

Zorunlu Göç Araştırmalarında Metodolojik Sorunlar: Türkiye'deki Suriye Diasporası Bağlamında Travma, Yılmazlık, Din ve Güven Sorunu*

J. Eduardo Chemin^a

Öz

Doğu Akdeniz Bölgesi Suriyelilerinin başlıca istikameti olan Mersin'de ve Adana'da yaşayan ve çalışan bir araştırmacı olarak yerinden edilmiş Suriyelilerin zorunlu göçe maruz kalmış olmanın yol açtığı travma ile nasıl baş ettiklerini ve nasıl yılmazlık tutumu geliştirdiklerini araştırmak istedim. Suriyelilerin dindarlık düzeylerinin yüksek olduğu bilindiğinden dolayı yerinden edilmiş insanların pozitif başa çıkma stratejisi geliştirmelerinde dinin rolünü de anlamak istemiştim. Kendisi ile görüşme yaptığım mültecilerin çoğu, travmatik bir olay yaşama esnasında kendisini dindar şekilde tanımlamaktaydı. Çalışma neticesinde, dini bir gruba bağlanma ile olumlu başa çıkma stratejileri oluşturma arasında yalın fakat pozitif bir ilişki buldum. Bununla birlikte, görüşme yaptığım Suriyelilerin az bir kısmı çevrelerindeki ev sahibi topluluğun yaşamına dâhil olmuştu. Çalışmadan elde edilen bulgulara dayanarak bu durumun bize metodolojik bir sorun gösterdiğini ileri sürdüm. Bu sorunun kaynağında Türkiye'de yaşayan Suriyeli mültecilerin kendilerini gömülü buldukları sosyal ve psikolojik bağlamın verileri çarpıtması yer alıyor olabilir. Bu araştırmanın bağlamını tanımlarken zorunlu göç çalışmalarındaki bazı metodolojik zorluklara daha geniş değindim; bunu yaparken de istikrarsız siyasi ve sosyal çevrelerde yaşayan savunmasız kitleler üzerinde araştırma yapmanın etik boyutlarını sorunsallaştırdım.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Suriyeliler • Zorunlu göç • Travma • Din • Yılmazlık • Metotlar

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a (✉) J. Eduardo Chemin (Dr., Kıdemli araştırmacı). Eposta: eduardochemin@hotmail.com

Methodological Challenges in the Study of Forced Migration: Trauma, Resilience, Religion and the Problem of Trust in the Context of the Syrian Diaspora in Turkey*

J. Eduardo Chemin^a

Abstract

As a researcher living and working in the Turkish cities of Mersin and Adana – major destinations for Syrians in the East Mediterranean – I wanted to learn how displaced Syrians cope with the trauma of being forced to emigrate and how they build resilience. Given the reported high-levels of religiosity amongst Syrians, I also wanted to understand the possible role of religion in helping displaced people develop positive coping strategies. My findings revealed that the majority of the refugees I interviewed considered themselves to be religious whilst most experienced a traumatic event. I also found a modest but positive correlation between attachment to a religious community and the building of positive coping strategies. However, only a small number of Syrians interviewed took part in the life of the host communities around them. Based on these findings, I argue that, perhaps, this presents us with a methodological problem, one that originates in a distortion of the data by the social and psychological contexts in which displaced Syrians living in Turkey find themselves embedded. In the process of describing this research context, I discuss some of the methodological challenges in the study of forced migration more broadly, whilst problematizing the ethics of researching vulnerable populations living in unstable political and social environments.

Keywords

Syrians • Forced migration • Trauma • Religion • Resilience • Methods

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a (✉) Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Dr. J. E. Chemin (PhD). Email: eduardochemin@hotmail.com

In September 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) announced that the number of Syrians forced abroad since March 2011 had surpassed the 2 million mark. According to the same agency, as of February 2017, approximately 6,1 million people are internally displaced in Syria with another 4,900,741 becoming refugees in five main countries within the region: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt (UNHCR, 2017b). Only 1.7% of Syrian refugees have been offered sanctuary in countries outside of the region. Still, a growing number of Syrians are finding their way into European countries with the costly help of human traffickers. This picture becomes more dramatic when we consider that "over a short period of time, Syria went from the third largest refugee hosting country primarily for Iraqi refugees...[but also Palestinians] to the largest refugee producing country, with more than 1.9 million Syrians escaping its borders in less than two years" (Quosh, Eloul, & Ajlani, 2013, p. 276). According to a January 2015 UN estimate, the number of fatal casualties amongst Syrian Government forces, opposition groups, and civilians had reached 220,000. At the time of writing, the conflict has displaced approximately 12 million people, including 7.6 million people internally, making the situation in Syria the largest humanitarian crisis worldwide and one of the most violent since WWII. Yet the role of religion in both humanitarian aid and as causes of conflict, as well as the relationship between religion and displacement, needs to be expanded. For instance, David Hollenbach, the University Chair in Human Rights and International Justice, Theology Department, Boston College, acknowledges that "while much is known about these matters, further investigation and research is needed, for this area has received less academic and practitioner reflection than its importance warrants" (2015, p. 457).

As a researcher working and living in the East Mediterranean region of Turkey, I have witnessed the growth in refugee numbers in the cities of Adana and Mersin: from an estimated 10,000 in 2011 to anything between 75,000 and 150,000 – perhaps more.¹ However, these two cities are not unique. Great numbers of incoming migrants are spreading throughout Turkey's urban areas as far west as Istanbul. This represents a sharp growth in the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey: from 9,500 in January 2012 to over 3 million (perhaps more as statistics vary according to different sources) as of February 2017 (DGMM, 2017; UNHCR, 2017b).

My objective is to look into the methodological premise of my study and thus to turn the focus away from participants to the research itself. I argue that the so-called "refugee crisis" – an endemic long-standing problem in the Eastern Mediterranean that although not having started with the 2011 Syrian wars, has a much longer and complicated trajectory – by its very nature, forces us academics to rethink the way in which we approach the subject of forced displacement more broadly.

¹ There are no reliable official records available in Turkey. This figure is according to various official and unofficial sources.

In this instance, I have paid particular attention to resilience and coping mechanisms found amongst Syrian refugees living in Turkey. Primarily, I sought to investigate how displaced people cope with the traumas that may follow forced migration and how they build positive coping mechanisms in order to achieve resilience. Given the explicit nature of religious beliefs and practices amongst displaced Syrians, I became particularly interested in the potential role of religion in helping people cope with traumatic events. This can be all summarized in view of the following research questions: “Does religion act as a buffer or helping mechanism in the development of coping strategies for people who have experienced trauma as a result of forced migration?” and: “If religion does operate as a coping mechanism, why do those who are displaced not seem keen on engaging with religious communities and, in turn, why do religious communities not seem to provide clear opportunities for engagement and support?” As I hope to show, the methodology used in an attempt to answer these questions may in fact detract us from learning anything useful about the situation in which displaced Syrians living in Turkey find themselves.

In times of trouble, people may turn to their beliefs to find comfort (Gunn, 2007). In such cases, many will seek out support from the wider (religious) community. The structures of religious traditions, their texts, leaders and councilors, religious buildings, such as churches, mosques, and synagogues, are used for psychological appealing as well as shelter (Koenig, 2007). Because of this, there is a growing awareness of the importance of religious understandings of the world for people in need of building positive coping mechanisms, in particular for those who have been exposed to high levels of stress, such as that often caused by forced displacement.

Indeed, a recent report by the [International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies \(2014\)](#) tells us that religion helps people cope with the immediate and longer-term consequences of disasters and is also an important psychological and social element for individual and community recovery.

Religion can provide a reserve of social capital that can be tapped to facilitate recovery, including support, information and resource sharing such as donations [and it can also provide] ...a platform, framework and social grouping that can be useful for educating about risk reduction (p. 55).

Despite this, religion is often left out of policy-level decisions on how to approach the causes and consequences of forced displacement. The findings of the current study showed that 1) the majority of the refugees I interviewed were practicing Muslims. 2) Most refugees I interviewed experienced a traumatic event. 3) More importantly, I also found a positive correlation between attachment to a religious community and the building of positive coping strategies. 4) However, only a small number of Syrians interviewed actively engaged in the life of the communities around them.

Hence, if participation in the religious community seems to help the building of positive coping strategies, yet there is a resistance to engage with the religious community of the receiving country, by what means and strategies do displaced Syrians living in Turkey use to build resilience and overcome the difficulties and traumas commonly associated with forced migration following brutal armed conflict? Why are they not engaging with the religious life of communities in order to help others and themselves overcome some of the hardships they face? In my view, this question presented me not with a theoretical problem, but a very real methodological shortcoming, one that required me to look at the context in which the empirical data was collected and consider the social and psychological contexts in which displaced Syrians find themselves embedded. In particular, I point to what I call the “PFF” effect (Persecution Fear Factor), which I believe, at least in this specific case, helped cause a warping of the meanings associated with words such as “community” and “religion”.

I begin by offering a brief literature review only to establish the importance of the conceptual link between religion, psychology, and forced migration. I then move on to a discussion of the methodology and the basic demographics of my sample. This is followed by the analysis of preliminary results from my fieldwork, which then leads me to reflect on methodological aspects of the study. In particular, I focus on issues such as the suitability of quantitative research for cross-cultural research in fluid, transitory, social contexts as well as the problem of terminology and how the latter may severely impact on results. I also discuss the aforementioned “PFF effect” vis-à-vis the politics of governance in Turkey that in combination, render data collection on psychology and religion particularly challenging. I conclude by summarizing the most important results of this study whilst being self-critical toward my work as a researcher working with people in highly vulnerable situations.

The Impact of Permanent Transitions: The Role of Religion in Coping with Traumatic Life Events

For reasons that will be made clear in the remainder, I believe the suspended status of “permanent transition” of Syrian refugees living in Turkey may offer fertile ground for such conditions as PTSD, depression, and other trauma-related mental disorders that may affect the refugees’ adaptation to transit and receiving countries. The latter no longer seems to be a contentious claim as I found evidence of this in other studies in the field of forced migration (see Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999; Silove, Austin, & Steel, 2007; Steel et al., 2009). For example, Kirmayer et al. (2011) observes that:

During migration, immigrants can experience prolonged uncertainty about their citizenship status as well as situations that expose them to violence. Those seeking asylum, in particular, sometimes spend extended periods in refugee camps with poor resources and endemic violence.

In some countries, asylum seekers are kept in detention centers with harsh conditions, which lead to a sense of powerlessness. This sense can provoke or aggravate depression and other mental health problems (p. E961).

“Traumatic events” in one form or another (I give concrete examples of these in the results section), are nearly universally experienced by refugees (as shown by Frazier, 2012) and are often defined with regard to the outlined criteria in the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V* - 5th. Ed. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) for post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). In accordance with the diagnostic criteria for PTSD in the DSM V, potentially traumatic events can be defined as exposure to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence.

My work aimed at investigating the relationship between potentially traumatic life events as defined by the DSM V, religious belief and practice, and the development of coping strategies among Syrian refugees in Turkey. As a host and/or transit country, Turkey, like the other neighboring countries to Syria, such as Lebanon and Jordan, received millions of refugees as survivors of (sometimes extreme) torture and other forms of organized systemic violence. In addition, survivors have often experienced dramatic and potentially traumatic escapes. To be a forced migrant or displaced person under these conditions, therefore, implies an exposure to a series of unpredictable life events that they must *learn to cope* with. One way (amongst others) in which coping is achieved is through one’s religious beliefs and the support of faith communities and the structures contained in them. According to a review of the services provided to Syrians in 2012, a year or so after the Syrian conflict began, we find that:

There is general evidence that exposure to continuous, distressing, and potentially traumatic events, the depletion of resources, forced displacement, and lack of security can all negatively impact mental health and the increase risk of maladaptation. There is, however, a lack of research regarding the impact of prolonged uncertainty and the instability of protracted displacement settings, as well as of renewed violence and insecurity, on the mental health and resilience of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria (Quosh et al., 2013, p. 277).

My aim was to contribute to the literature on forced migration and to help close this research gap by designing a study about the health effects of prolonged uncertainty and instability and how refugees cope with these circumstances. Based on my preliminary findings, I have learned about the decay of social ties that Syrian forced migrants experience in Turkey. Although I believe my research is limited in its scope and validity (I discuss this in length in the last section), this aspect is supported by other previous research. For instance the OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) has reported that Syrians “...have exhausted their resources and coping mechanisms...” and that “Traditional community support mechanisms are failing due to displacement and *distrust*” (OCHA, 2013, p. 13 – italics added).

I emphasize the word “distrust” as I believe it has great impact on empirical research of the type I have attempted to conduct.

In particular, I believe that the distrust found amongst Syrians in Turkey is partly responsible for the low level of attachment that I have found between individuals and the “communities” around them. Here, I place inverted commas in the word *community* because, in my view, Syrians living in Turkey would be better described as individuals living parallel or isolated lives rather than as members of a “community.” This, I theorize, is potentially a side-effect of the “PFF effect,” which I think is caused by two aspects of the Syrian conflict: 1) the long range quality of the threat of persecution cast by different groups in Syria and in Turkey, and 2) the confusion in establishing who the enemy is. That is, for Syrians living in Turkey, any other Syrian could be a potential threat. In my view, this probably causes the effects we see in the data. Although religious community is correlated with the development of positive coping strategies, only a low number of people interviewed took part in the life of what they understood as “community.” Naturally, one must question the meanings associated with the word “community” in this context. I will do so in the following sections.

Religious coping refers to religious behavior or thoughts occurring in response to a specific situation that is usually defined as stressful or traumatic. There is a growing body of literature that explores the role of religious coping in the trauma recovery process (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013; Chen & Koenig, 2006). Studies have investigated the relationship between religious involvement and mental health. In most cases, they have found that higher levels of religious involvement are associated with greater psychological well-being. In a number of studies, Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, and Hahn (2001) have identified positive and negative religious coping strategies. Their work offers the possibility of understanding how religiosity can apparently function in ways that support, as well as undermine, trauma recovery.

Drawing from these and other findings, it is important that psychologists (and social scientists more broadly) understand the potential role of religious coping in trauma recovery. For example, the American Psychological Association (2010) asserts that psychologists are ethically mandated to consider their clients’ religion as an aspect of diversity when formulating treatment plans for them. As a result, religious coping can become instrumental in directing the pathway for post-traumatic growth and the potential coping and adaptations of those forced to flee their country due to conflict. I argue that this should be extended to policy making and aid agencies as the evidence suggests that strengthening religious community ties can help refugees to find better tools and therefore develop more positive coping strategies more quickly.

I now turn to a discussion of my preliminary findings before tackling the issue of methodology.

Methodology & Demographics

The research I discuss in this paper is part of an inductive study that laid the ground for further enquiry and theorizing and, more importantly in this instance, some reflection on methodology. It is important to note that this is an on-going study whose results should therefore be seen as preliminary. Here, I discuss the potential relationship between forced migration as a source of trauma and the coping strategies used by people in the context of forced migration.

Research Aims

This study is a multidisciplinary effort involving the conceptual and methodological tools often deployed in the disciplines of sociology, social and clinical psychology. My methodology was chosen on the basis of the initial research question: “does religion act as a buffer or helping mechanism in the development of coping strategies for people who have experienced trauma as a result of forced migration?”

I divided my task into a few basic preliminary steps. First, I had to assess if my sample had experienced traumatic events as a result of the conflicts taking place in Syria and their subsequent relocation to Turkey or at any time during their journey. The second step was to investigate any potential correlations between religious belief and practice and the level of trauma experienced by each participant. Only then did I attempt to understand how people coped with trauma and whether religion played any role in copying.

Participants

The preliminary sample was composed of 128² adults of which 60.7% were men and 39.3% women.

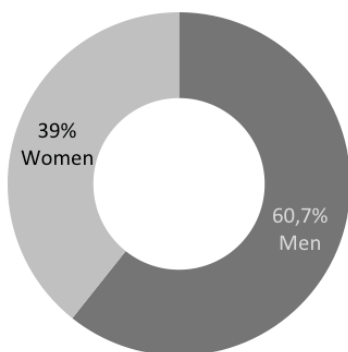


Figure 1. Gender distribution.

² My aim is to collect a more representative sample as I further develop and retune the instruments and overcome some of the problems and issues I raise in this instance.

The sample was composed of relatively young Syrians aging between 18 and 67 with a mean age of 35. In terms of education, I found that 28.9% were either attending university at the time they left Syria or had finished a higher education program. Most reported disruption in their education caused by the conflict and the need to leave Syria. 21.9% of those interviewed had attended (or were attending) high school, 21.9% attended secondary school, and 21% were primary school students before leaving Syria.

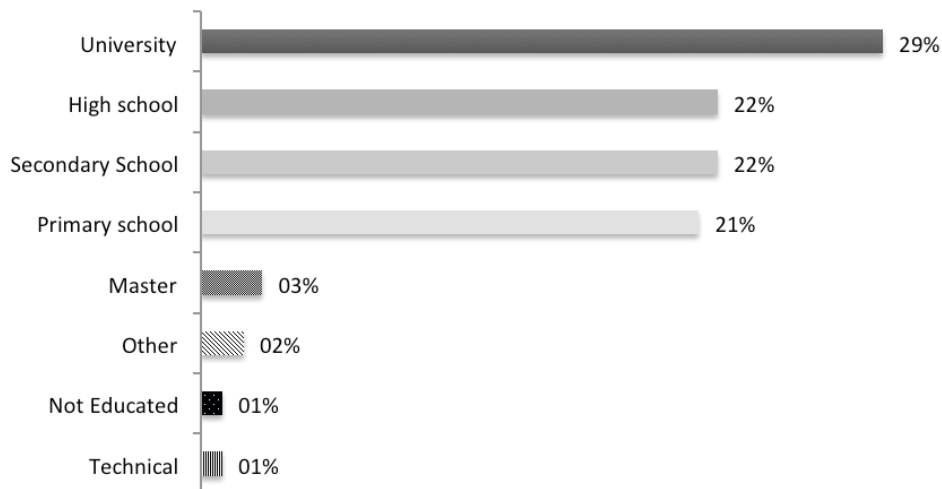


Figure 2. Education.

It is worth to point out that not everyone can easily continue to study once they are in Turkey. Many are the factors involved, but the language barrier is one great obstacle for Syrians who want to continue with their education. In Turkey, those education institutions whose languages of education are English are in fact private and costly. All state schools offering courses lower than high-school offer courses in Turkish only. Therefore, most educational opportunities found by Syrians in Turkey are in fact provided by the Syrian community itself, whom through volunteers and private donors and with the limited help of some international organizations, are able to group students and offer courses at various levels in different arrangements, such as in the form of charities or privately-paid schools. Depending on the resources available to families, some Syrians do have good prospects and higher living standards and in such cases, can access education opportunities more easily. Yet, even in such cases, language is often still a barrier preventing Syrians from attending university even when their material circumstances is better than average.

More important for the purposes of this study was the religious dimension. 83.1% of the people I was able to interview considered themselves to be “religious.” 57.1%

were “very religious” and 26% reported they were “moderately religious.” 8% acknowledged being “not really religious”.

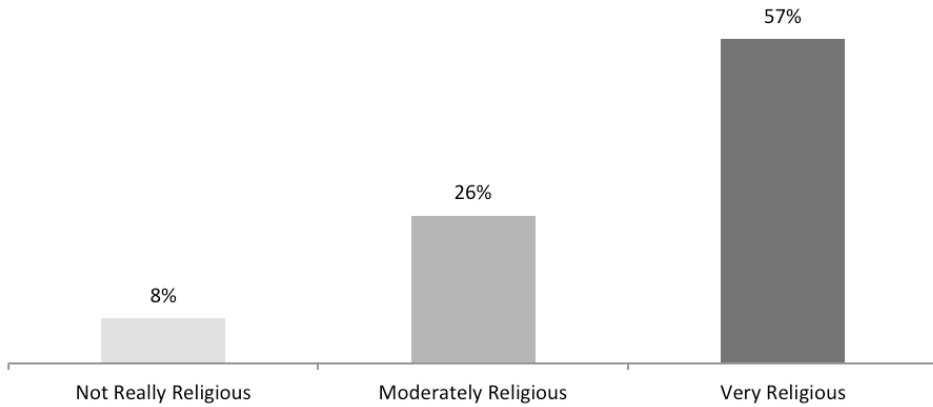


Figure 3. Levels of religiosity.

When asked whether any of them were members of a religious community in either of the two cities from which I collected my data (Adana and Mersin), 77% of interviewees said "no" whilst 23% said they were actively engaged in a religious community in their host neighborhood.

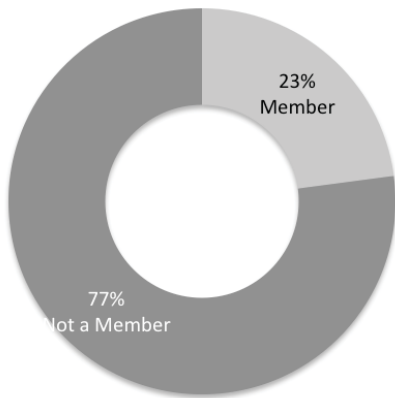


Figure 4. Member of religious community.

54.9% stated they had never visited their religious community center or meeting place. Of those who visited it, only 18.9% said they did so on a weekly basis and 13.3% said they visited it daily. Only 4.4% said they visited it once a month.

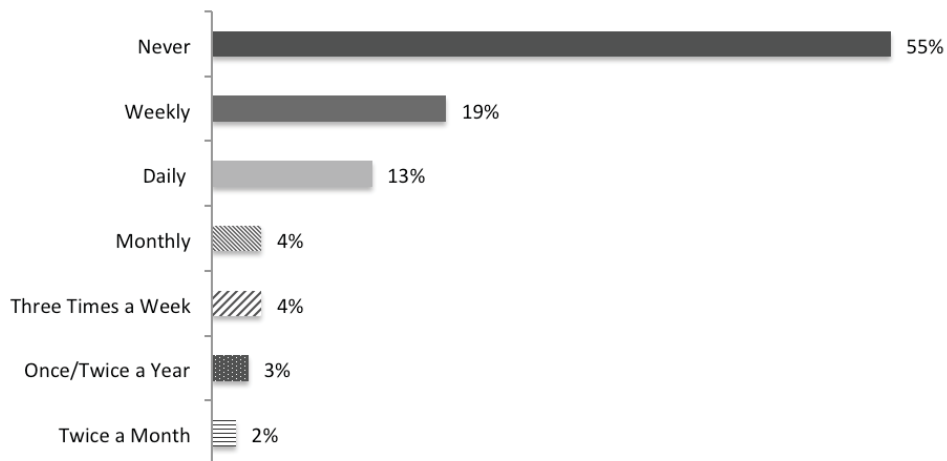


Figure 5. Attendance of community meetings and/or community activities.

Given these numbers, my conclusion is that although the majority of Syrians in the sample described themselves as being either moderately or very religious, they did not seem to engage in outward religious practice involving community activities. This shows a gap between their personal religious beliefs and the lack of a sense of belonging to their new environment.

Instruments

For the purposes of measuring traumatic events people may have experienced, I used an instrument known as the LEC-5 (Life Events Check List – see Gray, Litz, Hsu, & Lombardo, 2004; Weathers et al. 2013). The LEC-5 was developed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V (DSM V) of the American Psychological Association (APA). That is, a self-report scale used to assess whether participants have indeed suffered trauma and if so, what kind of trauma they experienced.

The LEC-5 commences with a statement directing the participant to be open about their history of traumatic events. The questionnaire itself is simply a list of a number of difficult or stressful experiences that may sometimes happen to an individual. For each event, participants are asked to check one or more of the boxes to the right of the page to indicate that: (a) it happened to the participant personally; (b) the participant has observed it happening to someone else; (c) the participant learned about how this has happened to a close family member or close friend; (d) the participant was exposed to it as part of his/her job (for example, paramedic, police, military, or other first aid responder); (e) the participant is not sure if it fits; or (f) it doesn't apply to the participant. Participants are then asked to be sure to consider their entire lives (as they are growing up as well as adulthood) as they go through the list of events.

Events questioned in the scale include natural disasters (for example, flood, hurricane, tornado, earthquake), fire or explosions, transportation accidents (for example, car accident, boat accident, train wreck, plane crash), serious accidents at work, home, or during recreational activity, exposure to toxic substance (for example, dangerous chemicals, radiation), physical assault (for example, being attacked, hit, slapped, kicked, beaten up), assault with a weapon (for example, being shot, stabbed, threatened with a knife, gun, bomb), sexual assault (rape, attempted rape, made to perform any type of sexual act through force or threat of harm), and other unwanted or uncomfortable sexual experience. It also includes combat or exposure to a war-zone (in the military or as a civilian), captivity (for example, being kidnapped, abducted, held hostage, prisoner of war) as well as life-threatening illness or injury and severe human suffering. In addition, I asked about the experience, or the witnessing of sudden violent death (for example, homicide or suicide) and sudden accidental death or serious injury. I also asked about harm or death the participant may have caused to someone else or any other very stressful event or experience.

For the purposes of this study only, I attempted to couple the LEC-5 with another instrument called the RCOPE (Religious Coping Strategies Scale). The latter helps to measure how much religion is responsible for the development of coping mechanisms. The RCOPE was developed by Kenneth Pargament (1997) and refers to a fourteen-item Likert-type scale with four response alternatives ranging from 1 (meaning “not at all”) to 4 (meaning “a great deal”). Half of the items measure positive religious coping strategies (PRCs), whilst the other half assesses negative religious coping strategies (NRCs). In their review study, [Pargament, Feuille, and Burdzy \(2011\)](#) argued that the RCOPE has a well-established concurrent validity indicating that PRCs are consistently related with better psychological functioning (e.g. post traumatic growth and optimism), while NRCs are linked to negative psychological constructs (e.g. anxiety and depression). The internal consistency of the RCOPE was also acceptable in various samples (median alpha for example was .92 for PRCs and .81 for NRCs; see [Pargament et al. 2011](#), for further discussion).

The RCOPE scale refers to three possible avenues for coping with stress: (1) Collaborative: people co-operate with God to deal with stressful events, (2) Deferring: people leave everything to God, and (3) Self-Directed: people do not rely on God and try exclusively to solve problems by their own efforts ([Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000](#)).

Without wanting to make the survey neither long nor too intrusive, I planted – between the LEC-5 and RCOPE – a self-developed ten-point Likert-type instrument to measure attachment to one or more communities. Finally, I also asked participants to provide me with some basic demographic data, such as gender, educational background, and religious affiliation.

Preliminary Results: Religion, Coping, and Trauma

According to the assessment of the results provided by the LEC-5, most of the participants reported one or more incidents that could be comfortably established as “traumatic events”. The following summary identifies the most important trends. 63.9% of my respondents either witnessed or experienced “fire and explosions”. 57.1% were involved in some capacity in a “war zone”. 66.6% were involved directly or witnessed grave “transport accidents”. 58.0% witnessed or experienced “severe human suffering” and 46.8% witnessed “sudden accidental death” (see Figure 6).

I could not measure *exactly* how much each and every experience may add to notions of trauma or even how traumatic events can influence people in their daily lives, especially when they are trying to adapt to a foreign culture, language, job market, and/or geography as they attempt to create a new life for themselves in the host country.

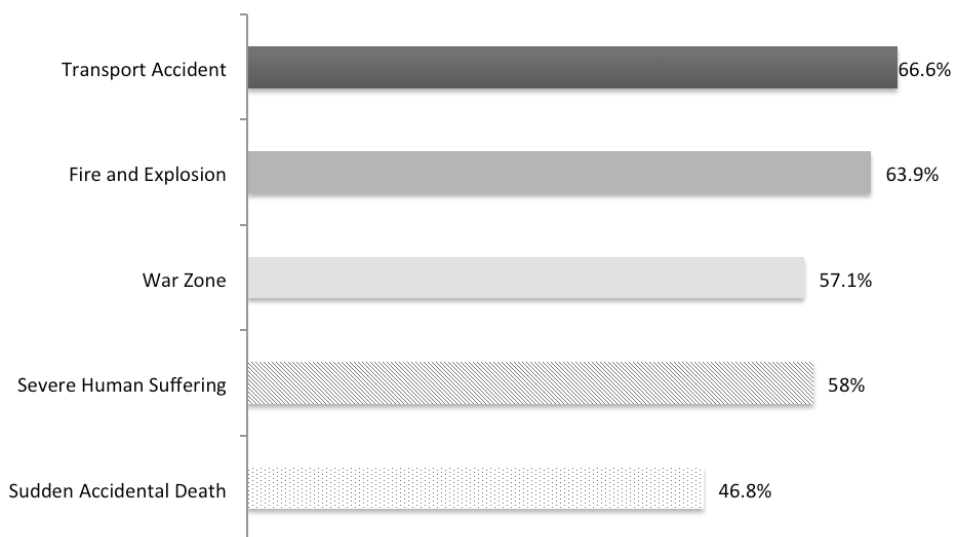


Figure 6. Traumatic events – LEC-5.

The more technically challenging part of this work relates to my attempt to investigate a possible relationship between the two scales (LEC-5 and RCOPE). This was necessary as an attempt to ascertain whether traumatized participants used religious coping strategies and if so, of what kind. Through the use of the LEC-5 questionnaire, I was able to establish that most of the respondents either witnessed or suffered directly as a result of the incidents aforementioned. I ran various analyses on the responses given to the subscales of the RCOPE whilst comparing the results with those from the LEC-5 as well as the basic descriptive statistics collected on age,

education, gender, and religious affiliation. My findings suggest that PRC (Positive Religious Coping) was positively correlated with attachment to religion ($r(106) = .26, p < .01$), indicating that participants who reported being either moderately or very religious also tended to use positive religious coping.

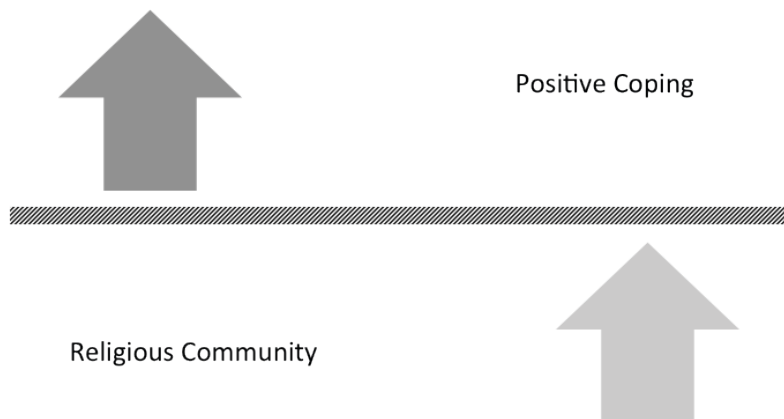


Figure 7. PRC and attachment to religion.

However, the LEC-5 ratings and attachment to religion were negatively correlated ($r(110) = -.19, p = .05$), showing that as participants had more traumatic experiences, they tended to report less attachment to religion.

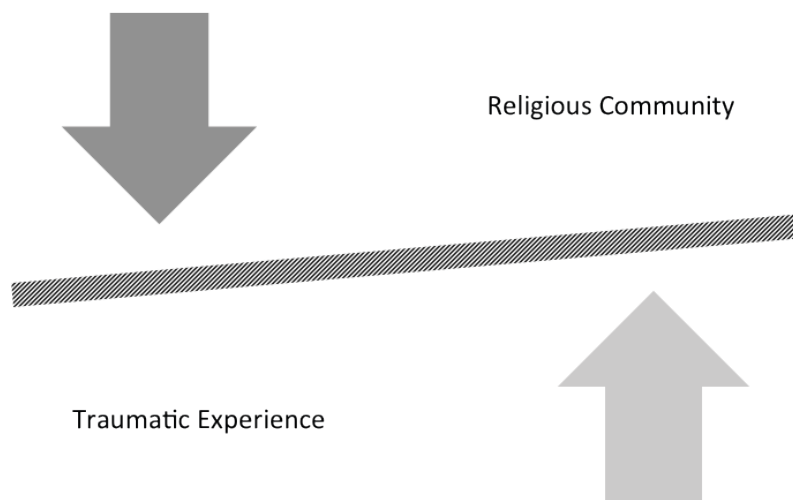


Figure 8. Level of traumatic experiences negatively correlates to participation in religious community.

Similarly, as participants' age increased, their reporting of traumatic experiences decreased ($r(108) = -.25, p < .05$).

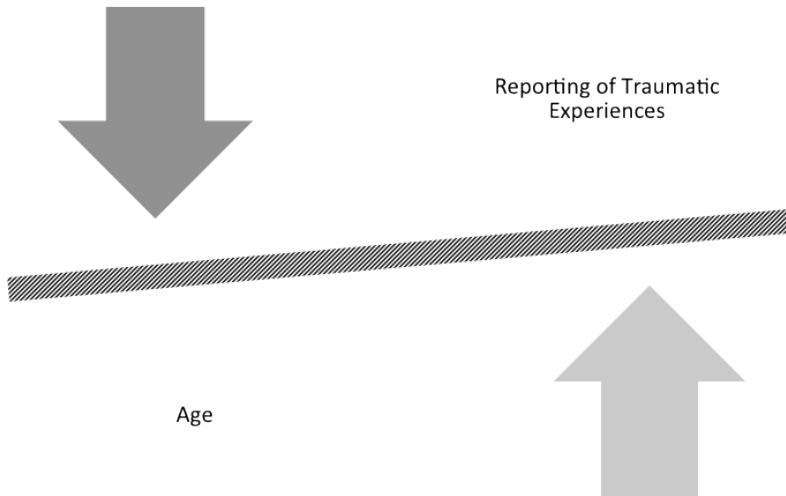


Figure 9. As age increases, self-reporting of traumatic experiences decreases.

Age was positively correlated with religious attachment ($r(110) = .33, p < .001$), showing that older participants tended to rate themselves as more religious than younger ones.

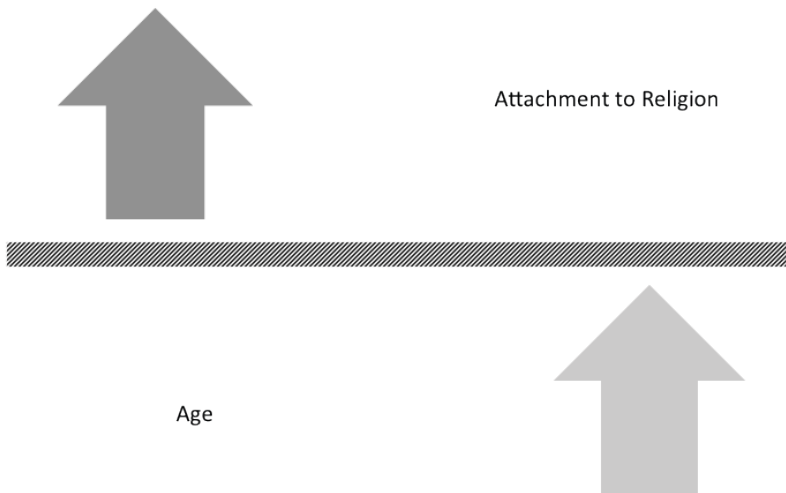


Figure 10. Attachment to religion was positively correlated to age.

These results reveal an important “time” element that seems to be implicit in these findings. By that, I mean that traumatic experiences occur, logically, with reference to the *past* whilst the assessment of religious belief and practice occurs in the *present*. As traumatic experiences increase in number and power, one way of coping with them seems to be to blame it on the lack of response from God. However, I cannot reliably affirm the latter with certainty because the correlations between negative RCOPE (NRC or Negative Religious Coping) and other variables were not significant. Furthermore, in another similar study (though with a modified version of these same instruments - see [Cetrez & DeMarinis, 2017](#)), the authors perceived NRC to be the least reliable scale. That led the authors to conclude that in this specific population, blaming God might be considered a step too far (a sin), something participants tried to avoid affirming.

For that reason, I found that participants overwhelmingly gave the same answer to each of the NRC scale items; that is, “not at all”. What this indicates is that perhaps participants begin to rely less on God for the relief of distress stemming from traumatic experiences. This can result in the person no longer attending rituals or religious and/or community-based activities whilst withdrawing from shared experiences. Another interesting finding relates to age as for when age increases, the level of traumatic experiences decreases. There are many ways to interpret this finding. For example, as age increases, what was previously perceived as “traumatic” does not appear to be worth reporting later on in life. In common terms, it could be said that, with time, the person develops a “thick skin” or to use our preferred jargon, *mechanisms of coping that result in resilience*. The uptake on this is that as age increases, so does attachment to religious views.

Perhaps more interesting was the finding that the more traumatic experiences respondents reported, the less prone they were to take an active part in community life. 77.2% of those who reported to have either witnessed or experienced a traumatic event reported never attending community-related activities after the events in their new country of residence (in this case, Turkey).

Two further findings help us elucidate the context of the research. The first, refers to the fact that those who reported taking part in the life of a religious community also tended to display more positive religious coping strategies ($\bar{x} = 24.96$, $SD = 2.35$) and less negative religious coping strategies ($\bar{x} = 13.08$, $SD = 4.36$) than the ones who did not participate in religious community life ($\bar{x} = 23.72$, $SD = 3.43$ for positive RCOPE and $\bar{x} = 14.78$, $SD = 3.88$ for negative RCOPE; $t(60) = 2.09$, $p < .05$ and $t(108) = 1.89$, $p = .06$, respectively). That is to say, Syrians who reported not participating in, say, religious community meetings or activities were also less positive in terms of finding coping strategies. The second finding in this cluster refers to a negative correlation suggesting that the less community activity was acknowledged, the more traumatic experiences were reported ($r(106) = -.25$, $p < .05$).

In the next sections, I will attempt to describe what these findings might potentially mean whilst describing the psychological, social, and political contexts in which the data was gathered.

Reflections on Methodology: Cross-Cultural Research, Ethics, the Fear Factor, and the Politics of Migration

Cross-cultural research: The problem of terminology and how it may impact results. One important determining factor for the correct interpretation of these findings relates to the translation of some words that, depending on the context, can make a great difference vis-à-vis the reliability of findings. The best example is the pivotal word “community” that, in this case, underpins the notion of religion. Most of the quantitative scales I found available for the study of religion, trauma, and coping are standardized forms first written in English and developed by either European or American scholars and are therefore primarily designed within Christian cultural contexts. When translating sentences such as “how many times do you go to church on a given week, month, year?” or “how many times you meet with your religious community any given week, month, year?” I came across the problem of cultural understandings of the word “church” and “community.” Here, I must underline the differences in meaning. Mosque is not equal to church in the Islamic context, since it is associated with a religious place and not necessarily implies a direct connection with god or the religious community. However, if by the word “community” it is understood “religious community” (TR: *cemaat*/AR: *جَمَاعَات*) then this meaning can change with each locality. For example, in Turkey, the term *cemaat* is often associated with radical groups or sects. This perhaps partly explains why some Syrians, if aware of such difference in terminology (I could not establish if they were), would not want to engage with religious “communities” of that kind once in Turkey. More important perhaps, is that Turkish is used for most part instead of Arabic as the main language in Islamic religious communities in Turkey. Syrians are largely non-Turkish speakers and the language barrier alone can go a long way in explaining why my respondents did not seem to be keen on attending religious rituals or affirming belonging to a community in their new host country. To add to the problem, studying Syrians living in Turkey brings the burden of having to read a very fluid, dynamic social and cultural context full of inferences and difficult understandings about religion and community that must be understood within the context of Turkish nationalism and ways of practicing and understanding religion. I found evidence of such problem in other research concerned with refugees and migrants. For example, in [Kirmayer et al. \(2011\)](#) we find that:

Many studies report the toll of mental disorders resultant from the traumas associated with forced migration and most make us aware that recognizing and appropriately treating mental health problems among new immigrants and refugees in primary care poses a challenge

because of differences in language and culture and because of specific stressors associated with migration and re-settlement (p. E959).

Even though I consulted with Syrians about what they understood for the word “*cemaat*” (community), for example, it was hard to establish whether the meaning associated with the word in Turkish are not quickly absorbed into the way Syrians end up viewing membership to a religious community in Turkey – even when all participants involved in my research were Syrians. If we disregard this potentially cross-cultural knowledge of certain linguistic expressions, we risk building hypotheses based on a misinformed idea of why participants hold certain attitudes and why they behave in certain ways.

The ethics of researching people in extreme and/or vulnerable conditions. It is worth engaging in a discussion about the ethics of researching people in such vulnerable situation. Although the level of vulnerability varies between people, it is neither a science nor guess work to estimate that once we establish that one in two people have either witnessed or experienced some kind of potentially traumatic event, questions which may bring memories back to the front can be utterly discomfoting for someone trying to do precisely the opposite, that is, to forget and overcome such memories and episodes.

Another important consideration is that the very act of asking people to report on their religious beliefs in a time when many consider their religious beliefs to be responsible or partly responsible for the conflicts back at home, can spark a sudden reaction that is never easy to predict or control. Many of my requests for interviews were turned down simply because we were seen as “asking too many personal questions”. In fact, I was told that in Syria, it is considered “rude” to ask about religious beliefs. In similar previous research endeavors, I did not encounter this kind of resistance. The main difference this time was the addition of questions asking about religious affiliation, belief, and practice. This in turn led me to, once again, reflect on the meanings of the word “community”. Considering the surprising resistance I encountered in the data collection process, I found that although they are often referred to as “the Syrian community,” displaced Syrians living in Turkey are not at all a community as such, but a large number of *individuals* that are often very skeptical of one other. This situation has been witnessed by the junior researchers who helped me collect the data and reported to me informally so it is not visible in the data set just presented. What I learned from this was that there is a palpable fear of further persecution amongst the Syrian diaspora in Turkey that may be influencing the way Syrians view their own communities and therefore try to avoid being in contact with religious groups, or any kind of group or association at all, choosing instead to practice religion in their own private space without further engagement with the outside world. Considering that engagement with communal religious practices is said to improve the conditions in

which positive coping mechanisms are developed, it would be not farfetched to assume that Syrian refugees in Turkey are trapped in a situation where lack of trust between individuals (also between guests and hosts) may prevent them from strengthening their coping strategies, something that *may* enhance the risk and/or duration of mental conditions such as depression, PTSD, and other mental ailments.

The “Persecution Fear Factor” (PFF). During my research, I was confronted with many challenges. The greatest of these was related to the recruitment of potential interviewees. This not only prevented me from achieving a greater number of participants, but also distorted the dataset and therefore effect results: the “persecution fear factor” (or PFF for short), which can be broken down into two other elements: *trust* and *identification*.

The lack of trust between participants themselves was evident during the data-collection process. This is not a result of guest (Syrian)/host (Turks) relations, but rather the impossibility of trust building between Syrians themselves. Sectarian conflict and the possibility of government-backed spies in Turkey, as well as the militias in Syria tormenting the families and friends of people who have already fled abroad, all play heavily in the consciousness of Syrians living in Turkey. One example of the effects of the persecution fear factor is that interviewees often answered questions in a way that made them appear “neutral” to all political, religious, or conflict-related matters.

The main preoccupation was not necessarily about one’s own personal safety, but with the safety and protection of one’s friends, immediate family, and relatives still in Syria and with the possibility that by giving information about who they were and what they thought about their own condition, might somehow hinder their efforts to potentially reach Europe. Those interviewed were keen that I vehemently promised not to disclose any of my data to the Turkish government or with any European institution. The idea was that this could perhaps curtail the chances of some of my participants of going to Europe and being accepted as asylum seekers there. Many of those interviewed mentioned that Turkey was only a transitory, temporary shelter and that the real aim was to reach Europe, most likely by paying to “take the boat”. These dimensions are by no means evidenced in the quantitative data. Except for evidence from a previous study that shows willingness from the part of Syrians to appear grateful for being in Turkey (most answers from Syrians in one of my previous studies paint a suspiciously rosy picture of life as a refugee in Turkey), the fear factor and its impact on the data can only be accessed therefore by qualitative observation of the context and “off the record” type of comments I received before and after each interview. That said, on the quantitative data itself, one sees potential correlations that may give some validity to those qualitative observations. As mentioned, this points to a picture of fragmentation based on distrust amongst Syrian refugees themselves and between guests and hosts.

My findings seem to resonate with that of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2013, p. 13) when they reported that:

The effected populations [referring to Syrians in Turkey] have exhausted their resources and coping mechanisms [...]. Traditional community support mechanisms are failing due to displacement and distrust. This has had a significant impact on the psychological wellbeing of the population and may lead to increased protection risks

Politics of governance and how it impacts on academic work. As my study was being conducted, a document issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and submitted to my university (it was also published in a Turkish newspaper by a journalist – see [Odatv, 2015](#)). The document, stamped and signed by YÖK (the Turkish Higher Education Authority) was sent to university rectors all over the country. It contained direct instructions to universities and research institutions conducting fieldwork on Syrian refugees in Turkey that they stop doing so. The document solicited that research permissions must be acquired from the Ministry of Internal Affairs via a written application form. I believe that the intention was not simply to regulate and control the ethics of research, but to stop data collection altogether. This measure was not to be of any genuine concern concerning the well being of research participants, as any ethics committee would have highlighted. In any case, I would have fully complied with the exigencies of an ethics committee. The reason to curtail research on the needs of Syrian refugees in Turkey seemed to be, in this case, a political maneuver to contain information about Syrians within national borders. The Turkish press, which is closely watched by the government, rarely speaks in any significant depth about the Syrian diaspora in Turkish cities, or other issues related to other minorities. Although this prohibition has now been lifted, the situation of Syrians in Turkey has not become any better with the German led EU-Turkey agreement on the so-called “refugee crisis”.

In a related study ([Chemin, 2016](#)), I have perceived a gap between public opinion of Syrians in Turkey and the way the government has implemented their immigration policies. Most Turkish people we have interviewed are rather forthcoming in denouncing the government for, until recently, allowing so many Syrians across the borders, largely unchecked. The local populations of Adana, Mersin, and Tarsus have exhibited indifference, even hostility, toward Syrians. Most important, I detected a good amount of mistrust and suspicion from the part of Turks toward Syrians, but not the other way around. As it occurred in Lebanon and Jordan, Syrians are also discriminated in the labor market by having to submit to low wages if and when they do find work, mainly in construction, catering or, indeed, for some women, prostitution. Often they are not paid on time or not paid at all.

However, the problem in researching the Syrian diaspora in Turkey goes beyond the bureaucratic rigidity of the government and whatever ulterior motives it may have. Some of the researchers whom helped collected the data were Syrians

themselves and therefore spoke fluent Arabic. Yet, that only increased the fear of potential participants. If there is one finding I can report on with great accuracy is the relentless fear displayed by those I have approached to serve as participants in my research. Given that all research protocols are followed and that the research is guided by a strong sense of ethics and the right approvals, asking participants a few simple questions about their religious beliefs under other circumstances should present no real discomfort to participants. However, given the environment in which they are embedded, I was quickly made aware that there was no such thing as a “simple” question for displaced Syrians living in Turkey. Religion has become a hypersensitive topic as well as anything to do with what people have witnessed or experienced whilst in Syria or on the way to Turkey. This forced me to re-think my data-collection approach. In fact, I considered whether conducting research of this type under these conditions is something that should be done at all.

Conclusion

In this research, I wanted to learn how displaced Syrians cope with the trauma of being forced to emigrate, how they build resilience, and given the reported high-levels of religiosity amongst them, whether religion plays a role in helping displaced Syrians living in Turkey develop positive coping strategies. My findings seem to bring to the surface some interesting problems. One is the apparent negative correlation between traumatic events and community belonging. The other is the important role of adhesion to a religious community not only in building positive coping strategies to overcome potential traumatic events, but also in building resilience. I found a somewhat revealing correlation between age and the reporting of traumatic events that puts forward the notion that perhaps resilience increases with age. The latter implies that children and young adults would be particularly at risk in these situations.

Yet, despite the potential ontological implications of these findings, I find that there are epistemological problems that need to be addressed. As such, I attempted to build a skeptical picture of my own research based on the complexity involved in gathering data in hyper fluid and unstable political and social contexts. The transitioning forms of social life and organization that I found in my study of Syrians living in Mersin and Adana made me reflect more deeply on the methodological challenges that research on vulnerable participants, their traumas, fears, and futures can bring. Good intentions are not enough in this case. My aim has never been less than conducting objective research that informs and helps researchers, policy makers, and aid workers to better understand the field and make better decisions based on accurate and reliable information. However, the complexity of the human condition, especially when under the pressures and traumas imposed by forced migration, are enough to put in doubt whether this aim can ever be achieved without a certain degree of self-deception. My respondents were kind enough to comply with my request to

be interviewed, despite thinking that they could be potentially risking their security by doing so. Here, some questions become pertinent: Is there a limit to research after all? How much we can ask, given the nature and vulnerability of forced migrants?

When we encounter a displaced person, it is most likely that they will have already been through events that none of us would be willing to consider a pleasant memory. Their past is often haunting, their present fraught with difficulties, and their future altogether uncertain. For them, researchers like us may be just another man or woman holding a clipboard. We may be able to convince ourselves that our intentions are good and selfless and that our concern is true or that our methods are sound. However, we cannot deny the delicacy of the human psyche under these conditions and how much of an impact we may be causing when we try to conduct what we consider to be “our” work. We must be careful not to transform displaced and highly vulnerable people into statistics. For behind such data – and despite the incredible resilience displayed by forced migrants – we find suffering human beings. Our methods must reflect that and our aims must go beyond the reporting of findings if we are to achieve a true understanding of research outcomes.

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