

Multi-Method Research on Albanian Migration

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ARTICLE

This short article has two main parts: the first section is epistemological, and makes the case for mixed-method and multi-sited research when studying migration; and the second is empirical, describing two research projects which I directed over the past fifteen years. Throughout this brief account, however, I try to maintain a conversation between the two parts, so that they constantly inform each other.

Anecdote

I start with an anecdote: the story of Haki Doku, Albanian migrant, construction worker, paraplegic, Paralympian, family man, and computer programmer. Like many irregular Albanian migrants, Haki worked in the informal labour market on Italian building sites in the 1990s. But a fall from scaffolding left him with a broken back and confined to a wheelchair. With no social insurance or compensation for his life-changing injuries, he relied on Italian and Albanian charities to rehabilitate. To cut a long story short, he took up recumbent cycling (using his arms to propel the pedals) and eventually became Albania's only representative at the 2012 London Paralympics. He did not win a medal, but that is not the point. His story is a dramatic example of triumph over adversity; of sacrifice, tragedy and survival. Now he has a regularised status and lives in Milan with his wife and two young children, having retrained as a computer technician.

This story is true but anecdotal – a case-study of one, and an exceptional case at that. Too many people rely on personal anecdote to frame their opinion on migration. But, chosen carefully, and framed realistically, a single biographical story can be a powerful heuristic device to aid our understanding of the dynamics of migration, especially the more human and emotional aspects of the process (King et al., 1988).

Mixed-Methods and Multi-Sites

The mixed-method approach can be defined as research in which the investigator(s) collects, analyses and interprets research data using and integrating two or more approaches, often mixing quantitative and qualitative methods. Although relatively recent as an explicit and specific research epistemology, many studies in the field of population and migration now employ such multiple methods. Assuming two methods, one quantitative (QN) and one qualitative (QL), several design issues and possibilities arise over timing and sequencing, over the weight accorded to each

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method (which is primary and which is secondary), and over triangulation (what happens if different methods produce different results?). Regarding sequencing, we can envisage the following research design scenarios as examples of mixed methods:

- QN → QL, e.g. a large-N questionnaire-based household survey is used to identify migrant types in order that a small-N series of in-depth interviews can drill down to explore certain issues not covered by the survey;
- QL → QN, e.g. a series of expert interviews or a Delphi survey of academics and policy leaders is used to elicit key issues and strategic opinions, which then become the key questions in a larger-N questionnaire survey;
- QN → QN, e.g. census mapping of population, migration-history and ethnic identity data is used to create a sample frame for a household survey;
- QL → QL, e.g. research starts with one or more focus-groups to highlight key issues, followed up by a larger-N in-depth interview survey to gather relevant information on the issues raised in the focus-group discussions.

Of course, some of these pairings can be implemented simultaneously rather than sequentially, but often there is a research-design logic to sequence one method before another (Gamlen, 2012).

Given the nature of migration as a phenomenon that traverses space and connects two or more places via a combination of human, economic and cultural bonds, multisitedness in research design and fieldwork is either desirable or inevitable. In his landmark paper on multi-sited ethnography, Marcus (1995: 105) writes:

“Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, and juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some kind of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of ethnography.”

Marcus envisaged several strategies and objectives of multi-sited research; here I draw out their relevance for migration.

- follow the people – the most obvious link to migration and mobility studies, especially in studies that take a transnational migration approach;
- follow the thing – relevant here is my study of remittances (more anon), but also we can consider other “material” things like “ethnic” goods, gifts, etc.;
- follow the discourse – e.g. about a “better life” abroad, where there are said to be “greener pastures”, or about stigmatisation and suffering;

- follow the biography – life-histories, longitudinal studies and the like.

The Albanian Background

Albania presents a unique case, almost a laboratory case, for the study of intense migration processes over the past 25 years (King, 2005). The country swung from total isolation during the harsh, orthodox Stalinist regime of Enver Hoxha, to a mass exodus after 1991. By 2010, 1.4 million Albanians were living abroad, compared to 2.8m living within the country at the 2011 census. Migration has been continuous since 1991 but was particularly massive in the years 1991-93, the initial exodus, then again in 1997 when a financial collapse bankrupted a large share of the population, and in 1999 triggered by the Kosovo refugee crisis. Most migration was initially irregular (and this continues) but regularisation schemes, first in Italy and then in Greece, allowed migrants to settle longer term and bring in or start families. These two destinations account for around two-thirds of emigrant Albanians. Emigration has also been accompanied by massive internal migration, from all peripheral regions of the country towards the capital Tirana, now surrounded by chaotic new-build peri-urban districts.

From the Albanian national economic perspective, the main pay-off to mass emigration has been the inflow of remittances, accounting for up to 22% of GDP but now falling as emigration declines and emigrants in Greece, especially, are hard-hit by the economic crisis. Nevertheless, many households are still supported by remittances from family members working abroad.

Project 1: Albanian Migration to Italy

This project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust 2000-03, looked at discourses of stigmatisation of Albanian immigrants in Italy, and at Albanian migrants' narratives of work and social integration in Italy (see King and Mai 2008, 2009 for key findings).

Two main research methods were employed:

- discourse analysis of the media and public debate about the arrival of the Albanians in Italy during the 1990s;
- 90 in-depth interviews with Albanian migrants, with an evenly-distributed threefold stratified sample – 30 each in Modena (Northern Italy), Lecce (in the South), and Rome (the capital, located in Central Italy).

These main methods were supported by a large number of key interviews, as well as casual conversations and group discussions, which arose spontaneously.

The main discursive framing of the Albanian immigrants in Italy was extremely negative throughout the 1990s, although it has ameliorated since. Three main themes emerged from the media analysis:

- Albania as a country of chaos, poverty and moral backwardness;

- a general “fear” of Albanians – “Albanophobia”;
- specific stereotyping of Albanian men as violent, with a tendency to be criminals, and the women as prostitutes.

The same stigmatising and stereotyping themes echoed through the 90 interview narratives about work and social integration. Participants told of difficulties and discrimination they suffered when trying to access “decent” jobs; most were confined to “marginal” jobs where they suffered exploitation, low pay and poor treatment; only after some time did work conditions improve, although those with good education and qualifications were generally employed below their skill levels. Labour-market integration was hardest in the South of Italy, but social integration was easier there; whereas the reverse held true in the North – better pay and conditions, but a more challenging social environment. Albanians’ strong desire to integrate fully into Italian society – “Italophilia” – was met by a restrictive unwillingness on the part of the host society – “Albanophobia”.

Project 2: Remittances, Gender and Development

The general view in Albania is that remittances have had a major impact on lifting households out of poverty – especially in rural areas where alternative sources of employment outside of subsistence farming are almost entirely lacking. There is some evidence of small business development financed by remittances, but this process has yet to really take off. The main innovative aspect of this project, however, was to introduce a gender perspective into the debate on remittances, development and empowerment. As with project 1, two main research methods were employed to collect salient data:

- a questionnaire survey (N=350) to households in three villages in southern Albania with strong migratory links to Greece; to qualify for inclusion in the survey, the households had to be in receipt of remittances from one or more family members working abroad;
- in-depth interviews with 25 remittance-receiving household members in the three villages, and with 20 remittance-sending migrants in Thessaloniki

Again, supported by focus-groups, general discussions and general ethnographic observations.

Key questions for project 2 were:

- who sends remittances?
- who receives remittances?
- who decides how remittances are spent?
- who actually administers their use?
- what effects do remittances have on gender relations?

These questions were answered, in a first step, by mapping “remittance dyads”: person-to-person pairings of senders and receivers. The focus was especially on the gender, generational and kinship pairings that emerged.

Remittances were found to be overwhelmingly a “male thing”. Almost all remitters were men. Receivers were only women if they had been “left behind” by their husbands to take care of children and other family members, or if they were elderly widows living on their own. In the very few cases where women were remitters, the remittances were not named as such but instead were called “small gifts” or “just for a coffee”. Regarding the spending of remittances, most went on general day-to-day living expenses and on enlarging and improving the housing space, including building new housing, often not in the village but in peri-urban Tirana. Also important was remittance spending on life-stage ceremonial events, such as weddings and funerals. It was hard to see remittance involvement as an empowering experience for women; in cases where they received remittances and were responsible for administering them, this was seen more as an extra burden (King et al., 2011; Vullnetari and King, 2011).

Conclusions about the Albanian Migration Experience

Albania is Europe's and maybe the world's most dramatic instance of migration in recent decades, when considered in terms of migrant-to-population ratio. Despite limited channels for legal migration and heavy stigmatisation by the societies of the two main receiving countries, Greece and Italy, Albanians have integrated rather fast and are now firmly established as settled immigrant communities. Remittances peaked in 2007, since when they have declined. We find remittances continue to be handled mainly by men; women are involved in a more tokenistic way and derive only limited empowerment from this. In recent years, the severe economic crisis in Greece, and less so Italy, has put pressures on Albanian immigrant employment and income, and a trend towards return migration has now started although data to document the scale of this trend are lacking.

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