

## Migration Consultants - A perspective on Positionality

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### Abstract

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Migration research recently has experienced an important transformation, with more authors questioning not only the practice of migration and its policy shortfalls but increasingly the way migrant populations are studied. These analytical proposals have a common denominator, although not central to their findings, they have laid the grounds of questioning knowledge production practices within migration research. This article focuses on one particular (as it will be proven to be) knowledge creator: consultants. Consultants have been fairly overlooked in the study of knowledge production in migration research, even though they are actually mentioned in many publications and sources of knowledge.

Based on an extensive literature review and interviews to consultants themselves, this paper argues that this is the role of the consultant, to be a fully visible relevant actor yet very much absent of sometimes even their own production (research). In order to expand of what their role is, this paper has two central goals; the first is to locate the study of consultants in a wider spectrum of migration research and its possible contribution; second, it describes how their positionality is relevant to a wider understanding of knowledge production in migration.

### Studying Consultants

There have been several advancements in the critical questioning of the process and outcomes of migration research. Authors like Dahinden (2016) call out our attention to the intrinsically methodological nationalism of our studies and propose to “de-migrantize” migration research. Other authors such as Andersson (2014) or Xiang and Lindquist (2014) have intentionally moved away from the problematization of migrants and searched actively to unravel in their words the “migration industry” and “migration infrastructure”. These and

many other scholars share that this reflexive wave is particularly relevant, especially considering the current reality of mobility both internally and across borders.

As these important strides of reflexivity are made, both the understanding of migration and the policy that derives from it, in the practice remain the same. A recent article by Barak Kalir and Céline Cantat, had the title “Fund but disregard: The EU’s relationship to academic research in mobility.” The piece offers evidence based on the experience of researchers on how the “EU invests heavily in the production of knowledge in the field of mobility governance. Yet this knowledge is almost never included in revising old policies or drafting new ones.” (ibid, 2020).

Within this challenging scenario of availability of knowledge and yet lack of action, the study of consultants gives important clues about the functionality of expert knowledge. In this sense, the knowledge that stems from some studies sustain other functions but its application. For example, sometimes it is needed to justify funds, to bring legitimacy to projects and organizations and as Cristina Boswell describes also to justify political agendas and sustain the vision of policy implementers (Boswell, 2009). As a result, the great advancements in research, for example, in challenging the epistemology of migration or the narratives that arise from this reflection might not be as functional to the way in which the current migration regimes are designed.

Considering the above mentioned, an initial reflection of this paper is precisely to start by recognizing the important wave of critical and reflexive knowledge production in migration research; these studies that might never actually reach the public, governments or organizations in order to actually being taken into account in a change of practice. This paper might add to that. However, it searches to fill a gap of explanation regarding the current conditions that allow knowledge production to be what it is. It does so, by addressing the role and particular position of consultants.

Consultancy work started at the end of 1800s, with the idea to bring expert knowledge from universities to real life. At the beginning consultants were experts, generally academics who gave advice to industry and to the private sector. Later, their advice was used in crucial

government sectors such as health and education (see Weiss, 2014) with plans to optimize human and financial resources in order to better and effectively modernize the nation-state. One of the crucial aspects of their intervention also was their sporadic involvement in organizations. This means that one of the characteristics of consultancy work is in fact their short-term assignment.

Nowadays, although the characteristic of temporality is kept, consultancy has changed immensely, with consultants working almost in every field, organization and country. The wide spread use of the figure of the consultant has also been transformed, with more and more consultants actually working in long-term assignments, “like a staff” but with short-term contracts. The question here lies in how this mode of work has an effect on the way that knowledge is produced, in this case in the migration field. And more concretely within the study of migration itself.

Since consultants are so varied and they work for many organizations, the research project which this paper is based on, has centered on consultants belonging to International Organizations (IOs), International NGO’s and consulting firms which are active in the migration field. Here, it is worth noting that these organizations in their knowledge creation practices, particularly in those involving consultants, cannot be considered separately. As such, it is useful to apply Zürn’s notion of global governance. “Global governance [is] ‘the exercise of authority across national borders as well as consented norms and rules beyond the nation state’[. He] argues that the contemporary system is characterized by both significantly greater levels of global authority and contestation of that authority.” (Zürn in Fioretos & Tallberg, 2021).

In this sense, these organizations can be considered global governing actors that generally act together or parallel to each other and have a global authority and impact. Furthermore, this system of networks and relationships unravel a far more complex process of knowledge production where the notion of migration in itself is a contested practice between many entities, with “rules or modes of thinking” (ibid, 2021) about the way it should be managed.

Based on an extensive literature review and the testimonies of ten consultants working on migration, I argue that this form of work in the way that it is used by *global organizations* sheds important light into the way that knowledge is created, spread and operationalized. Furthermore, the study of consultants provides important information about the backstage of knowledge production that uses this temporality of contracts also as a way to make knowledge legible and to translate local understandings of migration to a global narrative of it. By studying consultants, a new practical, material and real actor appears. One that can be more specific than the study of general bureaucracies or organizations. Consultants have the possibility to navigate both worlds, the public and the private, and the many worlds that migration actually involves.

In this sense, they form part of the notion coined by Xiang and Lindquist of migration infrastructure, that considers that migration happens within the constraints and freedoms of several factors that might not immediately be part of policymaking but have the capacity to transform it. Hence, the concept of migration infrastructure shows the "systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility – [and as such open up] spaces of mediation to analysis" (ibid, 2014). Within this lens of migration infrastructure, migration is seen as a constellation of these mediation processes. Therefore, the focus is moved from the migrant person to the structures that allow, control or prevent human mobility. Moreover, the authors propose "five dimensions of migration infrastructure: the commercial (recruitment intermediaries), the regulatory (state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training and other purposes), the technological (communication and transport), the humanitarian (NGOs and international organizations), and the social (migrant networks)" (ibid, 2014). Although these dimensions evidently contemplate a wide range of areas in which knowledge practices could be analyzed the study of consultants allows to include another one: the dimension of knowledge production.

In this sense, the study of consultants provides a liminal space for many theoretical advancements in the migration field. First, one could say that consultants are in fact knowledge workers. Organizations hire them either to carry out commanded research missions or for supporting knowledge tasks such as monitoring and evaluation, donor reporting, etc. Thus, I want to argue that the notion of 'the worker' is crucial in defining

consultants, since it is the nature of their temporary hiring and their position of the “in-between” that make them part of a particular workforce of *independent* workers.

Furthermore, consultants’ hold many positionalities. They navigate between a variety of spheres, industries, spaces and organizational structures. In fact, it is their “in-betweenness” that makes them unique and provides important evidence about the complex system of knowledge creation they are part of. Through their eyes, common knowledge about a subject like migration, has the potential to become more critically reflected. Indeed, the outcomes of their research respond to a variety of interests, narratives and policy tendencies coming from the funding organization, national political agendas, global governance interests, the perspective of the migrant community that they study, as well as their own theoretical, ethical and personal background. In the next section, I discuss this particular aspect of *in-betweenness* in order to further explore how this actor navigates the so-called “business of advice” and to clarify the possible ways in which this study can advance a new perspective to reflect about how knowledge is obtained, circulated and valued in the migration field.

#### Navigating the in-between – Consultant’s positionality in knowledge creation

In order to analyze the notion of the *in-betweenness* that is so crucial to the role of consultants I use the concept of positionality. Positionality as a method revises the context of the researcher for example in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class, education, previous experience, etcetera; and their relation to the researcher’s “study subjects”. However, more than a revision of categorical difference, positionality could also be seen from a critical geography perspective. Thus, it regards social positioning also in the sense of location in space-time which can provide connections and social convergences beyond geographical restrictions. These are useful ways to escape the vision that positionality is a categorical fixed construction. All the opposite, positions are fluid, especially when looking at consultants.

Taking the aforementioned in consideration, in ontological terms, this fluid understanding of positionality could also help explore in broader ways, the field of power of knowledge production. In this sense, understanding positionality could also be seen as what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledges.” She argues that: “official ideologies about objectivity

and scientific method are particularly bad guides to how scientific knowledge is actually made.” (Harraway, 1988) In fact, according to her:

*“science -the real game in town – is rhetoric, a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one’s manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power. Such persuasions must take account of the structure of facts and artifacts, as well as of language-mediated actors in the knowledge game. Here, artifacts and facts are parts of the powerful art of rhetoric. Practice is persuasion, and the focus is very much on practice. All knowledge is a condensed node in an agonistic power field.”* (ibid, 1988)

Consultants navigate this field of power in different ways based the tools that they have, on the artifacts they know and the capitals they possess. In this sense, their position or situated experience/knowledge can help also untangle “the rhetorical nature of truth, including scientific truth” (ibid, 1988) so deeply embedded in their productions. Considering positionality as a tool to understanding the “situated knowledges” consultants hold and are part of this concept can provide an analytical lens to contextualize their knowledge production outcomes.

In order to expand this perspective of positionality, it is worth noting the different areas that this analytical tool opens. This paper aims to focus particularly on this process of the “in-betweenness”. This practice of lack of organizational belonging while holding many positions, characteristic of consulting helps explain the tensions that arise from producing knowledge within global organizations. In furtherance of the notion of the in-between, this section describes this process from three different standpoints: areas of knowledge production, organizational structures and knowledge practices.

### Areas of Knowledge

Within the areas of knowledge, especially in the migration field, it is crucial to understand that many subjects within migration are actually intertwined. In fact, it would be unrealistic to say that migration is an isolated incident in a person’s life since it involves many social fields

and contexts. As a result, it is not surprising that migration consultants often, have not studied migration. They have built their experience in other fields such as in economics, development, humanitarian aid, international relations and last but not least even the financing sector. Although currently there is an aim both in the academic sector and in the work place that professionals become more interdisciplinary, it is important to tell the viewpoints that these areas of knowledge bring into the outcome of research.

Henceforth, one of the crucial issues of the studies produced by consultants especially in international organizations, is the fact that this formative lens is barely mentioned in their reports.<sup>1</sup> This positionality aspect or the so-called *writing place* that has been so eagerly encouraged in the field of science and academia seems to be absent in the current reporting for policy-making. In this sense, one can wonder about the audience that reads these outcomes. Could policy-makers be exempt from understanding this lens? Could one consider that they understand the biases involved in generalist studies? Or because of their condition of working as practitioners inside the field, can one deem them aware of this position? The question here is, since these reports are used by media, the public, civil society organizations and migrants themselves, should they be informed about this particular subjectivity?

These questions could be further explained by what Antoine Pécoud calls International Migration Narratives (IMN):

*"IMN aspire at a double order: first making migration dynamics transparent and intelligible, through data and research, and thanks to policy categories that transform indistinct flows of people into separate policy problems and issues; and second transposing this proper understanding of migration into a reality and 'managing' migration in a way that is 'orderly,' 'predictable,' 'balanced,' etc."* (Pécoud, 2015).

Reports built by consultants can often be categorized as IMN. From that perspective, the lack of inclusion of the researchers' lens fulfills a purpose, which in the case of consultants often

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<sup>1</sup> See for example IOM Country Assessment Reports.

means to become anonymous while at the same time functional to the need of expert knowledge.

In this sense, the need of expert knowledge accomplishes a function of legitimization. This means that institutions and policy makers appear more solid to the public and to themselves only by providing reference to a certain acquired knowledge. (see Boswell, 2009) In addition, it is important to note that legitimization is also formed by making something legible. As a result, consultants do not only help produce knowledge but have an important function of translation. Translation in the sense means to make reality legible, which taking the perspective of IMN, means to create a condensed, simplifying narrative from something as complex as migration. In this sense, consultants based on their *writing place*, also have the task to translate local knowledge into a global narrative. This translation process falls into what Christian Buerger calls epistemic practice. This refers to the process of *making things known* (ibid,2015). He gives a clear example of how operationally this happens for the notion piracy, how it has become to be known, studied and given a policy framework. Considering this case, one can find important similarities in which global organizations have constructed these epistemes also regarding subjects such as migration. In sum, practices like translation construct epistemic knowledges, and in the case of migration, consultants hold a great role in how these are framed and disseminated.

### Organizational Structures

This perspective of the *writing place* has also an implication in the second aspect for explaining the *in-between* position of consultants and that has to do with organizational structures. Consultancy implies a lack of institutional belonging. In fact, they often navigate between many organizations. As such, a lot of consultancy contracts involve partnerships between governments, civil society organizations and IOs. This outsider role of consultants stems from the birth of consultancy in itself. In the effort to modernize bureaucracies, it was thought that these experts by looking from the outside could see objectively and neutrally what happens inside an organization. (Weis, 2019) This believe remains to be a powerful notion.

In this sense, consultants' "not belonging place" is actually crucial to their interventions and outcomes. Likewise, it is important to note that this understanding of the outsider navigating between two, or more organizations does not imply a problem. Indeed, often collaborative interdisciplinary interventions have been a new way into generating creative and innovative proposals in response to permanent organizational structures. However, this study proposes to be aware and critical of the role of these outsiders and to evaluate their presentation of data as neutral and objective, far away from any perception of ambiguity or "in-betweenness."

Furthermore, there are important limitations to this outside perspective. First of all, considering the short-term contractual forms, consultants also have a short amount of time to explore often very complex subjects while dealing with a wide variety of actors with competing interests. Second, there is current a context, particularly, in the field of migration of what Lemberg-Pedersen & Hayoti call data craving. In fact, the business of data and knowledge is very profitable (ibid, 2020). This means that organizations compete for information. Some consultants that were interviewed for this project actually mentioned having to write the same report for two organizations since each of them wanted to have ownership of the report and information even though it was the same study. In sum, these practices prove that consultants' position has important function in the competition for knowledge, where they are located in the possible neutral in between to attend the needs of organizations and the system of knowledge production in itself.

### Knowledge Practices

Considering these aspects, the final element of positionality of consultants has to do with knowledge practices. Here, I refer to the ways in which organizations create knowledge, the possible aims that are behind this knowledge and the aims of consultants themselves that have to interact together. To give a more concrete example, a knowledge practice could be the way in which the majority of reports of international organizations produced by consultants have a diagnostic section and finish with policy recommendations. This structure of reporting binds consultants to a certain language, process of knowledge acquisition and

overall narrative of migration. In this sense, there can be a conflictive dynamic within the way that knowledge is formed by consultants.

Many of the consultants that were interviewed mentioned that their own understanding of migration sometimes highly differs from the one of the organization that they are working for. In this sense, also their personal narrative and theoretical background could be different than the ones their hiring organization use. Consultants have more capacity of negotiation of their narrative and creative process based on their social, economic, academic capital as well as their experience in consultancy work. For example, consultants holding a doctoral degree have more possibilities to negotiate the terms of property rights, or the methods they use to obtain information, among others. Also, consultants coming from social states where they can apply for unemployment benefits will most likely have more options regarding the contract conditions they accept.

Based on the aforementioned, one could argue that the position of consultants holds an intrinsic ambiguity which shows a field of tension in which knowledge is produced and later applied. This process provides evidence for the complex way knowledge is actually created. Therefore, allowing a more critical understanding about knowledge production practices could be a useful way to address a wider field of migration research and policy implementation.

## Conclusions

The aim of this paper is not to deem consultancy a negative tool but to critically reflect about the ways in which knowledge is built and in which we, the public, get information. Having this in mind some conclusions about the notion of positionality are drawn. The first is to recognize the field of tensions from which knowledge is constructed. These tensions stem from the short-term nature of consultancy as much as the way in which the knowledge products that consultants provide are designed. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that even though the social sciences have advanced in the way to critically address the position of both the researcher and *subject*, the so-called practical research still remains to be understood as separate procedure where standard measurements of transparency are not as clearly

demanded and stated. Moreover, even though narratives produced by global organizations, with great contributions by consultants, remain to be presented as neutral, scientific and objective. Research in itself as a task has been rethought as a process of many subjectivities in which the author is involved at all times. This rigidity in the field of practice, presenting knowledge as sealed from any subjectivity is unrealistic. Indeed, in the practical aim of knowledge production for global organizations: relationships, are complex and necessarily involve conflictive knowledge practices.

Furthermore, the study of positionality actually shows the complex notion of the *in-between* to try to understand the nature of competing knowledge practices and their final production. Knowledge is a black box of practice, a box that is rarely seen in the outcome of any research or study but ultimately provides a better understanding of practice of knowledge creation. In this box, everything is fluid while at the same time organizational pressures, contestation and resistance coexist. Henceforth, the study of positionality especially based on the case of consultants, reflects the importance to further analyze these newly seen actors who have a particular functionality between providing expert knowledge and to a greater extent guaranteeing legitimacy and organizational survival.

Finally, consultants occupy a liminal position that can be useful in thinking about knowledge practices in the migration field. The fixity of these practices says much about the maintenance of paradigms, on how and what knowledge should be built and mostly what migration is actually represented to be.

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