



Engaging with Three Predicaments of Transnational Migration Research in the Postcolonial Condition

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The paradigm of transnationalism has been featured prominently in research agendas in migration and refugee studies for quite some time. The popularity of transnationalism can be explained by its perceived ability to offer solutions to some of the epistemic problems and analytical limitations of migration research. Yet, the paradigm of transnationalism has also been subjected to critiques, many of which are inspired by postcolonial and decolonial approaches. This special issue is an outcome of a workshop organized in 2022 in Duisburg, Germany. During two days of discussions, we defined a list of challenges – what we refer to as ‘predicaments’ – that we encountered during the research practice. These predicaments do not exist in a vacuum, but as the contributions to this special issue (SI) show, they are interlinked. We are thus not primarily concerned with altering conditions of transnational migration but rather focus on methodological and epistemological challenges that we faced while conducting transnational migration research in the current postcolonial condition(s). This SI focuses on three such predicaments, namely asymmetrical power relations and positionalities between a researcher and the researched, the persistence of conceptual frames and methodologies shaped by the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1995) and the ‘destination country biases’ (Czaika & de Haas 2014; Gutekunst & Scheel 2019) that are coupled with a research funding structure dominated by institutions in the Global North (read Europe, North America and, Australia).

Before engaging with these three predicaments, we briefly review the discussion around transnational migration research, including some of the critiques that have been directed against it.

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Scholars have adopted transnational research designs to fully grasp the practices, connections, networks and lived realities that cut across nation-state borders. They have pointed to the cultural, social, economic and political transformations that are initiated and sustained by transnational lifestyles, networks and connections. These transformations include, for example, the creation of transnational families, whose members may have political affiliations in more than just one nation-state, and the sending of remittances by those who have migrated. These developments, in turn, lead to reconfigurations of nation-state sovereignty and regimes of citizenship (see, e.g., [Bridgen 2016](#); [Ho 2008](#); [Vertovec 2010](#)). To do justice to the socio-cultural complexity associated with transnational migrations and migrant communities, researchers have responded to calls to 'globalise the method' ([Burawoy 2000](#); [Stoller 1997](#)) and resorted to multi-sited research ([Marcus 1995](#)) and mobile methods ([Urry 2000](#)). As an attempt to challenge preconceived static categories that shape research agendas and to transcend the limitations set by predetermined fixed locations and group boundaries ([Brubaker 2002](#)), researchers have turned to analysing relations, networks and connections instead ([Desmond 2014](#); [Marcus 1995](#)). Last but not least, transnational migration research builds on the extensive critiques of methodological nationalism, which assumes that nation-states are quasi-naturally given, unquestioned units of analysis ([Glick Schiller 2010](#); [Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002](#)). More recent works of this line of scholarship question the idea of a neutral ground in migration research and call on researchers to critically reflect on their complicity in the 'nationalization of society' ([De Genova 2013](#)) and their involvement in normalizing anti-migration policy discourses ([Dahinden 2016](#)).

Research that attempts to grasp the sociocultural complexity and transnational character of the phenomenon known as 'migration' faces various conceptual, methodological, ethical and political challenges. A transnational approach to migration research necessitates a long-term commitment and creativity from researchers ([Stoller 1997](#)). Critics of multi-sited research, however, warn that research in numerous sites comes at the cost of in-depth engagement with a particular research site ([Hage 2005](#)). Moreover, mobile methods ([Amelina & Faist 2012](#)) and related research strategies such as 'following the people' are criticized for 'othering' and ultimately ontologizing migrants as culturally different, nomadic people who are easily identifiable objects of research ([Dahinden 2016](#); [Hage 2005](#); [Scheel & Tazzioli 2022](#)).

Viewed from a postcolonial perspective, the question is not about commitment or the selection of methods. Instead, postcolonial approaches consider migration studies as a part of the problem, as long as they continue to reify 'migrants' as a distinct category of human mobility ([De Genova 2013](#); [Scheel & Tazzioli 2022](#); [Schinkel 2018](#)). To overcome such pregiven category-thinking that is fixed on national borders, feminist scholars have called for researchers' increased self-reflexivity that accounts for both the positionality of the researcher and the researched along intersecting categories of gender, race and class ([Anthias 2012](#); [Faria & Mollet 2016](#); [Kobayashi 2003](#); [Shinozaki 2012](#)).

ASYMMETRICAL POWER RELATIONS AND DESTINATION COUNTRY BIAS

An important line of critique addresses the often extractive character of migration research and the hegemonic role of Western (read European, Australian, and North America-based) institutions in knowledge production (Amelung, Scheel & van Reekum 2024; Crush & Chikanda 2018). Following policy imperatives (Bakewell 2008), migration research is primarily produced in Western countries on south–north migration, while important migratory movements between countries in the Global South remain unstudied (Crush & Chikanda 2018; Fiddian-Qasmieh 2020). The subsequent ‘destination country bias’ (Czaika & de Haas 2014; Gutekunst & Scheel 2019) and ‘Eurocentrism’ affecting positionalities and power relations leads to privileging viewpoints of the Global North. Transnational migration research has thus been blamed for offering limited benefits for those who are the subjects of such research (Pittaway, Bartolomei & Hugman 2010), particularly in countries labelled as the sending countries. Too often, migration scholars rely on concepts and frameworks that have been developed in Western countries, erroneously assuming that these are universal and transferable to other contexts (Fiddian-Qasmieh 2020; Gorodzeisky & Leykin 2022; Ramirez 2020).

The ‘destination country bias’ is intricately tied to the question of asymmetrical positionalities and power relations. While contemplating the calls to decolonize knowledge production – drawing on empirical examples from Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Morocco, Egypt, Iran and the USA – the contributions to this special issue demonstrate how the positionalities of both the researcher and the researched are influenced by a multitude of social, economic and emotional factors relevant to the postcolonial context in which the research is conducted. This leads us to question the relevance of some of the binaries drawn between the Global South and the Global North, as they are not always able to grasp the power dynamics in transnational research. Such binary distinctions tend to perpetuate and reify a regime of truth that distinguishes between a superior “West” and an inferior “rest” of colonized others (Hall 2006; Mustonen 2022). Moreover, they betray the complex positionalities and entanglement of relations of domination that have been highlighted by intersectional analyses of contemporary migrations and border regimes (Schwenken 2018; Tudor 2017).

THE PERSISTENCE OF NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The interrelated question of the persistence of national frameworks in transnational migration research constitutes the third predicament discussed in this SI. Transnational migration studies often focus on a form of nationalism that is established within migrant communities or diaspora networks. This ‘long-distance nationalism’ (Anderson 2006) constructs ‘the diaspora as a nationalist extension of the homeland’ (Tudor 2017). The problem is that imagined diaspora communities (Anderson 2006) tend to be uncritically reified by studies that make national ties, and related cross-border networks and connections, the central starting and reference point of their research. Consequently, such studies ignore conflicts that emerge through the categories of race, class and gender. Even studies that avoid this form of ‘groupism’ (Brubaker 2002) might remain caught up in methodological nationalism, as they rely on conceptual frameworks, which are informed by and ultimately reify the ‘national order of things’

(Malkki 1995). As Abdelhady and Aly (2022) note regarding the study of Middle Eastern diasporas, there is an urgent need to do justice to the manifold forms of diaspora life related to the region. To achieve this, it is important to acknowledge what the authors call diasporic sensibilities, which translate into multiple identifications and belongings. These are not solely defined as exceptional life events related to the experience of physical displacement (ibid.). Inspired by these critiques, the contributions to this SI critically address the ‘national order’ in research on migration and the subsequent epistemic legacies and conceptual baggage attached to the period of the formation of the modern nation-state (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002).

(POST)COLONIAL LEGACIES AND COLONIALITY OF POWER

To understand how colonialism produced knowledge of domination to the detriment of the colonized peoples who were researched and described by (often) European scholars for European audiences, postcolonial theory interrogates the epistemologies that continue to structure knowledge production (Said 1978; Stoler 2016). Although the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ are often used interchangeably, there are important differences. Early critiques of postcolonial theory confronted ‘postcolonialism’s’ failure to acknowledge power relations between the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’ and its failure to account for geo-political distinctions between regions and countries (McClintock 1992). From a decolonial perspective, the prefix is misleading, as postcoloniality does not exist as long as Western institutions and policies continue to dominate (Bhambra 2014; Weiner 2018). Moreover, decolonial thinkers criticize postcolonial theory precisely for its Eurocentric bias and its tendency to overlook non-European sources. This criticism is based on the notion that postcolonial theory is disconnected from the materiality and the social world that exist beyond textuality (Colpani et al. 2022; Mezzadra 2011).

Despite the contested relationship between decolonial and postcolonial approaches, they both critique the world order dominated by North American and European powers and challenge the subsequent Eurocentrism of knowledge production (Bhambra 2014). Following Colpani (2022), several articles in this SI complement postcolonial theory with its materialist critiques that bring the capitalist forces into place. Indeed, these critiques do not exist outside of postcolonial theory, but are an integral part of it and help to conceptualize the troubling relationship between modernity, colonialism and capitalism (Colpani 2022; Gregory 1995; Mezzadra 2011). In particular, the contributions in this issue address what Grosfoguel, Oso and Christou (2015) rightly critique as transnational migration studies’ blindness to the *coloniality of power*, understood as an entanglement of different forms of power, including ‘sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation.’ Importantly, this web of power relations is structured by racisms that carry colonial legacies and histories. Owing to this blind spot, transnational migration studies risk ignoring the heterogeneity of migrant experiences implicated by the continued virulence of these forms of racism and the racialized hierarchies sustained by them.

This gauntlet thrown at transnational migration research raises the question of how to better account for (and possibly undo) the different threads of epistemic subjugation, erasure and exploitation that constitute the coloniality of power in much of the research on contemporary migration. This SI engages with this question to

reinvent transnational approaches as a strand of migration research that contributes to the reframing of migration as a dynamic force and a survival strategy, implicating social change from below in the context of the continued coloniality of power. This attempt to decolonize transnational migration studies is indeed necessary for preventing transnational approaches from becoming yet another strand of migration research that ultimately ends up reifying the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1995) or providing the knowledge that is needed for the governance and exploitation of people called migrants.

In what follows, this SI engages with circumstances, categories, factors and forces that are, to a significant extent, inherited from the colonial era (Stoler 2016) but nevertheless continue to inform and shape transnational migration research (Mayblin & Turner 2021).

Earlier work published in NJMR has examined recent developments affecting transnational migration studies in conceptual terms (Glick Schiller & Frykman 2018). They, among other things, explored the build-up of ever more restrictive mobility regimes (Glick Schiller 2018) and the emergence of a migration industry (Nyberg Sørensen 2018). The contributions to this SI, in turn, focus on the challenges that arise in the actual practice of conducting transnational research. Many of these challenges grow from the three predicaments discussed above.

ADDRESSING THE THREE PREDICAMENTS OF TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION RESEARCH

All contributions to this SI engage with the predicament of 'destination country bias', which denotes the ongoing presence of structures that impose normative constraints on how migration is researched. It is often based on a false assumption that migration is a one-directional process, from the Global South to the Global North. In this SI we are concerned with the subsequent prevalence of Eurocentric ideas and framings within research agendas. Three contributions address the 'destination country bias' and associated problems such as Eurocentrism in particular. We start out with Talebi's (2024) article entitled *Talking Past Each Other: Politics of Knowledge Production in Transnational Power Relations*. His contribution forces us think about data extraction from the angle of the Middle East (Talebi 2024). He shows how research on things and people associated with 'the Middle East' is shaped by agendas, demands and constraints of Europe-based institutions and funders, resulting in 'extractivist' forms of knowledge production (De Sousa Santos 2018; Pittaway et al. 2010). Talebi further illustrates how this type of knowledge production displays a profound epistemic ignorance vis-à-vis local understandings, histories of migration and the (nation-)state.

In a similar vein, in her article *Research Funding and Passport Hierarchies: Power Asymmetries in Multi-sited Ethnographies in Migration Studies*, Pool (2024) critically engages with the structures and infrastructure that enable multi-sited migration research. In particular, she shows how mobile research depends on powerful passports and research funding, and argues that a multi-sited method is, in fact, the method of the privileged. It is predominantly researchers located in the Global North who have access to research funding and passports that enable multi-sited projects and allow them to cross multiple borders and engage with their research interlocutors on different research sites.

Lind's (2024) contribution *Child-Right-ing: Going Beyond Innocence to Realize the Rights of Undocumented Migrant Children through Struggles for the Rights of All Children* the 'destination country bias' from another angle, that of vulnerable children and the supposedly transnationally recognized children's rights. While exploring children's rights through a discussion on illegalized children and their families living in Sweden, Lind's article reveals the limitations and politically low ambitions of a Eurocentric human rights paradigm.

The Eurocentric approach to migration research is intricately linked to the second predicament of asymmetric power relations. Four contributions to this SI address the challenge of how to negotiate researchers' multiple and mutable positionalities and asymmetrical power relations in multi-sited research. They engage with the question of how to reverse 'epistemological subjugation' (Ramirez 2020) of knowledge produced with the so-called migrants in Europe or in the 'global Souths.'

Talebi (2024), who writes from the positionality of 'someone not from there', illustrates the challenges of being a 'migrant researcher' from the 'Middle East' conducting 'migration research' in Germany. He highlights the in-betweenness that emerges from his positionality as privileged vis-à-vis many of his Iranian compatriots in Germany, while at the same time lacking the privileges of his European colleagues.

In her article, *In the Shadow of the Colonizer: Studying Up in the Post-colonial Middle East*, Mustonen (2024) discusses asymmetric power relations in the context of ethnographic research in a country profoundly shaped by colonial legacies. While reflecting on her ethnographic fieldwork as white European researcher in Egypt with society's privileged members during a politically volatile period, she shows how both the positionality of the researcher and the researched are shaped by geographic and social locations and political constellations. Her rich ethnographic material allows her to question the analytical value of widely used conceptual binaries such as 'Western' and 'non-Western', the 'Global South' and the 'Global North', and 'colonized' and 'colonizer' that often feature in and shape transnational migration research. She argues that these conceptual binaries are too shallow to grasp the existing social hierarchies and power asymmetries and instead can be appropriated by the elite themselves in a quest for resources and profit.

Stock's article *Emotions, Positionalities and the Reproduction of Border Regimes: Multi-sited Ethnography with Syrian Transnational Families* illustrates the emotional impact of overlapping border regimes on Syrian male migrants. Subsequently, she argues that migration regimes are also always emotional regimes. They not only produce and shape emotions but also use them as technologies of governance. Stock highlights the omnipresence of different emotions, such as shame, envy, guilt and disgust, which link different positionalities within the migration regimes. Her multi-sited transnational ethnography also touches upon a less-researched theme of researchers' emotions and their impact on their positionality. Stock calls for more sensitivity to emotions in transnational research, as they have a profound impact on research on transnational relations.

Also Pool's article contributes to the discussion of positionalities by showing how multi-sited research is not unproblematic itself but rather builds on and risks reproducing highly unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched. These unequal power relations are often underpinned by postcolonial legacies. Yet, Pool also shows that, during her ethnography with undocumented migrants, despite the harsh conditions and few resources, certain practices such as hosting the researcher

allowed her research interlocutors to exercise their agency and reverse the power relations, at least momentarily.

The predicament of asymmetric power relations leads to the third predicament of transnational migration research discussed in this SI: the persistence of conceptual frames and methodologies that are shaped by and ultimately reify the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1995). Related conceptual issues often revolve around the question of how to account for the continued relevance of the nation-state in the constitution and governance of transnational phenomena without falling back into the epistemic bias of methodological nationalism. Another interconnected question is how to theorize the contestations and negotiations among multiple actors and agents, ranging from multinational companies and international organizations to local street-level bureaucrats and migrants engaging in a ‘politics from below’. Lind, while studying undocumented children’s rights, highlights the paradoxical character of these rights, as they constitute one of the few resources available to illegalized migrant families to improve their legal status and living conditions. At the same time, as Lind illustrates, children’s rights (and the human rights paradigm in general) reaffirm the sovereignty of nations, as they rely on the same states that act as the guarantors of rights but that also harm and limit the life opportunities of migrants through violent border regimes. Consequently, he coins the term ‘vulnerabilization’ to describe the work of the state-based system that, on paper, is meant to protect vulnerable children.

de Hart’s (2024) article *Juggling Paperwork across Borders: Theorizing Transnational Legal Space* responds to the ‘national order’ by researching transnational families. She shows how, in their everyday activities and relationships, transnational families engage and struggle with multiple sets of laws and institutions that may involve plural and fundamentally different legal systems and normative orderings. To study the social and legal workings of laws across borders from a bottom-up perspective, she develops the concept of ‘transnational legal space’, which she defines as a transnational social field that criss-crosses national borders. In this space, individual family members, family networks or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mobilize law, creating and using new norms in response to the interaction or collision of different family law systems. The transnational legal space is thus not an even playing ground but one that is deeply shaped by colonial legacies and continuities, as well as resultant asymmetrical power relations.

CONCLUSION

The three predicaments discussed in this SI highlight conceptual, epistemic, methodological and political challenges that arise while conducting transnational migration research in the contemporary postcolonial condition(s). The separation of these three predicaments – ‘destination country bias’, asymmetric power relations and the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1995) – is arbitrary, as there are overlaps and intersections between them. Yet, spelling out the predicaments separately has helped us scrutinize their entanglements. Each of the six contributions makes visible various methodological and epistemological challenges pertaining to transnational migration research that arise from these predicaments. The articles encourage researchers in transnational migration research to critically reflect on their research practices. In doing so, they open pathways for conceptual frameworks that move beyond simplistic binaries, challenge state-centric approaches and question Eurocentrism in research agendas.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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