From Policy Irrelevance to a Return to Relevance: Active Strategies in Forced Migration Research

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Abstract

This article traces a key logical framework in migration research: policy relevance. While many scholars and practitioners call for a closer relationship between research objectives and policy relevance, others have argued otherwise. Research which privileges the worldviews of forced migrants, rather than those of policymakers and practitioners, holds promise for moving beyond strict policy-laden and often legal categories, thereby creating new knowledge and priorities for policy itself. In this article, we unpack the denouement of this argument, that is, what has transpired in Forced Migration Studies since. Policy irrelevant research seeks to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge, and this article interrogates the politics and the imperatives, both ethical and practical, that arise from such a challenge. To that end, we look at the goals and conduct of a case study of organizations run by and for resettled refugees in the United States. This study illustrates how challenging policy-defined assumptions and categories, and raising critical perspectives drawn from forced migrants’ voices, yields implications for policy. To get there, research moves beyond categories and asks new questions through a deconstructive approach; yet going from here, we argue, entails another role for forced migration research, an “active” approach that involves critical translation and application. At this juncture of forced migration research, policy irrelevant research seeks to make itself relevant and reasserts itself in policy discourses.

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Introduction

Research aspires to be relevant, and in forced migration studies, research seeks to find applicability and use by policy makers for policy formulation and adjustment. Scholars have observed and debated the intimacy of the connection between academic inquiry into forced migration and policy and policymakers ever since the emergence of the academic field post-World War II. A problem-centered, practice-informed orientation to research that is methodologically rigorous, as well as relevant to policy, leads to funding from public and private donors. It also garners interest from bureaucratic, development, and humanitarian institutions that serve refugees and other displaced populations. The policy orientation of Refugee Studies or Forced Migration Studies (FMS) went hand in hand with the institutionalization of the academic field and, in turn, with its production of knowledge.

One decade ago, Oliver Bakewell problematized precisely those intimate links between forced migration research and policy. He argued that in the search for policy relevance, research has taken the categories, priorities, and priorities of policymakers and practitioners as initial frames of reference, failing to move past them and rendering real-life issues and concerns – things that matter – invisible. This initial framing and referencing to policy characterizes and defines policy relevant research. While the construction-in-progress of the “refugee” has been queried at least ten years earlier, Bakewell’s rather unique position, calling explicitly and unapologetically for policy irrelevant research, is key to the analysis presented here. Bakewell posited that the dominance of policy concerns has led to irreconcilable contradictions for academic inquiry into forced migration. Specifically, the intimate policy–research connection has constrained three things: the research questions asked, the objects of study, and methodology and analysis. At the heart of such constraints are categories; because “refugee studies” is founded upon the label or policy category “refugee,” it is therefore founded upon policy-driven definitions of the “refugee.” When policy definitions and labels are used uncritically in research and scholarly writing, academic independence and methodological rigor is compromised. An academic field that is too entwined in policy can represent policy-defined labels as natural and uncontested, and may obscure or entirely miss alternative perspectives.

Ten years after Bakewell’s call, perspectives that question categories and problematize the research – policy link have persisted in the field of FMS. Most recently, in 2018, Crawley and Skleparis consider Europe’s “migration crisis” in revisiting the “disjuncture between

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6 Black, “Fifty Years of Refugee Studies.”
9 Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories.”
conceptual and policy categories and the lived experiences of those on the move.” 10 They argue that privileging dominant categories – making them the basis of an analytical approach – could limit one’s understanding of migration and make them potentially complicit in a political process that has undermined the rights of refugees and migrants in Europe in recent years. 11 Indeed, given the current migration policy restrictionism, militarization, and heightened nationalism in the global north, and the worsened precarity of displaced populations and migrants globally, the old problem of “categories” gains salience anew.

“By breaking away from policy relevance,” Bakewell concludes, “it will be possible to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin much practice and in due course bring much more significant changes to the lives of forced migrants.” 12 This article takes this supposition seriously. It takes account of such perspectives and their application in specific research, and then follows them through to their ethical conclusions: what research must do once data and findings are present.

Using a case study approach, this article examines two related projects on Refugee Community Organizations (RCOs). The first project was a nationally-based research study of 35 RCOs in cities across the United States, and the second project was a place-based study of RCOs of different refugee backgrounds. As a reflective and introspective analysis, this article presents an analysis of the two projects that are underway. The examination and argumentation we make here emerged as we self-reflected on our ongoing work. We employ a case study approach, following Bakewell, as it allows for contextual and in-depth exploration. Examining the goals and methods of these two projects, we consider research that cuts loose from policy relevance and confronts assumptions, and then, finally, we interrogate what happens in due course if policy relevance is not central to a project’s objectives. In so doing, this paper ultimately argues for active strategies in FMS research as the preferred way forward.

Policy Irrelevant Research

Two strands of literature have emerged from Bakewell’s proposition. One affirmist view champions a policy irrelevant approach to research that loosens up the categorical boundaries of FMS. This approach disconnects from legal definitions of “refugee” and posits that any movement of population in a war-affected country should be considered for inclusion in research when authors show a link to warfare, given the reality of the fluid and mixed nature of population movements during armed conflicts. 13 By veering away from a narrower scope of inclusion, 14 this method helps to correct assumptions about persons affected, identifies important data and large population groups, and decreases the likelihood of misinterpreting information and twisting casualties. 15 Further, since a host of characteristics influence mobility, research must link refugee studies with broader social scientific studies of mobility 16 and its

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11 Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both,” 50.
12 Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 432.
15 Combaz, “Effects of Respect.”
political, economic, social, cultural, and emotional dimensions in order to broaden questions asked and expand who is considered an object of study. This is also needed to counter the “symbolic violence of categories” and categorical fetishism, and to expand often-static abstractions of technocratic-humanitarian displacement categories and even ideas such as “transit,” “settlement,” and “community.”

The viewpoint that this approach takes is that policy-oriented research could constrain the objects of study. In social work research into migration, for example, the main focus of policy-oriented research has been migration as a challenge for specific migrant groups (i.e., people seeking asylum). In rights-based research, because migration is more and more entwined with human rights abuses, Rivetti calls into question the bifurcation between “ordinary migrants,” who were theoretically not forced to emigrate, and refugees. Differences in their situations may be more theoretical rather than real. Categorizations of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in some border areas are also problematic, as they could exclude people from research through a rigid insistence of categories.

Policy acts as a filter, or blinder, to the methodical and analytical mind. To avoid such constraint, researchers have emphasized selecting methods that minimize categories and definitions in order to understand self-settled refugee communities. Research could thus be place-based, surveying all persons located within a territory, whether migrant, refugee, or otherwise. It could also be phenomenon-based, looking for and into the lives and conditions of people affected by a certain cause of displacement regardless of location. Such approaches encourage new permutations of design and methods, with soundness and ethics of research as the only possible limitations. In policy-led research analyses, by comparison, since definitions of migration and displacement are separate and disparate, distinctions between psychic and physical displacement are necessarily highlighted. However, research that takes an irrelevance approach has alerted the differences between category and conditions, or else certain experiences may be excluded. Because categories are collapsed, researchers often loosen their employment of terms, e.g., refugee or forced migrant in research follows self-identification or self-settlement or self-selection as a proxy.

A second stream of literature contests Bakewell’s proposition altogether. These researchers argue that within the context of carefully designed research, deliberate and thoughtful studies can address Bakewell’s concerns. Moreover, employing policy terms

19 Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both.”
20 Hammar, “Ambivalent Mobilities.”
enables research findings to be embedded within social realities. For Lundgren, research on groups belonging to policy-led categories is necessary to increase knowledge of both particular situations and people’s everyday life experiences in exile.²⁸ It should also invite critical thinking about the ways policies work and their impact on people affected by forced migration.²⁹ In other words, categories do exist and do matter, and one cannot do away with them in research.

However, the reality is that policymakers’ questions and frameworks, explicit or not, still guide academics who try to offer solutions through empirical research that is structured to ignore or revisit political meanings.³⁰ While policy irrelevance has gained traction in the last decade, the use of policy categories in research remains; scholars either take policy irrelevance for granted or actively pursue policy-relevant research.³¹ The paradox is that policy irrelevance is part of the research toolbox to achieve the purpose of affecting changes to policy and even to strict legal, conventional policy-laden categories. However, there has been little interrogation of how policy irrelevant research delivers “change to people’s lives,” as envisioned.³² We highlight the dearth of explorations into this denouement in existing scholarly literature.

**Policy Irrelevance in Researching Refugee-Run Organizations in the United States**

In this section, we discuss our case study and reflect upon policy relevance and categories, as applicable to refugee organizations in the U.S. resettlement domain. “By breaking away from policy relevance,” Bakewell concludes, “it will be possible to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpins much practice and in due course bring much more significant changes to the lives of forced migrants.”³³ Taking Bakewell’s prompt, we use our case study of refugee community organizations in the U.S. to conceptually analyze policy irrelevance step by step: first, breaking away from policy; second, questioning categories; and finally, interrogating outcomes and looking ahead.

**“Breaking away from policy relevance”**

For Bakewell, “notions of policy... tend to focus on formal organizations and their interactions with people”³⁴ and “policy is the domain of institutional decision-making by powerful actors, such as governments, aid agencies, and so forth.”³⁵ Policy and categories are concerned not only with refugees and displaced persons at the individual level, but also with organizations and institutions. In the United States, there are nine federally contracted organizations, termed resettlement agencies, funded annually by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (U.S. ORR) to implement the bulk of resettlement policy and programming. They are the primary institutional actors on the ground, implementing programs and services such as reception and

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³⁰ Christina Oelgemöller, “‘Transit’ and ‘Suspension’: Migration Management or the Metamorphosis of Asylum-Seekers into ‘Illegal’ Immigrants,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010).
³² Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 450.
³³ Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 452.
³⁴ Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 433.
placement services, housing, cultural and systems orientation, job readiness and job placement, and referral services for such concerns as physical health, mental health, and education. Resettlement agencies thus present what Bakewell calls a policy-guided set of practices and formal ways of doing business.36

Resettlement agencies are formalized policy-implementing agents and, consequently, the focus of considerable research. Indeed, scholars have queried and critically analyzed resettlement agencies’ implementation of refugee policy, particularly work-first refugee policy, and its consequences, contradictions, and challenges. Studies find that policy mandates and policy priorities delimit services for resettled refugees. For instance, Darrow discusses how service providers engage in administrative indentureship, whereby policy operates to bind the actions of service providers and their interactions with client-refugees.37 Similarly, Trudeau considers resettlement agencies as translation mechanisms for neoliberal state policy.38 Setting aside policy in research — within the context of U.S. refugee policy — this means looking beyond the resettlement agency as a policy-implementing agent and turning to other organizational actors (structured and unstructured) that operate alongside resettlement agencies. One such entity within the U.S. resettlement context that has largely escaped the attention of scholars, policymakers and practitioners alike, are community-based, informal, and grassroots groups run by and for refugees themselves, termed Refugee Community Organizations (RCOs).39 Research has traditionally focused beyond the level of the individual or the unstructured community of individuals,40 leaving individuals themselves, households, communities, and groups of resettled refugees — RCOs precisely — unexamined in terms of policy. The little research that does focus on RCOs, meanwhile, typically examines them in terms of the solidarity, community-building, and integration support they provide, without analyzing their explicit links to policy operations.41 Because they are state-detached and positioned outside the formal institutional domain, RCOs, particularly those in the United States, are rarely considered in analyses of resettlement policy.

Our case study, comprised of two related projects, explicitly puts the resettlement agency aside and focuses instead on RCOs. The first project was a nationally-based case study of 40 interviews with RCOs in 35 different cities in 30 states across the United States, alongside an examination of in-depth data about the types of activities conducted by RCOs of one refugee community, Bhutanese refugees.42 The second project built upon the first one by examining how those activities of Bhutanese RCOs may be relevant and applicable for RCOs of different refugee backgrounds in one location, using interviews, participant observation, and surveys. The survey and interview protocols were based on the Guide for Organizational Profile Interviews,43 modified to fit the context drawing from findings from the first project.

The case study aimed for an “oblique” approach to policy as Bakewell so described.44 This entails using a different angle and/or broader sociopolitical lens to gain fresh perspectives on the same policy concerns or categories or on issues outside the purview of current policy. This case study of RCOs did not rely on policy-defined characterizations of RCOs nor commonly used theories of community and social capital or cultural capital, but instead used as theoretical and empirical context for analysis the institutional network of which RCOs are a part. By not discriminating between resettlement agencies and RCOs and expanding the universe of organizations to include RCOs, this research design sought new and empirically informed insights that are all too often outside the field of vision of policy relevant scholarship.

“Challenging taken-for-granted assumptions” and “stepping outside the categories”

Refugee-run groups or RCOs are typically treated as entities that are informal and function within the social and cultural domains of refugees’ lives upon resettlement. “Refugeeness” precedes refugee-run groups.45 Migration research suffers from an “ethnic lens” that can be essentializing,46 and so, categorizing arguably follows for research on migrant organizations. The ethnic fetish that predominates migration research has been critiqued for obscuring the more particularized ways of being of migrants and social relations that emerge out of migration processes.47 Most studies examine RCOs during the early stages of organizational life, treat them as static and uncomplicated, and neither account for internal dynamics that adapt to shifting policy and institutional contexts, nor changes in practice and constitution over the life cycle of organizations.48 As a result, studies falsely homogenize these groups by failing to recognize complexities. They construct a fictive, collective identity of “refugeeness” that is built upon an externally created unity which, in many cases, does not reflect the aims or aspirations of the categorized groups.49 Indeed, the labeling of refugees, and in this case their groups and organizations, entails stereotyping through disaggregation, standardization, and the formulation of categories.50

In the U.S. institutional context, the “bureaucratic label”51 for refugee-run organizations are Ethnic Community-based Organizations, foregrounding them as “ethnic” and “cultural”, and “Mutual Aid Associations”52 that in turn depict their social orientation as communal and communitarian in terms of “mutual aid.” Yet, its value notwithstanding, culture can swallow up the entirety of an organization’s character. An over-emphasis, for instance, on the “social network attributes” of refugee-run groups has led researchers to ignore certain aspects of RCO research. When one cannot account for or readily accommodate some of the services that refugee-run groups provide, because they relate to the fact that they are also established organizations on their own right, research does not capture them.53

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44 Anucha, Dlamini and Smylie, Social Capital.
45 Piacentini, “Missing from the Picture?”
48 Piacentini, “Missing from the Picture?”
49 Piacentini, “Missing from the Picture?” 436.
51 Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 436.
In examining RCOs, we tried to not “stare too hard” at them, nor “make them exceptional” or “exclude them from our ‘mainstream’ theories.”\textsuperscript{54} We aimed to dislodge them from the bureaucratic labels that foreground their ethnicity and mutuality in aid and view them past conventional characterizations that depict them as cultural and social or associational. We sought to distinguish the RCO as an “analytic category” rather than a “policy category,”\textsuperscript{55} seeking to look beyond the “refugeness” of these refugee-run organizations.\textsuperscript{56}

What emerged in research was a reframing of labels or categories used to define refugee-run organizations or RCOs\textsuperscript{57} which illustrated the key roles that these organizations play in filling gaps in policy and responding to structural limits of policy-specified service provision that is state-led and state-driven\textsuperscript{58}. If the research were restricted and confined to state-ordained RCOs, it could not have accounted for the dynamics of the public-private and the role of the private sector and refugee-run organizations in providing services, public good, and their sense of responsibility towards refugee human rights. Whereas state-funded organizations have policy-specified limits and restrictions on their actions and priorities, our analysis illustrates that refugee-run groups are able to extend who is served by extending eligibility requirements specified in U.S. welfare policy (i.e., resettled refugees are eligible for services only for the first eight months after arriving in the United States) and by removing limitations from when, where, and how services are provided. Refugee-run groups are also evidenced as providing case management, crisis management, systems navigation, outreach, and prevention, akin to the service modalities and functions provided by their state-partnered and professionalized counterparts.\textsuperscript{59,60} To be sure, refugee-run groups themselves face limitations, among which are official modes of accountability as humanitarian actors and those related to funding and mobility.

**Active Strategies in Forced Migration Research**

Policy irrelevance and problematizing categories are two points of departure for research that yield promise to “in due course, bring much more significant changes to the lives of forced migrants.”\textsuperscript{61} However, this denouement seems implied and supposed, rather than followed through in research or argumentation. That is, the nature and extent of such significant changes in migrants’ lives remain unspecified in research. The intervention we thus present here, joining other FM scholars as discussed below, is a probing of what it means for FM research and researchers to follow through that denouement and promise.

Empirical and conceptual findings in our case study of U.S.-based RCOs offers new insights about their roles and functions vis-à-vis policy and state-funded programs and proposes new ways of categorizing such organizations. Whereas conventional labels or frames consider them as organizations that are informal, cultural-social, or “ethnic,” our case study instead posits a reframing of refugee-run organizations that foregrounds their practical relevance, and thereby policy relevance,\textsuperscript{62} much like state-contracted resettlement agencies. Arising precisely from research informed by the premise of policy irrelevance laid out by

\begin{itemize}
  \item Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 449.
  \item Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 436.
  \item Placentini, “Missing from the Picture?”
  \item Benson, “Refugee-Run Grassroots Organizations: Responsive Assistance.”
  \item Benson, “Welfare Support Activities.”
  \item Benson, “Refugee-Run Grassroots Organizations: Responsive Assistance.”
  \item Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 432.
  \item Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 432.
\end{itemize}
Bakewell and others, we gain new insights that can potentially have practical and policy relevance; the road leads back to policy, and, accordingly, to a reframing of refugee-run organizations. Thus, research exposes realities on the ground. Notably, we did not abandon the notion of categories per se or take an anti-category stance. Instead, we present possibilities that counter policy-defined labels or the categorizing of these important organizations.

With this, we want to consider: what’s next? This question and introspective questioning related to ethics and the imperatives of research are neither new nor unique to FMS. We revisit this line of questioning, in conversation with policy irrelevance and category problematization scholarship, via Bakewell. We consider active strategies in forced migration research, which entail going beyond knowledge development towards applicability in policy and practice. Rather than issuing a prescription for active strategies in FMS, this discussion instead presents a call to question, aiming to join and help bolster the recently emerging line of inquiry within FMS that rethinks academia’s classic and enduring desire and concerns over application, obligation, and ethics.

“Why (do) we bother doing it?” is one of the “quintessential questions that cannot, or should not, be separated when researching people fleeing persecution and in need of protection.” The heightened vulnerabilities of forced migrants demand not only methodological and ethical rigor, but intentionality in application. If research were to do justice to its subjects, it must unceasingly reflect on its foundations. Ngwato, in examining data use and advocacy with migrants and displaced persons in South Africa, states that if researchers choose to explicitly ask migrants about their current problems and needs, this creates an “obligation for actions on those needs.” Similarly, Mackenzie and colleagues recognize the researcher’s obligation to intervene and act, and thus argue for going beyond “do no harm” in FMS and for a “fundamental conceptual shift in research ethics to a model of community negotiated research that provides reciprocal benefit to refugee populations.” Mackenzie et al. use these perspectives more specifically for interpersonal relations between researchers and individuals or groups and contexts. Research unearths conceptual and organizational relationships that have implications on action.

Pertaining specifically to research on categories, meanwhile, scholars contend that categories could influence policy, practice, and even colloquial understandings of the concepts of FMS, for academia is also influenced by policy categories. Bakewell himself acknowledged the limits and ontological dilemmas inherent in an anti-category position that can be too all-encompassing; he further reflected how his own work led him back to policy terms in the end. Thus, what may be perceived as inevitable academic categorizing can either be complicit in policy-led categorizing or contest it. In a recent piece that revisits categorical fetishism in refugee studies within the context of Europe’s “migration crisis,” Crawley and Skleparis query the processes of translating nuanced, complicated research findings into

64 Jacobsen and Landau, “Dual Imperative in Refugee Research.”
69 Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories.”
messages that can be legible for politicians and policymakers. They offer four suggestions on how scholars can resolutely engage with the politics of bounding, that is, the process of constructing categories, their purposes, and their consequences, to reject their use as invidious mechanisms of subjugation. These discussions emphasize how scholars can actively engage with policy-defined categories, in order to make research relevant and applicable, without being overrun by them.

**Forward Directions in Active Strategies in FMS**

Fundamental to such discussions of relevance and applicability are ethics of reciprocity that denote researchers’ obligations. The ethics of immediate reciprocity entail “payback” for research participants specifically, while general reciprocity is not about direct returns for participants but instead some larger and social benefit. Perhaps in between the ethics of immediate and general reciprocity are active strategies in research, including in FMS. These active strategies do not necessarily need to be conceptualized in direct, individual, immediate terms as specified by Mackenzie et al. and Block et al., but they also should not be subject to abstraction, lengthy discourse, and indefinite duration, as described in Crawley and Skleparis.

Active strategies in FMS, viewed as an ethics of middle-level reciprocity, are concerned with the intentional application of findings to practice modalities of organizations and/or policy. Ngwato, for instance, specifies FM researchers’ obligation to integrate their findings into the work of organizations. This could increase the likelihood of the use of data and benefit surveyed populations. Active strategies denote applications that entail some level of institutionalization or uptake in programming, which is one level above direct engagement with individual participants, but also at a more practical lower level than abstracted, unspecified shifts in discourse and ideologies over time.

Such ethical discussions are long-standing issues in FMS, but systematic empirical analyses and theory-building seem to be still forthcoming, as the field is yet to embrace this task of investigating implications of policy irrelevant research. In our own case study and current work, active strategies are also yet in the making, and the reflective analysis we present here has emerged from in-the-moment queries pertaining to our own ethics of reciprocity. Paralleling strategies employed by others, the active strategies we have formulated have a range; Participatory Action Research (discussed below), white papers and presentations for policymakers and practitioners, dissemination of findings, and public scholarship via online sites for research partner organizations, for example. We imagine these activities as a continuum that need to be re-focused even more to interrogate Bakewell’s denouement.

In terms of active strategies, perhaps the most directly relevant research modality is Participatory Action Research (PAR), and indeed it is one that is not unfamiliar to FMS scholars. PAR seeks to do away with power relations between researcher and participants to create collectivity and relationality in the knowledge development and production of research.

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70 Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both.”
71 Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both,” 48.
73 Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway, “Beyond ‘Do No Harm’”.
75 Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both.”
76 Ngwato, “Collecting Data on Migrants,” 211.
in order to sustainably address the issues that communities face. FMS researchers demonstrate that application of PAR can be transformative and have lasting impacts. For example, Alissa Starodub and research participants used self-exposure and other modalities of co-creating knowledge to interrogate the border zone on the Balkan route in Central Europe, towards refugee solidarity action. Decolonizing methodologies, meanwhile, as emerging and promising approach for FMS, draw from indigenous epistemologies and ontologies to take power from western academia and to redistribute and reformulate knowledge and institutions via active participation of marginalized communities. Koen Leurs and Kevin Smets, along with their colleagues in their special collection on forced migration and digital connectivity, take on the question and task of de-centering Europe in digital (forced) migration studies. 

Essentially, the engaged scholarship movement, not as action oriented as PAR, seeks to integrate communities and universities as partners in researching social issues. For instance, Darcy Alexandra used arts-based methods — digital storytelling and scriptwriting — to engage asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland to create powerful testimony, generate connections and produce knowledge. The university-engaged scholarship movement is a direct reaction to the privatization of research in higher education and elitism that accompanies the claim to objectivity in knowledge production. Despite the lack of a cohesive theorizing, these lines of action-based and participatory approaches within FMS seem to converge upon the “politics of the everyday,” emphasizing the integral role of migrants in active strategies in research. Such convergences draw from a range of theoretical and epistemological traditions, including feminist research, decolonizing methodologies and perhaps even the more broad-based approach of public scholarship, as discussed. Importantly, scholars extend these issues to a global perspective, whereby research from the global south is contrasted with and prioritized over research from the global north. Feminist scholars make similar arguments, advocating the use of research to make a difference in the life of the researched, positioning feminist researchers in a place of action alongside

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activists. Schrödinger’s refugee is not a mere object of others’ research, but that they be active actors who formulate their own research questions and design and undertake research, and then carry findings forward with application. Active strategies would bring lived experience and perspectives that can most powerfully and effectively identify categories, question them and then push their boundaries. For who lives these categories but forced migrants? From there, forced migrants’ ownership of knowledge and embodiment as researchers can lead to the relevance so sought. That is, the forced migrant — with the means and mechanics of family, organization and community at their disposal and then as the owner of that knowledge — is the one who is best situated for turning theoretical implications of research into material consequences that are policy relevant.

Conclusion

The categories are now problematized, but these problematics warrant active engagement beyond mere visibility. That is, the findings and theoretical arguments of policy-irrelevant research should have application, especially given the current moment of heightened precarity for forced migrants. While we elaborated on the contribution of Bakewell’s proposition to FMS discourse, we have also highlighted the importance of adopting a more nuanced approach to policy categories as they relate to research. Balancing the closures of policy categories with the need to speak in a language that is relevant to diverse audiences is of utmost importance. After a policy irrelevant method of research, Bakewell himself acknowledges that policy and legal frames are needed and should be incorporated in a principled analysis “where it seemed necessary to relate the findings back to policy categories in order to challenge them.”

Of equal importance is the need to consider the denouement. We raise questions, both ethical and practical, about the imperatives and processes through which research that was once policy irrelevant may engage with more active components of scholarship. To be clear, this does not take policy categories at face value, but provides an avenue to engage with them and other actors critically and intentionally. The discussion of relevance reflects a certain persistent ennui that has been long-standing in FMS research. Our discussions here aim to join a line of FMS that beckons for serious attention to the “impact” agenda of research, “obligation for active engagement,” “professional integrity” of researchers, “rigorous reflexivity,” and, as we now argue, “active strategies” in FMS. Particularly in the current global environment of restrictionism, nationalism, xenophobia, and militarism over borders globally, academic approaches that simply query the epistemology and power of policies and categories, important as they are, seem incomplete without grappling with the issue of relevance.

90 Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories,” 449.
93 Ngwato, “Collecting Data on Migrants.”
94 Halilovich, “PAR Ethical Approaches in Research.”
95 Block, Riggs, and Haslam, Values and Vulnerabilities.
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