

# Transnational youth mobility trajectories

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## English summary

Much research on migrant youth focuses exclusively on their lives in their country of residence, exploring which family, school, and community factors support or inhibit their educational success and general well-being. The lives of young people born in the country their parents migrated to are considered to exist solely within that country's borders, while young people who themselves migrate are viewed as 'blank slates' upon arrival (Mazzucato 2015). While transnational migration research acknowledges that migrant youth maintain connections to people and places beyond the borders of their country of residence – through contact with relatives in their family's country of origin, the practice of home-country language, religion and cultural customs, or knowledge of their family's past (Levitt and Waters 2002; Levitt 2009; Haikkola 2011) – this research largely considers migrant youth to be immobile. While these bodies of research provide insights into the practices, influences, and relationships that constitute the daily lives of migrant youth in the country of residence, they are missing a crucial piece of the puzzle: transnational mobility.

The absence of transnational mobility from research on migrant youth is puzzling, given that an increasing proportion of the youth population in Europe has a migration background (OECD/European Union 2015) and that empirical evidence shows that they are highly mobile. For example, recent studies show that most migrant youth in Europe visit their or their parents' country of origin at least every two years (Schimmer and van Tubergen 2014; Mazzucato and Haagsman 2022). Developing a better understanding of how, why and with what effects young people are on the move is important. Geographic mobility is increasingly seen as an integral part of youth transitions to adulthood and as a pathway to the acquisition of skills needed in a globalised world (Suárez-Orozco 2005; Robertson et al. 2018). By contrast, negative assumptions abound about migrant youth's mobility: education policy presumes that mobility harms migrant youth's education, while public policy often views migrant youth's connections to their country of origin as coming at the expense of their 'integration' into their country of residence (Carrasco and Narciso 2015; Mazzucato 2015). Some scholars argue that migrant youth's transnational mobility can in fact produce positive competencies (Suárez-Orozco 2005: 211; Orellana 2016: 91; Mazzucato 2015), yet these positive impacts remain understudied.

Against this backdrop, this thesis asks: *How do young people of Ghanaian background living in Hamburg, Germany, experience their transnational mobility over time and space, and how does mobility affect their lives?*

I conducted 14 months of youth-centric, multi-sited, mobile ethnographic fieldwork with 20 young people of Ghanaian background in Hamburg and on their travels to Ghana in 2018 and 2019. The sample included 14 female and 6 male participants aged 15-25. While 8 were

born in Ghana and 12 in Germany, all had experienced some form of mobility between the two countries, including 14 changes of residence and 29 short visits. Data collection involved participant observation and interviews with participants and other key informants, but also the use of various mobile methods that documented young people's mobility patterns, experiences and effects over time and space. These included mapping young people's mobility trajectories throughout their lives, following their mobility by accompanying their visits to Ghana and staying in touch online during their travels, and interviewing them before and after their trips to understand the anticipated and actual impacts of their mobility.

The thesis draws on insights from various bodies of research, particularly migrant transnationalism and mobility studies, while addressing five main research gaps. First, it takes a youth-centric approach in contrast to the focus on adult migrants or adults' perceptions of migrant youth in the literature. Second, I explore migrant youth's diverse mobility experiences over time and space through the concept of 'youth mobility trajectories', which encapsulates all moves young people make, rather than focusing on a single migratory move or return visit. Third, I investigate how experiences in the country of origin throughout young people's mobility trajectories impact their lives in the country of residence, rather than considering only residence-country factors as relevant to their day-to-day lives. Fourth, I employ an innovative methodology that is youth-centric, multi-sited, mobile, and collaborative, to generate new insights into migrant youth mobility, especially regarding the embodied and dynamic aspects of mobility. Finally, the thesis provides empirical data on the under-researched yet increasingly important migration flow between Africa and Europe, especially of migrant youth. The case of Ghanaian-background youth in Hamburg is relevant because many young people of Ghanaian background abroad are part of highly mobile transnational networks, and Germany hosts Europe's second-largest Ghanaian community after Italy, with Hamburg being home to the largest Ghanaian community in Germany (Nieswand 2008; Mörrath 2015).

## **Main empirical findings**

The main research question was dissected into three sub-questions, each addressed by an empirical chapter that has been published or is currently under review at international peer-reviewed journals.

Chapter 5 investigates young people's visits to Ghana from Germany to understand *how their mobility experiences shape their changing relationships to the country of origin over time and space*. Using a modified version of Urry's (2002) typology of proximity (face-to-face, face-the-place, face-the-moment), the chapter studies mobility up-close, in real-time, and through the changing constellations of people, places and moments that make up young people's visits to Ghana throughout their mobility trajectories. The chapter shows the value of using a youth-centric and mobile methodology that enables researchers to investigate the

specific details that make up young people's mobility experiences, and of adopting a mobility trajectories lens to investigate such experiences throughout young people's lives. The findings challenge the often-static representation in research of the country of origin and migrant youth's feelings towards it by revealing that migrant youth experience and articulate their relationships to the country of origin in changing, complex ways based on mobility experiences that also change over time and space.

Chapters 6 and 7 apply the embodied and processual approach fleshed out in Chapter 5 to explore how migrant youth's experiences in the country of origin throughout their mobility trajectories shape life in the country of residence. They do so by studying the contexts inhabited and relationships nurtured in Ghana, which provide resources that are applied to life in Germany. Chapter 6 investigates *how young people gain resources in the country of origin and then translate and use these resources to navigate their school transitions in the country of residence following an international move*. In the chapter, I analyse young people's resources through the concept of 'embodied cultural capital' and employ a mobility trajectories lens. The analysis reveals how young people gain four types of embodied cultural capital – confidence, discipline, respect and adaptability – through their educational environments and extended family networks in Ghana and then use these resources to successfully navigate their school transitions in Hamburg. Their successful transitions reflect a 'chemical reaction' between the resources young people possess and the recognition and value afforded these resources in their specific reception context. By looking at factors beyond the country of residence and by employing a youth-centric perspective, the chapter contributes to explaining previously unexplored mechanisms that shape migrant youth's school transitions.

Chapter 7 analyses *how young people build and maintain transnational peer relationships through their mobility trajectories, which resources they obtain from these relationships, and what effects these resources have on their lives in the country of residence*. The chapter combines how transnational peer relationships are established and maintained through young people's periods of residence in and visits to Ghana, as well as through the use of ICTs during periods of immobility. The chapter uses the concept of 'social capital' to analyse the resources migrant youth obtain from their relationships with other young people in Ghana. These resources, including educational motivation and transnational frames of reference, affect young people's lives in the country of residence by shaping their education and plans for the future. By adopting a mobility trajectories lens, the chapter advances our understanding of migrant youth's support systems and the resources they provide, thereby moving beyond adult-centric views of transnational networks and methodologically nationalistic views of young people's peer relationships.

## Conclusions

The thesis makes five key contributions to the literature on transnational youth mobility and other bodies of research with which it engages.

### *1) Emphasising the value of studying transnational youth mobility trajectories*

The concept of ‘youth mobility trajectories’, which includes all geographic moves young people make and the changing family constellations that accompany them (Mazzucato 2015; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018), allowed me to address a crucial gap pertaining to migrant youth’s mobility in existing research by enabling me to study their mobility in a thorough and nuanced way. In other words, it allowed me to focus on young people’s individual mobility experiences as well as their broader patterns of mobility, and the effects mobility has on their lives. Gathering information on all mobility experiences throughout young people’s trajectories – including their timing, duration, purpose, and location – creates a comprehensive picture of the topography of their transnational lives. This achieves two things.

First, it brings migrant youth’s experiences in the country of origin into the picture, countering the methodological nationalism of much research on migrant youth and emphasising the importance of a transnational lens for understanding their lives. Second, by considering experiences in both the country of origin and the country of residence and analysing them over time and space, youth mobility trajectories allow researchers to study mobility’s cumulative effects and dynamics; that is, how experiences in the country of origin shape young people’s lives in the country of residence. For example, the confidence, discipline, respect and adaptability young people built through their schooling and family relationships in Ghana smoothed their school transitions to a new education system in Hamburg, and young people’s relationships with peers during period of residence in and visits to Ghana gave them educational motivation, directly affecting their schooling in Germany. Young people’s mobility has largely been overlooked in research, studied alongside sedentary transnational practices, or conceived in simplistic ways. By studying youth mobility trajectories, this thesis shows that migrant youth *are* mobile, that they have unfolding patterns of multi-directional mobility, and that mobility shapes their lives in profound ways. This finding contributes not only to transnationalism research and mobility studies, but also to literatures that seek to better understand the factors shaping migrant youth’s lives in the country of residence.

### *2) Showing that mobility trajectories provide migrant youth with transnational resources*

The methodologically nationalistic view in much research of the resources available to migrant youth focuses on their family, school and community contexts in the country of

residence (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2009; Haller et al. 2011), while transnational migration research highlights migrant youth's resources transmitted through their parents in the country of residence. By adopting a mobility trajectories lens and taking a youth-centric approach, this thesis shows that migrant youth also gain resources first-hand through their own transnational mobility to and from the country of origin. These resources include various forms of embodied cultural capital, like confidence, respect, discipline and adaptability; social capital, such as educational motivation and transnational frames of reference; and young people's changing relationships with the country of origin itself, comprised of the social relationships, resources and opportunities they associate with it. Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates how these resources operate transnationally – that is, how resources gained in one country are translated to and used within another. This finding adds empirical weight to the theoretical importance of using a transnational mobility lens in research on the lives of migrant youth by showing that the contexts in which they develop resources extend far beyond the boundaries of their country of residence and are accessed through their mobility trajectories. Transnational resources are particularly important in migrant youth's education and future planning.

### ***3) Demonstrating the central role of young people's agency in their mobility trajectories***

This thesis argues that migrant youth's agency is crucial to the viability of their transnational resources and thus to how transnational mobility shapes their lives. The agency of the participants in this study enabled them to translate and use their transnational resources between the country of origin and the country of residence. They actively pursued opportunities, invested in or retreated from relationships, and interpreted the meaning of their visits to Ghana; they exercised agency in determining which forms of cultural capital from Ghana to use or adapt in their school transitions in Germany; and they agentically shaped their own transnational networks by establishing, maintaining, and employing resources from transnational peer relationships.

This finding does not imply that adults are unimportant in the lives of migrant youth, nor does it suggest their agency is unfettered. Relationships with adults were important to them, and adults had a prominent presence and influence in their transnational mobility trajectories. However, such relationships and influences are well documented in the literature; this thesis instead highlights young people's agency as an important aspect of their transnational mobility and how it shapes their lives. This finding contributes to transnational migration research, making clear that research needs to study the migration and mobility experiences of young people in their own right, not just in reference to and relationship with adults. It also contributes to research on cultural capital and education by showing that young people do not only benefit from their parents' capital, but actively broker their own transnational resources, accumulating, translating, and using them strategically to shape their own pathways.

#### ***4) Revealing the shifting dynamics of young people's transnational social positioning throughout their mobility trajectories***

Transnational migration research has long acknowledged that migrants – including many Ghanaian migrants – often hold higher social positions in their countries of origin than their countries of residence (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Nieswand 2011; Coe and Pauli 2020). Yet such findings have rarely explored in relation to migrant mobility trajectories, nor for migrant youth. This thesis shows that migrant youth also experience diverse social positions between the countries of origin and residence, and that their transnational mobility trajectories help explain the dynamics of these diverse positions. The participants in this study occupied low social-class positions in Hamburg but often came from relatively privileged backgrounds in Ghana. Their experiences and relationships in various contexts in Ghana provided them with valuable resources that moved with them throughout their transnational mobility trajectories and were used to offset certain disadvantages of their lower social-class position in Germany.

This thesis highlights that one mechanism explaining the relationship between parents' social-class backgrounds in the country of origin and their children's outcomes in the country of residence (Ichou 2014; Feliciano and Lanuza 2017) is migrant youth's own transnational mobility trajectories. Further, this study indicates that changing social-class positions experienced through mobility trajectories, and the related flow and impact of resources between the countries of origin and residence, are important not only for adult migrants in the employment and economic spheres, but also for young people and in other areas of life, such as education. Finally, literature on cultural capital and education about migrant youth has focused almost exclusively on migrants occupying low social-class positions in the country of residence, and on the resulting disadvantage inflicted by their 'lack' of the 'right' capital. My thesis suggests that the dynamics of social class in the education of migrant youth are more complex. Understanding migrant youth's educational experiences and outcomes within the country of residence requires knowledge of their social positioning in their country of origin, to which they remain actively connected through their transnational mobility trajectories.

#### ***5) Innovating a youth-centric and mobile methodology for the study of transnational mobility trajectories***

The theoretical insights of this study of transnational youth mobility trajectories were only possible through a methodology that adequately captures the patterns, experiences, and effects of mobility. I used an innovative methodology that centered around young people's own perspectives and experiences and employed mobile methods to capture various aspects of their mobility (Büscher and Urry 2009; Fincham et al. 2010), in contrast to the methodological approaches that have dominated research on migrant youth mobility thus far.

Within an ethnographic approach including participant observation and interviews, three techniques used in this research represent a palette of youth-centric mobile methods that can be used separately or in combination. These include mobility trajectory mapping to capture young people's mobility over time and space throughout their lives; following mobility in real-time, both physically and digitally, to emphasise the embodied and dynamic nature of mobility experiences; and before-and-after interviewing to document the meaning-making process in action by tracing the anticipated and actual impacts of mobility.

Using these methods is not necessarily easy. Physically accompanying mobility, for example, is resource intensive; it takes significant time, money, and energy. Yet where it is possible to use youth-centric mobile methods, they add enormous value to research and can be used by diverse bodies of research, including studies of mobility or those that would benefit from acknowledging the central role of mobility in the lives of migrant youth.