

Young lives on the move

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IMPACT PARAGRAPH

This dissertation analyses how physical mobility – both migration and shorter trips – between the country of origin and residence shapes the lives of migrant youth. Today, one in five young people across the European Union has a migration background. This number is much higher in many larger cities, such as the fieldsite for this research, the Belgian city of Antwerp, where three of four young people are either born abroad or have parents who are. Many of these young people engage in visits to the country of origin on a regular basis and/or have been mobile before they migrated to Belgium. Even though there is much research on the impact of *migration* on young people, their actual *mobility* is hardly investigated. At the same time, common assumptions prevail that mobility of migrant youth constitutes a problem for their emotional well-being and educational outcomes. Yet there is no evidence to date that this is the case. This dissertation provides a detailed ethnographic account of the mobility of Ghanaian-background youth between Belgium and Ghana, and investigates how mobility shapes their emotional and embodied experiences over time and space. Such a focus on emotions and embodiment is important because it affects young people's relationships to significant others, their personal development, and their sense of self.

Throughout the dissertation, two concepts take centre stage. First, the concept of *youth mobility trajectories* refers to the moves in time and space that young people make, the concomitant family constellations that result from these moves, and what transpires during mobility. Second, this dissertation develops a conceptualization of *transnational affective engagements*, which captures the emotional and bodily interactions between youth and the people and places they encounter during their transnational mobility and can therefore give insights into how young people make sense of their lived experiences.

One important finding of the study is that it is important to consider all moves a young person engages in, not just the migration move, because mobility significantly affects how young people are faring. This dissertation further develops and employs a set of methodological tools to adequately capture the diverse and complex mobility patterns of migrant youth and their embodied mobility experiences: the research combined ethnographic methods of interviews and observations with mobile methods, such as mobility trajectory mapping and physically accompanying young people on country-of-origin visits. Considering that most research to date has either not considered mobility or focused on isolated moves through

retrospective interviews with adults reflecting on their youth, this is a unique contribution to academic research in and of itself. Furthermore, the methodological approach of this research has brought into focus the themes of emotion and embodiment that – because of the methodological challenges involved – have received limited attention in previous studies.

The other research findings relate to what we can learn if we pay attention to migrant youth mobility. Analysing the mobility trajectories of Ghanaian-background youth provides an important alternative account to current policy perspectives on family reunification. The dissertation shows that young people who migrate to Europe may already have moved between different households in Ghana throughout their childhood and youth, whereby they build emotional connections to multiple kin and non-kin caregivers over time, many of whom remain important later in life. Thus, when young people migrate to Belgium to reunify with one or both parents, ‘family reunification’ can still be experienced as a separation by young people because they leave behind significant others in Ghana. These findings are important for people who work with youth, such as teachers and social workers, to be able to better understand young people’s lived experiences as they may continue to be part of transnational families even after reuniting with their parents in Belgium. Furthermore, policymakers should take note that legal and policy definitions of family as the nuclear family and family reunification as taking place only in the country of destination do not necessarily coincide with the lived reality of migrant youth.

Another important finding is that visits to the country of origin provide opportunities for the personal growth of young people with a migration background. Ghanaian-background youth cultivate self-confidence and develop their educational and career aspirations by interacting with role models in Ghana, experiencing respectful treatment, learning about their culture, being able to compare opportunity structures in different contexts, and having access to luxurious spaces that might not be available to them in Belgium. This is a contribution to previous research which more commonly focuses on how trips to the origin country shape young people’s sense of belonging or ethnic identity. However, acknowledging the personal growth benefits of country-of-origin visits has broader implications. School systems and public debates in many European countries consider such trips to disadvantage migrant youth while praising the transformative potential of international student mobility and travel. This dissertation shows that it is important to consider other types of mobility beyond student exchange programs and travel, and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate personal growth during such travels to the country of origin.

Finally, young people with a migration background use both digital media and visits to the country of origin to actively shape the embodied and emotional interactions with people and places in the country of origin through which they experience, what I call in the dissertation, a sense of ‘extraordinary everydayness’: the unique nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space. Young people of Ghanaian background use social media before visits to meet *new* peers online, both friends and romantic partners. During visits to Ghana, these relationships come to life and help to create a sense of connection and familiarity which extends far beyond the visits and leave a lasting impression after young people return to Belgium. Furthermore, smartphones are an important tool to independently move around the country, book accommodation, or navigate the unfamiliar urban landscapes in Ghana. These findings contribute to previous academic research which predominantly focused on how family ties are maintained across borders after migration but have insufficiently investigated other types of relationships or new networks that are created as a result of mobility. These new relationships with peers, but also location-based apps used during country-of-origin visits, help to generate a sense of sociality, confidence, and independence.

As evident from the discussion above, my research findings are relevant for different groups, including fellow academics, migrant youth and their parents, policymakers, and others working with young people, such as teachers, social workers, or church leaders. These target groups were – or will be – involved in and informed about the research in various ways.

My research is part of a larger multi-country project called MO-TRAYL. In June 2019, the MO-TRAYL project held a 3-day creative storytelling workshop called ‘Finding Your Voice’ for several research participants from the three European case study countries (Belgium, Germany, and The Netherlands).²² At the workshop, young people produced stories about growing up transnationally and learned skills, such as creative writing, interviewing and public speaking, which are applicable in various contexts in their lives. The outputs from the workshop – a book in printed and e-book versions in three languages, podcasts, and audio interviews – amplify young people’s own voices by bringing them to a wider public. The book also contains a ‘how to’ guide for other researchers and people working with migrant youth who are interested in this form of creative practice. The main aim of this workshop was to ‘give back’ to research participants both directly – participants gained skills, confidence, community,

²² More information on the ‘Finding Your Voice’ storytelling workshop as well as the workshop outputs can be found on the MO-TRAYL website: <https://www.motrayl.com/stories/youth-workshop>

and pride in the creation and sharing of their powerful personal stories – and by influencing their surroundings, such as their teachers, church members and others working with migrant youth. The printed ‘Finding Your Voice’ book has therefore been distributed to participants, schools, churches, community organisations, and youth associations in the four MO-TRAYL fieldsites (Belgium, Ghana, The Netherlands, and Germany). Through the MO-TRAYL website and social media, the outputs were further shared with an international audience. The ‘Finding Your Voice’ project won the Valorisation Prize of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University for its notable societal impact.²³

Research findings were also shared with an academic audience. All three empirical chapters have been published as open access peer-reviewed articles in well-read academic journals. Based on these articles, I will publish illustrated blogposts to make the research findings accessible to a broader audience. The two last years of my PhD coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, so that many conferences were cancelled or postponed, but I have still presented findings from my research at five international conferences and workshops. Furthermore, I have used Twitter²⁴ to communicate my research to a wider audience and given presentations about my research project in undergraduate and graduate courses at Maastricht University, the University of Antwerp, and the University of Lausanne.

Together with my MO-TRAYL colleagues, I co-organized one panel and one workshop at two different international conferences to share reflections on the ‘Finding Your Voice’ storytelling workshop mentioned above. Relatedly, based on our experiences with the storytelling workshop, we will organise an interactive session at the Synergy ’22 in June 2022, an event organised by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) that brings together researchers, policy developers and practitioners to explore opportunities for impact and connect science and society. The main objective of our interactive workshop is to collectively reflect on ‘giving back’ with other scholars across the social sciences and humanities. Based on findings from the MO-TRAYL project, we further submitted a project proposal to rethink the categories we use for young people with a migration background, which has been shortlisted for the Synergy Award 2022 as one of four projects.²⁵

²³ The announcement of the Valorisation Prize winner and excerpts from the jury report can be found here: https://fasos.maastrichtuniversity.nl/weekly/fasos-valorisation-prize-winner/?utm_source=weekly_staffsedition&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_content=staffsedition&utm_campaign=03-06-2021

²⁴ My Twitter account is available via https://twitter.com/anschutz_sarah.

²⁵ For more information on the Synergy event and Synergy Award, visit <https://www.synergy22.nl/home/>.