

Methods to study migration processes: focus groups and circular migration plots



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Increasing migration has occurred globally since the Second Industrial Revolution, owing to a more interconnected world that facilitates flows of capital and labour (Potts, 1990 as cited by Wimmer and Schiller, 2003, p. 586). Migration is often classified as either internal or international, along with a variety of patterns connected to the causes of migration motives, such as socio-economic factors. This has different outcomes, like the rate of assimilation within the migrants' host community. Therefore, it is necessary to understand these migrant-related processes from the interpretation of methods used to study this phenomena. I will outline the use of focus groups and circular migration plots used to study migration, which are qualitative and quantitative methods respectively, along with an analysis drawing upon their strengths and weaknesses.

Focus groups are a qualitative means of collecting data, often to put in use in a survey or to formulate questionnaires (Barbour, 2007). As focus groups tend to target ethnic minorities or marginalised groups (Barbour, 2007) and can link to related issues such as racialisation (Skop, 2006), the application of data from focus groups into the study of migration is important to understanding the phenomena and its resulting social implications.

According to Krueger & Casey (2015, p. 2), the data from focus groups are used to interpret personal experiences, and to look at the “ range of ideas or feelings” from an aspect of migration (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 19), with the aim of discovering the reasons why people act, across a range of perspectives. In addition, Frisina (2006) found that when conducting a study on young Muslims in Italy, the groups served as a form of empowerment by tackling the politically-sensitive issues around their religion within their

community, as well as prompting new waves of discussion that may not be otherwise considered from another qualitative data methodology such as an interview. Therefore, although “ only 55 articles (...) have used focus groups” (Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero, 2017, p. 11), this method for studying migration produces diverse and unique results on a community level.

A quantitative approach to study migration is to use circular migration plots. This technique is used to visualise net flows of migrants between nations, using software such as Circos or D3 (Sander *et al.*, 2014).

A segment of a circular migration plot are designated to an area like a region or a continent, and given a particular colour. The volume of migrant flow is represented by the width of the curves moving to each area. Furthermore, spatiality of migration is accounted for by the location of different regions because neighbouring regions are situated next to each other on the circle, and flows for migration journeys that are further apart are longer in length . (Sanders *et al.*, 2014).

Sander *et al.* (2014) also explain that

“ The stacked bars on the outside of the circle provide additional information on the net gain or loss. The inner bar shows the total volume of immigration, subdivided by origin colour. The outer bar shows emigration by destination colour. Placing the two stacked bars on top of each other yields the total volume of migration that is encoded by the circle’s segments” (p. 9).

Therefore, although this kind of plot is predominantly a visual tool in understanding migration flows (Sanders & Abel, 2014), the additional

quantitative data translates the plot from being relative flows, to having a numerical value, which gives a better understanding of the data.

The focus group method to study migration is a small scale method that collects intangible data such as rates of assimilation and stigma around particular groups' identities. Due to the " safety in numbers effect" (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999 as cited by Barbour 2007, p. 21), groups with a " common attribute or experience" (Barbour, 2007, p. 21) feel more inclined to voice their opinions than if they were on their own. Furthermore, Stahl *et al.* (2011, p. 2) suggest that " the focus group method can support emancipation of all individuals involved in research because each participant brings his or her own experiential insights, which may change as he or she learns of other participants' experiences and insights". Therefore, despite the socio-cultural disadvantages migrants may face, focus groups may bring people closer, encouraging further insight into topics such as belonging. However, focus groups may possess only " internal validity" (Balaz and Williams, 2018, p. 11) due to the small sampling size and the particular topic being discussed within the group. Typically, as focus groups relate to a specific form of qualitative data collection, the results cannot readily be scaled-up to apply to the whole population (Barbour 2007). Despite representing large-scale migration, circular migration plots are not complex. As they describe the general migratory flows of people over a period of time, rather than looking at sub-divisions of migrants (such as temporary migrants and refugees), the plots are better at spatially comparing migration flows over time (Sander *et al.*, 2014). The idea of " mixed-methods" (Skop, 2006, p. 115) supports this as collecting data via focus groups can provide hidden details or build up on

other methods, but cannot be used as the main source of data to study migration patterns (Barbour 2007, Stahl *et al.*, 2011), whereas circular migration plots largely generalise patterns of migration. Therefore, combining the different methods to study migration should yield more accurate and precise results. The analysis of online focus groups reveal that the groups result in unequal participation, slower interactions and reduced dynamism (Sinickas, 2001, Edmunds 1999 and Greenbaum 1997 as cited by Hughes and Lang, 2004, p. 97). Therefore, focus groups should be conducted in a face-to-face manner to be successful. In addition, Gorodzeisky (2011) revealed that because many focus group participants do not use specialist or similar vocabulary, she had to use the “Naralizer program” (Gorodzeisky, 2011, p. 13) to organise her qualitative data for the various categories of focus groups, hence interpreting qualitative data is more difficult than quantitative data. As circular migration plots interpret migration flows on a larger scale, they represent the whole population. However, the plots are derived from general statistics perspective and are removed from the social aspects of migration. Abel & Sander (2014, p. 1522) states this is a key weakness as “a better understating of the causes and consequences behind current migration patterns may allow for a more informed speculation on future trends”. Unlike focus groups, which looks at qualitative data collected by the researcher to understand the process of migration, circular migration plots can only shed light on migration flow trends. Moreover, these plots are composed a source of secondary data such as migrant stock data from the UN (Abel and Sander, 2014), so they do not take into account illegal or undetected flows, which may cause some inaccuracy in the data represented by the plots (Balaz and Williams, 2018).

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To conclude, both the methods of focus groups and circular migration plots are useful tools in understanding the processes behind migration. Focus groups collect data from particular groups of migrants, particularly ethnic minorities (Skop, 2006) to study social aspects and experiences witnessed by migrants with a common background, that results in the cumulation of qualitative data. This contrasts to circular migration plots, developed by Abel and Sander (2014), that represent large scale migrant flows between continents or regions and uses quantitative data to analyse spatial patterns in net migration. As both methods are so different, it has been useful to draw upon their relative strengths and weaknesses. However, as both cannot fully represent or aim to understand migration by their own as they are either too focussed or too broad in their approach, I agree with Skop (2006, p. 115) in that a “ mixed- methods” approach would be beneficial to provide a more accurate and precise picture of any migration and to also predict its future patterns.

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