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# Taking on the categories, terms and worldviews of the powerful: the pitfalls of trying to be relevant

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## ABSTRACT



Researchers have many incentives to make sure that the work they do is relevant to policymakers and implementers. First, it may secure them funding; second, 'impact' is part and parcel of academic evaluations; and third, researchers are often attracted by the prospect of doing work that matters and that contributes towards social justice. Moreover, the mandate and urge to be relevant are central to governments' capacity to formulate effective and just policies, but this may also constitute an epistemological challenge by creating blind spots. In this article, I explore key challenges that emerge from the relationship between policy and research. I take as a starting point my own experiences as a migration scholar, who mainly conducts research on migration to Norway and the development and implementation of Norwegian migration policies, and use these to reflect on the consequences of external and internal pressures on research to be relevant and have an impact.

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## Introduction

This article addresses interrelated issues concerning demands for research to be relevant and have an impact. Social science researchers have several incentives to ensure that their research is relevant to society. Policymakers and implementers desire research to help them achieve their aims. This is not surprising, but 'impact' has become a buzzword in academic settings as well. In recent years, the term 'impact' has become relevant to the internal and external evaluations of the value of research. While different operationalisations of the term exist, at its core is the idea that research should have long-term effects on societal, economic, or environmental developments (see e.g. European Union 2015). The pressure to be relevant and to have an

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impact sometimes arises because funding bodies ask for and prioritise research that will offer answers to questions that are generally considered pertinent at the time. Other times, this pressure arises from internal processes within academia that valorise the demonstration of relevance and the production of a societal impact. Of course, these factors are related; when academic institutions want more external funding and prestige, they need to demonstrate their value to funders and to society. A third incentive comes from how researchers often are motivated in their work by the ambition to do research that matters, and this also serves as a drive towards usefulness. That research-based knowledge is applicable to social problems is of course a positive thing, but such a practical orientation also creates the risk that problem understandings remain unproblematised. In Norway, social science has a particularly strong history of being oriented towards various state institutions' need for knowledge and maintaining a tradition of action research and a problem-oriented empiricism (Zhang, 2008). While the focus here is on the relationship between policy and research in the case of migration, alignment with funders' interests and perspectives introduces a bias towards the interests of the powerful, which also poses a challenge in other areas of research. However, most research areas are not subjected to the same levels of interest and scrutiny as migration, thus making these problems especially prominent there. The relationship between policy and research also raises some ethical issues around what kinds of consequences research leads to. It may be difficult to foresee how one's research comes to align with policy and matter to people, and one may come to realise that one's research is being misused and misrepresented.

Based on my own experiences of conducting both commissioned and fundamental research in the field of migration, I discuss difficulties in maintaining an independent, critical, and open approach, particularly at a time when ideas about 'evidence' and 'impact' are so powerful. Lack of reflection over how research can contribute towards normalising the categories, terminology, and perspectives of powerful institutions means that researchers become complicit in how state projects are depoliticised and power being difficult to identify. In this way, the purported evidence that researchers provide can be used to silence critiques (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Büscher 2010; Christie 1997), thus shifting the role of researchers from 'problem raisers' to 'problem solvers', to use Lesley McAra's (2017, 768) formulation. I present experiences that I have had as a researcher of migration as a starting point to reflect on how producing knowledge that can have an impact on policy and, thus, matters to society easily comes to be about alignment with dominant categorisations, terminology, and worldviews. In the Norwegian context, the external demands on research to have an impact and contribute towards policy and the internal disciplining of social scientists to produce knowledge that matters create blind spots in how research comes

to align with dominant worldviews, but it is also a source of potential for critical engagement.

My own experiences with, and reflections on, how impact matters to research and researchers in these ways may have value beyond serving as a warning to others who venture into the politicised research field of migration (see Andersson 2018). This exercise may be thought of as part of the reflexivity that researchers must exhibit as they take part in producing the realities that they seek to describe. By investigating the relationship between research and the context of knowledge, I seek to perform what Loïc Wacquant (2011) calls 'epistemic reflection'.

### **The role of research in 'migration management'**

My case is Norway, a country that is part of the European Research Agenda (ERA) and, therefore, must align with how the European Commission views the value of research if it is to attract funding. Norway is also a party to Europe's migration management instruments as a member of the Schengen Area and a signatory of the Dublin Regulation. What is researched about migration at any given time, and thus what is known about migrants, is political in the sense that the research is directly or indirectly influenced by the priorities of politicians, bureaucrats, and NGOs. This is because much of the contemporary European research on migration and beyond is expected to 'be relevant' for policy developments. In such a situation, it is necessary to unpack what are the blind spots of contemporary understandings – blind spots which are easily reproduced by research.

The issue of migration is central to political agendas throughout Europe, and in the last few years, it has been discussed as something that deserves a distinct European policy, for example, with the establishment of the European Agenda on Migration in 2015.<sup>1</sup> In this agreement and on other occasions, migration is spoken of as 'a challenge' and 'a crisis' (Sigona 2018), and many European countries' migration policies are currently changing to approach solving 'the crisis' that they define migration to entail. There has been criticism of how the increase in registered arrivals to Europe of third-country nationals in 2015–2016 was debated in politics and media (see e.g. New Keywords Collective 2016; Skilbrei and Guia 2016; Franko 2019). Yet while debates in the last few years have been particularly heated, the whole premise of migration policy is that human mobility is a problem and must be regulated. In this way, migration or human mobility comes to be established as an exception and as inherently problematic, creating what Oliver Bakewell (2008) terms a 'sedentary bias'. Research is among the resources on which the EU and European countries draw when developing policy. More so than before, policymakers are now expected to base their policies on evidence

(Scholten 2018). To do so, politicians and bureaucrats rely on research and the presence of researchers on expert committees.

The fact that European countries, over the last few years, have been particularly concerned about the potentially negative impacts of migration on European societies – combined with the belief that research can enable European states to better manage migration – means that migration research has gained more funding, visibility, and traction during this time (Scholten 2018). Great investments are currently being made in research aimed at serving as a starting point for policy revisions in the field of migration and integration. This situation is particular to the field of migration, but this is not the only development that potentially orients researchers towards the value of being useful.

In this case, European governments fund research to aid them in ‘managing the problem of migration’, and this may make the bias created by ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) more prominent. When states look to fund research to help them devise policies, they are likely to ask for research that is limited to the study of what happens in a particular nation state, and this strengthens the extent to which the nation state looks like a natural entity and a sufficient source of knowledge.

Calls from funding bodies communicate what researchers should prioritise when they are developing research proposals, but they also communicate how the topics should be framed. Take for example the calls from the European Commission research programme, Horizon 2020, which are formulated with an aim to fund research that contributes towards solving ‘societal challenges’.<sup>2</sup> Funders often build on a particular problem definition and worldview, such as when the EU in 2017 issued additional Horizon 2020 calls for funding for €11 million ‘in response to the refugee crisis’.<sup>3</sup> What ensues, then, is that what funders deem interesting and necessary data about migration – and therefore the kind of research that governments are willing to fund – is closely linked to views about what migration is and what should be done about it.

The expectation that migration researchers will help to solve ‘the problem of migration’ stems from an understanding of research as part of the processes of policymaking and implementation in a very direct sense. Researchers are expected to document the functioning of migration management as a type of machinery that can be improved if one tightens the right bolts. In this way, research becomes integrated into what is often presented as a ‘policy circle’ (Sutton and Levinson 2001), where it serves a purpose in improving and approving the system (Boswell 2009). Therefore, as participants in ‘migration management’, scholars must think critically about the role that they play in the field (Armstrong, Blaustein, and Henry 2017, 14; Scholten 2018). Needing to be relevant and to have an impact, then, easily becomes an act of complicity, whereby the position of academic knowledge is used to legitimise harsh migration policies and silence critiques. Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie (1997) has written

about the danger of the 'oversocialisation' of academic scholars: 'It is just not true that officials as a rule are negative to social research. On the contrary, they are encouraging of research, and they are eager consumers of the results. But what they ask for is answers to problems as seen by themselves, helpful answers for running the state'. Geiger and Pécoud (2010, xiii) warn researchers of how that obligates them to be wary of not just reproducing contemporary understandings: 'A critical standpoint is necessary, to avoid remaining too close to its ["migration management's"] narratives and stated objectives, and to develop a counter-perspective to the proliferation of the so-called "policy-relevant" studies by "experts"'. Taken together, these developments – that the European Union (EU) and individual European states are turning to research to aid them in the complex policy field of migration and the idea that research should produce a discernible impact on society – have produced both opportunities and challenges. Key to producing knowledge that moves thinking beyond the perspectives of powerful institutions is using theory to critically engage with contemporary understandings of migration as an exception. Accepting the premise that migration is an exception and a problem to be solved easily underestimates the degree to which human history is one of incessant mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) and how its scope and expressions are affected by broader societal processes, and this means that migration often belongs within the same analytical frames as other phenomena (Castles 2010). The danger is that migration studies take part in reifying political justifications for border control and the administrative ordering of the world into those who belong and those who do not by how they approach their object of study. This is similar to a danger discussed within criminology that the premise of the whole discipline, and that criminological research is often performed without placing crime in the larger context that it deserves, reifies and collaborates with power and normalises the state's right to punish and, in some jurisdictions, also kill its population (see e.g. Wacquant 2011). To bring migration into a broader context, to discuss migration as a social phenomenon on par with others, can be a way to avoid being bound by state-centric understandings of migration.

As mentioned above, funding institutions have the power to frame research topics in a particular way by how they formulate calls for proposals and how they institutionalise their relationship with researchers in ways that may make the researchers take on the 'bureaucratic gaze' and align with state agendas. These are all powers that, one might argue, will ensure that research is relevant and, thus, produces an impact, but they are also powers that may influence what researchers think, say, and write. Herbert Blumer (1969, 24) has pointed to the need to investigate the foundational ideas of what we study: 'The entire act of scientific study is oriented and shaped by the underlying picture of the empirical world that is used'.

As described earlier, the underlying picture in Europe today is that migration is a problem per se (Jurado, Brochmann, and Dølvik 2013). The increased investment in migration research at this time enlists researchers into political and bureaucratic efforts to reduce migrants' mobility. While this situation structures what and how researchers conduct research (by how they must comply with the calls and needs of policymakers), the situation also plays a part in framing the phenomena that they study, thus establishing particular truths that are difficult to identify and address. In the following, I will discuss some processes whereby research risks taking on and normalising the categories, terms, and worldviews of powerful institutions.

### **Alignment as a requirement for funding**

By taking administrative divisions and terminology as a starting point, researchers take part in changing motivations and people instead of broadening the discourse. The danger is, thus, that the whole research field becomes structured by these categories and boundaries. At the same time, according to Dirk Jacobs (2018, 8), 'if we uncritically adopt state categorisations, political or day-to-day discursive categories, we risk reinforcing stereotypes, particular power relations and/or (elite) racism, racialisation and essentialist forms of culturalism'.

One example is how, legally and administratively, the state divides forms of mobility and migration from each other. In the EU, 'mobility' is used in reference to intra-European human movement, while 'migration' is a term for the mobility of 'third-country' nationals into Europe through the various regulated entry schemes (family reunification, student, expert labour, and asylum) and irregular entry (Boswell and Geddes 2011, 3). In one sense, this division is a very realistic and necessary delineation as these are the terms and legal divisions that the people whom researchers study must relate to. In another sense, however, appropriating these terms uncritically results in normalising these divisions as legitimate and 'natural'. In a situation where researchers deliver evidence on how a particular programme or scheme can be improved, the different strands of migration are often kept apart and evaluated separately and are, therefore, normalised as being different. I have experienced this myself in situations where I have been tasked with evaluating a particular policy and have been instructed not to place this in a broader context as funders have seen this as irrelevant and as a breach of the contract. My interpretation is not that funders actively have sought to hide linkages between policies but rather that administrative categories and therefore boundaries become naturalised by how their work is organised, for example, in how caseworkers in the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) are allocated different types of cases, and the work is organised into different departments.

Seeking impact easily translates to communicating and collaborating with the powerful, and if scholars want to communicate with powerful state institutions, then they might have to appropriate their language (McAra 2017). In one sense this is a practical matter, but in another sense it frames thinking about situations that may have been addressed differently. The danger is, for example, that by applying the preferred terminology of powerful institutions, researchers take part in obscuring power relations. In my own engagement with governmental institutions, the question of what terms to apply has been one where bureaucratic representatives have insisted that administrative categories be used, whereas I and other researchers have preferred to apply terms that we have argued are more candid about realities and more fitting with how the phenomenon is experienced by and affects migrants.

While the precision and analytical potential of concepts are crucial to social scientists, sometimes we must forgo the concepts that we would like to apply if we wish to be able to communicate with end-users. Discussions over terminology were central in the relationship between funders and researchers in several projects I have been involved in. One example of this situation is a set of steering-group discussions within the UDI that took place in 2007–2008 regarding a research project on migrants lacking residency permits. In this case, Statistics Norway (SSB) was to conduct a quantitative estimate of the size of this migrant population, while Fafo, the research institute which was my employer at the time, was to discuss ethical and practical challenges in studying the group. While Norwegian authorities today often use the term ‘irregular migrants’, this was a contested concept at the time, when representatives from the UDI and other bodies typically spoke of ‘illegal migrants’. The impossibility of reaching an agreement on what terminology to apply in the steering group may be found in the titles of the outputs from the project. The findings of the SSB and Fafo were presented together in a report published by the UDI. While the UDI report was titled *Learning about Illegals: Issues and Methods*, the text of the SSB report that was included in that document applied the term ‘unauthorised foreigners’ (Zhang 2008), and the Fafo report used the term ‘irregular migrants’ (Brunovskis and Bjerkan 2008).

I have experienced similar discussions with representatives of funding bodies over what term to apply in the field of return. In the same period, the Norwegian authorities used the term ‘voluntary return’, a concept that researchers were hesitant to apply because the voluntariness of return is questionable when deportation is one’s only alternative. The Norwegian authorities later changed their terminology and no longer speak of return as voluntary, but as long as the formal name of the return programme contained the term ‘voluntary’, it was difficult for researchers to avoid using it. One term that representatives from governmental bodies have been



uncomfortable with in recent years is 'deportation'. Instead, they prefer 'enforced returns'. In discussions with funders over this terminology, they argued that since 'enforced returns' is the correct administrative term, using another term would make our findings difficult to apply for bureaucrats. A desire to be read and used by bureaucrats may thus make researchers willing to align with administrative language and the underlying assumptions they express.

Applying terminology developed in opposition to administrative and political terminology is not, by definition, liberating and accurate. One example of this is the expectation to not only reject the government's language of 'illegality' but to align with the protest against it by applying the term '*sans papiers*' ('*papirløse*' in Norwegian), a term commonly used by NGOs in the mid-2000s. This was, in my opinion, an imprecise term as migrants may have many different documents. However, as the term '*sans papiers*' was one that marked a protest against the term 'illegal', *not* using it, at that time, was sometimes interpreted as a sign of support for the government's position.

To recognise the pitfalls of accepting administrative logics and terms is the easy part. It is more difficult to identify how one inadvertently takes part in reproducing an 'underlying picture of the empirical world', that Blumer addressed. Suda Perera (2017) proffers an interesting example of this in how researchers came to build new stereotypes in their work on violent conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). Similar to states and NGOs, the research started from the assumption that what was going on was something that Western states needed to intervene in, and this framed how the empirical evidence was analysed. Perera argues that while the research came from a place of critique against Western actors in the region, it nevertheless reproduced the assumption that Western intervention was necessary in DR Congo – limiting which characteristics of the conflict and actors involved seemed relevant for researchers to address but also meaning that they underestimated the unpredictability of how an intervention would affect people. That critical researchers would also fail to move beyond Western intervention as a default when exploring problems on the African continent may be considered in light of the normalisation of an interventionist logic that underpins how Western countries approach Africa (Bakewell 2008).

### **Alignment as a requirement for making an impact**

Above, I described the existence of external pressures on the independence of research and its ability to identify and comment on power. Knowing that the aim of funding bodies is to fund research that will help them formulate what they perceive to be better policies or to help them implement policies more efficiently, researchers may choose to align with categories,

terminology, and perspectives to ensure funding. Such alignment may also be a requirement if one wants one's research to matter to society.

However, pressure to align with funders' worldviews is not the only factor that binds researchers to particular agendas and creates blind spots. The focus on relevance is not merely something that comes from 'outside' but is also internal to researchers' motivations and *modus operandi* – the desire to produce research that matters. Many social science researchers, including migration scholars (Andersson 2018), have chosen their profession because they want to have a positive impact on society in general or on a specific cause in which they are already invested. One side of this scenario is what Howard Becker (1967) describes as an inclination on the part of researchers to present the people they research in a positive light since they want to convince others that they deserve sympathy, not condemnation. Researchers also have an ethical responsibility to ensure that their research does not harm participants – for example, that the results will make their lives harder. This responsibility is often referred to as the principle to 'do no harm', which is expressed in §12 of the Norwegian Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology.<sup>4</sup>

Below, I present an example from my experience of doing research on transnational prostitution, including under conditions equal to human trafficking. I have headed several research projects on human trafficking, funded both by governmental bodies tasked with meeting the needs of victims and by the Research Council of Norway. I have also participated in public debates and have served in various expert capacities on the issue. In these interventions, I have been critical of the Norwegian Government's ability to meet the needs of such victims. Most of the time, my impression has been that government officials and politicians have interpreted my critique as a positive contribution that has assisted in improving policies while remaining within the boundaries of the existing framework.

One experience in which I was thought to have 'gone too far' made me reflect on my role in the field, as follows:

I was presenting a report from an evaluation of Norwegian efforts to provide protection to identified victims of trafficking at a public event organised by my then-employer, the Norwegian research institute, Fafo. More than 100 people had turned up for the event, many of whom represented ministries and different governmental bodies tasked with implementing Norwegian trafficking policies. The Norwegian Government is bound in its efforts by the UN Trafficking Protocol and the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, both of which are clear that governments should take care to return victims to their countries of origin only if doing so will not infringe on their safety and wellbeing. At the launch of the report, we presented our central findings, one of which was that victims felt uncertain about the future and of the Norwegian State's ability to protect them.

In the report and at the event, we described the current policy of refusing asylum and residency permits on humanitarian grounds to victims of trafficking based on the 'internal flight' alternative and how they instead are returned to Nigeria, also against their will. My co-authors and I pointed to the inherent problems that the Norwegian authorities encounter when offering the best assistance possible to victims while they are in Norway while at the same time not helping the victims with what they want the most and what would best protect them in the long run – namely, residency in Norway. Research from Nigeria demonstrates that facing repercussions from traffickers is only one of the present dangers for migrants who return and that new vulnerabilities emerge when women establish themselves in new regions of Nigeria, where they lack family and other networks that could have mitigated these repercussions. Returning to Nigeria without the great rewards others expected and settling somewhere new is a factor that lowers thresholds for new attempts to travel irregularly to Europe, which creates a danger of again being subjected to exploitation (Plambech 2017). During a Q&A session on the results, I answered a question about how we could best help victims by saying half-jokingly, 'Of course, if it was up to me, they could all stay'.

Immediately after the event, while I was packing my belongings, a contingency of representatives from the Norwegian immigration police approached me. They expressed their extreme disappointment in me. One of them stated, 'We've followed your work with great interest and have read everything you've written. But from now on, we can no longer trust anything you say'. I was perplexed by this reaction, as I had enjoyed a good working relationship with the police and did not understand why they had changed their perception of my research. They explained to me that now that they knew about my views on migration policy, they would not trust my conclusions as being objective. In their view, from then on, they would treat me as a political actor, not an objective researcher.

Before this event, my impression had been that I had a good rapport with Norwegian stakeholders, including the police. Further, I had not thought that a precondition for this relationship was that I would share the current Norwegian Government's position on migration. For example, I would not have expected all police officers or social workers who worked in the human trafficking field to agree on what would be the right policies to apply. The police officers in question did not appear to have detected a particular bias in reading my work, but the short statement that I had made in public made them question whether my conclusions were research-based or political. As this example suggests, accusations of biased research typically arise when researchers align with the powerless, not with the powerful (Hammersley 2000).

During my interventions in public debates over the last two decades on the problems faced by female migrants involved in prostitution in Norway, I have particularly emphasised the lack of coherence between the concern, which politicians and others express, that they might be victims of trafficking and the way in which the women are treated. Concern for these women has

somehow become a lever for stricter migration controls for this particular group; they are now subjected to document checks, which the authorities have argued are tools for identifying exploitation but have instead led to increased danger of deportation. When I attempted to address this issue directly, I was perceived as having a political agenda (as someone opposed to restrictive immigration policies). I believe that one of the reasons the issue of my lack of alignment with the policy was sensitive for the police officers is how this may have been interpreted as criticism of those tasked with executing policies. (In the last few years, the Norwegian immigration police have been subjected to increasing pressure from politicians and police management to deport irregular migrants. They have even had to work towards an annual target. At the same time, they have faced criticism from civil society and scholars. [For a description of the police's experience of being in the crossfire of immigration debates, see Gundhus 2018.])

The kinds of impacts that researchers strive for – both in the field of migration and elsewhere – take different forms, which Mette Andersson (2018) specifies as academic recognition, media fame, and political influence, all of which scholars balance differently. Some scholars are dedicated to influencing political developments in a particular field. To achieve that goal, turning to media and politics is normally a better strategy than publishing in international, theoretically oriented journals. If, instead, academic recognition is most important to them, then participation in public debates or policy processes will not help them reach that goal. Different skills are needed for these different orientations, and this poses a challenge for many people. If scholars attempt to influence policy processes, then it is clear that while having a PhD and professorship will open doors, these professional attributes cannot prepare them to act as policy entrepreneurs (McAra 2017). To understand how to achieve an impact requires skills that researchers may not have, and this involves the risk that they are not able to protect their work from being misused and misrepresented.

### **The unpredictability of how research is received and has an impact**

External demands to make an impact and internal ideals of producing research that matters orient social scientists towards engaging with the world of policy and the various actors that operate there. Yet how research actually comes to matter is not easy to steer. The evaluation above was undertaken with an aim of producing knowledge that would help to improve policies because it would better fit the needs of migrants. Research ethics state that researchers are responsible for ensuring that they communicate their findings in a clear and respectful way. However, once a publication is out, researchers lose control over how their findings will be applied. Then

they must face the fact that their research may have a different impact than they would have desired.

A few years ago, I was contacted by a lawyer representing a woman whose asylum claim had been rejected. Her claim had been assessed by the UDI; her appeal for a reversal to the Norwegian Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) had just been rejected as well. The basis for her application was her need for protection as a member of what Refugee Convention Article 1A(2) defines as a 'particular social group'. This is a category that supplements other, more predefined groups: people persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, and political opinion.<sup>5</sup> Her basis for arguing that she had a right to protection as a member of a particular social group was that she was a former victim of trafficking and feared persecution upon her return to Nigeria due to lack of fulfilment of debt payment to her trafficker. As of 2010, the Norwegian Immigration Act recognises former victims of trafficking as belonging to a particular social group, in the sense of the Convention's definition noted above. Being believed to be a victim of trafficking can provide access to asylum but only if the UDI considers the claimant's home country to be unable to provide sufficient protection. In such a situation, return is in breach of the principle of 'non-refoulement' in the Refugee Convention.

While the UDI and UNE found the statement that she had been subjected to trafficking credible, they did not support her claim that her situation made it impossible for her to return to the country of which she was a citizen (Nigeria) without being persecuted by her traffickers, to whom she still owed money. They found support for this rejection in a report from a project that I had once headed (Skilbrei, Tveit, and Brunovskis 2006). In this report, we presented findings from our research among Nigerian victims of trafficking. Among the issues covered was the conditions of the debt many of the women we interviewed had acquired to be able to afford passage to Europe. One of our interviewees had expressed that the sum and conditions of repayment were negotiable; the UDI and the UNE used this individual quote as evidence that returning victims of trafficking should not be considered to be in breach of the non-refoulement principle. Most other informants, including others quoted in the report, expressed that they feared repercussions if they failed to repay their debts. The claimant's lawyer told me that this concrete quotation had been used in several asylum rejections.

The offer of expensive loans that female migrants are expected to repay by engaging in prostitution in Europe is considered a typical *modus operandi* of Nigerian traffickers. Local organisers put women, or the parents of girls, in contact with brokers who can find funding and organise irregular travel to Europe as well as identify and secure job opportunities there. Some of the women and girls who leave know that they will have to repay the money they have borrowed at least in part by engaging in the sex industry, but they may be unaware of how little influence they will have over their situation while in

Europe or how much hardship they will need to endure to repay the debt (Skilbrei and Tveit 2008). Others are under the impression that they will be doing very different work in Europe and, upon arrival, are tricked or forced into prostitution. Both those who do and do not know may fit the international and national definitions of being a victim of trafficking. Since the introduction of the UN Trafficking Protocol in 2000, victims of trafficking have been a prioritised category for assistance and rescue, even to the extent that states that are 'good on trafficking' enjoy political prestige. The US State Department even issues an annual report in which countries are ranked according to how good they are at preventing trafficking, prosecuting persecutors, and protecting victims (e.g. US State Department 2018).

The heightened international attention towards human trafficking, and the way a state's humanitarian reputation may be harmed by being seen as unable and unwilling to protect victims, mean that governments have to be careful to find arguments that are legitimate, and in this case, they could reject offering protection to victims with the argument that this was a research-based decision. The woman described above is not alone. While the Norwegian authorities recognise many Nigerian women as victims of trafficking to Norway every year, these women's asylum claims are typically rejected on the grounds that they upon arrival to Nigeria can relocate to a different area than where their trafficker resides, what is termed the 'internal flight' alternative. In my public interventions and disseminations, I have encouraged the UDI and UNE to make their decisions more evidence-based and to look beyond the country reports that the government itself produces as a basis for assessing risk upon people's return to their country of origin (Bollingmo, Skilbrei, and Wessel 2014; Skilbrei and Guia 2016). However, I have underestimated the pedagogical challenge involved in ensuring that research will be read and used in a reasonable way.

Demonstrating nuances and room for agency in situations that look bleak is a typical sociological endeavour, but such nuances and agency risk being interpreted such that I cannot control for end-users who seek absolutes and arguments. The frustration for researchers often lies in the fact that their research seems not to be read or applied at all (McAra 2017). In the case above, the problem was that my research was taken to mean something different from what I believed it meant.

There is no way of ensuring that such misrepresentation and misuse of research will not happen. Making sure to simplify findings in a way that makes them useful to end-users, without leaving out necessary context, is what is needed when one communicates research findings in a field such as migration.

## Discussion

Particular challenges are involved in intervening in a field as politicised as migration (Andersson 2018), but these challenges are also a reason not to

give up. At best, the communication of discourses that stem from scholarship and circulate in universities becomes a bridge between advocacy and the state, which is instrumental for gaining influence and accomplishing tasks (Bacchi 1999).

To achieve the kind of impact that researchers are expected to deliver (and that they may also desire to achieve themselves), they often must go along with adhering to the terms and frameworks that are acceptable and recognisable to politicians and bureaucrats. In these situations, it is difficult to avoid not simultaneously producing a very different kind of impact than what one had planned for, as in the case above, where my research was used to reject asylum applications. What policymakers and implementers want are clear-cut answers that will make their jobs easier, and that means that they will be likely to simplify complex issues, and this, in turn, means that they may use research findings without regard for their contexts. Some of the blame for that rests on researchers. Knowing that end-users are looking to research to find solutions to very practical needs, one way of preventing misinterpretation and misuse is to offer the clearest possible answers, formulated in an explicit way.

While commissioning applied research typically steers what is researched (and how) in a very direct sense, calls for researchers to be relevant and have an impact also come from other funders, from society, and, more than ever before, from the research community itself. As mentioned above, the oversocialisation that Christie (1997) describes is not an issue of censorship or self-censorship but one of how researchers' thinking is framed, and thus limited, by institutions and their perspectives – both when researchers wish to comply in order to gain funding and to have an impact and when research is formulated in opposition so that it will have a different kind of impact.

The examples noted above were drawn from research that was commissioned by public institutions. This is an important consideration as the time-frame for such research typically differs from that of fundamental research projects (Andersson 2018) although the methodology and analytical ambitions may be the same. This consideration is also important because it means that those developing and implementing policies will expect the produced research to be relevant to them. While this means that differences will exist between various kinds of projects, a division does not necessarily exist between university scholars and other academic researchers, such as researchers working at the many research institutes in Norway. In the Norwegian context, researchers who work at universities and at research institutes perform similar tasks under comparable conditions. Scholars in both sectors perform both applied and fundamental research and share many of the same ideals about the relationship between research and policy. In my experience, the extent to which researchers are dedicated to

fundamental research or to more applied research differs more between individuals than between institutions.

## Notes

1. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration_en).
2. <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/what-horizon-2020>.
3. <http://www.h2020.md/en/commission-invest-%E2%82%AC85-billion-research-and-innovation-2017>.
4. <https://www.etikkom.no/en/ethical-guidelines-for-research/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/>.
5. §28 of the Norwegian Immigration Act provides the right to protection for people who have a reasonable fear of persecution due to 'origin, skin colour, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or for reasons of political opinion'.

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