



AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Aalborg Universitet

Irregular Migration

Mismatch between Conceptualizations and Lived Experiences

Lund Thomsen, Trine

Published in:
Qualitative Studies

Publication date:
2012

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Lund Thomsen, T. (2012). Irregular Migration: Mismatch between Conceptualizations and Lived Experiences. *Qualitative Studies*, 3(2), 97-114. <http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/qual/article/view/7303>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Irregular Migration: Mismatch between Conceptualizations and Lived Experiences

Trine Lund Thomsen

Abstract. This article focuses on researching differences in relation to irregular migration and various methodological challenges and ethical considerations that arise when working in this type of research field. Due to the precarious character of the migration and the vulnerability of the migrants, a large degree of responsibility is placed on the researcher in order to refrain from harming the researched group(s) further. Yet, the need to access information about their life situations are of great importance to shed light on matters that otherwise would remain hidden and undisclosed. How do researchers recognize the implications of the methods used in researching irregular migration and other vulnerable people and sensitive subjects? How do we carry out research in this field without causing further harm to the subjects researched? What kind of differentiating categorization of migrants do researchers construct, produce and reproduce during the research process? This article addresses the above questions by looking at the construction and categorization of irregular migrants in both the research process and as the products of research conducted, using the biographical narrative method in order to obtain a deeper and more complex understanding of the social dynamics involved in the field of irregular migration.

Keywords: Biographical narrative method, conceptualisation, irregular migration, social constructivism

Please cite this article as: Thomsen, T. L. (2012). Irregular Migration: Mismatch between Conceptualizations and Lived Experiences. *Qualitative Studies*, 3 (2): 97-114.

Introduction

The acceleration of globalization and differentiation of international migration has made the study of migration and ethnicity more relevant than ever (Castles and Miller, 2003). The escalation of mobility and migration over recent years has resulted in an increased focus on the processes, causes and consequences of these movements and the implications these transformations have on individuals and societies. However, scholars in this field have mainly been preoccupied with the production and reproduction of adequate theoretical frames for explaining and understanding migration-related developments. Much less attention has been paid to methodology and the methods applied when researching migration. Castles argues that basic methodological principles for a critical sociology of migration and ethnicity should increase awareness of general trends and alternative approaches to conducting empirical studies in the field of migration. According to Castles, researchers need to take a holistic approach and to include the human agency of migrants, applying participatory research methods, giving migrants and other persons affected by migration an active role in the research process (Castles, 2007). This notion applies to both regular and irregular migration, although there are exceptional conditions

regarding irregularised and vulnerable migrants that call for special attention to the ways in which we research these groups.

The main concerns in this article are the production of knowledge about and the conceptualization of research on 'irregular migration', as well as the interrelationship between these aspects. In addition, the article will consider some of the methodological dilemmas and challenges that arise during the research process. The focus is primarily on how encounters with irregularised migrants require special attention to the ways in which researchers access and address irregularised migrants and, furthermore, how the information and knowledge obtained from empirical data, such as interviews, is brought into knowledge production about, and conceptualization of, a highly politicized area. These matters will be addressed by using my own research experience from doing field work in this area and through analysis of empirical data. Experiences from my research will be discussed within a broader frame of academic research on irregular migration. Apart from the methodological considerations and discussions, the purpose of the chapter is also to illustrate how data produced using the biographical interpretive method provide new knowledge and a deeper understanding of the problems and challenges faced by migrants through their own experiences from everyday life. The chapter will address the following issues from a methodological perspective: researching difficult to access groups; categorization and conceptualization of irregular migration; living irregularity; and production (and reproduction) of inequality and misrecognition – stereotyping and stigmatization.

Regarding the latter point, I wish to focus on issues of self-presentation and representation in the everyday life of irregularised migrants and how categorization and conceptualisation may lead to stereotyping, which in many cases produces stigmatization and marginalization. A distinction between migrants' own self-presentation and that of the representations produced through categorization can be identified in researching irregular migration. My experiences from interviewing irregular migrants show that their self-presentation and self-identity does not correspond with the view of irregular migrants in the political and public spheres, often as being both undeserving and deviant, and this view is to some extent also produced in the academic literature through framing and conceptualization.

The main purpose of this article is two-fold and discusses the following issues:

What are the main challenges of applying a biographical narrative method approach in researching irregular migration?

How can biographical narrative interviews contribute to concept development or theory building in the research field of irregular migration?

Being reflective on the use and definition of concepts is vital in social research, and research on irregular migration is no exception. The concept of irregular migration is a legal, political and social construct of the current times. It is also a blurred concept, loaded with values, and highly politicized (Koser, 2005; Düvell, 2008a). The intricacies

of defining irregular migration, and the values attached to it, make conceptualization extremely sensitive and important, as it may have serious consequences for the people who inhabit this particular social world.

Living Irregularity

The research project that this article is based on is an explorative study of the migration experiences of Polish workers in Denmark, their motivations and strategies in relation to the migration process, and how these may be influenced by policies and opportunity structures. The research focuses on the migration process of the individual, from the motivating factors behind the choice to migrate, to the strategies used in the actual immigration process, and the consequences of the migration for migrants themselves and their families. The central aim of the research project was to explore how opportunity structures such as immigration policies and labour market structures affect the lives of migrants, and whether and how these may lead to irregular migration.

The issues presented in this article mainly deal with aspects related to Polish migrant workers' experiences of access to and incorporation into the Danish labour market, and only briefly refer to other aspects such as policies and opportunity structures. The study is limited to the period 2004-2008 and, therefore, does not include the consequences of the economic crisis since 2008, or the termination of the Transitional Agreement on 1 May 2009.

Studying irregular labour migration in Denmark has become particularly important since the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004, when 10 new member countries acceded to the Union. Eight of these countries were East European, and many of the "old" member countries introduced Transitional Agreements in the initial 3-5 years of migration by migrants from the new accession countries. The Transitional Agreements of the 'old' member states were all restrictive to some degree, and Denmark had one of the most restrictive agreements (Holzman & Münz, 2004). One of the main arguments for this was to protect the foreign workers from being exploited by employers and other labour market actors, by regulating the demand for work permits, as well as restricting their rights to social benefits in the transitional period. However, these regulations had a number of unintended consequences, because the restrictions themselves produced inequalities and irregularisation (Thomsen, 2010).

The method used in this research project on irregular migration in Denmark was based on a triangulation approach using several types of data. Qualitative interviews were conducted at the micro and meso levels, (biographical interviews and expert interviews, respectively), and policy documents were used as macro level data. The triangulation of the data from all three levels was done in order to capture a more nuanced perspective on the migration process, and to strengthen the validity of the results. At the macro level, policies and secondary data were included in order to situate the migration process within a contextualized political framework. Different types of documents were also included as a means of accessing knowledge at all three levels. At the meso level, expert interviews were conducted with representatives from

various organisations such as trade unions (BAT and 3F), the Danish Construction Association (Dansk Byggeri), and from the Catholic Church and the Polish Association in Aalborg. A group interview and individual biographical interviews with Polish migrant workers were conducted at the micro level. The reason for doing interviews was to obtain rich and detailed information about how certain relations and circumstances during the migration process was experienced and conditioned the strategies and activities of the migrants.

Biographical interviews were conducted with 24 Polish migrant workers representing different trades, mainly in construction, and the industrial and the service sector in Aalborg, the fourth largest town in Denmark. Through the analysis of biographical narrative interviews it is possible to obtain information about how certain relations and circumstances during the migration process have conditioned the strategies and activities of the migrants. The interviews can, therefore, help determine how the migration process is shaped through identifying significant factors in the respective narratives and patterns that may occur among them. The interviews were conducted in 2006 and in 2008 starting with the representatives at the meso level. Through some of these informants, initial contact to Polish migrant workers in Aalborg was established. The local Catholic priest contributed with useful insights, but the intended strategy of gaining access to Polish workers through the church failed. The chairman of the Polish Association in Aalborg became a key person and the gatekeeper of contact with Polish workers. Together with an element of "snow-balling", all informants were found through this one contact. A main concern of this one-sided recruitment of informants is that it is very possible they are not representative of irregularised Polish workers and do not cover the diversity of the group. It is quite likely that they represent the most successful half of that group because the recruitment happened through someone who himself belonged to the more resourceful group like many of the other members of the Polish Association in Aalborg. This may possibly lead to some degree of bias in the sample, and the case is therefore not representative of the whole group of Polish workers in the low-skilled areas of the Danish labour market.

The biographical narrative interview method (BNIM) was the primary method used at the micro level, with individual migrants. The main strength of the biographical method, from a methodological perspective, is that it facilitates a way of exploring subjectively experienced reality and conceptually reconstructs a changing world as interpreted by the social agents themselves (Hoerning, 1996; Kupferberg, 1998) providing a perspective from below. In order to understand the biographical experience and social action it is necessary to bring the articulated actions into a biographical coherence.

Using the biographical narrative interpretation method for obtaining knowledge about a particular area or phenomenon has certain implications for the research process. First of all, it is a method that is orientated towards the process of individual life courses, and secondly, it enables the researcher to link the subjects and the structures through the experiences of the individual. The biographical method aims to reduce the complexity of reality by extracting the significant, essential and selective topics from

the qualitative data material. On this issue, Max Weber acknowledges that reality, whether it is natural or social, is in length and depth infinite, therefore, any approach to an analysis of any thinkable phenomenon is in reality always selective and guided by values (Weber, cited in Giddens, 1974: 7). Following this methodological approach, research cannot be conducted in a valueless manner, and it, therefore, contains some degree of normativity. It can never be fully objective, no matter how hard the scholar tries to carry out neutral and valueless research.

Biographical narratives capture how labour migration entails turning points in the life trajectory of the migrants and, to various degrees, leads to a lack of autonomy and control of the person's biographical project, when they find themselves in an irregular position. If, on the other hand, the migrant's status is regular/legal, the level of autonomy and control is experienced as being higher. The interviewed Polish workers all expressed their experiences of migration as leading to a lack of autonomy and control over their biographical project, and they also expressed the vital importance of changing this situation by revising their biographical project and changing their life plans by moving into other migratory 'spaces'.

The decision to concentrate on Polish migrants was based on several aspects of the research process. First of all, there were considerations about mobility patterns and the representation of migrants from various Eastern European countries, with Poland being hugely over-represented as a sending country in comparison to other new accession states. Secondly, the choice of limiting the researched group to Polish migrants increased the possibility of making comparative analysis with other EU countries, as Poles are also the largest researched migrant group from the new EU countries to the so-called 'old' EU countries. Polish labour mobility has a long history both in Europe and the United States. However, the recent flows of migration within Europe after the EU enlargement are quite extraordinary both in terms of numbers and patterns.

Accessing and interviewing vulnerable migrants

Migration may produce both vulnerability and empowerment depending on how the migration process develops, and depending on the agency of the migrant. Irregularised migrant workers are more vulnerable and exposed to exploitation than national workers due to their legal status and limited rights (Stenum, 2010). Working with this group involves particular challenges in relation to obtaining reliable and unbiased findings. It is, therefore, essential to access deep information about the specific situations and conditions concerning migratory processes from the various actors involved and, not least, to give the migrants themselves a voice so that their experiences of the migration process is exposed, and their narrations used as valid empirical data for understanding and conceptualizing irregular migration.

Getting in contact with migrants is often one of the largest challenges of researching irregular migration. One of the main reasons is that, due to the irregular character of the migrants' status or activities, they have a vested interest in staying hidden from the authorities. There are safety and security risks, for potential informants as well as for

the researcher, and there is no reliable sampling frame or route for contacting informants. The difficult and limited access to informants has several consequences for the research design and methods, in terms of representativity of the researched group and the limitations of the used method(s) for the data collection. Taking a quantitative approach and counting the irregularised is for example rather impossible.

A second challenge is to establish a trusting relationship once contact has been made. In the first instance, trust was established through the Polish contact person and translator, and secondly through the information given about the purpose of the research project in order to establish confidence in that taking part in the interview would not harm the interviewees in any way. In most cases further trust was established during the course of the interview, but in some cases it was rather difficult to get the interviewee to talk about subjects related to irregularity.

One important challenge of conducting the interviews was the language barrier, which meant that translation from Polish to Danish, and vice versa, was necessary. The use of language translation when conducting qualitative interviews is challenging in a number of ways, depending on the type of interview and on the type of research. When conducting biographical narrative interviews, it may even be rather problematic. This is primarily due to the limitations in creating a dialogical style of interview where the interviewee is motivated to go into greater details about relevant issues through the interviewer's responses to the narration.

Already at the beginning of the investigation it was clear that it would be difficult and even impossible to conduct interviews in either Danish or English, as the majority of the participating migrants do not speak Danish or have an extremely limited Danish level, and I do not speak Polish. Most interviews were therefore conducted in Polish, the informants' native language, which meant they could express themselves adequately, compared to if the interviews had been conducted in another language than their mother tongue. When conducting biographical narrative interviews it is especially important that the interviewees can express themselves in-depth and comprehensively, making their native language preferable. In the interviews conducted in Polish it was necessary to use an interpreter. The interpreter's task is to "convey understanding between people who otherwise would not have understood each other because they speak different languages" (Gal & Gal, 1999: 15). Furthermore, the interviews conducted with an interpreter are perceived as a conversation between three parties, where the interpreter's presence always influences the situation. The interpreter does not simply act as a 'glass wall' where the conversation is filtered through, and it is necessary to reflect on how the interpreter affects the situation and how details or phrases might be lost in translation. It was also necessary that the informant's narrative story was split into smaller parts; otherwise it was not possible for the interpreter to reproduce the conversation.

Eye contact is very important in order to maintain contact with the interviewee, despite the interpreter's linguistic contact with the informant. I tried, therefore, to maintain some level of eye contact with the informant, while the interpreter translated

the informant's narratives (Galal & Galal, 1999). The interpreter's translation of the questions and remarks posed by the interviewer is quite impossible to check because of the language barriers. This loss of control over the interview is quite serious when conducting biographical narrative interviews, not only due to whether the translation from one language to another is correct, but also because the interviewer has little, if any at all, possibility of supporting the progress of the interview.

Conceptualising the 'irregulars'

How we conceptualize issues and understand the concepts is central to knowledge production, which is closely related to the methodological approach (see also Jørgensen this volume). Both 'illegal' and 'irregular' are inequality-creating categories that are produced in certain historical and geographical contexts, making time and space important aspects when carrying out research in this field. Being categorized as irregular never stands on its own, but is connected with other differentiating categories such as ethnicity, gender, religion and class. In relation to this, the concept of diversity serves as an umbrella for differences and inequalities.

A concept is an abstraction – or symbol – a representation of an object or one of its properties, or a behavioral phenomenon (King, 1988). In practice, the researcher begins the process of research by using concepts as keywords for describing the empirical world, such as 'irregular', 'social recognition', 'migrant', 'ethnicity' and 'integration'. Concepts serve a number of important functions in social research. Firstly, they are the foundation of communication in research, being a symbol of phenomena, and as such, they are abstracted from perceptions and are used to convey and transmit information (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1997). The primary function is thus to enable researchers to understand each other by using the same interpretation of concepts through on-going negotiations of these. However, the exact definition of a concept may vary, creating on-going debates on how to describe and define a particular part of reality that is discovered or studied in the empirical world. Moreover, concepts introduce a perspective, a way of looking at the studied subject in a certain way, meaning that through scientific conceptualization the perceptual world is given an order and coherence that could not be perceived before conceptualization. Secondly, it permits the researcher, in a community of other researchers, to lift the idiosyncratic experience to the level of consensual meaning or intersubjectivity (Denzin, 2009). Thirdly, it enables the interaction of the individual with his or her environment; "he (or she) indicates to himself (or herself) what a concept means and acts towards the designation of that meaning. The concept thus acts as a sensitizer of experience and perception, opening new realms of observation, closing others" (Denzin, 1989: 38). A fourth function of concepts is to allow researchers to classify, structure, categorize, order or generalize their experiences or observations. The functions of concepts are vital for the research process, not least when doing biographical research, because the theoretical concepts are utilized for in-depth description of socio-structural relations with the aim of understanding movements of societies (Bertaux, 1981: 41). The need to transcend the legal aspect of irregular migration is based on the understanding that concepts themselves create significance in the production of meaning. The conceptualization of irregular migration in the research project is, therefore, developed

in a dialectic relationship between empirical data and conventional theoretical approaches, which cannot be completely separated, as they interact with one another through the research process.

The distinction between regular and irregular migration is rather difficult to pinpoint, as it depends on national legal contexts and migration regimes (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2008). Until recently, irregular migration in the Nordic countries has mainly originated from the asylum system (Koshravi, 2006: 290), but since the enlargement of the EU there has been a growing connection to labour migration. For example, due to the status of being EU citizens, Polish workers have certain rights that migrants from outside of the Schengen/EU area do not enjoy, but they may still become irregular migrants by not complying with labour market regulations (Friberg & Tyldum, 2007). In this sense, the distinction between regular and irregular migration becomes rather fluid when it is related not only to entry and stay, but also to activities that do not fully comply with the national rules and regulations.

The perception of irregular migration has changed over time, and the regulation of unwanted foreigners has been guided by various political discourses in different immigration countries with reference to changing potential or imagined threats to society and the nation state (Düvell, 2008a). The potential danger caused by the foreign 'Other' has been influenced by issues such as religion, social cohesion and security, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City. The construction of the 'illegal' other is closely connected to the 'us-them' dichotomy, between the established national group and the newcomers, in terms of one group (us) having (more) right(s) over the other (them). From a sociological point of view, the categorization of certain migrants as illegal, that is, as criminals, is related to a sense of social uncertainty, in which the unknown stranger is perceived as belonging to a 'dangerous' class and/or a threat to the social and political order (Düvell, 2008b). The element of danger varies from country to country depending on the type of society and labour market, which the type of migration regime often illustrates (Andersen, 2004). The common reaction of states to these threats is restrictive immigration policies even though the capacities of governments are rather limited, not least due to the nature of irregular migration (Castles & Miller, 2003). Increased restrictions might even result in migrants becoming further irregularised in order to remain hidden from the authorities. In many cases, this, unfortunately, also includes covertness from the institutions that could protect migrants from exploitation and destitution (Düvell, 2006). Movement across borders is not the only legal concern of states. Managing migration may also create dilemmas at various national levels. From this point of view, illegal or irregular migration are categories that are constructed in various spaces on global, national and local levels and are defined according to the particular context of the migration process. Furthermore, there tends to be a more positive view of irregular migration in prosperous times, mainly due to labour shortage, when migration is not only tolerated or even encouraged by employers, but also by the authorities (Ghosh, 1998). In that sense, the construction of various types of migrants change in terms of whether they are perceived as deviant subjects or accepted as contributing and deserving individuals. In order to capture changes over time it is necessary to apply a method

that has a longitudinal character such as the biographical method (see also Bloksgaard this volume for other longitudinal research strategies).

There seems to be a tendency to divide migrants into dichotic categories such as: 'documented' and 'undocumented', or 'legal' and 'illegal' migrants. These dichotomies, however, oversimplify the empirical reality, where the legal status of migrants may change over time. Some migrants may, for example, enter countries through legal channels and later become 'undocumented' by overstaying their visas, while others may violate the terms of visitor visas by working without permission. The boundaries between regular and irregular populations are permeable and in constant flux because there is a constant flow of people on the move, and in and out of legal status (Calavita, 1998). This categorisation is, however, also a product of the state's criminalisation of certain activities that do not comply with the legal status of the migrant. It thus seems more appropriate to refer to illegalised or irregularised (rather than illegal or irregular) migrants in order to emphasize that the concept is constructed, and to protect these persons from further stigmatisation and marginalisation.

The space of legality is carefully controlled by the law. Admission to legal status requires certification by the state authorities, which is clearly stated within legislation. However, it is much less clear what it means to be an illegal migrant in terms of the law. The legal categorisation seem rigid in the sense that if a person does not fit clearly into the national definition of legal entry, residence and work, that person occupies a grey zone without the required certificates (Guild, 2004). The political discourse and the attitude towards irregular migration and irregularised migrants changes over time. The change in attitude also illustrates the importance of structural conditions and their impact on the facilitation of irregular migration, as well as how these legal spaces are also social spaces, in which transboundary expansion also takes place. The transboundary expansion of social spaces is restricted to certain regions and involves clustering of transactions, exchanges, networks and interaction of actors in functional and geographical grouping of states (Faist & Özveren, 2004).

The construction of irregular migration is mired in negative connotations, and when it comes to the political agenda immigration countries have focused primarily on control issues (Miller, 1995; Koser, 1998). In the discussion of the 'outlaw as other', it is argued that in post-industrial societies of the late 20th century, we returned once again to the concept of the 'dangerous' classes and the criminalization of the unemployed underclass. This categorization of the 'other' leads to increased inequalities between national and non-national workers, and creates various stereotyping of different ethnic groups (Jenkins, 2004). The immigrant is often discussed as the 'other', and is furthermore constructed as an outlaw who, in some cases, becomes the stereotype of migrant workers. Most irregular migrant workers find themselves marginalized and even stigmatized due to their inability to follow the accepted social rules, norms and practices (Goffman, 1963, 1990), and at times their vulnerable positions force them into further irregularity and insecurity. However, many immigrants do not consider themselves 'illegal' and one could argue that the law creates irregular migration and

irregularises migrants for the purpose of protecting the state and law and order, and in this quest creates the 'outlaws' or the 'other'. The discrepancy between the self-identity and the social identity can, if experienced negatively, lead to lack of self-esteem and may affect the psychological well-being of the individual migrant (Goffman, 1969).

The intersection of the dichotomies legal/illegal and licit/illicit illustrates how multiple types of 'criminal' spaces are produced (Van Schendel & Abraham, 2005). The main consequence of this mainly politically-induced construction is the criminalisation of millions of migrants around the world. There are several important issues in relation to human aspects of the criminalisation tendency that need to be considered and addressed, such as handling forced migration and stigmatised identities. In the model, social responsibility by all actors involved in the migration process can be integrated in the comprehension, and, furthermore, allow for interpretation of the concept that goes beyond the legal (state-centered) perspective on migration issues. The relevance of adding the social perspective on irregularity becomes quite clear when researching irregular activities in the labour market, where the national workers, employers and other labour market actors, take part in irregular activities, but are, nevertheless, not labeled as 'irregulars' in the same way that foreign workers are.

Figure 1: The nexus between policy making at state level and the norms and praxis at the social level.

State sphere	Legal	Illegal
Social sphere		
Licit	A	B
Illicit	C	D

(Van Schendel & Abraham, 2005)

The above table illustrates the multiple combinations of regular/irregular migration when various levels of compliancy are confronted with both the legal/illegal and the licit/illicit spheres. The spaces correspond with the different ways in which migration may be irregular, which means that only when migration is fully legal and fully licit is it regular. The incorporation of the social level in relation to irregular migration provides a broader frame for analysing all of the agents involved in the migration process, including employers, subcontractors/agencies and networks.

From 'regular' to 'irregular' – and back again

In the biographical narrative interviews, the Polish workers do not regard themselves as 'illegals' or 'irregulars', but as hard working and reliable workers. The following section addresses how the biographical method may provide useful details about living as an irregularised migrant, enabling a far more nuanced construction of irregularity. Through the biographical narratives, which contain rich information about the experiences of the migration process, supported by the theoretical concepts, it is possible to identify correlations between different aspects in the narrations and discover patterns among the narratives. The analysis is structured around three cases of Polish migrants who have taken up work in Denmark during the period between 2005 and 2008. Two of the cases are based on individual biographical interviews with Piotr and Marcin, and the third case is based on a biographical interview with a couple, Ewa and Darek. The three cases are chosen from the whole sample of interviews as exemplary cases of different narrations of migration. Together, they represent patterns that emerge from the whole sample.

Most of the Polish workers interviewed for this study have at one time or another been irregularised due to not being in full compliance with the legal and the licit level. Marcin, aged 51 and working in construction, started working in Denmark as irregularised because he did not have the required working permission. Marcin had lived in Denmark for more than three years but did not speak much Danish. He was dependent on the employer to take care of the official arrangements with the authorities. Marcin does not talk much about this period in his narration, and he does not go into details about the irregular aspects of his work situation. He says:

“In the beginning I worked in a small building company. There was also another Polish guy working there, and a Danish guy, and the boss was Danish. We worked six days per week and sometimes on Sundays too, but that was more private work.” (Interview 8)

After the interview, the Polish translator who knows Marcin personally tells me more about the period when Marcin was employed on conditions that did not comply with the regulations and norms of the trade, and that it involved moonlighting. The information obtained from the translator adds important aspects to the narration, and it also shows the vulnerability of the interviewed person, as well as the limitation of the method, when used across a language barrier. Although the strength of the biographical method is the nuanced data and its explorative character, this example also reflects interviewees' desire to give certain impressions of themselves and their potential motivation for leaving out parts of the biographical narration. The period that Marcin focuses most on in his narrative relates to the time around and after he became self-employed. Marcin talks a lot about this part of his migration experience, as he has an interest in narrating himself in a positive way. After a couple of years in Denmark, he decided to become self-employed and through this occupational position create a change in his legal status. He now runs a small construction company and has been united with his wife and daughter, who is planning to study for a university degree in Denmark. The change from being employed on irregular conditions to being

self-employed brings Marcin from one migratory space to another. From a legal point of view, Marcin's original employment was illegal, because the necessary work permits were not submitted to the authorities. Marcin's narrative of his migration process in Denmark highlights processes of jumping from one social and legal space to another.

Using BNIM in data collection makes it possible to gain access to the migrants' experiences of their lived life, and the fact that the migration situation for some of the Polish workers has resulted in having to prolong their stay, and has in some cases pushed them into further irregularisation due to lack of opportunities and rights in the social space they inhabit. Such a situation puts some migrant workers in vulnerable situations where they are easily exploited, by having to work very long hours, on dangerous working sites and even without being paid.

"In Denmark it is not possible to use my qualification, not even my experiences. Here I am only cheap labour, but this is fine for me. I just need to earn the money, so I can pay back my debts and start over again"
(Interview 5)

During the interview with Piotr, a 47 year old qualified accountant who is unmarried and has no children, it becomes apparent that there are open and closed spaces in Piotr's narrative. When the conversation addresses issues of irregularity, he changes the subject or stops talking. The unequal power relation between myself as part of the established group with the right to categorise others, and the migrant as a newcomer who might possess stigma and is, therefore, a potential deviant, does certainly influence the interaction and communication between us. Piotr's (and other informants') unwillingness to give detailed information about the actual situation of being irregularised made the use of the BNIM approach even more suitable, because it is one of few methods capable of investigating issues, such as irregular migration, without asking directly about it. It is the direct and indirect changes that are expressed during the narration that makes it possible to identify the transformative character of irregular migration. Connected to these processes are the ever present issues of time and space, captured in the account of the migration experience and the changes of moving from one migratory space to another.

The exploitation by employers, which some of the Polish workers mention in their narratives, might be legitimised by arguing that the wage paid is higher than the migrant would receive at home, and in this sense he or she is better off. This type of irregularity is characterised as being illegal on the one hand, but in certain environments it may be socially accepted by the actors involved in the activities. Furthermore, the migrant might not always be aware of the usual level of salary for the particular job position and are not, therefore, in a position to argue the (un)fairness of the salary. The biographical narrative interviews show the significance of the asymmetric relationship of power and language barriers between the employer and employee, which makes it very difficult for the migrant worker to make any demands and enforce the equal rights that he or she is entitled to under EU legislation.

In the course of the implementation of the transitional agreement, some Polish migrants shifted from being in full compliance with the legal requirements to various degrees of irregularised migratory situations, or the other way around, in the sense of not complying fully on either the state or social level, and in some cases both. At the same time, Polish workers could have a legal status and still be an irregular migrant if, for example, the employer did not comply with the regulations in the labour market.

A young couple, Ewa and Darek, chose to go abroad to work, despite both having university qualifications and relatively good job positions in Poland within the marketing sector. The couple had decided in 2006 to travel to Norway like many other Poles at that time. On their way, they made a stop in Aalborg in Northern Denmark, where they found jobs at the local newspaper. In the interview Ewa explains:

“When we came to Denmark we found work as newspaper distributors and we worked there for about seven months. The pay was not so good because we didn’t work for very long every day, but we could manage.”
(Interview 1).

Like many other Polish workers in this sector, they were employed for 15-20 hours weekly, which is not in compliance with the regulations of the East agreement (the Danish transitional agreement) which requires that EU workers are employed for a minimum of 30 hours per week. In other cases, Polish newspaper deliverers have been underpaid and some have been lured by the distribution companies promising more than 100 DKK per hour and 37 hours of work per week. Even though wages may be in compliance with the agreements, there is a tendency for the Polish and other EU workers to be paid a lower wage than national workers. This is not necessarily in non-compliance with the legislation, but a breach of the wage level negotiated for the particular sector and, therefore, does not comply with the licit level recognized by the trade union and union members. This wage pattern does of course not reflect illegal activities, but is rather an expression of an illicit (and legal) development, that does not meet the norms of the particular area. In this sense, it may not be considered acceptable and legitimate by the involved actors and institutions.

The lack of recognition of the migrant workers’ skills by underpaying them is experienced negatively by the migrant worker, as it makes them feel less valued than the national workers, which affects both their self-esteem and self-confidence, because their irregularised position means they have fewer rights and possibilities of changing the situation. Irregular migration is, furthermore, often the result of the migration process having resulted in migrants losing, to various degrees, autonomy and control of their own situation, and becoming victims of exploitation (Lisborg, 2011). Changes are identified in the biographical narrative interviews through the patterns of moving from an illegal/irregular space to a legal/regular space. An example of this pattern is when temporary migration turns into more permanent settlement, followed by an actual integration process. This often has a regularizing effect on the migrants’ position. Almost all of the Polish workers interviewed in the course of this study have

at one time or another been irregularised due to not being in full compliance on the legal and the licit level. In relation to such a situation, the rather restrictive policy seems to be a barrier for accessing the labour market. The rights and conditions that are attached to the status of the individual migrant shape the possibilities of being in full compliance with the rules and regulations. The large variations, depending on the type of stay, have caused some confusion and frustration for both employers and employees. As a result, during the time of the transitional period, many EU workers have been in situations of not entirely complying with the residence and/or working regulations and, therefore, not being fully legal. The workers may, however, not necessarily be aware of the legal aspects of their position and status as EU citizens. Although the Eastern agreement is considered a success, and is viewed as a political expression of the ambition to control and regulate wage and employment conditions, there have been many cases of irregularised migration of EU workers since 2004 (Thomsen, 2010). The biographical narrative interviews show how different strategies are applied by the Polish migrants, connecting opportunities for accessing regular spaces and gaining recognition with the desire to settle in Denmark. The long-time strategy of settlement and integration is often related to the existence of better possibilities for family- and work life in Denmark, because of the opportunity structures in the Danish labour market.

Conclusion

In light of my experiences of researching irregular migration using BNIM, I suggest a multiple combination approach to researching irregular migration where various levels of compliance are confronted including both the legal/illegal (state) and the licit/illicit (social) sphere, which also should be reflected in the conceptualisation of irregular migration. The analysis of the biographical narratives of migration processes and experiences shows how the construction of categories of the deviant ethnic 'Other' cannot be framed in a black and white manner of being regular or irregular or legal or illegal, but that the reality of the lived life is much more complex. The interviews illustrate on-going changes in social positions in migratory spaces over time. The biographical method contributes with valuable data and qualitative knowledge about migrants' paths in regular and irregular migratory spaces.

Researching migrants who are categorized as irregulars entails various implications and challenges for the research process, and places responsibility on the researcher with regards to research conduct, ethics and reporting. Both illegal and irregular types of migration are politically constructed, and are products of the management of national (often security-related) interests. The irregularisation of migrants as a consequence of state intervention through the legal system forms the formal normative frame for defining and constructing the 'illegals'. The definition of irregular migration and irregularised migrants presented in this article includes both a legal and a social dimension of the concept, in order to go beyond a purely legal perception of irregular migration. Conceptually, irregular migration has the potential to function as a terminology that embraces the various concepts applied in the literature on irregular migration, such as illegal, undocumented, clandestine, unauthorised. In this article, the social dimension of the concept of irregular migration is highlighted in order to ensure

the inclusion of all the various actors taking part in the migration process, as well as linking the micro, meso and macro levels. The attempt to transcend the legal aspect of irregular migration is certainly not an easy task, as the focus in this research area is mainly on how the legal system continuously criminalises migrants for their movement and activities.

Instead of solely focusing on the status of migrants (that is, on whether they comply with legislation or not), another perspective that is based on the activities and conditions that characterize the migration process would shift the focus from merely criminalizing migrants to including the various actors involved. This approach also opens up the possibility of accessing a deeper understanding of the relationship between actors at the micro level, as well as the relationship between micro and macro level. When it comes to immigration policies, states often apply a rigid understanding of irregular migration. Simultaneously, the state often defines the very same concept that neglects recognition of the hundreds of thousands of border zone migrants who are living with changing and/or combined statuses (Düvell & Vollmer, 2009). The political construction of irregularity maintains these migrants on the edge of the economy, where they provide a 'flexible' labour force, as it may be referred to within policymaking.

By including a social dimension, a constructivist approach to doing irregular migration research is introduced, and the discrepancy between the personal and internal identity of the irregular migrants and the external identification by others, such as the legal system and the media, is exposed. In order to avoid stereotyped framing and naming of particular groups and individuals through a black and white approach to categorization of the 'Other', it is useful to give voices to the researched subjects, in this case irregularised migrants, including lived experiences of individuals in the conceptualisation and social construction of irregularised migrants.

References

- Andersen, T. M. (2004). Challenging the Scandinavian welfare state. *European Journal of Economy*, vol. 20, 743-754.
- Bertaux, Daniel. (1981). *Biography and Society*. California: Sage Publications.
- Brunovski, A. & Surtees, R. (2008). Agency or illness – conceptualization of trafficking victims' choices and behaviors in the assistance system. *Gender, Technology and Development*, special edition on human trafficking.
- Calavita, K. (1998). Immigration, law, and marginalization in a global economy: Notes from Spain, *Law & Society Review*, vol. 32, no 3, 529-566.
- Castles, S. (2007). Twenty-First-Century Migration as a Challenge to Sociology. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Volume 33, Issue 3.
- Castles, S. & Miller, M. (2003). *The age of migration*, London: Macmillan.

- Denzin, N. (1989). *Interpretive Biography*. London: Sage.
- Düvell, F. & Vollmer, B. (2009), Irregular migration in and from the neighbourhood of the EU. A comparison of Morocco, Turkey and Ukraine, available at http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/transit_report_compas_sept091.pdf (last viewed 18 June 2010).
- Düvell, F. (2008a), *Transit migration: A politicised and blurred concept*. Keynote presentation, IMISCOE conference, Istanbul.
- Düvell F. (2008b). Clandestine migration in Europe. *Social Science Information*. vol. 47, no 479, Sage Publications.com.
- Düvell, F. (2006). *Irregular migration in Europe: Beyond control?* Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Friberg, J.H. & Tyldum, G. (eds). (2007). *Polonia i Oslo*. En studie av arbeids- og levevilkår blandt polakkere i hovedstadsområdet, Fafo report 2007:27
- Faist, T. & Özveren, E. (2004), *Transnational social spaces. Agents, networks and institutions*. Adershot: Ashgate.
- Giddens, A. (1974). *Positivism and Sociology*. London: Heinemann Educational.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma. Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. London: Penguin Psychology.
- Goffman, E. (1992). *Vore rollespil i hverdagen*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Ghosh, B. (1998). *Huddled masses and uncertain shores – insights into irregular migration*. The Netherlands: Kluwer Laws International.
- Grabowska-Lusinska, I. (2007). *Skill shortage, emigration and unemployment in Poland – causes and implications*. Migrationonline, available at <http://www.migrationonline.cz/e-library/?x2004866>.
- Guild, E. (2004). Who is an irregular migrant?, in Bogusz B., Cholewinski R., Cygan A. and Szyszczak (eds.), *Irregular migration and human rights: Theoretical, European and international perspectives*. Holland: Martins Nijhoff Publishers.
- Hansen, A.J. & Hansen, W.N. (2009). *Polonia i København*. FAOS Sociologisk Institut, Københavns Universitet.
- Hoerning, E. (1996). *Life Course and Biography: Approaches and Methods*. Aalborg University, Institut for Samfundsudvikling og Planlægning. Serie nr. 199.

Holzmann, R. & Münz, R. (2004). *Opportunities of International Migration for the EU, Its Member States, Neighboring Countries and Regions: A Policy Note*. Stockholm: Institute for Future Studies.

Jenkins, R. (2004). *Social identity*. London-New York: Routledge.

Kontos, M. (2001). *Sammenlignende overvejelser over kodifikationsmetoden i Grounded Theory og i den biografiske metode*. Dansk Sociologi nr. 3/12.

Koser, K. (2005). Irregular migration, state security and human security. Paper at the *Policy Analysis and Research Programme of the Global Commission on International Migration*. Conceptual Reflections 45

Koser, K. (1998). Out of the frying pan and into the fire: A case study in illegality. Koser K. & Lutz, H. (eds.), *The new migration in Europe: Social construction and social realities*. Houndsmills: Macmillan Press.

Koshravi, S. (2006). Territorialiseraad mänsklighet: irreguljära immigranter och det nakna livet®, in Svenska Offentliga Utredningar SOU (2006:37). *Om välfärdens gränser om det vilkorade medborgarskapet* Stockholm, 283-310.

King, I.M. (1988). Concepts. Essential Elements of Theories. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, Sage Journals

Kupferberg, F. (1998). Models of Creativity Abroad. Migrants, Strangers and Travellers. *European Archieve of Sociology*. volume 39, nr 1, 179-206.

Lisborg, A. (2011). *Menneskehandel i den grønne sektor*. Udvalget for Udlændinge- og Integrationspolitik 2011-12. BEU alm. del Bilag 58, LIU alm. del Bilag 19, REU alm. del Bilag 172, SOU alm. del Bilag 119, UUI alm. del Bilag 50

Miller, M. J. (1995). Illegal Migration. R. Cohen (ed.), *The Cambridge survey of world migration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nachmias, C. & Nachmias, D. (1997). *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. London: Edward Arnold.

Schutz, A. (1971). *Reflections on the Problems of Relevance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Thomsen, T. L. (2012). Conceptual Reflections – Transcending the Legal Aspects of Irregular Migration. *Irregular Migration in a Scandinavian Perspective*, eds. Thomsen et al., Maastricht: Shaker Publisher.

Van Schendel, W. & Abraham, I. (ed.) (2005). *Illicit flows and criminal things. States, borders, and the other side of globalization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Author

Trine Lund Thomsen is an Associate Professor at the Department of Culture and Global Studies at Aalborg University, Denmark. Email: tlt@cgs.aau.dk