

Identities

Global Studies in Culture and Power

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gide20>

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To cite this article: Mette Andersson & Garbi Schmidt (2020): The politics of migration research: research focus and the public identities of migration researchers, *Identities*, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2020.1813461

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1813461>



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Published online: 08 Sep 2020.



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The politics of migration research: research focus and the public identities of migration researchers

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ABSTRACT

This special issue focusses on how migration and diversity researchers experience and perform their role as academic experts in politicised public debates about migration and diversity. In a world wherein experts are increasingly demanded for policy development and wherein migration as well as ethnic, racial and religious diversity are among the themes dividing voters the most, migration and diversity researchers find themselves in a challenging position. How do they view their obligation to participate in public debate and how does their identities as researchers relate to such participation? This special issue will discuss the impact and implications of these challenges in the Scandinavian context, although the theme of researchers' roles in politicised public debate is of a broader relevance both to other geographical regions and to other controversial research fields. Debates on public sociology, on the science/media interface, and on present challenges to academic expertise more generally, are central to the discussion.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 4 December 2019; Accepted 14 April 2020

KEYWORDS Research communication; migration; diversity; academic expertise; politicisation; Scandinavia

This special issue focusses on how migration and diversity researchers experience and perform their role as academic experts in the politicised public debates about migration and diversity. In a world wherein experts are increasingly demanded for policy development and wherein migration as well as ethnic, racial and religious diversity are among the themes dividing voters the most, migration and diversity researchers find themselves in a challenging position. How do they view their obligation to participate in public debate and how are their identities as researchers related to such participation? This special issue will discuss the impact and implications of these challenges in the Scandinavian context, although the theme of researchers' roles in politicised public debate is of a broader relevance both to other geographical regions and to other controversial research fields.

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In modern day, distrust in science and the critique of academic expertise from politicians and laypeople interact with a tendency among the media to focus on the problems rather than the social resourcefulness related to both migration and ethnic and religious diversity. The public critique of knowledge produced by academic experts in migration research seems to have increased in legitimacy alongside the rise of right-wing populism, anti-elitism, and competition regarding anti-immigration voters (Boswell 2018; Ruhs, Tamas, and Palme 2019). Labels such as 'immigrant friendly', 'politically correct', 'leftist', and 'naïve' are, as described in this special issue, frequently used to describe and criticise migration and diversity researchers. The fact that these labels appear to some as specifically suitable for describing migration researchers is thought provoking in light of meta-analyses into the development of migration research in Europe. Existing analyses underline that researchers have had relatively scarce influence over the themes related to migration and diversity that local, national, or EU granting bodies end up prioritising (cf. Bommers and Thränhardt 2010; Essed and Nimako 2006; Favell 2005). Rather, various European nation states' definitions of the welfare state and citizenship as well as the specific national requirements for the policy relevance of research seem to have guided the development of research themes more so than grounded questions arising from researchers' own priorities. From its early stage, the development of migration research in Europe has thus been influenced by government-relevant approaches applied in degrees that somewhat vary among the different nation states.

On a more general note, the themes of expert knowledge and researchers' public identities are topical in modern day. On one hand, experts are being increasingly demanded to secure what is referred to as evidence-based policy development, and policy developers may herein apply their research knowledge quite symbolically (Boswell 2018). As noted by Ruhs, Tamas, and Palme (2019, 3), "evidence-based policy-making" and "post-truth politics" – are, to a considerable extent, caricatures of much more nuanced and messy realities of what are typically highly politicised processes of (de)linking data/research, public debates, and policy-making'. On the other hand, expert advice is now more often than previously met with critique for being 'politically correct' and is therefore not trustworthy qua science. Rival statements concerning truth from religion, politics, 'common-sense knowledge', and science as well as increased media attention to and the visibility of rival claims about truth within science itself may indicate scientific knowledge's increasing vulnerability as the most trustworthy form of knowledge. Such rivalry regarding the truest or most accurate knowledge is certainly not newsworthy in social science, to which the harsh debates over postmodernism and relativism around the millennium shift bear witness. Historical studies of science communication demonstrate that such debates were also fierce during the 19th century, and scientists were often dependent upon stakeholders and allies in

guaranteeing the soundness of their research results to politicians and other outside audiences (Collins and Evans 2017; Gieryn 1998).

Nevertheless, we still find it reasonable to suggest that modern attitudes towards scientific expertise and experts are more ambivalent than were earlier attitudes. Developments within media institutions and universities may partially explain why science's status seems more complex today than in earlier times. The expansion of social media platforms and web-based newspapers and blogs have, for instance, allowed more people than ever before to express their critiques of research results. Attacks upon researchers for being politicised, naïve, or, in some instances, outright evil are now directly distributed to a large number of followers through the internet, and researchers are thus scapegoated to many different audiences.

Within higher education, demands for institutional visibility urge researchers to be more visible and publicly relevant than they were in earlier times. For example, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK assesses the achievements of British higher education institutions on a regular basis. Its stated aims are to provide accountability for public investment in research, and among the indicators of such accountability are the so-called 'impact cases' wherein academic institutions showcase how concrete research projects have impacted society through politics or social debate. Similar research evaluations and demands about 'impact cases' – taking their lead from the REF in the UK – are occurring in Scandinavia (for instance, Norway's 2018 SAMEVAL evaluation). This newly mandated focus upon 'impact cases' that showcase academic knowledge as important for policy development and social debate is not, however, similarly rewarded in the internal reward systems of most Scandinavian universities and research institutes. There still exist few internal incentives for researchers who aim to improve their public communication with and impact upon civic audiences or politicians.

Migration as well as ethnic and religious diversity research are younger research fields in Europe than in the US, where such themes were pivotal at, for instance, the Chicago School of Sociology. In the US, quantitative assimilation studies of immigrant descendants have a long history, and modern European researchers use North American debates on segmented assimilation, racism, and transnationalism as a backdrop for exploring similar or diverging developments in European nation states. The contrast between the US as a self-declared country of immigrants and European nation states that to varying degrees acknowledge their migration and/or colonial histories explains why migration research is more influential and was initiated earlier in the US than in Europe (Noiriel 1996).

Scandinavia holds a specific position in the broader European landscape due to its lower levels of economic inequality and more generous welfare states than those among the rest of the continent. While migration has for centuries significantly affected the region, migration and the diversification of migration patterns increased in the late part of the 20th century. Sweden is the Scandinavian

country that has historically held the least strict immigration regime in recent times, whereas Denmark is recognised as the strictest and Norway the middle ground among the former two (Brochmann and Hagelund 2010). All three Scandinavian countries experienced significant influx of immigrants from countries in the South and the development of complex diversity patterns following immigration during the 1970s and onwards. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines the immigration population as both immigrants and native-born citizens with migrant backgrounds (including those who are native born with mixed backgrounds and two foreign-born parents). In December 2017, the immigration populations (including mixed-background citizens) were approximately 18% for Denmark, 22% for Norway, and 31% for Sweden (OECD/EU 2018, 19).

Historically, a close relationship has existed between the Academy and policy development in Scandinavia, specifically in the social sciences. Scandinavian researchers have been expected to popularise their research through op-ed and commentary articles in newspapers, via participation in radio and television discussion programmes, and via participation on discussion panels conducted face to face among audiences. Studies of research communication from Norway demonstrate that the researchers who produce the most academic publications are also the most frequent research communicators (Carlsen, Müftüoglu, and Riese 2014; Kyvik 2005).

Research communication and the expert role

Research communication is a theme of rising importance and research focus in science and technology studies (STS). The democratisation of expert knowledge and the challenges involved in informing audiences about scientific consensus within vital areas such as vaccination and climate are among the field's main topics. STS scholars have primarily focussed on the natural sciences and paid less attention to the specific challenges associated with communicating social and human science research to audiences who often view themselves as everyday experts on those themes. In the human and social sciences – more so than in natural science or medical research – researchers adopt a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods as well as different theories to explain human motives, social interaction, and social patterns, and there seldom exists a clear consensus among researchers regarding future political solutions. As the articles in this special issue bear witness, many challenges are related to how we as researchers discuss and write about our research to audiences outside the Academy. Our own normative and epistemological positions, regardless of whether we adopt the 'transnational literacy' position (Elisabeth Eide, this volume) or insist on our putative neutrality and objectivity, are significant regarding how authorities, minorities, and majorities interpret our research. When research is communicated to various audiences, researchers must relate

to both the various knowledge cultures existing in their respective countries and the various subcultures they wish to reach.

One central question posed to migration and diversity researchers when they write about their research in newspapers or blogs, when they give talks, or when they participate on panels held face to face with their audiences concerns how normative they can or should be and from which perspective their normativity is measured. Such judgements are not exclusively within the individual researcher's capacity to make because accusations of politicisation – as argued above – are not necessarily controllable among researchers alone. Newspaper desks, journalistic angles, and the platform from which one communicates influence audiences' interpretations of research-based knowledge. And, as becomes evident in the articles discussed in this issue, the theme itself can create normative reactions.

The history, size, and institutional anchoring of a research field comprise one dimension that may influence the type of research communication associated with that field and the reactions spurred from the public. In this special issue, Andersson writes about, for example, the 'implicit normativity' in the fierce internal debates among researchers during this research field's early years in Norway. In Norway in the 1990s and in the early years of the new millennium, two research fronts quarrelled about which topics and theories deserved granting and research. Researchers associated with these fronts also occasionally accused one another of being apologists for specific political positions or of being advocates for either migrants or state authorities in mass media and academic journals. Later on, when the research field matured and expanded, these fronts dissolved, and the distinctions between researchers thus became more fluent and complex. Due to an increasing number of researchers and the inclusion of more themes (e.g., right-wing extremism and religion), it also became more difficult to keep track of all publications and media interventions.

The degree of overlap between normative distinctions within the active researcher community and the explicit normativity of a political divide in society at large poses an empirical question that cannot be answered a priori. This circumstance means, for example, that some researchers' insistence upon the need to study themes such as criminality, gendered violence, racism, or islamophobia is not necessarily transferable to political maps of populist right-wing, conservative, liberal, or democratic voting preferences. As Martin Bak Jørgensen explores in his article in this issue, some migration and diversity researchers are appointed academic experts from their universities' leadership, whereas others are not. Divergence in thematic expertise, theoretical perspectives, and the interests of politicians and research-granting bodies may influence why some and not others are appointed as experts. Intricate power dynamics and hierarchies of valued knowledge within the Academy are, however, not easily transparent to external audiences. Another dilemma concerns

how one manages different professions' guidelines and criteria for valid knowledge, as illustrated in the article by Elisabeth Eide, professor of media studies and active journalist. Thus, what counts as expert knowledge in different professional cultures? And how do researchers who know the media system through their own practice as journalists traverse communication barriers?

Michael Burawoy's (2005a, 2005b) intervention on the acute need for what he deemed *public sociology* following the millennium shift is one of several theoretical inspirations for this issue's focus on research communication. Burawoy argues that the normative undertone of research communication depends upon researchers' own preferences and illustrates this condition by pointing to various positions among central public sociologists in the US. Burawoy argues that public sociology always builds upon professional sociology, and the defining trait of the former (compared to professional, policy, and critical sociology) is that it provides reflexive knowledge to audiences outside the Academy. Burawoy's call for public sociology has additionally inspired researchers in other disciplines, thereby leading to similar books and articles in anthropology (Bangstad 2017; Eriksen 2006) and criminology (Loader and Sparks 2011). Burawoy distinguishes between two forms of public sociology that, according to him, both involve double conversations (within publics and between publics and researchers) and traditional public sociology, which he exemplifies with earlier classics from Dubois and Myrdal about racial diversity in the US during the first half of the 20th century and which created large societal debates about the future of society. A contemporary parallel (as few modern sociology books create public debates of the same magnitude) involves op-ed and commentary articles in contemporary mass media; one may also consider research communication through blogs and other social media platforms in a similar sense. Organic public sociology, on the other hand, refers to direct cooperation with study subjects, where researchers initially communicate directly with these subjects and subsequently translate the discussion for larger audiences. Burawoy's examples of organic sociology cooperate with immigrant rights groups and labour unions, among other entities.

Apart from Burawoy's seminal writing about communication with civic and policy audiences, others have focussed on the conditions for modern academic intellectuals. Dallyn, Marinetto, and Carl (2015) argue, for example, that the 'universal intellectuals' of earlier times (e.g., Foucault and Sartre) are few and far between in today's Academy. Instead, we find more of what the authors refer to as safely positioned 'specific intellectuals' who direct their messages to specific audiences on a continuum from politics to diverse civic audiences. In this special issue, we will observe several examples of how migration and diversity researchers reflect upon their experiences from several types of expert positioning vis-à-vis politics, media, and civic audiences. As the first (to our knowledge) thematic issue concerning research communication in migration and diversity studies as testified from researchers' own

perspectives, we aim to contribute to a broader discussion about researcher identities in modern day.

Categories and framing

On 17 December 2018, leading Danish newspaper *Berlingske* published an article about a news report that analysed the societal integration of the so-called third-generation-immigrants from non-Western countries living in Denmark. The article's headline set the stage univocally: 'The Immigrants Had Children and They Had Children – And They Still Lag Behind' (Beck Nielsen and Graversen 2018a). The article that followed referred to the news report and the two ministries behind it – that is, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Immigration and Integration (2018). The article summarises some of the report's main points, including statistical figures indicating the achievements of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants, and argues that third-generation immigrants did not perform in school significantly better than their parents. The two ministers behind the report, Mette Riisager (Liberal Alliance) and Inger Støjberg (Venstre, the Liberal Party of Denmark), were interviewed, both of whom were alarmed by the report's results: 'The report shows that we have subscribed to a false understanding of things' (our translation, Beck Nielsen and Graversen 2018a). The story was widely quoted on television, in other newspapers, and in online media. Other politicians, such as Social Democrat MP Lars Aslan Rasmussen, reacted to the report's results with indignation, claiming that third-generation youngsters and their parents needed to pull their acts together and stop looking upon themselves as victims (Rasmussen 2018).

Interestingly, a number of social science researchers started reacting to the report and the media debate. Political scientist Hjarn von Zernichow Borberg was among the first to react and did so in his online blog. Conclusions regarding the report's basis were too strong, Borberg noted, and the analytical work presented within it was too weak (Borberg 2018). One point of Borger's critique was that the number of people involved in the analysis of third-generation, non-Western immigrants was quite small (just more than 500 people). About two-thirds of the statistical population was aged younger than ten years, and the achievements this significant group would reach later in life remained to be seen. Considering the significant shift in education level and marriage age between second-generation women who became mothers in the late 1990s and late 2000s, there existed valid reason to expect that the segment of young third-generation immigrants would perform significantly more favourably than those who were now aged into their twenties. Furthermore, the comparison made in the report was weak.

Research director of the Rockwool Foundation research unit Jan Rose Skaksen soon became another of the report's heavyweight critics. *Berlingske* published an interview with Skaksen the day after the interview with the two

ministers was published, and Skaksen noted: 'It may well turn out that third-generation immigrants are going to hell [in terms of their achievements] ... but you cannot conclude on the basis of this analysis [the report] that focussed on a special selected group' (our translation, Graversen and Nielsen 2018). One flaw of the analysis was grounded in *the definition of the 'third-generation immigrant' concept* as defined by Statistics Denmark. According to that definition, third-generation immigrants were *exclusively* those, where one parent had immigrant parents and the other came from outside Denmark, or was him/herself the child of immigrants to Denmark. In conclusion, Skaksen stated:

The analysis only focused on a segment of third-generation immigrants that are [socially] weak. By itself, it [such analysis] can be fine enough, but not if you based the analysis on a larger discussion of what migration will cost the future (our translation, Graversen and Beck Nielsen 2018).

While Skaksen pointed out on Danish national radio that the analysis was in itself legitimate although could not be used to offer a general 'statement' on third-generation migrants as such, sociologist Heine Andersen in the same programme criticised the anonymity of the report's authors in that they could not be held accountable for nor explain their results:

A basic rule that we teach our students, all social science students learn this: If you want to compare groups they have to be compatible groups. And if they [the groups] are not compatible, you must try to correct this. That has not been done in this case ... it [the report] is methodologically below acceptable standards (our translation, Danish National Broadcasting Company 2018).

The fierce debate is alone worth broader academic interest, although its outcome is worth pursuing even further. *Berlingske* placed a disclaimer on the article that had made the case accelerate. The disclaimer emphasised, amongst other assertions, that the newspaper should have 'mentioned and stressed the uncertainties in the analysis ... it is *Berlingske's* duty to inform the public correctly' (Beck Nielsen and Graversen 2018b. Our translation).¹ Amalie Holstein, director of welfare in liberal thinktank CEPOS, also wrote a commentary in *Berlingske*, wherein she concluded that 'no matter what, it became obvious to us how dependent we are that competent researchers do whatever they can do to keep the debate on track' (Holstein 2018. Our translation). This example is illustrative of this special issue's content for several reasons. The example, for instance, relates to the difficult and politicized aspects of framing and categorisation, which represent a central theme of several articles in this special issue. Categorisation processes in academia are not solely academic. They also include aspects of how migration researchers must relate to influential concepts in societal, political, and scholarly debates; in other words, concepts matter. In the debates concerning immigrants to Scandinavian welfare states, for instance, concepts particularly do so due to the emotions that stick to certain bodies. As noted by Sara Ahmed (2014, 67), 'the economy of fear works to contain the bodies of others'. Fear, as underlined by

Andersson, Jørgensen, and Schmidt in this special issue, is a feeling to which migration researchers must relate. Fear sticks to the people and groups that constitute our research subjects. Fear sticks to certain concepts that are originally coined in academia and then transferred to the public sphere. Fear, as noted by Ahmed (2014, 65), often relates to the future, or 'that which is not in the present'. Such fear may, for instance, include the fear of unexpected consequences resulting from the anticipated low social integration among third-generation immigrants. Fear may also relate to the expected, uncontrollable consequences of researchers' focus on, for example, migrant youth in relation to crime.

Thus, whilst categories and concepts are important and innate tools for conducting research, the politicisation of categories and concepts can become stumbling blocks for the production of *credible* research. While the third-generation immigrant concept was coined by Statistics Denmark, the implications hereof were highly political, and the Danish government was able to scientifically polish its report by using it. Afterwards, researchers spent hours and days debating the report's credibility, including the central variable's validity. The extent to which the research/political coining of the third-generation immigrant concept will affect future research remains to be seen. However, the combination of political attention and scientific blueprinting is likely to create a scenario that will compel researchers to relate to the concept in one way or another – either willingly or unwillingly.

Research roles

The debate in the wake of the report on the so-called third-generation immigrants to Denmark illustrates other central aspects of this special issue. Firstly, it underlines researchers' *authority* and *expertise* as privileges of a particular societal role; in other words, when researchers presented their academically founded critiques of the report, they were actually heard and accepted – at least, in this case, by the press. Secondly, the example underlines how migration researchers, as noted by Martin Bak Jørgensen in this volume, must often critically evaluate political initiatives and politically motivated reports. This aspect of academic work, as noted by Jørgensen, can take the form of *public sociology* (Burawoy 2005a) in which migration researchers actively address audiences outside academia. In this case, the multiple audiences included media, politicians, and the general national public. Thirdly, the example underlines a certain activist stance among migration researchers. In this volume, researcher activism and normative arguments for migration research are themes scrutinised in the articles of Mette Andersson, Mai-Len Skilbrei, and Martin Bak Jørgensen. As Skilbrei notes, many migration researchers want their research to affect society as extensively as they want to produce strong and credible research. This societal stance that researchers adopt is underlined by the Danish example.

Among the general public, media, and politicians, migration researchers are framed by the complicated term *experts*. As Mette Andersson notes in this issue, based on her extensive interviewing of Norwegian migration researchers, migration research is characterised by *internal boundary work* due to the field's interdisciplinarity. However, boundary work also takes place *externally* in relation to other social actors who claim expertise in migration, such as consultants, debaters, activists, politicians, and journalists. While the field's interdisciplinarity can be considered a strength on one hand, it nevertheless involves a challenge due to the potentiality of polarisation within the field. As indicated by Garbi Schmidt and Martin Bak Jørgensen in their articles, this polarisation and even antagonism between researchers often find their way into the media. While discussion and mutual critique are established tools for academic progress, lifting the discussion to another context may actually increase the risk of discrediting some types of research as well as some researchers according to a media-based discussion that is far from founded upon academic standards. While many researchers appear to perceive speaking to diverse types of audiences as an ethical requirement, such an endeavour is not devoid of risk; for example, fierce and emotional reactions from a non-academic public may affect a researcher's credibility vis-à-vis his academic peers.

Importantly, all articles in this special issue (i.e., those of Andersson, Jørgensen, Skilbrei, Schmidt, and Eide) highlight the potential societal *vulnerability* among migration researchers. Although researchers may be careful to strictly follow all academic standards and weight their language and conclusions, their communication of the research results to mass media, for example, may possess severe consequences. Skilbrei describes how presenting certain research results at a seminar infuriated political actors in the audience to such an extent that they subsequently informed her they would never again be taking her research seriously (which they had appreciated until that point). Vulnerability includes the fear of losing one's academic credibility, one's reputation, and eventually one's job. Vulnerability also crucially involves one's fear of being dismissed by funding agencies. Fear and uncertainty are emotions to which the researchers interviewed for articles in this special issue relate. Fear's 'stickiness' may be analysed as a result of one's manoeuvring within a politicised field and researching groups associated with fear – that is, groups that migration researchers often feel compelled to defend as part of the ethical requirements of their work. Fear may stem from the risk of losing a central part of one's identity, while it may also stem from hate mail and threats that some researchers receive and that pose consequences to them, to their loved ones, and, concerning the communication of their research, to certain audiences. Opting out of speaking to journalists about research is one strategy whereby some researchers safeguard themselves from such consequences.

Perspectives

This special issue has grown from a number of national and international migration research conference workshops and their subsequent discussions among researchers. The workshop attendance demonstrated the extent to which the researchers were interested in the topic, while the debates within and after these events underlined the urgency of continuing the discussions. Among the articles discussed herein, each in its own way addresses the problem based on either personal experiences or larger research projects. While we as social researchers are from early on imprinted with the requirement that we pay heed to the impact we may have upon our research, the current age calls for a deeper and sincere scrutiny of how, for example, politics and social media affect research and the researcher's role. This special issue thus serves as one attempt to address this call.

Note

1. Ritzau also published a supportive article on the report and its analysis, which the company withdrew on 3 January 2019 (Danish National Broadcasting Company 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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