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Session 6: Integrating qualitative and quantitative research approaches

Bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative research methods. The case of biographical approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Disciplinary and methodological fragmentation in research on migration is still one of the major limits to the understanding of the complex drivers of migration processes, leading to a partial empirical knowledge of the phenomenon.

The dominant methodological nationalist perspective has also deeply shaped the way migration has been scientifically conceptualized and researched, fixing the phenomenon in time and space, rather than assuming it as a fluid, ongoing, dynamic process and preventing a more comprehensive understanding of migration patterns.

A shift from this perspective was undertaken within qualitative studies on migration, mainly through the analytical framework provided by transnationalism.

While the "qualitative versus quantitative" debate somehow frames the methods in opposition, the note advocates a shift away from this perspective, suggesting how possible innovations can be achieved by adopting reciprocal approaches and methodological devices, as shown in the case of the biographical research.

1) MAIN EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL GAPS IN MIGRATION STUDIES

1.1 A THEORETICAL, DISCIPLINARY AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAGMENTATION

It is not a new observation that the deep division between quantitative and qualitative approaches and research methods is unproductive and artificial, and, hence, that research is often not able to grasp the complex nature of social phenomena such as migration, is not new.

Since the late 1980s several scholars, like Massey (1990), Findley (1982) and more recently Castles (2010), have observed the **fragmentation** between **disciplines** (sociology, economics, anthropology, geography, political science, etc.), which in turn partly corresponds to a **division between methodological approaches** (quantitative vs. qualitative).

Such fragmented approaches tend to be strongly **self-referential**. Research traditions exert a powerful influence over the thinking of researchers. As Massey argues (1990: 4) "disciplinary parochialism" generates a multiplicity of self-contained migration literatures that reinforce and perpetuate basic cleavages across and within the disciplines.

Furthermore, they produce **heuristic outcomes** which fundamentally differ from each other, either focusing more on the macro (as primarily in economics and in political science), the meso (e.g., sociological research on networks) or the micro level (individual, family, as e.g. in anthropology). While many qualitative studies provide in-depth, rich, but subjective and hardly representative insights on the one hand, quantitative studies may generate rigorous, generalizable results, but tend to be devoid of a sense of complexity and the "intuitive appeal of real life" (Massey, 1987: 1504).

As a result, our theoretical and empirical understanding of migration is partitioned and incomplete, providing a weak basis for research and policy. What is still missing in migration studies is a unitary conceptual framework, in which each discipline, by using its own perspective and tools, can contribute to a common body of knowledge, leading to a better overall understanding of migration.

1.2 A DOMINANT METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM APPROACH AND THE "SEDENTARIST BIAS"

Much research on migration has been furthermore affected by a **methodological nationalist perspective**, which can be described as "an intellectual orientation that assumes national borders to be the natural unit of study, equates society with the nation-state, and conflates national interests with the purposes of social science" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

As the latters argue (*ibidem*), this mainstream concept, is closely associated to the nationstate building process in Western societies, which has deeply shaped the way migration has been conceived and still strongly influence current thinking in social sciences.

Within this dominant methodological perspective, both qualitative and quantitative research concentrated almost exclusively on specific phases of the migration process (settlement and integration in destination countries; temporary returns and circulation between sending and receiving countries; permanent return in origin countries) or on the effect of migration on sending and receiving countries.

The influence of methodological nationalism can also be detected in the way statistical data are usually collected and made available. Most surveys are still based on nation-state units. This can be easily explained by the desire and need of state actors to internally govern and to externally control migration. The availability of data on a national basis and the tendency to reproduce studies on this scale is therefore highly functional to (nation) states, but has heavily skewed the way of thinking, theorizing, categorizing and studying migration.

The "sedentarist bias" (McDowell and De Haan, 1997:3-4), according to which every move across national border tends to be framed as an exception of the rule of sedentariness within the boundaries of nation-state (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002: 210) and the "permanent settlement migration paradigm", conceiving migration as a displacement from the country of origin A and a permanent settlement in a destination B (Agunias, 2006: 44), still largely define the conceptualization of migration and data collection systems.

Hence, social sciences still have difficulties with capturing "mobility". Ways of conceiving migration have been paradoxically informed by a "desire to fix" migration processes, within a clear spatial framework, what is unfixable, in order to make it knowable (Cresswell, 2006). Such fixing strategies are also to be read methods to control, analyse, functionalise and interpret mobility, functionally to the construction and maintenance of nation-states (Meeus, 2010).

As of the late 1980s, the transnationalist paradigm emerged from anthropology as a new approach in migration studies. The novelty of transnationalism resided in a profound shift of the analytical framework, which allowed scholars of migration to move away from nation-states as the unique containers within which migratory processes should be analyzed.

If under the theoretical and epistemological point of view the contribution of studying transnational communities consisted mainly in a shift of perspective away from a methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), from a methodological point of view, several methodological tools have supported the operationalization of the new assumptions of transnationalism.

The first methodological contribution refers to the geographical dimension and the related call for a **multi-sited** construction of **research** designs in migration studies (Marcus, 1995), by studying both migrants' origin and destination contexts jointly. **Matched samples** between migrants at destination and their relatives and network members at origin is considered to be a second distinguishing feature of transnational linkages (Mazzucato, 2010). The third

methodological input issued from transnationalist approach is the operationalization of **simultaneity** of the migration processes between the origin and destination contexts (Glick Schiller and Levitt, 2004; Mazzucato, 2010).

It is interesting to stress how the methodological and epistemological innovation introduced by transnationalist approaches, as a shift of perspective away from a methodological nationalism, was initially mostly undertaken within qualitative research and only afterwards progressively (albeit partially) assumed by quantitative approaches in migration research.

This sequence seems to reflect a more structural pattern in migration studies: qualitative research seems to have (as also is the case of the biographical research on migration, presented in next paragraph) a greater capacity to generate new perspective, insights and concepts, which quantitative approaches tend to adopt later on.

The higher ability of qualitative approaches to think "out-of-the-box" can be explained through a more de-structured paradigm, leaving room to more innovative and creative approaches. Another possible concomitant reason is that statistical disciplines have always been more connected to the state powers, suffering in this way of a lower degree of autonomy and innovation.

1.3 CROSS-SECTIONAL (vs LONGITUDINAL) APPROACH

Next to a fixed spatial dimension, a static temporary dimension is still deeply implied in most migration studies (Meeus, 2010). When studying migration and its drivers, a **cross-sectional approach** is still dominant, often disregarding previous trajectories and backgrounds of migrants and often reducing them into permanent and temporary migrants (King et al., 2006).

As most surveys are still based on nation-state units, as has already been mentioned, they often do not allow to identify migration trajectories or patterns across the life course, as they do not capture adequately their dynamic transnational behaviors and belongings, and more in general longitudinal migratory paths (Khagram, Levitt 2007; Levitt, Jaworsky 2007).

As Pries argues (2004, pp. 29 & 31), "without enlarging the conceptual framework to include recognition of pluri-local (social) spaces, we will probably lose touch with a growing part of the reality of migration, and thus, be unable to sufficiently understand and explain it". All in all, cross-sectional data are generally inadequate to fully explore the migration processes along time, failing to account for dynamic, longitudinal processes.

Drivers of migration are in fact longitudinal non only across contexts (cf. evolution of migration policies and regulatory frameworks, of labour markets, etc.), but also across individual lives: like King et al. (2006: 246) declare, the 'decision to migrate' needs to be conceived as a longitudinal *process* which has both a 'formation' period and outcomes that play over time, and which involves several decisions with consequences for many people.

Because migration is often not a one-time event, it should be conceived as a *process*. The determinants of migration and the reasons for migration evolve and often change *during* the migratory experience, and this is even more crucial when migrants follow step-wise trajectories, undertaking transits, temporary returns, re-departures, re-migration towards further countries, etc.

In the African migration context, for instance, research has revealed an increasing complexity and fluidity of migration flows and routes towards Europe, with a subsequent fragmentation of migrants' journeys. Partly in response to border controls, *step-by-step* migration (Bredeloup, Pliez, 2005), is progressively developing as an emerging migration strategy (Castagnone, forthcoming; Castagnone 2011) with transit migration assuming an increasing role in the

trajectories undertaken by migrants. Return and circular migration patterns are also common practices (Castagnone, 2011). Finally, African migrants do also frequently get involved in intra-European mobility, which is entailing further onward re-migration of migrants in the European space. Although this intra-European mobility receives hardly any political attention and cannot be captured by mainstream research methodologies, it constitutes a significant phenomenon¹.

These considerations show the need for a diachronic look at migration events, according to a step-wise, "fragmented journey" perspective (Collyer, de Haas, forthcoming), in order to reconstruct the complex and dynamic migration patterns.

1.4 LACK OF A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK OF MIGRATION PATTERNS

Finally, one of the main explanations of why both quantitative and qualitative studies have hardly been able to build comprehensive, multi-level conceptual frameworks, is that they tend to rely on insufficient preliminary knowledge of the **structure** of the **migration patterns**.

Both statistical and conceptual analytical frameworks tend to privilege analyses of separate segments of individuals' migratory paths or process, such as people's reasons to leave and settle, the factors that determine integration in receiving societies; or their return and reintegration in origin countries; and have difficulties to unveil the full complexity of migration patterns

Hence, much research on migration relies on insufficient preliminary knowledge of overall structure of the migration patterns, of their multi-faceted nature and composition, and of the contextual framework in which they take place (Bakewell and de Haas, 2007; Cross et al. 2006; Lucas 2006; Hatton, 2004). There is still a lack of approaches which account for the longitudinal trajectories and paths through the various stages.

The few available studies have been largely based on aggregated and weakly reliable data sources, which are not able to capture the multi-level and longitudinal dimensions of the phenomenon. Again: transnational data collection and longitudinal methodological approaches are necessary to understand the complexity of migration patterns and to fully take into account the interrelated connections between origin and destination countries.

The analytical effort of understanding and discerning migration patterns in their full complexity and heterogeneity is an essential preliminary step in order to subsequently explain its driving forces and causes.

A comprehensive analysis of migration patterns constitutes a preliminary base for undertaking research on causes of migration and should necessary be based on a dialectic multi-method approach, providing intuitive frameworks based on qualitative insights and corroborating or adjusting and quantifying it on a statistical base.

¹ Recent empirical evidence on the Senegalese case was provided by the MAFE data (Castagnone, 2011).

2. BRIDGING THE METHODOLOGICAL GAP BETWEEN QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS: THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH.

The case of biographical research provides us with a positive example of how qualitative and quantitative methods, instead of opposing each other or being jointly used, can also *substantially* draw inspiration from each other conveying innovation in their methods and tools.

The use of biography in social research originated in the tradition of the Chicago School of Sociology. Biographical research was developed as an innovative method in the social sciences in order to explain complex migration-specific social phenomena (Apitzsch 2006a). The second phase of the biographical studies developed in Europe since the late 1950s. Working independently of each other, practitioners in the various social science disciplines – anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, political science, demography, etc. - began to revive this approach.

Particularly in migration studies, the sociological life course approach brought a new access to the understanding of migration from the micro perspective:

- reconstructing retrospectively the whole life of migrants with regards to its different phases and movements
- connecting parallel trajectories of migrants in different domains of their lives (mobility, family, education, labor career, etc.)
- contextualizing diachronic trajectories of migrants. King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) stress how "the view of migration as an inherent dynamic phenomenon, as part of the life path of individuals within the context in which they live is the most innovative contribution of biographic analysis to the study of migration".

While qualitative biographical studies did originally develop within qualitative research, and in particular anthropology and ethnography, in more recent years these approaches have been increasingly integrated into quantitative research.

The **objective of the quantitative biographical studies** as an approach is to retrace the entire life-course of the respondents and to organize and interprete material through logical nexus, establishing connections between processes and events (Corbetta, 1999) in individuals' life's.

However, qualitative and quantitative biographic studies still differ substantially, which is largely related to the level of the methodological paradigms they pertain to. Consequently, while qualitative life histories are generally case study approaches in which data is obtained through non-structured interviews centred on autobiographical dimensions, quantitative biographic studies stick to established methods applied in quantitative research. Samples are (ideally) randomly obtained from a register, questionnaire are largely based on closed questions (pre-defining categories), generating categorical, ordinal or numerical variables, and analyseis consists of statistical models that take into account time as a key factor.

In quantitative biographical studies, statistical analysis of the distribution of different events in relation to each other along a life cycle, allows studying the interaction between events or sets of events. The specificity of the biographical survey is to collect at least three major parallel sets of states and events: residential history, work career path, and milestones of family life (birth, marriage, death, co-residence of spouses, ascendants and descendants) since the birth of the individual to the time of the survey (Golaz, 2005).

Quantitative biographical studies represent in particular two levels of advancement, if compared to: 1) qualitative studies applying the same approach and to 2) traditional quantitative methods to study migration.

Compared to qualitative studies, biographic surveys allow to study biographies of migrants:

- 1) systematically (through standardized questions and answers)
- 2) thus better allowing comparison (between groups or countries of origin, socio-demographic characteristics of individuals, destination contexts, characteristics of networks, etc.)
- 3) providing representative, generalizable empirical evidence
- 4) allowing *rigorous* longitudinal multi-level analysis (integrating dynamic macro and meso data to the micro ones).

In addition, compared to most traditional quantative surveys, biographical surveys:

- 1) tend to be focused on the **micro level**, on individuals, their experience and their migrationtrajectories
- 2) allow to systematically study the change in individual's lives *over time* and *over space*. Thus, conventional longitudinal approaches (i.e. using retrospective data, as opposed to cross-sectional data) makes room for a dynamical perspective in quantitative studies, as a way of conceptualizing migration as a *process*, in which people shift from one categorization to another (Collyer, de Haas, forthcoming) in a continuum of changes from one status to another. Furthermore, retrospective data on migration allow to retrace the whole geographical path of individuals.
- 3) to reconnect individual trajectories to the meso and macro level, studying the interplay of structure and agency over a life course perspective time, through the integration of meso and macro-contextual longitudinal data, that might impact on individual status at any moment of life. This enables **multi-level analysis**, which is central to the study the drivers of migration. In this way, the events that mark the individual respondents' life are not decontextualized, which allows for an understanding of individual trajectories from past life events the experiences of his/her relatives, and the broader context within which individuals operate and migrate (country of residence, political, economic, social context, etc.).
- 4) potentially also allow a comparative study of migrants, returnees and the non-migrants in a more rigorous way, through the application of uniform tools of biographical data gathering among these populations.

From these considerations, we may conclude that biographic surveys can be a valid methodological instrument to fill some of the mentioned empirical gaps in quantitative studies on migration. Of course, surveys also have several limits, when compared with qualitative methods (and vice versa). While survey methods, in fact, produce reliable quantitative data for statistical analysis, generalization, and replication, in guaranteeing quantitative rigor, however, they lose historical depth, richness of context, and the intuitive appeal of real life. Anthropological studies, in contrast, capture the richness of life, but sacrifice quantitative rigor. Lack of quantification makes it difficult to demonstrate the validity of conclusions to other scientists, and subjective elements of interpretation are more difficult to detect and control (Massey, 1987: 1504).

Golaz (2005) highlights the complementarity of the biographical and ethnographic approaches and how crossing these two approaches at different times of the research process can be helpful to generate a more critical look on the collection and substance of data. Even within the biographical approach, interaction and integration of quantitative and qualitative methods is still a necessary and virtuous practice.

One of the first and still most innovating and articulate experience is the **ethnosurvey**, adopted by the late 1980s for the Mexican Migration Project (MMP) for the study of migration between Mexico and the United States (Massey, 1987). The ethnosurvey design was developed to capitalize on the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods, while minimizing their respective weaknesses. The key elements of this research design are: 1) multimethod data collection (ethnography + in-depth qualitative interviews + biographic survey); 2) matched multisite sampling; 3) multilevel data compilation; 4) interdisciplinarity (team trained in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, which strictly collaborate all along the whole research process).

A second, more recent, example is that of **MAFE** research (Migration Between Africa and Europe) focused on Afro-European migrations². The project yielded a new individual biographic data set, through comparable surveys in 3 origin countries in Africa (Senegal, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo) and 6 destination counties in Europe (Belgium, France, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, UK). MAFE data are: 1) multi-topic (various aspects of the respondents' lives are covered by the questionnaires, including work experience, family formation, residential mobility, legal status, etc.); 2) multi-level (meso and macro comparable data in surveyed countries are associated to individual-micro data on migrants); 3) longitudinal (through retrospective data) 4) transnational (collected and giving account for both sending and receiving countries). Importantly, the MAFE data are strictly comparable across all surveyed countries (almost exactly the same questionnaires were used in all countries) and different populations (migrants, non migrants, returnees).

While most biographical qualitative research is retrospective (i.e., reconstituting the paths of life through a narrative reconstruction of past experiences by the interviewer), two recent studies used qualitative mobile (entailing movement of the researcher along the path of respondents), dynamic methods (repeated over time) to study the trajectories of migrants. The first, used by Schapendonk (2010) collected migration histories, reconstructing the paths of mobility through multi-local and multi-timing (longitudinal and dynamic) repeated interviews with migrants, who were firstly interviewed face-to-face, and then followed along their trajectories through long distance conversations (via Skype or phone) or email interviews. The second, undertaken by Arab (2009: 79), deploys a series of qualitative interviews repeated over time, implicating physical displacement of the researcher along the route of the interviewed migrants, and meeting with them at some following stages of their migration paths. These mobile (multi-situated along the path of the respondent) and intensive (repeated vs on-off contacts with the respondents) methods combine the richness of qualitative insights with the advantages of longitudinal methods, allowing to better operationalize and give account of trajectories of migrants and of the dynamic dimension of migration process and its drivers.

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² Research project web site: <u>www.mafeproject.com</u>

CONCLUSION

After having highlighted some major methodological limitations of migration research, highlighted how combining qualitative and quantitative approaches can be viable and fruitful.

Through exploring the case of biographic approaches, the note demonstrated that qualitative and quantitative methods can not only be simultaneously employed within the same research as two separate but complementary approaches and toolkits, but can also produce new methodological and heuristic devices. This showed that flexible research practices can help to enhance, refine and innovate our instruments for migration research.

With flexibility, we refer to the capacity of crossing disciplinary boundaries (what Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) advocated as "methodological fluidism") and of challenging theoretical, epistemological and methodological taken-for-granted conceptions and instruments. This can be achieved through a constant effort and exercise of critical auto-reflexivity, on one side, but necessarily also through: 1) inter-disciplinary critical epistemological thinking (comparing different approaches issued from different paradigms and disciplines) and 2) extra-disciplinary research (looking for creative, "out of the box" approaches, able to dialogue with and innovate theory and methods).

All in all, "thinking differently" is what we are, as researchers, called upon to do, as part of a constant effort of challenging our theoretical concepts and methodological instruments.

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