CHAPTER 12

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

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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. In his seminal article, Marcus (1995) offered six possibilities: follow the people, things, metaphors, stories, lives, and/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 (Rutten 2007). So while Appadurai (2000) argues that local area studies are things of the past given that most social phenomena involve or are affected by cross-boundary flows, others, like Mintz

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(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 stand out. First, all of the studies researched two or more sites in a step-wise fashion. That is, a researcher first worked in one location, and then moved on to a second and possibly a third. Second, the majority of the reviewed studies obtained their primary information from interviews involving 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 longer-term relationships with respondents when dividing oneself amongst multiple research sites.

Simultaneity and networks are two important features of transnational phenomena that emerge from the theoretical literature. Transnational flows of people, goods, ideas, and money do not occur in a vacuum but rather need trans-border networks along which to travel. Second, 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

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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.
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. A simultaneous matched sample (SMS) methodology refers to using a sample of informants who are linked to each other by being part of a same social network and studying these informants in a simultaneous fashion so that information obtained from one informant in one locality can be immediately linked up with information obtained from another informant in another locality. I describe the SMS methodology and the multi-sited research design and mixed-method approach it entails. I then go on to reflect on the kinds of data and understandings that this methodology produced.

A simultaneous matched-sample methodology

The Ghana TransNet research programme 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 programme thus aims to understand how local economies are being changed, by focusing on institutions that are impacted by migrants’ transnational lives.

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3 Readers wanting more information about the project can consult: www2.fmg.uva.nl/ghanatransnet.
The research programme takes migrants’ simultaneous engagement in two or more countries directly into account methodologically (Mazzucato 2000). As argued by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), simultaneity is one of the distinguishing features of transnational phenomena. That is, contemporary information and communication technologies make communication across large distances easier, faster, and cheaper, and facilitate and make widespread the ability of migrants to be simultaneously engaged in two or more countries at the same time. The SMS methodology takes this burgeoning quality directly into account and uses networks as the unit of analysis. 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 was typical of migration studies of the past, 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, simultaneity is taken into account by conducting the study through 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 programme 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

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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.
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 carried out, a research team established, Amsterdam-based respondents selected, and preliminary fieldwork conducted in Ghana. In a second phase, lasting two years, Ghana-based respondents were contacted, similar research tools developed for each research location, and research 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. These phases are described in detail below.

First, contact needed to be made with Amsterdam-based Ghanaian migrants. Amsterdam has the largest concentration of Ghanaians in The Netherlands. Of the official figure of 18,000 Ghanaians in The Netherlands in 2006, approximately 60 per cent lived in the wider Amsterdam region and of these, almost 80 per cent resided in one neighbourhood, Amsterdam South East (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek 2006). Initial contact was made by frequenting the neighbourhood, going to church ceremonies and social events, and working together with Ghanaians on a cultural project.

As there exists no general survey of Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands, we conducted an initial network survey by randomly selecting migrants encountered in as many different social settings as possible (two churches, one cultural project, two community leaders, three hometown associations, one workplace, chance

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5 Unofficial estimates are 40,000 in 2000 (Mazzucato 2004).
encounters in markets, and initial contact with migrants’ families in Ghana). The
diversity of gateways helped ensure we came into contact with a wide variety of
migrants with different individual and network characteristics. Based on this survey
we then selected case study individuals and their network members to follow in an in-
depth way. Below we describe the network survey and the in-depth methods we used
with case study individuals and networks.

A network survey based on 17 name-generator questions was conducted among 106
Ghanaians. The name-generator questionnaire is a tool used in quantitative social
network analysis (Burt 1984; Campbell and Lee 1991) in which questions are asked
with respect to the exchange of emotional and material supportive content between
ego and alters (McAllister and Fischer 1978). In our study, we asked questions
pertaining to both positive relations (such as friendships) as well as negative relations
(such as people one argues with) and strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1973).
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.

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,

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6 Snowball sampling, often used in migration studies when there is no baseline survey, was not used so as to avoid the risk of obtaining access to only certain types of migrants.

7 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?’. An example of a question getting at a material tie is ‘Who does the household chores such as shopping, cleaning, cooking, and child minding?’.

8 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.
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 being asked of people who at that stage did not know the researchers very well. Whenever 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 were undocumented or were related in some way to a migrant who was undocumented.

Meanwhile, two additional researchers had been recruited and based in Accra, the capital of Ghana (where many migrants pass through on their way to Europe or have otherwise sojourned), and in a rural location in the Ashanti region (to which many migrants trace their roots). A preliminary fieldwork visit to Ghana followed. As migrant respondents were being found in Amsterdam, 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 network members located in a cluster of rural locations. Spatial clustering was necessary in order to keep distances manageable (the Ashanti region is approximately 24,400 km$^2$) for a researcher to be able 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

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9 Including the Amsterdam based researcher, the team was composed of a development studies scholar, a rural sociologist, and a development economist. All had several years of field experience in developing countries
respondents had to be added from each village who were related in some way to a 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 networks\textsuperscript{10}, or 115 respondents between the three research projects.\textsuperscript{11}

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 towns and villages of origin of visa applicants to check if the information on the application form was correct. If any member of the extended family gave a different answer about the applicant from that given on the visa form, this would be used as grounds for a visa refusal.\textsuperscript{12} 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. However, the most helpful, indeed crucial, tactic in getting respondents in Ghana to collaborate in our study, was asking the migrants to telephone their network members in Ghana to communicate to them that the research programme was a bona fide academic exercise (i.e. that we were not working for the Dutch immigration police). It was a major undertaking to ensure that migrants called, that respondents in Ghana had access to a phone (especially in rural locations), and fixing the physical location of respondents (especially in the

\textsuperscript{10} In four cases the migrants did not want to take part in the research, thus only their network members were interviewed.

\textsuperscript{11} Including the smaller Kumasi study, we had a total of 131 respondents. However, here I report only on the respondents in the three main locations as these were the ones with whom all methods were employed.

\textsuperscript{12} In our specific case, when we tried to get a Ghanaian PhD candidate to work with us in The Netherlands on this project, his grandmother, who had more than 20 grandchildren, had forgotten that the candidate was born Accra, and gave a different answer than was on the visa form. The candidate was rejected a visa based on these grounds and thus could not work with us on the project. He ended up getting a PhD degree from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in the UK.
metropolis of Accra where street names do not exist). Some migrants sent a gift and letter for respondents in Ghana through one of the researchers and this helped to gain trust. In the urban areas we soon learned that first meetings with respondents should be made at well-known locations from which we would proceed to the 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
This schematic diagram shows a ‘typical’ transnational network in which our respondents in the three research locations are demarcated by a circle. It shows that in some instances we had information about flows from both sides because both sender and receiver were our respondents. In other cases, we had information about flows only from one side, our respondent, because the network member resided outside our three research locations.

Once the selection of respondents was made, the second phase of the programme 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{13} on a monthly basis conducted in eight domains of daily life, identified from the 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

\textsuperscript{13}Transactions are defined as an exchange of information (through telephone, post, audio cassettes, physical travel, or computer), goods, money or services.
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. Thus, while rather than a one-off visit, this questionnaire required 12 visits to each respondent. 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.

The various research techniques we employed required visiting respondents at least on a monthly basis and some times more frequently. This allowed us to build a relationship with respondents, which fostered feelings of trust and improved the quality of response. Further, two of the three nodes were urban locations, which meant that we faced challenges typical of urban research where chance encounters are less frequent and where appointments need to be made to meet with respondents, making observation in informal settings more difficult than in rural locations. 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 neighbourhood ‘chop’ bar. The relationships we established with respondents also meant that we were at times invited to ceremonies such as funerals, marriages and baptisms, giving us further opportunities for ‘participant observation’.

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. As mentioned earlier, multiple sites pose serious challenges to the established idea of the ‘lone ethnographer’, who alone is in a position to interpret her data. One of the greatest challenges is gaining depth of information and being able locally to contextualize information. If a researcher needs to spend time in multi-sites, this limits the duration of work in any one site, to take part in people’s lives, see differences between informants and to place activities within a cultural context. Further, information obtained from multiple sites can appear ‘splintered’, making it difficult to combine the various 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. Migration can be a sensitive topic that requires a trusting relationship between researcher and informant/s. In our research it was important to know about the income and asset wealth of informants 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 went into 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 (Mazzucato 2007). 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 allowed us to piece together the different bits of information. Through sharing information between researchers from the various sites, each researcher had updated information on other parts of the network. This had two advantages: first, being able to contextualize knowledge about our research site within a broader picture of what was happening in other sites, and, second, gaining more in-depth information from our respondents by adapting our questioning with knowledge of what was happening to other members in the network. Below we give an example for each of the two advantages and then discuss the mechanics of how the data sharing occurred.

An example of the first advantage is our study of the economics of funerals in Ghana. Each researcher followed events related to a specific funeral that took place in three locations during three months of preparation for the funeral: the village where the three-day funeral ceremony was celebrated; the regional capital where many of the provisions for and guests to the ceremony came from; and the national capital where the body was preserved for months in order to allow migrants to prepare for the funeral and travel to Ghana. 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 (Mazzucato et al. 2006).

An example of the second advantage is the increased ability to obtain information at our own sites that this gave us. Below we give the example of an event that happened to a respondent in Amsterdam and how this increased the quality of information obtained in Kumasi.

While traveling to Spain, Nana Asasa was detained at Schiphol airport without proper documentation. She was taken to a prison approximately 30 km from Amsterdam where she was given one phone 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 cards. Nana Asasa 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 Asasa’s parents in Kumasi. Although Nana Asasa had already been in prison for a few weeks and Nana Asasa’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 Asasa’s situation. The parents thus saw that Nana Asasa 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, abandoning agricultural activities on the family farm located a day’s travel from Kumasi, so as to be present for any decisions that needed to be made concerning Nana Asasa, 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 Asasa’s situation in the Netherlands, we would with difficulty have detected, as they blend in with daily activities of people in Ghana.

This contextualization of information, 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 lone social scientist who is trained to think in terms of individually *producing* and *owning* data. Making clear agreements on a set of co-authored publications can facilitate this sharing 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. For example, researchers based in Ghana were not free to pick their own field sites as that depended on the respondents that were selected in Amsterdam and where their network members were located. Another example is when methodological tools had to be developed. If team members have different ideas as to the tools to use, at a certain point the team leader needs to make a decision and the rest of the team needs to follow, so that the same tools are used across sites to ensure comparability. Finally, 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 above-mentioned 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 such as the questionnaires for the network and transaction studies and interview keys for the in-depth interviews and life histories, ensuring that they are relevant for each context. During the Ghana TransNet programme, this exercise was conducted between the first and second fieldwork phases, 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.

Working in a team, cannot substitute for the lived experience of a researcher, which helps her to contextualize information. However, we built in various ways of helping researchers to contextualize information. The principal investigator who was responsible for integrating the three projects, and was herself conducting the Amsterdam-based fieldwork, made various visits to the urban and rural field sites in Ghana and assisted in one interview (and in some cases more) with almost all of the informants. An alternative could have been to have all researchers visit each other’s sites however, this takes more time and finances than we had at our disposal. A second way that we used to help researchers contextualize information is by sharing information on a regular basis through bi-weekly reports. 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. Such
close and frequent communication in the team was possible because all researchers had access to the Internet, making it possible to share field notes via e-mail.

*Simultaneity and multiple sites*

Having a team of researchers located in the most important nodes of Ghanaian migrants’ transnational networks enabled us partially to overcome one of the challenges of researching a mobile population: following people on the 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. Marcus’ suggestion to ‘follow the people’ is appropriate but how to do this if one is researching various people, some of who move, and some of who do not? Having researchers located in the most important locations of Ghanaian migrants’ transnational networks, using the same tools at the same time, and sharing information, enabled us to continue working with our informants who moved between one location and another. 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 an Amsterdam-based went for
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.

SMS methodology allowed us to trace the direct consequences of Dutch immigration policy 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 is a qualified 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, and worked in the lowest ranks of elderly care. During our fieldwork, Joy was at the limit of 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. Her husband who was working two jobs in The Netherlands had to use his income to support her during this transition phase, which lasted almost a year. The costs of this move were documented in the transaction study and 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.

These insights were only possible through the simultaneous, multi-sited, production of transaction data. 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 revealed 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. While some aspects can be obtained through recall during interviews or life histories, simultaneity allows us to deal with the dynamics and periodicity of memory, to capture smaller transactions or events which may be forgotten, or draw linkages which respondents themselves may not have been aware of but that can be important for leading to new insights for researchers.

There are many discourses around migration that exist in Ghana and among migrants overseas, 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 manoeuvre, we concluded, than they portray themselves to have. Matching data on requests made from network members in Ghana, with actual migrant behavior in The Netherlands and knowledge of migrants’ financial situations revealed the ways in which some migrants skirt requests or are able to avoid requests from some people in their network. These are aspects of their behavior that migrants will not easily reveal in an interview. These strategies only became clear to us when we could observe migrant behavior at the time of requests. Knowing when requests were made from Ghana and following migrant behavior immediately ensuing the request allowed us to study these strategies. 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). 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 project. Rather this came out of observing how migrants solved difficult situations (such as losing a job, getting detained or getting cheated in a marriage-for-residency-permit), the requests they made to people in Ghana and the ensuing actions that network members in Ghana undertook on the migrants’ behalf. As the example of Nana Asasa’s detainment above shows, we were only able to come to these various conclusions by observing and collecting quantitative data from the different sides of the migration process at the same time.

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 abroad, ‘money grows on trees’. The discourse has it that this conspicuous behaviour of migrants 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 Ghanaian 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 that ‘doing development’ together with migrants, 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\textsuperscript{14} 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

\textsuperscript{14} In section two I describe our definition and operationalization of a network.
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 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. Many migrants strive to build a house in their home country, in the town or village to where they trace 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, or the slew of requests for money which comes with being seen as wealthy (Smith 2007). A survey we conducted of 106 Ghanaian migrants in Amsterdam, showed that 10 per cent would entrust the construction of their house to non-kin. This is a significant percentage given Asante 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 kin. Interviews with migrants indicated that they 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 to use remittances sent for housing construction for other uses and 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 seven 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 the number of informants we followed during our research represent 80 per cent of all network members based in our research locations that were mentioned by Amsterdam-based migrants. This means that for some ties in a network we could collect information from both ends, while for others only data from one end were forthcoming.

Third, networks are defined by one of the members - in our case, the migrant in Amsterdam. This runs the risk of missing out on network members that are more isolated or marginal, for instance those to whom the migrant does not remit; clearly, these types are crucial for a fuller understanding of 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 as to why these people were so marginalized, and how they survived without remittances (Kabki 2008).

**Considerations for the use of an SMS methodology**

There are some practical considerations when deciding whether to use an SMS methodology. A first consideration is the time investment the methodology requires. In all research dealing with a vulnerable population, time is needed to gain people’s trust. Even if they do not fully understand the meaning of academic research, they need to be able to trust the researcher that s/he will not misuse any information. With an SMS methodology this aspect is even more accentuated because researchers ask informants for detailed information about their network members who are located far away. This gives informants less control and oversight over what is done with his or her network members and thus requires much trust to be built up before researchers can ask this information. Indeed, in our research we visited all respondents several times before contact details of network members were asked.

Another aspect, distance, also makes the initial time investment needed to use an SMS methodology great. Distance makes miscommunication more likely and the clearing up of a miscommunication, a more difficult and lengthy process. Short international telephone calls from a migrant to her network member in Ghana may not give enough time for a migrant to fully convey the intentions of the research. If miscommunication arises, this can have consequences for obtaining the consent of informants in Ghana. Costs of telephone calls from Ghana to The Netherlands are high, so in a few cases where there was a misunderstanding between the migrant and her network member, it took a long time before the miscommunication could be
cleared. First, the Ghana-based researcher had to contact the Amsterdam-based researcher, then the Amsterdam-based researcher had to contact the migrant and finally the migrant would have to re-contact her network member. In one case, where the husband of the Ghana-based network member thought the researcher was courting his wife, the clearing of this miscommunication lasted too long so that the Ghana-based network member did not want to participate in the research any more.

To gain trust and avoid miscommunication, the whole of the first year of the Ghana TransNet study was used to make diverse types of contacts and to gain people’s trust. Not a single 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.

The mechanics of getting a matched sample of respondents in a transnational setting is also very time consuming. Time is needed for Amsterdam-based informants to identify network members, explain the intention of the research, and seek consent to pass on contact details to researchers. Once we received the contact information in the Ghana TransNet study, the next (equally time consuming) task was to trace the contacts 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 locating residences. Other difficulties are that people might have their mobile phone numbers changed, move to places where they are unreachable, or that telephone connections work only sporadically. Finally, as mentioned above, when a network member is traced, they might not have been adequately briefed by the gatekeeper, requiring time for additional contact to be made.
This phase of making contact with the matched side of the sample took approximately three months with each researcher in their 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 as intensively as SMS methodology necessitates.

Another consideration to make before using an SMS methodology is related to costs. Working with teams of researchers will inevitably be more costly than working alone. Furthermore, the Ghana TransNet study was a pilot study with a total of 115 respondents. If one were to apply SMS methodology to greater numbers, more researchers would be required. The Ghana TransNet program consisted of three full time researchers for four years and a total of 16 research assistants hired during the two years of fieldwork.\textsuperscript{15} The total project cost almost 500,000 euros including personnel\textsuperscript{16} and material costs. This therefore makes the SMS methodology not applicable to small projects and requires funding from agencies that allow large grants.

Another consideration is that of researcher participation in her research field. Being part of a team located in the central nodes of transnational networks, it is inevitable that researchers get involved and partially influence the flows that go on between research locations. When researchers traveled from Ghana to The

\textsuperscript{15} Additional MA students worked on the project but at no cost to the project.

\textsuperscript{16} In the Netherlands, PhD students are hired as university employees where they receive salary and full benefits making their costs quite high. In another country, where PhDs are paid less, the total project costs could be substantially reduced.
Netherlands and vice versa, they were 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 to reciprocate for informants’ time spent on the research, and at the same time to be careful not to stimulate these flows by actively encouraging respondents to send things through researchers.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has reviewed some of the main characteristics of SMS methodology: working in teams, working in multiple sites simultaneously, and working with networks. It has highlighted 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. It 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.
However, the main advantages of SMS methodology are its ability to address the most important challenges of researching transnational topics: that of bridging the boundaries between depth of information and breadth of research sites. Theoretical and methodological literature on multi-sited field work (Hannerz 1998; Marcus 1995; Stoller 1997) indicates its importance in understanding social phenomena under contemporary globalized conditions. A burgeoning of transnationalism studies have taken on this challenge.\(^{17}\) However, most works study multiple sites sequentially, thus omitting a simultaneous component. Empirical studies thus leave open the question whether simultaneity, which has been identified in the theoretical literature as being a characteristic feature of transnational flows (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Vertovec 1999), results in a qualitative difference in transnational social phenomena. This chapter has reviewed some of the advantages and difficulties in incorporating simultaneity in multi-sited research and what this adds to our insights on transnational flows of communication, money, goods and people.

Suggestions for how to conduct multi-sited ethnographies made in theoretical and methodological literature, such as Marcus’ (1995) idea to follow the people, goods or ideas, are enticing, yet they leave methodological quandaries for researchers to solve. For example, a researcher can follow a person or group to a different country but this means abandoning, at least temporarily, the study of those who stay behind. Yet as Levitt (2001) has argued, and others after her, transnational social fields incorporate both those who leave and those who stay behind. How does one follow people when some remain behind and some move to different places? Furthermore, the suggestion to follow the people, assumes that all people we are interested in

\(^{17}\) There are too many to cite fully, but some examples are: Basch \textit{et al.} 1994; Gardner 1999; Goldring 1998; Guarnizo \textit{et al.} 1998; Levitt 2001; Osili 2004; Schmaltzbauer 2004.
studying depart for the same location so that a researcher can follow them. An SMS methodology is the way we found to address these quandaries left in the methodological and theoretical literature so as to incorporate the various locations and those who move as well as those who stay behind in the study of transnational social phenomena.
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