JIMS

Journal of Identity and Migration Studies
Volume 18, number 2, 2024

RESEARCH ARTICLES

"It's Never Just One Thing:" Complexifying Migration Concepts and Categories through Stories of Movement from the Middle East and North Africa to the United States

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Abstract. Migration has been a ubiquitous human experience for millennia. Scholars have worked within and across disciplines to generate central theories and concepts about what it means to migrate. However, debates continue about fundamental categories to describe the movement of people. This article explores the challenges in conceptualizing multifaceted processes of migration. It draws on fourteen interviews conducted with individuals who came to the United States from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Interviews illuminate how overlapping migration concepts play out within the lives of individuals. Based on insights from participants' narratives, I argue that the complexities of migration call for reconceptualizing categories as interconnected positions in a *multidimensional migration space-time*. I offer that as a metaphor with which to think throughout the research process. The article urges scholars of migration to remain sensitive to the need for flexible and adaptive frameworks to understand migration and the need to carefully construct studies to foreground nuance. This article concludes by arguing that while more elastic concepts offer opportunities, there are also important potential risks to consider.

Keywords: Migration; immigrants; asylum-seekers; refugees; mobility

Introduction

Migration is as old as human societies (Brubaker 2010).[1] Indeed, we can understand human history as complicated, ongoing processes of movement (Nail 2015). People leave one community, geography, or territory and enter another for many different reasons: conflict, opportunity, safety, adventure, love, and on and on. The contours of such movements are contextual and conditioned by the circumstances of particular times and places. Although migration has been a ubiquitous social, political, and economic experience for millennia, migration's complexities pose challenges for researchers.

Scholars have worked within and across many disciplines to generate central theories and concepts about what it means to migrate (Brettell and Hollifield 2014). However, debates

[1] I presented an early version of this article at the XIIth Race, Ethnicity, Place/Middle Atlantic American Association of Geographers Conference in Washington, DC in October 2023. I then revised that presentation into a perspective article for the International Journal of Population Studies (Online First September 2024, open-access CC BY 4.0). Portions of this article have been adapted and expanded from that commentary.

continue about fundamental categories to describe the movement of people. Concepts such as migrant, asylum-seeker, and refugee have significant differences but also overlapping characteristics (Tsegay 2023; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Disaggregating categories requires considerable effort. In fact, studies of migration "destabilize the rigid division of the world" (Bastia 2014, 238). The messiness of individuals' lived experiences of migration calls for scholars to critically examine how categories are constructed and mobilized (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

In my previous and ongoing research, I have explored the lived experiences of those who have migrated to the United States. A recurring theme across that work has been the challenges intrinsic to categorizing migrations. For example, in a previous study with Iraqis who left their homes because of the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation, the multiple routes individuals took to seek refuge meant answering the ostensibly simple question, "who is a refugee?" was not straightforward. The US government runs at least three separate programs through which it grants (or denies) legal statuses to people who are displaced: the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), asylum, and the Special Immigrant Visa Program (SIV) (Keyel 2023).[2] I interviewed Iraqis who arrived through each program. In that work, I conceptualized all of them as refugees. However, that is not a universally accepted approach. Encountering those complexities prompted me to pursue engaging directly with the intricacies of theorizing types of migration.

Inspired by that previous study, this article explores some of the challenges conceptualizing the multifaceted processes of migration presents. To do so, it draws on fourteen interviews conducted with individuals who came to the United States from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The experiences of the individuals with whom I spoke demonstrate the complexities of attempting to categorize migration(s). In many ways, my findings reinforce and reiterate the results and insights of earlier studies. The interviews I conducted illuminated how overlapping migration concepts play out within the lives of individuals and their families. Individuals may find themselves moving among multiple migration categories and concepts.

Based on my findings, I argue scholars could benefit from moving away from strictly delimited migration categories. Instead, reconceptualizing categories (immigrant, asylum-seeker, refugee, etc.) as interconnected positions in a *multidimensional migration space-time* can allow scholars to examine the myriad facets of movement in nuanced ways. Along with that analytical metaphor, scholars should also remain attuned to the reality that the intricacies of migration necessitate the (re)construction of adaptable concepts for understanding highly temporally, geographically, culturally, and politically contextual and contingent experiences. Therefore, for those of us studying migration, we need to exercise care in designing research projects that portray the subtleties, tensions, and contradictions in migration, even and especially if that nuance does not fit neatly into instrumentalized understandings used by governments and international legal regimes.

In this article, I first outline the interview process from which I draw empirical grounding. I then review existing literature that interrogates the challenges of defining key concepts in migration and categorizing the experiences of individuals who migrate. After that, I turn to interviews and

[2] Adding to the multiple schemes and statuses, the United States also has a program called Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which provides certain people and groups a limited and impermanent right to reside in the country if conditions in their former place of residence are deemed unsafe. None of the participants in the study had TPS but there are both similarities and significant differences between this program and asylum and refugee status.

examine research participants' narratives of migration with an eye toward how they illustrate the challenges of categorizing migration experiences. With those narratives in mind, I then argue that the complexities necessitate approaching understanding a *multidimensional migration space-time* rather than rigidly defined and bounded migration categories. I call for scholars of migration to remain sensitive to the need for flexible and adaptive frameworks to understand migration and the need to carefully construct studies to foreground nuance. I conclude by arguing that while more elastic concepts offer opportunities, there are also important potential risks to consider.

Interviewing Individuals who Migrate

The research that this article draws from is a follow-up project to previous work that examined the experiences of Iraqis who left their country and came to the United States after the 2003 US-led invasion (Keyel 2020; 2023). This time seeking a geographically wider set of participants, between July and December 2021, I conducted interviews with fourteen individuals who left the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and came to the US.[3] I sought to open participation in the research as broadly as possible. Therefore, I allowed potential participants to self-identify as originating from the MENA region however they chose to define it. Additionally, I did not predetermine or restrict participation to any particular immigration status (or lack thereof). I spoke with individuals from Egypt (4), Iran (4), Syria (2), Bahrain (1), Lebanon (1), Morocco (1), and Palestine (1). Eleven of the individuals I spoke with identified as women and three as men. They ranged in age from 27 to 48 years old. I conducted most interviews via video calls on Zoom. In two cases I spoke on the phone with interviewees. Conversations were conducted in English. I recorded and transcribed twelve of the interviews. One participant asked not to be recorded. In that case, I took detailed, contemporaneous notes during our conversation. In the final instance, one participant agreed to an interview and recording, and then asked that I destroy the interview recording after we finished. Following their wishes, I did not retain a copy of the recording. That participant continued to give consent to participate in the study, however, and I include material about their experiences based on the notes I took during our conversation. All interviewees are referred to only by pseudonyms.

I conceived of this research as exploratory. As such, interviews were semi-structured. I approached each participant with a set of questions about themselves and their experiences migrating but allowed discussions to flow into unanticipated directions and topics. Conversations

[3] Like migration, there are ongoing debates about how to define the borders of the MENA concept and whether we can or should consider it a single region at all. Moreover, given MENA's connections to orientalist European projects of colonialism and imperialism, there have also been moves to replace it with the newer term Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). See Armen (2023) for a discussion of SWANA as a descriptive geographic/cultural/political concept and as a decolonial praxis. For this project, I continued to use MENA for two reasons. First, it is a term that is still widely used and understood, and therefore I assumed that it would be clearer to a larger pool of potential interviewees. And, indeed, several people I interviewed defined themselves as Middle Eastern. Second, SWANA still seems to me to bring together a vast diversity of cultures, people, languages, and geographies to define a region based on largely arbitrary and homogenizing geographical reference to another point on the map (Asia in this case instead of Europe). Such redefining still implies a set of shared characteristics and experiences, even minimally. As Armen points out, one of the risks of moving from MENA to SWANA is substituting one hegemonic, homogenizing concept for another. I am not yet convinced that SWANA overcomes that risk.

covered several subjects including explorations of the processes and decisions to leave a country of birth and/or habitual residence and come to the US. During interviews, I also asked participants to elaborate on how they defined themselves and their backgrounds across characteristics including age, sex/gender identification, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and migration category—migrant, immigrant, asylum-seeker, refugee, resident, citizen, etc. Taking an inductive, iterative approach to analyzing the interview transcripts, I derived several major and subsidiary themes (Bailey, 2007; Saldaña, 2013). This article focuses on one of those themes: the overlapping migration statuses many interviewees experienced. By taking an inductive approach, I sought to allow research participants to self-identify with and/or challenge imperfect concepts of migration, background, and identity to understand the complexities of their experiences. To illustrate these nuances, I include significant passages from interviews in a later section, lightly edited for clarity. Per Collins, I sought to analyze interviews with a commitment to "experience as a way of knowing" that is always partial and in the process of construction and reconstruction (2019, 185). I have chosen to include many, though not all, relevant quotes in this article. I chose those incorporated below for their clarity in illustrating the theme of migration category complexities.

Existing Literature: Migration Categories as Contested Concepts

Over the course of decades, a number of scholars and practitioners have identified the challenges in defining and applying central migration categories such as migrant, immigrant, asylum-seeker, refugee, resident, alien, and others (Anderson and Blinder 2019; Devanney et al. 2021; Tsegay 2023; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Lister 2013; Shacknove 1985; Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2020). Even with extensive exploration, ongoing debates persist regarding how to conceptualize multifaceted and contextually specific movements of people (Tsegay 2023). Migration concepts may be simultaneously analytical, practice, and/or legal categories (Triandafyllidou 2022).

Moreover, widely used migration categories often (unintentionally) oversimplify complicated experiences. Concepts such as immigrant or refugee often assume that an individual occupies only one such mutually exclusive category (Devanney et al. 2021). Furthermore, determining whether migration is "voluntary," "involuntary," "forced," "economic" or otherwise is not straightforward. Varied experiences of movement may involve some compulsion and some exercises of agency. Some migration is temporary, and some is permanent. Yet those with temporary statuses (guest workers, international students, etc.) may wish to remain in their countries of migration but cannot because of circumstances and legal regimes beyond their control (Triandafyllidou 2022). In a complex social and political world, the boundaries among categories such as voluntary/forced and temporary/permanent are not as firm or distinct as they may be made to appear (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

As Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) note, the concept "immigrant" is simultaneously unifying and differentiating. It flattens often-disparate experiences and processes into a single category as it simultaneously marks newcomers as apart from existing populations. Similar processes take place for those defined with other migration categories such as migrants, asylum-seekers, and/or refugees as well. Those and related concepts are neither natural nor transhistorical. Rather, societal actors of all kinds (re)negotiate and (re)define the meanings of such categories over time and in varied geographic and political contexts (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

Additionally, individuals' self-perceptions of the type of immigration they have undertaken or category of immigrant they are can change as time passes and as their material conditions improve or diminish (Tsegay 2023). It is crucially important to note that the ways individuals define themselves and their experiences may not comport with the ways governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other institutions and regimes at national and international levels categorize those who migrate. This matters because categories such as asylum-seeker and refugee do not simply describe specific displacement experiences. Those classifications are also legal terms with statutory definitions. As defined in national laws and international treaties, migration categories determine the rights and protections for which specific people are eligible (Bakewell 2008). Categorizing is not a neutral process; it is a political act embedded within structures of power relations. When an agent of a state, international or intergovernmental organization, or NGO defines someone as a refugee (or denies that individual such a status), there are life-and-death consequences for that individual's immediate safety and future life chances.

Like the debates throughout scholarship, there are intense contestations by governments and legal regimes regarding how to define and operationalize such categories. The stakes in answering the question of who is eligible to claim asylum or refugee status are high (Lister 2013). The modern international regime and many national ones that govern displacement and refugees grew initially out of the upheavals caused by World War II. Much has changed in the world in the intervening decades. Mass movements of people caused by war and violence both within and across international borders along with the rise in numbers of people displaced because of climate change-related disasters have presented numerous challenges to existing legal definitions and frameworks (Moszynski 2011).

To put it succinctly: foundational categories in the study of migration remain contested concepts (Tsegay 2023). Some have argued for the need for new categories or further disaggregation within existing categories to aid in the study of migrations' complexities (Devanney et al. 2021). Others suggest it is productive to view migration as a spectrum of experiences (Nail 2015). Some apply two-dimensional, four-quadrant typologies, matrices or taxonomies to map a field of migration possibilities beyond discreet categories (Delli Paoli and Maddaloni 2021; Triandafyllidou 2022). Such approaches facilitate robust explorations of migration concepts. As I argue below, I suggest an approach that goes even further, incorporating multiple axes and polyvalent meanings, and adding further, contingent, dimensions to that space.

Considering this, navigating a research path through the morass calls for embracing uncertainty and ambiguity. As the next section explores, the interviews I conducted with individuals who came to the US demonstrate that complexity and point toward the need for movement away from rigid categories and typologies.

Migration Experiences Speak to Categorical Complexities

Across the fourteen interviews that I conducted, I spoke with individuals who came to the United States as international students; as children with their families; for job opportunities; and who were seeking asylum. Many participants have convoluted journeys—literally and figuratively—that unfolded across time and geographic locations and saw them move among multiple migration categories. Within and across their stories are ambiguities and tensions. The narratives I heard complicate the boundaries between migration categories and unsettle a forced/voluntary migration binary. Furthermore, for some of those with whom I spoke, shifting

among various migration statuses often entailed multiple phases of migration in which an individual moved first to one location with a particular status and then moved on to a new location and/or migration status.

Ava, 46 and originally from Iran, for example, had multiple experiences of movement within and across societies. She left Iran and returned several times before leaving permanently in her twenties. As a child in fourth grade, she traveled to the United Kingdom to study for the year. She then returned to the UK to study again in high school. In her twenties, Ava left Iran for Montreal, Canada where she lived and worked for many years. She eventually became a Canadian citizen and considered herself Iranian-Canadian. At the time of our interview, Ava was living in Nebraska in the United States. She came to the US on a work visa and told me if she could find a similar job in Canada, she would rather return there. Ava's experience was unique among the individuals I interviewed as she had been an immigrant and later a citizen in a second country before coming to the US. Her story illuminates the possibilities of oscillation among various migration categories. Her experiences also speak to the need to question linear migration narratives wherein movement, arrival in a new society, and eventually gaining citizenship are assumed to be the normal and permanent end goal.

Layla, 34 and originally from Egypt, came to North Carolina in the United States as a child with her family. She told me that she considered herself "One hundred percent, an immigrant. Even though I've been here for a really long time, we came in 1998. So, I pretty much lived most of my life here, [but] I still identify as an immigrant." She went on to say that her mother brought her and her brother to the US originally on tourist visas. Once they arrived, Layla's mother claimed and received asylum for herself and her family. Layla's story incorporates three migration categories, some of which changed over time: tourism, asylum, and immigration. Despite living in the US since she was a child and now having US citizenship, Layla perpetually located herself in the position of an immigrant, a sentiment that recurred in multiple interviews. I interviewed Layla's older brother Isaac, 37, as well. Like Layla, Isaac became a US citizen when he was eligible to do so. Interestingly, unlike his sister, he definitively told me he no longer views himself as an immigrant. Isaac also never mentioned that his mother claimed asylum in the US. I would not have known about this aspect of his migration story had I not also spoken with Layla.

Dina, 31 and also originally from Egypt, described how she initially came to Boston as an international student. However, her experience of migration placed her "between both" agency and compulsion. Dina began by very succinctly outlining definitions of common migration categories. She said:

I feel like I use immigrant most of the time when someone asks me. That's the one that I feel like I identify with the most. My understanding, the way I see it, is migrant is someone who moved … but I feel like immigrant is someone who is just staying here in a more permanent way. And a refugee is someone who had some kind of a force or a difficult reason that pushed them to move, against their choice.

She went on to elaborate on her experiences with those categories:

I feel like I'm *between both*, the refugee, and the immigrant. The immigrant is an easier one for me to identify with because I came here, I used to work as a journalist in Egypt and I moved to the US because towards the end of my time in Egypt, it was getting really difficult for me to work. I had to hide all the time. I got harassed several times. I got my social media accounts hacked repeatedly. So, it was already becoming difficult for me but at the same time, I came here to the US kind of by choice, I applied for school. I came here to study and then after school, I

worked really hard to actually be able to stay and get a job and switch my immigration status and everything. But I'm still able to go home. I know it would be risky for me to work in Egypt. But I'm here by choice, kind of. So, that's why I always struggle with it because there is a part force, but there is also a part choice.

Dina went on to say that she had worked with the Committee to Protect Journalists and that at the time she left, Egypt was one of the most dangerous countries for members of the media (Beiser 2015). She was followed and had people call the police on her while reporting. Dina said that:

[I]t got significantly worse in 2013 when the military took over.[4] There used to be red lines before 2013. And after 2013, you just don't know what the red line is anymore. It's just anything. And it's actually by law, like the laws in Egypt now officially say you can be fined or jailed if you publish information that contradicts with the government's official narrative or statement.

After coming to the US, she considered applying for asylum "multiple times." However, she worried if she were to apply, she would never be able to return to Egypt unless the conditions changed significantly. So, she said she kept the possibility of applying as a "last resort." Dina's experiences speak to the strategic choices those who migrate may attempt to enter particular migration categories. In some cases, people can choose among feasible options what will provide them with the most safety, the most opportunity, and so forth. And, while Dina could choose to apply for asylum or not, ultimately the decision of whether she could move into that position is one the US government has control over.

Halima, 27 and originally from Bahrain, also came to the United States initially as an international student. As her studies in New York City ended, Halima made the difficult decision to apply for asylum, primarily on the grounds of her sexual orientation. When I asked her what terms she used to define her migration story, she said: "I would say I'm an immigrant. … [And] a big part of my identity is that I'm an asylum-seeker. That defined my life as soon as I applied for asylum, but like defined my identity." I asked Halima whether she defined herself as an asylum-seeker or whether it was a definition imposed upon her and she said:

Both, because I feel like I defined it for myself. But also, once I applied for asylum, my life was defined for me, based on the circumstances of the path that my life was taking, that was out of my control, like things that were out of my control.

Halima's story reveals how individuals may locate themselves in multiple migration categories at the same time.

In Halima's case, she called herself both an immigrant and an asylum-seeker. Halima went on to detail the difficult process of deciding to claim asylum and the shame she felt about that decision. Like Dina, Halima investigated alternatives including work sponsorship before applying for asylum but was unsuccessful. Before applying for asylum, Halima had worried that her family would be disappointed with her. Unfortunately, her fears were confirmed as her parents

[4] In January 2011, mass uprisings, trade-union organized strikes, and other peaceful actions overthrew the 30-year rule of autocratic Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. The military ruled the country until June 2012 when Mohammed Morsi was elected to the presidency. In July 2013, Morsi's government was overthrown by a military coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. During the coup, the military massacred thousands of Morsi's supporters and imprisoned thousands more including Morsi himself (Cleveland and Bunton 2016). The country has been ruled by el-Sisi's increasingly authoritarian government since 2014.

reacted negatively to her asylum claim. They were upset both because Halima had claimed asylum and because the grounds for that asylum were Halima's membership in the LGBTQ community. As Halima explained:

The fact that I claimed asylum was sort of like a betrayal. It sort of felt like: How can I not feel safe in a place that nurtured me, and with a family that cared for me? And that was the association that I had with it. And it's true, all of the things that I had assumed about it were completely true, because I eventually told my family. Two years after I claimed asylum, I told them the truth. The whole time, they thought that I was in the US because I was about to get sponsored [for a job]. And the process took long, because I just had a really hard time coming to terms with it myself, that I claimed asylum. I was struggling with it for myself. And then also, knowing that it would be really hard for my parents to understand. And if I told them I claimed asylum, they will ask me why. And I wasn't ready to tell them why. And eventually, they found out [about my sexual orientation] and all the assumptions that I had were true. And they felt like I let them down by claiming asylum. They said that they were not proud of the direction that I was going.

Halima's story demonstrates that migration categories can be influenced not only by state actors and policies but by social pressures and expectations from family and other community members as well.

Like Dina and Halima, Ahlam, 27 and originally from Morocco, came to the US as an international student to attend a university in Virginia. At the time of our interview, she had recently graduated and was starting a new job in the Washington, DC area that would allow her to stay in the US beyond her studies. She said that being "international" played a significant role in her life and that:

I've never actually put that label [of immigrant] on, which is funny. But maybe I'll have to transition into it now that I'm no longer a student. … It makes most of the decisions on my behalf, in the sense of, I have to be on top of my immigration matters. I cannot have the same mobility that another person would have. … I came here as an international student, and that was the label that was assigned to me. … And that's really how I've kind of defined myself. But, now it's slowly changing because I just recently graduated … and I started my Optional Practical Training. So, I started basically this experience. … And then I actually got a new job at a nonprofit and this nonprofit is actually undergoing a process of sponsoring me. … In this process of sponsoring me, this implies that I'm going to work here under a different kind of visa that was not a student anymore, so maybe then I'd be an immigrant?

In addition to the transition from international student to immigrant, Ahlam explained how she encountered several other categories that are used to describe those who come to the US:

The reason why it's also kind of tricky for me to embrace this [immigrant] label is because in the US, and maybe they've dropped this appellation, but I'm a non-resident alien. And even though I've been here for almost eight years, I'm considered non-resident. So, I don't know, it's just hard for me to think of myself as such for now. … But I think I'm just in a shift in my life where I kind of have to embrace what immigrant means. And maybe that's kind of the next step for me is to ask myself those questions on a deeper level.

Ahlam experienced moving between several temporary statuses: international student, Optional Practical Training, and the process of sponsorship by an employer. There was significant ambiguity in how Ahlam discussed and understood those categories. Rather than a straightforward process of claiming or having a category of movement assigned to her, she described needing to think about it and make a conclusion herself.

Finally, Mariam, 28 from Gaza, was seeking asylum in Canada at the time of our interview. She had recently left the US, where she had lived for several years while completing a graduate degree in New York City. Mariam's story illustrates the inadequacies of narrowly defined and mutually exclusive migration categories. It also speaks to the constraints on agency in pursuing particular migration statuses. At various points in her life, Mariam has occupied positions as a non-national born in a foreign country, a refugee, an international student, and an asylum seeker. Mariam's grandparents were victims of the Nakba: the ethnic cleansing of 750,000 Palestinians by pre-state Zionist militias from what became Israel in 1948 (Pappe 2006; Khalidi 2006; Kimmerling 2001). Both of Mariam's parents were born in Gaza as refugees. Mariam was born in Saudi Arabia. Her father was one of the tens of thousands of Palestinians who sought economic opportunities in the Gulf countries in the decades after the Nakba (Rouleau 1985). In the mid-1990s, Mariam's family returned to Gaza from Saudi Arabia. As Mariam explained:

I lived my whole life as a refugee, I feel. I've always had this feeling of displacement, that anywhere I lived was temporary, even as a child. My parents own their home, and we were very lucky to own a house. But I was brought up to believe that I was a refugee. I went to an UNRWA [United Nations Refugee Works Administration] school,[5] which was for refugees. And I learned about the story of how my grandparents lost their homes and how despite living in Gaza, and my parents building their lives there, I didn't feel like that's where I belonged. And that feeling just like continued my whole life. When I traveled to the UK, and when I went back home, and when I went to the US, I just always felt a sense of displacement. It doesn't just come from that historical narrative. It also comes from a lot of other insecurities, be it financial or feelings of safety, and stuff like that. I've never viewed myself as an immigrant. Maybe because I've always been a student wherever I went. That was my primary goal wherever I went … to get a degree or something. And right now, I view myself as a refugee because there's a true urgency. And a real sense of not being safe if I went back home.[6] And maybe going through the legal process is also … why I feel

[5] Palestinians who fled their homes in what became Israel in 1948 are members of a group that constitutes the longest-lasting refugee crisis in modern history. At the end of the war that created the State of Israel, Palestinians were, and continue to be, denied the right to return to their homes in the new state, their property was seized, and the Israeli government "effectively and retroactively deprived [them] of their citizenship" (Goodwin-Gil 2022). Israel's actions have created and perpetuated a multi-generational refugee crisis for millions of Palestinians. Additionally, Palestinian refugees are formally excluded from international legal protections guaranteed under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Goodwin-Gil 2022). Instead, UNRWA, established in 1949, has a mandate to provide support to Palestinian refugees (Cory 2020).

[6] Israel maintains de facto military occupation of Gaza and has illegally blockaded it since 2007 (B'Tselem 2021). At the time of our interview in summer 2021, Gaza had recently suffered another in a long line of intense Israeli bombings that together killed 5,365 Palestinians and injured 153,431 more between January 2008 and October 6, 2023 (OCHA n.d.). As of writing in October 2024, conditions in Gaza are catastrophic. For the past year, Israel has been committing genocide against the Palestinian people (UNHR 2024). In response to the Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023, that killed 1,139 people and injured at least 8,730 more, mostly Israelis, Israel launched an assault on Gaza that has killed at least 42,126 people and injured 98,117. Another 10,000 people are missing and presumed dead (AJLabs 2023). In an open letter published on October 2, 2024, a group of 99 physicians who have volunteered in Gaza in the last year estimated that including indirect deaths such as those due to disease and lack of medical care, the actual death toll in Gaza is nearly 119,000 ("Letter to President Biden and Vice President Harris" 2024). Israel is preventing food and other life-saving necessities from reaching more

afraid, and why I'm seeking Canada's help in protecting me, personally. … Right now, legally, they call me an asylum claimant. And I view myself as a refugee in Canada, but I've always felt like a refugee my whole life.

Mariam's story illuminates the deep nuances of migration. Indeed, she told me:

The thing that I want to stress is that displacement and moving around and having to leave anywhere is a complex combination of things. The factors that lead you to it, the experience of moving itself and arriving at the new place are all complex. And it's never just one thing. It's always a combination of things that lead you to do it and it's always a combination of experiences while doing it.

Mariam located her narrative within a multi-generational story of migration involving conflict, displacement, and movement between multiple countries. She very clearly positioned her experience as a Palestinian refugee—a position legally, socially, and politically distinct from others with refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Cory 2020; Goodwin-Gil 2022). Yet she also noted she had been an international student and, at the time of our interview, an asylum-seeker in Canada. Mariam explained that even though she had lived her entire life as a Palestinian refugee in Gaza under Israeli military occupation, her asylum application in Canada did not take that existing status—or the persistent violence and risk to her safety that it entailed—into account. For Mariam, the categories of migration she has had to navigate, claim, and contest are polyvalent. They involve personal perceptions with social meanings. They are also legal categories, defined differently by various regimes of movement, each with histories and ongoing practices of colonial and imperialist violence. Moreover, critically, for Mariam and millions of other refugees from Palestine and many other places, those categories have imminent material implications for basic safety and the possibility to live a life without fear of instability and violence.

An Interpretive Metaphor: Multidimensional Migration Space-Time

Considering the nuances and conceptual interconnections that participants' experiences in the foregoing section have illuminated, I argue that scholars could benefit from rethinking existing categories of migration. To do so, I develop an understanding of concepts as located within a *multidimensional migration space-time.* I offer this as a *metaphor to think with* throughout the research process—question development, participant recruitment, analysis, theorizing, and so forth.

Rather than identities or individual characteristics, such an approach understands categories such as immigrant or refugee as positions, unstable and changing, that anyone can occupy to varied degrees (Nail 2015). Such positions impose expectations on those occupying them about what behavior is appropriate (Agier 2008; Malkki 1996; Nguyen 2012). Refugees, for example, are often expected to be grateful for the limited protections governments provide them and to be silent about their conditions (Malkki 1996; Nguyen 2012). Through ongoing processes

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than two million people in Gaza, intentionally creating famine and starvation (UNHR 2024). The Israeli onslaught has displaced 90 percent of Gaza's population, and destroyed the majority of civilian infrastructure including homes, medical facilities, schools, mosques, roads, and farmland (Wood 2024). Ongoing Israeli attacks have also killed at least 751 Palestinians and injured 6,250 more in the occupied West Bank (AJLabs 2023), and killed 2,306 people and injured more than 10,598 in neighboring Lebanon (Pietromarchi 2024).

of movement, displacement, and/or expulsion, those who were formerly settled can always find themselves occupying one or more, interconnected (Tsegay 2023), migration position(s).

Migration frequently requires navigating intersecting and/or contradictory social positions and legal statuses. Migratory journeys can have several phases of various durations, from a few days to multiple decades in each location. Movement can also be multi-directional: departing, arriving, returning, remaining. In this way, migratory journeys may incorporate not only mobility within a country and across its borders but also periods of immobility. For instance, someone might leave their country and apply for asylum in the United States. As Halima's story demonstrated, once that process begins, the individual is "stuck." They must remain in the US until their case is resolved. That enforced immobility puts them in a liminal space with no final determination about whether they can remain permanently. Moreover, as several of the stories of interviewees demonstrate, an individual may occupy positions as an immigrant, asylum-seeker, and/or international student in succession and/or simultaneously.

Thus, instead of precisely bounded migration categories and concepts, we can think about migration as a *multidimensional space-time* in which socially, politically, geographically, and temporally specific migration positions are located. Each position has fuzzy edges, bleeding into other locations in space-time in different permutations. For example, with travel along geographic and time axes, individuals may move from a refugee to an immigrant to a citizen to an immigrant again. Normative dimensions in migration space-time will change as well. The definition and qualities of asylum, for example, will likely shift over time as different political regimes pass new laws, discourses about who has a right to cross borders change, and members of societies support alternatively more open or restrictive responses to newcomers. With that in mind, we can approach definitions and categories as always provisional and meaningful only within the context of their generation and use.

Interpreting migration in this way is a practice of stretching our analytic imaginations. We should try to identify how migration positions are entangled with other concepts and experiences in complicated ways (Raghuram 2021). Migration spaces intersect with class, race, sex/gender, states, borders, war, technology, governance, and many other concepts, each of which comprises its own multidimensional space-time.[7]

The contingent circumstances and fluidity of positions such as migrant or guest worker make developing a universal theory of migration difficult (Nail 2015; Cameron 2014). And, as I argue here, we should avoid attempting to do so. Rather, if we conceive of migration positions as contextual and mobile in multidimensional space-time, then we need to (re)construct adaptable

[7] Much like the migration categories interviewees put themselves into, participants' self-perceptions of identity were similarly complicated. To give one example, siblings Layla and Isaac, who grew up in the same household, described themselves in quite different ways. Layla said she is Arab, Middle Eastern, American, and Egyptian. Isaac specifically noted that he was not Arab. He said that Egypt is diverse because it had been conquered "many, many times over." As a result, because he and his family come from a Coptic Christian tradition "we're technically coming from a Greek background. So, I would say, I'm not Arab. I'm more of a Greek-Egyptian than anything. But, of course, I came here to the US. I just say I'm Egyptian-American." This example demonstrates how like migration broadly, identity categories can be mapped in multidimensional space-time that intersects with geopolitics, religion, class, immigration, etc. Further publications will explore the identity aspects of participants' experiences in greater detail.

concepts to explore that space. We should endeavor to understand how boundaries between flexible migration positions blur in specific contexts.

If scholars define migration categories and concepts too narrowly, we may inhibit possibilities for participants to explore the intricacies, tensions, and contradictions within their lives. In such cases, we can (even unintentionally) constrain the self-perceptions of migration understood by those who migrate. In this way, scholars may perpetrate and perpetuate epistemic injustice on research participants (Fricker 2007). If researchers, typically in positions of relatively greater interpretive power, are predetermining narrow, rigid, and/or binary migration categories into which participants must fit their experiences, then we may prevent those who migrate from using and/or developing critical concepts to describe and interpret their own experiences. Therefore, ideally scholars should work with those who migrate to co-create adaptable concepts that remain open to reconsideration and revision (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021).

Likewise, who has the power to define individuals and groups matters (Raghuram 2021). How we categorize people, and their experiences, has material implications for their lives. For that reason, scholarship should disentangle legal regimes that govern migration statuses (international student, temporary resident, etc.) and the conceptual contours of those categories. Legal definitions cannot, and do not seek to, portray the full nuance of lived experiences. As border and immigration authorities operationalize legal definitions, they impose assumptions on those who migrate and either fulfill or deny rights and protections. Therefore, we need to consider that policy relevance and conformity should not be the final criteria of empirical clarity or research significance (Bakewell 2008).

Migration scholars should be careful in designing studies so they can capture the nuances, tensions, and contradictions in migration experiences. When enrolling research participants, for instance, we need to pay close attention to how we create and communicate recruitment materials. There may be research projects for which it is important to delineate precisely which migration category an individual “fits into;” however, that is certainly not required in every situation. Narrowly defining and communicating participation criteria risks forcing potential participants to choose an either/or answer to what category they belong to (importantly, *at the time of recruitment for the study*). Scenarios like that may leave out those with complicated migration stories who may originally conceive of themselves as occupying only one category (immigrant *or* refugee). But, if we can leave open sufficient interpretive space for individuals to contemplate and define their own lives, they may reframe their stories as navigating multiple positions simultaneously (immigrant *and* refugee). They may also then have the opportunity to explore temporal dynamics of shifting among various categories (international student *then* asylee; immigrant *then* citizen *and* former migrant). This was certainly the case in the stories elaborated in this article.

As the interview narratives explored above make clear, if I had set out to recruit only “immigrants” for the present research project, I would likely have unduly excluded several participants. The same would be true if I had formed recruitment criteria around refugees or asylum-seekers. The insights from the interviews explored in this article informed the development of the *multidimensional migration space-time* metaphor and I plan to conduct future research using this approach.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I note a potential opportunity that comes from adopting flexible categories and a possible risk in doing so. First, we should ponder how complicating migration category binaries could support those who move in challenging exclusions and articulating alternative conceptions of justice, belonging, and citizenship that can integrate the ambiguities and tensions as people shift among various positions in a *multidimensional migration space-time*. Affording opportunities for those who migrate to develop their own self-conceptions, rooted in norms of welcoming and justice and sensitive to power dynamics, may facilitate the development of language around which to articulate demands and build coalitions across communities otherwise assumed to have discrete goals, needs, and concerns. For example, provided opportunities to explore their experiences in nuanced ways, those with legal status as refugees in the US might find that they share interests, goals, and experiences with visa lottery winners or recipients of family reunification visas. Additionally, they may not only locate grounds for developing relationships of solidarity with those in other migration categories but also with members of native-born populations across further intersecting dimensions. This is, of course, not a foregone conclusion. People do not always interpret their experiences in ways that point in progressive directions. Nevertheless, opening space for deep reflection may aid in emancipatory struggles.

Second, despite the importance of concepts that can engage the manifold facets of migration, destabilizing existing categories has risks. Researchers should be careful about how the information we collect and analyze may be instrumentalized by authorities that might seek to use it to harm rather than help people on the move. Those seeking safety from violence and instability often already struggle to secure the rights and protections they are guaranteed under existing legal frameworks. Generally, the international refugee regime and national-level governments force individuals seeking safety to prove they are either a refugee or not, with no ambiguity. States, then, have an interest in enforcing binary categorizations of migration used to judge who they permit to cross their borders and for what reasons.

In addition to dichotomous conceptions of migration categories, governments, humanitarian NGOs, and news media frequently use rhetoric that frames migration through binary assumptions of immigrants and refugees as good/bad, friend/enemy, guest/alien, and/or deserving/undeserving (Dhaliwal and Forkert 2016; Szczepanik 2016; Raghuram 2021; Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014; Sassen 1999). Agents and representatives of states often seek methods to exclude and deny protections to those they assert are not “bona fide” asylum-seekers or refugees (Bohmer and Shuman 2008). Therefore, when seeking to understand the nuances of migrations, we should be careful not to portray complexity in ways that undermine already insufficient protections for those seeking refuge. We should orient engagements with subtlety toward opening spaces for newcomers to describe their own experiences. Individuals like Halima may consider themselves both immigrants and asylum-seekers, for example, and they may make strategic decisions about how to ensure their safety. We need to be proactively ready to confront the possibility that governments and exclusionary social movements could try to use such research to undermine claims for asylum, refuge, and the rights and protections of newcomers generally.

To close, let me reiterate that migration scholars (and many others) have long acknowledged the difficulties categorizing presents to interpreting the social world in which we live. In this article, I have argued that one way to work through those difficulties is by using the

metaphor of a *multidimensional migration space-time* to explore the scope of phenomena that fall under the broad label of migration. I propose that notion as a metaphor through which to destabilize categories, reflect on contingent particularities, and consider new possibilities. Working through those processes can aid scholars in becoming more comfortable with ambiguity, messiness, and contradiction.

I am not proposing a predefined, alternative typology or taxonomy of migration categories. Rather, I suggest we should *play* in that vast space throughout the planning, execution, and iteration of research projects. Toying with *multidimensional migration space-time* can be an integral element of reflexive practice (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021). That process should remain method agnostic and undertaken without predefined parameters; it could be adapted to myriad data collection and analysis strategies, both qualitative and quantitative. Finally, I return to the reality that migration is a fundamental human social, political, and economic experience with urgent implications for the rights, security, and opportunities of tens of millions of people. Migration has been a central part of human life and will remain so. Because of this, scholars and practitioners should continue to develop approaches to understanding the movement of people that are sensitive to all the phenomenon's multifaceted dimensions.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my colleagues in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences writers' group at Rowan University for helpful feedback on an early version of this article.

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