Critical Reflections on Conducting Elite Interviews on Forced Migration in Small Island Developing States

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Abstract

This paper considers the ethical and methodological concerns related to undertaking qualitative research on forced migration in small island developing states (SIDS). It is based on reflections on the first stages of a qualitative research project, which seeks to examine the impact of the current Venezuelan migration crisis on SIDS in the states that were colonized by the Dutch and English (Aruba, Curacao, and Trinidad and Tobago). This paper discusses how culture, domestic politics and the geo-political environments of SIDS influences the negotiation and conduct of interviews with experts (government and non-governmental officials working in immigration and foreign policy). In discussing the effects of scale in the conduct of research into forced migration, the author also draws on her experience conducting doctoral research on undocumented migration in another SIDS, Barbados. Using a small states lens thus enables critical reflection, on the part of the researcher, towards adopting a flexible strategy to ensure appropriate ethical and methodological approaches. The research affirms debates in the literature on undertaking sensitive research with qualitative methodologies. It points out that the challenges related to elite participation in research on sensitive topics are exacerbated by small size. The paper thus contributes to an emerging dialogue regarding research in “small connected communities.” In addition, the paper weighs the merit of undertaking research in the Caribbean, an under-researched setting, where policy decisions/actions vis-à-vis emerging migration crises, are being taken without clear evidence of support from data and research. It thus sheds light on this region of the world where increasing public attention is now being paid to forced migration (and displacement), signifying the need for robust methodologies of investigation.

Keywords: Small Island Developing State(s) (SIDS), Ethics, Methodology, Qualitative Research, Elite Interviews, Reflexivity, Flexibility, Sensitive Research, Scale

Introduction

Since 2015, approximately 1.6 million Venezuelans have emigrated due to the multidimensional crisis affecting the country. The majority (90 percent) have travelled to

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South America. Several have also travelled to small island developing states (SIDS) in the Southern Caribbean. Venezuelan arrivals in this region has been met with mixed policy responses. However, a common narrative has emerged concerning states’ (in)ability to manage a (substantial) increase in forced migration flows from Venezuela. In order to examine the implications of the Venezuelan migration crisis for these Caribbean SIDS, I designed a multi-sited study organized in two phases. The first seeks to understand from the perspective of elites, the factors that limit the respective state’s capacity to effectively respond to higher levels of inward migration from Venezuela. I had decided to focus on the forced migration contexts of the three SIDS in the Caribbean – Aruba, Curacao and Trinidad and Tobago, most impacted by the crisis. The second, will entail an ethnographic study of migrants in at least two of these destination countries, to explore their reasons for emigrating and the challenges of integrating in the host country.

The first phase of research thus entailed “studying up” as I prioritized interviews with local political officials and international civil servants working in the areas of foreign policy, national security and migration management. I sought access to those “who hold important social networks, social capital and strategic positions within social structures.” I thought my engagement with these individuals would be a critical entry point to other key players, since ultimately my requests would have been routed to these initial contacts, making or breaking their decision to participate. Of greater importance was the fact that I thought it essential to contextualize migrants’ experiences by understanding the role of the state in the reproduction of their exclusion. This paper is concerned with the challenges of completing the first phase of the study. I encountered difficulties obtaining access to elites to undertake semi-structured interviews. In attempting to understand what accounted for the low rate of participation, I drew on literature related to small state discourse, forced migration and qualitative research (elite interviewing). Were the challenges related to the fact that these were all small states defined

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3 SIDS share a number of characteristics, which distinguish them from other states. These include their vulnerability to exogenous shocks, susceptibility to natural disasters, and remoteness. The grouping is constituted by sovereign and non-sovereign states in the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea (AIMS), Caribbean and Pacific regions. The Caribbean region has the highest number of SIDS. UN-OHRLS, Small Island Developing States: Small Islands Bigger (ger) Stakes (New York: UN-OHRLS, 2011).


6 In addition to these three countries, Guyana has also seen an increasing number of Venezuelan arrivals. ("The Influx of Venezuelans in Guyana: Refugees to Some, ‘Silent Invader’ to Others," Kaieteur News, November 5, 2018) Later research will focus on this country, which is distinct from the current cases due to its land rather than coastal border with Venezuela, as well as the nature of the government’s response, which has been receptive to inward migration from Venezuela ("Guyana Establishes Support Group for Venezuelans Seeking Refuge," Guyana Times, June 4, 2018).


8 Ibid.

by a unique set of characteristics, emblematic of small states? Or were they to be explained by the more generic issues related to conducting research with elite populations?

The paper is organized into four sections. The first entails a review of the literatures on undertaking qualitative research through elite interviewing and discourse on small states. The concept of “scale” is used to unify these two disparate areas of scholarship. A brief overview of the Venezuelan crisis and a description of narratives and policy responses surrounding the increase in inward migration from Venezuela to the Caribbean is then provided. A discussion of the research project and the steps taken to negotiate access ensues. This is followed by a discussion of the factors, which explained low rates of participation of elites contacted for the research project. This section links the discourses on small states and qualitative research methodologies and includes comparative analysis of a research project undertaken in another SIDs. The paper concludes by discussing implications of the research findings for future research into forced migration in the Caribbean context. In addition to reconciling the issues faced during the research process, this paper can provide insight for novice researchers who may face similar challenges undertaking research in small island contexts.

On Scale

Scale is a contested terminology in geography;10 it is less fraught where there has been a tendency for an operational definition which conflates scale with size.11 There has been quite heated debate regarding the definition of scale and its various components, that is scale as size, level and relational, respectively.12 In this paper I adopt a definition of scale which embraces these three dimensions. Specifically, I am interested in how factors related to small size are reproduced throughout the research project, as well as the extent to which the research project, undertaken in small geographical spaces, was impacted by social relations shaping the (geo) political existence of the small states being studied. It was necessary to draw on a wide range of literature in order to understand and paint a coherent picture of the relationship between scale and qualitative research. Based on the scholarship examined, scale can refer to the scope of the project, that is, the number of participants or the pool of potential participants,13 the site of the project, that is, the spatial/geographical extent of the place being studied,14 or a combination of both.15 Gregory et al. (2009)16 affirm that scale impacts research design, since

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questions must be appropriate to the unit of analysis. But scale also has other consequences, as I will demonstrate below.

Does Size Matter? Scale and Place

There is a well-established literature on scale in relation to place, most notable, the discourse on small states, and within that, the scholarship on small island developing states (SIDS). This discourse spans a range of disciplines including International Relations (especially International Political Economy), Political Science and Development Studies. While the definition, and contingently the methods for measuring (small) size are contested, there is consensus that SIDS share a number of characteristics which distinguish them from large(r) states, and which impact their mode of being in world. For the purposes of this analysis we focus on dimensions of territory, specifically population, as this is the most frequently used quantitative metric. I have adopted the 1.5 million threshold, which is advanced by the Commonwealth Secretariat and endorsed by the World Bank.

In the literature, there appears to be a divide concerning the extent of the impact of small country size on methodology. On the one hand, there are indirect discussions on the relationship between design and scale, where research sites are chosen precisely because of their small size in order to satisfy research objectives. Research into small places is also characterised by similar methodological tools employed in large(r) places including semi-structured interviews and site visits, case studies, online surveys using a structured questionnaire, and multi-criteria choice methodology. This underscores the suitability of small places as appropriate sites for scholarly investigation; indeed, islands have a special place

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17 For further information on current issues being addressed by the discourse, please see the Journal of Island Studies and the Journal of Small States and Territories coordinated by the Universities of Prince Edward Island, Canada and Malta, respectively.


20 Ibid. Maass makes a useful distinction between quantitative and qualitative dimensions, the latter relating to power and influence in the international system, typically embraced by scholars of International Relations.


as they facilitate examination of diverse processes of migration. It does not, however, settle the question of whether/how small size impacts methodology. This concern is addressed by the inter-disciplinary field of Island Studies. Within the context of research into and on island states, considerations of scale influence researchers’ responsibility to: (1) not objectify island spaces; (2) recognize the agency of the researched; and (3) engage multi-scalar conceptualizations of scale in order to enrich theoretical understandings.

In a discussion on methodological issues, Baldachinno notes that islands are characterised by closely knit and surveilled networks, which poses challenges for investigating island life. Islanders carefully guard information due to the risk of being alienated from their community. This bears special significance for those with positionality as outsider, who are unable to interpret social cues and break the “culture of silence”. Within this framework, scale converges at both the territorial and societal levels. This is an important point to highlight since societal scale – the number and quality of role relationships – can be constrained in large territories as well. Baldachinno does not provide a specific case study, as he uses as an auto-biographical approach based on his broad breath of experience in this field. Yet, his observations affirm the need for sensitivity to issues related to small size. They also suggest that ethical and methodological concerns can arise due to small (country) size. The links between scale and ethical and methodological considerations are more evident in the discussion on small sample frame, especially concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity in elite interviewing.

**Does Size Matter? Scale and Sample Size**

There is rigorous debate in the literature on what constitutes too small a sample and the associated challenges of validity and generalizability of findings. This forms part of a larger debate between quantitative and qualitative methodologists. Justifications regarding the use of a small sample include methodological orientation, satisfying study objectives, as well as pragmatism - overcoming issues of access in hard to reach populations, or in sensitive subject areas. In this regard, the debate is particularly problematic since there are recommendations for minimum cut off points for sample size, including suggestions that the sample size be

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determined a priori. Dworkin for example, recommends a range of 25-30 individual interviews, as this is believed to exhaust all research questions and enhance the possibility of rigorous data collection, including testing of negative cases. These minimum (and arbitrarily assigned) points may not be pragmatic in certain settings, where small country size may impose small sampling frame. The approximation of less than 20, proposed by Crouch and McKenzie, seems to be much more tenable. Notwithstanding the above, there is consensus that small sample sizes (irrespective of how defined) are useful, in particular for case studies, since it encourages deep analysis.

Discussions regarding challenges of a small sampling frame have arisen, especially for studies related to sensitive research topics. Diligence and sensitivity are required throughout the research process from the initial stages of contacting interviewees through to reporting data. In the case of the former, the researcher can build in protective mechanism, such as a blurb regarding how data will be reported. In the case of the latter, anonymity can be counter-productive since deliberate obfuscation of identifying details does not prevent discovery of participants or place, by local or extra-local actors. While the possibility exists to increase the sample size by including additional sites for data collection, this flexibility is useful only if it is feasible and appropriate to the study. Moreover, the interconnectedness of networks in specialized fields or groups, may still pose challenges to confidentiality. Heightened interconnectedness of networks can lead to recommendations for further contacts, facilitating access. However, the converse logic is also true, in that the participation of potential interviewees may be discouraged by those with whom initial contact has been made.

Research Context

Since the death of Former President Hugo Chávez an ongoing multi-dimensional crisis has affected the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. One aspect of the simultaneous

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34 Dworkin, "Sample Size Policy for Qualitative Studies Using In-Depth Interviews," 1319-1320.
35 Crouch, and McKenzie, "The Logic of Small Samples in Interview-Based Qualitative Research," 483-499.
Research on the contemporary destinations of Venezuelan migrants is now emerging;\textsuperscript{49} work in this area has not focused explicitly on forced migration though consideration is given to issues, which are important factors in forced migration settings, such as mental health of migrants\textsuperscript{50} and discrimination.\textsuperscript{51} For Venezuelans - economic migrants, individuals reuniting with family members and persons seeking asylum, SIDS in the Southern Caribbean are popular destinations due to their proximity. At eleven kilometres, twenty-five kilometres and 68 kilometres north of Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba and Curacao, respectively are easily accessible by boat. However, the journey by boat to these destinations is expensive, and

\textsuperscript{43} Dire economic conditions have produced critical shortages in basic necessities, such as food and medicine.\textsuperscript{44} Emigration has therefore become a means of survival. This sizeable outward migration has signalled a turning point in the socio-cultural history of Venezuela, which was once characterized as a country of immigration.\textsuperscript{45} During the Chávez administration, emigration rates increased with the departure of middle-class professionals, who were disenchanted with the political regime or recruited for their expertise and skills in fields such as medicine and engineering.\textsuperscript{46} Emigration since Maduro’s assumption of office is, however, distinct from that which would have taken place under Chávez’s leadership. This new wave is largely composed of the unemployed and disaffected youth,\textsuperscript{47} who are making precarious journeys on foot or by sea, to proximate and contiguous continental and island destinations. In addition, an increasing number of Venezuelans are now claiming asylum, significantly higher than previous years, and are travelling to new destinations in the hemisphere.\textsuperscript{48}


\textsuperscript{43} IOM UN Migration, “UNHCR and IOM Chiefs Call for More Support as the Outflow of Venezuelans Rises Across the Region.”


\textsuperscript{46} Vargas Rivas, "La Migración en Venezuela como Dimensión de la Crisis," 91-128.


at times, risky. In January 2018, for example, a vessel en route to Curacao carrying approximately twenty persons broke apart. Only four of the persons drowned were recovered on a beach near Willemstad in Curacao.

In local and regional media, political elites in each of the three islands expressed concerns regarding the increase in arrivals of Venezuelan migrants. In the Dutch Caribbean, it resulted in a protracted row with the Kingdom government, whom the islands maintain have a responsibility to address claims for refugee status. In Trinidad and Tobago, Prime Minister Keith Rowley stated, “we cannot and will not allow UN spokespersons to convert us into a refugee camp.” This highlighted tensions between the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the stationed United Nations missions, and marked the stalling of dialogue with the UN and local partners to build on the existing policy mechanism by adding a special provision that would enable Venezuelans to work. It appears that these talks have recently been reinvigorated. There was reluctance across the region to classify Venezuelans as refugees, despite the endorsement of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (Cartagena Declaration) by Curacao and Trinidad and Tobago. Countries stressed their lack of capacity to be responsive to the migrant crisis given their small size – limited land area and lack of financial resources.

In the sections which follow, I discuss my approach to understanding the dynamic of forced migration in the Caribbean context, through the eyes of elites. Forced migration studies favour qualitative studies into the lived experiences of migrants. In order to obtain greater clarity on these experiences, which would have constituted a second phase of research, I sought to understand the perspective of elites who were in the process of debating and shaping the policy and legislative framework regarding protection of forced migrants from Venezuela.

Doing Forced Migration Research in Aruba, Curacao and Trinidad and Tobago

54 Curacao Chronicle, "Premier Aruba: The Netherlands "Too Indifferent' about Refugee Flow to Venezuela."
55 Bridgall, "TT Not Refugee Camp: Rowley Buffs UN on Venezuela Deportations."
57 bid.
58 The Cartagena Declaration, a non-binding agreement for the Americas, broadened the definition of refugees by including displacement caused by 'generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order' as a basis for claiming asylum (Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, BZ-CO-CR-SV-GT-HN-MX-NI-PA-VE, Nov. 22, 1984).
59 The pace of ratification of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees has been uneven in the region, though the majority have ratified. Among the cases studies, Trinidad and Tobago has ratified both the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. Aruba has ratified only the 1967 Protocol. The unevenness in terms of ratification and complicity is explained in the main by states’ limited capacity to implement international treaty commitments related to human rights protection (on the case of Trinidad and Tobago, see Rochelle Nakhid, and Andrew Welch, "Protection in the Absence of Legislation in Trinidad and Tobago," Forced Migration Review 56 (2017): 42-44). In addition to factors stemming from weak legislative frameworks and capacities, receptivity to forced migrants is also contingent on geo-political factors (See for example, the case of Cuban migrants in Jamaica as discussed by Stephen Vasciannie, "The 1996 Cuban Asylum-Seekers in Jamaica: A Case Study of International Law in the Post-Cold War Era," U. Miami Int'l L. Rev. 28 (1996): 5.
Prior to the start of the research project, I had very limited contacts in the research sites, and in the absence of intermediaries, sought to establish credibility, through a letter of introduction, which had been signed by the Director of the research institute to which I am attached. The letter explained my role at the Institution and outlined the objectives of the research. Along with the letters, I also included an informed consent form, which provided potential interviewees with further details regarding the study and participants’ rights. I made it optional for participants to have their names excluded from the study, unless they desired, including the option of anonymous quotations.

The letter (and accompanying documentation) was circulated in email requests for interviews, after initial contact had been made via telephone. In all cases, I spoke with the secretary/administrative assistant of the elite, with whom I wanted to engage. This was unavoidable, given their status calls are routinely screened. Unless I was probed, I did not provide significant details about the study over the phone though I did make it clear that I wished to do research on immigration from Venezuela. I did not think sharing at length would be helpful. On the one hand, it may have resulted in refusal to share contact information, bringing the project to a premature close. On the other, and especially in the cases of the Dutch islands, telephone connections were poor. In these cases, some conversations took place in Spanish, which made interacting much easier, since I do not speak Dutch.

Prior to making contact, I spent some time going through online versions of local newspapers. During this analysis I noted which individuals had issued public statements on Venezuelan immigration. While I had anticipated some challenges with gaining access, I did not expect high levels of respondent resistance. I assumed that elites (provided they had the time) would be willing to speak on matters they had already discussed in public fora. In addition, the objective of the study – to understand the factors limiting SIDS capacity to respond to the migration and refugee crisis – mirrored the language of governments’ framing of the problem.

I had initiated contact at least two months in advance and hoped the fact that I would be travelling to undertake the interviews would lend itself to favourable consideration of the request. Some interviews were confirmed ahead of travel, and I remained optimistic the others would be finalized during my time in each country. For Trinidad and Tobago, where I had the least confirmations, I also made plans to do archival research so that I could maximize my time. I also intended to use the opportunity to become familiar with each country – I had not travelled to either Aruba or Curacao before this research - and intended to return to conduct the second phase of the study. Potential interviewees were provided with the option of conducting the research virtually, at a time that was convenient to them, if they were unavailable during my visit. To date, those who have declined to participate have not taken up this option.

In total, I was able to conduct eight elite interviews, three in Trinidad and Tobago and five in Curacao (see Table 1). This was below my intended target of seventeen. In the end, I did not travel to Aruba because I did not receive favourable responses to my requests. During the negotiation of interviews with government officials, I was met with the following responses:

1. Lack of acknowledgement of correspondence and no response to requests for interviews despite multiple follow-ups.
2. Outright decline to participate in the study
3. Lengthy turnaround time to respond to request (despite multiple follow-ups) to ultimately decline
4. Lengthy turnaround time to respond to request to eventually recommend contact with another expert; this expert continues the cycle of delay.

5. Promises to provide feedback, without agreeing or declining to participate.

In one instance, I was asked to forward my request to a specified email address, but I was also asked to share personal bio-data - a copy of my passport, which I felt was not only unnecessary but could possibly be used for ulterior purposes.

There were contrasting approaches of elites from staff of international organizations working on migration governance issues in the region. Two elites agreed to be interviewed. For another there was resistance to engage, despite verbal signals which suggested they were interested in the study and willing to support the research. A fourth individual in the international public sector consented almost immediately, and then retracted consent under the premise that headquarters would need to approve their participation. I was later informed that this was not possible under the current circumstances. Specific reasons were not provided but I assumed these related to shifting modalities for the registration of asylum seekers.

Table 1: Participation rate among potential elite interviewees contacted in research sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Site</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Category of Elite</th>
<th>Y/N</th>
<th>Reasons Provided for Lack of Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aruba</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Government Official 1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Recommended another official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government Official 2*</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Current circumstances do not allow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>International Public Servant</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Current circumstances do not allow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rate of participation</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curacao</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Government Official 1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Recommended another official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government Official 2†</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Retired Government Official</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>International Public Servant</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NGO Representative</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NGO Representative</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rate of Participation</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Government Official 1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Recommended another official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government Official 2†</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>None provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government Official 3</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>None provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government Official 4</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>None provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Retired Government Official</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>International Public Servant 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>International Public Servant 2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Without the benefit of being provided with reasons for non-participation, I must draw conclusions based on my knowledge of the region. Mikecz suggests that foreigners have greater access to elites as they are not perceived as threats, especially if the research is to be published outside the country of study. My project was driven by policy imperatives and aimed at influencing dialogue on migration management in the region; thus, it was highly likely to be read by experts within the Caribbean. Notwithstanding my Caribbean nationality, my outsider status was underscored by the fact that I was unconnected to the elites directly, or to persons within their network, anathema in contexts where politics is highly impersonal and political relationships based on patronage. Elites may therefore have assigned me adversarial positionality. Knowledge of the research objectives could have dissuaded participants, despite promises of confidentiality. They may have feared (further) critique from the regional and international community regarding their handling of the migrant crisis facing their respective countries.

Within eight months of the start of the research project, two separate reports were published, castigating governments for lack of protection of the refugee community in Trinidad and Tobago and a de facto deportation policy in Curacao. The report on Curacao was published while I was still trying to negotiate interviews with government authorities in Aruba, after several months of delay. This, as well as other geo-political events including negotiations in the energy sector and pressure from the Organization of American States to force the ousting of Maduro were unfolding simultaneously with the research process. They highlight the importance of timing, which is an important consideration for studies with small connected communities around highly sensitive policy issues. These realities also underscore the relational level of scale, in particular the reproduction of small states as weak powers in the

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61 Key: # = Total number of elites contacted; * = official recommended by initial contact; 1 = contacted separately from recommendation, at the beginning of the study; 2 = contact initiated after return from Trinidad and Tobago; Y = Yes, elite participated; N = No, elite did not participate. Two officials participated in a single interview session with an NGO in Curacao.
65 Teff, Forced Into Illegality: Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in Trinidad and Tobago.
international political economy. In this respect, the influence of small size was beyond research design, but nonetheless had significant impact on the outcome of the research project.

In addition to the above, elites may have declined to participate in order to distance themselves from controversial public statements regarding the migration crisis confronting their respective countries. As the research unfolded, it became very clear that the discussion had become highly politicised. It was therefore naïve of me to expect that drawing on the rhetoric of the elite, as an inducement to participation, would have been effective. It is my impression that the rhetoric regarding limitations of scale for the management of migration was strategically devised to respond to both domestic and international pressures. This did not necessarily mean, however, that potential interviewees would be open to discussing these challenges, as the low participation rate points out. I also believe, and this may explain their decision not to engage with international advocacy groups, that these small governments did not wish to open themselves to greater scrutiny. While their rhetoric was centred on limited capacity, they were not able to provide statistics regarding the number of arrivals. Revealing such figures may have undermined the credibility of their assertions. If this is so, it highlights the triumph of the personal over rational-legal approaches, which is typical in small places.

The above discussion highlights that the main constraints to the success of the research project concerned my positionality, lack of access to gatekeepers, and politicization of the subject under study, which is also connected to the timing of the research project. These are not unique to research in small places. However, I show below with a comparative analysis of a research project conducted in another SIDS, Barbados, that these challenges were compounded by the small state characteristics of the cases under examination.

Linking Discourses on Small States and the Challenges of Engaging Qualitative Methodologies

In 2010, I travelled to Barbados to undertake doctoral research into the lived experience of undocumented Caribbean Community (CARICOM) nationals residing in Barbados. The research took place towards the end of a highly charged policy shift regarding regularization of intra-regional migrants. I had felt it important to have discussions with several experts in government and other sectors, in order to better appreciate the context. Though a Caribbean national, I was removed from the happenings in Barbados based on my physical distance from the island studying in the United Kingdom, but also due to my having interacted with the context through mediated reports. It would be my first time travelling to the island and having the opportunity to observe first-hand the unfolding situation.

In Barbados, most of the elite interviews were with individuals whose jobs did not relate directly to the management of migration and/or did not work in government. The potential for negative consequences due to their participation (reprimands, threats or job loss) was therefore marginal to none. In addition, notwithstanding reports of an anti-immigration rhetoric in Barbados, there was significant sympathy among the population for Guyanese nationals. They were to be most impacted by the ad hoc amnesty, which concluded three months prior to my

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71 "Over 40,000 Venezuelans in T&T," CNC3, September 12, 2017.
arrival. This may have influenced the participation of several of the expert interviewees, who consistently referenced the historical relationship between Barbados and Guyana, stemming from inter-national migration during the post-emancipation era. Some had clear links to opposition parties in the island. There may also have been a desire to repair the negative image painted of Barbados by regional press.

I had significant success with elite interviews, as I was able to speak with pre-arranged contacts, as well as with additional participants through snowballing. For example, I spoke with two immigration lawyers who had first-hand knowledge of legal procedures and indirect experience through their clients, who had filed applications for amnesty. I also spoke with a senior official in the trade union movement, given my interest in migrants’ contribution to the labour market. However, I was unable to obtain one key interview with a government official, despite having received confirmation prior to my arrival. Unlike the current project, there was no outright refusal to participate, though it did take some perseverance to obtain a confirmation about the interview’s scheduling.

It is difficult to say definitively that this participant’s reluctance hinged on fear of retribution from superiors, which is heightened in small places, especially as anonymity could not necessarily be guaranteed in this context. Our exchange during the limited time we interacted at the interview site indicates that power dynamics were more at play; though the individual did not interview, they used the opportunity to critique my methodological approach. I was advised that migrants’ narratives are unreliable; however, I was, paradoxically, not provided with the opportunity to get feedback from an official of the state working directly in the management of migration. As an outsider, my access was further constrained as I did not have ties with gatekeepers who were connected to the current political administration.

A comparison of the experience of negotiating interviews during this study and the current research project, suggests that scale played a role. I was naturally restricted to a small sample frame, in terms of potential expert interviewees. This was further exacerbated by the specialized nature of the area, and its sensitive nature. In addition, the refusal of this key interviewee to participate prevented access to other important stakeholders in this particular sector. While this can happen in larger country contexts, the high inter-connectedness of networks, which typifies small states constrained my access to other potential interviewees working in migration management. In this regard, the discussion on implications of small size for domestic politics is instructive. Public administrative systems in small states are characterised by over-extended personnel, timid decision-making, limited number of trained personnel, who carry multiple portfolio responsibilities, as well as highly personalized political systems. In addition, due to close kinship ties, politicians find it difficult to distinguish between decisions taken for the public interest, and those which support kinship and affinity. Finally, issues of public concern rise quickly to national prominence and can become highly politicized. These characteristics, when linked with the discourse on elite interviewing, suggest that this type of research can be challenging in small places. Gaining access to elites is difficult for a number of reasons, including sensitivity of the research topic, hectic schedules, lack of trust, and broader political/environmental factors as shown in Table 2.

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77 Buddan, Foundations of Caribbean Politics.
Table 2: Small country size and implications for elite interviewing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of SIDS</th>
<th>Ethical/Methodological Considerations for elite Interviewing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Constraints</td>
<td>▪ Elite’s busy schedule make it difficult to arrange meeting time (Mason-Bish 2018)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Gaining access to elites inherently difficult based on their status (Mikecz 2012; Herod 1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Elites to be engaged at their convenience and with sufficient notice (Leuffen 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constrained) Power</td>
<td>▪ Elites require endorsement of their manager to participate (Lancaster 2017)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Close Kinship Ties</td>
<td>▪ Elites are secretive (Alvesalo-Kuusi 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Elites do not trust outsiders (Liu 2018; Werning Rivera, Kozyreva and Sarovski 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Elites assign adversarial status to outsiders (Petkov and Kauollas 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Intermediaries essential to gain access to elites (Leuffen 2006; cf Petkov and Kauollas 2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Author’s elaboration based on Everest-Phillips and Henry 2018; Brown 2010)

I resorted to use of government policy documents, speeches of political elites and local immigration legislation in the absence of engagement with political elites. While this flexibility was necessary to complete the research, it raised questions for me regarding the extent of the understanding and analysis of contextual factors impacting migrants’ lived experiences. I address similar concerns for the current case studies, in the upcoming section. In both instances, while I could claim insider status based on my Caribbean identity, I was simultaneously an outsider. As a non-citizen of the countries under examination, I was far removed from the kinship ties which would have facilitated access to interviewees. Ironically, this was the case less so in the context of the Dutch islands, than in Trinidad and Tobago where it was quite...
difficult to gain access to interviewees. Yet, there I could claim some affinity based on my belonging to CARICOM, as well as my position at a higher education institution supported by CARICOM governments, including Trinidad and Tobago. In addition, the power of the elites was quite stark in the process of negotiating access, a process which was not mediated but rather exacerbated by distance. For the current project, the significance of power was highlighted in a much later discussion with a quite established senior colleague, who emphasized that an introduction from the ‘right’ individual in leadership at the University (a male individual with significant renown and reach in government circles) may in fact facilitate access. This interaction was quite sobering for it underscored the gendered dimensions of my interactions with primarily male elites (and their female assistants), as well as the influence of my status as an emerging scholar of migration in the region.

**Is There a Place for Conducting Research into Forced Migration in the Caribbean?**

As a part of the process of reflexivity, I have contemplated deeply the concept of the dual imperative. In light of participants’ reticence, is it essential that I pursue the research project? Obelené \(^{78}\) notes that “The expert researcher has to manage relationships with powerful research subjects, and simultaneously he or she has to find a point of control in order to secure the purpose of scholarly investigation.” This is critical, as I respect the imperative that participants are allowed to decline participation in an interview at any stage of the research process. However, how does one balance questions of governance and transparency as an objective of scholarly investigations into issues such as forced migration in small island contexts, where refusal to participate might well signal the demise of one’s research project?

There are two contextual realities which suggest that research into forced migration in the Caribbean is important. The first, is that the region is under-researched. This might be explained in part by the small scale of incidences of forced migration, relative to other locales. This is the case despite the frequency of natural disasters, which has led to displacement in a number of countries, most recently the island of Barbuda.\(^ {79,80}\) Research into forced migration contexts in the Caribbean thus fills a critical gap in knowledge in a geographical space that is shaped significantly by migration phenomena, and which in the context of forced displacement, fluctuates between receptivity and hostile rejection of displaced persons based on complex social, economic and geo-political factors. The absence of legislative framework to ensure protection of rights of refugees and displaced persons, presents challenges for the region.\(^ {81}\)

The second issue concerns the weak governance framework in the Caribbean context. Absence of quantitative and qualitative data, across all ministries/departments is one of the primary deficits of the countries’ governance framework. Such data would lend credible support to existing calls for improvements in the governance framework, towards facilitating integration and protection of the rights of vulnerable migrants including forced migrants.\(^ {82}\) Engagement with academic policy experts is thus essential, especially in contexts where such

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80 Haiti, would perhaps be the exception to this general tendency, given the significant impact of the 2010 earthquake.
82 Ibid.
a policy process is evolving in “real time.” These case studies fit this criterion. However, arguments in support of undertaking research into forced migration in the Caribbean, can be curbed by issues surrounding the feasibility of such research, as explained above. The main concern here is the timing of the research project, and whether given political sensitivities, it may be best to defer investigations in order to increase likelihood of participant engagement. Despite Lancaster’s concern that this results in the investigation of past/reconstructed narratives, there is evidence that these delays may support successful completion of research projects.

Conclusion

Damianakis and Woodford describe social science research investigating “small connected communities” as an “emerging dialogue.” This paper has contributed to this emerging dialogue through reflection on the methodological and ethical challenges surrounding research on forced migration in three SIDS. It demonstrates that elite interviewing is an inherently difficult exercise, especially the initial stages of bargaining for access to elites. Moreover, the peculiarities of small states may exacerbate existing limitations involved in undertaking elite interviewing. By merging the disparate discourses of small size and qualitative research, using the concept of scale, I was able to provide critical insight into factors that may account for low participation rates in elite interviewing concerning forced migration in three small island contexts – Aruba, Curacao and Trinidad and Tobago.

With this reflective exercise, I have engaged in “ethics-as-process.” Ethical and methodological considerations raised during the process led me to question whether a project of this nature is important. Considering the paucity of data on the subject of forced migration in the Caribbean, I would conclude in the affirmative. However, researchers will need to be flexible, adapting to the vagaries of the research environment if they are to successfully complete a project. This may entail deferring real time studies, for “historical analyses”, which also has disadvantages. Though the paper is concerned with negotiating access to elites, it indirectly tackles the issue of dissemination. Polzer notes that one should be guided by the questions “what is this research for” and “who is this for” from the initial stages, since this impacts research design. In small spaces, however, these are complicated questions.

Acknowledgements

I had the opportunity to return to Curacao, and visited Aruba for the first time, in May 2019. This trip took place a little over a year following my initial fieldwork visit. This time I was able to engage with staff of international organizations working with refugees, including one organization with which I had previously no success. I am grateful to these individuals who took the time to share their experiences with me as their engagement filled an important gap in the research.

85 Damianakis, and Woodford, “Qualitative Research with Small Connected Communities: Generating New Knowledge while Upholding Research Ethics,” 708-718.
87 Tara Polzer, Disseminating Research Findings in Migration Studies: Methodological Considerations, (Johannesburg, Forced Migration Studies Programme, 2007)
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