

## Review PhD dissertation Natalia Szulc

It was a great pleasure to read Natalia Szulc's doctoral thesis. The research is undoubtedly a fantastic addition to the literature on asylum seekers and refugees and in particular the perspective focused on practitioners and their assessments and explanations of things that work well and aspects where the system fails. It is a dissertation that is highly informative and brings together a significant amount of knowledge.

It is a high quality piece of work, exemplified by its methodological rigour and the thorough engagement with the respective sources that are used. The focus groups are extremely well executed and the analysis is carried out in an exemplary manner through a combination of codes and memos. It is clear that the available material has been explored in a highly systematic manner through the very professional use of a coding software.

It is also clear that the subject is not just one of academic curiosity for the author. Natalia Szulc's writing conveys a deep involvement in the academic debate and, at the same time, that she cares deeply about the topic, which is indeed more than a theoretical problem. Rather, she has identified an issue that is clearly important and at the same time has enormous political potential. Even if academics are well advised to keep a safe distance from making policy recommendations, this dissertation clearly conveys that social science matters to our world.

From a more academic perspective, the case selection is well argued and convincing. The dissertation is also a pleasure to read, as it is very well written, with only a few minor typos. In my opinion, the dissertation is particularly strong in chapter 6, when the actual discussion of the material takes place and the own empirical material from the focus groups and the legal review is brought together with the existing scholarship. Examples such as on p. 202, when the author engages with the work of Hainmuller et al. emphasise the significance of the length of asylum procedures as a parameter that affects the integration of AR in host societies. It is in these moments that the thesis is at its best.

However, when considering how to turn this excellent dissertation into a strong book that will appeal to a good press and a wide readership, a number of revisions are required. I would urge the candidate to take these to heart and incorporate as much as possible into the doctoral thesis.

The first element that I am not convinced about is the added value of the **systematic review** as a way of *representing* the literature. I think this is a meaningful way of organising thoughts about the literature, but not as a way of representing a narrative about the state of scholarship. There is no doubt that it is important to be systematic when reviewing the academic literature, but as a way of engaging with the academic literature, the systematic review clearly stands in the way of presenting a critical examination of the literature. In my view, the systematic review is an excellent preparatory stage, but then it is important that the author develops her own take and a narrative about the literature, its shortcomings and her own contributions. This is not possible with the systematic review approach, which prevents a narrative about literature to emerge and makes it difficult for Natalia Szulc to demonstrate that she has *appropriated* the literature.

I would also question the claim that this review is quantitative in nature. For me it is not clear how exactly the quantification is driving a narrative and the understanding of the literature, also in light of the rather small number of articles (73) used for the systematic map. I think it would be much stronger



to engage in a critical examination of the literature that speaks to shifts over time and demonstrates the author's own engagement with the literature throughout the dissertation.

The question is really fundamental when thinking about turning the dissertation into a book now. Currently, the systematic review does not allow Natalia Szulc to position her own research agenda in its relation to the literature, which is a central criterion when pitching your book. As a result, it is difficult for the reader to understand what to focus on in this review, what concepts and questions to keep in mind when going forward in the analysis. In short, the second chapter reads a little too much like a dissertation, where you have to demonstrate that you have done your duty and carefully examined the available literature, but it does not read like an engaging text just yet.

The second element on which I would like to suggest improvements is the **use of focus group material**. To begin with, more information about the participants and the sample are required to enable the reader to understand the quotes. There is no doubt that the non-probabilistic sampling is fine for a qualitative approach, but as a reader I need to know who you end up including in the focus groups. What is their age, their professional position, the time they have already spent in the sector and maybe what their prior work experience was or even their political beliefs? Such information would be very useful when interpreting the results. The focus group participants are currently in a bit of a black box even though the chosen method (very appropriately) allows to achieve a certain degree of proximity and to convey relevant biographical details about the individuals. This is one of the great advantages of focus groups compared to surveys, where individuals are reduced to data rows.

A related issue is that it ultimately remains unclear what we have learned from the focus groups that we could not have learned from a series of in-depth interviews. In the methodological discussion, Natalia Szulc rightly points out that focus groups operate at three levels: the individual, the group as a whole and the interactions that take place between individuals. At present, the emphasis is clearly on the individual, and much less attention is paid to the other two levels – however, it is these other two levels that are really the hallmark of focus groups. I admit that it is exceedingly difficult to work on the interactional and the group levels, but trying to work on these dimensions as much as possible would strengthen the methodological contribution of the work and unambiguously underline why it is a relevant approach.

Developing on that point, I would say that it would be promising to consider which statements or conclusions reflect a group dynamic and which insights might not have been articulated in a particular group in light of how the group dynamics evolved. It would also be important to reconnect the focus group material again to the theoretical and methodological discussion and to stress how the socially and culturally constructed nature of meaning can be encountered in a group context. This would be an important additional step in the use of this unique material. I would also like to see clearer evidence of the ways in which the groups were empowering for the participants, as suggested on p. 35.

A third element I would like to highlight relates to the **presentation of the results**. For me personally, the strongest section with the most clearly articulated insights and contributions to the literature is the rather short chapter six, "Discussion". It would be my recommendation to restructure the entire dissertation when it is turned into a book manuscript, such that sections three to five become significantly shorter. What is currently chapter six should be divided into several thematic chapters, bringing together the various strands.

For instance, the very important section devoted to legal aspects and procedures is by and large dissociated from the results presented in the empirical section. As a consequence, the dissertation tends to fall into several distinct slots in its core sections which also hampers journal publications. To



my mind, it should be the aim to combine these sections – right now, we have two very strong and well analysed empirical sections (chapters four and five), but it should be the ultimate goal to ensure that they both talk to each other. The easiest way to achieve this would be through thematic axes.

To further illustrate this point, it is one of the key findings of this thesis to unravel the extent to which the implementation of the asylum procedures and other legal components ultimately depends to a significant extent on the human beings who put them into practice. With the legal and the focus group section being in different parts of the text, it is impossible to appreciate how a legal text is put into practice and where the constraints of the legal system work effectively and where they eventually backfire. Restructuring the material would allow the author to highlight such interactions much more clearly.

If the sections are to be kept separate and merely serve as “context for the empirical results” (p. 67), it is my impression that the importance of the interaction between the social and the legal side are severely diminished. It also limits the interpretive depth that is achieved with the research at hand. Reorganising the text would allow to see aspects that are missing in the law, the elements that work well, or the aspects of the law where good intentions have led to bad results. Restructuring would also avoid this rather harsh and somewhat unfortunate transition from the legal section to the first sentence in 5.1, which is about the human factor.

Alongside, I would also bring the academic literature into the debate much earlier to ensure that it is demonstrated how the focus groups speak to the literature, what aspects of vulnerability and injustice are uncovered that might be missing in the literature as it stands. Currently, such important contributions are too complicated to extract from the text.

I would like to acknowledge that I am a far cry from being a legal scholar so I cannot comment on the legal analysis undertaken in this thesis.

A fourth element that I would like to highlight is that the step to **policy recommendations** is a bold one and seems to provide a pertinent interpretation given that these recommendations are primarily based on the views of the experts that were involved in the focus groups. I wonder whether it would be worthwhile to feed these recommendations back to the experts and have them discuss them. This would ensure a degree of reliability and thus increase the relevance of the conclusions of this work. Moreover, from a critical academic perspective I think it would be crucial to also assess how some recommendations might very well backfire. As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and one of the crucial roles of academia is to identify the weak spots in the recommendations coming from experts. One element for instance that I could see becoming problematic on the ground is the proposed multi-stakeholder cooperation, which may very well not work at all given different institutional logics, budgetary regulations, decision-making procedures or competing goals and agendas. Is there any actual research that relates to the different recommendations that are made to put them into perspective? Feeding those recommendations back to the experts would also help us to understand why these things are not being implemented, or at last why they are not being used more efficiently. Is it a lack of will or institutional inertia, or what is holding back these decisions?

A fifth element concerns the **place of refugees** in this study. The author sets out to motivate this study by focusing on Nigerian women arriving in Italy and justifies the relevance of that particular case. However, this focus on Nigeria turns out to be of very little importance in the review of the legal texts as well as in the focus group discussions (the analysis and also the protocol). So what is the contribution to the case of Nigerian asylum seekers and refugees that this dissertation makes? If it is such a central



concern, I am surprised that it does not occupy a prominent place in the focus group guides. One can, of course, not return to the focus groups but the question is whether the justification of the dissertation through the case of Nigeria is such a convincing one in the light of the findings. Lastly, there is the question about the extent to which the asylum seekers' perspective should be included. This is clearly beyond the scope of a doctoral dissertation, but will be a central question when working towards a book publication.

Related to the question of the place of the Nigerian case is the methodological question of the applicability of the research to other cases. At the beginning, the author rightly mentions that the case travels to a larger universe, but this insight and engagement with the scope conditions falls too short at the end. It is, to my mind, a good practice to summarise the findings and show the implications of the research that has been carried out in order to emphasise the implications and relevance to the larger universe that you have in mind.

Finally, there are a number of minor issues that I would encourage Natalia Szulc to take up. For one, there is a very elaborate discussion of CGT and constructivist and post-positivist methodologies in the opening of the dissertation. These pages are well written and interesting, but it remains entirely unclear, how these theoretical premises ultimately apply to the interpretation of the material. It is important that there is always a systematic link back to the theoretical considerations in order to ensure that the work as a whole is coherent and becomes one cohesive overall product.

I am also uncertain as to what the substantive theory that is said to be a goal (p. 25) eventually is. Could this that theoretical contribution be more clearly articulated? The concluding theoretical reflections on the theory of structural injustice seem somewhat artificial to me, and should either be integrated more upfront and worked towards, or be dropped altogether. At the moment, it seems too tacked on at the end rather than something that emerges organically from the material. It is also somewhat unclear to me how exactly you deal with this theory – as the result of an important doctoral research project one should own the theory and be bolder in the conclusions.

A final aspect I noticed relates to the regional variation, which is very relevant in the focus group discussions. Obviously, there is significant variation between the Italian regions and since a diversity is covered, I wonder whether more effective use can be made of this when interpreting the results?

Despite these questions which I invite the candidate to respond to as part of the PhD viva and its afterlife, I am gladly expressing a positive assessment of the research and recommend the PhD candidate to proceed to the final stages towards earning a PhD.

Berlin, 24 September 2024, Félix Krawatzek

