Transnational youth mobility: new categories for migrant youth research

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ABSTRACT
Large-scale research on migrant youth categorises youth along two lines: ethnicity and generation. Yet insights from smaller-scale qualitative studies indicate that it is important to experiment with categories based on mobility. While these studies have shown that young people’s mobility affects their identities, educational resilience, sense of belonging and sense of self, findings have not led to new thinking about categories used in large-scale migrant youth research. Given this lacuna, we investigate young people’s mobility, understood here as long or short trips to countries other than where they reside, based on a large-scale survey in three European countries (N = 2019). We find that travels are common amongst secondary school pupils of both migrant and non-migrant background and that youth with a migration background primarily travel to their or their parents’ ‘home’ country. While lower socio-economic status is associated with less frequent travel for the general population, it is not linked to the frequency of travel of youth with a migration background. In today’s globalised world, where there are important distinctions between those who can travel and those who cannot, our findings call for putting the mobility of young people at the heart of analytical categories.

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Introduction
Analytical categories used in research are important as they determine the kinds of outcomes that can be found and, by consequence, the kinds of solutions that can be proposed. Categories need to be informed by theory, but there is also the risk that once a theory exists, all theoretical developments will proceed in one direction, given the categories that prevail in research. What further compounds this spiral is the way that data are collected. Once particular categories become salient, data collection follows these categories, making other categorisations potentially unfeasible. This paper argues that migration studies, in particular those focusing on young people, need to explore new categories given recent theoretical developments. A diversification of categories may lead to different insights about what affects
youth and how, and ultimately to different solutions affecting the lives of young people.

Research on migrant youth, especially large quantitative analyses that are influential in policy on education, has consistently used two kinds of categories. ‘Migrant youth’ are categorised according to the countries/regions they come from or whether they are first-, 1.5- or second-generation. Comparisons are made according to different origin groups of the same generation, same origin groups of different generations, or generations and origin groups are compared to ‘native’ youth. In doing so, studies make ethnicity and generation the key distinguishing features of migrant youth. This is true of academic studies based on large datasets such as the Labour Force Survey (LSF), the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Cebolla-Boado and Garrido Medina 2011; Levels, Dronkers, and Kraaykamp 2008) or studies that collect their own data (Crul et al. 2017; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Such studies and datasets are influential in determining policy developments in areas such as the education of young people with a migration background (European Commission et al. 2019). Their main categories condition the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn. For example, a study on second-generation migrant youth can only conclude something about second-generation migrant youth: how they fare, the conditions that affect them, or the outcomes associated with them. Solutions emanating from such research are invariably aimed at youth of the second-generation. Aside from shaping the direction of analysis and solutions sought, such categories presume that youth of the second-generation or from the same ‘origin’ country have commonalities that justify studying them as a group and that they will be largely affected by conditions in the same way. Internal diversity within groups is overlooked.

Yet, recent scholarly insights from the fields of transnational migration, return migration and mobility studies justify experimenting with other forms of categorisations in studies on youth with migration in their biographies. In recent decades transnational migration studies have shown that migrants maintain a relationship to their ‘home’ country, even when they are integrated in a country of destination and when they are part of the second-generation, although to varying degrees and in different ways (Levitt 2009). The more recent sub-stream of ‘second generation returns’ literature has argued that young people continue to stay engaged with their or their parents’ country of ‘origin’, engage in return visits or even decide to return permanently (Christou 2006; Vathi and King 2011). This relationship to ‘home’ has been shown to have important meanings for their identities and sense of belonging in both the ‘origin’ country and the country where they live (Binaisa 2011; Caneva 2017; Reynolds and Zontini 2016).

These findings, however, have hardly led to reflections on the types of categories used in migrant youth research. Larger quantitative studies, especially, have not taken the relationship of young people to their or their parents’ ‘home’ country into account. By working with static categories such as first, 1.5 and second-generation, they privilege young people’s or their parents’ original move to another country, while turning a blind eye to the continuous mobility that young people engage in – precisely those trips ‘home’ that ‘second generation returns’ literature has shown to be so important to the development of young people’s identities and sense of belonging (Mazzucato 2015). It is, therefore, time to diversify the categories used in migrant youth research using theoretical insights from smaller-scale studies. We need to explore the relevance
of mobility-based categories. Doing so can help us to gain new insights into the lives of young people and the importance of things other than their origin or their migrant generation. It allows us to investigate the diversity that can be found within migrant youth, and it can help to further theorise youth mobility.

Exploring the relevance of mobility for young people of migrant background is not just an academic exercise. There is also a societal need. Despite the lack of research, there seems to be a consensus in many European countries that travels ‘home’ are bad for the educational development of youth with a migration background. Countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium impose large fines on parents whose children miss school or cut government-funded child allowance (van Geel 2019). In both countries, there are regular proposals to shorten the summer school holidays, because if youth travel ‘home’ during summer vacation, their language skills in the country of residence deteriorate. These attempts to limit ‘home’ travel reflect a national and institutional bias: that learning and positive child development happen only within schools and in the country of residence. Yet, there are no studies to date that confirm or refute such assumptions.

This paper aims to explore alternative categorisations that can offer new understandings of the realities faced by youth with migration in their backgrounds. It explores the scope and frequency of trips abroad made by all youth, both those with and without a migration background, and includes those young people who do not travel and are immobile. The paper further explores the characteristics that are associated with youth who travel frequently. The analysis is based on the first large-scale survey of the international mobility of young people attending secondary schools in three European countries (Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands). By studying their short and long-term international trips, we shed light on a phenomenon that has remained invisible and undertheorised. Based on our findings, we call for explorations of new categorisations of youth that make mobility central. This will allow scholars to move beyond classifying youth of migrant background in terms of their ethnicity or migrant generation and to look at other potentially important categories that are related to their mobility. This is in line with the recent calls to ‘de-migranticize’ migration research (Dahinden 2016; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018) and to do so by reflexively engaging with the categories used in migration research (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2020).

**Literature review**

Studies on migrant youth are largely concerned with how youth with a migration background fare in their countries of residence. They investigate a variety of outcomes such as physical health, emotional well-being and educational achievement and typically investigate these by focussing on first- or second-generation youth and sometimes comparing them amongst each other or with native youth and/or with youth of different country origins. Based on such categories and comparisons, theories have been developed such as the segmented assimilation model (Portes and Rumbaut 1990), which highlights the different modes of assimilation of youth in a host society. Factors shaping education and well-being outcomes, such as family and school characteristics, have also been found by using such categories and comparisons (Cebolla-Boado and Garrido Medina 2011; Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011).
Such studies are too many to adequately review here, but what is important for our argument is that while most studies find variability in the outcomes of youth according to their origins and migrant generation, much of the variability remains unexplained. This indicates that some of the variation observed may be due to things that are not being captured in quantitative analyses (Veerman 2015). Furthermore, there is hardly any research that explains within-group variability. Why is it that youth with the same country origins, living in similar neighbourhoods, with comparable family structures and attending similar schools fare differently? Studying such within-group differences can help to identify what leads to successful outcomes beyond ethnicity. Clearly, it is theoretically and empirically valuable to question the kinds of categories used in research on migrant youth. Are commonly-used categories possibly hiding important differences between young people? In what directions should we look in order to start experimenting with additional categorisations?

Different pockets of research indicate that paying more attention to young people’s engagement with their or their parents’ ‘home’ country would be fruitful. For example, the cultural capital that is conveyed to young people through their parents’ ties to their ‘home’ countries has positive effects on their ability to complete college education (Fernández-Kelly 2008). Why should this be so? We know that migrants from the Global South to the Global North often experience a de-skilling in the labour market and occupy inferior positions in society than they did in their ‘home’ country (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). This suggests that migrant parents have access to more social, cultural and financial capital in their ‘origin’ country than in their country of residence (Coe 2020). ‘Home’ can thus serve as a resource for parenting that they would otherwise not have. That parents feel the value of ‘home’ can also be seen in the practice of sending children ‘home’ to be re-educated when circumstances require it (Bledsoe and Sow 2011; Hoechner 2020).

‘Second generation returns’ literature, a sub-field of transnational migration studies, expands on the finding that ‘origin’ country context may be important to young people’s lives by investigating what travels to a ‘home’ country do to young people’s identity formation and sense of belonging. Transnational migration studies have shown that the lives of migrants are affected by their relationships with people, and especially family members, in their countries of origin. They continue to ‘do’ family across borders (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). But while transnational migration studies have mainly focused on the material and emotional work that goes into maintaining long-distance relationships, they have focused less on the mobility of people. ‘Second generation returns’ literature, in contrast, motivated by the ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences (Sheller and Urry 2006), has focused on the actual travels by mainly second-generation youth to their parents’ country of origin (Binaisa 2011; Christou 2006; Jain 2013; Potter 2005; Vathi and King 2011). Many such studies focus on young people’s motivations for returning and their experiences upon return, highlighting the disorientation felt by young people when imaginations of their homeland do not coincide with their actual experiences of it (Lee 2011; Wessendorf 2007). Although some studies do address the diversity of mobility that young people of migrant background engage in (Lee 2011; Vathi and King 2011), this literature mainly focuses on permanent returns and not on patterns of mobility.

Yet, young people with a migration background engage in a wide variety of trips, ranging from weeks to years, to and from their or their parents’ country of ‘origin’. 
They do not always follow their parents. Young people engage in family visits and roots tourism. Some undertake longer trips for the purpose of (in)formal (Kea and Maier 2017) religious (Erdal et al. 2016) or cultural (Whitehouse 2009) education. Others are ‘sent back’ when they misbehave or when parents can no longer balance occupational and caregiving responsibilities in the host country (Bledsoe and Sow 2011; Kea and Maier 2017). Some ‘return home’ in search of their identity or to start a business (Potter 2005; Reynolds 2010). When migrating internationally, children and young people may accompany their parents when they migrate or move independently in search of work, educational opportunities or safety (Huijsmans and Baker 2012). For entire or extended families to migrate is rare, especially for people from the Global South moving to the Global North, due to strict migration laws in the countries of the Global North (Eremenko and Bennett 2018). Consequently, when young people migrate, even if they migrate with their parents, they almost always leave parts of their family behind, such as aunts, uncles and grandparents, along with friends and significant others (Anschütz and Mazzucato 2021). To maintain relationships with those they leave behind, young people engage in various transnational activities, including physical mobility. They also develop specific skill sets that allow them to operate within different cultural contexts and with different expectations and norms, creating a ‘transnational family habitus’ (Zontini and Reynolds 2018, 418–419).

Scholars have recently called for researchers to investigate the diversity of young people’s mobilities (Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). van Geel and Mazzucato (2018, 2145) used the concept of ‘youth mobility trajectories’, defined as the moves young people make over time and across geographically distinct localities and the changing family constellations that this entails, to investigate mobility all along the life course, including prior to and beyond the first international move. They criticise the general conceptual and methodological tendency to approach young people of migrant background as though they were a ‘clean slate’ upon arrival in a new country. Through a visual mapping technique, they identify at least four different mobility patterns amongst young Ghanaians living in the Netherlands, irrespective of whether they are first- or second-generation. These mobility patterns are defined by the frequency and timing of moves that young people engage in both before and after their first international move. The authors highlight that for some young people, their first international move is preceded by internal moves. These moves are significant in the lives of young people but are not taken into consideration by the ‘clean slate’ conceptualisation used in much migrant youth literature.

There is thus enough recent evidence that being mobile helps young people maintain relationships with their or their parents’ country of ‘origin’ and that these relationships can have meaningful consequences for their self-worth, identity formation and sense of belonging, and can impact educational and well-being outcomes (van Geel and Mazzucato 2020). Yet, studies of mobility have mostly been small-scale, and their findings have yet to be picked up by larger studies that impact policy-making on migrant youth. We know little of the prevalence and frequency of young people’s mobility and how this compares with immobility. There is no research on what drives their mobility or whether the distance between country of residence and ‘home’ country makes a difference. The only study to our knowledge that looked into mobility on a larger scale is by Schimmer and
van Tubergen (2014) who find that trips ‘home’ are common amongst youth with a migration background.

This article is based on a larger-scale study of the prevalence of ‘home’ visits amongst young people attending secondary schools and examines whether their mobility is associated with particular characteristics. It does this with the aim of exploring alternative categories that can be used in studies of migrant youth and young people more generally. Categories are never neutral but are situated in particular historical and political contexts and reflect conventional theories (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2020; Gillespie, Howarth, and Cornish 2012). We argue that there is enough empirical and theoretical evidence to explore new categories in migrant youth studies, as these can shed light on aspects of young people’s lives that have heretofore gone unnoticed in large-scale studies.

The data for this study are part of a larger research project called Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives: Transnational Youth in Global South and North (MO-TRAYL) that explores the effects of ‘home’ visits on the lives of young people who have migration in their backgrounds. The project covers three European countries (Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands) and Ghana, but the analysis presented here focuses on the European cases. Countries were selected that represent different levels of openness of their educational systems and migration regimes as defined by the 2014 Migrant Integration Policy Index (www.mipex.eu). Their openness was measured according to indicators relating to the ease of family reunification, targeting of needs in education, and intercultural education for all (for more on the project and country selection, see www.motrayl.com).

Data & methods

Data

The survey was conducted in 2018–2020 in secondary schools. Per case-study country, we selected three main cities which have a significant proportion of youth of migrant background (above 40%). For Germany, these are Bremen, Hamburg and Düsseldorf, and for Belgium, Antwerp, Ghent and Turnhout. In the Netherlands schools in large cities were less willing to cooperate due to research fatigue. So we targeted schools in smaller cities, Tilburg, Heerlen and Weert, which also have 40% or more migrant-background youth. In all the cities, schools were randomly selected, and we conducted quota sampling per school type, aiming for three schools per type in each city. Schools that declined to participate were randomly replaced. Twelve (the Netherlands), 26 (Belgium), and 36 (Germany) per cent of the schools that we contacted agreed to participate. Given the different acceptance rates, the sample has more schools from Germany than the Netherlands and Belgium.

The schools were instructed to select classrooms in the last two school years. The schools themselves decided how many and which classes participated. Some schools allowed us to survey the whole grade, while others chose certain classes based on their availability. In each class, students decided whether to participate. We informed students through a brochure that was distributed by the school two weeks prior to the survey. On the day of the survey, we explained again that participation was voluntary, anonymous,
and that students could withdraw at any time. If they agreed, students then signed a consent form. In addition, parents or caregivers were informed of the study by letter at least two weeks before the survey. Parents or caregivers could withdraw their child from participating (i.e. passive consent) with one exception in Germany where a school decided to use active parental consent. After an introduction on how to fill out the questionnaire, students completed it themselves, but we assisted in case of questions.  

The sampling procedure yielded a total of 2019 youth between the ages of 15 and 19. Nonresponse amongst students was low, with nearly all students in selected classes agreeing to participate. Thus, while there might be selection bias in the type of schools that wanted to participate, we do not see that in the students within participating schools. The full sample includes students from diverse educational, socio-economic and migration backgrounds, and a wide range of countries of ‘origin’. Although there was an overrepresentation of German students – due to differences in school size, the procedure the school opted for (allowing us to interview the whole level or only a few classes), and differences in response rate – we ran separate analyses per country and results are similar.

**Analyses**

In this article, we explore the frequency of international trips of secondary school pupils and whether these trips are associated with particular characteristics. The analysis is composed of two steps. First, we look at the frequency of international trips all youth make and whether this differs by the categories commonly used in migration research: migrant generation and native youth. For a sub-sample that excludes native youth, we study the frequency of trips youth make to their or their parent’s country of ‘origin’ and compare whether this differs for the conventionally-used categories of ‘first’ and ‘second generation’ and region of origin. Second, by means of ordered logistic regression, we investigate which factors are associated with frequency of trips to the country of origin, both for the sub-sample and the whole population. The questionnaire was specifically designed to study young people’s international mobility and its relationship to psychological and educational outcomes. Indicators of these outcomes used in psychology and educational research were included, as well as factors identified in the literature as important for youth outcomes such as individual, family and school characteristics.

International mobility is operationalised in two ways: for the full sample, we look at frequency of travel abroad, while for the sub-sample we look at frequency of visits to origin. Frequency of travel abroad covers the trips youth make outside of their country of residence, for more than one week and consists of the following answer items: (1) never been abroad; (2) every few years; (3) once a year; and (4) multiple times a year. Frequency of visits to ‘origin’ are the trips that youth of migrant background make to their or their parent’s country of origin, with answer items consisting of (1) never visited the country; (2) one or two times; (3) several times; (4) every two years; and (5) every year. For the regression analyses, we recorded these items into (1) never; (2) few times (one time up to several times); and (3) often (every two years to every year).

We also look at the association between the variables representing mobility and migrant generation to see if mobility is different from, or correlates with, migrant generation. For this analysis, migrant generation consists of the following answer items:
(1) native; (2) first-generation (the respondent and at least one of his/her parents is born abroad); (3) second-generation (the respondent was born in the survey country and both parents are born abroad); and (4) second-generation with one migrant parent (the respondent is born in the survey country and one of the parents is born abroad). We underscore that we use these categories because they are used in most large-scale analyses and we need to evaluate whether the new categories we propose are substantively different.

There are four main regions of ‘origin’ defined by (a) their distance to the country of survey and (b) the migration flow they represent. The four regions are: (1) Western Europe; (2) Eastern Europe (the largest groups being from Poland and Bulgaria); (3) Turkey and Morocco; and (4) Global South (the largest groups being from Afghanistan and Syria). As only a few students originated from Western countries outside of Europe (N = 13), and because they might have distinctive mobility patterns which cannot be explored with such a small number, we excluded these students from the analyses.

The control variables we include in the regression analyses are (1) parental education and (2) socio-economic status measured by (a) whether they have enough to live on and (b) the number of bedrooms in their house. Parental education is measured by taking the highest level of education completed by either of the parents and is subdivided into (1) high school; (2) vocational training; (3) polytechnic; and (4) university. As youth do not know their parents’ income, we use proxies for socio-economic status (SES) that are commonly used in surveys with people who cannot accurately assess their family’s income and asset wealth. We asked respondents whether they felt they had enough to live on, which they could answer with Yes, Sometimes or No. As very few reported not having enough to live on, we combined these with those who said they struggled at times, creating the following answer categories: (1) yes, enough to live on; (2) no or sometimes. Bedrooms per person divide the number of bedrooms in the student’s house by the number of people in the house.

We ran analyses for each survey country separately as well as for all countries combined. As no significant differences were found between countries, we present the combined analyses for ease of presentation.

The sample

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the whole sample (N = 2019) and a subsample that excludes youth whose parents were born in the country of survey (N = 828). The latter sample will be used in the second part of the analysis.

Although Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium have different school systems, all three countries track students by academic ability in secondary school. Except for the school systems in Bremen and Hamburg (Germany), schools distinguish between three tracks, which we translated as low, middle and high. In Bremen and Hamburg, schools had a Gymnasium (high level track) and the rest of the students were placed in a track together, which we refer to as the Combined Level. We have a slight overrepresentation of the higher school tracks (38 per cent) compared to the lower (22 per cent) and middle (20 per cent) school tracks. Parental education varied, with most parents of the full sample having either only a high school degree (24 per cent) or a university
degree (37 per cent) and of the sub-sample 37 and 33 per cent, respectively. The majority of youth indicates they have enough to live on (84 per cent), with the percentage dropping slightly for youth of the sub-sample (78 per cent). Finally, students have on average 0.86 and .81 rooms per person in each of the samples, respectively.

The sub-sample consists of 38 per cent second-generation, 37 per cent who have one migrant parent, and 25 per cent first-generation (Table 1). The majority have a Global South (44 per cent) or a Turkish/Moroccan background (30 per cent). Over 50 countries of ‘origin’ are included in the sample. There are a few groups that stand out per country. In Belgium, there are quite a number of youth of Dutch descent and, because of its colonial history, of Congolese descent. In Germany, there are many Kazach and Russian ‘origin’ youth. In Germany especially, but also to some extent in the other countries, there is a significant proportion of Afghan and Syrian youth. Furthermore, we find that first-generation youth mostly come from the Global South while second-generation youth have parents from the Global South or Turkey/Morocco (see Table 2). This reflects the migration history of these countries and the guestworker programmes of the 1970s. When only one parent is a migrant, that parent is more often from Western Europe.

| Table 1. Descriptive statistics. | Full sample | Sub-sample |
|---------------------------------|-------------|------------|
|                                 | Freq.      | Percent   | Freq. | Percent |
| **Country of survey**           |            |           |       |         |
| Netherlands                     | 473        | 23.43     | 87    | 10.51   |
| Belgium                         | 654        | 32.39     | 316   | 38.16   |
| Germany                         | 892        | 44.18     | 425   | 51.33   |
| **Total**                       | 2019       | 100       | 828   | 100     |
| **Generation**                  |            |           |       |         |
| Native                          | 1064       | 56.24     |       |         |
| First-generation                | 211        | 11.15     |       |         |
| Second generation               | 312        | 16.49     |       |         |
| One migrant parent              | 305        | 16.12     |       |         |
| **Total**                       | 1892       | 100       | 828   | 100     |
| **Region of origin (only for those of migrant descent)** | | | | |
| Western Europe                  | 226        | 22.22     | 130   | 15.85   |
| Eastern Europe                  | 130        | 12.78     | 86    | 10.49   |
| Turkey/Morocco                  | 262        | 25.76     | 247   | 30.12   |
| Global South                    | 399        | 39.23     | 357   | 43.54   |
| **Total**                       | 1017       | 100       | 820   | 100     |
| **School track student**        |            |           |       |         |
| Low                             | 452        | 22.49     | 175   | 21.29   |
| Middle                          | 396        | 19.70     | 109   | 13.26   |
| High                            | 772        | 38.41     | 307   | 37.35   |
| Combined level                  | 390        | 19.40     | 231   | 28.10   |
| **Total**                       | 2010       | 100       | 822   | 100     |
| **Parental education**          |            |           |       |         |
| Max high school diploma         | 405        | 24.22     | 246   | 37.19   |
| Vocational                      | 185        | 11.06     | 55    | 8.31    |
| Polytechnic                     | 456        | 27.27     | 136   | 21.12   |
| University                      | 626        | 37.44     | 218   | 33.38   |
| **Total**                       | 1672       | 100       | 655   | 100     |
| **Enough to live on**           |            |           |       |         |
| Yes                             | 1462       | 83.54     | 526   | 77.70   |
| No/sometimes                    | 288        | 16.46     | 151   | 22.30   |
| **Total**                       | 1750       | 100       | 677   | 100     |
| **Bedrooms per person**         |            |           |       |         |
| N                               | 1716       | 0.86      | 662   | 0.81    |
| Mean                            | 0.86       | 0.42      | 0     | 6       |
| SD                              | 0.42       |           | 0     |         |
| **Max**                         | 6          |           | 6     |         |

Source: MO-TRAYL survey 2018–2020.
Results

Part I: frequency of international travel and visits to ‘origin’ country

Table 3 displays the frequency of travel abroad all youth engage in. It concerns trips of over a week, and we distinguish by migrant generation.

Youth, in general, are highly mobile, with 44 per cent of all youth in the larger sample engaging in multiple international trips a year and 27 per cent once a year. Only 6 per cent never went abroad. In comparison, youth of migrant background travel abroad less frequently, but most still travel abroad at least once a year. For the majority of youth of migrant background (sub-sample), these trips are made to their or their parents’ country of ‘origin’ (Table 4). Of all youth who have migrant parents, 40 per cent travel each year to this country and 21 per cent do so every two years. Hence, a majority visits ‘home’ at least every two years.

We find significant differences in the frequency with which different categories of migrant youth visit their or their parents’ ‘origin’ country (Table 5). First-generation migrant youth visit the country of origin least often, whereas, the second-generation visits the most ($p < 0.01$). This is a noteworthy finding because it contrasts with what is often thought: that transnational ties to a ‘home’ country diminish over the generations (Levitt and Waters 2002). More first-generation youth have never visited their country of origin than youth from any other category. We will return to this below in Table 6.

There are significant differences between regions of ‘origin’ ($p < 0.001$). The majority of youth from the Global South has only visited the country of ‘origin’ once or twice (24%) or never (27%). The vast majority of youth whose parents come from Western or Eastern Europe or from Turkey/Morocco visit the country of ‘origin’ regularly: about four out of five visit every two years or every year. Those whose parents come from a European country are most likely to visit every year. This suggests that distance matters. At the same time, it is important to note that if one combines the ‘several times’, ‘every two years’ and ‘every year’ categories, almost half of Global South youth do visit

Table 3. Frequency of travel abroad by migrant generation (row percentages).

| Migrant generation      | Types of trips made abroad |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
|                         | Never | Every few years | Once a year | Multiple times a year |
| Native ($n = 1049$)     | 6     | 17              | 27          | 49                     |
| First-generation ($n = 206$) | 13    | 32              | 22          | 34                     |
| Second-generation ($n = 302$) | 3     | 37              | 33          | 27                     |
| One migrant parent ($n = 298$) | 4     | 20              | 26          | 50                     |
| Total ($n = 1855$)      | 6     | 23              | 27          | 44                     |

Source: MO-TRAYL survey 2018–2020.
their respective countries of origin, which tend to be low-income countries. It is noteworthy how often these youth travel to the country of ‘origin’ and yet how little such travels feature in large-scale studies on migrant youth. It is, therefore, important to understand what characteristics are associated with frequency of travel to origin.

**Part II: regression analysis migrant generation on visits to country of origin**

In the second part of the analysis, we explore which factors are associated with frequency of trips to country of origin. We seek to determine whether migrant generation is indeed a defining feature as the literature seems to suggest or whether other factors are important. As frequency of visits is an ordinal variable with three categories, we run an ordered logistic regression, meaning that coefficients (log odds) cannot be compared against each other as in a standard regression model. As we are not interested in effect sizes in this paper but in which factors are important, we focus on the direction and significance of associations which read similar to standard regression models.

Table 6 shows that, controlling for other factors, there is no statistical difference between how often the first- and second-generation visit the country of ‘origin’ as compared with youth with one migrant parent. That those whose ‘origin’ country is in the Global South travel less often to this country than those with other regions of origin, is likely due to their ‘origin’ country being a country in conflict, such as Syria or Afghanistan, with 17 per cent of first-generation youth in our sub-sample coming from a conflict region. Also, the fact that Global South countries are for the most part at a greater

### Table 4. Visits to own or parents’ country of origin.

| Country of survey | Freq. | Percent |
|-------------------|-------|---------|
| Never visited     | 109   | 14      |
| One/two times     | 105   | 13      |
| Several times     | 96    | 12      |
| Every two years   | 172   | 21      |
| Every year        | 319   | 40      |
| Total             | 801   | 100     |

Source: MO-TRAYL survey 2018–2020.

### Table 5. Frequency of visits to own or parents’ country of origin (row percentages).

| Migrant generation | Never visited | One/two times | Several times | Every two years | Every year |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|------------|
| First-generation   | 19            | 15            | 7             | 18              | 41         |
| (n = 194)          |               |               |               |                 |            |
| Second-generation  | 10            | 15            | 13            | 26              | 36         |
| (n = 306)          |               |               |               |                 |            |
| One migrant parent | 13            | 10            | 14            | 19              | 43         |
| (n = 299)          |               |               |               |                 |            |
| Total (n = 799)    | 14            | 13            | 12            | 21              | 40         |
| Pearson’s Chi² (8) | 20.78 (p < 0.01) |               |               |                 |            |

| Region of origin | Never visited | One/two times | Several times | Every two years | Every year |
|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|------------|
| Western Europe   | 2             | 9             | 6             | 10              | 73         |
| (n = 124)        |               |               |               |                 |            |
| Eastern Europe   | 4             | 5             | 6             | 18              | 68         |
| (n = 83)         |               |               |               |                 |            |
| Turkey/Morocco   | 3             | 3             | 9             | 34              | 51         |
| (n = 242)        |               |               |               |                 |            |
| Global South     | 27            | 24            | 17            | 18              | 13         |
| (n = 337)        |               |               |               |                 |            |
| Total (n = 786)  | 13            | 13            | 12            | 22              | 40         |
| Pearson’s Chi² (12) | 302.23 (p < 0.001) |               |               |                 |            |

Source: MO-TRAYL survey 2018–2020.
distance, means that travel is more costly. Youth whose parents received polytechnic education travel more to ‘origin’ than those whose parents have no more than a high school diploma (p < 0.05), but no differences are found between the other levels of parental education. Socio-economic status, as measured by bedrooms per person and having enough to live, is not significant.

These findings shed new light on migrant youth mobilities. First, youth with migration in their biographies are highly mobile and this does not depend on their migrant generation. In other words, young people do not cease to travel to their or their parents’ country of ‘origin’ over time, nor are there significant differences between first- and second-generation. Second, we see that socio-economic status is not associated with frequency of travel to origin, indicating that even though money might be tight, migrants ensure they can visit their country of origin. This suggests that families and young people attach importance to these trips and will make them despite financial hurdles.

To determine whether this is specific to trips to ‘origin’ and not other travel, we compare the frequency of travel of youth of migrant background to youth of non-migrant background in the next section and pay specific attention to socio-economic status. We perform an ordered logistic regression on frequency of travel abroad of the whole sample and interact socio-economic status with migrant generation. Table 7 shows the result of this analysis, with model 1 as the baseline and model 2 showing the interaction effect.

Model 1 shows that youth with a migration background travel abroad less frequently than youth without a migration background, similar to what we saw in Table 3. Youth who do not or at times do not have enough to live on travel abroad less frequently than those who do (p < 0.001), so socio-economic status makes a difference. Also, the higher educated the parents are, the more often youth go abroad. Yet Model 2 shows that the interaction effect of having enough to live on and having a migration background is significant, indicating that there is a difference in how socio-economic status is associated with frequency of travel abroad for youth with a migration background compared with ‘native’ youth. Further analyses (results not displayed) show that only for ‘native’

### Table 6. Ordered logistic regression of frequency of visits to own or parents’ country of origin.

|                      | Log odds | SE  | 95% Confidence interval |
|----------------------|----------|-----|-------------------------|
| **Migrant generation (ref: First-Generation)** |          |     |                         |
| Second-generation    | 0.26     | 0.30| −0.33 to 0.85           |
| One migrant parent   | −0.55    | 0.30| −1.15 to 0.04           |
| **Region of origin (ref: Global South)** |          |     |                         |
| Western Europe       | 2.71***  | 0.36| 2.02 to 3.41            |
| Eastern Europe       | 2.94***  | 0.42| 2.11 to 3.77            |
| Turkey/Morocco       | 2.93***  | 0.30| 2.35 to 3.51            |
| Bedrooms per person  | 0.40     | 0.22| −0.04 to 0.83           |
| Have enough to live  | 0.34     | 0.25| −0.15 to 0.84           |
| **Parental education (ref High School)** |          |     |                         |
| Vocational           | 0.80     | 0.45| −0.08 to 1.69           |
| Polytechnic          | 0.61*    | 0.30| 0.02 to 1.21            |
| University           | 0.29     | 0.27| −0.23 to 0.81           |
| Pseudo R-squared     | 0.22     |     |                         |
| Log Likelihood       | −346.85  |     |                         |
| Number of observations| 504      | Prob > chi² | 0.000 |

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Source: MO-TRAYL survey 2018–2020.
youth is having enough to live on, associated with more frequent travel. For migrant-background no association between this measure of socio-economic status and travel abroad is found. This confirms that trips that youth make to their or their parents’ ‘origin’ country, while less frequent, are somehow more important to youth with a migration background and their families than general trips are to ‘native’ youth and their families. Youth with a migration background make these trips even when economic resources are low.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to bring insights about mobility to bear on the categories scholars use to study migrant youth. Migrant youth studies almost exclusively work with categories based on ethnicity and migrant generation. While revealing elements of young people’s lives, such categories limit the ability to capture the variation within migrant populations and assume that the most salient characteristics when analysing migrant groups relate to ethnicity and generation. As such, this exploration heeds the call to reflexively engage with the categories used in migration research (Anderson 2019; Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2020; Wimmer 2009). Despite these calls, few studies give examples of how to practically engage with categories when collecting data and doing research (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2020). This article proposes concrete ways.

We argue that migrant youth research needs to engage with more categories. The theoretically and ethnographically informed insights from transnational migration and ‘second generation returns’ studies reviewed in this article reveal the importance of travels ‘home’ for youth with a migration background. We thus investigated mobility as a new category through which to understand the lives of young people, both those with and without migration backgrounds, and including those who do travel and those who do not. This leads us to four findings.

First, we find that youth, in general, are highly mobile and often engage in trips abroad of a week or more. More than 85 per cent of youth, irrespective of whether they have a migration background or not, travel abroad every few years to multiple times a year. At

| Table 7. Ordered logistic regression of frequency of travel abroad. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Model 1 | Model 2 |
|--------|--------|
| Coef. | SE | Coef. | SE |
| Youth with migration background⁵ | −0.25* | 0.12 | 0.38 | 0.26 |
| Bedrooms per person | 0.28 | 0.14 | 0.29* | 0.14 |
| Have enough to live | 0.70*** | 0.15 | 1.09*** | 0.21 |
| Enough to live*Youth with migration background | −0.78** | 0.29 |
| Parental education (ref High School) | | | |
| Vocational | −0.05 | 0.18 | −0.03 | 0.18 |
| Polytechnic | 0.62*** | 0.15 | 0.64*** | 0.15 |
| University | 1.26*** | 0.14 | 1.26*** | 0.14 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.06 |
| Number of observations | 1361 |
| Prob > chi² | 0.000 |

**⁵Includes first- and second-generation and youth with at least one migrant parent. The reference category is ‘native’ youth.**

Source: MO-TRAYL survey 2018–2020.
the same time, there are young people who hardly travel at all. In today’s globalised world, where air travel has become cheaper and destinations more numerous, whether young people are mobile or not matters. We know from international student mobility literature that trips abroad provide opportunities for personal growth and that such personal development enhances educational outcomes and provides more options for school-to-work transitions (Bachner and Zeutschel 2009; Prazeres 2018; Trower and Lehmann 2017). Some of the literature on student mobility has criticised exchange programmes for being elitist, implying that youth of migrant background do not have such opportunities. Yet, our research shows that international travel is a common phenomenon even for youth of migrant background, albeit outside of student exchange programmes. Mobility is thus desirable and appears to benefit young people, and it may be that it is more important in today’s globalised world than whether one has a migration background or not. This is an area for future investigation.

A second finding is that for youth with a migration background, travel abroad mainly entails visits to their ‘home’ country. This again is significant. Small-scale qualitative studies have found that travel ‘home’ affects young people’s sense of belonging and identities (Bolognani 2014; Cave and Koloto 2015; Mand 2010; Vathi and King 2011). More recent studies looking beyond the lens of identity and belonging have found that trips ‘home’ allow young people to accrue transnational resources that help them to increase their educational resilience in the countries where they reside (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018) and to develop self-confidence and aspirations for the future (Anschütz and Mazzucato 2021). Travel ‘home’ has these effects on youth with a migration background due to what they learn about their roots and their culture, the ways they are treated by local populations who express pride in them, the insights they gain when they compare their situation with the poverty they see around them, or the experiences they have of luxurious spaces that are normally not accessible to them in their residence country (Akom Ankobrey, Mazzucato, and Wagner 2021; Anschütz and Mazzucato 2021; Gardner and Mand 2012; Hoechner 2020; van Geel and Mazzucato 2020; Wagner 2019).

Importantly, and contrary to what is often stated in the literature, our third finding shows that young people’s transnational engagement as shown through their travels ‘home’ does not diminish according to their migrant generation. Migrant generation is not associated with the frequency of trips home; 81 per cent of first-generation and 97 per cent of second-generation youth have visited at least once or twice the country of ‘origin’ and of these, 63 per cent and 62 per cent, respectively, visit frequently (annually or bi-annually). Region of origin, however, is important. If the place of ‘origin’ lies in the Global South, trips ‘home’ are less frequent, but even so, over 75 per cent have visited at least once or twice to once every year. This finding indicates that distance is an important factor affecting the possibility for travel. Distance is associated with greater expense and countries that are far away may require more documentation in the form of passports and visas, depending on young people’s and their parents’ legal status. In this study distance was also associated with countries in conflict, making visits to such countries difficult. To our knowledge, this is the first time that distance has been investigated with respect to the international mobility of youth with a migration background. Our fourth finding relates to the family’s socio-economic status in the country of residence. For ‘native’ youth higher frequency of travel is associated with higher levels of socio-economic indicators while for youth with a migration background, it is not. Overall,
these two findings show that even when household income is low and ‘home’ is a long way off, visits to ‘origin’ are made.

Our aim has been to propose additional categories to the dominant ethnicity and generation-based ones used in migrant youth literature in the Global North. While studying youth mobility is not new, developing alternative categories for youth mobility studies based on mobility, is. Using data that we purposely gathered on youth mobility, we explored two categories of mobility based on frequency (how often young people travel, if at all) and type of trip (‘home’ travel or other). These are some first explorations, but the data lend themselves for developing more specific categories that either apply solely to young people with a migration background or more broadly to all young people. There are various salient elements of visits that we know from small-scale studies that can help refine mobility-based categories proposed here. For example, for people with a migration background home visits can have various purposes such as tourism, attendance at ceremonies such as funerals or marriages, and family visits (Janta, Cohen, and Williams 2015; Urry 2002). Furthermore, for ‘home’ visits we know that who is visited (family, friends, other) affects the experience of such visits (Akom Ankobrey, Mazzucato, and Wagner 2020; Ogden and Mazzucato 2021). For all young people, irrespective of migration background, it may be important to know with whom young people travelled (parents, other family, friends, alone) as this affects the types of activities engaged in (Akom Ankobrey, Mazzucato, and Wagner 2020; Anschütz & Mazzucato, 2022; Ogden and Mazzucato 2021). Finally, we know that the experiences of home visits by migrants to their origin country are affected by the length of stay and the timing of such visits (King and Lulle 2015; Osei, Mazzucato, and Haagsman 2022). By extrapolation, we argue that studies of how young people’s mobility affects them should also investigate the length (duration) and timing of travel (at what age).

The kind of international mobility we have analysed relates mainly to mobility that enhances middle-class capital. We have not, for example, studied the labour mobility of young people who are forced to move for their daily survival (Huijsmans 2019) nor the mobility of those who move because states do not accept their presence, such as rejected young asylum seekers in Europe (Nimführ and Sesay 2019). These are cases in which mobility is a burden rather than a source of capital.

Our findings show that mobility is a discerning characteristic of all youth in the Global North and that it is sufficiently different from characteristics such as parental education or level of income that it is worth exploring as a category. In today’s globalised world having access to the resources that travel provides can help cultivate self-confidence, self-knowledge, and reflexivity, soft skills identified by the World Economic Forum in its 2020 report ‘The Future of Jobs’ (WEF 2020). In short, mobility is not only part of many young people’s lives but can have an important impact on their futures. Future large-scale studies need to investigate how mobility impacts young people’s development, resilience, identities, educational motivation and school-to-work transitions, to name a few.

With respect to migrant-background youth, using mobility as a category allows the exploration of differences between young people and can better help to inform European countries’ policies that currently aim to limit ‘home’ visits on the presumption that such visits hamper educational performance. Such assumptions need to be investigated, which
can only be done by putting mobility at the centre of analysis. One impediment to doing this is the lack of data. Future large-scale data collection exercises should collect data on young people’s mobility. This is less difficult than it may seem. It means stepping out of the methodological nationalism that characterises most data collection by national statistical offices and adding a few questions about frequency, timing and purpose of travel. Large-scale studies matter because they can inform policy making with respect to ‘home’ visits and more.

Our work gives empirical weight to Bauman’s (1998) argument that the freedom and ability to move is fast becoming a stratifying factor in late-modern times. For youth residing in the Global North mobility is a discerning element: some young people can travel and develop a cosmopolitan outlook, and some cannot. Such distinctions of mobility go beyond the migrant–native dichotomy and have the potential to de-migranticise migration research (Dahinden 2016; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018).

Notes

1. We use the term ‘migrant youth’ when referring to the literature to reflect the common terminology used in this literature. We prefer the term ‘youth with a migration background’ to indicate that they have migration in their family history, but it is not a defining feature of their identity as ‘migrant youth’ implies. At the same time, we acknowledge that there is no perfect term.

2. We received ethical approval from the European Research Council and the Ethics Review Committee Inner City faculties of Maastricht University. We additionally received ethical approval from the German States in which we performed the survey: the Hamburg Institute of Educational Monitoring and Quality Development (Institut für Bildungsmonitoring un Qualitätsentwicklung, IfBQ) and the Senator of Child and Education (Die Senatorin für Kinder und Bildung, Org.-Z: 20-13) in Bremen.

3. Turkey and Morocco form a separate category because people of Turkish and Moroccan background are numerous in all three European countries due to guestworker programs in the mid-1960s, which were followed by family reunification starting mid-1970s.

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