

**Ethics case study: Providing care to transiting refugees and
migrants in Macedonia**

Dr. Ljubica Topuzoska

University Evro Balkan, Skopje, R. Macedonia

Professor Dr. Ivan Bimbilovski

**University St. Paul the Apostle, Ohrid, R.Macedonia
Macedonia**

Abstract

In light of the current global migration crisis, refugees moving to their desired destination carry specific ethical concerns, inherited by their cultural values in the countries of origin. This paper provides illustrations and recommendations regarding specific care provision as well as ethical research methods provided towards these populations, considering their vulnerability as a consequence of the displacement. The qualitative and ethnographic methods implemented demonstrate how to conduct culturally sensitive service provision as well as surveys by implementing specific ethical approach in order to preserve autonomy, ensure confidentiality and build trust among the vulnerable individuals on the move. The paper, in general, examines the ethical issues which emerge in refugee-related research and locates the research enterprise within the broader socio-political context.

Keywords: refugees, ethics, care, assistance

Introduction

People affected by the global conflicts are forced to move many times both within the same country and across international borders. They are falling between the gaps created by artificial distinctions between different gained statuses, such as refugees, internally displaced people, irregular migrants smuggled migrants etc. Considering the high level of vulnerability of these people caused by the displacement, the authors of this article have been analysing the

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specific approaches for care provision, specifically in terms of conducting culturally sensitive methods in order to preserve autonomy, ensure confidentiality and build trust among the individuals on the move. Many authors have described some of the challenges faced by researchers and service providers working with these populations. According to Liamputtong (2007), research and clinical practice involving refugees and vulnerable populations poses specific moral and ethical challenges. (Gifford et al. 2007) highlight the issues relevant to the informed consent given by the refugees and other vulnerable categories of people on the move. The ethical considerations during the service provision in the hosting communities have been considered and analysed as second subject of this research.

Methodology of the research

In the period of June- September 2015, over 300 interviews have been conducted with the refugees and asylum seekers that were transiting via Macedonia from Greece to Serbia with Western Europe as their desired destination. In addition, in order to complement the methodological approach, questionnaires have been distributed among over 100 front-line service providers and volunteers engaged to support the migrants and refugees on the move. The questions asked were structured in order to respond to the actual hostile environment, in which the needs, the ethical considerations and cultural values of the refugees and asylum seekers are often misrepresented and devalued. The main reason for that situation was the massive influx of refugees back in 2015, which provoked vast workload among the national authorities and civil society organisations. The frontline workers were overstretched and the accommodation facilities for the refugees were limited. The relationship between the authors and the social context emerged as particularly important within the context of research undertaken among the interviewees, mainly families and individuals moving throughout the country. Namely, during the research period (in June 2015), the Macedonia's parliament has adopted changes in the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection. The law provisions have allowed migrants, upon their illegal entry in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to legally stay in the country for three days by lodging an asylum claim. The changes have been adopted in order to meet the needs of the people on the move, as well as to prevent tragedies during their movement through the country. Upon their request for asylum (orally or in written form to a police officer in the field or in the nearest police station), refugees have received a document for legal stay of 72 hours in the country. This timeframe has been given in order to avoid the dangerous situations on the train tracks (many migrants have lost their

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lives in the recent period, as stated in the previous parts of the study), as well as to prevent their irregular movement through the country and being endangered by criminal gangs that steal money and belongings. With these law provisions, migrants were able to travel more regularly with public transportation. The authors sought that there was no administrative restriction on communicating directly with the migrants and refugees on the move. The interviews have been conducted on the open space, either on the roads and railways (while they were waiting for a public transportation), or near the border with Greece, immediately upon the entry in the country, upon given oral consent. The given answers were anonymous as requested by most of the respondents, with aim to provide honest and truthful answers. The authors understand that this sample size does not yield results that can be generalized to the overall situation; however they believe that the conducted research provided insights that could be useful in analysing the current and upcoming trends. In parallel, desk-based research on relevant literature, reports, official documents and statistics has been carried out. Distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of interviewed people on the move (June-September 2015)

Number of respondents	
Male	175
Female	167
Total	342

Most of the interviewees have been asked about the ethical considerations they faced along their route to Macedonia (human rights, ethical issues and concerns of the different origins and cultures). In addition, they have been asked if the research approach the authors conducted is appropriate and corresponds to their cultural values. Their answers are summarised in the following table.

Table 2.

Respondents (refugees and migrants)					
	Yes, fully	Yes, particularly	I have no opinion on this	Only exceptionally	Never

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Do you consider that your human rights have been violated during your journey?	12	235	35	40	20
Have you received appropriate support in Macedonia?	32	179	86	23	22
Did you provide your informed consent before receiving any form of support/assistance?	/	54	/	178	110

The information that was required by the research team contained the following:

- The factors which led the refugees/IDPs to flee their homes.
- The dates, location and nature of human rights violations such as the killing of civilians by soldiers.
- The alleged perpetrators of human rights violations.
- The identities of victims of human rights violations.

The answers have been analysed by the research team. The alerting point was that near 69% of the respondents answered that their human rights have been violated during their journey. The interviews have shown that most of the respondents have only a basic knowledge of the human rights international conventions, however, they have reported that in many cases, the fact of being obligated to leave home itself entails violation of certain rights such as the right to security of person, and the freedom to choose one's residence. Very often, the factors which led to the displacement- discrimination, armed conflict as well as the other forms of violence etc.- themselves involve violations of human rights. In general, the following human rights have been violated, as interpreted from the answers of the respondents:

- The right to freedom of movement: aside from the right itself, freedom of movement of those who resided in camps was essential to have access to cultivated fields, water

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sources, paid employment, etc. many reported that their freedom of movement was restricted, for example by local police or soldiers;

- Right to a name and nationality: documentation papers: refugees claimed that they were obliged to flee without any identity papers proving their name and nationality. At the same time, these documents were important in the registration process, as a proof of identity;
- Access to education: those are essential rights which have been reported by the refugees who were forced to stay for a longer period of time on some of the countries of transit. They claimed that they fear that it may never again be possible for the children to recover those lost years and that this situation would eventually have limiting effect on the children's entire adult life.

In addition to the above mentioned analyses, the research team has notified several interesting facts that cannot be treated as a human rights violation, but can be considered as mistreatment. Namely, 92.5% of the interviewed people answered that they have been mistreated at least once during their journey. Most of those answers (nearly 82%) are claims of receiving inappropriate support by the local authorities along their journey, such as not providing the basic hygiene and medical needs. 64% of the interviewees, asked to provide an unpleasant example of their journey, answered that they had fear that they will be perceived as terrorists in the countries of transit and destination. There have been a lot of examples of robbery - 28% answered that they have been robbed by local gangs during their journey. As regards to their stay in Macedonia, 68,3% answered that they feel more save in Macedonia after the changes in the asylum law (June 2015) entered into force. This has been explained with the fact that most of the respondents felt more save travelling with local transportation, rather than engaging a smuggler to lead their journey and walking near the railways and train tracks, which is dangerous. Another interesting fact is that 87% of the respondents answered that they are satisfied by the treatment of the front-line staff in Macedonia, however they claimed that the conditions for providing services were not always satisfactory.

The research team has interviewed number of front-line staff, responsible for registration and service provision to the transiting migrants and refuges. The number of the interviewed staff is shown in the following table:

Table 3. Number of interviewed front-line staff

Interviewed front line staff	
Volunteers	65
Health care providers	25
IO/NGO representatives	32

In general, most of the interviewed front line staff confirmed that they are familiar with the general standards of legal protection provided for by international refugee law. The various provisions of this body of law provide for minimum standards from which refugee should benefit and to which they have a right. However, a significant number of front-line representatives 63,5% answered that even they were aware about the different cultural and ethical values of the refugees, however they didn't have enough time/conditions to provide appropriate support. All of the respondents (100%) answered that the conditions for providing services to the migrants and refugees need to be improved. The analysis of the answers has shown that 56% of the interviewed staff considered that most of the migrants and refugees are vulnerable to different kinds of risks. Enormous number (95% of the interviewees) stated that they have dealt with psychological stress of the migrants and refugees and that they tried to provide appropriate support. 67% stated that they couldn't communicate with the migrants and refugees due to language or cultural barrier.

Recommendations

According the above analyses, the following recommendations can be drawn:

- There is a need for developing and implementing ethical guidelines for communication and providing support to the transiting migrants and refugees;
- There is a necessity for engaging cultural mediators for facilitating the communication with the migrants and refugees;
- Developing special procedures for service provision to the vulnerable groups of migrants would significantly improve the situation;
- Adapting the existing laws/bylaws and other normative acts to the emerging situation in order to provide appropriate support to the transiting migrants and refugees is crucial;

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- There is a need for developing and implementing prevention programmes on national and regional level in order to avoid different kinds of risks to migrants and refugees.

Although the research team has found these recommendations useful, it can be concluded that they are not exhaustive. The service providers's own ethics weights equally since decisions often have to be taken on a case-by-case basis.

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