Insider Research on Irregular Migration:

Transnational Methodology and the Possibility of Multiple Roles[1]

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Abstract

The paper addresses the limits and opportunities on insider research of irregular migration. Different from many studies of irregular migration, where the research is carried out in countries of destination, I conducted a transnational, or multi-sited ethnography. My claim is that migrant researchers have an enhanced capacity to play multiple roles while conducting research *at home* and *abroad*. In such a case, I describe the limits and opportunities offered when the researcher is a migrant, a sociologist, a friend of a friend, and a friend of a relative. Besides, such a strategy can enhance the ability to obtain access to information as well as insights into the workings of irregular migration, especially when researchers attempt to grasp the often contradictory roles and statuses that irregular migrants occupy both at home and abroad.

Introduction

Research on irregular migration has received increased attention in the past years in Europe. Confined to the problematic of labour migration, this research agenda gained relevance in the context of large flows of irregular migrants arriving in the EU, and the securitisation campaigns of the European borders. Drawing on research carried out with irregular Romanian migrants in Milan, Italy, between 2004 and 2007, I analyse the limits and opportunities offered by insider research. Different from similar cases where the analysis is oriented towards contexts of destination, I used multi-sited ethnography as an approach in looking at both ends of a migration stream. My claim is that migrant researchers have an enhanced capacity to play multiple roles while conducting research *at home* and *abroad*. Such a strategy can enhance the ability to obtain access to information as well as insights into the workings of irregular migration, especially when researchers attempt to grasp the often contradictory roles and statuses that irregular migrants occupy both at home and abroad.

Transnational methodology and irregular migration

Transnational, or multi-sited methodology, developed out of the attempt to recast migration at both ends of migratory streams. As Fitzgerald argues, 'anthropological techniques … that were originally elaborated to describe remote villages are inadequate to the task of understanding contemporary human mobility' (2012, 1725). After the manifesto from 1995 when Marcus proposed multi-sited ethnography as a new research avenue, migration scholars embarked consistently on the task of 'following the people.' Although multi-sited ethnography has limitations compared to deep and intense fieldwork in specific places and communities (Candea 2007; Marcus and Okely 2007; Falzon 2009; Riccio 2011) it still provides unique opportunities to recast more fully migrants' transnationality: their simultaneous involvements in contexts of origin

and destination. Besides, transnational methodology did not focus on ethnographic methods alone, but incorporated mixed methods, including qualitative interviews, ethnography and quantitative approaches (Meeus 2010).

Research on migrant transnationality was carried out with the normative purpose to go beyond the limits of methodological nationalism. Sometimes it involved collaborative work conducted simultaneously in countries of origin and destination, as it was in analysing Mexican migration to the United States or Ghanaian migration to the Netherlands (Mazzucato 2008; Fitzgerald 2012), in which researchers followed specific groups of people for a certain period of time. More often than not however, research is carried out individually due to specific academic requirements as well as financial and time constraints, such as the case of anthropologists who conduct individual research projects (Marcus and Okely 2007).

In the past twenty years, insider research proliferated in migration studies as there were more and more scholars originating from non-OECD countries (Matejskova 2013). Despite this development as well as the programmatic predominance of the transnational perspective in the field, fieldwork still remained oriented towards contexts of destination. Insider research was thought of as providing advantages due to researchers' ability to possess cultural intimacy and common habits with those researched, a sense of depth that insiders can easily obtain in the field, including a lack of language and cultural barriers between researchers and researched (Carling, Erdal et al. 2013). However, as some authors contend, the distinction between insiders and outsiders actually obscures more diverse categories of insider-ness (idem). In some instances, common migratory background offers insider advantages as researchers are able to better grasp the difficulties and challenges of migratory life, despite different ethno-national senses of belonging (Matejskova 2013). Elsewhere, researchers explore the meanings of common national belonging between researchers and immigrants in addressing the issue of reflexivity in qualitative research (Kempny 2012; Nowicka and Cieslik 2013). In other contexts (Tsuda 1998) common ethnicity alone is a too-broad cate-

gory for describing the position of the researcher in the field as insider or outsider. In some other contexts, researchers undertook multiple roles during the research process as it was with Wade (1984) who was simultaneously working in university administration and at the same time conducted research with minority students. In my own work, I looked at the different roles researchers may take in the field in the sense that researchers may perform different roles (as migrants or researchers for instance) but their main task is that of a researcher. Different from some perspectives on positionality, where researchers may change their positions in the field but they are assigned one and the same role during the research phase, I look at a case where both positionality *and* the role of the researcher, are changing.

Heretofore I shortly discuss the Romanian irregular migration to Italy. I continue with the empirical analysis and the description of the research process as socially constructed: I analyse different roles I took during research, including failures and achievements, and the type of information I was able to obtain at different research stages. I conclude with a general comment on the perspective of multiple roles for transnational methodology.

Romanians in Italy

Today, Romanians make the largest immigrant group in Italy (Ban 2009; Anghel 2013) with over one million people. In spite of the size, Romanian migration is relatively new, as most of the immigrants arrived in the country in the last ten years. The development of Romanian migration to Italy resembled the other main migrations to the Peninsula. It developed irregularly, quickly, and in substantial numbers (Zincone 2000; Zincone 2006). The main migrant groups today are the Romanians, Albanians, and Moroccans (ISTAT 2011).

International migration in Italy started to become an important phenomenon since the beginning of the 1990s, when the growth of the Italian economy and the emergence of new service sectors, such as the caring industry, required migrant labour. The country easily became an attractive migration destination. As

labour demand was not filled by recruitment policies, migration to Italy largely developed irregularly from countries from Eastern Europe and North Africa. The solid demand for jobs in Italy coincided with a massive shrinking of the labour market in Romania in the 1990s, and with Romania's accession to the EU, which granted Romanians the right to travel freely to West European countries. Romanian migration developed irregularly, sustained by rapidly expanding migrant networks from different Romanian regions. As migration to Italy developed irregularly, the country employed post-migration regularisation of irregular migrants as a means to 'solve' the problems generated by the large influx of irregular migrants, enhancing their social and economic integration. In the context of massive irregular migration and weak measures to control migration, many considered that at some point in time Italy lost the control over irregular migration (Colombo and Sciortino 2003). However, towards the 2000s a series of measures started to signal the structuring of the country's migration policy based on the principles of social security and respect of human rights (Zincone 2000). Migration policies however, remained unstructured and public institutions were tolerant of the newly arriving immigrants. The issue of immigrants' integration largely remained the task of local municipalities, but their actions were not sustained by sufficient financial means (Zincone 2006). This resulted in a high local variation in the experience of immigrants' integration (Riccio 2011). In the end, migration developed autonomously from institutions and state policies.

In this context of weak state control and lack of institutions to support migrants' arrival and incorporation, irregular migrants had to rely overwhelmingly on social support (Colombo 1996; Bleahu 2007; Anghel 2013). Romanian migration developed similar to other migratory flows to Italy: it was based on social networks, where pioneers were followed by their friends and relatives. The migrant careers of Romanians were following a more general pattern of immigrant adaptation in Italy (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010) - migrants' careers developed in certain stages, from irregularity and insecurity, to precarious incorporation and finally, residence and settlement in Italy

(Vlase 2006; Cingolani 2009; Anghel 2011).

Romanian migration to Italy developed after 1997 with networks from different regions organising the labour migration (Sandu 2005; Cingolani and Piperno 2006). Until 2002, when Romanians obtained the right to travel freely to Europe, religion played a significant role in migration, as members of the Catholic and Pentecostal Churches were able to migrate easier and actually became more successful in comparison to their Orthodox coethnics (Stan 2005; Cingolani 2008). As migrant networks expanded, migration took traction. In 2002, when Romanians obtained the right to travel freely to Europe, migration boomed, and a few hundred thousand Romanians arrived in Italy. In the same year there occurred a mass legalisation of irregular migrants which recorded a surprisingly high number of Romanians (Anghel 2013). Romanians were soon considered a 'security problem' in the Peninsula and often encountered negative public stereotypes (McMahon 2012). Claims over the alleged criminality of Romanians appeared in the Italian media. Research also shows the marginality of many Romanian migrants, with reports on begging, trafficking, and child labour (L z roiu 2000; Alexandru 2006; Tesar 2011). In the context of free movement of people and the massive arrival of Romanian immigrants, many new migrants reported harsh living condition and the lack of social support.

I conducted research in Italy in 2004, when many Romanian immigrants resided there irregularly. In that context, many such Romanians were new immigrants without much knowledge of Italian society. Throughout the fieldwork period I aimed at obtaining insights into how people adapted to Italian society, found work and socialised in the new context. Besides, I was interested to learn about migrants' transnational practices and their relations with their home communities. With these questions in mind I moved to Milan, which hosted one of the largest Romanian communities in the country. I did not chose Milan as an 'arbitrary location' but as a strategic site of research, a city hosting a large number of Romanian immigrants, where I could potentially unfold a diversity of migratory experiences and patterns of migrant transnationalism.

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Researching irregular migration

Irregular migration became one of the important research topics in Europe in the last ten years, raising a series of theoretical and methodological challenges. Researchers analysed migrants' interaction with state institutions and the local population, and access to the labour market and social capital among migrants (Bommes and Sciortino 2011). First, questions on how migrants survive and make a living under conditions of irregularity are of central importance. Methodological dilemmas and ethical considerations are paramount as 'the insecure situations in which irregular migrants live can lead to chronic stress and anxiety' (Düvell, Triandafyllidou et al. 2010).

Second, research on marginal and vulnerable migrants is not at all new in the social sciences. Analysing African immigrants in New York for instance, Stoller (1996) mentions race relations and the colonial past as the main obstacles he encountered during his research. He therefore needed several years to complete his study on West African migrants in New York. In his case, some African migrants were mistrustful and took him for an undercover police officer (Stoller 1997, 90). In another Romanian study, Bleahu (2006) encountered difficulties when conducting interviews with irregular migrants in Rome. She was able to overcome access difficulties because she was related to some of the migrants she interviewed. Suspicious attitudes towards researchers were mentioned by other scholars as well, as 'the researcher can be seen as a threat to migrants in insecure situations' (Carling, Erdal et al. 2013, 7). Yet, my interest lies in asking whether fieldwork carried out at home would meet with similar difficulties and mistrust on the side of migrants as compared with fieldwork conducted abroad.

As it is with research on irregular migration, very rarely is such research on marginal, vulnerable groups realised with a transnational optic (Van Meeteren 2010). It was rather assumed that more better-off migrants would maintain stronger transnational ties, whereas those with a shorter migratory experience and marginal statuses would develop weaker forms of transnationalism (Waldinger 2008; Soehl and Waldinger 2010). Given the difficulties entailed in carrying out research with irregular migrants I seek to illustrate how such a multi-sited research project can be conducted. I focus on the different roles researchers can take up during the course of fieldwork. Here I do not mean that researchers can have simultaneous different activities, but that in the social contexts where the research is carried out, they are ascribed different social roles. In this way I seek to uncover how different categories of insiderness emerge for 'insider research' in relation to different social roles that researchers undertake both at home and abroad. The focus of the paper is not on reflections on insiderness and the depth associated with it, but rather how the researcher can obtain access to the field and tap into migrants' life experiences. During the fieldwork period I performed different social roles: migrant, sociologist, friend of a friend and friend of a relative. In what follows, I will analyse the research opportunities and limits for each of these roles.

The researcher as a migrant

I started fieldwork in the autumn of 2004 in the open square in front of *Stazzione Centrale* – the main train station in Milan – and in one of the parking lots where Romanians were gathering in the city. In the initial stage, my research aim was twofold: on the one hand to analyse the main features of Romanian migration to Milan and n the other hand, to focus on a specific group and to analyse migrant transnationalism in that case. Over the course of the first days of research I only talked to migrants gathering in front of the station. In such places people met, discussed among one another, and tried to obtain labour contracts. I introduced myself as a student in Germany living for a while in Milan. In the beginning I started to gather general information on working and living conditions in the city, without focusing on a specific group. At the same time I conducted interviews with Italian NGOs working in the field of migration and immigrants' integration, Italian academics, and Romanian associations. In all these cases, and whenever I recorded interviews, I introduced myself as a Ph.D.

student in sociology. In this first period my research strategy resembled that of other researchers who went to open places of Italian cities where they could interact with immigrants (Colombo 1996; Marcu 2011; Riccio 2011). After a while I decided to concentrate on people coming from a small city in northern Romania, Bor a, as they were presented by other Romanian migrants as more successful than the rest of the Romanians. As time went by I encountered many migrants. It became apparent to me that people depended on their relations with other Romanian migrants. Usually, they obtained labour opportunities with the support of other Romanians, but at the same time, a lot of exploitation was at stake. Several critical instances made apparent these migrants' fragile arrangements. Once, I went to a park were Romanians used to gather. On a bench there were some migrants from Romania swapping jokes and remembering joyful events from home. It was the middle of the day and they had no jobs. Suddenly, one of them, Daniel[2], proudly told the others he was to start working the following day. 'I have friends in Milan,' he said. After spending some time together, another migrant, Toni, coming from the same Romanian region as Daniel, asked him: 'If you have some available work, why don't you help me?' Toni was in a state of despair. He was in Milan for some time and so far he had no job at all. When he was asking Daniel about jobs, Toni was almost crying in front of him. As he later said, 'if you are alone here it is as if you are on an isolated island in the middle of the ocean.'

Some other time at *Centrale* I observed irregular migrants seeking jobs and forging social ties among themselves. It was Saturday and Gabriel, a migrant from Bor a, had an appointment there. When we arrived in front of the train station, there was a substantial group of Romanians talking to one another. Gabriel met two Romanian women, Ana and Mariana. Gabriel knew Ana, who was by then in Milan for some time. Mariana, in contrast, was a new migrant and was desperate to find a job. Ana tried to help Mariana and talked to some other Romanians to find work for her. After a while she met two acquaintances who looked for a migrant woman to

cook and clean for them. Mariana had the intention to accept the job but she eventually passed it up. 'I actually don't know them. How would I know they are trustworthy, serious people?' After a while a car with *Carabinieri* appeared on the spot. Most migrants were irregular and fled the place instantly, including Mariana, Ana and Gabriel. The whole group of Romanians vanished in a less than a minute. I left together with Ana, Mariana and Gabriel, where we headed to a McDonalds outlet on the other side of the station.

Fieldwork in Milan revealed the precariousness of migrants' lives, how much they depended on one another on available opportunities, and how crucial the lack of state and institutional support was. In such a fragile environment, only the Catholic Church provided people with some institutional support, as they offered clothes, washing facilities, and a warm meal each day. After I spent some time in the city and made some acquaintances, I was able to accompany them to some parking lots and to *Centrale*, obtaining insights into the everyday life situations of these people. After being in Milan for more than three months, I met migrants only when they had some free time. As they were steadily involved in working and obtaining work, such meetings with Romanian irregular migrants were limited in time. In this first phase I did not conduct interviews, nor was I able to obtain migrants' life stories and experiences of migration. What I could do instead, was to reflect on the meetings with these irregular migrants, and to look at their attitudes and practices towards one another and towards the Italian authorities. I used to meet migrants almost daily, but because our meetings were limited time-wise, I was not able to gather sufficient and precise information on their migration strategy and incorporation practices. Besides, I had access only to migrants who met in the city's open places, usually recent migrants who were typically in a very precarious situation.

Towards the end of my residence in Milan I obtained much better access to the field and respondents. For a few days I was able to work with migrants from northern Romania, Bor a included. Then, I was able to work side by side with irregular migrants and

I obtained dense and rich information on their experiences of migration and their lives in Milan. Such information was usually disclosed through small chats occurring during the lunch breaks or working hours. After work, we used to spend some time together in different pubs. The group of migrants I worked with was small, but they offered detailed information on how they got to Italy and how they managed their lives afterwards. As I was regarded as a migrant too, some of them tended to be more forthright with me. During working hours they told me their migration stories, from the first days and years of living in Milan, and how they regarded migrants coming from Bor a, whose migration I was investigating. Unfortunately, this research period lasted only a few days, as the work availability was very limited. I kept contact over the years with one migrant, Mihai, but I met him again only randomly. When I was in Milan one year after completing my research, he asked me to help him buy a second-hand car from Germany. Despite not having sufficient knowledge of cars, I promised to help him by surfing through some internet pages together and accompanying him to Germany. Although I was ready to accompany him and help with translation, his intentions did not materialize in the end.

The researcher as a sociologist

From the beginning of my fieldwork in Milan, I opted for a mixed approach in which I combined situations when I presented myself as a migrant alongside situations when I presented myself as a sociologist, a Ph.D. student in Germany interested in Romanian migration to Italy. As a sociologist, I conducted interviews with Italian NGOs involved in the field of immigrants' integration, and with representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church. I once attended a Romanian cultural event in the city and spoke to members of some Romanian associations there. Upon agreeing to an interview with members of a newly formed association, they also introduced me to some migrants living in a small city in the vicinity of Milan.

Every evening, fifteen to twenty migrants used to meet in a small park, exchanging information about jobs, and socializing at the same time. I introduced myself as a sociologist researching the life of Romanian immigrants. In the beginning migrants were open to me but they did not agree to have our discussions recorded. Most of them were parsimonious in narrating their migration stories. They however allowed my presence there and were also open to me accompanying them to different parts of the city, to *Centrale*, and to places where Romanians used to meet. I used to go almost daily to that park but after a while I realised that I had not collected enough empirical data. Some of them lived in precarious conditions, such as in a deserted house. Others lived in overcrowded houses with some other Romanians. As most of them were new migrants and lived irregularly in Milan, access to jobs was scarce and they were often suspicious of one another. They usually did not know much about what the others did, as it was essential for each of them to protect their working and housing arrangements from other migrants.

After a while, some of them started to become suspicious of me. This suspicious attitude towards me and my research activities grew over time. At the beginning, some of them tended to trust me, but after a while it became apparent in their attitude that some others felt that there was something wrong with my presence. I came to realise this state of affairs in an evening, when three migrants openly expressed their mistrust. In that evening we were in a small Chinese pub close to the park. Two of them said: 'We don't know whom do you work for, but many people here do not trust you. In order to survive everybody here has a job. How is it possible that you don't work but are able to live in Milan?' One of them later explained to me that in their circle, Romanians did not share information about themselves, not even among friends. They said that very often, everybody has to hide something from the others. Sandu, a young migrant man told to me directly: 'We don't know if you work for the police, or for some bad guys, we cannot know that. But what you do here is weird for us.' After that event I realised I would not be able to continue going there. I abandoned the fieldwork there and opted a different strategy, trying to find access by using friendship ties.

The researcher as a friend, or friend of a friend

The third role I had in the field was that of a friend. In the last three weeks in Milan, after abandoning the park, I got acquainted with Marcel, a migrant from Bor a who used to host in his place, Romanians living in tents or deserted houses. This was facilitated by a friend of mine from Germany whose wife had a brother, Ion, living in Milan. Ion was a close acquaintance of Marcel and asked him to talk to me as I was his friend. As I was a trustful person now, I lived in Marcel's house a few days during which I was able to record the migration story of Marcel, and his brother, Costica. I also went to Bor a to attend a wedding where Marcel's daughter got married. Some other migrants from Bor a were living in Marcel's flat. As Marcel hosted and trusted me, and they lived in his house, they expressed no suspicion, just as it was the case in the park before. This entry was important, as it offered access to the network of Marcel, a well-respected person among his fellow Bor eni. While completing the research in Milan, this last strategy offered me a way to obtain rich empirical information. In the second phase of research I started fieldwork in Romania. From among the migrants I encountered in Milan, I was able to maintain my connection to Marcel, his family and friends. Bor a is a small town in Romania. However, during the fieldwork period there while walking on the streets and spending hours in the centre, I met no other migrants from Milan.

The researcher at home: friend of a relative

The last research strategy I employed and the role derived therein, was that of a friend of a relative. I have used this strategy while conducting fieldwork in Bor a, Romania, in the summer following fieldwork in Milan. This time I was fortunate to work with Mioara, a student of sociology at the Babe Bolyai University in Cluj – the largest city in Transylvania – whose mother was born in and who grew up in Bor a. Mioara had some tens of relatives there and some acquaintances. In Milan I introduced myself as a soci-

ologist, a Ph.D. student. I did the same in Bor a, and also mentioned that I had previously taught at different Romanian universities. Mioara, who was a BA student in sociology at the time, said that she was doing her BA with a topic on migration from Bor a, and that I was supervising her research. When we arrived in the city, we were hosted by some of her relatives. To my surprise, in Bor a, I did not encounter the same suspicious attitude as in Milan. Indeed, I met only Marcel and his family, but still, there was a different attitude towards me. If in Milan there was a predominance of suspicion and difficult access to migrants, in Romania it was the opposite. People there were very open and keen to tell their migration stories. Out of more than 60 people I encountered, only 2 expressed their suspicion and did not want to talk to us. Indeed, the fact that Mioara had relatives in Bor a played a fundamental role in defining our role during my fieldwork period. We started by conducting interviews with Mioara's relatives: uncles, cousins and aunts. We then started talking to different people we met fortuitously. In such cases, we mentioned her mother was from Bor a and that she had many relatives in the town. The information we gathered was full with details and allowed us to reconstruct the history of migration to Italy. We gained insights into migrants' coping strategies, as well as their role in the community of origin. Participant observation, both in Milan and in Bor a, helped me to be discerning about the information gathered in Romania. If in Milan migrants struggled to survive and make a living at the margins of Italian society, in Bor a they were engaged in a process of gaining status. There, migration was considered an avenue of success, as it allowed people to accumulate resources, build new houses and improve their living standards. In this social repositioning, migrants narrated their histories of migration, often stressing the difficulties they encountered in the first few years abroad and how they eventually became successful migrants.

Besides, if in Milan I had access to a limited number of migrants from Bor a, usually newly arrived in the city, in Romania I was able to meet migrants with longer migration histories. I thus obtained a more nuanced view on how migrants adapted to the Italian

context. In addition to the new migrants, often living in precarious conditions, there were also many more successful migrants who secured for themselves a good position in the Milanese labour market. Some of them were even small entrepreneurs engaged in employing other migrants from Romania. Due to the richness of information I gathered, I was thus able to reconstruct the history of migration over a period of 15 years from 1990 to 2005, obtaining crucial information on migration practices and migrants' incorporation.

I recorded a high number of interviews and life stories, but I focused afterwards on a very limited number of persons – who became key informants in my study. They were pioneers of migration and attracted a large number of relatives and friends to Italy. I also maintained contact over the years with some other migrants outside of Mioara's kinship network, as well as with some key informants in Bor a. The focus on key informants allowed a more detailed analysis of these peoples' lives. I was able to grasp their attitudes and their changing positions over the years. Besides, I visited them in Milan several times after I concluded my fieldwork there. Migrants did not reckon their migration experiences in full-depth during interviews. As I usually had little time devoted to each individual, I had to organise the interviews focusing on subjects related directly to migration. However, when I developed friendship ties with some individuals I obtained a more nuanced, complex, and longer-term view on how migration altered the lives of these individuals. Changing attitudes, emotions, power relations with non-migrants and relatives left behind unfolded not in interviews, but rather through casual discussions and in the time we spent together when I observed social actions and attitudes at home. Similarly important as in Milan, when I look into the fragility of peoples' lives meeting in front of *Centrale*, participant observation in Bor a offered a unique opportunity to grasp the changes that migration produced in the town. One example is Marian. I met him for the first time in 2005. He migrated to Milan in 2003 and in 2005 was still an irregular migrant. At our first meeting, he shared that he was not sure at all if his decision to migrate was

right. Towards the end of the meeting, he started to complain about how difficult life in Italy was. He was about to burst into tears, expressing the difficulty of living afar. I met Marian again in 2007. This time he was not only a legal migrant, but a small successful entrepreneur. In the time that has passed since our first meeting, he became associated with an Italian friend and started a company in construction. Not only did his situation improved tremendously, he even started to complain more about Romania and Romanian authorities, which, in his view, did almost nothing for them.

In Bor a I obtained rich information, but my fieldwork there had its constraints. As migrants spent their summer holidays there, it was only then where I was able to meet and talk to them. In the rest of the time I conducted interviews only with migrants' friends and relatives, former migrants and non-migrants. Besides, migrants tended to overestimate their gains over costs in migration and presented themselves as successful individuals. But their stance in Milan was not always good. By conducting research in both locations I was therefore able to grasp the discontinuities and dilemmas of irregular migration, of how people struggled to make a living in Italy and at the same time, construct a position of high prestige at home. Fieldwork cross-fertilisation in the two sites – Milan and Bor a – allowed me to better grasp the paradoxes of this migratory flow, as well as its development from an individual innovative migration to a substantial chain migration. In both contexts I tried to reciprocate the time and trust that migrants offered me. I spent many hours with them, listening to their difficulties and dilemmas. Besides, some of them had the intention to acquire cars from Germany. Similar to Mihai, whom I tried to help in Milan, I offered my support to some others in Bor a who had this intention. In these cases too, such plans did not materialise.

Conclusion

Irregular migrants occupy a marginalised status in destination countries, with their access to various resources being limited by legislative and administrative

barriers. On the other hand, it is accepted that migrants initiate migration in order to achieve upward mobility in the community of origin, often materialised through return migration. In this case, following people in multiple sites allows for a better understanding of their contextually built social roles and statuses.

In some cases, researchers report changing their positionality during research, which bears significant effects on the power relations between researchers and other social actors the field. In such cases travelling between different sites of research is a solution to obtain more data (Weissköppel 2009). In my case, I not only traveled between sites but also switched between roles. However, none of the positions I had during the fieldwork, researcher, migrant, friend of a friend, or friend of a relative, provided me with an avenue to research migration in depth. Each had serious limitations and provided only 'partial truths'. The combination of these roles, however, provided me the opportunity to gather significant amount of data and many hours of participant observation.

Even if I did not perform an auto-ethnography (Khosravi 2008), insider research involves the researcher in a web of social relations in a very consistent manner. As a Romanian migrant in Milan, I was able to spend only a limited amount of time with migrants and I was not able to gather interviews of their life stories. As a sociologist I was regarded suspiciously and I was able to record a limited amount of data. In both positions, though, I conducted participant observation, spending much time with migrants, and obtaining insights into their everyday experiences. As a friend of a friend I obtained significant information; however I had not much time at disposal to carry out fieldwork in Milan. As a friend of a relative, I was able to obtain detailed information on peoples' experiences of migration, but I often lacked insights into the difficulties of irregular migration and the fragility of migrants' positions. Each role, though, allowed me to recast a larger process of irregular migration. Furthermore, on-and-off schedules characterised my field immersion. Unlike classical ethnography, there was almost no habitation in Milan on my part. Only in Bor a did I live in migrants' houses, spending much time with them and their relatives.

In research on vulnerable groups, the visibility/invisibility of the researcher, as well as the access to information, are of main concern. The access and correctness of information is a second issue. Visibility and invisibility are closely related to the identities and roles the researcher builds in the eyes of participants. Social worker, teacher, coworker, fellow migrant or countryman, are only some of the fluid identities created through the interactions in fieldwork. In ethnographic studies, the researcher can deploy and negotiate different self-identities when interacting with diverse social categories in the field, e.g. in all-male or in all-female settings, with different ethnic groups in the field (Tsuda 1998). In multi-sited ethnography, however, self-identities are diverse not only within the single place, but also between research sites. Thus, the issue of visibility/invisibility of the researcher was very significant in gathering data and gaining the trust of the people in Milan. Here, being a migrant offered unique opportunities when associated with invisibility, but posed serious limitations when I made myself visible as a sociologist. I also experienced a shocking difference in what it concerns the quantity and quality of data gathered *abroad* and *at home*: in my case the data obtained at home was more accurate and richer than what was gathered abroad. However, participant observation abroad was crucial in order to understand migrants' lives and statuses in both origin and destination societies.

Notes

[2] In this paper I use only fictitious names in order to provide anonymity of those whom I interviewed.

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