Bridging boundaries with a transnational research approach: a simultaneous matched-sample methodology
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Abstract

Theoretical transnational migration studies identify simultaneity and cross-border networks as central concepts that make transnationalism a unique area of study. Yet there seems to be no empirical study to date that takes both these concepts directly into account in its methodology. In this paper we review the methodology developed within the interdisciplinary research program Ghana TransNet, in which a simultaneous matched-sample (SMS) was used. Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands were studied at the same time as their network members based in Ghana, in both rural and urban contexts. This resulted in widening the scope of people studied beyond, the individual migrant, her nuclear family, or her clan or kin relations to include also non-blood related actors such as business partners, pastors and secondary school friends. Furthermore, this methodology required a team of researchers to be based in different locations: Amsterdam, Accra and villages in the Ashanti Region of Ghana and to work collaboratively, sharing information in order to gain knowledge about the whole network and how the same action can have different interpretations and effects in different parts of the world. The paper explores what additional information can be gained by studying different parts of migrant networks simultaneously. Furthermore, it presents the most important considerations to make when deciding upon the use of such a methodology.

Keywords: transnationalism, migration, methodology, multi-sited, simultaneous matched sample, Ghana

1. INTRODUCTION

Conducting research on a transnational topic poses the challenge to researchers of finding a good balance between depth and breadth. Transnational phenomena are, by their very nature, phenomena that cross nation-state borders, be they people, ideas, goods or institutions. Various scholars have suggested that multi-sited research lends itself well for understanding these cross-border flows. Marcus, in his seminal article in 1995 on the topic of multi-sited research offered six possibilities for how to do it:

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1This paper reports on results of a collaborative research program between the University of Amsterdam (AGIDS), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (AOE), Amsterdam Institute for International Development (AIID), and African Studies Centre Leiden, in the Netherlands and the Institute of Statistical Social and Economic Research (ISSER), in Ghana entitled “Transnational networks and the creation of local economies: Economic principles and institutions of Ghanaian migrants at home and abroad” (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) grant number 410-13-010P).
follow the people, things, metaphors, stories, lives or conflicts. Yet for researchers who have since employed this or similar research approaches, the challenge has been to combine multiple locations with an in-depth understanding of the different localities and to be able to contextualize the often-fragmented information that one gets from multiple sites (sources). So while Appadurai (2000) argues that local area studies are a passed station given that most social phenomena involve or are affected by cross-boundary flows, others, like Mintz (1998), Burawoy (2000) and Rutten (2007), argue that local anchoring of research is necessary to gain in-depth knowledge of globalizing processes.

In a review of multi-sited, empirical transnational studies that I conducted in 2005 (Mazzucato 2008), two characteristics of these studies stand out. First, that all of the studies researched two sites in a step-wise fashion. That is, first a researcher started in one location and then, after the first period of fieldwork, the researcher moved to the second location. Second, the majority of the reviewed studies obtained their primary information from interviews involving a one-off or short contact with respondents. This finding supports Rutten’s (2007) argument that social scientists often claim to use anthropological or ethnographic methods, such as was found in these studies, when in reality what they are doing is qualitative, in-depth interviews. Both of the above characteristics attest to the fact that it is difficult to build up longer-term relationships with respondents when dividing oneself amongst different research sites.

Simultaneity and networks are two important features of transnational phenomena that come out of the theoretical literature. Transnational flows of people, goods, ideas, and money do not occur in a vacuum but rather need networks in place. Secondly, people can be simultaneously engaged in two or more countries, facilitated by modern information and communication technologies. Simultaneous engagement enables linkages between dispersed people to tighten, new livelihood opportunities to emerge, social institutions to change, and hybrid identities to develop. These changes have led to qualitative differences in how migrants, the cities in which they live and their home communities are impacted by migration (Foner, 1997).

This paper reports on a simultaneous, matched sample methodology developed for the Ghana TransNet study in which we attempted to bridge the boundary between breadth and depth and to incorporate simultaneity and networks directly in the methodology. In section 2 we describe the multi-sited research design as well as the mixed-method approach used. In a third section we reflect on the kinds of data and understandings that this methodology allowed us to gain.

2. A SIMULTANEOUS MATCHED SAMPLE METHODOLOGY

The Ghana TransNet research program examines how migrants’ transnational networks affect the principles and institutions on which local economies are based. Through flows of goods, money, services and ideas between migrants and people they know in their home country, values, knowledge, economic opportunities and means of social assistance are changed, adapted and transformed, ultimately impacting the institutions that shape local economies both at home and abroad. The program thus

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2 Of the 23 studies reviewed, all were conducted in a step-wise fashion and 15 used methods requiring a one-off or short contact with respondents.

3 www2.fmg.uva.nl/ghanatransnet
aims to understand how local economies are being changed, by focusing on institutions that are impacted by migrants’ transnational lives.

The research program takes migrants’ simultaneous engagement in two or more countries directly into account in the methodology (Mazzucato 2000). As argued by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), simultaneity is one of the distinguishing features of transnational phenomena. That is, information and communication technologies that are available today that make communication across large distances easier, faster and cheaper, facilitate and make widespread the ability of migrants to be simultaneously engaged in two or more countries at the same time. The simultaneous matched sample (SMS) methodology takes simultaneity directly into account in two ways. First, the unit of analysis is a network of people who are not necessarily based in the same nation-state. Rather than an individual migrant or her household back home as is typical of migration studies, here the unit of analysis includes the migrant but also her friends, family, colleagues and others with whom she engages in trans-border exchanges. This makes the unit of analysis the transnational network. Second, the program used a team of researchers based in the main locations of migrants’ networks so as to study the people in a network at the same time. Below follows a description of this research design.

The program is composed of three projects based in three important nodes of Ghanaian migrants’ transnational networks: Amsterdam where most Ghanaians in The Netherlands reside, Accra, the capital city of Ghana where most migrants have lived or passed through, and rural to semi-urban villages in the Ashanti Region of Ghana to which many migrants trace their roots.4 The projects investigate how transnational networks affect economic activities in each of these locations.

The five-year research program was conducted in two phases. In a first phase, lasting one and a half years, contact was made with Ghanaian migrants in Amsterdam, a network survey was conducted, a research team was established. Amsterdam-based respondents were selected and preliminary fieldwork was conducted in Ghana. In a second phase, lasting two years, Ghana-based respondents were contacted, similar research tools were developed for each research location, and research was carried out in each of the three research locations. The last one and a half year of the program was spent analyzing and disseminating results in academic and policy circles.

First, contact needed to be made with Amsterdam-based Ghanaian migrants. Amsterdam has the largest concentration of Ghanaians in The Netherlands. Of the officially counted 18,000 Ghanaians in The Netherlands in 20065, approximately 60% are in the wider Amsterdam region and of these, almost 80% are in one neighborhood: Amsterdam South East. At first, contact was made by frequenting the neighborhood, going to church ceremonies and social events, and working together with Ghanaians on a cultural project.

A network survey was conducted with as many different migrants as possible so as to be able to select respondents to be followed in-depth in a second phase of the program. There exists no baseline survey of Ghanaians in The Netherlands and a large

4 Later, a smaller study was added in Kumasi, the regional capital of the Ashanti Region, where migrant’s network members were also located in large numbers.
5 Unofficial estimates are 40,000 in 2000 (Mazzucato 2004).
number of migrants are undocumented. Therefore a network survey based on 17 name-generator questions was conducted among 106 Ghanaians. We conducted the survey by randomly selecting migrants encountered through 11 different gateways (two churches, one cultural project, two community leaders, three hometown associations, one workplace, chance encounters in markets, and initial contact with migrants’ family in Ghana). Snowball sampling, often used in migration studies when there is no baseline survey, was not used so as to avoid the risk of only obtaining access to certain types of migrant. The diversity of gateways helped ensure we came into contact with a wide variety of migrants with different individual and network characteristics.

The name-generator questionnaire is a tool used in quantitative social network analysis (Burt, 1984; Campbell and Lee, 1991). In this study, an exchange approach to networks was used in which questions were asked with respect to the exchange of emotional and material supportive content between ego and alters (McAllister and Fischer, 1978)\(^6\), both positive relations (such as friendships) as well as negative relations (such as people one argues with) and strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) were asked. Respondents were asked to mention as many names as they could think of for each question and along with the names, also the location of the person and the relationship with the respondent (kin/non-kin and for each, specifying what kind of relationship, such as ‘business partner’ or ‘mother’s sister’). The tool was tested for cultural relevance of questions and saturation.\(^7\)

A selection was made of respondents with whom to conduct the second phase of the research based on individual characteristics of the migrant (sex, age, income, education, and length of migration period) and network characteristics (size and density), trying to get as much diversity as possible. This step required asking those selected if they would take part in our research and if yes, if they consented to having us interview their network members in Ghana. This was a very delicate step as much was asked of people while they still did not know the researchers very well. As much as possible two to three meetings were held with each respondent before asking them to take part in the research so as to create a feeling of trust. This was important, given that many respondents were in vulnerable positions either because they did not have staying permits or because they were linked to someone who did not have the correct documents.

At the same time, two additional researchers had been recruited as part of the program in order to be based in Accra, Ghana, the national capital, where many migrants pass through on their way to Europe or have lived, and in a rural location in the Ashanti region, to which many migrants trace their roots. The researchers were from the fields of development studies and sociology and already had a number of years’ experience in developing countries. The researchers went to Ghana on a preliminary fieldwork visit. As migrant respondents were being found, their network member names and addresses were communicated to the researchers in Ghana. In the selection of Amsterdam-based respondents, attention needed to be paid to selecting migrants with

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\(^6\) An example of a question for an emotional support tie is ‘If you experience problems with raising your children, whom would you go to, to seek advice?’\(^7\) An example of a question getting at a material tie is ‘who does the household chores such as food shopping, cleaning, cooking, child minding?’\(^7\) Saturation refers to eliciting as complete a network with as few questions as possible. The complete questionnaire can be found on www2.fmg.uva.nl/ghanatransnet.
network members located in a cluster of rural locations. This was necessary in order to keep distances short enough (the Ashanti region is approximately 24,400 km²) for a researcher to visit all respondents on a weekly basis. Four clusters were chosen, three larger towns and one cluster of three, more difficult to access, smaller villages. In order to have enough respondents in each cluster, a few networks had to be added to the original Amsterdam selection by contacting people in the village/town clusters and working our way back to the migrant in Amsterdam. We were aiming for 30 to 40 networks, and after getting the permission of various migrants, and some rejections, ended up with a sample of 33 networks⁸, or 115 respondents between the three research projects.⁹

It was often difficult to trace network members in Ghana and to overcome their initial distrust. During this period, Dutch immigration policy was extremely restrictive, going as far as sending detectives to the hometowns of visa applicants to check if the information on the application form was correct. Any discrepancies found would be grounds for a visa refusal. This made migration a highly sensitive topic in Ghana surrounded by a great distrust of foreigners asking questions about migrants. Working with local research assistants helped assuage the suspicion of local residents. But most helpful, and indeed crucial, in getting respondents in Ghana to collaborate in this study, was having the migrant telephone their network members in Ghana to communicate to them that it was fine to participate in the research program (i.e. that we were not working for the Dutch immigration police). It was a major undertaking making sure that migrants called, that respondents in Ghana had access to a phone (especially in rural locations), and finding the physical location of respondents (especially in the mega metropolis of Accra where street names do not exist). Some migrants sent a gift and letter for respondents in Ghana through the researcher and this helped to gain trust. In the urban areas we soon learned that the first meeting with respondents should be made at a well-known location and later be brought to respondents’ homes. Because of its intricacies, this phase lasted ten months, from September 2002 to June 2003. Figure 1 shows schematically what the networks that we studied looked like.

Figure 1. Schematic representation of a migrant network and respondents of the Ghana TransNet program

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⁸ In four cases the migrant did not want to take part in the research thus only his network members were interviewed.

⁹ Including the smaller Kumasi study, we had a total of 131 respondents. However, here we report only on the respondents in the three main locations as these were the ones with whom all methods were employed.
Once the selection of respondents was made, the second phase of the program could begin. The research team jointly developed questionnaires and question lists so that the same questions would be asked simultaneously in the three research locations to the network members of the same networks. First, a transaction study was developed to record all transactions\textsuperscript{10} on a monthly basis conducted in eight domains of daily life, identified from literature and preliminary fieldwork as being important in the economic lives of migrants and people back home. These domains are housing, business (including farming), funerals, church, health care, education, remittances for general sustenance and community development projects. For each transaction, the name, location and relationship of the transaction partner were recorded. The transaction questionnaire was administered on a monthly basis during the period July 2003 to June 2004. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out on the eight domains paying specific attention to the role of network members therein. Third, life histories were conducted, focusing on the role of network members in a person’s life to understand more about how relationships evolved and what role they had in respondents’ lives. Fourth, observation and participation in social events were employed in Amsterdam from June 2002 to August 2005 and in locations in Ghana from May 2003 to August 2004.

These various methodological tools we employed, some of which on a monthly basis, meant that we visited with respondents repeatedly, sometimes once a month, other times more frequently. This allowed us to build up a relationship with respondents,

\textsuperscript{10} Transactions are defined as an exchange of communication (through telephone, post, audio cassettes, physical travel, or computer), goods, money or services.
which enhanced feelings of trust and the quality of the answers we got. Furthermore, two of the three nodes were urban locations, which meant that we faced difficulties typical of urban research where chance encounters are infrequent and where appointments need to be made to meet with respondents, making observation difficult. However, having the ‘excuse’ of having to administer a questionnaire or an interview also created the opportunity to observe respondents in their different contexts: at work, at home, at the market or in a neighborhood ‘chop’ bar. The relationships we built up with respondents also meant that we were at times invited to ceremonies such as funerals, marriages and baptisms, giving us further opportunities for observation.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF AN SMS METHODOLOGY

**Working in a team**

Working in a team of researchers presents researchers with methodological advantages as well as organizational and attitudinal challenges. Below we discuss these aspects, respectively. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the greatest challenges when studying multiple sites is gaining depth of information and being able to locally contextualize information. If a researcher needs to spend time in more than one site, this limits the amount of time she has in any one particular site, to take part in people’s lives, see differences between informants and to place activities within a cultural context. Furthermore, information obtained from multiple sites can result as splintered making it difficult to place bits and pieces into a whole picture (Rutten 2007).

One way to combine in-depth analysis with multiple sites is by working in a team of researchers in which each researcher covers a different site. This allows each researcher to spend a longer amount of time at the site than if she were to have to cover different sites by herself, giving a researcher the time to embed herself in the everyday context of life and activities of respondents. This also gives a researcher the time that is needed to build up trust with respondents. Often issues around migration can be quite sensitive and need a trusting relationship between researcher and respondent to be able to talk about certain topics. In our research it was important to know about the income and asset wealth of a person to see to what degree people back home were reliant on migrant remittances and for migrants, to be able to estimate how much of their income they dedicated to remittances. In the urban contexts of Accra and Amsterdam, these topics could only be discussed in a reliable fashion once trust was established. The same is true for the legal status of a migrant. We found that legal status was very important for understanding migrants’ vulnerability, their access to services, housing and jobs and their reliance on social network members. Yet it was only possible to discuss issues of legal status once considerable time was spent in building up relationships with respondents.

Having researchers based in multiple sites allows piecing together of different bits of information into a whole. For example, in a study of how migration affected the economies of funerals in Ghana, we had each researcher following events related to a particular funeral that took place in three locations. Through sharing of information between researchers we were able to document the different transnational activities that took place to make the funeral possible, to place these within the culturally relevant context of funerals in Ghana, and to see how outcomes of the funeral, such as who benefited financially from the funeral, who gained in social prestige and how
relationships between migrants and their home town were negotiated, were influenced by events and activities that took place in the three locations.

This contextualization of information into a broader whole, however, can only be achieved through close collaboration and data sharing between the team of researchers. This requires a different mind-frame of researchers and infrastructure for data sharing. The mind-frame of researchers in a team needs to be different from that of the single researcher. Researchers need to be ready to share data; this is quite a shift from the single social scientist who is used to considering data collected as his own. Making clear agreements on co-authorship of publications can facilitate this process. Another shift in mind-frame needed for working in a team is that researchers need to accept that they are less free to make independent choices. Timing of events in one location may require a researcher in another location to readjust his schedule to be able to follow those activities associated with that event. For example, when migrants from Amsterdam came to Accra to prepare for the funeral, the Accra-based researcher needed to put aside his schedule of planned interviews, to be able to follow the migrants in their activities.

A second area of intensive sharing among researchers is during the development of research tools. In order to achieve many of the advantages of an SMS methodology, it is necessary to be asking the same questions in the different research locations, simultaneously. This allows comparison across sites, provides additional information with which to improve questioning in each site, and allows researchers to note discrepancies between how migrants intend their remittances to be spent and how they are actually allocated by people in the home country. Methodological tools thus need to be developed that will be applied to each research site simultaneously. This necessitates that researchers, with their own previous knowledge of their site, develop tools together, ensuring that they are relevant for each context. During the Ghana TransNet program, this phase was conducted between a preliminary fieldwork phase and the main fieldwork phase, when all researchers were in The Netherlands and could together develop the different tools to be used. Information on amendments necessary to the tools, discovered during the testing phase in each of the research sites, was communicated through intensive e-mail contact between researchers.

In summary, researchers working in a team have less flexibility in scheduling their own fieldwork and developing their own independent methods. They need to be dedicated to the project and sometimes put the project’s objectives before their personal ones.

Close communication in the team was possible because all researchers had access to the Internet, making it possible to share field notes via e-mail. In our project, we mailed each other bi-weekly field reports in which we summarized for each other the main happenings at our sites, and made a list of possible topics/themes of interest to be asked to respondents at the other sites. Each researcher tried, as much as possible, to pick up these themes in their regular interviews with respondents at their site.

One of the main advantages of sharing data between researchers was the increased ability to obtain information at our own sites that this gave us. An example of how this works can best help explain this point.
While traveling to Spain, Nana was caught at Schiphol airport without proper documentation. She was brought to a prison approximately 30 km from Amsterdam where she was given one calling card with which she called her sister in Amsterdam to ask for help. Her sister first went to visit her and brought her money so that she could purchase more calling cards. Nana then called me to tell me what had happened and ask for help. I e-mailed a summary of my field notes to the researcher who was studying Nana’s parents in Kumasi. Although Nana had already been in prison for a few weeks and Nana’s sister had contacted her parents to let them know the situation, the researcher in Kumasi had not been told about the situation by the parents. After my e-mail the researcher told the parents that she knew about Nana’s situation. The parents thus saw that Nana trusted us with the information and subsequently let the researcher in on the details of what was happening. Through their stories, we found out how they were experiencing the event, and the activities that they engaged in as a consequence of the event. These activities involved making phone calls to the Netherlands, staying at home to receive calls from the Netherlands, cutting a two-week stay at the family farm located at a day’s travel from Kumasi, short so as to be present for any decisions that needed to be made concerning Nana, and attending a prayer camp for two weeks with fasting and prayers and in which donations were made. These were all activities that, had we not known about Nana’s situation in the Netherlands, we would not have easily detected as they blend in with daily activities of people in Ghana.

Working in multiple sites simultaneously

Having a team of researchers located in the most important nodes of Ghanaian migrants’ transnational networks enabled us to partially overcome one of the challenges of researching a mobile population: tracing people when they move; it allowed us to trace the immediate consequences in one country of actions taking place in another country and to trace the link between these two; and it made it possible to verify discourses about migration by verifying people’s actions in both sending and receiving countries. Below we expand on these three points.

One of the difficulties in conducting research with methods that require more than a one-time visit to a mobile population is that one sometimes loses track of one’s respondents: people change addresses, change mobile phone numbers, migrate to another country. Indeed all of these situations presented themselves during our research. In the latter case of people migrating, having researchers located in the most important locations of Ghanaian migrants’ transnational networks enabled us to continue working with some of the people who moved. So, for example, when one young student, daughter of a migrant, graduated from Kumasi National University for Science and Technology and moved to Accra for her job, we continued to interview her through the researcher based in Accra. The same was true in the case where a migrant returned to Ghana for a two-month stay in Kumasi, where the Kumasi-based researcher was able to conduct two of the monthly interviews with him while he was in Ghana. This also enabled the Kumasi-based researcher to observe the migrant when he was back home and take note of his activities and how he acted vis-à-vis his network members in Ghana.

An SMS methodology allowed tracing the direct consequences of Dutch policies on the lives of those who are in Ghana. Stringent requirements for verification and validation of professional diplomas in the Netherlands has led some migrants to seek better employment opportunities elsewhere in Europe, as was the case for one of our
respondents, Joy. Because of our following of Joy’s network members in Kumasi, we were able to document the effects of Joy’s move on her school-age nephew.

Joy, a Ghanaian nurse who in the nine years that she resided in The Netherlands, seven of which with the appropriate documentation, was never able to have her nursing diploma validated in The Netherlands and worked in the lowest ranks of elderly care. During our fieldwork, Joy reached a limit to her patience and had grown increasingly dissatisfied with repercussions for her self-esteem. She ultimately decided to move to the UK where she had better chances of getting her diploma recognized. This was not without financial consequences as she needed to pay for her trip, housing, and it would take some time for her to obtain a nursing job, thus her husband in The Netherlands had to use all his savings to support her. The additional spending was documented in the transaction study but at the same time we were able to follow the consequences this had in Ghana. Joy and her husband were supporting a nephew in Ghana through school and as a consequence of Joy’s move; they were not able to pay the school fees for half the academic year. At the end of our fieldwork no one in Ghana had been able to substitute for the loss in school money and the child was taken out of the school.

This effect came out of simultaneously collecting transaction data in different locations simultaneously. Joy and her husband had not mentioned their inability to pay school fees for the nephew, either because they had not thought of it, or because they were ashamed of it. Asking respondents in Ghana after a long period of having taken the boy out of school, may also not have turned up this information as the link between the remittances and the boy’s schooling may have been forgotten or the link may not be so clear in people’s minds. Thus this effect would not have come out by just relying on informants on one side of the migration process and may have been overlooked if the information was not collected simultaneously.

There are many discourses around migration that exist amongst ordinary people in Ghana and amongst migrants and one often finds them reproduced in migration studies that solely rely on what people say (i.e. interviews) without recognizing that these are discourses, which may not necessarily correspond with what people actually do.

An example of a discourse around migration that one finds amongst migrants is their portrayal of the burden of their extended family’s constant requests for help. Often, researchers who base their findings on one-off interviews with migrants, report this discourse as a finding, and thus propagate the image of the migrant as a helpless victim of extended family systems prevalent in developing countries. Observing what migrants do, i.e. their practices, revealed in our study the various strategies migrants employ in order to continue supporting people back home while at the same time giving space to their own personal objectives (Mazzucato 2004). In reality migrants have more room for maneuver, we concluded, than they portray themselves to have. Furthermore, we observed that some migrants do not receive so many requests, and others that do, sometimes explicitly deny these requests. Finally, we found that migrants are also dependent on their relations in the home country particularly in certain phases of their migration trajectory, making them net receivers rather than givers of help. This can partially help explain why they continue to send remittances despite the fact that they say they feel oppressed by requests (Mazzucato 2006 CSAE). We were only able to come to this conclusion by observing and collecting
quantitative data from the different sides of the migration process. Migrants’ reliance on home did not come out of interviews with migrants themselves because migrants often view this reliance with shame as it is associated with a “failed” migration story.

Another dominant discourse is that migrants show off their hard earned income in their country of origin, leading to the misconception in the country of origin that ‘money grows on trees’ overseas. This then results in youths wanting to migrate and in extended family members making constant requests for money and goods from migrants. Having researchers in different locations meant that we could observe migrants’ behavior on their home visits. We also asked migrants what they tell their network members in Ghana about life overseas. At the same time we could check this information by asking the network members in Ghana what they knew of life overseas. It resulted that people in Ghana, especially in the cities, had a very realistic picture of life in developed countries and were aware that their compatriots were often working and living in difficult conditions. We found that migrants were usually not explicit to their network members about their own personal circumstances, but they explained how living conditions were difficult in general and sometimes gave details about people they knew. In fact, some of our young respondents who were able to secure a decent job in urban Ghana did not express any desire to migrate. This showed that while the ‘money growing on trees’ discourse may have reflected reality in the beginning of Ghanaians emigration overseas in the 1980s, it is now outdated. Many migrants have since returned temporarily or permanently with realistic stories about their experiences, or worse, with little to show from their stay abroad. The discourse may, however, still be relevant in rural areas (Kabki et al. 2004) or areas of Ghana from where not many people emigrate overseas (de Lange 2003).

Finally, a third emerging discourse amongst aid donors, both governmental and non-governmental is the idea that doing development together with migrants, or what has been termed co-development, leads to more sustainable results. This is because migrants have direct links to their home communities and are thus more aware of the needs and can reach communities without having to go through the bureaucratic channels of central governments. Reports and academic publications reporting these advantages, however, are based on interviews with migrants and migrant organizations. Very little work exists in which what migrants say they do is actually traced back to the home country. An SMS methodology allows verification of what migrants say they do with what they actually do in their home areas. Comparing the five towns and village clusters where we worked in the rural areas of Ghana, we found indeed that in certain instances, particularly with small-scale projects such as the building of classrooms, the electrification of small villages or providing equipment and furniture to local clinics, this was indeed the case (Kabki et al. 2008). Migrants had very close links with leading figures in the village with whom they communicated directly to find out what the village needs are and through whom they allocate funding and delegate project management. In the larger projects in larger villages, however, migrant projects were not always viewed positively by the entirety of the local population. Different factions exist within the population expressing different needs and local leaders at times felt that their authority was threatened by the often-prestigious projects migrants initiated such as large structures for the central market.

*Working with networks*
Working with networks as our unit of analysis allowed us to not take as given that kin relationships are necessarily the most important for all aspects of life. There are some drawbacks in using networks that have been mentioned in the literature, such as the impossibility of getting complete networks, the difficulty in tracing them, and the high probability of getting many similar respondents (as wealthy/poor people tend to be linked to other wealthy/poor people). Some of these weaknesses we were able to overcome and others remain inherent to working with networks. Below we discuss these.

Working with networks rather than households or kinship groups, we also included non-kin relations amongst our respondents such as preachers, business partners, secondary school friends, and ex-girlfriends. This enabled us to notice that certain domains of migrants’ activities in their home countries are in the hands of non-kin relations, for example non-kin relations revealed to be important in housing construction. Most migrants strive to build a house in their home country. This is sometimes done in a ‘hometown’, which are towns or villages to which migrants draw their roots. In these cases, it is often a member of the extended family that helps a migrant in the various phases necessary to build a house (Mazzucato 2008). However, in a significant number of cases migrants prefer to build their house in the regional capital or Accra, where a migrant may have more social ties (for example, if he when to school there or if other migrants whom he has befriended overseas have also built houses there). Another reason to build in a city is to avoid the inevitable requests of extended family members in the hometown of living in the home or being seen as rich and therefore instigating a slew of requests for money (Smith 2007). A survey we conducted of 106 Ghanaian migrants in Amsterdam, showed that 10% would entrust the construction of their house to a non-kin friend. This is quite a high percentage given the tendency to organize economic activities along kin lines. Given the importance of the investment and the high monetary costs, one would expect the task of supervising the construction to be assigned to a kin relative. Interviews with migrants indicated that migrants feel they have more sanctioning power over a friend who misbehaves than over a family member, since custom makes it difficult to sever relationships with kin (Mazzucato, 2003). Also, kin members are more easily influenced by other kin members and can be persuaded to misreport information back to the migrant. Looking at the characteristics of the friend showed that friends are not in financial need and are therefore less likely to be tempted to divert some of the remittances for their own use. For the most part, they had also migrated at some point in their lives, and so knew that money was not easy to come by overseas.

Second, it is important to note that the networks are not complete in that it is too costly to have researchers at all locations of the network (some networks extend to 7 different countries) and furthermore, even in areas where researchers are located, some network members may not want to be part of the research or for one reason or another may not be able to participate. Indeed, of all potential network members in our research locations, we covered 80%. This means that for some ties in a network we could collect information from both ends, and other ties, we only had information from one end.

Third, networks are defined by one of the network members, in our case, the migrant in Amsterdam. This runs the risk of missing out on network members that are more isolated or marginal in the network, for example, those to whom the migrant does not
remit, while these types of respondents are also very interesting for a study on transnational networks. A well-designed name generator questionnaire should solve this problem. In fact, the Ghana TransNet program included various respondents who never received a remittance from migrants during the entire stay abroad of a migrant. This allowed us to investigate questions such as why are these people cut off from the network? And how do they survive without remittances from a migrant?

4. CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE USE OF AN SMS METHODOLOGY

There are some practical considerations to make when deciding whether to use an SMS methodology. A first consideration is the time investment the methodology requires. When dealing with a vulnerable population, time is needed to gain people’s trust. Even if they do not understand fully the meaning of an academic research, they need to be able to trust the researcher that he or she will not use any information against them. Particular to the SMS methodology, is that much will be asked of the case study respondents because of the long-term nature of the data collection and because contact names and addresses are asked of people in their network. This requires respondents to understand why the researcher wants this information and to trust that it will not damage anyone in the network nor the migrant him or herself.

In addition, vulnerable populations are not visible in that they are not captured in any official statistical exercise. This means that no base-line survey will exist from which the general characteristics of the population can be deduced. Therefore time is needed to gain different entry points to the population so as to reach as much as possible the different types of people that exist in the population to gain a complete picture of what the population looks like and to make an appropriate selection of case study individuals. The Ghana TransNet study is a five-year study and the whole of the first year was used to make diverse types of contacts and to gain people’s trust. Not one interview question was asked in that year. Rather, time was spent socializing, going to important events, ceremonies, and outdoor markets and conducting a cultural project together with migrants.

Time is also needed in getting the matched sample of network members who will be studied in the other research locations. Time is needed for migrants to trace a network member down, explain the intention of the research and ask permission to give their telephone numbers to researchers. Once we received the contact information in the Ghana TransNet study, time was needed to trace the persons in Ghana. One difficulty in the urban context, given the large scale combined with the absence of street addresses typical of developing country cities, is understanding where someone lives. Another difficulty is that people change mobile phone numbers, or travel and are not reachable, or that the mobile telephone connections work only sporadically making it difficult to contact people. Finally, when a network member is traced down and met, sometimes they had not been warned by the migrant or had understood something different and wanted time to contact the migrant to, again, check on certain points.

The policy context of The Netherlands added a further complication. There was great distrust especially of outsiders asking questions related to migration because the Dutch embassy in Ghana had been applying a very stringent, and locally perceived unfair, policy on visa applications. They would send ‘detectives’ (at times ‘whites’ but mainly Ghanaian detective officers hired for the job) to check the information that was written on migrants’ visa applications. Any minor discrepancy found between
information on the form and information received by migrants’ friends, colleagues, family, school teachers, etc. would be reason to deny the migrant a visa. After many stories of refused visas, the Ghanaian population has become sensitized to not giving any information out to strangers, be they ‘whites’ or Ghanaian relating to migrants. This meant that contact between the network member and the migrant had to be made before the person would collaborate in the research. This phase of making contact with the matched side of the sample took approximately three months with each researcher in his or her location intensively communicating back to Amsterdam so that migrants could be questioned again on the contact information or could be asked to contact their network members to give the go-ahead for them to collaborate with us. Finally, time was needed to gain the trust of the matched side of the sample so that they would agree to be researched so intensively as the SMS methodology necessitates.

The intensive nature of the SMS methodology in which respondents are studied over a long period of time and where trust forms an essential ingredient to ensuring the quality of the data collected, means that it can only be applied on a case study basis. This means the SMS methodology more appropriate for research questions relating to how things work and not for questions aiming at determining the extent of phenomena (Yin 1994). In the Ghana TransNet study, researchers had between 30 to 50 respondents, with lower numbers in urban areas because of the greater difficulty of making appointments and meeting people. If one wants to apply the SMS methodology to greater numbers, then more researchers need to be employed. The Ghana TransNet program consisted of three full-time researchers for four years and a total of 16 research assistants were hired during the two years of fieldwork. The total project cost almost 1 million euros including personnel and material costs.

The long duration of the study can make mobility a problem. People move, migrate, and go for prolonged stays elsewhere, making it so that some respondents will be lost along the way. This is partially resolved as mentioned in section 4.4 when respondents move to one of the other research locations. However, the long-term nature of the methodology makes it probable that some respondents will be lost along the way.

Another consideration is the fact that SMS methodology can only be carried out by a team of researchers and necessitates much coordination among team members. When selecting a matched sample, researchers need to communicate quickly any information and difficulties they may be experiencing because that will affect the selection of case study respondents for all other locations. For example, if a person in Accra chooses not to collaborate in the research, and he is the only person in the network other than the migrant, this may lead to the migrant being dropped as a respondent. Also, if people in Ghana seemed confused or weary of the research objectives, then it was necessary for the Amsterdam-based researcher to be informed immediately so that she may contact the migrant and ask for him to contact the network members in Ghana to explain everything. Another example is if the researchers in Ghana were not able to find the network member of the migrant, then the researcher in Amsterdam had to contact the migrant and ask her to find more contact information for that network member.

A second phase of intensive communication among researchers is during the development of research tools. In order to achieve many of the advantages of
applying an SMS methodology discussed above, it is necessary to be asking the same questions in the different research locations, simultaneously. This allows comparison across sites, provides additional information with which to improve questioning in each site, and allows researchers to note discrepancies between how migrants intend their remittances to be spent and how they are actually allocated by people in the home country. Methodological tools thus need to be developed that will be applied to each research site simultaneously. This necessitates that researchers, with their own previous knowledge of their site, develop tools together, ensuring that they are relevant for each context. During the Ghana TransNet program, this phase was conducted between a preliminary fieldwork phase and the main fieldwork phase, when all researchers were in The Netherlands and could together develop the different tools to be used. Information on amendments necessary to the tools, discovered during the testing phase in each of the research sites, was communicated through intensive e-mail contact between researchers.

The third phase of intensive communication is during the main fieldwork phase. Information needs to be exchanged about each research location so that researchers can refine their questioning in their own research site. In the Ghana TransNet research program this was done by way of bi-weekly reports that each researcher sent via e-mail to the rest of the team. The content of the reports was a summary of main findings that may in some way affect the questioning in the other research locations.

Another consideration is that of researcher participation in her research field. Being part of a team located in the central nodes of transnational networks, makes it inevitable that researchers get involved and partially influence the flows that go on between research locations. When researchers travel from Ghana to The Netherlands and vice versa, they are inevitably asked by respondents to carry money, gifts, photos, audiocassettes, mobile phones and other goods to their friends, family and business partners. Thus the researcher becomes a means through which to channel flows. Carrying goods over is also a way in which a researcher can partially reciprocate for the time respondents are spending on the research. These situations provide a wealth of information in terms of what is sent and how these flows are organized. But they also influence research results; would these goods have been sent were the researcher not present and if so, how? It is therefore important to make use of the requests made to researchers as a way to gain information about flows, and at the same time to be careful not to stimulate these flows by actively inciting respondents to send things through researchers. This way a researcher can try to limit his or her influence on research findings.

Sharing information between researchers sometimes leads to situations in which a researcher is aware of things that her respondent may not know. However, in order not to influence research results, but also importantly in order to protect the privacy of each respondent, researchers need to be careful not to divulge personal information that they come to learn of during their interviews, to anyone outside of the team. This creates awkward situations, for example, of knowing that a remittance has not been used for the intended purpose or seeing that a migrant does not remit to a needy family member while noting the absolute poverty in which that family member is living. This leads to ethical considerations. To what degree should a researcher remain silent in such situations? In the Ghana TransNet research program, we took
the secrecy vow to respondents as most important and thus, even in awkward situations, did not pass on any of our knowledge to other respondents.

6. CONCLUSIONS

There are two overall implications that result from this review of SMS methodology and its contribution to our knowledge about the migration and development nexus. First, is that more studies using SMS methodology are needed. SMS methodology allows the operationalization of many of the concepts that have resulted as important from transnationalism studies. Transnationalism work to date can be categorized in three categories (Mazzucato 2008). The first category comprises publications that theorize transnationalism as a concept and phenomenon. The second are empirical studies, which in turn are of two kinds. One type focuses on issues of identity, feelings of belonging, or political participation of migrant minorities in their countries of origin. Most of these studies are based in one country and study migrant minority groups in that country. A second type focuses on migrant livelihoods, entrepreneurship or remittances. These studies tend to be multi-sited, focusing on both migrants’ home communities as well as the countries where they reside, however data is hardly ever collected simultaneously nor is it collected over long periods. Therefore empirical studies that operationalize more rigorously concepts such as networks and simultaneity of flows that have been brought to the fore by transnationalism studies are needed. One way to do this is through an SMS methodology.

This paper has reviewed the some of the main characteristics of an SMS methodology: working in teams, working in multiple sites and working with networks. It reviewed some of the advantages such as the triangulation of results, the possibility to collect supplemental information with which to improve the quality of data obtained and getting beyond dominant migration discourses. The paper also discussed some of the difficulties, such as the different researcher mind frame needed to be able to work in a team, the fact that it is virtually impossible to work with complete networks, and the great time investment needed to work with members of networks scattered in different countries.
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