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Diversifying analytical categories for studying youth with and without migration background: an example of mobility-based categories

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Abstract

This article develops mobility-based categories for studying young people with and without a migration background. Most research on migrant youth uses the category of ethnicity, defined by a young person's country of origin or that of their parents, or the category of generation, with migrants defined as first, second or 1.5 generation. But these categories hide the mobility that young people engage in, both for those youth who have migration in their biographies and those who do not. Mobility can entail migration, but also other kinds of trips such as study abroad, vacations, gap years, and family visits. In a globalising world the ability of young people to move is increasingly a marker of difference and therefore needs to be considered when studying young people's lives. Using insights from the transnational and mobilities turns in the social sciences, this article argues that we need to develop new analytical categories that capture the various ways in which young people are mobile. Such mobility-based categories promise to shed light on young people's lives in three ways. First such categories allow investigation of various elements of commonality and difference between youth, irrespective of where they or their parents come from. They allow us to go beyond the nation-state lens that still guides most large-scale migration research and to explore within-group differences. Second, mobility-based categories take young people's past and present mobilities into account, allowing a temporal understanding of how mobility affects their lives. Finally, mobility-based categories are a way to operationalize the notion that mobility entails a process rather than a one-time move. The article explores what mobility-based categories could look like, based on a recent, large-N, primary data collection project on secondary-school student's mobility in three European countries and one African one.

Keywords: Migration, Categories, Mobility, Transnational, Youth, Generations, Europe, Africa

Introduction

The categories used in research are inevitably linked to the type of knowledge that is produced and, by consequence, the directions in which solutions for social issues are sought. While the confounding of policy and analytical categories in migration research has been criticized (Brubaker, 2004; Stierl, 2020), this paper addresses a separate issue, namely, the need to diversify the analytical categories that are used to collect and analyse

data in migration research and in migrant youth studies. This need is particularly acute in quantitative studies, which often feed policy making in areas that affect youth, such as education, social work or migration. A continual feedback loop exists between the data collected, the research questions asked, and the way research is conducted. Once particular theories become widespread, their specific categorizations reinforce theoretical developments in one direction. Findings lead to future data collection that uses the same categories that produced the findings, hampering exploration of other possible categories. In migration research two analytical categories have dominated quantitative analyses: ethnicity and generation. There is a need to forge new, theoretically and empirically informed categories and experiment with them to make migration studies more reflexive. New categories can help us see old issues in new ways, question the status quo (Hinger, 2018), and even change the questions we ask (Bakewell 2008).

The dominant categories used in migration research in general, and in research on youth in particular, were developed in studies of assimilation and integration by researchers in the United States and Europe. The theories that guide this work take a nation-state perspective by comparing youth with a migration background to a “native” population, or to youth from different ethnic groups, or to youth of different migrant generations. Invariably researchers find differences or similarities between these groups, which means that findings can only relate to these nation-state informed categories. Findings in turn determine where researchers look for solutions. For example, a study that focuses on the second-generation can only link findings to the second-generation, and solutions emanating from such research are invariably aimed at youth of the second generation. Such a categorization presumes that youth of the second generation have commonalities that justify studying them as a group and that they will be largely affected by specific conditions in the same way. Consequently, such generational and ethnic-based categories do not allow for an adequate understanding of within-group differences. Nor do they allow us to explore whether there are commonalities between migrant and non-migrant youth and whether factors other than a young person’s status as a migrant may impact their and “native” youth’s lives in the same way.

Recent theoretical developments in transnational and mobility studies can help us develop new categories that are mobility- instead of nation-state based. Such categories can add to the current limited types of categories for collecting data on and analysing the lives of youth with a migration background. In a globalized world, new forms of inequality are emerging between those who are physically mobile and those who are not (Bauman 1998). It is thus important to study the physical mobility of all young people, not just migrants, to understand how this shapes their lives and the opportunities and constraints they face.

My aims are threefold. I argue that using mobility-based categories allows us to broaden the context of analysis beyond the residence country, which is emphasized in dominant theories of migrant youth integration such as segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Zhou, 1993) and subsequent elaborations (Crul & Schneider, 2010). Such a broadening happens by opening categories to meaningful experiences and relationships that extend beyond the immediate nation-state context in which youth live. Secondly, I contend that mobility-based categories are a way to operationalize a temporal lens that has resurfaced in migration studies in reaction to the long-foregrounded focus on space

at the expense of time (Griffiths et al., 2013). Mobility-based categories can help us to investigate how young people's past and current physical mobility shape the ways they cope in the present and how this influences their future outlook. Finally, I maintain that mobility-based categories allow us to attend to the dynamic elements of young people's lives, as such categories go beyond simple binaries (migrant/non-migrant, first/second generation, ethnic/non-ethnic). This heeds the call to develop categories that pay attention to process (Anthias, 2012).

The study of the mobility of young people is not new, but developing analytical categories based on their past and current mobility is. While previous researchers have criticized the use of ethnic categories in migration research (Brubaker, 2004) and pointed out the need to de-migrantize migration studies (Dahinden, 2016), they do not offer alternatives for the collection of large-scale quantitative data. I address this lacuna by drawing on a concrete example of mobility-based categories that I and a team of researchers developed while studying young people's mobility trajectories, that is, their physical movements in time and space and concomitant changes in their family constellations. We used our data to develop categories that reflect different mobility trajectories, based on frequency and type of travel, to investigate how international mobility affects their lives.

Although we used mobility-based categories to study young people with a migration background, they can be used to study all youth, irrespective of their background, and adults. Overall, I argue that migration research needs to experiment with multiple theoretically and empirically informed categories and learn from the new knowledge these categories can bring to the field. I use the word "experiment" to emphasize that we need to try things out without necessarily knowing the results in advance. To experiment requires collecting new types of data.

Before I start, a few words on terminology. I use the term "migrant youth" when referring to the published literature which uses this and related terms, but when presenting my research, I prefer to write "youth with a migration background" because I do not wish *a priori* to draw a distinction between those who migrated themselves and those whose parents migrated. The mobility-based categories presented here can be applied to any kind of mobility, including movements made within a country, but for the purposes of this paper, in which I address myself to migration studies scholars, I expressly focus on international mobility, which can take the form of summer vacations, short trips, exchange trips, "homeland" visits and the like. Finally, I use quotation marks for the term "home" country because young people may not perceive their or their parents' country of origin as home. Likewise, as they may have been born in their current country of residence, the term "origin country" is also unsuitable. The quotation marks indicate a lack of appropriate terminology; this lack is in itself a sign of how far research on migration has been and continues to be guided by a nation-state perspective.

Drawing on the "transnational" and "mobilities" turns to develop new categories

Categories based on ethnicity (usually country of origin of youth or their parents) or generation (typically, first-, 1.5- and second-generation migrants) have two characteristics: they reflect the nation-state perspective that dominates research on migrant youth,

and they are static. That is, they obscure the multiple ways in which all young people are physically mobile and, specifically, how youth with a migration background continue to be mobile even after their or their parents' migration to a new country of residence. To propose new categories, this section reviews two theoretical developments from the past three decades – the transnational and the mobilities turns in the social sciences – to build the argument that youth mobility is a useful avenue to explore to build new analytical categories. The transnational and the mobilities turns developed separately, but when combined, they enable new theoretically informed categories for migration research to be developed. I then discuss a third development in recent scholarship that brings these approaches together and the implications this has for category development.

The limits of taking a nation-state perspective in studies of migrant youth and implications of the transnational turn

The dominance of a nation-state perspective in migration research has been under challenge by transnational migration scholars for some time (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Tarrius, 1987). Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) argued that methodological nationalism permeates migration research methodologies, in which a geographical space bounded by national borders is presumed to be the most suitable container for studying everything relevant to migrants' lives. This methodological nationalism is manifest in the dominant categories used in migrant youth research: those based on ethnicity, which tends to be seen as synonymous with country of origin, and generation. Defining a group by their, their parents' and sometimes even their grandparents' country of origin reflects a nation-state framework in which migrants or people of migrant background are marked in opposition to a so-called "native" population that is considered to be the norm. Likewise, categorizing migrants by generation means defining them by when they arrived in a particular nation-state, the so-called "receiving" country: a young person who arrives in the new country within their lifetime is first generation; someone born in the receiving country after their parents migrated to it is second generation; while those who are 1.5 generation (or variations thereon) arrived in the new country at a young age. The emphasis given to generation and arrival in the receiving country is guided by the dominant focus in migration studies on questions of assimilation or integration. For example, an important theory of migrant youth integration is the segmented assimilation model (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990), which argues that the path youth follow to assimilate into a society depends on the context of reception (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

Nation-state categories are also reflected in the types of questions that are asked by large-scale studies of migrant youth. For example, studies that examine migrant youth outcomes, such as physical health, emotional well-being and educational achievement, investigate young people's lives *in the receiving country*, such as their family compositions, schools and neighbourhood characteristics (Cebolla-Boado & Garrido Medina, 2011; Haller et al., 2011; Mood, Jonsson and Brodin Låftman 2016). Put simply, a focus on the nation-state, and the receiving country context in particular, permeates categorizations of migrant youth and the variables used for understanding their lives. This assumes that how migrant youth are faring can be understood by focusing solely on their country of residence.

Undoubtedly the country of residence is important. However, as Veerman (2015) points out, much variability in youth outcomes remains unexplained. Scholars have sought to address this by searching for new variables, collecting better data and using more sophisticated analytical techniques, but even then their explanations remain limited. Drawing on recent literature, I argue that the singular focus on the nation-state, particularly the receiving country, that has guided theory and categorization in migration studies has created important blind spots.

Three decades of transnational migration studies have shown that migrant realities do not map onto one national space. Instead, they are shaped by migrants' heterogeneous links to "home," which affect their economic and political activities, their identifications and their affective relationships (Schmoll, 2003; Guarnizo et al., 2003; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Levitt, 2001). Transnational family studies, while generally focusing on adults, show how migrants' lives continue to be intertwined with the lives of those in the country of origin, even at a distance (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Parreñas, 2005). For example, the well-being of migrant parents, local caregivers and children who stay in the origin country are linked (Schmalzbauer, 2008; Dreby, 2007; Dankyi et al., 2016). The well-being of migrant parents abroad is associated with how well they feel they are able to care for their children from afar (Haagsman et al., 2015). Conversely, the well-being of children at "home" is linked to the material conditions faced by parents abroad (Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2016; Graham & Jordan, 2011). While linkages between migrants and those in the country of origin were initially thought to be a first-generation phenomenon, recent studies have demonstrated that the lives of young people are intertwined with the lives of those who migrate and those who remain in their country of origin regardless of questions of generation (Mazzucato & Haagsman, 2022).

Most transnational studies focus on adult migrants. Some early qualitative transnational studies showed how young people's identities are impacted by their sense of belonging to an ethnic or diaspora group (Levitt, 2009). These studies were precursors to a more recent wave of case studies focused on migrant youth's relationships to their or their parents' country of origin. These will be discussed below, but first, I discuss the mobilities perspective.

Beyond static categories in migrant youth research: implications of the mobilities turn

Ethnicity- and generation-based categories are static. By categorizing a person by their or their parents' country of origin, or by when they or their parents entered a receiving country, we lose sight of the mobility that occurred before they arrived in the new country and that which may take place afterwards. Categories of ethnicity and generation render all previous or subsequent mobility irrelevant or invisible, making migrants seem static or sedentary.

In part, the dominance of ethnicity- and generation-based categories reflects the conceptualization of migration as a linear movement from country A to country B. This view of migration obscures all moves that take place after the initial migration. Even in the context of more complex movements, such as transit migration, the presumption is still that migrants are on their way to country B, and once there, they become sedentary. Scholars have criticized this static view of migration (Ehrkamp, 2020), and some have suggested that we give more attention to migrant trajectories

(Mazzucato, 2015; Schapendonk & Steel, 2014) by integrating a mobilities perspective. The mobilities turn in the social sciences can help us to develop more dynamic categories.

The mobilities turn places emphasis on the actual journey or travel of people or objects. By doing so, it adds something new to our understanding of migration. Early transnational migration studies have often focused on the economic, political, social and cultural relationships with a “home” country but downplayed the actual movement of people. In fact, some scholars have noted that to be transnational does not necessarily entail physical mobility but rather a consciousness of belonging to a transnational group, whether a diaspora, network or other border-crossing social grouping (Clifford, 1994). Sometimes migrants are not mobile if circumstances make it difficult for them, but they continue to engage with their “home” country emotionally, politically and economically (Schmoll, 2003; Guarnizo et al., 2003; Levitt, 2001). They make frequent use of information and communication technologies (Madianou & Miller, 2011), maintain memberships in “hometown” associations (Mercer et al., 2009), and give “home” an important place in their imaginations (Clifford, 1994).

Thus, early transnational migration studies focused on the ties that connect people to a “homeland” because they were reacting to a migration studies scholarship that, at the time, ignored such ties due to the methodological nationalism discussed above. But as a consequence, people’s actual experience of movement, that is, their experiences of the speed, rhythms and frictions associated with their mobility, was underplayed. The mobilities turn in the social sciences, which emerged separately from transnational studies, helped balance this by drawing attention to the way mobility is experienced. Originally examining everyday mobilities, such as commuting or weekend visits to elderly parents in the next town, mobility studies focused on embodied, sensorial and emotional experiences while travelling (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2010; Urry, 2002). Indeed, methods of studying the embodied experience of transportation were developed (Büscher & Urry, 2009).

But at its inception, mobility studies did not focus on migrants or migration. Over the past decade, however, scholars have combined a transnational approach with the processual and embodied focus of the mobilities turn to study migrants’ mobility (Schmoll, 2014; Schapendonk & Steel, 2014). These scholars have shown that one type of transnational phenomenon is the actual physical mobility that happens during migration. They have questioned the presumption that migration only involves a move from one country to another, highlighting that journeys, including through transit countries, entail a diversity of rhythms (King & Lulle, 2015) and periods of immobility (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014); they are not linear but can entail back-and-forth movements as people adapt to situations encountered along the way (Wissink et al., 2017; Ehrnkamp 2020).

The “second generation returns” literature combines transnational and mobilities theoretical perspectives to investigate not only what happens during migration, but also how people experience physical mobility after migration. Scholars often focus on longer-term returns that second generation migrants engage in, and how their travels affect their sense of belonging and identity. Homeland visits can be disorienting, especially when the reality of a homeland contrasts with migrants’ ideas about

it (Wessendorf, 2007; King & Christou, 2014). While some studies address the diversity of mobility that young people of a migrant background engage in (King et al., 2011), much of this literature focuses on permanent returns and adults.

In sum, both the transnational and the mobility turns in migration studies have questioned the methodological nationalism and static conceptualizations of migration that have dominated the field and highlighted the different rhythms, patterns and sensorial experiences of mobility that impact people's identity, sense of belonging and sense of self. Next, I discuss the implications this has for the development of new categories.

The need for new analytical categories for quantitative research

That categories play a role in knowledge production has been argued forcefully by feminist scholars; some poststructuralist feminists denounce the use of any categories, while others show the need to complexify categories so that they are better reflective of social realities (Crenshaw, 1994). Within migration research, scholars have pointed to the dangers of uncritically adopting categories used in policymaking and thus imposing political and sometimes unjust and stigmatizing categories onto populations of migrants (Hinger, 2018). They have also criticized the problematic assumption that identity, and ethnic identity in particular, is the most important characteristic of a group (Brubaker, 2004). To avoid the homogenization and static rendering of social realities, Anthias (2012) calls for a focus on processes in social relationships that take place in diverse places and give rise to complex and often contradictory social positionings, something Anthias terms translocational positionality. Dahinden (2016) argues the need to de-migranticize migration research to break from the historical nation-state migration apparatus that normalizes discourses about migrants as different or "other". And Carling, Erdal and Talleraas (2021) argue that both migrants and non-migrants may have transnational lives and that we need to go beyond migrant-based conceptualisations.

These are important theoretical insights. Yet few studies give any idea of how concretely to operationalize them or how they might yield new categories of analysis. Dahinden et al. (2020) propose investigating emic categories held by people with a migration background. While it is important to understand the categories that migrants feel best represent them, a focus on emic categories brings two challenges. First, emic perspectives may be as diverse as the people who hold them, making emic categories untenable for large-scale studies. Second, using emic perspectives to develop new categories presumes that migrants are somehow not influenced by nation-state normalizing discourses. In fact, Dahinden et al. (2020) admit that the emic category of "migrant descendant" found in their study does not eschew the "national order of things," though it is, they argue, more inclusive. What is missing is an understanding of how to operationalize more open, processual and complex categories into concrete categories for quantitative analysis. I propose that mobility-based categories offer a solution. In the next section, I explore why mobility is a fruitful avenue for developing new categories, drawing on recent studies that bridge transnationalism and mobility studies, and bring their findings to bear on the categories used in research on migrant youth.

Making youth mobility central

The study of the physical mobility of young people has only begun to gather speed in the past decade. Following the latest developments in transnationalism studies and the mobilities turn, scholars have laid out research agendas to investigate the diversity of young people's mobilities, including the rhythms and pacing of, and sensorial experiences during, physical mobility (Robertson et al., 2018; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018; Cheung Judge et al., 2020). Responding to this call, the Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives project (MO-TRAYL), which I led, conducted several ethnographic studies into how young people with a migration background have been affected by travels to their "home" country. The MO-TRAYL researchers found that such travels keep young people engaged with family members who may have been important during their upbringing (van Geel & Mazzucato, 2020), allow them to build transnational peer networks, increase their resilience when facing adversity in the school system in their countries of residence, and help them envisage hopeful and agentic futures for themselves (Akom Ankobrey et al., 2021; Anschütz & Mazzucato, 2022; Ogden & Mazzucato, 2021). The studies show that young people's experiences during their travels are shaped by the sensory, emotional and rhythmic characteristics of their mobility. In addition to exploring short-term visits, other researchers have investigated longer trips made by young people to their "homeland" for the purpose of (in)formal (Abotsi, 2020; Kea & Maier, 2017), religious (Erdal et al., 2016) or cultural (Whitehouse, 2009) education. Some are "sent back" when they misbehave or when their parents can no longer balance occupational and caregiving responsibilities in the host country (Bledsoe & Sow, 2011; Kea & Maier, 2017). Other young people "return" to search for their "roots" (Potter, 2005; Reynolds, 2010). Although these journeys differ in purpose and duration, they shape transnational lives in which young people negotiate socio-cultural and religious expectations and identities. For this purpose, young people need a specific set of skills and to be acquainted with a "transnational family habitus" (Zontini & Reynolds, 2018: 418–419). All of these studies thus point to the fact that young people's mobility, especially between country of residence and "homeland", is central to defining who they are.

Youth mobility does not figure prominently in quantitative studies of youth, and therefore readers might ask whether such mobility is an anomaly rather than a pervasive experience, which would call into question whether mobility can adequately be used as a category. In fact, the studies referred to above were small-scale and selected their research populations specifically to investigate youth mobility. They may therefore be capturing the experiences of a very particular group of youth. Yet, the few large-scale surveys that have asked young people about their mobility show clearly that youth mobility is a common phenomenon, both general mobility and "homeland" mobility (Schimmer and van Tubergen 2014). It is common not just for migrant background youth but for all youth. The MO-TRAYL project found that all young people, irrespective of their ethnicity and including so-called "natives," had significant international mobility in their biographies, ranging from short vacations in other countries to longer study trips, gap years and visits "home". The frequency of short international trips longer than one week was high, with over 70% of young people travelling at least once per year (Mazzucato & Haagsman, 2022). Longer trips were less frequent, with about 12% of all youth, irrespective of ethnicity, engaging in them. The most common longer stays were due to a parent's

work abroad, a gap year and being born abroad. For youth with a migration background, the study found that 40% travelled to their or their parents' country of origin each year, and an additional 20% every two years. Additionally, the project found that their travels are not dependent on their parents' wealth or education. This suggests that mobility for youth with a migration background is something unique that is not correlated with other characteristics. Finally, and importantly, travels to the "home" country do not diminish across generations. While some of the early literature on transnationalism wondered whether the second generation would continue being transnationally engaged (Levitt & Waters, 2002), the MO-TRAYL findings suggest that young people with migrant parents, even young people born in European countries, frequently visit their parents' home country. Indeed, such trips seem to increase over the generations rather than to diminish. Visits "home" are thus a widespread phenomenon, one that has been a blind spot for researchers.

A data problem

Although small-scale studies have successfully shown that travels to a "home" country can influence young people in significant ways, and although large-scale studies have shown this to be a widespread phenomenon, taken together, these studies have had surprisingly little influence on the conceptualization and development of new categories in large-scale migration research. Even when the nation-state perspective is criticized, this is done in a context that is saturated in the nation-state thinking that dominates how migration is perceived, analyzed and discussed, and nation-state thinking creeps into the categories used without being perceived (De Genova, 2013). Importantly, investigating alternative categorizations is also difficult because the large-scale data necessary to do so are scarce. Categories and data collection go hand-in-hand. Statistics are a form of governmentality (Foucault, 2007) and reinforce a nation-state perspective. Most surveys on migration thus collect data on ethnicity or generation, while registry data reflect only what happens within nation-state boundaries. Recent surveys have begun to collect data on ongoing mobility within and outside of the borders of the nation-state, such as the NCCR Migration-Mobility survey in Switzerland (Crettaz & Dahinden, 2019) and the CILSS4EU in four European countries (Schimmer and Van Tubergen 2014). However, the questions on these surveys are too limited to produce mobility-based categories. The MAFE and TeO2 datasets managed by INED in France are the exception. They are the most complex and collect mobility trajectories over a respondent's lifetime (Beauchemin, 2012; Beauchemin et al., 2023). These surveys have yet to be used to develop mobility-based categories, but they have the potential to do so and to test some of the ideas presented here and explored with the MO-TRAYL dataset, which I explain below.

Exploring mobility-based categories

The MO-TRAYL project conducted a quantitative survey of secondary school children in three European countries (Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands) and Ghana. It collected detailed data on young people's mobility patterns and experimented with using mobility-based categories to understand young people's lives. The researchers proposed to focus on "youth mobility trajectories," defined as the moves that young people make

over time and across geographically distinct localities and the changing family constellations that these entail (van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018: 2145). The focus on mobility trajectories addresses several of the limitations identified earlier. First, it “de-migranticizes” data collection, as it collects mobility data among so-called “natives” as well as young people with a migration background. This is done by collecting data on different types of international mobility, not just visits “home” but also student exchanges, temporary moves with the family, vacations and so forth. Over time, all these moves together comprise a mobility trajectory. Second, a focus on mobility trajectories can help explain within-group differences, something that has been lacking in much migration research (Anthias, 2012). Third, it allows a temporal view of mobility by attending to mobility over the life course. For migrant youth, this does justice to the complexity of their mobility, which may include mobility before an international migratory move and after it, as well as changes in family composition that happen along the way. Focusing on mobility trajectories allows researchers to take into account different social positionings (Anthias, 2012; Coe & Pauli, 2020; Tucci et al., 2021) and family constellations that change as one moves over time, rather than assume them to be static.

The MO-TRAYL project mapped young people’s mobility trajectories using the Ageven technique developed in demography (Antoine et al., 1987) for collecting important life-events that resembles Hägerstrand’s (1982) time-geography but goes further in operationalizing the approach for large-scale surveys. Researchers have used this method to collect mobility data between country of residence and other countries. Few studies have used it in large-scale data collection on migration (Beauchemin, 2012), and only ours and TeO2 (Beauchemin et al., 2023) have used it to collect data on young people’s mobility. This approach collects structured data on the timing, duration and purpose of travel. It also tracks who the young person was living with and when, as moves can entail a change in who cares for a young person and in family composition. This methodology is flexible: it can also act as a visual aid for qualitative interviews and conversations about mobility, which can bolster the large-scale findings with detailed descriptions of embodied experiences of mobility (for more details on the methodology, tools and visualizations, see Mazzucato et al., 2022).

Collecting fine-grained data on mobility allows categories to be developed that can take into account the timing, rhythm or pacing of moves, which are all important elements of mobility (Creswell 2010; Urry, 2002). The MO-TRAYL project aimed to understand inter-group differences among youth with a Ghanaian background (meaning that either they or their parents had migrated from Ghana). The reason for this was that young Ghanaians living in similar neighbourhoods, attending similar schools, and with similar family structures seemed to experience different types of educational trajectories, with some entering university and others dropping out of school. If the environments are similar, what might cause the differences in outcomes? Might mobility hold the key? The MO-TRAYL project investigated youth mobility to Ghana drawing on literature, discussed above, which argues that such trips are important in helping young people to form their identities and their feelings of belonging. The team identified four empirically induced categories of mobility, based on the frequency, timing and location of moves among European-based Ghanaian-background youth (van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018). These categories can be expanded upon to

include other migrant background youth, non-migrant youth, and youth in countries of origin (below I expand the original categories to distinguish more types of travel).

In Table 1, the four numbered rows in the first of the two A columns show the categories developed in the MO-TRAYL project for youth with migration background in Ghana, irrespective of generation. These categories distinguish between those who: (1) have only experienced one international move, for example a young person who lived in one place in Ghana and then migrated to a European city and did not move elsewhere; (2) have had multiple international moves, such as a young person who lived in one place in Ghana and, after moving to a European city, made many visits to Ghana; (3) have moved many times but only once internationally, for example a young person who moved internally within Ghana before their international move to a European city where they have since stayed; and (4) have moved several times nationally and internationally, for example a young person who moved several times within Ghana before migrating to Europe and then moving back to Ghana.

This categorization can be expanded, depending on the research questions, to other youth and other types of travel. For example, the MO-TRAYL project includes categories for what are often called “left-behind” youth (which we prefer to call “stayer youth” to avoid the derogatory connotations of the former term), given that they are also impacted by the migration of their parents. Mobility categorizations were also applied to young people whose parents migrated internally (within Ghana) or whose parents never migrated. These latter two groups are not shown in Table 1 for ease of presentation but were included in the MO-TRAYL project. They are important to include in migration research as they are the most relevant reference groups if one is interested in understanding how migration and mobility impact youth. Yet they are hardly ever included, precisely because of the methodological nationalism guiding migration research. Mobility categories can also include other types of international migration, as youth with a migration background can move internationally without it being to a “home” country (Columns B).

The type of travel can be diversified by including specifications of places and durations. For example, in Table 1, Columns C distinguish between types of shorter travel (national vs. international) and Columns D between durations of travel (visits/holidays for short stays vs. migration lasting 3 months or more). The sub-categories used in each column cover additional details concerning frequency; in Columns D, for example, a distinction is drawn between no travel, one trip and several trips. Depending on the types of travel that define a category, different youth types can be included. For example, Columns A focus on youth with a migration background in Europe. By expanding the type of travel, it is possible also to include stayer youth (Columns B) or natives in both the country of “origin” and the country of “destination” (Columns C and D).

The flexibility that these categories allow provides opportunities for important comparisons that go beyond the nation-state. Because they are not based on where the respondent is born, as are ethnic and generation-based categories, they can easily include non-migrant youth both in the country of “origin,” such as “stayer” youth with migrant parents abroad, and in the “destination” country, such as “native” European youth who may not have travelled internationally.

Table 1 Possible trajectory and youth types that can be analyzed, using Ghana (GH) and The Netherlands (NL) as examples

(A)		(B)		(C)		(D)	
Trajectory types	Youth population ^a	Trajectory types	Youth population	Trajectory types	Youth population	Trajectory types	Youth population
for 'migrant' youth in The Netherlands (NL) distinguishing between those who have:	- Migration bckd ^d living in EU ^e	for 'migrant' youth in The Netherlands (NL) and 'stayer youth' in Ghana (GH) distinguishing between those who have:	- GH 'stayer youth' - Migration bckd living in EU	for all youth (migrant and non-migrant) distinguishing between those who have:	- EU natives - GH natives - Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH	distinguishing between types of travels:	- EU natives - GH natives - Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH
- mobility to and from a 'home' country (GH) (marked as int'l mobility)	- mobility to and from a 'home' country (GH) (int'l)	- mobility to and from a 'home' country (GH) (int'l)	- GH 'stayer youth' - Migration bckd living in EU	- mobility nationally for greater than 1 week	- EU natives - GH natives - Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH	- visits/holidays < 3 months	- EU natives - GH natives - Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH
- mobility within a 'home' country (marked as national mobility)	- general international travel (other)	- mobility within a 'home' country (national)	- Migration bckd living in EU	- mobility internationally for greater than 1 week	- Migration bckd living in EU	- migration ≥ 3 months	- Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH
1	Single or no national ^b Single international (GH ≤ 1; NL ≤ 1) ^c	Single national Single international No other (GH ≤ 1; NL ≤ 1; Other = 0)	Migration bckd in EU	No national No international (GH = 0; Int'l = 0) (NL = 0; Int'l = 0)	EU natives GH natives	0 visits/holidays general 0 visits/holidays to a home country 0 migration	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH
2	Single or no national Multiple international (GH ≤ 1; NL ≥ 2)	Single national Multiple international No other (GH ≤ 1; NL ≥ 2; Other = 0)	Migration bckd in EU	No national Single international (GH = 0; Int'l ≥ 2) (NL = 0; Int'l ≥ 2)	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH	≥ 1 visits/holidays general 0 visits/holidays to a home country 0 migration	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH
3	Multiple national Single or no international (GH ≥ 2; NL ≤ 1)	Single national Single international Multiple other (GH ≤ 1; NL ≤ 1; Other ≥ 1)	Migration bckd in EU	No national Multiple international (GH = 0; Int'l ≤ 1) (NL ≥ 2; Int'l ≤ 1)	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH	≥ 1 visits/holidays general ≥ 1 visits/holidays to a home country 0 migration	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH
4	Multiple national Multiple international (GH ≥ 2; NL ≥ 2)	Single national Multiple international Multiple other (GH ≤ 1; NL ≥ 2; Other ≥ 1)	Migration bckd in EU	Single national Single international (GH ≤ 1; Int'l ≥ 2) (NL ≤ 1; Int'l ≥ 2)	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH	≥ 1 visits/holidays general 0 visits/holidays to a home country ≥ 1 migration	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH
5		Multiple national Single international No other (GH ≥ 2; NL ≤ 1; Other = 0)	Migration bckd in EU	Single national No international (GH ≥ 2; Int'l = 0) (NL ≥ 2; Int'l = 0)	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH	0 visits/holidays general ≥ 1 visits/holidays to a home country ≥ 1 migration	EU natives GH natives Migration bckd in EU Migration bckd in GH

Table 1 (continued)

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
	<p>Trajectory types</p> <p>for 'migrant' youth in The Netherlands (NL) distinguishing between those who have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mobility to and from a 'home' country (GH) (marked as int'l mobility) - mobility within a 'home' country (marked as national mobility) 	<p>Trajectory types</p> <p>for 'migrant' youth in The Netherlands (NL) and 'stayer youth' in Ghana (GH) distinguishing between those who have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mobility to and from a 'home' country (GH) (int'l) - mobility within a 'home' country (national) - general international travel (other) 	<p>Trajectory types</p> <p>for all youth (migrant and non-migrant) distinguishing between those who have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mobility nationally for greater than 1 week - mobility internationally for greater than 1 week 	<p>Trajectory types</p> <p>distinguishing between types of travels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - visits/holidays < 3 months - migration ≥ 3 months
	<p>Youth population^a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Migration bckd^d living in EU^e 	<p>Youth population</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GH 'stayer youth' in EU - Migration bckd living in EU 	<p>Youth population</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EU natives - GH natives in EU - Migration bckd living in GH 	<p>Youth population</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EU natives - GH natives in EU - Migration bckd living in GH
6	<p>Multiple national</p> <p>Multiple international</p> <p>No other (GH ≥ 2; NL ≥ 2; Other = 0)</p>	<p>Migration bckd in EU</p>	<p>EU natives</p> <p>GH natives</p> <p>Migration bckd in EU</p> <p>Migration bckd in GH</p>	<p>EU natives</p> <p>GH natives</p> <p>Migration bckd in EU</p> <p>Migration bckd in GH</p>
7	<p>Multiple national</p> <p>Single international</p> <p>Multiple other (GH ≥ 2; NL ≤ 1; Other ≥ 1)</p>	<p>Migration bckd in EU</p>	<p>EU natives</p> <p>GH natives</p> <p>Migration bckd in EU</p> <p>Migration bckd in GH</p>	<p>0 visits/holidays general</p> <p>≥ 1 visits/holidays to a home country</p> <p>0 migration</p> <p>0 visits/holidays general</p> <p>0 visits/holidays to a home country</p> <p>≥ 1 migration</p>
8	<p>Multiple national</p> <p>Multiple international</p> <p>Multiple other (GH ≥ 2; NL ≥ 2; Other ≥ 1)</p>	<p>Migration bckd in EU</p>	<p>EU natives</p> <p>GH natives</p> <p>Migration bckd in EU</p> <p>Migration bckd in GH</p>	<p>≥ 1 visits/holidays general</p> <p>general</p> <p>≥ 1 visits/holidays to a home country</p> <p>≥ 1 migration</p>
9	<p>Single national</p> <p>No international</p> <p>Multiple other (GH ≤ 1; NL = 0; Other ≥ 1)</p>	<p>GH 'stayer youth'</p>	<p>EU natives</p> <p>GH natives</p> <p>Migration bckd in EU</p> <p>Migration bckd in GH</p>	<p>≥ 1 migration</p>
10	<p>Single national</p> <p>No international</p> <p>No other (GH ≤ 1; NL = 0; Other = 0)</p>	<p>GH 'stayer youth'</p>	<p>EU natives</p> <p>GH natives</p> <p>Migration bckd in EU</p> <p>Migration bckd in GH</p>	<p>≥ 1 migration</p>

Table 1 (continued)

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
	Trajectory types	Trajectory types	Trajectory types	Trajectory types
	Youth population ^a	Youth population	Youth population	Youth population
	for 'migrant' youth in The Netherlands (NL) distinguishing between those who have: - mobility to and from a 'home' country (GH) (marked as int'l mobility) - mobility within a 'home' country (marked as national mobility)	for 'migrant' youth in The Netherlands (NL) and 'stayer youth' in Ghana (GH) distinguishing between those who have: - mobility to and from a 'home' country (GH) (int'l) - mobility within a 'home' country (national) - general international travel (other)	for all youth (migrant and non-migrant) distinguishing between those who have: - mobility nationally for greater than 1 week - mobility internationally for greater than 1 week	distinguishing between types of travels: - visits/holidays < 3 months - migration ≥ 3 months
11		Multiple national No international No other (GH ≥ 2; NL = 0; Other = 0)	- GH 'stayer youth' - Migration bckd living in EU	- EU natives - GH natives - Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH
12		Multiple national No international Multiple other (GH ≥ 2; NL = 0; Other ≥ 1)	- EU natives - GH natives - Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH	- EU natives - GH natives - Migration bckd living in EU - Migration bckd living in GH

Source: Author

^a Youth population columns indicate the types of youth that would be included in a study using the trajectory types identified in the previous column. Youth population does not represent the categories that such studies would use. The categories are instead indicated under 'trajectory types'

^b National indicates the moves within a 'home' country (in this case Ghana); international indicates moves to and within the country of residence (in this case The Netherlands); Other indicates all other international moves (e.g. a school exchange, a year abroad, a holiday in a country other than the 'home' country, etc.)

^c Indicates the frequency of trips. For example GH ≥ 2; NL ≤ 1 means: two or more moves within Ghana and one or less moves to or from The Netherlands

^d bckd = background

^e Note that 'migration bckd living in EU' can consist of both the so-called 1st and 2nd generation migrant youth

The fact that young people who are usually categorized differently in migration studies, such as natives and migrants or the first and second generation, can be included in the same category allows different research questions to be explored or different explanations to be found for certain outcomes. For example, by comparing youth who have travelled a lot with youth who have not, one may discover that what makes a difference to their educational trajectories is the level of their international exposure. Travel may impact the choices young people make about which secondary schools to attend, which careers to pursue, and whether to go on to tertiary education or not. This might reveal that youth who never travel, be they “native” or migrant youth, have more in common with each other than one might otherwise assume.

Conclusions

In this paper, I use migrant youth research as an illustration of the broader potential gains to be had in using new categories. Most large-scale research on “migrant youth” takes little account of the mobility of young people with a migration background, despite qualitative evidence from transnational and mobility studies that their various trips influence their identity and sense of belonging. Furthermore, general studies of youth that are not focused specifically on migrant youth have shown that travel has important and positive consequences for young people’s development, educational outcomes and careers (Brown, 2009; Parey & Waldinger, 2011). It is thus striking how little large-scale research has investigated the effects mobility has on young people, with or without a migration background.

I have argued that the dominant categories of ethnicity and generation hide the physical mobility of young people. Ethnicity and generation are static markers and are guided by a perspective of methodological nationalism. Because they are the only categories used in large-scale migrant youth research, there is little exploration of other characteristics that young people share irrespective of their ethnicity or generation. I use recent advances in the fields of transnationalism and mobility studies to argue that mobility is an important characteristic, worth exploring for its potential to experiment with in developing new categories for use in migration research in general, and in migrant youth studies in particular.

Migration scholars need to engage more profoundly with social scientific theories outside of the field of migration studies (Dahinden et al., 2020). Dahinden (2016: 2217) argues the need to re-think the idea that a migrant population is automatically the relevant unit of analysis. We should rather re-focus our analyses on whole populations, which include migrants but are not limited to them. Yet, concrete ways of doing this, especially for large-scale data collection, have yet to be developed. In this paper I have presented a means of enabling more refined data collection on youth, all youth, by focusing on their mobility trajectories. This entails several innovations.

Mobility-based categories allow researchers to move beyond an ethnic and generational lens. In a globalized world, those who can travel gain opportunities to reflect on their place in the world and acquire cross-cultural skills, cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence, all of which are needed in today’s rapidly changing labour market (World Economic Forum, 2020). The COVID pandemic restricted travel, and potential measures that governments may take to tackle climate change, such as raising the cost of

air travel, may reduce young people's mobility. How this affects the salience of mobility as a category remains to be seen: it may reduce its importance, or it may make mobility an even greater mark of distinction. In such a world, youth with a migration background who travel to their "home" countries may be more like their "native" counterparts who travel for student exchanges than their "ethnic" counterparts or "natives" who never travel. Mobility-based categories allow the investigation of other characteristics of commonality rather than presuming ethnicity or generation to be the only or most salient ones.

Mobility-based categories also allow for the investigation of intra-group differences, which have been little studied in migration research (Anthias, 2012; Wimmer, 2008). They allow investigation of how differences in mobility between the "home" and residence country and differences in mobility before any international move affect youth with a migration background. These within-group differences may help to identify factors other than ethnicity that influence why, for youth living in similar neighbourhoods with similar family and school characteristics, some seem to do well while others struggle. Such differences can help us detect the micro realities that enhance young people's life chances and identify concrete levers of change that can be applied to the school, family or other youth environments. For example, if mobility categories can help explain differences in life chances, then it is important for schools and educational policymakers to take this into account in an effort to develop policies and practices that turn youth mobility into an asset for young people with a migration background rather than something to be discouraged and even penalized, as is done in many European countries that see trips "home" as educationally disruptive (van Geel, 2022). Youth mobility to a "homeland" may help to create more equity in education as young people can draw on resources they gain from their ties to their country of origin. Equity rather than equality has been recognized as an essential policy focus for schools with a diverse student population in terms of social and economic backgrounds.

A focus on mobility trajectories allows a temporal lens to be applied in the development of categories by including people's past and present experiences outside of a particular country of residence. Mobility-based categories allow us to conceptualize migration as one among many types of move a person can make. As such, they bring into focus the moves that people may have made before their first international move and the ongoing moves that they may engage in following an international move. Mobility-based categories therefore go beyond sedentarist notions of human lives. They acknowledge that lives are made up of many types of mobility and that events, people and affections "elsewhere" can be important for understanding what happens "here." Rather than considering people who migrate, especially those from the Global South, as "people without a history" (Wolf, 1982), mobility-based categories bring people's individual histories into focus.

If they promise conceptual and empirical gains, new mobility-based categories also carry implications for how data are collected. Collecting mobility data is not an insurmountable task, but it means stepping out of the methodological nationalism that characterizes most large-scale surveys and engaging in transnational data collection. Most data collection at present is guided by a nation-state perspective and does not ask about people's mobility before they enter or after they leave a particular nation-state. It is only

by diversifying the types of data collected that experimentation with different categories becomes possible.

The need to collect transnational mobility data has consequences for how we work as migration scholars. Transnational mobility data may be collected by asking people about their past mobility even when they were residing outside of the nation-state where data is being collected, such as the TeO2 survey has done. But it may also involve multi-sited research designs and collecting data from youth in origin countries, as was done in the MO-TRAYL project. Origin country youth are highly relevant to the question of how migration and mobility affect youth, as the best comparison is with youth who have no (international) mobility in their background. Furthermore, origin country youth are also affected by mobility either through their parents' international migration or their own internal mobility (Osei et al., 2022). To include them in our analyses means expanding data collection to different countries than those where Global North-based migration scholars are used to operating, and it necessitates fostering connections with researchers in the countries where migrants come from, something that Global North-based migration researchers have done only partially. Such studies will require funding agencies in the Global North to allow collaboration with countries in the Global South on an equal footing.

By de-migrantizing the research population and exploring commonalities other than ethnicity and generation, mobility-based categories heed the call for migration studies to engage with broader social scientific theories (Dahinden et al., 2020). By including all young people in a study, it is possible to bring findings to bear on youth studies and on the literature on tourism or international student mobility that has often focused on elites rather than general populations (Anschütz & Mazzucato, 2022). And vice-versa, engaging with other literatures allows migration researchers to extend their analyses beyond the usual concepts of identity and belonging, which tend to be used primarily to analyse migrant populations, and instead to explore different conceptual lenses, such as self-development and resilience.

New categories offer new possibilities for methodological and theoretical exploration and innovation. They help to identify blind spots and assumptions behind conventional categories. Ultimately, the forging of new categories is a way of rethinking and questioning the way research is conducted, and thus of practising a more reflexive method.

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Authors' contributions

This is a single authored work and the author is responsible for the development of the argument, the new categorization that is proposed and has written the entire article.

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Availability of data and materials

The dataset used during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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