

African Migrations Workshop

African migration research: methods and methodology

Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines
Mohammed V Agdal University
Rabat
Morocco

International Migration Institute
James Martin 21st Century School
University of Oxford
Oxford UK

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Call for Papers

While migration out of Africa has become the subject of growing interest, especially in Europe, there has been much less research into international migration within the continent, only a small fraction of which may result in journeys to Europe, North America and beyond. As a result, there is limited knowledge about the forms and patterns of migration across much of the continent. Many statements about African mobility are therefore based more on supposition than empirical evidence.

The Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences of the Mohammed V University Rabat – Agdal and the International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford are convening an African Migrations Workshop which aims to bring together migration researchers from Africa (North and sub-Saharan) in order to:

- Map contemporary African migration patterns through presenting empirical research
- Discuss innovative methods and methodologies of migration research

Following up from the first African Migrations Workshop held in September 2007 in Accra, Ghana, this workshop aims to further strengthen migration research within Africa by bringing together scholars from across the continent and discussing innovative methodological approaches to migration research. The convenors welcome the submission of papers from scholars and graduate students *based in North African and sub-Saharan African universities* who are adopting new and innovative methodological approaches to empirical migration research in Africa. Papers should meet the following requirements:

- Papers should be based on original qualitative or quantitative empirical research on African migrations;
- Papers should explicitly justify the choice of methods and methodologies used and reflect upon how this choice has affected the outcome of analyses (applicants are encouraged to read the attached concept note for further details on this topic);
- Papers should preferably be based on innovative or new methodologies.

While the emphasis of this workshop is on methods and methodology, the convenors would particularly welcome papers aiming to empirically study changing patterns and emerging forms of African migration as well as the interconnections between different migratory flows within and beyond the continent.

Authors should submit an abstract of up to 400 words in English or French and a short biography by email to imi@qeh.ox.ac.uk by **Friday 30th May 2008** at the latest. Authors of accepted proposals will then be invited either to present at or to participate in the workshop. If invited, authors will be expected to submit a full paper by **Monday 1st September 2008**. Funding assistance to cover travel and subsistence will be provided as needed. The convenors are keen to encourage the participation of *early-career scholars from African universities* in this workshop. To this end, they will give first preference to abstracts submitted by graduate students or scholars who were awarded their postgraduate degree or doctorate after 2002. The convenors aim to publish selected papers in an edited volume or special edition journal.

The **Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences** of the Mohammed V University of Rabat – Agdal (www.flshr.ac.ma) has played a leading role in research on Moroccan and Maghrebi migrations since the 1970s. Its research has particularly focused on the relation between migration and development in sending countries and regions. The **International Migration Institute** has been actively building links with migration researchers and institutions across Africa and works in collaboration with these researchers on new migration research initiatives, notably the African Perspectives on Human Mobility Programme, funded by the MacArthur Foundation. For more details about IMI see its website www.imi.ox.ac.uk.

Methodology and Methods

Discussion Notes

Stephen Castles (with input from Ellie Vasta)

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Methodology and methods are often confused, or used as if they meant the same thing. Many publications in the social sciences have a section on 'methodology' that merely describes the methods used in a study, but does not actually discuss methodology. Methodology and methods are closely connected, but they are not the same thing.

In preparation for the workshop, it is useful to emphasise that *methods* are specific techniques used to **collect** and **analyse** information or data. *Data collection methods* include for instance: literature review, secondary analysis of a dataset, a survey, qualitative interviews, household budget analysis, life histories, and participant observation. *Data analysis methods* include for instance: literature analysis, content analysis, qualitative analysis, simple tabulations, cross-tabulations, regression analysis, social mapping, cartography, network analysis, socio-grams. It is important to specify the methods of data collection and analysis in any report or publication describing a research study.

Methodology, by contrast, is about the underlying logic of research. It is closely linked to the branch of philosophy known as *epistemology* – literally 'the theory of knowledge'. Epistemology asks such questions as: 'What is knowledge?' 'How is knowledge acquired?' 'How can we know something to be true?'

A key dispute in epistemology is between *positivists* who claim that there is an objective world outside ourselves as observers, and *constructivists*, who believe that meanings are constructed, interpreted and constantly re-constructed by people observing the world.

Methodology involves the systematic application of epistemology to research situations. It deals with the principles of the methods, concepts and procedural rules employed by a scientific discipline. Each discipline has its own methodology. Here we are concerned with the methodology of the social sciences and their application specifically to migration research.

In the social sciences the dispute between positivists and constructivists has also been important. Positivists believe that there is a single objective truth that can be found in studying social institutions or practices. The early French sociologist Emile Durkheim spoke of 'social facts'. Later US functionalist sociology followed this approach. By contrast social constructivists believe that social meanings are constantly being created, modified and re-created through processes of social interaction. Early German sociologist Max Weber argued that the observer has to try to understand the social meaning for the people involved, leading to the idea of 'interpretative sociology'. For positivists, social science is a matter of improving research methods to the point at which we can accurately describe and measure social facts. For constructivists, social sciences have to interpret the social meanings that they find, and may actually influence these in the process. Positivists believe in objectivity, while constructivists believe that there is no single truth in social phenomena.

Early positivists claimed to be bringing the certainty and objectivity of the natural sciences into social research. However, the questioning of the immutable laws of Newtonian physics by early 20th century quantum mechanics undermined this approach. Quantum mechanics works with probability rather than certainty and its ‘uncertainty principle’ (proposed by the German physicist Heisenberg) states that, by measuring something, the researcher actually changes it. More recently, positivists have come to believe that ever more sophisticated statistical packages and computer analysis can lead to objectivity. Constructivists, by contrast point to the complexity of social situations, and the impossibility of building models that can really include all possible factors.

Methodology asks such question as:

- How can we obtain knowledge about a social practice or a relationship, such as about its frequency, its significance, its links with other aspects of a social situation?
- What leads us to believe that the methods of data-collection and analysis we want to use will actually provide valid and reliable data?
- How can we understand the significance and meaning of a social practice or institution for those involved?

For example, if we use the method of a sample survey in an African city to answer a research question about intentions to migrate to another country, how do we know:

- That our sample is representative of the population we want to study?
- That our respondents have the same understanding of the questions as we do?
- That they are willing and able to tell us what they really think?
- That their stated intentions provide an accurate guide to their actual behaviour?
- Further questions could be added.

These are methodological questions that cast doubt on uncritical use of technical methods. They require us to ask if the methods we use will really provide accurate answers to our research questions. This issue has been confused in recent times by use of increasingly sophisticated data-analysis software on computers. This has led some people to think that if they feed quantitative data (=numbers) into a regression analysis package, they will get scientifically valid results. However, if the quality of the data is poor (due to lack of statistics or inadequate survey techniques), then the results will have little value: ‘garbage in → garbage out’. However, it is important to emphasise that, in principle, the same holds for qualitative research.

To address such problems, it is important that every social scientific study includes reflection on methodology as well as a justification of the methods used. Ideally, a social scientific paper or report should have a section on methodology and another one on methods. At the least, an author should always address both themes, even if in the same section.

Ideally, a social scientific project proposal should:

1. Outline the issue or problem to be studied, and explain why it is significant;
2. Analyse the state-of-the art of the research by discussing existing literature on the theme.
3. Outline the relevant theory on the topic.
4. Develop one or more hypotheses or research questions based on the previous steps. These should include both descriptive questions (‘what specific social behaviours or practices are taking place’?) and analytical questions (‘how do the studied behaviours and practices relate to each other, to wider social issues and to social theory’?).

5. Discuss the methodological challenges to be faced in answering these questions in the research situation concerned.
6. Describe and justify the methods used for data collection and analysis.
7. Outline the type of outputs that are expected from the study.
8. Provide a research plan that shows how the work is to be carried out with the resources and time that are available.

A research report should cover the same themes, with the addition of a description of the information collected, discussion of the data collection and analysis and any problems that arose, and an analysis of the findings. Any publication arising from a research project should provide a summary of methodology and methods used, and provide the reader with a link or contact to obtain fuller information on these matters if required (e.g. by reading the full report and accessing the archived research data).

A methodological discussion of how a social scientist can know something or answer the research questions will often highlight the limitations of any one method of data collection and analysis. The methodological conclusion will frequently be that there should be a 'triangulation of methods' – that is a range of different methods should be used to collect and analyse data on the research topic. If the answers are the same with a range of methods, this allows a much higher degree of confidence in their accuracy. If the answers are different, then it is likely that the methods are not actually answering the questions as the researcher had expected. In addition, use of multiple methods provides broader and more profound information on the topic.

Another important methodological point is that different types of method can answer different types of question, e.g.:

- A cross-sectional survey (a study covering a representative sample of a population at one time) can answer such questions as current levels of income or mobility, but it cannot tell us anything about how a phenomenon has changed or developed.
- A longitudinal study can show how such indicators have changed over times; but cannot explain the motivations or the social meaning attached to behaviours, practices and institutions.
- Use of qualitative methods (non-directive interviews, social biographies, asking about family mobility trajectories) can help us understand intentions and social meanings, but cannot give an accurate measurement of the frequency of certain attitudes or behaviours.
- Historical studies can help show the development and significance of social practices, but cannot show their current extent.

This list could be prolonged. The point is that it is usually necessary to use a range of methods. For instance, the Mexican Migration Project has used a mix of large surveys and qualitative studies to describe and explain patterns of migration from Mexico to the USA. Because the project has carried out several waves of research over a long period, it also has an historical dimension.