

Explaining UK migration policy and data as a foreigner

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13/12/2021

Published at: <https://staff.web.ox.ac.uk/node/2333421>

I have been doing research on UK issues related to UK migration for over a decade at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS). I have explored topics that range from the impacts of migration on the NHS to the labour market outcomes of refugees in the UK, among many others. While I consider myself an expert on UK migration issues, as someone that sounds and looks ‘foreign’, I am not always perceived that way.

Take the case of the media. While I was working at the Migration Observatory, one of our main public impact projects at COMPAS, I had to do radio and TV interviews on a weekly basis. Journalists would not question my academic credentials – being a Professor of Migration Studies at Oxford provides plenty of authority in that regard. But there were questions about my lived experiences: Can this foreigner really understand the situation of low-income British workers competing with migrants for jobs?

These doubts and questions are not only expressed by journalists. I remember that one morning after doing an interview for the BBC Breakfast show one of the parents at my daughters’ school summarised her expectations very well: ‘I saw you on the TV and I was expecting you to explain something about Latin America or perhaps Southern Europe ... but then you started talking about the UK.’

The reminders of my foreignness have come in other less succinct ways. For example, once I was making a video for an ESRC impact prize that had been awarded to me and some other colleagues, and I had to repeat the same phrase multiple times in order to sound something close to resembling the expected pronunciation from a UK migration expert. The video’s producer gave up on this after the tenth attempt. The late Celia Cruz, a famous salsa singer, coined the phrase ‘My English is not very good looking’; I can definitely relate to that.

Another time on a radio interview I explained that migration policy was like ‘squeezing’ a balloon – you squeeze on one side and it pops on the other. During the interview I realised that I could not really pronounce the words ‘squeezing’ and ‘squeeze’. However, I felt somewhat vindicated a few weeks later when a UK Prime Minister used the exact same analogy in a speech. Needless to say that the PM’s pronunciation of ‘squeezing’ was flawless.

The confusion is not limited to the UK public. Many friends back home have assumed that I ‘teach on Latin American issues at Oxford’. Some even assumed that my classes are given in Spanish. They are disappointed when I explain that instead of being a full-time intellectual ambassador for regional issues, I spend a lot of time thinking about things like how best to count migrants entering and leaving the UK.

Over time I have realised that my foreignness can also be used as an asset. It was just a matter of identifying the right questions to focus on. For instance, Why do some migrants become entrepreneurs? What explains the health outcomes of migrants? Where do migrants feel at home? In conversations on these types of topics, which put migrants at the centre of the discussion, sounding and looking foreign actually provides a great deal of credibility.

The way we look and sound, along with our family background, can also mean that we are classified as experts on topics that we do not necessarily focus on from an academic perspective. For instance, Hispanic Heritage Month is celebrated each year in the United States from 15 September to 15

October. Given my personal trajectory (see the [summary here](#)), this year I was asked to give several keynotes on what it means to be Hispanic. I had some initial doubts about accepting, given my lack of academic expertise on the subject. Yet I agreed to do it because I felt that my own experiences were sufficient for me to give an informed opinion.

This recent experience has made me think about the link between expertise and perceived lived experiences described at the beginning of this article. While it is possible to be an academic expert on any topic, as long as we dedicate enough time and effort to researching it, there is something unique that we miss by not having lived certain experiences and it is important always to be aware of that.