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Worm, Arne

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Worm, A. (2023). Migrantized Biographies: Reconstructing Life-Stories and Life-Histories as a Reflexive Approach in Migration Research. *Historical Social Research*, 48(4), 178-198. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.44>

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Migrantized Biographies. Reconstructing Life-Stories and Life-Histories as a Reflexive Approach in Migration Research

Arne Worm*

Abstract: »Migrantisierte Biografien. Rekonstruktion von Lebensgeschichten und Lebensverläufe als reflexiver Ansatz in der Migrationsforschung«. The social category of migrants has been marked by state policies of bordering and “managing migration,” powerful discourses on social groupings, and global, regional, and local conflicts around participation and exclusion. The complexity of this category has been emphasized by critical approaches in the fields of migration research that have been crucial in de-essentializing it. In this article, I will discuss how, as a processual, comparative, and case-oriented approach, biographical research might contribute to more reflexive, Global Sociology-oriented migration research by empirically reconstructing *migrantization* (turning movements into migration and turning mobile people into migrants) as a multilayered and complex process. In doing so, I will present empirical findings from the research project “Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany: processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration.” These findings reveal the different ways in which members of migrant groupings present themselves and their migration trajectories, divided into an “*individualized type*” and a “*we-group-oriented type*.” This leads me to demonstrate the need to reconstruct mechanisms of migration-related boundary-making from a processual perspective in order to understand migrantized people’s positions and positioning practices within asymmetric balances of power, as well as the overlapping processes that generate both movements and mobilities.

Keywords: Biographical research, Global Sociology, migration research, migrantization, methodology.

* Arne Worm, University of Goettingen, Institute of Methods and Methodological Principles in the Social Sciences, Goßlerstraße 19, 37073 Göttingen, Germany; aworm@uni-goettingen.de.

1. Introduction

Migration phenomena are a significant field of research for Global Sociology, which itself is highly significant for migration research. Although debates on the agenda and methodologies of Global Sociology are anything but complete, both initial assumptions are plausible when we take a historical perspective, thus overcoming both eurocentrism and “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; see also Amelina et al. 2021), as well as reflexivity regarding orders and practices of knowledge production as its core concerns (see Bhambra 2013; Burawoy 2000; Go 2016; Hanafi 2020). Spatial movements and mobility have been permanent and widespread phenomena of human history, shaping social processes, inequalities, and connections throughout the world. The realities of migration in both past and present are inseparably entangled with the rise and transformation of “modern” (nation) states and border regimes in the context of colonial modernity (see Mayblin and Turner 2021). From this perspective, migration is a specific sociopolitical category of governance and power, of *doing difference*, that emerged and became institutionalized especially in the Western centers of global hierarchies from the late 19th century. It then became entangled with discourses and practices constructing citizenship and belonging, as well as with processes of territorial and social inclusion and exclusion (see Dahinden 2016; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Amelina 2020; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Bachmann-Medick and Kugele 2018). Thus, a historical and reflexive “doing migration” approach (Amelina 2020) foregrounds the following questions: “*how the social practice of moving from one locality to another becomes socially transformed into ‘migration’, and how mobile (and some immobile) individuals become turned into ‘migrants’*” (ibid., 2). This in turn varies in different local, regional, and transnational contexts depending, among other things, on the level of the state, the nature of discourses, and the figurations of everyday life. Migration research informed by and informing Global Sociology thus faces the challenge of thinking linking complex processes of spatial movements with wider processes of social transformation (see Castles 2007). This is reflected in how movements and mobilities are negotiated, governed, and contested within global, regional, and local balances of power.

As an empirically oriented biographical researcher who has worked on migration-related conflicts and established outsider figurations in different geopolitical regions such as Germany, Israel/Palestine, Spain/Morocco, Jordan, and Brazil (Becker, Hinrichsen, and Worm 2022; Worm, Hinrichsen, and Albaba 2016; Worm 2019; Rosenthal, Bahl, and Worm 2017; Bahl and Worm 2022), I am particularly interested in the methodological consequences and challenges of this research agenda, especially potential contributions from

biographical research.¹ Thus, in this article, I will discuss how, as a processual, comparative, and case-oriented approach, biographical research might contribute to reflexive migration research by empirically reconstructing *migrantization* (turning movements into migration; turning mobile people into migrants) as a multilayered and complex process. The aim is to show from a processual perspective how *migrantization* is reflected in the present perspectives of members of migrant groupings² and how this is interwoven with other processes in which mobility and movements are involved. Accordingly, I see biographical research as a way of doing migration research without migrants, but not without mobile and moving subjects.

In the following, I will discuss this approach by presenting empirical findings from the research project “*Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany: processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration.*”³ I will discuss: a) how mobile subjects whose migration projects or trajectories have been irregularized to different degrees in both contexts present and position themselves within the figurations of their everyday lives; and b) how different modes of self-presentation are connected to different overlapping processes. I argue that *migrantization* in the narrower sense of labelling movements within migration regimes and in everyday life figurations is complexly related to the overall processes that generate both movements and (im-)mobilities.

I will first introduce the project and its theoretical and methodological framework (sect. 2). I will then present empirical findings on different types of how the members of migrant groupings present their migration trajectories, distinguishing between a “*we-group-oriented type*” and an “*individualized type*” (sect. 3). This leads me to show the need to reconstruct mechanisms of migration-related “boundary-making” (Barth 1970; Wimmer 2008) from a processual perspective in order to understand migrantized people’s strategies of positioning within the figurations of everyday life. In the conclusion (sect.

¹ At this point, it is worth mentioning my personal and academic socialization and “positionality” (Baur 2021) as a white person in Germany without any experiences of migration/migrantization in my family history, which meant growing up in a context where essentializing views on migration-related difference were hegemonic. Germany has refused to acknowledge its own migration history for most of the 20th century (see Pries 2021), and dealing with migration-related diversity remains highly polarized up to the present day. “Migrant” tends to be a category of “othering” in everyday life, and Germany plays a leading role within the European Union when it comes to policies of so-called “migration management.”

² Following Brubaker (2006), I use the term “grouping” to point out that in the sociological sense this is not a group taken for granted, but a heuristic term for people affected by migrantization.

³ Funded by the German Research Foundation (RO 827/21-1;2) from February 2019 to January 2023. The principal investigator was Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal. The team members were Dr. Eva Bahl, Dr. Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu, Lucas Cé Sangalli (M.A.) and Dr. Arne Worm. The student members of the research team were Margherita Cusmano, Merve Eryoldas, Tim Sievert, and Tom Weiss. See <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/607273.html> (Accessed September 07, 2023).

4), I will argue that biographical research is helpful to include a multitude of overlapping processes involved in migrantization in the analysis.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework of a Research Project Relying on a Biographical Approach to Global Migration

The research project (2019–2023) focused on recent trajectories of movements and mobilities labelled as *irregular* within migration regimes, figurations in everyday life, and hegemonic discourses in Brazil and Germany. We were interested in the biographies and practices of participation of members of migrant groupings from the MENA region and West Africa who have moved either to Germany or Brazil roughly within the last ten years. This has led to different case studies of migration processes, for example, from countries such as Senegal, Guinea Conakry, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq (see Rosenthal 2022). Following a biographical approach, trajectories of movement and *migrantization* were reconstructed in the context of life histories in relation to both collective histories and family histories. An important aspect of the research was the extent to which trajectories of mobility are intertwined with the negotiation of images of self, we, and them within unequal balances of power and dependency networks.⁴

While we conceptually associated the term “participation” with addressing the claims and perspectives of migrantized people themselves, the term “irregularized” directed the perspective to practices of labelling and the categorization of movements predominantly but not exclusively in the contexts of transit and immigration. The use of the term *irregularized* relies on similar considerations concerning the term *illegalized*, which “draws attention to the institutional and political processes rendering people illegal” (Bauder 2014). As Liisa Malkki has pointed out, migration categories are not a “natural given,” but emerge from powerful labelling processes (Malkki 1995). Consequently, the term “irregularized” heuristically expands the concept of illegalization to include not only the construction of (il-)legality, but all processes, institutional settings, and discourses that focus on the (de)normalization of migration in a certain socio-spatial setting in general, or concerning specific forms of migration or specific groupings of migrants. This includes the impacts of *different legal regimes or legal statuses* and *different practices of how state actors are involved in governing migrants’ everyday lives*, as well as *figurations between*

⁴ Images of the we, the self, and the other are inherent components of people’s positions within dynamic networks of interdependence, or figurations, as has been discussed by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson ([1965] 2008.) For the terms “we-group,” “they-group,” and “they-image,” see *ibid.*, 28, 31.

migrantized newcomers and members of long-established groupings and discourses on migration. Differences between Germany and Brazil are simply evident in the fact that, in Germany, state actors tend to “micromanage” the daily lives of migrantized people more, such that irregularized migrants are under greater stress of fearing deportation. In Brazil, conversely, the precarity and insecurity of irregularized migrants have more to do with dependence on volatile informal economies and networks. Also, for example, our interviewees in Germany tend to feel more pressure than our interviewees in Brazil to justify their migration projects against the background of discourses framing immigration as a problem and/or calling for the assimilation of “migrants.”⁵

Our research is based on multi-method, ethnographic fieldwork and comparisons of biographical case reconstructions. We worked with participant observation, biographical-narrative interviews, follow-up interviews, and group discussions. With some interviewees in our sample we have been in contact with for a couple of years, starting with a preliminary project.⁶ The overall theoretical and methodological framework is informed by social constructivist biographical research in connection with figurational sociology taken from Norbert Elias. This connection was empirically and theoretically advanced by the work of Artur Bogner and Gabriele Rosenthal (Bogner and Rosenthal 2017).

As a bottom-up approach, the biographical approach is, first of all, a perspective that focuses greatly on everyday experiences, stocks of knowledge, and the patterns of actions of the subjects involved in the chosen phenomenon. These reflect a certain *present* perspective and positionality vis-à-vis a phenomenon, but also the wide range of overlapping *past* processes and social forces, like family histories and collective histories, that gave direction to the course of an “individual” life history. Drawing on social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1966), we assume that life-histories emerge from processes in which subjects and contexts of action, the so-called micro- and macro-levels of the social, are mutually constituted. Biographical approaches to migration place the experiences and perspectives of mobile actors at the center of the research and show how they are interwoven with overall social processes and social forces that give a biographical trajectory its direction (see Rosenthal 2012).

From the connection with a processual or figurational-sociological perspective emerges the principle of also including longer-term historical processes in the analysis (Elias 1978). The concept of figuration, as a strictly relational perspective, requires always looking at people in terms of their

⁵ For further considerations on “integrationism,” see Nieswand 2021.

⁶ Fieldwork was very much affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. In between and after joint fieldwork trips to Brazil in 2019, February 2020, and autumn 2021 in Germany, we conducted interviews by various means, e.g., online or by telephone (see Bahl and Rosenthal 2021).

interconnections with other people. These relations are to be considered as balances of power that frame the life chances and decisions of actors, though they are also changeable and contested by individual and collective actions. The claim that a biography-theoretical sociology should place the socio-historical genesis of particular cases at the center of the analysis involves reconstructing the formation of experience and people's modes of action in the various phases and sociospatial contexts of their lives. It also includes methodologically paying attention to changes in people's views of their past lives. There is a fundamental difference between the present or the present biographical perspectives of the individual and his or her past experiences. For Gabriele Rosenthal, the constitution of life stories and the construction of biographies can be understood as a dynamic process of interpretation and re-interpretation (Rosenthal 2018, 155ff.).

Within the methodological distinction between the present perspective and the past perspective, changes in networks of action and dependencies are crucial to the biographical approach. This also includes viewing categories of belonging and difference as emerging from processes of social construction and power relations, not as static, nor as a given (see Lutz 2009). Accordingly, it is extremely fruitful in migration research to combine the biographical approach with the concept of transnationality (e.g., Faist, Fauser, and Reisenauer 2013), as well as concepts of "boundary work" (Wimmer 2008) and belonging (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013), which we did within the project.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that in the project we do not assume that either the contexts of arrival or the contexts of origin are homogeneous units. The previous section might have created the impression of a certain "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Not least, our own empirical findings clearly speak against its assumptions, as significant regional and local differences, for example, in terms of legal practices and established/newcomer figurations are the rule rather than the exception in both "arrival contexts." The same goes for the countries or regions of origin. According to our findings, locality and regional belonging, as well as transnational networks, tend to have significantly more explanatory power for the formation of migration trajectories than the context or state of origin. However, it is still true that, globally, opportunities for power are significantly based on the "birthright lottery" (Shachar 2009) and that citizenship remains a significant predictor of life chances in terms of global inequalities (Weiß 2017). In that regard, our comparison does not primarily aim to compare Germany and Brazil as units of comparison, but rather to treat them as heuristic starting points for empirical inquiry that critically ask for state power as *one* component – among other contextual references – that are formative of migration trajectories. We are precisely interested in the question of the extent to which state contexts and nationalized discourses, as

complex and heterogeneous ensembles, do matter concretely within the formation of irregularized migration.

A consistent finding of our research is the high importance of transnational orientations and practices of action for our interviewees. This is perhaps not so surprising because we are dealing with specific migration phases and, moreover, irregularized migration. We define transnationality in a biographical sense, referring to the changing degree to how strongly one's own life is connected with and dependent on people in other countries (see Bahl and Worm 2022). Here we find extremely complex relationships, especially at the level of family relations, and especially among those who migrated in the context of an ongoing conflict such as the internal warfare in Syria, Sudan, and Iraq.⁷

The critique of “methodological nationalism” by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002), as both they and others have pointed out, does not mean neglecting state contexts, institutions, and practices of state that aim at governing “migration,” but seeing them in their interrelatedness with other global, transnational, and transregional connections and forces (see also Çağlar 2015). Ultimately, this means examining a multitude of processes in their intersection, which take on different formations and have different consequences. I will demonstrate this with the following empirical findings.

3. We- and Self-Presentations of Irregularized “Migrants” in Germany and Brazil

3.1 Overall Empirical Findings

Based on interview data structured to a high degree by thematic choices and relevancies of the interlocutors, a sequential “text and thematic field analysis” (Rosenthal 2018) aims at “uncovering the mechanisms that determine which topics are presented and in what way” (ibid., 176). An important component affecting modes of biographical self-presentation is the interactive research setting itself, in which interviewer and interlocutor encounter each other as bearers of a whole bundle of components of belonging and are positioned in hierarchies of power.

Following this approach, the biographical narrative interviews and group discussions with members of different migrant groupings in Germany and Brazil revealed clear differences in the extent to which the present situation, the migration trajectory, and its relation to the interlocutor's entire biography were presented as *individual* or *collective*. These different patterns of presentation culminate in questions as to (a) whether our interlocutors barely or

⁷ For similar findings particularly on the level of kinship and care relations, see Alkan 2022.

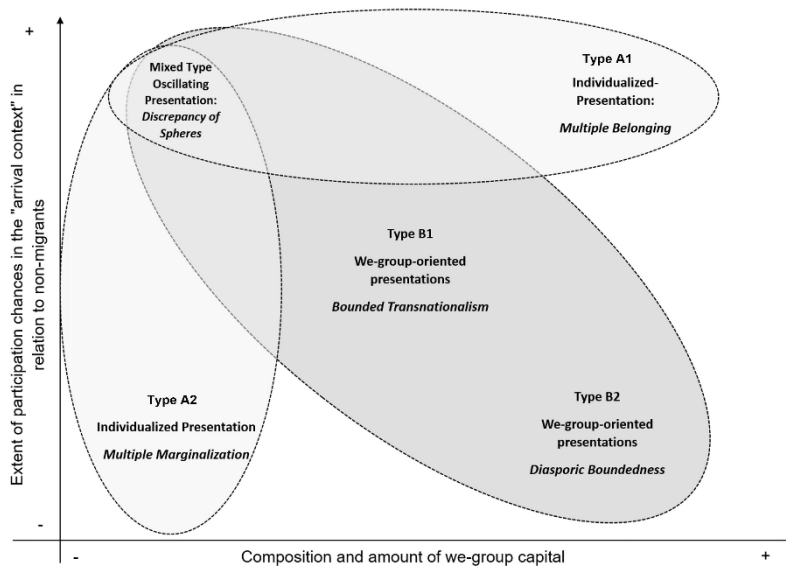
strongly address affiliations to social collectives in the past and present, and (b) whether the migration project was framed as representative of a specific collective – or we-group – or as an individual process. For example, our interviews with people from Senegal in Brazil, whose migration courses strongly relied on networks of religious brotherhoods, show a very homogenized we-image (Rosenthal, Sangalli, and Worm 2022). In the interviews with people from Sudan in Germany, my colleague Lucas Cé Sangalli similarly reconstructed the tendency to stress belonging to a homogenous we-group of Sudanese refugees (Cé Sangalli 2022) against the background of precarious residence status in Germany and the ongoing armed conflicts in their home region. What increasingly interested us in the analysis of these “we group-oriented presentations” (Type B) was that they had a tendency to cover up power imbalances and diverging experiences within these groupings, or at least made it difficult to express perspectives that might collide with the collective framing. In stark contrast to this, we were interested in the highly “individualized” self-presentations (Type A) that we found in interviews with people from very different contexts of origin, migration histories, and current situations regarding the extent to which, and why, biographically relevant collective references tended to disappear from their accounts.

The theoretically interesting and methodically challenging aspect about these findings is that different types of self-presentation can emerge from very different, even opposing patterns of migration courses, and thus from opposing positions in power balances. Type A seemed to emerge from two trajectories in particular. In one case they stem from migration courses that tend to have a *relatively* stable or stabilizing trajectory, and where the speakers are in a *relatively* more powerful position within the figurations of “diasporic” and/or transnational networks, as well as with members of “old-established” groupings. Alternatively, “individualized representation” emerges from extremely precarious migratory trajectories that are associated with exclusion and harm through severe forms of symbolic or physical violence in either the present or the past and, more generally, a continuity of extremely insecure, volatile living conditions. For these interviewees, turning to past lives in the interviews was very difficult, and thematizing future prospects was similarly threatening and blurred. We similarly found contrasting dynamics when looking at the processes constituting the “we group-oriented presentations” (Type B). This pattern was characteristic of both those whose entire migration process was embedded in relatively stable reference groups, and those whose migration courses were fragile, for whom the presented and/or perceived affiliation to a specific we-group only became more important in the course of their migration.

These findings have led me to develop a typology, a relational model, that links modes of migrantized self-presentation to the underlying structural dynamics that tend to produce these modes of presentation (see Figure 1). One

component leading to different types of self- and we-presentation was the degree of how strongly our interview partners feel othered or migrantized at the everyday level in the sociospatial contexts in which they live in the present. This includes the level of (in-)security in terms of residency status, the level of stigmatizing discourses on “migrants,” practices of inclusion or marginalization in everyday life based on constructions of “migrant otherness,” etc. But the degree of migrantization does not explain the whole picture, as its effects and consequences are interrelated with other biographical dynamics and resources, especially the degree of having what I would call “we-group capital.” Following Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu, the term “capital” refers to the resources, (inter-)dependencies, and restrictions that emerge from memberships in networks and collectives, which have to do with the power chances of the collective itself, for example, its degree of cohesion and one’s position within it. The typology is illustrated in Figure 1; I will explain the opposing clusters in more detail in the following.

Figure 1 We and I Presentations



But first, a few preliminary remarks on the typology and the illustration. This relational typology should not be misread in terms of absolute power chances on a regional or even global scale. It is about mapping and reflecting on relative power differentials within migrant or migrantized communities in order to visualize the different impacts of migrantization, as well as the chances and strategies that deal with it. What do the two axes represent?

The “*extent of opportunities for participation in the ‘arrival context’ in relation to non-migrants*” represents the level of experiencing one’s own participation chances in relation to “non-migrants” in a certain social setting. This includes socio-structural components such as residency status or legal situation, having a job, level of financial security, participation in the education sector, and opportunities for social and physical mobility. Taken together, this axis relates to the present life situation and the *relative* degree of power chances in a certain arrival context, especially how steep the power balances within figurations with long-established residents, or “non-migrants,” in everyday life are experienced. This includes the forms and amounts of othering experiences as a migrantized newcomer, either in media discourses or in everyday life.

The second axis (“Composition and amount of we-group capital”) refers to Bourdieu’s theory of using “capital” to refer to various power chances in specific fields (Bourdieu 1986). Following Bourdieu, this term sums up the extent to which migrantized people are biographically bound to certain we-groups and how they are positioned within them. It also reflects how strongly the migration decision and its dynamic have been influenced by belonging to a certain we group or being marginalized within one. Here, violence plays a crucial part. Also, the degree of inclusion or marginalization within a diasporic or “migrant” community, as well as within transnational family networks, play important roles.

It is important not to see the components expressed in the axes as additive, but as interwoven in a dialectical sense. For example, if the level of marginalization in an immigration context increases because discourses become more stigmatizing, the dependence on specific we-groups can increase. At the same time, being closely bound to a specific we-group might increase the danger of being targeted as a member of this specific group. Also, positionality is not static. On the contrary, it is based on the complex overall history of how affiliations have developed in the biographical course and how these relate to migrantization dynamics. I will now look in more detail at the different modes of self- and we-presentations that depend on we-group capital and the dynamics of migrantization.

3.2 Individualized Self-Presentations (Type A)

The graph shows cases representing the individualized type of presentation on opposing sides of the matrix. Representatives of this type can be in a position shaped by a relatively high degree of participation opportunities in relation to non-migrants in a certain context and a high degree of “we-group capital” (Type A1: Multiple Belonging). However, “individualized presentations” are also characteristic of those who are acting in very insecure and marginalized positions and have few resources due to a lack of networks.

The most striking difference from cases representing all other types is that cases representing the *subtype A1: Multiple Belonging* tend to have the fewest problems in embedding their “migration project” in the context of their whole biography, including family history and other collective processes. The cases representing this sub-type are in a relatively stable situation in the present (for example, in terms of residency status) and in terms of patterns of action are not highly, and especially not one-sidedly dependent on transnational or “diasporic” networks. A more individual course emerges on the level of the self-presentation by relating one’s own biography and migration project to a multitude of dynamics, events, and collectives. Cases representing this type speak most openly against being perceived as a token member of a particular group. Criticisms of stigmatizing images of migrant groupings and claims concerning participation opportunities are addressed relatively openly. Representatives of this type could also be called flexible or strategic in their self-presentations, which depends on a relatively higher level of power compared to cases that are more closely bound to specific we-groups (see Type B) or who are very marginalized within almost every aspect of social dependence (see Type A2). This is similar to the findings Hendrik Hinrichsen and Johannes Becker reconstructed in their research on migration-related figurations in Amman (Jordan) (Hinrichsen and Becker 2022).

A paradigmatic example of this type of self-presentation and position is Sameera Amin,⁸ who migrated from war-torn Syria to Germany in 2015. Sameera fled in the course of the escalation of a violent conflict since 2011 (see Hinnebusch 2012; Abboud 2018). In 2011, when the protest movement in Syria started in the context of the so-called “Arab Spring,” Sameera was studying at a university in Deir ez-Zor (eastern Syria) and became active in the early phase of the civil protest movement. Sameera moved to Damascus and a few years later left for Turkey together with her boyfriend, who had faced the threat of being drafted into the military. From Turkey, the couple migrated to Germany via the so-called “Balkan route” (see Hameršak et al. 2020). In the years after Sameera had received refugee status in Germany, she became very determined to bring her family to Germany. She was successful in this, and her father, mother, and two siblings have lived in Germany since 2017. In 2020, at the time of our interview, Sameera was living in Frankfurt am Main, where she was studying in a master’s program.

Sameera presented her biography as a gradual process of expanding her horizon of belonging away from a locally bound life in the Salamiyya region, where she had lived as a child, to more diverse urban contexts, starting with studying. Starting to study in Deir ez-Zor (East Syria) coincided with the rise of the civil protest movement, which Sameera experienced as very transformative:

⁸ Sameera Amin was interviewed in English by Arne Worm and Tim Sievert in Frankfurt a. M. (Germany) in February 2020 and by Arne Worm in October 2021 (follow-up interview).

When I moved to Deir ez-Zor, it was kind of very hard until I found my, my bubble [...], it's a totally different world [...] so I found my people, and in the revolution actually, I started to realize that it's not about little anymore because everyone came together and we had a main enemy, whatever that means, that in a way that was very, um, like full of energy, this year was full of energy and full of hope and trust in the people that I had no trust in before. (Sameera, 1st interview, February 2020)

When the secular, leftist opposition milieu became more and more marginalized within the fragmenting and increasingly sectarian logic of the war (Løland 2019), Sameera fled to Germany. While on many levels her situation in Germany is relatively stable, she quite openly addressed experiences of being othered in everyday-life figurations in Germany, as can be seen in this quote:

I cannot say that I like the city. I'm just (2 sec. pause) okay with it because I'm doing something working studying aaand that's normal, but it's not really (3 sec. pause). You know, the first thing you're forced to live somewhere, that's the whole problem, of, like, you cannot leave this place or you are forced to, to speak this language or you are forced to leave a place, not stable enough to decide if you if you actually want to live in this place, that's the most problem that Syrians are now facing...[...] and the people when they ask you the first time, most of the time when they ask you where are you from, they say ahhh, either ahhh very sad, or they don't talk at all because they don't like you or you think of going back [...].

Samira reflects on the loss of the ability to make choices and the fragility of normalcy in her present situation. She defines this as the characteristic aspect of being a Syrian refugee. The second part of the quote refers to experiences with non-migrant Germans in everyday life, oscillating between superficial expressions of empathy, open hostility, and criticizing her for not longing to participate in the society she is living in right now.

I cannot go into details of her family history here, but what is important to mention is that there are several components in her biography that structurally inform an individualized self-presentation, components that are *relatively* stable. This includes the transformative time as a student in Syria, which I mentioned above. But constellations of multiple belongings have already shaped the family milieu she was born into: a secular, relatively well-established middle-class and opposition-oriented family milieu. Her father had a career in the Syrian military, which gave his family a reliable financial income and a high social status. He later deserted from the army in the course of the Syrian civil war. When Sameera was a child, her paternal grandfather had been kept in prison for over a decade as a critical journalist, being persecuted under the authoritarian rule of President Hafiz al-Assad, the father of current president Bashar al-Assad. Being in the military and at the same time keeping a political distance or even maintaining opposition to the regime is not a contradiction per se, but it challenged the family as a whole to navigate

through this complex relationship to the state. Sameera's mother grew up in Beirut (Lebanon) and moved to Salamiyya after getting married, which meant moving back to the town her own parents, Sameera's grandparents, originally came from. This draws our attention to family networks, but also to the socio-religious community of the Ismaili most family members on her mother's side belong to, and who constitute the majority of the population in the Salamiyya region.⁹ While her grandfather (her father's side) had converted to Sunni-Islam, Sameera described her family as very secular and identified herself as "non-religious." We can assume that the family's complicated relation to this grouping, which has a transnational history and a complicated relation to the ruling regime, has significantly shaped an individualized, multi-belonging trajectory. Sameera's present perspective is certainly an expression of her being a member of a younger generation of more established, secular, urban Syrians who experienced the confinements of an authoritarian regime and the shattering of hopes for change in Syria.

Similar in terms of self-presentations, but very different in terms of their present life situation and migration trajectories, are those cases representing *subtype A2: Multiple Marginalization*. Here, interview partners speak from a very marginalized position in the present and look back on migration courses shaped by marginalization and typically extreme forms of violence from the very beginning. Either looking back on their past lives or towards a future that looks highly ambivalent or even threatening. Just as extremely insecure residence situations, economic precariousness, and a lack of access to formalized or informal security systems limit the view into the future, the view into the past is also extremely delicate and blurred. Cases representing this type usually act in constellations my colleague Eva Bahl and I have called "precarious transnationalism" (Bahl and Worm 2022). As an example, we have reconstructed the case of Mina Ahmed, who fled from a general situation of instability in Iraq and gendered violence and persecution within her family to Jordan and from there to Brazil. Her migration project started from the constellation of a financially precarious family milieu and, most importantly, a high degree of marginalization within her own family. Her case exemplifies a process of being forced to migrate without any local or transnational support networks, although she tried to build new networks in the process of migration, for example, by converting to Christianity. In Brazil, Mina was living with an insecure residency status and had only a few options to earn a living. As a result, she considered moving back to a Middle East country, although she faced the danger of being in reach of persecution by members of her

⁹ The history of this religious community is a good example of how complex dynamics of colonialism and empire shape communities' relations to the state (e.g., to the Ottoman Empire, the British and French Mandate in the Levante, the Baathist Revolution in Syria); see Douwes 2011; Merali 2020.

family again. Mina's self- presentation was highly individualized and based on multiple marginalizations in both past and present.

3.3 We-Group-Oriented Presentations (Type B)

A similar phenomenon of opposing migration courses leading to similar presentation patterns can be observed in the cases of migrantized presentations representing Type B, "we group-oriented presentations." These are typically shaped by presenting oneself as a member, or even a representative, of a certain we-group, and to look back at and interpret past and present experiences through this lens. This basically means that aspects and experiences of one's own life are highlighted and mentioned earlier in the interviews and group discussions when they fit a certain we-image, while biographical experiences conflicting with this we-image are presented less or only after asking questions about them. This is important because of our clear finding that the "we group-oriented presentation" tends to homogenize differences of power within we-groups and to harmonize conflicts within migrant groupings.

The different dynamics leading to a we-group presentation relate to the question if belonging to a specific we-group is a central constitutive component in migration and whether it remains relatively stable in the process of migration, as in the cases of Senegalese in Brazil and to a certain extent also Kurds in Germany (see Çakır Kılınçoğlu 2022). However, the presentation can also emerge from turning towards a specific we-group as a means of empowerment in the course of moving, as my colleague Luas Cé Sangalli has reconstructed based on refugees from Sudan in Germany and Turkey (see Cé Sangalli 2022). Accordingly, the first examples represent *subtype B1: Bounded Transnationalism*, and later *subtype B2: Diasporic Boundedness*.

The first type, "*Bounded Transnationalism*," is exemplified by our findings on the transnational migration projects of people from Senegal in Brazil, who migrated with the help of Islamic brotherhood networks (see Rosenthal, Cé Sangalli, and Worm 2022):

This grouping of Senegalese migrants shares a very explicit we-image: "We are only here to work, we intend to go back to Senegal, and we are doing nothing wrong." They typically say: "We obey the commandments of our Islamic brotherhoods and our religious leaders." Those who have wives in Senegal underline that their wives do not have to go out to work, for that would go against their tradition, and that they send enough money home to them. Their life in Brazil is dominated by the desire to participate in the labor market in the diaspora, and to be able to send money to their family of origin or their family of procreation in Senegal. (ibid., 28)

We could reconstruct the migration courses representing this type, which have been bound to transnational networks and orientations that were relatively stable in the course of migration. This means that people could plan with and rely on these networks to a much greater degree than people

representing other types. Additionally, many aspects of everyday life are directed to other members of these networks, although cases representing this type see themselves as less marginalized within figurations with non-migrants in the contexts of arrival than cases representing type A2, but more marginalized than those whose migration courses are represented in type A1.

There are many similarities here to the findings of my colleague Sevil Çakır Kılınçoğlu, who has reconstructed biographies of Kurdish migrant women in Germany within the framework of the same project. Boundedness to a transnational Kurdish we-group is an aspect continually defining the lives and experiences of flight of these women to a high degree. One important difference from Senegalese in Brazil is the high level of political persecution and violence in which their biographies are entangled, which binds them in a different, more ambivalent way to a Kurdish we-group.

The most important components leading to a we-presentation here are a) an actual and relatively stable boundedness to members of a we-group on the level of everyday life, meaning that people do act to a high degree within networks of other migrantized people; and b) a not extremely marginalized, relatively level power balance in the figuration with non-migrants in an arrival context. The we-presentation corresponds to some extent to a network-bound practice of action. However, this presentation is updated to a greater extent when one's own migration project has to be represented to the outside world, as is the case in the research situation. This presentation tends to downplay or taboo power imbalances within migrant communities.

*Diasporic boundedness*¹⁰ is a mechanism leading to a we-group orientation, where turning to a migrant or diasporic we-group, or being bound to it, is something that happens in the process of moving. This can be based on processes happening in the contexts of origin, in transit contexts, or in the arrival societies. Being in a marginalized position of power in the arrival contexts, building migrant or diasporic networks is essential or even existentially important. But this can mean having to deal with internal frictions and power differences within diasporic we-groups, which are mentioned less in the interviews. This has been reconstructed in the case of refugees who fled in the context of armed conflicts in Sudan by my colleague Lucas Cé Sangalli (2022). This presentation results above all from a strong power imbalance in the figurations with non-migrants, towards whom a we-image is built up that increases one's own chances of power. Above all, however, the we-image also deals with differences within diasporic groups. Compared to Type B1, members of these groups are less strongly related to each other at the level of action practice and have a lower level of cohesion.

¹⁰ Following Brubaker (2005), I use the term "diaspora" here to mean migrant groupings who regard their situation as "diasporic," in other words, who define themselves as being geographically separated from their "original" collective, regardless of whether this is a national, ethnic, religious, or regional collective.

3.4 The Mixed Type: Shifting Self-Presentation (A+B)

Here, we speak about cases of migrants who are in a relatively more established position, but who see themselves as quite torn between belonging to a we-group and finding their “own” way. Their mode of self-presentation is highly contextual and situational, meaning we find very contrasting self-presentations over time. I have reconstructed this dynamic in the case of Youssoupha, who migrated from the Senegambian border zone to Germany. Youssoupha did not migrate with the help of religious brotherhoods: in fact, he has almost no biographical connection to them, despite their being quite influential for power balances in Senegal. Youssoupha was born in 1992 into a family of “established outsiders” living in the Tambacounda region (see Rosenthal, Cé Sangalli, and Worm 2022, 66ff.). The Mandinka-speaking family was in an outsider position in the figuration with groupings based in the urban centers of Senegal, such as Dakar, but had several means of power in the local context, such as land ownership, involvement in the cross-border trade of agricultural products, and locally rooted political and religious offices, and they belong to a “noble caste,” which Youssoupha mentioned very late. Furthermore, they had a transnational family network extending to Spain, where Youssoupha migrated in 2009. From there he went to Germany in 2010, starting with a very precarious residence situation, but entering into a process of gradual stabilization. He managed to obtain a more secure residency status, completed vocational training in 2021, and is currently in a relationship with a woman from his village of origin.

The analysis of his patterns of self-presentations shows on one hand that he is negotiating his relationship with his family of origin and their values and we-images, which for him constitute a source of self-respect and at the same time an ambivalent (transnational) tie. On the other hand, as part of his migration trajectory, he has experienced a transformation in his own self-image, a rise in the social scale, and is negotiating the central coordinates of this transformation in multinational milieus in Berlin. When speaking in Germany about this complicated constellation, he obviously feels that his relationship with his family of origin and positioning himself in ethnic and religious we-groups is very ambivalent and multi-layered. He therefore pushed them to the back of his biographical self-presentation during the first interviews. Later, however, he felt more comfortable reflecting on his being bound to his family of origin:

[...] I come from a rather, how do you say it, ahmmm, so not a pious family but I mean so conservative, so with us, also with us, there are still today that families are distinguished, so there are so noble families, and there are others, so they are called so not noble families, and I was, I am just from such a noble family [...]. Sometimes I wished why are you from this corner, but it's you, you can't just change your identity like that or somehow because, when you get an upbringing as a child that anchors itself in you, that stays

in you, even if you can adjust more. There are people who totally adjust to a new culture and a new life without problems, but there are also people like me who don't feel completely comfortable with it.

Shifting self-presentations can be the expression of a rather stable present-day life situation, in which the connection to collectives, however, consists in a complicated process of “biographical navigation” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013).

4. Conclusion

Migration research informed by and informing Global Sociology faces the challenge of linking complex processes of spatial movements together with wider processes of social transformation (see Castles 2007). This includes the reconstruction of labelling processes and categories of power that shape and are shaped by movements and mobilities in an unequal world. It is thus crucial to engage critically and reflexively with group categories such as migrants or refugees.

In sociology, biographical research can contribute to this agenda by reconstructing migrantization from a processual perspective, meaning paying attention to multiple overlapping processes involved in movements, and migrantization and its heterogeneous consequences. Furthermore, methodologically it allows to contrast and link the dynamics that shape migrantized people's current perspectives and self-presentations in a certain setting with the complex dynamics that shaped their trajectories of movements, interwoven with biographical processes. Biographical research helps methodologically to take into account a variety of those conditions that have been discussed as central to connecting Global Sociology and critical, reflexive migration research. This is an historical, comparative, and holistic approach (Castles 2007, 367) that also takes the “transnational dimensions of social transformation” into account (ibid.; see also Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Çağlar 2015), “theorizing socialization across borders” (Amelina et al. 2021), in a “de-essentializing” or “non-groupist” take on the established repertoire of categories in migration research.

Empirically, I have tried to show how “doing migration” (Amelina 2020) not only takes shape in quite different ways depending on the sociohistorical context, but is in fact shaped by a multitude of overlapping processes and relational contexts. In turn, migrantization has different consequences for the migrantized. The findings on the self- and we-presentations of the migrantized, which I summed up in a typology, shows very diverse ways of how members of migrant groupings present and position themselves within figurations shaped by migration categories or migration-related “boundary making” (Wimmer 2008). Each type challenges us to think about what processes lead to what kinds of presentation, and what role power balances play.

Just as individualized presentations should not be taken for granted – that is, we should pay attention to the complex webs of dependencies in which the migrantized with individualized self-presentations act – we should not reproduce groupism, even if the migrantized *can* tend to present themselves in a “we group-oriented” way.

In the field of migration studies, we are accordingly called upon to adopt institutionalized methodological principles that contribute to reflexivity and allow the empirical investigation of these complex processes of migration-related boundary-making. In this article, I have tried to show how this empirical investigation takes shape in a project that is based on a processual, biographical perspective. Migration research without migrants, as should have become clear, does not necessarily mean not including the perspectives of mobile or moving subjects. However, the necessary critique of selective migration policies and the current political governance of movements and mobility in many contexts all over the world can in my view be formulated sharply and substantially, above all when one considers them in the context of the multitude of contradictory dynamics and power relations constituting movements and migrantization. Migrantization in the narrower sense of labelling movements within migration regimes and as a label in everyday life figurations is complexly related to the wider processes of social transformation that generate and are generated by movements and (im-)mobilities.

However, in this article I could only address some of the methodological considerations and advantages of linking Global Sociology and critical migration research through a biographical approach. Central methodological questions that arise especially from de- and postcolonial perspectives concern, for example, research relationships within very steep power inequalities, and power hierarchies within academia in general (Baur 2021). In particular, anthropological research on diasporas or displacement has shown again and again how including the experiences of actors during research can be combined with critical engagement and with de-essentializing the core categories under investigation (e.g., Brah 1996; Ramsay 2017; Werbner 2002).

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Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique

Introduction

Johannes Becker & Marian Burchardt

Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique
- An Introduction.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.37](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.37)

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.50](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.50)