

Research Article

Transnational Involvement: Reading Quantitative Studies in Light of Qualitative Data

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Studies of migrant transnationalism are dominated by qualitative case studies. To take the field further, there is a need for more quantitative studies and for connecting quantitative and qualitative studies through a reiterative feedback loop. In order to contribute to this, we take two refined and original quantitative studies, one by Snel et al. and one by Portes et al., as a vantage point, commenting on the authors' organization of analytical categories and their operationalization of key concepts, in light of our own, qualitative data. These data come from a research project, EUMARGINS, where we analyze processes of inclusion and exclusion of young adult immigrants and descendants in seven European countries, using participant observation and life-story interviews in combination with statistical data. We conclude that the process whereby young migrants identify themselves in terms of ethnicity and belonging is context-specific, multidimensional, and hard to study quantitatively.

1. Introduction

The exact meaning of “migrant transnationalism” has agitated otherwise calm academics for roughly two decades. The challenges inherent in defining and operationalizing it may partly explain the relative paucity of efforts to quantitatively map the phenomenon, meaning that we still know relatively little about the scope and frequency of migrant transnationalism today. This paper is based on the premise that we need more quantitative studies to break this vicious circle. We contextualize our own qualitative findings by drawing on quantitative studies, as a vantage point for cross-camp dialogue and for reflecting on how our own data from the qualitative EUMARGINS research project can be of use to future quantitative research. A conclusion offers a few generalizations on the two methodological frameworks in the context of studies of migrant transnationalism.

It is fair to say that the whole transnational paradigm shift across the multidisciplinary field of migration studies emerged on a platform of qualitative research, being catalyzed by certain key anthropological works in the early 1990s by Georges, Grasmuck and Pessar, Rouse, Glick

Schiller, Basch, Szanton, and Kearney [1]. Later, mainstream sociology joined the trend [2], and forceful contributions were made by both qualitatively and quantitatively oriented scholars such as Portes, Guarnizo, Itzigsohn, Glick Schiller, Wimmer, Levitt, and Faist [3]. Early studies tended to see transnational migration everywhere and frame findings in a celebratory way and suffered from conceptual weaknesses common among innovative approaches [3]. There were a number of problems with these early studies in the way they theorized migrant transnationalism, during a period marked by “the excited rush to address an interesting area of global activity and theoretical development” [4]. Many of their shortcomings have gradually been addressed [5], while some of the initial criticisms continue to be made regardless of how they have actually been dealt with by a variety of scholars throughout a now massive range of literature [1]. There has been an increase in the articles key-worded “transnational” or “transnationalism” in the Social Science Abstracts Database from a mere handful in the late 1980s, to nearly 1,300 in 2003, of which almost two-thirds dated from 1998–2003 [6]. Illustratively, *Global Networks* were first issued in 2001. A review of sociological

immigration literature conducted by Fong and Chan in 2008 suggested that research employing the transnational approach published in the top three US sociological journals and *International Migration Review* had increased by more than 20 times since 2000 [7]. Against this backdrop, it is surprising that there are few comprehensive and quantitative studies of migrant transnationalism. Also, most studies on migrant transnationalism show remarkably little concern with methodology [8].

Ideally, there could be a kind of reiterative feedback loop where qualitative and quantitative studies interact and researchers from both camps build on each other's strengths. We argue in this paper in favor of reading qualitative data in light of quantitative methods, and also in favor of improving surveys according to the insight coming from a qualitative study, in the hope that this could stimulate and guide future survey-based studies and further efforts to re-read qualitative or quantitative data, respectively, in light of data from studies using the opposite method.

We take as a vantage point two good and original quantitative studies, one presented in the article "Transnational Involvement and Social Integration" by Erik Snel, Godfried Engbersen, and Arjen Leerkes, which was published by *Global Networks* in 2006 [9], and one presented by Portes in the article "Conclusion: Theoretical Convergencies and Empirical Evidence in the Study of Immigrant Transnationalism" in the *International Migration Review* in 2003 [8]. These are among only a handful of studies to deal quantitatively with the issue of whether transnational activities impede or foster the integration of immigrants. The article by Snel et al. [9] is of particular relevance and will receive the most attention here, as it is the only quantitative study we could find from recent years that comprehensively maps the transnational practices that migrants with broadly varying backgrounds and migration statuses engage in. Its relatively new conceptual distinction between transnational activities and transnational identification gave rise to an unusually wide range of operationalizations of transnationalism across social, economic, and sociocultural domains. This will probably make it relevant to future, more specialized quantitative research on narrower dimensions of migrant transnationalism and provide fertile ground for a conceptual discussion. Here we will neither go in-depth into these nor into other authors' findings, but will focus, in light of our own qualitative data, on the way the authors present and organize analytical categories and how they operationalize key concepts.

2. Background

As much as the qualitative approach allows researchers to convey the complexity of transnational identities and behaviors that shift across time, place, and space, the problem of sampling on the dependent variable, associated with the case study method, has been noted by Portes [10] and others. Both adherents and critics of the notion of migrant transnationalism draw attention to its limited empirical basis, because, as Snel et al. [9] argue: "Reflections

on transnationalism and transmigrants are often either theoretical or based on qualitative case studies. As these case studies tend to focus on migrants who are involved in transnational activities, they give the impression that transnationalism has become the major form of immigrant incorporation."

Many contemporary migrants maintain various kinds of ties to their homelands at the same time as they are incorporated into the countries that receive them [3], but hardly anyone believes that *everyone* does so. Waldinger [11] agrees that international migrants regularly engage in transstate social action, but contends that "neither transnationalism as a condition of being, nor transmigrants as distinctive class of people are commonly found"—meaning that it is more meaningful to look for the variety of types of transnational activities, each varying in terms of frequency and intensity as well as temporal modes (constant, periodic, and occasional), and each being politically, economically, and culturally structured. Even if a recent body of work has clarified the social spaces in which transnationalism manifests itself for migrants [3], large-n quantitative studies are still much needed to generate knowledge on these dimensions and their determinants. Only a few such studies exist. One important survey was conducted by Portes and his colleagues in the CIEP research project, of 1,202 Colombian, Dominican, and Salvadoran family heads, among whom it was found that "the number of immigrants who are regularly involved in cross-border activism is relatively small" [12]. Likewise, Portes et al. observed that in "the pooled and weighted CIEP sample, transnationals represent only 5 per cent of the total", although they made up 58 per cent of the self-employed [13].

Oeppen has identified one problem with these studies, as they depend, at least partly, on self-definition on the part of the respondent. For example, she says, in Portes et al. a transnational entrepreneur is defined as someone who owned their own firm and travelled abroad more than twice a year for business reasons and who answered "yes" to one of the following questions: "The success of my firm depends on regular contact with foreign countries"; and "The success of my firm depends on regular contact with [country of origin]". In other words, respondents' understanding of the key words—"success", "regular", and "contact"—has a significant bearing upon the case results [14]. This is to illustrate the complexity of conducting a quantitative study of migrant transnationalism, a phenomenon not easily conceptualized for the purpose of quantitative studies. The challenge of coming up with precise and operationalizable theoretical concepts is a difficult but also a constructive one. The nature of quantitative methodology forces research designers to make clear cut statements [14] and prevent levels of abstraction to reach the point where enthusiasm over theory leads to "global babble", as Abu-Lughod warned in the late 1990s [15].

3. Analytical Framework

The article "Transnational Involvement and Social Integration" offers a quantitative examination of the extent to which

migrants from various countries are involved in transnational activities and have transnational identifications [9]. Snel et al.'s study is based on a survey of 300 immigrants (from the USA, Japan, Iraq, former Yugoslavia, Morocco, and the Dutch Antilles), living in the Netherlands. The respondents are deliberately chosen to include different categories of immigrants, and recruited through "snowball sampling". Transnational activities, largely of a sociocultural nature, are found to constitute a substantial part of their lives, and many migrants also transfer money abroad. Professional economic activities were rare, however, and mainly limited to the American migrants. As a whole, respondents identified more with other compatriots living in the Netherlands than with people living outside the Netherlands. Snel et al. also conclude that transnational involvement does not impede "immigrant immigration", as migrant groups that are poorly integrated into Dutch society are not more involved in transnational activities and have no stronger identifications with the country of origin than other groups [9].

Another quantitative study of particular relevance here is Portes et al.'s Comparative Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project (CIEP) [10]. According to Portes, this study was the largest survey conducted so far "explicitly designed to gather evidence on the transnational economic, political, and sociocultural activities of immigrant groups." The CIEP study included both qualitative and quantitative data, but we will concentrate here on the quantitative part of the study. The survey included three targeted immigrant communities, namely, Columbians, Dominicans, and Salvadorans, in their principal areas of concentration in the USA. The study both analyzed activities corresponding to a "broad" definition of transnationalism, which included both regular and occasional activities, and activities that corresponded to a "strict" definition based on regular participation only. The study measures the frequency of affirmative responses to predefined questions. The result then is that, for example, transnational entrepreneurs represent only a small minority of the sample; however, they represent a large sample among those who are entrepreneurs. Similarly, the study found that only a small minority took part in cross-border political activities. Portes concludes that: "Taken as a whole, these results indicate that transnationalism is not the normative or dominant mode of adaptation of these immigrant groups. Most of their members pursue lives in the new country in relative oblivion of those that they left behind" [10].

In this paper, we read these and other quantitative studies in light of findings from a qualitative research project, EUMARGINS (2008–2011). This is a collaborative project financed by the EU. Research institutions in Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Estonia, Spain, Italy, and France are members of the EUMARGINS team, analyzing processes of inclusion and exclusion of young adult immigrants and descendants in these seven European countries using participant observation and life-story interviews in combination with statistical data. The researchers in each country have collected a minimum of 30 life-story interviews with young adults (18–25 years) of immigrant background (first generation immigrants or descendants). In order to factor in diversity, informants are recruited from various positions in

society, from different contexts, and with different migration statuses (labor migrants, descendants, irregular migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, those who immigrate through family reunification, etc.). In this paper, as opposed to the wider project level research, we restrict ourselves to making use of the Norwegian data material only. Out of 44 interviewees and two focus group discussions in Norway, a selection has been made of the 38 life-story interviews and two focus group discussions which contain reference to transnational activities.

The empirical parameters of our study are different than both Portes et al.'s and Snel et al.'s study. Firstly, Snel et al.'s study seems to focus on the so-called first-generation immigrants although there were also at least some descendants ("second-generation immigrants") among the respondents [9]. The same seems to hold for the CIEP study, although this is not specified in Portes' article [10]. Secondly, whereas the respondents from both these studies are of different ages, our respondents are young adults. The national institutional contexts, on the other hand, are relatively similar to our study and Snel et al.'s study. Both Norway and the Netherlands are European countries and advanced welfare states. The other study we have chosen for the sake of comparison is from the USA, where most of the research on migrant transnationalism has occurred [9, 16]. With its marginal social security, USA provides a different institutional context for transnational activities than European countries with advanced welfare states and may make transnational economic activity a more important livelihood for immigrants. Despite this, the CIEP study concludes that transnational activities are not very frequent. It might be however that the result would have been otherwise if they had included other countries of origin than Salvador, Dominican Republic, and Columbia.

Snel et al. focus analytically on two dimensions of transnationalism—transnational activities and transnational identification as "[t]hese two dimensions together give us insight into the transnational involvement of migrants." [9, page 289]. By *transnational activities* they mean "cross border activities of an economic, political or socio-cultural nature" [9, page 289], and the operationalization of these dimensions is inspired by a qualitative study by Al-Ali et al. of Bosnian and Eritrean refugees [17], offering a typology that distinguishes between transnational activities aimed at the country of origin and activities aimed at the host country. A second key dimension is *transnational identification*, which "refers to the extent to which migrants living in the Netherlands identify with compatriots outside the country" [9, page 290]. Transnational identification is thus not only limited to identification with compatriots in the home country, but also includes identification with any compatriot "living elsewhere outside the Netherlands" [9, page 290]. Although we do comment upon transnational identification, we pay more attention to transnational activities in Snel et al.'s article. These are presented in an overview [9, page 292], where the main categories are listed as follows: "Everyday economic activities"; "professional activities"; "political activities"; "sociocultural activities in country of origin"; "sociocultural activities in the host

country,” and each category has three-to-four subcategories. The three main categories of transnational activities are identical to those used in the CIEP study, although there are some minor differences regarding subcategories used [9]. In the CIEP study, the subgroups of economic activity are more equal to what Snel et al. labels professional activity [9]. The subcategories of economic activity in the CIEP study are “transnational entrepreneurs” and “transnational entrepreneurs as percent of self-employed” [10].

In the following, our commentary is structured around the analytical categories used by Snel et al. [9], but also incorporates transnational practices suggested by Portes et al. [10], as summarized in Table 1, as well as other quantitative studies. We are not the first to frame a discussion of migrant transnationalism around the categories offered by these two studies, Boccagni offers an interesting typology of the key forms of immigrant transnationalism by analytical level and social action domain [8]. The former is divided into identitarian-attitudinal analysis (bifocal identifications and senses of belonging), pointing both to country of origin and country of residence. The latter analytical level consists of social relationships persisting at a distance and social practices creating systematic connections between the country of origin and of residence.

4. Transnational Activities

4.1. “*Everyday Economic Activities*”. The temporal parameters for a definition of transnational activities are key to distinguishing between transnational practices as being “core” or “expanded” [18] and “regular” or “occasional” [10]. While Portes finds it paradoxical that transnationalism, as a new theoretical lens for studying immigration, is grounded on the activities of only a minority of immigrants, he also stresses that the broader impact of transnational practices is not a mere function of their frequencies [10]. As mentioned above, in the CIEP study, the word “regular” transnational contact was used to identify transnational entrepreneurs, but the meaning of “regular” depended on the respondents’ understanding of it [14]. Snel et al. [9] have no temporal element in their definition of migrant transnationalism as “cross-border activities of an economic, political, or socio-cultural nature”, but one of their analytical concepts, “everyday economic activities”, comprises “transfers of money to family”, “sending goods to country of origin”, “owning house in country of origin”, and “contributing to charities in the country of origin” [9]. By inserting the word “everyday” in the category they echo scholars who argue that in order to qualify as transnational in a meaningful way and avoid the charge of banality, transnational activities must be “regular and sustained” [12, 13]. However, it is only “owning house in country of origin” that intuitively fits with the analytical label “everyday”, and Snel et al. do not explain what is meant by “everyday”—whether it refers to a phenomenon as being “routine”, “constant”, “frequent”, and so forth [9]. This is not uncommon, as it is not always clear why temporal parameters are introduced in studies of migrant transnationalism or what is meant by them. Jayaweera and Choudhury [19],

TABLE 1: Overview of transnational activities (a modification of Snel et al., 2006 [9]: 292 and Portes 2003 [10]).

Everyday economic activities
(i) Transfers money to family
(ii) Sends goods to country of origin
(iii) Owns house in country of origin
(iv) Contributes to charities in country of origin
Professional economic activities
(i) Invests in companies in country of origin
(ii) Conducts trade with country of origin
(iii) Visits country of origin for business
Political activities
(i) Reads newspapers from country of origin
(ii) Keeps in touch with politics in country of origin
(iii) Member of political party in country of origin
(iv) Gives money to political party in country of origin
(v) Participates in demonstrations, political campaigns, or rallies related to country of origin
Sociocultural activities in the host country
(i) Member of organization related to country of origin
(ii) Attends meetings with primarily compatriots
(iii) Visits cultural events

for example, asked respondents about “regular” phone conversations with people in country of origin, but they neither defined what they meant by it nor included such a temporal parameter when asking about “transferring money to organisations in country of origin” or “keeping in touch with country of origin through media.”

Our interview data illustrate the pitfalls of the claim for regularity. B, a 24-year-old descendant of Pakistani parents, explains why, for instance, transferring money to family members in the country of origin does not have to be an “everyday activity” in order to be important.

When [my dad] came here and settled down—he wasn’t having a great time. But the only reason why he stayed was the possibilities in Norway. And he was determined that his family wouldn’t have a bad economy, that it wouldn’t have to go to sleep hungry. Like after he retired, his family wasn’t having a great time. And his siblings—he’d send a lot of money during the first years; he sent a lot of money the first years to the home country, to my mother and his siblings and. . . I remember, as well, last year that he helped his brother and sent him 50 000 Norwegian kroner [6330 EUR]. So then I and my sister helped him a bit. Cause we thought it was ok.

It is apparent from B’s narrative that the cash flow to family in the country of origin has not been an “everyday” activity. That the two sisters reacted by supporting their father financially also underlines the importance of not

disregarding the household level of analysis, where the practices of ordinary people and families do not necessarily square with demands for unilinearity. At the same time, gifts and money can also be remitted to support local or national authorities or communities in the country of origin [8].

Another example is provided by S, a 24-year-old immigrant from Sri Lanka who migrated to Norway through family reunion with his father. As in the previous example, several actors are involved in the transfer of remittances. Distinct from the first example, however, remitters are here also external to the household. S and his family moved first from Sri Lanka to India, while his father applied for asylum in Norway. He portrays this as a difficult time.

But we did get money from my father. He sent us money. It was good, it helps a lot. In the beginning we had some problems, but then we also received help from some of his friends—whom I don't know so well. But apart from that, when he was here [in Norway], we received money from here, and we got by.

According to Erdal [20], remittances are not necessarily restricted to the household in contemporary international migration, and sender-receiver relations are often far more complex than sometimes assumed. Finally, 24-year-old R, an Iranian asylum seeker whose asylum application was recently rejected, highlights the possibility of role reversal when it comes to sending remittances. Asked if he has any contact with his family in Iran, he replies as follows:

Yes, we have contact, but, how should I put it. You need to... have... a bank account first of all where we can transfer money; if a transfer takes place we need an account. We also have to pay a little tax from this. Firstly, we don't have a bank account. Second, we don't have the possibility of paying taxes. We had my aunt visiting once, she helped us a little.

Again, the temporal aspect matters, and the aunt helped when she visited, implying that reverse remittances do not happen on a regular basis. To not include them in a definition of transnational practices is to overlook that reverse remittances can be especially important as a transnational activity taking place at the beginning stages of migration [21].

4.2. Professional Economic Activities. As examples of “professional economic activities” Snel et al. cite “investments in, business dealings with, or business trips to the country of origin” [9], a category that can for some migrants overlap with circular international labor migration [8], although this is not acknowledged. This corresponds to what is called economic activities in the CIEP study, with the subcategories transnational entrepreneurship and transnational entrepreneurship when self-employed [10]. Finding that most immigrant groups participate little in transnational business activities, both studies conclude that “immigrant transnational entrepreneurship” rarely functions as an alternative route to social success for migrants. The heavy

emphasis on business in both studies selection of “professional” or “economic” activities however, excludes other kinds of transnational professional activities. Yet there is no inherent reason to focus exclusively on the economic and business-related aspects of professional activities, as the logic of global capitalism intensifies demand for transnational professionals. One could expand the parameters by calling it simply “professional activities”, a category of analysis that Portes describes as being still in its infancy in 2003 [10], but later has been applied on transnational professionals in the IT sector [22], architects and engineers [23], entertainers [5], technocrats [24], and will no doubt continue to be applied to other professional groups who engage in transnational activities, as their numbers only rise.

One of the reasons why it may be interesting to use this broader category, perhaps particularly from the host country perspective, is the possibility that transnational professional experience—a subdimension to transnational activities—promotes social mobility and structural integration. Both Snel and Portes find that transnationalism is more widely practised among the upper socioeconomic strata of the immigrant populations studied. We also found anecdotal evidence of this in our own study, although it was not systematically analyzed. One Chinese immigrant, 25-year-old F, was able to present references from relevant research experience in Hong Kong for his successful Ph.D. application at a Norwegian university. Another Ph.D. student illustrating another kind of link between professional transnational mobility and social mobility is G, a thirty-something male descendant of Indian parents. Being a surgeon, he wants to work for some years in India for a mix of personal and professional reasons. “I want to learn more about India and about my background. And I want to be a bloody good surgeon.”

Plans and aspirations for professional transnationalism may also be linked with a sense of belonging and identity issues. J, a 19-year-old immigrant from Somalia with refugee status, envisions working for a Norwegian NGO in Somalia, although she does not believe she will ever return to Somalia for good, and plans her long term future in Norway. Another interviewee reports that her Indian parents named her with an anglicised name to keep her options open for living in and applying for jobs in different countries. “A name that works both in India and in Norway and elsewhere”. Yet another informant cite international career options as one of the (admittedly several) reasons for studying medicine.

A relatively high number of interviewees, 5 out of 38, have either done a traineeship with or cite an interest in working for either the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) or the MFA in their country of origin. For A, a 21-year-old descendant of Pakistani parents, the dream is to be stationed abroad for Norway. “Or I get the possibility to represent Norway on different political issues in, for instance, Pakistan. One can give examples from Norway to Pakistan, not least to make Pakistan a better country.”

K, a 23-year-old Iranian immigrant, would have returned to Iran on a semipermanent basis, if he only had the financial resources to do so. His dream is to be an ambassador for Norway in Iran, seemingly combining his sense of belonging

to social networks in more than one country together with professional motivations. Although he thoroughly enjoys his holiday stays there, he says he knows it is difficult to settle there for the long term. *“I know that it’s difficult to live there, but if I’d have that job at the embassy and been able to live there and make money, that would have been a golden opportunity for me. And then I’m back and forth here [Norway] as well.”*

A third example of the seeming allure of the MFA service is given by M, a 21-year-old immigrant from Turkey. Asked about his career plans for the future, he says he wants to be Norway’s ambassador to Turkey.

I have advantages, yeah, since I know both cultures and have a Bachelor’s degree in languages. And I don’t have such a positive stance to the Turkish state, so there’s no danger that I work for “the other side”. And they do look at me as one of them, and then it’s easier. You can’t judge by my Turkish pronunciation that I’m a foreigner, so then it’s like that, you’re one of us, so one can work for both sides.

Whether or not these interviewees will succeed with their plans is beside the point, as their narratives suggests that “professional transnationalism” is a more comprehensive analytical category than its subset, “professional economic transnationalism”. “Transnational entrepreneurship”, referred to in Snel et al.’s article [9], is in our increasingly interconnected world just one of several transnational career paths for young professionals.

Finally, as we see in our own data, professional transnationalism does not necessarily imply cross-border activity. L, a 24-year-old immigrant from Poland, with a Norwegian father and a Polish mother, is firmly based in Norway and wishes to reduce to a minimum the time he spends in his “hometown” in Poland, which he finds stressful. Professionally however, he capitalizes on his transnational skills and connections. While pursuing a higher education in labor legislation, he runs his own private company—five minutes off campus for ease of access—offering practical advice and legal consultancy in matters related to labor legislation to companies, laborers, and individuals from Norway and Poland. Being fluent in both languages he has both the legal expertise and the cultural capital to act as a broker in conflicts, to “translate” between cultures, and to connect Norwegian employers with Polish laborers within a legal framework. As Polish labor migrants often work in the secondary sector in Norway and Poles constitute the largest immigrant group in the country, he plausibly sees a “huge need” for his kind of competence. Theoretically, being based in Norway and though operating outside the financial sector, his professional practice puts him squarely in the transnational social field, defined as “a set of interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” [25].

4.3. Political Activities. While few of the respondents in Portes’ CIEP sample engage in transnational politics either on a regular basis, and even on an occasional basis less

than one-fifth of the sample do so, “transnational politics” is understood as a cross-border activity [10]. This seems somewhat antiquated in our digitized age of time-space compression, and Snel here takes a more inclusive approach that would likely raise that number. “Political activities relating to the country of origin” are broken into four dimensions in Snel et al.’s article [9]. “Reading newspapers from country of origin”, “keeping in touch with politics in the country of origin”, “being member of a political party in country of origin”, or “participating in demonstrations related to the country of origin”. Boccagni [8] adds “motherland-related political activism” (enacted “here” or “there”), “distance voting”, and “exercise of dual citizenship” as further categories.

Although many of our informants seem to have some kind of knowledge about the general state of political affairs in their country of background/origin, very few explicitly talk of participation in any kind of the activities outlined above. One exception is D, a 20-year-old immigrant from Afghanistan with refugee status. He says he feels much more at ease hanging out with his friends from Afghanistan than when he is around Norwegians: “. . .if I’m with people from my homeland, perhaps we talk about politics and what’s going on in the home country and. . . what’s going on. If we talk with Norwegians they might be talking about something completely different (. . .). So that’s why you do not always identify with the other.”

Knowledge of country-of-origin politics is an identity marker and keeping in touch with politics in the country of origin may make it easier to get in touch with compatriots in the country of residence. This is, of course, not a unicausal relationship, as demonstrated by F’s story below.

F, a 22-year-old man who migrated to Norway through family reunification at the age of ten, went through a period in his early teens when he felt alienated from the Somali community. ((1) A is not part of the EUMARGINS data pool, but belongs to a previous research project [26, 27].) After first starting taking an interest in Somali culture, starting to frequent a Somali café and especially after a stay in Somalia, he also got involved in homeland affairs and politics. F’s narrative exemplifies that a formal, institutionalist view of homeland politics is narrow and Eurocentric. In Somalia, the clan functions as one principle of political organization complementary to Snel et al.’s category of “being member of a political party in country of origin”, and the clan defines a form of social commitment that F was not aware of in his youth. He experienced it for the first time in the Somali café, when an unknown man asked him for one hundred kroner. When F asked “why”, the man said that they had gathered money for a school that was built in the village where F was from, and that he had to pay because he was from the same clan as the man was. Since then, F developed a positive view of clan politics. Among other things, he also likes the way the clan is used as a conflict resolution tool. He says that even in Norway if people fight, they report it to the elders in their own clan and the other clan. “We do it just the way they do it in Somalia, here in Norway”. The elders meet and propose a solution to the conflict. After this, they go to the police if necessary. Today, F’s Somali belonging is a form of politicized

ethnicity, linked to his current community work for Somalis living in Norway. What started out as socialization with co-ethnics morphed into involvement in homeland affairs and has had a series of implications for his ethnic identification.

These examples serve to show that knowledge of political affairs is also a kind of cultural capital facilitating socialization with co-ethnics in the country of residence, and often at least as much sociocultural as political. It seems somewhat arbitrary then, when Snel et al. [9] defines media consumption (country of origin newspapers) as political and Vancluysen et al. define it (watching country of origin language television) as sociocultural [16]. In D's example, knowledge of current affairs in the country of origin is a marker of identity among co-ethnics in the country of settlement. In F's case such knowledge also helps him to assume a position as a bridge-builder between less integrated co-ethnics and the Norwegian society. What both these examples suggest is that there is an internal relationship between transnational connections stretched across nation-states and the social life of migrants within the country of settlement. In a rational actor perspective, this raises the vexing question of *meaning* for quantitative researchers. Is transnational politics for migrants a means towards the end of migrant-specific cultural capital [28] in the country of origin, or in the country of settlement, or both? The same question applies to other modes of migrant transnationalism, of course, and the answer will shape our understanding of the yet unresolved relationship between immigrant assimilation and transnationalism.

4.4. Sociocultural Activities in the Country of Origin. As defined by Itzigsohn and Saucedo [26], sociocultural transnationalism “concerns the emergence of practices of sociability, mutual help, and public rituals rooted in the cultural understandings that pertain to the sense of belonging and social obligations of immigrants. [It is] more affective oriented and less instrumental than political or economic transnationalism” (page 768). The three categories pertaining to “sociocultural activities in the country of origin” are outlined as follows in Snel et al.'s article: “visits to family/friends in country of origin”, “frequent contacts with family in the country of origin”, and “membership in social organization in the country of origin” [9]. As for the former category, several points may be made. Firstly, our interview data suggests a considerable change over time in the frequency of visits to family/friends in the country of origin/background. G, for instance, an 18-year-old descendant of Pakistani parents, was asked about the frequency of return visits: “I haven't been [in my hometown]... I think this is the fifth year, yeah, five years since last time I was there. But before, when we were kids, we used to go almost every year.”

O, a 19-year-old descendant of Turkish origin, maintains that the transnational ties to the parents' homeland remain important although he does not go there often: “Yeah, I used to travel there every year, but now that I got older it's perhaps less. But it means a lot. The Turkish national team in football means the world for me.”

Portes argues that longitudinal data are required to examine the crucial issue of generational transmissibility [10].

However, mere sensitivity to temporal dynamics and fluctuations in the levels of transnational activity would go a long way. Childhood experiences of return visits may foster a sense of belonging. Inversely, growing up may entail a reorientation and a reassessment of one's sense of belonging. B, a 24-year-old descendant of Pakistani origin, elaborates eloquently on the temporal, dynamic aspect.

[I stopped going there] as I was studying and busy with my own stuff. And I had to work in the summer holiday. But now that my father passed away I spent some time there. And now that I have a bit more time, and it's not so expensive to travel, I have decided to spend some time there. Now I'll try to go there maybe once during 3-4 years. And then try to maintain contact. At any rate I'll never be blonde, so it's good to know. I am particularly thinking, if I'll get children, that it's very good if they too know the place where Mum and Dad are from. And I have great respect for my father, and for that country. I have equal respect for Norway. So even if it doesn't define me as a person, I want my children to know about that country as well, because they all live in Norway. So it is very important, as I don't want them to forget our roots.

Not only temporal, one could call this an inter-generational dynamic. According to Levitt and Jaworsky, many scholars of migration accept that transnational practices and attachments are widespread among “first generation immigrants”, but far fewer think they persist over subsequent generations [3]. However, “(...) the same children who never go back to their ancestral homes are frequently raised in households where people, values, goods, and claims from somewhere else are present on a daily basis. They have the skills and social connections to become transnational activists if and when they choose to do so during a particular life-cycle stage” [3]. It is thus important to bear in mind when doing quantitative studies on transnational contact that although interviewees like B would receive a low score on the category of “visits to family/friends in the country of origin”. This can serve as a reminder to quantitative researchers to distinguish analytically between transnationalism as “ways of being”, the social relations and practices that individuals engage in, and “ways of belonging”, as practices that signal or enact an identity demonstrating a conscious connection to a particular group (Schiller 2003 cited in Levitt & Jaworsky 2007) [3].

Return visits is a sociocultural activity, often constituting a transnational “way of belonging”. Any quantitative assessment of the frequency of return visits, however, needs to factor in the legal-bureaucratic and other practical obstacles that condition migrants' ability to go for return visits. The skills and social connections that Levitt and Jaworsky refer to are situated within a very material, practical framework. It is easily forgotten that the ability and the aspiration to engage in transnational activities, especially return visits, are

likewise best analyzed as separate matters. For N, a 26-year-old descendant of Moroccan origin, practicalities strain her mobility resources.

Yeah, I try to return once a year. But it's not always so easy economically. It costs a lot. But the last three years I've returned there on a yearly basis. (...) You have to buy flight tickets when you go there, since you have to go to Spain and then from Spain to Morocco. Eventually take the boat. So it's no... It depends a bit on when you travel as well. If you travel during winter season, it's a lot cheaper than if you go during high season in summer. So it depends. But generally, it costs 6000–7000 kroner. And you need something to live by down there [as well as buying gifts for close kin].

Moreover, the mere possibility of return, not easily observable or quantifiable, may itself be conceptualized as promoting transnational involvement. Whether or not M, a 26-year-old immigrant from Iran with refugee status, pays frequent visits to Iran, his transnational connection remains very real in his narrative, though latent. It will not be translated into reality before a regime change takes place.

It doesn't really matter to me where I live, as long as I am content, have peace and am at ease with myself, so it's fine-regardless if I live in Norway or Iran or wherever. Because that [search for one's true identity] is finished for my part. Because one day, deep inside, I know that I will return, I do.

Thus, *imagined* return feeds into transnationalism as a “way of being”. The complexity of imagined returns is underscored by the fact that M, minutes afterwards, says he may in fact nevertheless settle for good in Norway.

A distinct analytical point may also be made as regarding the location of Snel et al.'s analytical category of “frequent contacts with family in the country of origin” as a sub-category to “transnational activities in country of origin” [9]. Firstly, this is in reality a two-way process, and *hosting* family members, in the country of residence, is perhaps similarly important as a transnational practice. As S, a 26-year-old descendant of Indian origin reminds us, restricting transnational contact to contact with family only in the country of origin/background is problematic.

Interviewer: What about relatives and that stuff... were you often in India?

S: Yes.

Interviewer: And do you often get relatives and the like here?

S: Well, it depends. My grandmother has been here, for 3 months. But she's most happy in India. My grandfather was here. Then he died. My aunt has been here on several occasions. And it's like, cousins and different people. But lots of people came through business connections. Lots of visits from India. Definitely. But not necessarily so much family and relatives.

S here talks about transnational business connections and family contact, though none of it would be ticked in Snel et al.'s [9] overview as these are activities in the country of residence. The transnational practice of playing the host to guests should however not be disregarded, not the least due to the symbolic and social value accorded it in many different cultural contexts. Although the cultural value of playing the host has receded in modern industrial societies, hospitality is still an important and defining feature of all societies and communities [27]. According to Derrida, there is no culture that is not also a culture of hospitality: “Hospitality—this is culture itself” (Derrida 2005 cited in Westmoreland 2008) [29]. Secondly, although cyberspace transcends the borders of nation-states, Snel locates “frequent contacts with family in country of origin” as an activity in country of origin in the overview [9]. Our informants maintain contact “here” when they are “there” and vice versa. T, introduced above, uses Facebook to keep in touch with family members in Albania on a daily basis. Y receives so many requests for “friendship” on Facebook by prospective wooers that she spends a lot of time simply blocking them. As T concludes: “Life is in Facebook. Everything is there.”

While the role of communication technology certainly merits attention, so does the physical contact. What we see from our data material is that identity issues often figured prominently when our interviewees spoke of their visits to relatives in other countries, and of holidays or sojourns in the country of origin/background. This typically led into statements of where the interviewee feels that s/he belongs, and where s/he envisions the future. There is a remarkable variety in the experiences described, however, as shown in the following.

For V, a 25-year-old male immigrant from Bosnia, who came to Norway at the age of nine, it feels natural to have Bosnian friends in Norway, but not to pay visits to Bosnia.

Nah, I send them an email now and then, my cousins. But that's it. I don't know if it's very natural to keep in touch with people you don't see very often. Given that you didn't know them very well before either. I don't necessarily see family ties as the thing that keeps you together. This is not a feudal society. That was a long time ago-it's now, and it's different.

E, a 21-year-old male descendant of Pakistani background, goes to Pakistan for summer holidays and to attend weddings and funerals. He has been there 8-9 times, and enjoys these travels a lot: “Here in Norway it's just my family, we have no one else here, and it's always alright to go down there to see the rest of one's family, and to see who we really are.” K, a 23-year-old male immigrant from Iran, likewise identifies strongly with Iran. Asked about how he feels when he goes for return visits, which he makes as often as possible, he replies: “It's incredibly nice! I feel at home. People do not look at you like a foreigner.” For others, such as T, a 17-18-year-old descendant of Albanian background, visiting “home” is an alienating experience in one sense. Local Albanians constantly point out her mispronunciation of Albanian words, for instance. On the other hand, she feels

more special there and gets more “special treatment”, and she refers to Albania as her home country: “Frankly, when I go to my home country I do not feel so welcome there. It’s like, not welcome, but I feel that I know that culture and not the one in Norway. It’s completely mixed, like, so I do not know where I belong, if you know what I mean.”

Luljeta’s classmate Y, descendant of Pakistani background, cuts in while listening to T’s narrative. She says she tries to adapt to the culture in Pakistan when she goes there for the sake of her parents, wearing a veil, not using her jeans, and adapting her way of talking to the way people talk there.

Y: I do it for my parents, to say it like that.

Interviewer: But do you feel more Pakistani there? And more Norwegian here?

Y: No, perhaps the opposite. More Norwegian there and more Pakistani here. I can’t... immediately when people see me and hear how I talk and... Some say I don’t master the language fully, that I talk with a dialect.

T: If you do that little thing [mistake], they will laugh at you.

Y: I know!

(Laughter)

(...)

Y: Yeah, it’s like that. They’ll mention it every single time we’re there. That’s how they are in the middle of everything. And we live in the middle of two cultures and when we are in our home country we are not quite... we are in a way nothing. We are everywhere.

Interviewer: But is it OK or?

Y: Yeah, it’s fun. It’s just fun, in a way. That we... I just think we’re unique.

This variety of experiences makes it difficult to draw clear conclusions concerning the relationship between “return visits” and transnational identity. Return visits may also function as reality checks whereby individuals realize how different they are from the locals in the communities they once emigrated from [30]. Whether return visits to Pakistan make you feel more Norwegian or more Pakistan, or whether you embrace “uniqueness” as Y, depends on such a wide range of contextual factors that simply knowing the frequency of “homeland” visits alone does not allow for a deeper analysis of identification. As held by Duval, “the return visit is perhaps best conceptualized as a process of identity negotiation between former residents and current residents of a particular community” [31].

4.5. “*Sociocultural Activities in the Host Country*”. Basing the study on The Netherlands, Snel describes transnational sociocultural activities in the country of residence as for instance “going to meetings attended mainly by compatriots, supporting cultural activities featuring artists from the country of origin, and joining migrant and other organizations in the Netherlands with connections to the country of origin” [9, page 293]. Portes likewise exemplifies migrant transnationalism in the political, sociocultural and political fields in terms of organizations [10]. The analytical emphasis is thus on organized, collective activities, taking place in the public realm. As argued by Itzigsohn and Saucedo [26], however, “[we] also need to explore the differences between the public and private transnational spaces” (page 790). For one thing, more private, individualized forms of transnational activities often take place prior to involvement in organized events of this kind, as identity processes in the home and in private may precede involvement in organized activities. Even with an organizational focus, individualized cultural consumption is hence not to be disregarded as a sociocultural activity in the country of residence. Although it blurs the distinction between ethnicity and transnationalism, Boccagni [8] defines “[predilection] for consuming goods from the country of origin” as “immigrant transnationalism” (somewhat oddly in the economic rather than the socio-cultural domain). U, a 23-year-old Hindi medicine student from India, whose parents brought her to Norway at the age of six, shows how the private and public may be seamlessly interwoven in everyday lives.

My parents have expressed very clearly throughout my upbringing how important it is to adopt different cultural values. They have done this in a number of ways for me and my brother. They read for us when we were small, religious and cultural stories, so that it became part of our childhood. We went and still go regularly to the Sikh temple and take part in the celebration of religious days, voluntary work based in the religious community, participation in community work where we represent Sikhs as a community in Norway... We watched Indian movies, which may arguably give some insight into the culture. We travelled and still travel frequently to India. We were often told what is right and wrong according to the culture, with reference to language, social affairs, important choices, and so on (...). We have learned to make Indian food by making it a family activity. I’m very fond of cooking, so I’ve been eager to learn how to make a number of Indian dishes.

An exclusive focus on organizational activities would leave out the private socialization into organizational involvement. The organized and formal may of course overlap with the unorganized and informal through social networks, again leaving a dichotomized understanding of the two insufficient. This is exemplified in the narrative provided by a 25-year-old immigrant from Bosnia, P. During her student days she was a passive member of a Balkan student association, and never became active and does no longer

know if the organization even exists. Furthermore, there is another Bosnian organization that she knows and could have been member of, but she takes issue with the organization's activities as well as with its leader. Asked how she knows this leader, she replies as follows:

I know her through some friends. I have a friend, no, let's see, the brother of my best friend takes on some duties in that association. So I get to hear some from him. And other people—you know, Bosnians know of each other, especially those who are at the university. So, [the leader of the association], I think she's done some courses with my sister, so I've got to know her through her.

What starts out as a spontaneously personal cultural activity may of course also become more organized with time. N, a 24-year-old male immigrant from Sri Lanka, whose mother brought him to India en route to Norway, was asked by our interviewer if he was part of a network connected to Sri Lanka.

N: Oh yeah, when we were in Western Norway there were not so many families. But we could play instruments, those Indian instruments, and then several persons were interested in learning from us. So we taught them. In that way you can say that... because there was a Tamil organization in Western Norway which found out about us, that we could play those instruments. And then we were offered to hold a concert, to teach others.

Interviewer: So that's how you got to know [other Tamils]?

N: Yeah (...).

N did not only “visit cultural events” related to the country of origin, but also played an active part in them. Again social networks seemed to have had an important role in facilitating contact between unorganized ethnics and organized coethnics.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that distinguishing between “sociocultural activities in the country of origin” and “sociocultural activities in the host country” does not always capture the transnational dimension very well. Religion, for instance, “does not only link migrants to coreligionists in the home and host countries; global religious movements unite members, wherever they live, with fellow believers around the globe” [3, page 140]. Another phenomenon ill fitting with the two geographical rubrics is the transnational family, whose members “live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely “familyhood”, even across national borders” [32, page 3].

5. Conclusion

Many of the studies on transnationalism or transmigrants are either theoretical or based on qualitative empirical research,

and both Snel and Portes offer a much-needed quantitative examination of the levels of transnational involvement. Believing that more statistical studies of transnationalism are needed for a better understanding of its scope and frequency, we have commented upon their operationalization and concepts with reference to our own qualitative data, reminiscent of how Snel developed analytical categories with reference to the qualitative data of Al-Ali et al. [17] in the hope of contributing to the further refinement of future studies of migrant transnationalism [9]. We have also drawn on other quantitative studies that have been narrower in scope, again focusing on operationalization and analytical categories rather than their findings.

Since the purpose of this paper has been to stimulate further quantitative research, our approach has been a practical and hopefully constructive one, as we seek to discuss unnecessarily rigid definitions of quantitative variables with the aim of refinement, attuning them more to the experiences and realities of migrants as qualitatively derived. It follows that we are more concerned with sharpening the tool-kit of quantitative researchers against “real world” qualitative data than with providing an epistemological treatise on quantitative and qualitative research juxtapositioned. We would, however, like to end off with a few generalizations on the two methodological frameworks in the context of studies of migrant transnationalism.

Firstly, quantitative research, with its typical claim for more representative and comparable data, can often provide findings that policy makers perceive as more directly relevant to them. As seen in refugee studies [33], the quest for policy relevance may stimulate research on practical policy challenges to fill empirical gaps without necessarily having to be conducive to the generation of new theory. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that the transnational lenses on migration studies were first suggested by qualitative researchers applying a social actor-based perspective, as the epistemological objective of exploring migrants' experiences and realities from an emic perspective tends to characterize their work. Bluntly put, such migrant-centric perspectives gradually complemented (while by no means replacing) state-centric perspectives. It was not so much that the new turn was away from policy relevance; it was that the policy implications for migrants were singled out for analysis, as in transnationalism “from below” and “above”. Often, early findings were presented in a celebratory way as liberating and empowering. Later on, more somber analyses discussed “forced transnationalism” when migrants' neither-here-nor-there lives represented a state of limbo [34], or how migrants talked of transmigrancy as “a tiring alternation of presences and absences, and of re-emigration as a failure of the return project” [35]. The comparatively privileged access to migrants enjoyed by qualitative researchers allows them to explore such questions of socially embedded meaning. A standardized definition of transnational mobility that remains sensitive to such embeddedness is by necessity elusive, and the underlying meaning of transnational activities and of aspirations is not easily spotted by (quantitative) researchers looking for “regularity” and answers to “whether” and “to what extent”. At the same time, advances

in qualitative and quantitative studies alike are made when the theoretical discussions are anchored in the concrete categories of analysis that statistics require [14]. To see evidence of this, one needs only to look at the profound impact of the findings from the quantitative CIEP project on the field, and how Portes, Guarnizo, and others shaped the debate on migrant transnationalism for years to come among qualitative and quantitative researchers alike and inspired the study by Snel et al. [10]. Likewise, a nascent body of literature is emerging on the relationship between transnationalism and immigrant integration, that owes much to the clear, if rigid, operationalization used by Snel et al. [9].

Secondly, airport-hopping qualitative researchers can sometimes be at least as inter- and transnationally mobile as the migrants they research, if not more, while there is a plethora of practical obstacles and considerations for any quantitative researcher wishing to conduct a transnational design where both ends (and transit zones) of the transnational social space are examined empirically. Such a design, if simultaneous and “matched”, could give a unique glimpse into the asymmetric relations between migrants and nonmigrants [8]. Yet, even if the design is localized at one end, migrants’ cross-border activities may constitute a methodological challenge to quantitative approaches in the form of sampling biases towards less mobile respondents for survey data. As pointed out by Levitt and Khagram (2008 cited in Levitt & Jaworsky 2007 [sic]: 142) [3], “[surveys] based on nation-state units are not designed to capture flows, linkages, or identities that cross other spatial units or the phenomena and dynamics within them.” Register-based studies, on the other hand, are often incompatible across nation-states or not sufficiently fine-grained. For qualitative researchers on the other hand, the multisited fieldwork has been suggested as a way of tapping into migrant transnationalism empirically [36, 37]. If the social space of migrants is stretched across nation-states, a holistic understanding requires an examination from more than one end, as data from the country of origin sheds light on data from the country of residence and vice versa. When the host country perspective dominates the analysis, as one could argue is the case in the study by Snel et al. [9], the two-way (and multilateral) dimensions are partly obscured by an implicit assumption that the flow of transnational practices moves from “here” to “there”, or, in a more postcolonial perspective, from “the north” to “the south”. Yet reverse remittances, hosting of family and friends, professional catering to newcomers, and principles of political organization may all come from “there” to “here”, as demonstrated by our qualitative data.

Thirdly, when researchers of migrant transnationalism suggest ways forward in their field, they tend to implicitly rather than explicitly address peers who do what they do and fail to specify potential divisions of labor between quantitative and qualitative researchers. Levitt and Jaworsky [3], for example, suggest some future directions for studies of migrant transnationalism. They start out by noting challenges with survey based studies and then suggest that the goal is “a thick and empirically rich mapping of how global, macrolevel processes interact with local lived

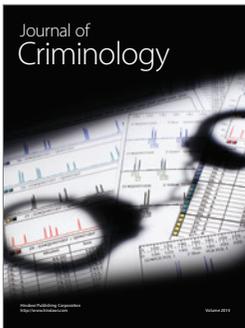
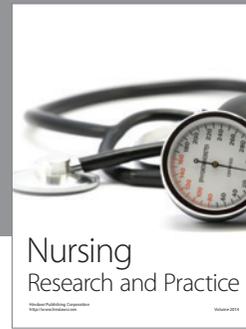
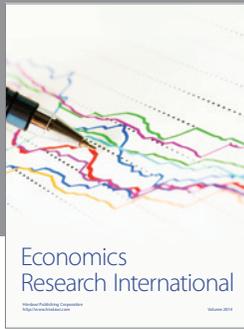
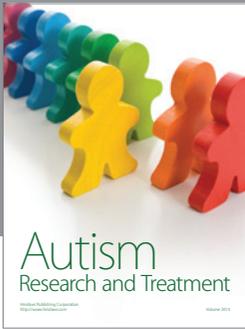
experiences that are representative of broader trends” (page 143) and go on to suggest qualitative methods such as multisited ethnography, the extended case method, and reflexive ethnography (before a methodologically neutral conceptual point is made on the importance of incorporating scale). Not factoring in quantitative designs, at least not explicitly, they likewise disregard mixed-method research as a direction for future research.

Mixed-methods migration research has got a long list of proponents in recent years, although few still actually do it, especially in studies of migrant transnationalism [8]. Castles argues that quantitative research “is important for obtaining comparative data to describe macrosocial changes linked to migration”, while qualitative research is “needed to provide understanding both of individual and community-level social action and of the history and cultures of sending, transit, and receiving societies” and concludes that clearly, most forms of migration research are likely to require “mixed-methods approaches” [38, page 21]. As a philosophy-of-science argument in an ideal world, we agree, and we cannot but wonder how the two quantitative studies here would have looked like if an in-depth qualitative pilot study had been in place. Yet what is often overlooked in the enthusiasm over mixed-methods is not only the practical challenge of ensuring a critical mass of disciplinary, or the epistemological/ontological challenge of ensuring methodological triangulation and cross-validation, but also the very distinction between reading and articulating research. While we do not believe it realistic that most researchers, alone or in teams, are able to articulate an integrated whole of high-quality qualitative and quantitative research, we think studies of migrant transnationalism—as well as general migration studies—would benefit from a more careful reading across the quantitative-qualitative divide. Indeed, we hope this article can illustrate that such “mixed reading” can provide a reiterative feed-back loop with plenty of fertile ground for theoretical advances.

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