

Migrant Scholars Researching Migration

Reflexivity, Subjectivity and Biography
in Research

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Valentina Mazzucato

Reflexivity in research and thinking of one's positionality are now commonplace, at least in certain disciplines such as anthropology and qualitative methodological traditions. I see reflexivity mainly used in two ways. One is through the work of critical feminist scholars who use their positions in society and their own lived experiences to reflect on broader issues of race and gender in contemporary society. An example is Maboula Soumahoro (2020), who uses her story as a French-Ivorian trained in the U.S. and now as a professor in France to reflect on black female identities at the beginning of the 21st century. A second way that reflexivity is used, primarily but not only in anthropology, relates to one's positioning in the field, how it affects our access to particular populations and events, and how our interlocutors engage with us and our research. The edited book by Mose, Brown, and Dreby (2013) is an example, it being a compilation of chapters by anthropologists of the family that reflect on how the unfolding of one's own family life intersects with one's work in the field. A commonality in both ways of thinking about reflexivity, apart from their use of personal experience, is how they use the art of writing as just that: an art. They experiment with different narrative forms, including poems, vignettes, and dialogues.

Inspired by these works, I would like to use this chapter as an opportunity to focus on a third way to use reflexivity: not to reflect on broad societal themes, nor to discuss how we interact with our research interlocutors, but to reflect on how our past affects the theoretical and methodological choices we make in research. As an interdisciplinarian, I am convinced that all theories and methods have something to contribute to our understanding of the world. But one person cannot master them all, so we make choices, choosing what to study and how and which theories and methods to use in our analyses. These choices are guided by our predilections, where we feel more affinity, training, and values, all of which relate to how we grew up and the experiences we gathered along the way. Such choices are made by all researchers, not just women of color, anthropologists, or qualitative researchers. Also, the white male researcher who conducts quantitative economic analyses is influenced by his history. And while the analysis of our story and how it affects our theoretical and methodological choices does not necessarily bring us new insights into the social phenomena we study, being cognizant of how our histories influence our academic choices helps us to be more humble in the way we interact with

researchers of other traditions or other theories and methods than the ones we are used to, as well as with other forms of knowledge outside of academia, gained from practice and everyday experiences.

As part of this humility and openness to other approaches, we need to reflect on how we represent. Who is representing, who is being represented, and what is the most ethical way of doing so? These fundamental questions are addressed by Spivak and Harasym (1990) when they explain that as researchers representing others, which we always do when conducting social scientific research, we need to acknowledge our situatedness: we are always inside discourse, culture, institutions, and geopolitics.

In this chapter, I will reflect on how my own migration story is intertwined with the theoretical, methodological, and empirical choices I made as a scholar on migration. I will address three aspects of my research: how I came to be a migration scholar in the first place, why I dedicated myself to developing theory and methodologies to operationalize a **transnational approach** to migration, and why I am currently developing the area of study of **youth mobility trajectories** as a way to move beyond static categories of first- and second-generation migrants. I will analyze the first and third aspects as cases in which my own life experiences affected the focus and aim of my research. In contrast, the second aspect is a case of an academic theory that helped me reflect on my own lived experiences as a migrant. A vignette from my life will precede these three reflections.

How I came to study migration

I was so nervous: my first day of school in the United States, and I didn't speak a word of English, despite the fact that my mom and I had sat in front of our record player in Italy for one hour a day for a few months, reciting the words that a man in a British accent asked us to repeat.

I walked into the second-grade classroom holding tightly onto my mother's hand. I could not believe my eyes. My teacher, Mr. Fletcher, had the most amazing hair I had ever seen. It was the 1970s, and his afro was massive, extending a good 20 cm from his head. He was the first person of color that I had ever seen. He walked up to me and gave me a big bear hug, his afro prickling my face. I was a bit scared but very intrigued. This was so different from anything I had ever experienced in school in Italy, where teachers would sit behind their big desks with stern faces and expect us to sit still the whole day. I came to learn that Mr. Fletcher's bear hugs were his signature trademark, and I loved them. I would conveniently place myself close enough to him, pretending not to notice, hoping he would come by and give me a bear hug. And he always did!

I migrated from Italy to the United States when I was seven. My educational trajectory, from the second grade in Mr. Fletcher's class up to and including my master's degree, was all in the U.S. During and after my schooling, I lived in France and various African countries. I then moved to the Netherlands, where I pursued a

PhD degree, which also required me to live in Burkina Faso. I have been in Dutch academia ever since. When I started as an academic, I never thought, ‘I’m a migrant. Why don’t I study migration?’ Rather, migration is a topic that came to me while studying something very different: soil and water conservation technologies in Burkina Faso. But that is also not the entire story. My turn toward migration research also came at a stage in my life where I had to make some changes. I will explain both of these influences.

I lived in Burkina Faso on and off for 2 years, spending 3 or 4 months there at a time while undertaking my PhD research. I lived there with my 6-month-old child, whose first words were “ça va?” repeating the words she most often heard from the children that followed us in our Fada N’Gourma neighborhood: “Eh, bébé, ça va?” It was only toward the end of my fieldwork in Burkina Faso that I realized I was missing interviews with 18–25-year-old men. I knew they were migrating to the Ivory Coast in search of work. During one of my last trips to villages outside my study area, I noted a curious thing. There were two villages just five kilometers from each other, inhabited by the same peoples, who spoke the same language and had similar political and social structures. There was a noticeable difference. In one village, the homes were round mud-baked huts with thatched roofs, typical of the region. The other was interspersed with two-story, rectangular cinder block homes with corrugated iron roofs and glass windows. How was this possible? I discovered that in the latter village, some of the young men had migrated to Italy and picked tomatoes. The pay was low and the conditions harsh, but these young men managed to send remittances to their families, who in turn built sturdier houses. I was observing this phenomenon in 1997, when international migration was just starting in this region, so there were still villages that did not have international migrants. I realized then that I had been so focused on the local village economy that I had been blinded to what was happening outside of the village and possibly more important to the sustenance of the farmers than agricultural technologies. I, therefore, decided that my next project would be about these young men, their lives in Italy, and how they affected life in their villages of origin.

But there was more to my shift in research focus. By this time, my first child was 3 years old, and I was pregnant with my second. My husband and I no longer wanted to live on different continents—me in Africa, he in Europe. I did not ask him to follow me to Africa. I had seen too many expatriate marriages end in divorce when one of the partners was obliged to make too many sacrifices. Most importantly, I noticed that no matter how hard expatriates in African countries might try to integrate their children into the local communities, children inevitably grew up with a view of the world where people of color provided services for white families and where expatriate children attended exclusive schools. All of this contributed to developing a taken-for-granted attitude in children toward their privilege. I did not want my children to grow up this way.

Studying migration became a way for me to continue to pursue my passion for West African cultures but to do so in a context that was amenable to raising a family in a way that reflected my values. I chose Amsterdam as my home, the most multicultural city in the Netherlands. My children attended the neighborhood

school that included people from all socioeconomic classes and 28 countries. I was also attracted to the topic of the Burkinabé young migrant men because, occasionally, it would take me to Italy. How wonderful would it be to work in my country of origin after having been absent for more than 30 years?

Many things came together for me in this choice: my curiosity and observations in Burkina Faso, my passion for West African cultures, and my needs at this particular life stage all contributed to my interest in understanding how West African communities were being affected by migration. So, my research interests and my biography intersected to shape this choice.

Transnationalism: a concept and a methodology

Growing up in the US, my life revolved around school, friends, parents, siblings, Girl Scouts, swimming and soccer teams, and college applications. But it was also influenced by people and events in Italy: my loving and dotting aunt and uncle, the long summer vacations, the teenage love stories, the food, and the songs by ‘cantautori’ that I would sing at the top of my lungs with my cousins. These worlds intertwined. My links with the two countries fueled my passions and choices growing up. Such as becoming the head of my high school’s international students’ club and the choice to study French and spend a semester abroad in France twice – because being in contact with different cultures all my life made me curious to explore the world. But also later, when choosing an internship during the summers between my college education, I chose the Associated Press and the Food and Agriculture Organization partly because I was attracted to what they did, but also because they were postings in Rome. I longed to spend periods of time in Italy with my aunts and uncles and fantasized about how it would be to live there, not just for vacations.

In order to realize the change in research focus that I chose for myself, I worked on a research application to study migration. Burkina Faso became Ghana, and Italy became the Netherlands—how research funding influences topics of research is an interesting and related topic, but one that I cannot develop in this chapter—and the focus on the ‘origin’ country became a transnational focus. As I was reading migration studies, it struck me how focused they were either on the country of destination of migrants, with issues of integration dominating academic inquiry, or on the country of origin, with matters of a country’s economic development taking the fore. I stumbled upon the concept of ‘transnationalism,’ which at the time was just beginning to permeate scholarship. Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton were the first to theorize the concept when they defined it as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (1992, p. 1). It immediately spoke to me because it identified what was at the time a gut feeling that I hadn’t yet put into words that migration was mostly talked about as an either-or situation: either a migrant is part of a ‘host’ community or, failing that, they will return ‘home.’ In reading Glick-Schiller’s

work, I became intensely aware of how my own life, exemplified in the vignette, was ‘doubly engaged,’ a term I later wrote about (Mazzucato, 2008).

Transnationalism resonated with my experience as a migrant much more than the more commonly used concept of integration. Its nation-state focus—you integrate into a national culture, economy, or society—had too much of a boxed-in feel to it. Likewise, the concept of identity felt static and confining. I had phases of my youth where I wanted to be American and just like the rest of my classmates, but I also had stages where I felt enriched to be of Italian background, to have familiarity with another culture, and to be fluent in more than one language. Both integration and identity felt like concepts guided by the outside; that is, the way in which society frames being a migrant. They did not resonate with how I felt inside. For example, I never quite knew how to answer the oft-asked question, “Do you feel more Italian or more American?” Or, because I do not look like most Italians who migrated to the US, my ‘Italianness’ would be questioned. By focusing on the linkages that people forge between countries at various levels, be they in their relationships, behaviors, identities, or political or economic activities, a transnational perspective seemed to do the most justice to the way migrants live their lives, emotions, and affects.

It is one thing to recognize transnationalism as a concept and phenomenon, but it is another to know how to study it. My migration story influenced the way I would develop methodology in two ways. Moving to Burkina Faso brought me into contact with people, life experiences, and conversations that would sensitize me to the need to include an equal focus on migrants and those who remain in the country of origin. More generally, frequent exposure to a diversity of people and cultures also made me more open to working in teams. I will explain both below.

As a newcomer to the migration field, I realized that even within the field of transnational migration studies, most research was focused on the migrant. Studies might ask about the families and friends back in the home country, but hardly any information was collected from people in the home country. This felt very one-sided. I recalled sharing with Tchamba, a woman in my study village in Burkina Faso, how much we each missed our loved ones—I, my husband, who had remained in the Netherlands, and she, her son, who had left for Ivory Coast almost 1 year earlier. The emotions of this mother were missing in the literature, which was full of monolithic accounts about the pressures experienced by migrants due to the unlimited requests for money from family members back home who did not understand the harsh conditions migrants faced overseas. But where was Tchamba’s side of the story? Tchamba was worried about the aggression against migrants in Ivory Coast at the time. My extended stays in African countries made me imagine real people at the other end of a migration stream. I knew I would hear another version of the migration story, as those left at home see things differently from the migrants.

In operationalizing the concept of transnationalism, I wanted to give equal weight to the people and communities in the origin country as to migrants in their country of residence. But how to include the multiplicity of people—their voices, behaviors, ideas, and emotions—that create the ‘transnational social field’ that

Glick Schiller and colleagues theorized about? Reflecting on my own life helped me develop the simultaneous multi-sited matched sample methodology (Mazzucato, 2009). To me, this was not just an academic exercise; it was a way to reconcile the way I would study migration with the knowledge I gained from the experiences and conversations I had while living in Burkina Faso.

I developed the simultaneous matched sample (SMS) methodology when multi-sited research designs were not common. The innovation of the SMS methodology is that people in different parts of the world who are linked to each other are studied *simultaneously* and given *equal* importance in the research. The SMS methodology has a particular characteristic: it can only be done through intensive teamwork. Researchers in different locations capture the everyday micro-actions entailed in maintaining linkages across large distances, such as the emotional and material effects of an international call or the consequences that imprisonment in the Netherlands has for family members in Ghana (Mazzucato, 2009).

Qualitative social scientists are neither encouraged nor taught how to work in teams. However, the way that I wanted to approach transnationalism, with just as much focus on origin contexts, meant that it was important to work in teams and to include researchers from origin countries. This adds an intercultural component to teamwork, a characteristic that, along with interdisciplinarity, has been at the center of most of my research projects.

My experience with different cultures, both due to my family's migration to the U.S. as well as my subsequent periods living in France and various African countries, helped me to develop teamwork skills such as intercultural communication or the perspective needed to recognize that your method is neither the only nor necessarily the best way of doing things. Each of my projects had healthy team dynamics characterized by a large degree of collaboration and always produced co-authored publications. They also contributed to African researchers building research careers in their home countries.

About categories—youth mobility trajectories

In the first weeks of my second-grade class, I had difficulties understanding what was going on and what was being said in this language I did not yet know. Seeing my discomfort, Mr. Fletcher put me at a desk with Maria. Maria was also Italian but had migrated a few years earlier, so she could explain things to me. But when she did, I did not understand a word. I was embarrassed and didn't say anything. I just smiled, pretending. The teachers, realizing I was still not understanding what was happening in the classroom, called my parents to explain that they suspected I had a learning disability. My parents could hardly believe their ears. I'm not sure how my mother was able to speak with Maria, but when she did, everything fell into place. Maria came from another region of Italy and spoke that region's dialect, which differs from the standard Italian I knew. There was more that created a distance between Maria and me: Maria had never traveled to Italy since migrating to the U.S. at a very early age, and she felt no particular affinity with me just

because I was also Italian. In fact, she would rather be with her American classmates than hang out with me, which only served to highlight her difference from the rest.

This story is emblematic of how the categories used in migration research foreground only some characteristics—that of ethnicity and migrant generation—with all sorts of consequences for how we understand the realities faced by youth with a migration background. The differences between Maria and me were many. While we were first-generation migrants from Italy, our families came from different backgrounds. Her parents were educated up to middle school and worked as gardeners and housekeepers. My parents both finished university and were working as university professors and homemakers. We spoke different languages. I was encouraged to engage with my Italian background by speaking Italian at home and frequently returning to Italy for the holidays. Maria's parents wanted her to learn English perfectly and therefore did not encourage her to speak Italian at home. They also never traveled back to Italy. Maria and I never sought each other's company, and our being forced together by the teacher in the vignette caused us both discomfort. The categories of 'Italian' and 'first-generation migrant' created the presumption of commonality between Maria and me that neither of us felt.

Reflecting on my experience with Italy through my yearly 3-month visits and my stays with my aunts and uncles, particularly one who felt almost like a second mother to me, made me realize how important people growing up can be for a young person located in different countries, especially if one has a migration background and continues to travel back and forth. Yet, categories such as first- and second-generation bring the focus of research to the country where young people reside. The categories define when one has entered the country of residence: either in one's lifetime (first generation) or before one's lifetime (second generation). They encourage researching young people as though what is relevant to them is only located in their country of residence: their family, neighborhood, school, and community. Yet Maria and I seemed to intrinsically differ in terms of how we related to Italy, with me traveling back and forth and maintaining meaningful relationships with people and places there while she focused much more on her life in the U.S. with no trips to Italy. This might be linked to social class, parental education, and, very simply, having the disposable income to be able to afford international flights and vacations, but this was up for investigation. Whatever explains why some children travel back to their country of origin and others do not, the question that intrigued me, reflecting on Maria and me, was what effects these travels have on the way young people grow up: their sense of who they are, the strengths that may derive from that, and the material and non-material resources that they accumulate to influence their futures.

I was also interested in seeing to what extent such travels affected the composition of networks that young people could draw on for support. While studies on migrant youth show the importance of social networks, they only focus on members living in the same country as the young person. My parents were very important to me, but how could I show my uncle's and aunt's importance to me, even if they

resided in Italy? When we lived in Italy, although we lived in different houses, we were always together, as is common in societies where extended families are important forms of social organization.

These reflections led me to develop the concept of ‘youth mobility trajectories,’ defined as ‘the moves that young people make in space and time and the concomitant changing family constellations along the way’ (Mazzucato, 2015). It is both a concept and a method as it allows the systematic collection of the travel histories of young people with a migration background, irrespective of their generation, and the important people for them along the way to understand how such travels impact their lives. Figure 14.1 illustrates Maria’s and my mobility trajectories.

My team and I are still in the midst of this project, but interesting findings are already emerging. Studies on the educational outcomes of migrant youth have indicated the importance of the whole ecology around a child, not just the school but also the family and caregivers, social networks of peers, neighborhoods, and cities they live in. From transnational studies, we know that migrants remain engaged with their home country through their imaginaries, virtual communication, sending money and packages, and travels. Our study shows that trips, in particular, equip the youth of migrant backgrounds with various resources that enable them to better position themselves in the societies in which they live (Ogden & Mazzucato, 2021; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2020).

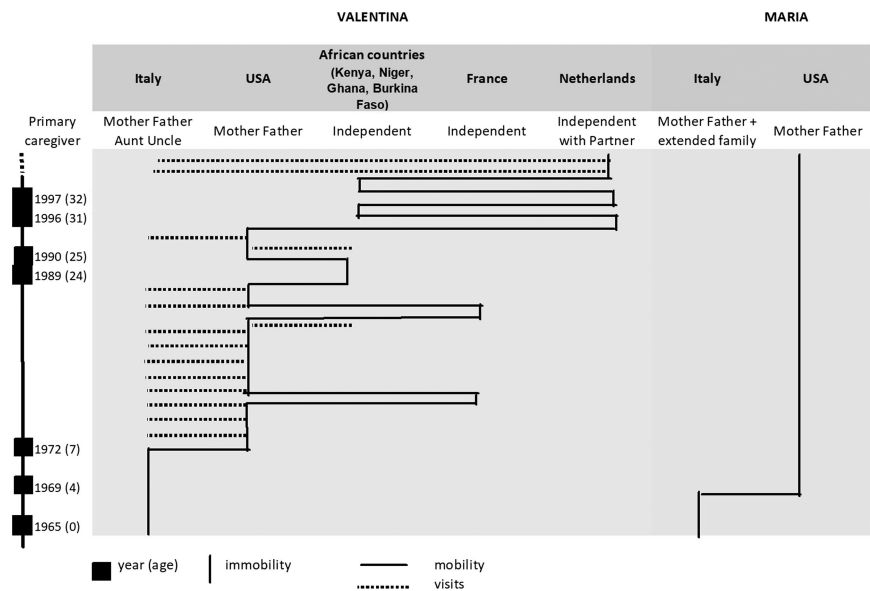


Figure 14.1 Valentina’s and Maria’s youth mobility trajectories

Note: An example of how to read the mobility trajectory: in 1989, I moved from the U.S. to Kenya, where I stayed for a year, and then moved back to the U.S., where I remained until 1996. I then moved to the Netherlands to live with my partner. Between 1990 and 1996, I undertook two short trips: one to Italy and one to Niger.

Because migration studies have focused on the ecological conditions of the child in the nation-state where they reside, they have ignored the potential role of people and experiences outside that nation-state. Not only in academia do we see a bias towards the country of residence, but also in practice. For example, many European countries have some form of financial penalty for parents whose children miss school, a regulation directed at migrant parents whose children might miss school due to travels to a home country (van Geel, 2019). This shows the presumption that home-country travel detracts from educational progress, yet no studies demonstrate this. By comparing children who often travel to those who do not travel to their or their parents' home country, we investigate the effects such travels have.

Part of the innovation of the concept of 'youth mobility trajectories' is that it can be used to investigate the role of mobility in the lives of children who do not move but whose parents do. These children are referred to in the literature as 'left behind.' Elsewhere I discuss why I do not adhere to this negative terminology—the children are not 'left' but continue to be cared for in various ways by their migrant parents and local caregivers (Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2020). Here I emphasize the fact that left-behind children in the literature are presumed to be immobile just because they do not move with their parents. In reality, they can be quite mobile, moving from one caregiver to another or from one school or city to another. Furthermore, the mobility trajectories we collected amongst Ghanaian youth living in three European cities showed that they, too, before coming to Europe, engaged in a diversity of mobility (van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018). Yet, migrant youth are studied in the context of the receiving country as though they have no past; they are a blank slate, and all that matters is what happens in the destination country. Our research shows that this approach turns a blind eye to all the mobility that young people may have engaged in before they arrived in Europe. Using such a concept thus shifts the focus of migration from only a 'receiving country' matter to also drawing linkages with origin countries.

Conclusion

My experiences of moving to the United States from Italy and growing up 'partially there and partially here,' as well as my migrations to various African countries, helped me to ask questions about migration that were not being asked by conventional migration studies at the turn of this century. I chose transnationalism as a conceptual framework for the study of migration between Ghana and the Netherlands because it resonated with my own experiences of growing up but also with what I was observing in the communities in Burkina Faso that I was researching. My multi-sited life drew me to develop simultaneous multi-sited and matched sample research designs and experiment with different categories than the common ethnic- and generation-based categories that are used to analyze the lives of youth with a migration background.

At the same time, it is not just my migration history that informed my research but also my research that informed the way I read my life history. My history is multi-sited, with my frequent and regular travels to Italy, which substantially

affected my life, the choices I made, my worldviews, the way I interact with people of different cultures, and my effects. Studying how Ghanaian young people living in Europe use the resources they gain during their travels to Ghana made me understand the variegated resources—material and non-material—that travels to Italy equipped me with, from my fluency in four languages to my passion for other cultures and the skills I developed to work in intercultural teams. The way young people of Ghanaian background use their transnational resources to face the hurdles they encounter in an educational system that is often prejudiced against them, made me realize the importance of having started my schooling in the U.S. with Mr. Fletcher, a teacher that made me feel appreciated and loved, parents who, although they did not know how the educational system worked, were brave enough to counter any misreading of my abilities, and an extended family who partially raised me during my stays in Italy. Ultimately, my research helped me to crystallize why I never felt like an Italian-American, or a first- or even a first-and-half-generation migrant, but rather someone who lived between two countries, with affects both ‘here’ and ‘there,’ imagining my future and reading my past as intimately linked with both the U.S. and Italy, and later the Netherlands, and accumulating friends and experiences in other countries along the way.

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