterns of migration (Global Commission on International Migration, 2005) have increased the number of ‘vulnerable’ migrants and have resulted in the emergence of important new fields for the study of migration. At the same time migration research is increasingly becoming a policy supporting research field. In this book we argue that both aspects; the growing political and legal marginalization of ever-larger immigrant populations and the increasing overlap of research and policy agendas have important methodological and ethical implications, which should be given more attention than was hitherto the case. As the concept of ‘the vulnerable’ is socially constructed a precise definition is problematic, but Moore & Miller (1999: 1034) contend that vulnerable individuals in general are people who ‘lack the ability to make personal life choices, to make personal decisions, to maintain independence and to self-determine’. Vulnerable people will include the impoverished, disenfranchised, and/or those subject to discrimination, intolerance and/or stigma. Whatever definition of vulnerability we may use it is clear that extreme sensitivity is needed while conducting research with persons in vulnerable positions.

In our view, the increased attention given to research involving vulnerable persons has not yet been adequately translated into corresponding publications on methodological and ethical challenges in the study of migration. There are very few books that document and provide advice on how to go about performing sensitive research with vulnerable persons. The relative scarcity of these publications reflects on the one hand the dilemma of the multidisciplinary nature of the study of migration (see also Agozino 2000), which requires comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the methodological approaches of various disciplines. On the other hand the scarcity of publications on this topic may also reflect the reservations towards emphasizing the fact that there are serious dilemmas
related to empirical research especially with marginalised and vulnerable groups. Most research in the field of migration, and in particular in the field of refugees, has its origin in policy concerns (Black 2001). This has encouraged researchers to take the categories, concepts and priorities of policymakers at the core of their research design (Bakewell, 2008). This privileges the worldview of the policymakers in constructing the research, constraining the research questions asked, the subjects of study and the methodologies and analysis adopted. Criticising these underlying assumptions and reflecting on the consequences of this type of research is likely to bring more significant changes to the lives of migrants, as certain questions derived from policy priorities may produce results that would be harmful for the community. The delineation of the field by policy categories is not only a challenge for those studying migration but generally broader for policy-driven research (Minnery & Greenhalgh 2007).

So far only little attention has been paid to building a body of literature on qualitative approaches within migration research that would enable migration researchers to learn from one another. We rarely get information on the design of the research or the research processes such as how participants were identified and accessed, to what degree participants were involved in the research, how translation issues were handled etc. Even less insight is provided in regard to difficulties experienced, possible biases and the researchers’ positioning. Consequently migration researchers working with vulnerable migrants are faced with similar questions time and again and often feel like reinventing the wheel when trying to find solutions for the challenges they encounter.

Is migration research unique?

Today migration is one of the most cross-disciplinary fields in academia allowing for interdisciplinary and methodological pluralism. Still, the field of migration is not unique in its approach(es) and methodological challenges. The multidisciplinary and at the same time topic-centred nature of migration studies bears the risk that the alleged or real specificities of this field of research or indeed commonalities which migration research shares with other research areas is not adequately reflected. Researchers in a variety of research fields have developed a sophisticated expertise in regard to all kinds of methodological and ethical concerns. Outside the ‘migration field’ there is excellent work addressing methodological issues and the question of research ethics from a wide range of perspectives that may apply to migration research as well. Still, the study of migration is shaped by specific features rooted in its very nature, with migrants representing the main type of actors and migrations the main type of processes. Nevertheless, not every group manifestation is to be explained by a single aspect (migration) alone. In reality, a broad range of factors that might only marginally be linked to a migration background might influence the views, perceptions or actions of migrants.

A specific challenge arises from the fact that in many cases various dimensions may overlap, influence or determine one another. In his introduction to ‘Researching refugees: Lessons, challenges and ways forward’ Bakewell highlights: ‘the challenge for refugee researchers is how to hold in balance the recognition of the distinctive situation of the refugees and the underlying ‘normality’ of the people. It is too easy to draw on the fact that someone has experienced forced migration as an explanation for many observations in the field, which may equally apply to non-refugees’ (Bakewell 2007: 8). In fact, his critique does not only apply to refugee research, but to all research involving migrants or their descendants. As a continuous task, researchers need to carefully weigh different factors according to their actual significance in order to avoid a ‘migration bias’. More subject-centred approaches may be a useful tool in understanding these different factors. Moreover, the fact that the social environment of potential participants is very much shaped by particular institutional settings in the broader framework of migration policy and legislation has several basic ethical and methodological implications specific to migration research and especially to research involving migrants in precarious situations.

A first implication is that the researcher positions the envisaged research within this specific institutional framework. As a corollary, this positioning is reflected in the framing of the research design and the respective methodological approach. For example, institutions are particularly intrusive in regard to undocumented migration, illegal residence or other aspects of ‘illegality’. They strongly shape migrants’ lives by naturally setting a certain frame in which these migrants are able to navigate. As a consequence, the framing of research questions and methodological approaches shape the nature and level of involvement of participating persons. After all, in case of undocumented migration research outcomes might have a severe impact on the participants’ current and future life if the research was not carefully designed. This, and similar aspects open a wide range of methodological questions as for example how to access these groups of persons and questions of professional ethics such as how to deal with confident information or minimize harm, as, after all, they might not see any good reason to participate and put their current lives at risk. Part One – Methods and Ethics in Institutional Settings – presents two case studies on research with vulnerable migrants within the institution ‘prison’.

The contributions in Part Two – Rethinking Basic Research Methods – base their primary focus on the questions of choosing the right methodological approach. By assessing various approaches authors elab-
create on questions and strategies in regard to accessing and keeping contact with hard-to-reach-populations. Other questions are framed around building up trust in a setting with high levels of suspicion towards the researcher, collecting sensitive information, data processing and ethical dissemination of the results. The question on who would benefit from research and whether research may potentially cause harm to respondents are core issues in research involving vulnerable groups, most notably in commissioned research as in this case the topics and directions of research are already pre-defined by stakeholders. Furthermore, qualitative research also allows for reflections on the role of the researcher in regard to the construction and production of knowledge. Part Three pays special attention to the role and position of the researcher within research with vulnerable migrants, thereby aiming at eventually disrupting the asymmetric power relations between the researcher and those researched. Sometimes it is argued that within advocacy and awareness-driven research certain aspects of social reality might remain under researched. One can however also argue that, as all research is framed in a certain context, the specific strength of advocacy-driven research is that it puts emphasis on considering the institutional frame and its effects on the creation of knowledge. Moreover, research can be called exploitative when the interest of the researchers alone guides every stage of the research process. Research that aims to give voice to the marginalised should try to transform these exploitative aspects of positivist science. One good example is the EU-funded project RIME (Releasing Indigenous Multiculturailism through Education) where the theory and practice of re-evaluation counselling was used in order to help participants to emotionally release hurtful experiences (van den Anker, 2006).

In migration research, and even more so in transnational migration research (Borkert & De Tona 2006), the question by whom research is carried out is particularly interesting when researchers (or part of the research team) are themselves migrants or even exponent of the population, community and/or identity group they are conducting studies with (Borkert & De Tona 2006). It becomes even more interesting when ‘minority’ researchers as ‘outsiders’ conduct research in the majority population which otherwise usually holds hegemony over the production of knowledge (Phoenix 1994: 55–56). Such reflections also have ethical consequences as ‘qualitative methodologies allow us to question how the researcher’s standpoint influences access to “the field”, the relation of the researcher to the research participants and, the process of interpretation and data analysis’ (De Tona 2006, par. 4). With regard to research involving vulnerable migrants there are two important questions to ask:

1 Why is the research conducted and why is it conducted in this specific way? As elaborated above, ethical questions in research start with framing the research. Why is the research conducted and what is the researcher’s position vis-à-vis the participants? Subsequently, such basic theoretical reflections find their translation into respective methodological approaches.

2 How is the research conducted? On the level of the research process itself, there are different ethical questions affecting methodological questions and vice versa. These questions circulate around questions concerning where and how will I get access to vulnerable research participants and how will I negotiate access? How should I conduct research which is sensitive? What ethical considerations do I need to observe? What is my role as a researcher in relation to the researched? How do I represent their views and how is the quality and content of the data collected affected by participants’ vulnerable position? And finally how do I present the findings to the public?

In the following, we discuss some contributions of selected research traditions to debates on methodological and ethical issues both within migration research and beyond which are regarded relevant to our case studies as presented in this collective book. Although not all of the research traditions deal with marginalised or vulnerable groups, they all have important lessons to teach in regard to both ethical and methodological issues and the link between them.

Research on forced migration and the fine line between researchers and practitioners

Social science research on forced migration initially emerged within the framework of policy-oriented research in refugee situations in the ‘developing world’. In this context, methodological and ethical issues arising in research on forced migration were often structurally similar to issues refugee agencies, relief workers and government officials were confronted with. In particular camp-like situations and humanitarian emergencies provided a favourable environment for engaging in methodological and ethical debates and reflecting on the research process itself (see Bloch 1999, Jacobsen & Landau 2003). Research that focused exclusively on ‘methodological’ problems as experienced by practitioners rather than researchers (e.g. Kibreab, 2004) provides important insights that have direct implications for research methodologies and ethics. After all, the position of a researcher vis-à-vis refugees may not be so different from that of a humanitarian fieldworker (see Shuman & Bohnem 2004, Salis Gross 2004). Both are placed within a specific institutional frame that labels identities (Zetter 1991), shapes behaviour, attitudes, opinions, and public
personae of refugees as well as their responses to questions. Indeed, from the perspective of refugees, a researcher may appear to be just as much part of the institutional structures dealing with refugees as are government officials and aid workers (see Harrell-Bond 1986, Barsky 1994, Hynes 2003).

A specific ethical challenge that is not peculiar to research on asylum seekers per se but which is perhaps more pressing there than in other areas of research concerns the role of advocacy in the research process. Very often advocacy-driven research runs the danger of overstating or indeed, misrepresenting research findings, or, as Jacobsen & Landau (2003) phrase it, of ‘talking crisis’; in order to achieve certain political outcomes. Conversely, findings that highlight, for example, how asylum applicants adjust (e.g. by adapting life stories etc.) to the expectations of actors within the asylum system, pose questions as to the potential negative consequences of such research both for individuals and groups at large. Indeed, in the field of refugee studies a lot has been done in regard to advance methodological and ethical sensitivity. Increasingly, also important outlets in this field for example the Journal for Refugee Studies, the UNHCR series New issues in Refugee Research or the Refugee Survey Quarterly and others regularly present case studies reflecting such challenges and more broadly cover aspects of developing methodology and research ethics in this field.

Feminist approaches and community based methodologies

As for other research fields important contributions to the debates on ethics and methodology is provided by feminist scholars. Feminist research differs from other types of research mostly by its worldview as it is women and their concerns which are the focus of investigation. A clear intention is to undertake research which is beneficial for women and not just about women. The concern of feminist research is to construct knowledge that “writes women into history” and acknowledges their active roles. Advocating for ‘agency’ by recognizing participants as the experts on their own experiences feminist researchers have also pointed to ethical dilemmas in established theoretical and methodological approaches. This concerns the understanding of subjectivity as well as power relations between the researcher and the research subjects. Feminist approaches actively seek to remove the power imbalance between researcher and participants and, by doing so, to challenge the established understanding of knowledge production and ownership of knowledge not exclusively ‘owned’ by the researcher (Harding 1987, Wolf, 1996). As a corollary, feminist scholars have challenged not only quantitative research, but also qualitative research approaches and have experimented with and promoted the use of ethnographic research such as life histories, in-depth interviews, participatory research and community-based methodologies which allow to relate to participants ‘in subjective way on their term rather than in objective ways on the researchers’ term’ (Edwards 1990: 489). Although ‘ethnographic research has enjoyed a long and valued place within immigration studies (…) feminist ethnographic enquiry tends to focus (…) on the perspectives and understandings of subjects’ actions and beliefs, thus facilitating the definition of potential interventions that reflect and respect local knowledge’ (Mahler & Pessar 2006: 30).

The researcher herself also received a lot of attention in feminist research as feminist research breaks the silence about researchers own experiences of dealing with emotions. Feminist research admits that researchers who are caught in emotionally laden research should not only look at the impact of their research at participants but also at themselves. Moreover feminist researchers explicitly admit that research is personal as well as political. Promoted by politically motivated feminist research this perspective of reciprocal understanding of research processes with its basic aim to eventually change social inequalities by recognising and placing standpoints of structurally marginalised groups of persons is no longer exclusively limited to gender-related questions within migration studies. It has found its way into the broader theoretical and methodological framework especially when it comes to questions on how societal structures and institutions shape and impact migrants’ lives and their strategies to cope with it. This is maybe also why feminist research has contributed a lot to refugee and asylum research (see for example Temple & Morin 2006).

Another area in the research on gender and migration of specific relevance to this book are contributions to the research field of migrant sexwork and migrant sexworkers and related topics such as, gender and labour migration, forced labour and human trafficking (see for example Kempadoo & Doeza 1998, Wijers & Lap-Chew 1996, Andrijaevic 2003 and Dahinden & Efionayi-Müder in this book). The highly controversial discussion also within feminist research on migrant sexwork and human trafficking serve as good example for difficulties arising from the lack of clear theoretical concepts, definitions, terms and categories. The controversial debate on migration prostitution and ‘human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation’ still is and will continue to be intensely discussed as it conflates around unresolved positions on the issues of female migration, prostitution/sexwork and agency. The interpretations of the underlying definitions vary significantly among researchers themselves as they also reflect the researchers’ political, moral and ethical stance towards the general question of especially (migrant) women’s participation in the sex business in general.
Research dealing with 'hard-to-reach' populations

Another research field increasingly raising and sharing particularly methodological concerns in the field of migration are those involving the so-called 'hidden' or 'hard-to-reach' populations (Atkinson & Flint 2001, Duncan et al. 2003). These populations are said to be hidden or hard-to-reach because they are hidden from the point of view of sampling and as such difficult to find. 'Hidden' or 'hard-to-reach' populations may also actively try to conceal their identity as belonging to that group what makes it even more difficult to find them. Examples of these populations are drug users, the mentally and chronically ill, sexually active teens, persons with eating disorders or gays and lesbians. The problem with these terms is that they are stigmatizing as 'it defines the problem as one within the group itself or within your approach to them' (Smith 2006).

In regard to migration, examples are expressed in case studies on undocumented smuggled or trafficked migrants. Empirical studies on 'hidden' or 'hard-to-reach' populations necessarily call for approaches different from those commonly used for research on more easily observable populations. By definition, size and location of these populations are unknown, thus difficulties in sampling and in applying quantitative methods of collecting and extrapolating data are inevitable (see Jandl 2004, Vogel 2002, Engbersen et al. 2002).

Authors in this field often reflect on established techniques of locating and accessing hard-to-reach-populations and, similar to research in forced migrations and asylum seekers, on issues of trust and mistrust (see for example Cornelius 1982, Ellis & MacGaffey 1996). In addition very often 'there exists a strong privacy concern when it comes to 'hard-to-reach' populations. Membership may involve stigmatised or illegal behaviour leading individuals to refuse to cooperate, or give unreliable answers to protect their privacy' (Heckathorn 1997: 174). This concern touches upon another challenging aspect namely the quality of data and information collected and its processing. Most challenging in this field, and very controversial ever since it is discussed, is the undercover, covert approach to fieldwork. Although exposed to ethical criticism 'it remains a method of choice for social scientists who fear that by openly announcing their intentions, they will cause potential subjects to scurry' (Herrera 2003: 315).

Research dealing with 'deviant behaviour'

In research on organised criminal activities and 'deviant behaviour' the challenge of how to get information becomes specifically evident as 'typical tools of the criminologist – observation, surveys, interviews, samples and questionnaires – are either extremely difficult or even impossible to use' (Finckenauer & Waring 1998: 7). In addition, the development of research questions may not only require the thorough consideration of individuals' perceptions but also the examination of group identities and their underlying values, norms and constructions of meanings. The way researchers interpret their role vis-à-vis their individual respondents and the groups they are representing is therefore crucial importance (Hobbs 2001).

In response to a more general linkage between migration, security and crime that has shaped public debates on migration in industrialised countries since the 1990s, the area of research on 'deviant behaviour' gains increasing relevance. For a variety of reasons the share of incarcerated non-nationals has significantly risen in recent years (see Barsky in this book). This situation has gained increasing prominence in various disciplines, ranging from anthropology, sociology of law to criminology and political science (see for example the 'EU foreign prisoners project'). Recently, selected studies have analyzed policies and enforcement actions, immigrants' specific vulnerability to restrictive treatment in the criminal justice system, exclusionary characteristics, its implications for rehabilitation processes, the implications of an increasingly diverse inmate population, and new challenges for governance of a multicultural prison-life. While in this case the target group might theoretically be easier to access we will raise attention in Part One to the fact that the characteristics of the institution 'prison' raise very particular ethical and methodological concerns.

Discourse and conversational analysis

Another research field that has made important contributions to qualitative research methodologies is the discourse and conversational analysis with the related field of 'intercultural communication'. This field of research emerged from different linguistic and sociological traditions and has undergone an exceptional growth in the past two decades. It attempts to deconstruct the meanings participants have about their lived experiences and the language they use. Discourse analysis has replaced the observation that an 'objective reality exists' with a view that reality is 'chaotic and unknowable' (Gribich 2004). Objectivity is replaced by reflexive subjectivity and the politics of position. In this line of reasoning meanings become recognised as individual creations which require interpretation and negotiation. Research on communication strategies has highlighted the challenges in dealing with differences in the understanding and conceptualization of communication situations, as well as differences in the understanding of the concepts about which persons of different backgrounds converse (see Ehlich 1998, Gumperz & Roberts 1991, Hartog 2006).
Critical discourse analysts have also highlighted the potential for misunderstandings produced by highly formalised and asymmetric communication situations. Research in this field has therefore provided valuable insights into power asymmetries and power dynamics at play in various formalised communication situations such as in medical examinations between health workers and patients, in court situations before defendants and professionals, or in class rooms between teachers and students (see Harris 1995, Trosberg 1995, Wodak 1985). As such this research field has provided important insights for conducting research in institutionalised settings as it points out the importance of self-reflexivity on the side of the researcher as well as permits the voices of the ‘Other’ and their reflexive practices. The assumption often is that once research begins participants will cooperate and freely tell researchers what they want to know. But why should people, and especially the ones who are already vulnerable, tell the truth? Researchers are in that case naturally viewed with suspicion and researchers have to find ways to ‘gain access’ to their subjects (see also Bilger & van Lijempt in this book).

When researching (with) immigrants difficulties in communication might be reinforced by basic methodological challenges such as for example the need to deal with various languages. Especially refugee studies and the research fields dealing with health issues thereby explicitly refer to challenges that go beyond simple linguistic difficulties by pointing to the fact that differences of meaning of key-terms as – e.g. in the area of health different concepts of well-being – need to be taken into account (see for example Samis Gross 2004). This becomes most apparent in all areas where a metachorical language is used and explains the importance for carefully selecting interpreters and take into consideration difficulties and limits of certain methods of analysis (see for example Temple et al. 2006). However, another dimension to the role of interpreters appears when interpreters from the same ethnic, linguistic or cultural background are involved in order to ease building up trust. Especially in institutional contexts, such as – in the context of this book – the asylum system or prison, a person with a presumed ‘insider’ position might not be trusted exactly because of this position (see Shuman & Bohmer 2004, Doornbos 2003).

Standardised ethical principles and the dilemma of ‘how to do it right’

For a long time ethical issues relating to research that involves human subjects were limited to the field of medical studies and related subjects such as human anthropology. Ethical standards in social science are much more recent. The first international code of ethics to protect the right of people from research abuse was conducted in 1949 in the Nuremberg Code. Other Codes of Ethics are the ‘Declaration of Helsinki’ (1964) and the ‘Belmont Report’ (1978). Today, in many countries social science research is routinely assessed in respect to its ethical implications. Ethic principles are integrated in a variety of national guidelines and regulations and, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, ethic committees are set up to which researchers should hand in their projects for approval. More recently, responding to the increase in transnational research partnerships and new developments in information technologies multiplying the sources of information available, which increasingly also raise issues of authenticity, verifiability and research quality, the European Commission explicitly commissioned the RESPECT-project with the aim to develop standards for socio-economic research in the European Union. The Project RESPECT has developed a Code of Conduct for conducting research in the social sciences based on a synthesis of the contents of a large number of various existing professional and ethical codes of practice (see www.respectproject.org). The result of the project, the ‘EU Code of Ethics for socio-economic research’ distinguishes three main types of ethical responsibility of researchers: responsibility to society, professional expertise and standards and responsibilities to research participants. This opens a wide range of questions when conducting research involving vulnerable migrants. To decide on what would benefit society is specifically peculiar in policy-oriented research and, even more so, research commissioned by policy makers or other relevant stakeholders simply because the broader framework of migration policy and legislation sets the frame in which these migrants move. On the individual level of participation researchers and participants might not necessarily access the harms and benefits of a research in the same way. Hence, to conceive the views of the potential or actual participants from their point of view may be a very complex undertaking. In general research ethics is often more about institutional and professional regulations and codes of conduct than it is about the needs, aspirations or worldviews of ‘vulnerable communities’ (Smith 2005: 96).

Ethical standards in social science are based on three basic principles: respect for human dignity, justice and beneficence. The standards also emphasise four guidelines through which these principles should be applied: informed consent, non-deception, privacy and confidentiality, and accuracy (Christians 2005: 144). These standards and ethical assessment procedures however still bear the hallmarks of medical research and life sciences and do not respond to certain areas of social sciences. The criteria of informed consent, non-deception, privacy and confidentiality for example seem not to be much of an issue to research where there is a reciprocal relation between the researcher and the researched. In his review Clifford Christians points to the radical break social and feminist thinkers have made with previous ideas surrounding research ethics based on the epistemological critique of positivist thinking and its norm of objectivity:
Rather than searching for neutral principles to which all parties can appeal, social ethics rests on a complex view of moral judgements as integrating into an organic whole various perspectives – everyday experience, beliefs about the good, and feelings of approval and shame – in terms of human relations and social structures (Christians 2005: 149). Christians argues that ‘research methodologies that have broken down the walls between subject and researchers ought to be excluded from IRB’s oversight, because they cannot meet the old criteria’ (Christians 2005: 157).

In research which enables people to come to terms with their everyday experiences and which understands research subjects as participating agents carrying knowledge and interpreting their own life worlds, ethical concerns of justice, fairness and moral actions go far beyond rigid sets of rules and guidelines. Elements such as moral values, ideals, personal and professional standards, empathy or intuition all play an important part in these research projects. Ethical codes however are very general and absolute. According to De Lain they are ‘intellectualized, objective constructions that make no allowance for cultural, social, personal and emotional variations’ (De Lain 2000: 4). Most research, especially with vulnerable people, raises much wider questions of power relations, equality and subjectivity. Informed consent for example is defined as the provision of information to participants about the purpose of the research, its procedures, potential risks, benefits and alternatives. The principle of voluntary participation from an informed basis bears specific difficulties when participants find themselves in vulnerable positions. In regard to migrants here again the broader framework of policy and legislation provides a specific dimension to these principles. As laws, regulations and measures which shape participants’ lives are often not fully transparent; participants may not easily appraise the possible consequences upon their lives and strategies. Language and cultural factors may also affect people’s understanding of what participation in a research project means and in what way it could harm or benefit them. As Augustin (2008) argues ‘the version of ethics that is usually referred to in research is, like so much else, a thoroughly western one’.

Another concern in this regard is deception. Although a highly contested methodological approach researchers may decide for ‘covert’ participant observation especially in research with ‘hidden’ or ‘hard-to-reach’ populations (see Markova in this book). When dealing with confidentiality and anonymity the issue arises that insensitive treatment could not only harm individuals, but a group of persons or a community as a whole. If the necessary sensitivity in this regard is not shown from the researchers’ side the consequences for the respondents might be far-reaching, in some cases even life threatening. Qualitative research in more sensitive areas usually demands a more active involvement of researchers. In some cases researchers have to be aware of the fact that obtaining certain information would automatically turn them into ‘bearers of secrets’ being in possession of information that could prove to be very harmful for the respondents, sometimes without even being aware of this. On the other hand there is the issue of reciprocity. Traditional methodology text books advise against offering assistance to respondents. But the moral implications of this have been challenged by social and feminist thinkers who do not only insist on the principle of mutual benefit but believe that rejection of requested help may ‘harm’ participants (see also Markova and Sturin in this book). Moreover, ethical questions are not static. They need to be raised and reflected from the beginning of conceptualising the research until placing the results in the public arena (see for example Glazer 1982). Muller & Bell (2002) likewise argue that ethics are often considered an ‘after-thought’ or something that needs to be considered only at the moment when the research proposal is evaluated by the ethical committee, whereas they need to constitute an ongoing part of research and should take part before, during and after the research. Thus understanding ethics as a process rather than a rigid set of moral values to be applied proposes a different way of obtaining informed consent that is well accommodated within the flexible nature of qualitative methodology.

To conclude, ethical standards may provide a useful general frame of reference. Nevertheless, its formalistic recommendations are of limited use as a guideline for the difficult choices and decisions to be made at different stages of the research process. Recently published books, such as Mauthner et al. (2002) address the gap between research practice and ethical principles. Increasingly researchers critically report their own experiences when conducting research in specific fields or groups while struggling with the fact that in the research practice of qualitative research, ethical codes often do not give an adequate answer on how to do it right. The ‘EU Code of Ethics for socio-economic research’ as developed by the RESPECT-project takes the pronounced critique on standardised principles into account not only by referring to it in the introductory part, but also throughout the report by including a section on possible ‘dilemmas that may need to be addressed’ associating every single principle. Still, by pointing to Friedmann et al. (2002) the RESPECT-report highlights that ethical codes ‘enable professionals to make informed choices when faced with an ethical dilemma, so if they behave unethical they do so by design rather than by error’ (Dench, Iphofen & Huws 2004: 31).

Next to this newly developed EU Code of Ethics for socio-economic research, there is in fact an ever-growing demand for addressing ethical and methodological challenges when researching persons in precarious situations and/or specific institutional settings. The ‘Ethical Guidelines for Good Research practice’ in the field of forced migration studies serve as one example for the attempt to acknowledge the specific challenges for the
research process imposed by the fact that ‘research on forced migration occurs in many places around the world; some where they are “at home” and others where they are in some way “foreign” and the subsequent consequence that resulting studies occur within a variety of economic, cultural, legal and political settings’ necessitating specific sensitivity’ (RSQ 2007: 163). The multifaceted nature of empirical problems would suggest multidisciplinary approaches and at the very least, that migration researchers take on board insights won by other researchers working in one of the fields dealing with marginalised populations. However until now not so many of these discussions have found their way into the broader frame of migration research. The Forum: Qualitative Research for example initiated an electronic debate on Qualitative Research and Ethics, an exchange and information tool directed to social researchers and participants alike aiming at contributing to a deliberate investigation of all possible topics relating to ethics in qualitative research (http://www.qualitative-research.net). Only few however are to be found on migration related issues. From our point of view a fruitful avenue for future research therefore, is to explore common methodological approaches across disciplines and across subject areas in a more systematic and comprehensive way. Against this background, we think that the present collection of methodological and ethical difficulties and considerations of those researchers who had joined together and started a discussion on these matters at the International Metropolis Conferences in the years 2004 and 2005 and afterwards contributes to a much needed broader discussion on methodological and ethical developments in the field of migration and a step forwards on our way to better understand on ‘how to do it right’.

Contributions to this book

In the following chapters we will deal with all of the above-mentioned aspects. In some parts of the book more emphasis is put on difficulties in regard to methodological approaches while other parts link these difficulties to ethical questions more explicitly. Some of the presented research faced similar difficulties but applied different strategies to deal with these difficulties, while others deal with the same group of participants or similar topics but face very different challenges. What is common to all contributions is that in all case studies the participating migrants find themselves multiply marginalised and in very vulnerable situations. Therefore all case studies presented touch upon various aspects of the above-presented debates even though their primary focus lies on specific parts. Due to this specific type of marginalization and vulnerability it seems imperative that all contributions take into account the political and legal frameworks governing their participants’ lives. Difficulties in accessing potential participants, building up trust in a context of mistrust, the role of the researcher vis-à-vis research participants, dealing with confidential information etc. are the basic issues guiding all contributions.

The common aim of the case studies presented is to critically reflect possibilities and limitations when conducting research involving migrants in vulnerable positions from various perspectives. The contributions very openly reflect on specific difficulties and possible mistakes that have occurred in the beginning of conceptualising the research, on the limits and reasoning behind modifications of research techniques and approaches and questions connected to dissemination of research findings. With this book we take the possibility to continue our reflections on ‘how to do it right’ or at least on ‘how to do it better’ we had started already in 2004. We believe that the ‘lessons learned’ by others who had to go through this process already, are suited to contribute fruitfully to the design of new research that will have to deal with similar challenges. The book is split in three parts: (1) methodology and ethics in institutional settings; (2) rethinking basic research methods, and (3) the role of the researcher when dealing with migrants in precarious situations.

Part One: Methods and Ethics in Institutional Settings

In the first part, methods and ethics in institutional settings the primary focus is on methodological problems and ethical concerns when conducting research on migration issues in a context where the political and institutional framework poses very concrete methodological and ethical questions, namely the institution ‘prison’.

Prof. Robert F. Barsky (Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, United States) Methodological issues for the study of migrant incarceration in an era of discretion in law in the southern USA.

Based on insights into the framework of a changing immigration policy practise and more specifically of immigrant incarceration since the adaption of new post-9/11 legislation Robert Barsky shows that within the context of heightened security and high level of discretion a whole new definition of the term ‘vulnerable population’ is created specifically applying to non-Americans. Based on these insights he presents the outlines of an interview-based methodology for a research project in this specific field. Exploring officials’ and incarcerated persons’ expertise on changed administrative practises of incarceration by conducting interviews insight the institution ‘prison’ is subject to several constraints and difficulties. It
makes it difficult for researchers who need to get past both the Institution Review Board Guidelines concerning vulnerable populations as well as the ever-stringent policies regulating prisoners. Barsky provides material for this kind of work within and beyond the United States, because even though some of the practices are particular to the US context similar developments can be observed in other countries as well.

Dr. Christin Achermann (Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies, SFMS, Geneva, Switzerland) Multi-perspective research on foreigners in prisons in Switzerland

Similarly, in her contribution Christin Achermann highlights that ‘prisons are special places, with their own logic and rules and full of ambiguity – for inmates, staff and also researchers’. Achermann takes on a different focus by exploring the situation of the immigrant inmate population in Swiss prisons and how various actors in the field assess this situation. Taking into account different views and assessments not only has methodological advantages but is also informed by ethical considerations. Giving equally voice to various views and valuing expertise from all persons involved (migrants, staff and administration) is one way of complying with the ethical principle of respect and responsibility to society. This also involves a certain level of reflection on the role of the researcher vis-à-vis its respondents as the question of justice and injustice play an inevitable role when researching in the institution prison. Based on this reflection in her concluding section she provides recommendations on what she ‘would change if conducting a similar research’.

Part Two: Rethinking Basic Research Methods

The contributions in the second part rethinking basic research methods base their primary focus on the questions of choosing the right methodological approach. By assessing various approaches authors elaborate on questions and strategies especially in regard to accessing hard-to-reach-populations, collecting information, data processing and dissemination of results.

Dr. Richard Staring (The Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands) Different methods to research irregular migration

Richard Staring provides insight into methodological issues when researching in a group not easily accessible. In his contribution he reflects on his research on processes of irregular migration of undocumented Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands and his experience with applying two methodological approaches namely ethnographic research and document analysis (police files). He elaborates on different forms of selectivity in both research approaches and concludes that still, depending on the specific research question, both research methods – on-site ethnographic research and secondary analysis of closed criminal investigations – can be successfully deployed in answering questions on the irregular migration processes and the supporting social capital.

Prof. Janine Dahinden and Denise Efionayi-Mäder (Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies (SFMS), Geneva, Switzerland) Challenges and strategies in empirical fieldwork with asylum seekers and migrant sex workers

Janine Dahinden and Denise Efionayi-Mäder take another perspective by reflecting on concrete methodological and ethical challenges they were confronted with both in a research on asylum seekers and in a study on migrant sex-workers. They decidedly take position by giving voice to structurally marginalised groups of persons. Having conducted interviews in both studies Dahinden and Efionayi-Mäder specifically focus on how best to access potential interview partners and they reflect on the quality of the data they collected in both studies. They also point at the broader ethical concern researchers are inevitably faced with when involving migrants in precarious situations by dealing with politically, socially, morally and legally controversially assessed topics.

Veronika Bilger and Dr. Ilse van Liempt (International Centre for Migration and Policy Development (ICMPD), Vienna, Austria and Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR), Brighton, United Kingdom) Methodological and ethical dilemmas in research among smuggled migrants.

The last contribution in Part Two is based on experiences from a collaborative research project on human smuggling. Veronika Bilger and Ilse van Liempt argue that already in the beginning ethical issues may be beyond the control of researchers as professional review boards themselves are in a powerful position to set the terms for selecting the appropriate methodological approach based on their perspective of who has a say and who does not, who can provide knowledge and who can not. Migrants’ who had been smuggled were assumed to be incapable of providing insights into the social organisation of human smuggling. Against such doubts the research team however insisted in the decision to include migrants’ expertise by conducting qualitative interviews. Still Bilger and van Liempt highlight that conducting and analysing the interviews proved to be the most chal-
lenging part in the course of the project. In their contribution they touch upon issues of accessing potential participants, how to build up trust in a context of mistrust, how narrations might be influenced by ‘external’ structures factors such as migration experience, migration policies and administrations, smugglers or the migrant community. Bilger and van Liemt conclude that the results of the research challenged common wisdom in approaching human smuggling exactly because a voice was given to otherwise underrepresented individuals.

**Part Three: The Role of the Researcher when dealing with migrants in precarious situations**

What is common to all contributions in the third part of this book is the reflection over the role of the researcher from various perspectives when researching migrants in precarious situations. Attention will be paid to the insider–outsider debate as well as to the close link between advocacy and research in this particular field.

**Dr. Eugenia Markova (Working Lives Research Institute at London Metropolitan University, London, United Kingdom)**

The ‘insider’ position: ethical dilemmas and methodological concerns in researching undocumented migrants with the same ethnic background.

Eugenia Markova who conducted research on the (informal) labour market performance of undocumented Bulgarian immigrants in three European countries elaborates on what a difference the position of being an ‘outsider’ or ‘insider’ makes. Markova argues that at first hand her active engagement with the Bulgarian community opened way to undocumented co-nationals participating in her research and eased access to important locations and information. Still, being a co-national, part of the community and therefore a friend opens a range of difficulties in the handling over conflicting roles. As she states: ‘clearly, this experience can be classified as “covert” research’. While researchers always hope to establish at trustworthy relationship with their respondents the situation looks slightly different if this relationship is already established beforehand. She argues that although using friendship for obtaining information might be considered a form of deception, some insights, especially when illegal activities are involved, cannot be gained by using conventional open methods but inevitably require certain ‘social lies’.

**Nuria Empez (PhD student at Max-Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Rostock, Germany)**

The fieldworker as social worker: dilemmas in research with Morrocan unaccompanied minors in Spain

In her research Nuria Empez follows Moroccan unaccompanied minors in their migration process from their home country Morocco to their destination Spain. Research involving children, considered as one of the most vulnerable groups, already bears specific issues in regard to methodology and research ethics. The fact that these children are staying undocumented only adds to their vulnerability. In addition, as these children organise their lives in the Spanish streets and thus constantly move bears additional peculiarities to be handled especially in regard to accessing these children and, as they usually organise in groups, establishing trust. As a researcher and at the same time a social worker, Empez highlights on advantages when navigating the fine line between these roles.

**Notes**

1 The EU Foreign prisoners project, coordinated by Professor Anton van Kalmthout and Femke Hofste-Van der Meulen from Tilburg University (The Netherlands) ‘addresses the issue of social exclusion of prisoners who are detained in the EU outside their country of origin’ in 25 EU Member States (http://www.foreignersinprison.eu)

2 Presented by the Refugee Studies Centre in 2007 and adapted from the ethical guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth.

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Part One

Methods and Ethics in Institutional Settings
THE ETHICS OF MIGRATION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

DEALING WITH VULNERABLE IMMIGRANTS

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