Searching for Directions: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges in Researching Refugee Journeys

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The refugee journey is the defining feature of the exilic process: it is a profoundly formative and transformative experience and a ‘lens’ on the newcomers’ social condition. Yet it remains a significantly under-researched theme in refugee and forced migration studies. This exploratory article maps what exists, what is missing, and what might be researched regarding these journeys. Commencing with a review of the fragmented nature of the research and its limited analytical scope, the article then reviews BenEzer’s definitive work. The core of the article explores the potential value and contribution of the study of journeys in terms of: better understanding the profoundly formative experience of the journey; giving voice to the refugees’ unique experiences; and better informing policy from a fuller understanding of the journey experience. The article presents four conceptual challenges in studying the refugee journey and the final section proceeds to discuss some of the methodological questions related to research of journeys.

Keywords: refugee journeys, exodus, flight, transit, crossing, life-changing events, narratives, trauma, forced migrants, new concepts, methodology

Introduction

What is known about refugee journeys? What experience do refugees go through on the journey while fleeing into exile? What research insights already exist about this process and what are the gaps in existing knowledge on the subject? The aim of this article is to map what exists, what is missing, and what might be researched regarding journeys in refugee and forced migration studies. Our main argument is that refugee journeys are powerful life-changing events that greatly influence whoever experiences them, and therefore deserve much fuller attention by researchers than has hitherto been the case.
In presenting our argument, two caveats are important. First, our argument is predicated on recognizing the exilic journey as a process which appears to be in contradistinction to the, more or less, static conditions which precede and succeed it. But we are mindful of the significant and influential post-modernist mobilities paradigm which suggests that images of fixity are an illusion.¹

Second, in confining our article to refugee journeys we acknowledge the wider, though still rather circumscribed, literature that exists on the journey in migration studies² and transit and undocumented migration,³ in the study of nomadic and mobile communities,⁴ and, of course, pilgrimage. What, perhaps, is surprising is that refugee studies does not appear to have recognized the significance of this context for developing its own genre of journey research.

In the first part of this article we review the existing literature and show the lacuna in journey research in refugee studies. The contribution of BenEzer’s research on the journey of Ethiopian Jews to Israel to this new field is discussed. In the second and third parts of the article we identify the conceptual and methodological challenges in this essential new focus of study.

Framing the Challenge

Setting the Scene

Handlin (1959) offers an example of a passage from Germany to the United States in the nineteenth century which could certainly be studied in itself. The journey by ship took 70 days and included many torments and obstacles, specifically torture, humiliation and degradation by the captain and the crew. One hundred and five people, one fifth of those who embarked in Hamburg, died during the journey. In a chapter entitled ‘The Perils of the Crossing’, Handlin writes,

For a long time, the difficulties of the voyage between Europe and America exerted a deep influence upon all immigrants. Death claimed many who left their homes with hope in their hearts; and fear of the dangers kept others at home. But even those who came safely off the ships for years thereafter were marked by the trying experience (1959: 31).

If individuals are marked to such an extent by the experience of the journey, it is reasonable to assume that this journey stayed as a unit in itself in their minds. It probably became a unique part of their life story and sense of self. It must have affected the way in which these survivors re-evaluated and reconstructed their previous expectations of ‘the New World’ and the new life which they hoped for, influenced the condition in which they landed in America, and had an effect on their subsequent adjustment and integration. Why then is the experience of the journey of limited appeal as a unit for
study for social scientists, in particular those working in the field of refugee and migration studies?

The Scope of Extant Research

Our contention is that refugees do indeed construct the journey ‘as a period in itself, with specific meaning and significance for the rest of their lives’ (BenEzer 2002: 9). Yet as researchers we have not appreciated this significance and may have seen the event merely as transitory stage. Therefore, we have not developed the conceptual and analytical tools to investigate the phenomenon. As a result, there is a very significant lacuna in research on refugee journeys. The research that exists is, we suggest, fragmentary, unsystematic and lacking in conceptual and methodological clarity.

Research on refugees and forced migrants is dominated by the causes and the consequences of exile. The study of refugees focuses on either one end or the other of the migration process. Conditions under which refugees are forced to flee, and then their reception and settlement in host countries, and the impact of uprooting over time, are key themes in sociological, political, anthropological, psychological and legal literature in this field. What happens in between—the actual exilic process, the medium that connects the two ends—is largely ignored or forgotten. Since it is the method and process of flight (with connotations of expulsion, enforcement and uprooting) which, after all, is the distinctive indicator of becoming a refugee (as opposed to other forms of migration), this research neglect is not only surprising in itself, but also overlooks the existence of one of the most significant processes of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a refugee.

Thus, research in refugee studies seems not to have recognized journeys as a phenomenon or life-event which deserves investigation, certainly not as a central subject of investigation. Journeys scarcely appear in the indexes of books produced on the groups of people who underwent such experiences or in volumes of abstracts or references (e.g. Kushner and Knox 1993; Marrus 1985; UNHCR 1995–2012; Zolberg et al. 1989). Colson’s consummate summary of anthropological research in the field of forced migration mentions neither the role of the journey nor its neglect by researchers (Colson 2003).

Yet, it is common knowledge that refugees and forced migrants undertake journeys, which are often long and difficult. There are ample examples: in 1939 the German ocean liner MS Saint Louis tried to bring 939, mostly German Jewish, refugees to North America. It was turned away by Cuba, the United States and Canada and forced back to Europe, where many of the passengers died in concentration camps. For the fortunate few that survived the war, this journey must have marked them, especially since the journey’s failure caused their subsequent incarceration and the death of fellow travelers. Survivors of the trainloads of Hindus and Muslims massacred as they attempted to flee to safety following the partition of India in 1947 cannot fail to have inscribed this life-changing experience in their memories.
In the later 1970s and 1980s, the Hmong people in Laos fled their homes to other mountainous areas, then trekked on trails to Thailand, where they first stayed in refugee camps and then in many cases were bussed to Bangkok and flown by air to the United States (Long 1993; Everingham 1980). In the same period, the Vietnamese ‘boat people’ were fleeing political coercion and persecution in their own country in dangerous and often fatal journeys by sea (Hitchcox 1991, 1993; Lam 1996).

More recently still, the significance of the journey has been given particular salience by rising international concern about human smuggling and trafficking, survivors’ accounts of land and sea journeys on which many die, and the evidence of bodies washed up on Europe’s Mediterranean shores or the Gulf of Aden. These events reprise memories of the Vietnamese boat people mentioned above. Then, as now, the realpolitik of combating irregular migration and the intersection of thorny questions of international law, jurisdiction and extra-territorial processing are the dominant policy and research interests, not the life-marking experience of the traumatic journey.

We may add another kind of journey here: that of refugee repatriation. Given the policy significance of repatriation as one of the three ‘durable solutions’, the refugee journey home is perhaps an even more surprising omission, despite extensive research on refugee repatriation itself. Limited exceptions tend to reinforce the point that this equally significant type of refugee journey is not widely studied (Lopez Zarzosa 1998; North and Simmons 1999).

All these journeys are known, some are even discussed briefly, but they form neither a focus for, nor a coherent body of research. To the extent that uprooting journeys have been part of the research agenda in the study of refugees and forced migration, this has been largely fragmentary and often incidental to, rather than the essence of, the investigation (e.g. Caplan et al. 1989; Hirschon 1989, 2003; Journal of Refugee Studies 1991; Loizos 1981, 1999; Moussa 1993; Rutledge 1992; Zetter 2012).

It should not be assumed that the experience, for the individuals, families or unaccompanied children who endured these journeys into exile, was anything other than highly significant in itself, one which may remain as such throughout their lives. As researchers, we should at least study whether and why this was so.

What does exist in some quantity, however, are personal and poignant accounts of refugee and migration journeys (e.g. Avraham 1986; Baker 1985, 1991; Clark 2006; Edensor and Kelly 1989; Flores-Borquez 1995; Grossman 1988; Ha 1983; Letts and Whythead 1999). Much of this material is anecdotal, highly personal, oral accounts which, although powerful testimonies in themselves and providing remarkable insight into the significance of the journey, are largely descriptive. They lack a coherent or systematic frame for an analysis of the experience. Nor are they set in the context of broader social, relational and historical phenomena. Reviewing a collection of 20 accounts of migrants to Edinburgh, Baker (1991) wrote over 20 years ago...
that, important as it may be, such a collection should be followed by some analysis, if it was to be of value for the understanding of refugee or migration experiences.

Taking these different perspectives—the broad sweep of refugee and migration studies, repatriation, and migrant smuggling and human trafficking—what is surprising is how little research there is in each of these perspectives that documents and analyses the refugee experience of the journey itself and the meanings which may be ascribed to the journey. The journey, as lived experience, metaphor, concept or construct has not been the object of systematic study. Therefore, we have limited conceptual apparatus to explore and analyse the significance of such journeys.

The lacuna of research exists in spite of the fact that the journey is a powerful notion in the human psyche. Thompson (1977), the great scholar of myths, who developed Aarne’s folktale typology and compiled the greatest myth collection from cultures around the world, points to ‘the journey’ as one of the most powerful, central and recurrent metaphors in most human societies. This is also expressed in the significance of the exilic or migratory journey in religious texts: as that of Abraham in the Jewish Torah; the flight of Muslims from persecution in the Qur’an (of which Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina is the most iconic); in the Christian New Testament, the holy family’s flight into Egypt following the birth of Jesus (a frequent subject in medieval art); as well as Siddhartha, the Buddha’s abandonment of his luxurious home to go on a journey of spiritual discovery (the Great Renunciation). The journey, therefore, is not a foreign concept in the minds of Western as well as Eastern scholars, which makes its neglect in refugee and migration studies all the more surprising.

Standing as an exception to this fragmented picture of researching the refugee journey is BenEzer’s 2002 study on the Ethiopian Jewish Exodus, which had as its central purpose an exploration of the process and ‘event’ of the journey itself. His interdisciplinary study, informed by sociology, anthropology, psychology and oral history, was an initial attempt to document and interpret the profoundly life-changing experience of the journey for Ethiopian Jews resettled from Ethiopia to Israel in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His book concentrated on the individual as well as the social impact and meaning of the journey.

On the one hand he examined the psychological impacts of the upheaval, the reactions to personal loss on the journey and how the journey transcended the immediate physical event to be a profoundly life-changing experience both in itself and in terms of the subsequent settlement and reconstruction of individual identity in Israel. Concepts of trauma, whether acute or sequential, and of personal growth, and their relation to cultural norms, gender roles, and so forth are discussed in this context.

On the other hand, his analysis shows the types of meaning that the journey acquired for this society along the way, which have subsequently turned into central aspects of the group’s identity. Following their journey,
Ethiopian Jews saw themselves: firstly, as more Jewish, as people who have proven their ability to keep their Jewish identity against all odds and in the face of hostility, in conditions unfavourable for observance of Jewish laws and customs; secondly, as brave people—people who have shown their inner strength on the journey, expressed, for instance, in their resourceful disguise and plans upon setting out, and their courageous acts in saving lives and crossing hostile areas along the way, all in line with the Ethiopian core value of govez (bravery, courage); and thirdly, as people who have acquired the status of ‘sufferers’, or ‘victims’—who have suffered so much that they have ‘earned’ their ‘social visa’ into their old–new Israeli society. All these were amalgamated for the community into the image of repeating the original Exodus of the biblical Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, thus arriving in Israel with heightened expectations of a social ‘embrace’ by their Jewish brethren and acknowledgement of these aspects of their identity. The way they perceived their unexpected reception by Israeli society was influenced by the journey experience. In Israel, they encountered doubt concerning their Jewish identity, praise for their Israeli, rather than Ethiopian, resourcefulness and courage, a political and media tribute to the Israeli security service (Mossad) operation in bringing them over to Israel and a lack of acknowledgement of their suffering on the journey. This, of course, was a shocking contrast to their self-image and expectations following their journey experience. It produced an intense response on their part, including a struggle for social recognition which was promoted by highlighting their journey experience as a meaningful group event: the journey was developed, by this process, into their central social myth.

The Rationale and Agenda for Research on Refugee Journeys

From this moment of transition, and the albeit fragmentary existence of research on the refugee journey, we can begin to formulate a rationale and agenda for such research. We suggest that such research is valuable for three main reasons.

The first and most important argument is that the journey is a profoundly formative and transformative experience and a ‘lens’ on the newcomers’ social condition. Powerful processes occur on journeys in refugee situations, as we have noted above, which affect the individual and community in life-changing ways. As the study of Ethiopian Jews’ journey to Israel demonstrates, the process and meaning of the journey will almost always have a transformative effect on lives during the journey and will mediate the wayfarers’ experience of arrival at the new country of residence, whether exile or return. So it must also have been for the people crossing the sea fleeing from Germany to the US, as described by Handlin, for the ‘boat people’ of Vietnam in their terrifying escape route, for the Africans risking their lives to reach European seashores in recent years, documented in many media.
On the individual level, the journey seems to effect the narrowing or expanding of personal boundaries, depending on its nature and the way it interacts with the individual's culture and personality. On the group level, these journeys may have an effect on the way members of a migrating/fleeing society perceive themselves as a group, including their social identity, and on the ensuing expectations regarding the receiving society and its reception of them.

Thus, the overall value of studying the journey as a construct, metaphor, and object is that such investigation almost certainly has the potential to inform a much deeper academic understanding of the life-changing meaning of displacement itself and the individuals and communities that are the wayfarers. In this way it should be possible to develop and elaborate a conceptualization of the exilic journey as an agency of change and a transformative event in the lives of refugees. A disregard for refugee journeys and the complex processes involved may result in limited or, more likely, erroneous interpretation of the refugees’ state in their new country. We may assume, for example, that the fragmentation of families and social structures starts in the country of arrival alone, ignoring the fact that such processes were initiated on the journey in often traumatic circumstances. By the same token we may have only limited analytical understanding of changes in gender roles, mental vulnerability and resilience. Researching refugee journeys is, therefore, critical for understanding the lives of refugees, on their way and on arrival in the new society. These perspectives are essential to ensure that the journey is not ignored or that the processes they undergo are not misinterpreted at worst, and to enhance our understanding of ‘who they are’ at best. That refugees and migrants may see the journey as a separate unit within their life story, and relate to it as an extremely influential part of their lives, adds the subjective aspect to the importance of journey research. It alludes to the fact that the refugees themselves view the journey as a meaningful event and thus an essential element to enrich the understanding of their lives.

Analysing such journeys, and their narratives in particular, could inform us about the psychosocial impact of the journey, the relations between meaning and coping, social and individual resilience, issues of trust, how communal and cultural resources are drawn on to deal with trauma, and the encounter with and adaptation to the new society.

Secondly, research on journeys can be a very effective way to give voice to the refugee/forced migrant, in a novel context, and which can challenge the competing voices that come from more socially powerful exogenous agents which may often discount or minimize the refugee experience. The voice of the journey has no competing versions of reality, compared with the multiple voices describing the reality of the country of origin and, even more so, the country of refuge. When refugees describe their reception by their new society, for example, members of that society have their own perception of the same reality, created by the media and/or personal experiences or stereotypes.
These competing versions are almost certainly more powerful and will usually prevail in the public sphere (and then also influence policymakers).

The journey, on the other hand, unlike reception, is a phase that commonly attracts little or no attention, particularly not by members of the receiving society. Frequently, it is a very personal/familial event—even if illegal or clandestine—whereby the voice of the refugee/migrant is almost the only source for the essential information. Voicing the journey can legitimate the identity and experience of exile. This makes it potentially easier to occupy a ‘space’ within the host population as well as in the public domain. A point of view can be offered which includes, beside their trauma and suffering, their active rather than passive stance and the resourcefulness, motivation and commitment that was needed in order to escape from their homelands and gain sanctuary. This is not to say that the refugee voice of the journey is homogenous nor necessarily truthful, since there will always be multiple narratives and interpretations of the journey by the wayfarers, irrespective of exogenous interferences. The ‘positionality’ of the storytellers must always be recognized, as we saw in the case of the Ethiopian Jews framing their journey as a central social myth.

In light of demands that social science should become more ‘socially committed’ and the claim to include social justice as part of these research considerations, one could argue that helping refugees and forced migrants by voicing their journey experience is a deserving goal.

A third reason for embarking on the study of the journey and understanding its impacts is as a medium for better informing policy. Better understanding the experience and meaning of the journey may provide a valuable and distinctive medium through which to develop new insights into the expectations, the challenges and often the pathological and dysfunctional reaction that refugee communities appear to display in exile, encampment and longer term adaptation and settlement. Enhanced knowledge of the often profound and transformative impacts of the journey into exile, and an understanding of the (re-) construction of identities and social worlds, can help to better inform policymakers, who can shape reception and settlement policies in host countries that are more responsive to the transitional (or transit) experience.

The Refugee Journey: Conceptual Challenges

Having argued the significance of exploring the refugee journey, we now turn to some of the conceptual challenges in undertaking such research. In this context it is worth reflecting on Kunz's kinetic model (1973, 1981): an early attempt to develop a conceptual framework of the different modes, typologies and timing of refugee movement that has a bearing on the exilic journey. We note here, for example, his ‘anticipatory’ refugee contemplating the need for such a journey (Zetter 2004). But his work was never developed and scholars have thus lacked appropriate tools to conceptualize and analyse the meaning.
of the journey. We seek to progress the development of a conceptual apparatus.

The challenge is significant because we have already implicitly and explicitly argued that the refugee journey into exile can be interpreted on several levels: as a conceptual construct; as a physical process; as a historical event; as a symbolic episode; as a metaphorical and material expression and representation of the exilic process; as the distinctive indicator of refugeehood; as a transformative experience involving immense personal and social upheaval.

**Temporal Characteristics**

*Is the journey a time-limited and finite event?* Does the temporal aspect of the journey correspond exactly with its physical dimension? In other words do time and space of journeys occur in parallel? Moreover, how do the wayfarers construct their journey in that respect? When does the journey commence? How researchers, and refugees, construct and understand these components and what they include, will reveal potentially significant insights into the physical, symbolic and mental representation of the journey.

In his study of the journey of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, BenEzer found that the wayfarers constructed the temporal dimension separately from the spatial one. The construct of the journey in their minds transcended the finite period from departure to arrival. The challenge here for researchers is to investigate whether this is true for the exilic journeys of other refugees. This will reveal potentially significant insights into the physical and mental representation of the journey. Three main questions are relevant here:

*When does the journey start?* The journey, in most cases, starts before the person starts moving. First, it can start in anticipation of events (Kunz 1973) that may lead to exile, and through listening to the stories that are relayed back by those who have already journeyed. Second, the journey starts in the planning, in making actual preparations, whether long before or very close to setting out. People anticipate events and may prepare for them, for example by taking livestock, or malaria pills, with them. They may think of means of financing their escape, needing bribes, or having to buy certain things on their way, thus plan and prepare hiding places, such as sewing their money into their sleeves, or boring into their walking stick to create a perfectly concealed bank. Even when time is very limited, and they just have to run away quickly as refugees, they may still have a day or an hour in which to prepare themselves.

All these experiences stretch the journey in time, beyond its spatial/temporal dimension. Beside the actual preparations of the wayfarers, in the cognitive sphere, this produces a form of ‘anticipatory socialization’ to the journey as well as to the new country/place of destination. In the same vein,
these processes—the journey of the mind—might also commence the mental separation from the country and place of origin and thus a ‘reverse socialization’.

**When does the journey end?** The journey may end as a physical event at the moment of arrival at the refugee camp or reception centre, but it seems that the moment of arrival is not always clearly defined. Firstly, many refugees and migrants remain mobile within their host country in the initial period following arrival and sometimes for protracted periods. This is particularly true for many forced migrants/refugees who cross borders illegally, thus experiencing secondary migration within that country, initiated by the state authorities or by their own choice due to survival needs. The process of episodic and circular refugee displacement and migration, for example, is a recently researched phenomenon amongst Somali refugees (Lindley 2010, 2011). Thus, for many refugees and forced migrants, arrival at their first destination is not necessarily the end of their journey.

In addition to the question concerning the physical end, it is perhaps even more important to investigate how, and indeed when, the wayfarers construct the ending of the journey in their minds. Thus, they may construe the journey as ending at their first point of arrival in their country of destination, when they have escaped danger to their lives, or at arrival in their last destination, when a sense of reaching a new resting place is achieved, or at other points along their long multi-border-crossings, or when they experience a sense of integration in their new society. Examples of this confusing conjuncture of the physical and mental continuity of a journey, not a fixed end-point, are many: such as Jewish refugees from Poland, Russia, Iran and Yemen, who had made their way during the Second World War or later to Egypt, and were then sent by train to Palestine, where they arrived at the British reception/detention centre of Atlit, not realizing that they had arrived at their destination. Some describe how it was later on, when they had met their relatives in Tel Aviv or some other location, that they grasped that this was, in fact, ‘Israel’ (BenEzer in preparation).

Moreover, for some refugees, there may be many ‘mid-stations’ on their journey that do not necessarily relate to physical borders, crossings or a physical destination at all: in this way, in the ‘imagination of the minds’, there is less a point of arrival, but rather, a process of being ‘on the way to a destination’.

For some, it is the initial reception by the new society that determines when the journey ends. Some wayfarers conceptualize the completion of the journey depending on a certain point in this complex process of integration. This point may relate to different aspects of the reception and integration process: arriving at a certain degree in their sense of belonging is the most common, of course, but other aspects such as new identity formation, economic independence, or social mobility, are also significant in this process of arrival at the new place and subsequent ‘completion of the journey’. Thus, as a construct, the journey often does not end with the physical arrival at the
destination, and sometimes it does not end at all. It is contingent on many circumstances.5

How long does the journey last? And is there a relationship between the duration of the journey and its meaning for the wayfarer? It might be assumed that a journey that occurs along a short period of time is less meaningful than one that takes place along an extended duration. Initial findings (BenEzer in preparation) show that this is not necessarily the case. While longer journeys include more opportunities for significant experiences, for the individual or the journeying community, it is still possible that very short journeys (even a few days) will become life-changing events in people’s minds.

**Drivers and Destinations**

Conflict, violence and persecution are the familiar drivers of refugee flight. But beyond these well-documented factors, the underlying drivers can be more complex, subtle and reflect intricate webs of causation. What are the reasons for setting out on the refugee journey? In what ways do different drivers of the refugee journey mediate the experience of the journey itself? And what is its destination? These questions, as we shall see, are not straightforward although they are often related to one another.

As mentioned earlier, four decades ago Kunz (1973) established a typology of events that precipitated refugee flight. This was later elaborated and refined by other researchers such as Richmond (1994) and Van Hear (1998). Various factors precipitate forced migration, for example partition journeys (e.g. India/Pakistan), political persecution/ethnic cleansing or genocide journeys (e.g. Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina), disaster or development induced journeys (e.g. New Orleans), or environmentally induced displacement (e.g. Bangladesh, Pacific Island states). Differentiating between them is important because this will impact both the mode of departure and the perspectives which the forced migrants will bring to bear on the purpose and meaning of the journey. A journey motivated by escape from a natural disaster will have different meaning from one precipitated by ethnic cleansing, where the journey may come to symbolize the injustice of expulsion. Thus, persecution in the country of origin, and expulsion, as the motor force for the journey may be contrasted with ‘suffering on the journey’ as an entrance ticket to a ‘new’ society.

In the same way, it is likely that journeys into exile will differ markedly in their meaning and impact from the experience of people who ‘return home’ (return journeys). For example, Ethiopian Jews ‘returning’ to Israel set out on a journey back to their ancient homeland. Thus, their journey was endowed with meaning which was a major factor giving them the strength to overcome the great difficulties on the way. We can only assume that the journey of Christian Ethiopians and other non-Jews leaving Ethiopia and travelling to the USA or Canada had a completely different, but no less
significant, meaning. The meaning attributed to the purpose of the journey is important not only for survival on the way but also because it influences reception and integration in the new society. As we have discussed above, Ethiopian Jews returning to Israel expected to be treated as ‘brothers and sisters’ by Israeli society. They were extremely disappointed when this did not happen (BenEzer 2002). By the same token, we may assume that the meaning attributed to the ‘return journey’ of African-Americans to Liberia over 160 years ago was influenced by the fact that this journey took place following many generations of slavery, thus producing certain expectations upon arrival, of people and land, which did not necessarily correspond with those of the native people who lived there.

Are there, however, other ways of conceptualizing destinations that could lead to potentially different experiences, or re-conceptions of journeys? Could the analysis be influenced by these additional forms of how destinations are defined? Some variables come to mind in that respect.

Is the destination significant? What is the image of the destination in the minds of the wayfarers and how does this impact experiences and recollections of the journey? The images of destinations, whether founded or unfounded, influence what refugees take or do not take for their journey. The image of the destination may mediate how they cope with the exigencies of the journey. Arrival, when imagination meets reality, may precipitate a re-evaluation of the experience of the journey and its impact.

For instance, some of the immigrants coming to Israel in the 1950s from communist countries in central Europe had a vision of a destination that was a ‘cultural desert’ that lacked ‘high culture’; thus people of the Romanian intelligentsia, for example, professionals and academics who valued high culture and who aspired to the model of Paris, tried to spend longer on their journey through Western Europe, before continuing to the ‘culturally bleak’ Israel (BenEzer in preparation). Work prospects and expected policies of reception in relation to economic survival can also influence the experience of the journey.

Do refugees always define/plan for one destination, or, at times, for consecutive places until they arrive at their goal? People may flee to a destination which is the easiest to reach initially, particularly when there are immediate threats to their life, but try to continue to a different destination in which they assume (even before setting out) that they will have better prospects. In the present era it is increasingly clear that refugee journeys across the Sahel and the Mediterranean are targeted at European countries. Some send part of the family (e.g. adolescents or fathers) to check whether there is a way out of the country of origin, with a plan to meet later at the in-between state, and go together to their new place. Thus, destination is defined by more than one term, depending on whether it is the ‘first stop’ or ‘final stop’ on their way, each carrying a different meaning on the journey.
The Process/Content of the Journey

A third conceptual challenge relates to the process of the journey. In other words, how does the journey unfold, what is its ‘content’, what are its major developments and constituents, what happens along the way, what are its unique characteristics? The conceptual challenge here is research into the relation between the process and characteristics of the journey and their contingent impact and meaning for the wayfarers.

The mode of travel may influence the meaning of the journey and its impacts on the individual. For example, we might assume that journeys on foot are likely to produce significantly different meaning than those made by sea or plane. This is not just because the journey duration may be different. For someone who has not been on a plane or crossed the sea before, the mode of travel will be a highly symbolic part of the experience of the journey. These possible differences, and their meaning, need to be investigated.

Another related characteristic of the journey is its socio-geographic realm, e.g. cultural and linguistic characteristics. It might be assumed that journeys that include crossing of cultural or linguistic zones dissimilar to that of the wayfarer may have a different impact on the individual and group than journeys that occur within the same cultural or linguistic environment. This is because the ‘level of strangeness’, or ‘otherness’ is significantly heightened, which may condition feelings of safety and the sense of threat. Refugees may perceive that their journey takes them across a ‘hostile ocean’, which may at its extreme induce a sense of paranoia. Being different may also activate reactions of hostility on the part of the local societies along the journey, which may further increase the sense of ‘otherness’ as well as the level of fear and stress. The lack of language may also pose challenges along the way. Such journeys, it can be assumed, become an experience which differs in many respects from a refugee journey taken within a cultural/language area; thus different meanings will be attributed to each kind of journey. But these assumptions need to be explored and tested.

Another dimension in which journeys differ is the extent to which they consist of different ‘modes of existence’, such as the walking part and the refugee camp part, or a journey where there are periods of time in different countries. It could be informative to study if these different processes in journeys are conceptualized differently.

Moreover, these phenomena can play out in a complex way: for example, in relation to the mixture of time and space. As mentioned above, whilst some journeys may be completed quite rapidly with a reasonably clear destination, even though there may have been barriers en route that must be overcome, other journeys may be far more fragmented and comprise arbitrary and haphazard stages. Consider, for example, the complex and episodic patterns of displacement in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, with many phases of forced displacement, with refugees and IDPs moving...
back and forth between insecure locations, displaced many times and over varying distances in search of safety from rapidly shifting battle lines.

Short-term and short-distance journeys morph into longer distance and duration journeys (Lindley 2012). The one-way journey with a clear destination does not exist in these conditions. Rather, the journey may be a semi-permanent, micro/macros spatial, and multi-phase process, an almost post-modernist experience in which nothing is stable/static and everything is on the move/on a kind of a journey. This results in cases like that of Dadaab camp, where, side by side with displaced people who completed their physical journey 20 years ago, are those who arrived last week, and those who move in and out of the camp at different times.

The Characteristics of the Wayfarers

A fourth set of conceptual challenges concerns the relevance of the characteristics of the people on the move. Investigating how people, as individuals or groups, react and interact on the journey, and how these interactions define their experience of the journey, and the meaning they impart to it, including the possible shaping of their identity, constitutes perhaps one of the most important areas for research on refugee journeys. Some examples of such characteristics could serve to illustrate our point.

Demographic and gender dimensions serve as our first illustration. Age, for example, could influence the experience and meaning of the journey. Thus children and adolescents, young adults, adults, and the elderly will all provide different lenses through which to investigate the journey. The elderly may be a particularly untapped population with respect to journey experiences and how these are differently conditioned by a lifetime in the country of origin compared to younger refugees.

Similarly, the experiences of women and men on journeys, their particular ways of seeing and expressing these experiences, and so forth, would be a fruitful focus of research. For example, the journey as a ‘liminal zone’ and the exigencies of the journey itself, are prone to breach the social norms and roles of the wayfarers and others they encounter on their way. Thus, women in particular, are more vulnerable on journeys. The Sudanese soldiers used to search among the Ethiopian refugees arriving at the border, and select attractive young women for sexual exploitation—a widespread experience in many refugee communities of course. This non-normative behaviour is more likely to happen in such liminal conditions. The state of limen—betwixt and between, as Turner (1967, 1974) defined it in relation to pilgrimages—may also affect the wayfarers themselves, thus changing their own behaviour to ‘out of norm’ modes, again with women being the typical victims in such situations.

Journeys could be, on the other hand, an opportunity for escaping from ascribed gender roles for women, thus an opportunity for personal growth, as
well as for actualizing cultural expectations of bravery and manliness for adolescent and young-adult males.

Another potentially insightful and rewarding framework is to explore and compare experiences of the journey undertaken with or without close relatives and friends. They may differ significantly in the levels of social support for the individual, resources for management of various situations, including life threatening ones, the ethical dilemmas and harsh decisions to be taken. Such an analysis may thus generate a typology of ‘different kinds of journeys’ for the individual, at times also consolidating future attitudes and behaviour. For example, in Lyytinen’s study of young refugees from DRC in Uganda, notions of trust (and mistrust) in individuals and ethnic groups built up during the journey into exile, had great significance in subsequent perceptions of who to trust in exile. The experience of the journey confirmed or denied pre-existing stereotypes, leading to the establishment of trust or mistrust later on (Lyytinen 2014).

Differentiating between individual and group journeys is another approach to investigating the significance of the journey. When a group is on the move, whether because of a decision to migrate or a refugee condition (generated by conflict or war, natural disasters or induced by development projects), the experience of the individual becomes part of a group experience. That is, part shared, resonating with the group, part independent of it. Under these conditions, as BenEzer (2002) has shown, the experience on and of the journey has the potential to produce changed meanings in the way individual members of the group see each other and indeed how the group sees itself. Here one might consider how attributes such as resilience, coping capacities, and norms of mutuality are sustained or fractured under the exigencies of the journey, the meanings ascribed to these changes and how these outcomes transform the group, the individuals and their expectations of each other. These perceptions of the group experience also affect the way they perceive their initial encounter with their new society. The Ethiopian Jews, for example, saw themselves as more Jewish following their traumatic journey across non-Jewish environments, thus raising their expectation to be fully accepted by their fellow Jews in their new/old country. This resulted in enhanced disappointment upon arrival, following the doubt cast on their Jewish origin and identity by Israeli religious authority. This process has led to a social struggle to re-affirm the dimensions of identity formed and/or strengthened on their journey ‘home’.

It would be valuable to explore what kinds of stories and explanations emerge in such instances. Among the issues in this context are questions such as: when do stories of the journey become a group myth? What are the processes involved in the creation of such myths? What happens to the ‘silenced voices’ and alternative stories within such group myths? (BenEzer 2002: 180–194, 2007).

Looking at the effects and meaning of journeys from the individual point of view is, of course, another important area of research. BenEzer explores
physical and psychological suffering experienced on the journey by Ethiopian Jews, alongside their counterparts of bravery and inner strength. Here the experience of the pain of separation and the disintegration of families, and the sense of mourning and loss which the physical experience of the journey reinforced, are examined. The physical dangers of the journey, mostly conducted by night, the fear of attack and capture by government troops, starvation and death are amongst the most poignant of the narratives. BenEzer shows how these often result in psychological trauma that induces personality changes (BenEzer 2002: 160–166).

Conversely, the sense of achievement, the realization of potential resources, and the consolidation of self-respect which the journey engendered are also documented. The manifestations of courage and endurance, the sense of challenge, and the opportunity which the young people, for example, took to overcome the traditional codes of their society, are important findings (BenEzer 2002: 166–174). This, of course, has to be researched in other cases, with individuals travelling for other reasons, to different destinations, having different cultural backgrounds and in a variety of journey experiences.

**The Refugee Journey: Methodological Challenges**

Beyond the conceptual challenges lies the methodological challenge. What are the most appropriate ways to study journeys? Here we want to put forward a number of questions and some tentative answers.

*The first question is when should study of the journey be undertaken?* Should this be only after it has been completed, or should (indeed, can) research into the journey be conducted while it is unfolding? Or maybe even before it starts? The challenge here is finding out whether the same research method suits all these points of time, or whether different methodologies fit the various phases of the journey. Crucially, we should look for methodologies that have a potential for promoting understanding of the journey when it is still taking place. If we study people in refugee camps, for example, could we develop a methodology that takes into account that, for most of them, this is not a separate experience but part of a journey towards some point, or between flight and return? As outsiders we construe this as a standalone and essentially static event/experience. But what meaning might refugees ascribe to encampment as a transitory part of an, as yet, incomplete process?

*What methods can be deployed for journey research?* The most obvious sources are narrative accounts and oral histories produced by interviews. But there is scope to research written accounts and autobiographies—some of which we have cited—and even literary pieces based on actual journeys, representations in film/cinema, poetry and popular songs, plays, prose, paintings. Recent years have seen the growth of a genre of English language children’s novels.
on refugees, many of which describe the journey into exile. In addition, other methodologies used in the social sciences could be investigated for their ‘fit’ with studying the experience of the journey, or what adaptations are required to fit the needs of this area of the refugee experience. The choice is demanding if the aim is to investigate aspects of the journey such as the relationship between length of preparation for the journey or the type of journey and the extent of traumatization, or between age and personal growth on the way, or between nutrition on the way or at refugee camps and the quality of decision making, resilience, mood and immune system.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of narrative research on journeys? This methodology is considered separately here since, as mentioned earlier, it is the most obvious and powerful tool in researching journeys and has been most widely used in the extant research. The narrative method is believed to be the closest one can get to the experience itself from a retrospective viewpoint (Wong 1992). It enables the individual to portray a multi-layered experience, which uses facts from outer and inner reality—objective occurrences together with emotional states and attitudes towards what happened and what one did or felt at the event, or when one recounts it. It can even include contradictory aspects within one story, or within one telling of an event. All is controlled and chosen, ‘edited’ as Rosenthal (1991) puts it, by the narrator, the refugees themselves in our case.

On the other hand, the pitfalls and problems must be acknowledged as well. Narratives are considered a ‘here and now product’, but they are influenced by contextual variables and the positionality such as: the characteristics of the interviewers; whether the narrative interview may touch on matters where the experience is filtered by the wayfarer or the current social situation or other conditions in the country where the interview is taking place. In most cases, this contextualization could be considered an advantage, since what is sought is a perception of the event and its meaning for the individual or community. However, we should note that this equally limits the ability to treat the evidence as purely historical facts, and that other ‘truths’—psychological and narrative truths—are present within the data (BenEzer 2002: 42–43; Dwork 1991). Another problematic of the narrative method is its cost in terms of research time, since the narrative interview itself, and its analysis, is time consuming. In addition, narratives pose challenges for interpretation, such as the need to be highly trained in using tools suitable for the analysis of large amounts of raw material.

How can we overcome inter-cultural obstacles within our journey research? This issue is not limited to journeys, but relevant to all research on people who come from different cultural backgrounds or use other languages. In researching journeys, particularly by collecting narratives, or other methods that involve trust building and strive to establish meaningful communication with the respondent, the challenge of creating culturally sensitive research
techniques is extremely important. Equally, as we have suggested, journeys and processes of mobility resonate in different ways in different cultures and societies. This experiential diversity must be built into the research on journeys.

How can we address the problem of interviewing around traumatic events? Unfortunately, most refugee journeys include traumatic events. This raises ethical questions and challenges. For people who were traumatized there is always a question of managing the memories of the event. As researchers, we should be aware of the fact that our interviewee has to navigate between painful memories and thresholds of memory which they cannot be sure how to cross, and which we are unlikely to have experienced ourselves. Thus, great sensitivity is needed. On the other hand, if conducted with due sensitivity, the event of recounting the journey story may have a therapeutic effect on the interviewee (see Agger 1994; BenEzer 2002; Felman and Laub 1992; Herman 1992; Lieblich 1981).

Conclusion

This article strove to define and conceptualize the research challenges of journeys in refugee and forced migration studies. We have shown the lacuna in research relating to journeys and the way in which BenEzer’s study (2002) first pointed at the important meaning of journeys and highlighted how we might research the phenomenon. We have mapped four conceptual challenges in ‘journey studies’: the temporal aspect, drivers and destinations, the process of the journey, the wayfarers’ characteristics. Lastly we have presented some methodological dilemmas.

The article raises epistemic challenges about the meaning and role of the journey as a specific, possibly unique, event, in the ways described above, as opposed to the ‘natural order of things’. Our main argument is that an exploration of, and detailed insights into, the lived experience of the journey, reveal and highlight the formative, ‘life-changing’ experiences that wayfarers undergo. Exploring the experience of the journey can shed new light on the social and individual processes of identity formation, adjustment and transition, and settlement and integration for refugees. It may help to explain the disjunctive and sometimes enduring pathological behaviour of refugees, which may be grounded in the traumatic, but little understood, experience of the journey as the motor force of the trauma. And, more positively, such investigation can help to explain how new resources, capacities, social attributes and aspirations emerge from that experience. We can better understand how the journey painfully enriches individuals and communities and enhances their resilience and capacity for survival. Exploring the journey thus significantly changes our understanding of the world of refugees and the modalities of intervention.
1. See for example Elliott and Urry 2010; Gill et al. 2011; Truölzi and McKenzie 2013; Turton 1996. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

2. Although better covered in the wider field of migration studies, even here journey research lacks coherence. See, for example, Kushner’s recent study (2012), which confirms, but also partially fills, the gap in the study of migrant journeys. But the journey is not mentioned under the term ‘migration’ in the 1933 or 1968 Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, nor in seminal research on migration such as Castles et al. 2013; Chamberlain 1997, 1998; Chamberlain and Thompson 1998; Cohen 1995, 2007.

3. See for example Bloch et al. 2014; Brede loupe 2010; Collyer 2010; Collyer and de Haas 2010; Coutin 2005; Düvell 2006. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

4. Studies of nomadic people include, for example, Clifford 1993; de Bruijn et al. 2001; Larsen 2003; Turton 1996.

5. We do not examine here, but might also consider, repatriation journeys (e.g. Allen 1990; Basok 1990) and return journeys which so often appear as myth rather than reality (Al-Rashid 1994; Zetter 1994, 1999).


