



MIGNEX Background Paper

Measuring migration aspirations and related concepts

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MIGNEX

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See www.mignex.org.



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MIGNEX Background Papers

The MIGNEX Background Papers are scientific papers containing the documentation and analyses that underpin the project results. Selected insights from background papers are also presented in non-technical form in other formats, including MIGNEX Policy Briefs and MIGNEX Reports.

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Measuring migration aspirations and related concepts

People's thoughts and feelings about the prospect of migrating are essential for understanding migration dynamics. Surveys can yield rich data, but formulating the right questions requires tackling theoretical and methodological challenges.

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A review of questions from more than fifty surveys resulted in a new conceptual model of five elements that distinguish questions on migration aspirations from each other.

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Field-based testing confirmed the advantage of binary questions and highlighted the importance of treating 'don't know' responses in a sound way.

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Surveys should include several complementary questions that cover different aspects of thoughts and feelings about migrating or staying.

Introduction

This background paper is a joint methodological and theoretical examination of how to measure people's thoughts and feelings about the prospect of migrating. It is motivated by the needs of the MIGNEX survey but written as a general resource for migration research. It fills a gap between general literature on survey methodology, theoretical work on migration decision-making, and empirical studies on migration desires or intentions. Such studies use data from the type of questions examined in this paper, but often lack theoretical and methodological reflection on how the questions were formulated (Carling and Schewel, 2018).

I refer to thoughts and feelings about the prospect of migration as *migration aspirations and related concepts*. The term 'migration aspirations' is an

established and theoretically anchored concept in the literature. It coexists with other terms including migration desires, plans, and intentions (Cai et al., 2014; Carling and Schewel, 2018; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2014; Williams et al., 2018).

These terms are often used as if they were interchangeable, which they are not. The differences that they embody, and the implications of choosing specific words over others, will be addressed in this paper. However, the diverse thoughts and feelings about the prospect of migrating form a distinct domain within migration research. As a pragmatic solution, I use ‘migration aspirations’ as a shorthand for a broader lexicon.

In short, the paper addresses three questions about attempts to measure migration aspirations:

- *Why* should we measure?
- *What* are we measuring?
- *How* can we measure?

Quantitative and qualitative approaches

The reference to ‘measuring’ immediately alludes to a quantitative methodology. However, the literature on migration aspirations and related concepts spans the qualitative–quantitative divide. Indeed, much of the insight into how migration aspirations emerge, are sustained, and shape migration is rooted in ethnographic research in societies of origin (e.g. Åkesson, 2004; Alpes, 2014; Bal and Willems, 2014; Fouquet, 2007; Gaibazzi, 2012; Mata-Codesal, 2015; Newell, 2012; Xiang, 2014).

The cross-fertilisation between qualitative and quantitative studies in this field has been limited, unfortunately. Quantitative and qualitative approaches can play invaluable complementary roles in understanding both the dynamics and patterns of migration aspirations. This paper is written in that spirit, though with an exclusive focus on methodology for survey-based research. The rationale is that when surveys include questions about migration aspirations, the value and use of the resulting data depends crucially on the exact questions. Much of the existing survey-based literature pays scant attention to the assumptions, nuances and interpretations that are embedded in survey questions (Carling and Schewel, 2018).

Motivations for studying migration aspirations

Why do some people migrate while others stay? This question, perhaps the most fundamental in migration studies, has been approached and addressed in a variety of ways, though with a common fundamental logic. A search for causes or drivers of migration implies that whatever stimulates or triggers migration, happens first. Once we know who migrates and who stays, we can examine whether they perhaps experienced different conditions, or reacted differently to the same conditions. But such an inquiry is hampered by a fundamental challenge: only the people who have *not* migrated are still present. How, then, can we compare migrants and stayers to understand their different behaviour?

There are several possible strategies. First, the challenge can be overcome with longitudinal designs that follow the same individuals over time (Liu et al., 2016; Willekens et al., 2016). However, such data is extremely costly and therefore rare. Where they exist, they are often collected for other purposes and cover migration only superficially.

A second strategy is to carry out surveys in countries of origin and include questions about family members who have emigrated. The data from such surveys can be assembled to compare those who stayed with those who left (Guveli et al., 2017). Since the data is collected retrospectively, and often by proxy rather than directly from the individual, there are limitations to the reliability of the data and the type of questions that can realistically be asked.

A third strategy focuses on migration aspirations and related concepts, rather than on actual migration. Methodologically, this strategy has the advantage of collecting data directly from the individuals concerned and not relying exclusively on retrospective questions. A key question, then, is whether there is a systematic relationship between these mindsets and actual migration. Several studies have indicated that this is the case (Creighton, 2013; Sandu and De Jong, 1996; van Dalen and Henkens, 2008). A recent study covering more than 160 countries confirmed a strong country-level relationship between migration intentions or plans and officially recorded migration flows (Tjaden et al., 2019). On average, a 1% increase in the number of people expressing plans to migrate from country A to country B increases actual migration between the two countries by 0.75%. There are substantial regional variations in this relationship, with a weaker relationship in developing countries. This is unsurprising, given the differences in ability to convert migration aspirations into actual migration (Carling, 2002).

While Tjaden et al. (2019) show a strong correlation between migration plans and behaviour, the number of actual migrants is only a small fraction of the number of people planning to leave. So even though the *variation* across countries has a similar pattern, most migration plans remain unrealised.

Apart from the desire to predict future migration flows, there are also other theoretical rationales for using data on migration aspirations to understand migration dynamics. If we assume that migration is the combined outcome of aspiration and ability to migrate, then determinants of each component must be examined separately (Carling, 2002). For instance, poverty might raise aspirations to migrate while lowering the ability to migrate. These dynamics would be obscured in an analysis based on data about actual migration. For many of the world's prospective migrants, the ability to migrate is constrained by migration regulations and their implementation, as well as by financial constraints (Carling and Schewel, 2018). In order to understand the drivers of migration – the factors that generate migration pressure – it might be most appropriate to examine migration aspirations, not actual migration.

A second rationale for studying migration aspirations lies in their potential effects on behaviour and well-being *beyond* actual migration. For instance, people who plan or expect to leave be less inclined to invest in local

livelihoods or relationships. Such effects might be an important under-explored aspect of the migration–development nexus.¹

Structure of the paper

This paper consists of two main parts. The first is an analytical review of questions from a large number of surveys. I propose a conceptual framework for how the questions can be deconstructed into five abstract components, and then examine the variants of each component. The second part of the paper reports on a field exploration in which selected survey questions were tested.

Analytical review of survey questions

An extensive review of literature on migration aspirations and related concepts identified more than 50 surveys with relevant questions. Some are small-scale surveys carried out in individual locations, e.g. the Pittsburgh Student Survey (Frieze et al., 2006), a household survey of Tongans and Western Samoans in Sydney (Ahlburg and Brown, 1998), and a survey in Egyptian villages (McDevitt and Gadalla, 1985). Others are large-scale repeated cross-sectional surveys such as the Afrobarometer, Eurobarometer, Latinobarometer, Pew Global Attitudes Survey and Gallup World Poll.

The references in the text are generally to a publication where the data is used, since the original survey documentation itself is often unpublished. Unfortunately, researchers using survey data sometimes fail to provide the wording of questions that were used. Many potentially relevant studies were therefore not included. Questions from the 57 surveys covered were retrieved from original questionnaires, exact reproductions of questionnaire items in publications, or adequate paraphrasing of the questions.

In the review of questions, I have replaced contexts-specific words in the examples with generic ones, where possible. For instance, a question that refers to ‘working and living outside of Kosovo’ will be presented as ‘working and living outside of [country]’, in the same way as it would in a multi-country survey where questions are adapted to the context.

Types of questions

The surveys that were analysed often included several questions related to the prospect of migration. They can typically be grouped as follows:

The core of migration aspirations: questions directly addressing the prospect of leaving versus staying. They can be expressed in terms of desires, plans, expectations, and a range of other concepts. Examples:

Are you currently planning or considering moving to another country?
(Tabor et al., 2015)

¹ The effects of migration aspirations on behaviour and well-being are central to the project Future Migration as Present Fact (FUMI) which is carried out in parallel with MIGNEX (www.prio.org/fumi). Implications of involuntary immobility for development will be examined in MIGNEX deliverable 7.2 (www.mignex.org/d073).

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country? (Gallup, 2008)

Secondary specifications: questions that add detail to responses at the core of migration aspirations, for instance about preferred migration destinations, the foreseen time frame, the motivations for migration, or the influence of other people on migration decisions. Examples:

If you go outside [COUNTRY] for work, for how long do you think you would stay? (Ivlevs and King, 2009)

Do you think the decision to move abroad would be made by you, or by others? (Sabadie et al., 2010)

Preparatory actions: questions regarding steps taken to prepare for migration, such as obtaining a passport or applying for a visa. These are retrospective, factual questions and therefore fundamentally different from the two other types of question. Examples:

Have you taken any of the following steps to prepare a move to another country? [Alternative responses listed] (Eurobarometer, 2010)

I have already applied for a residence permit or a work permit (Fassmann and Hintermann, 1998)

This paper addresses only the first group of questions – those that address the core of migration aspirations. They form the foundation for subsequent types of questions and are, as I will show, highly complex in their own right.

Questions addressing secondary specifications and preparatory actions involve different methodological and theoretical challenges, especially in cross-national surveys, which go beyond the scope of this paper.

Types of migration

The literature on migration aspirations is, as is other parts of the migration literature, quite fragmented between research on internal and international migration (see King and Skeldon, 2010). Moreover, some of the research on aspirations for within-country mobility focuses on residential mobility in metropolitan areas, which is usually not considered ‘migration’. In the analytical review of survey questions, I consider all these literatures. The different approaches to formulating survey questions is theoretically valuable. Moreover, it is often pertinent for empirical research on migration aspirations to address both internal and international migration in the same survey.

Most of the questions in the review do not distinguish explicitly between permanent and temporary migration. A notable exception is this:

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?’ (Gallup, 2008).

Asking about moving permanently makes the question much more difficult to answer and introduces uncertainty in the data. The question essentially confounds two different migration preferences: (1) migrating or not in the first place, and (2) returning or not in the future. It is likely that many

respondents who want to migrate are uncertain about return. Should they then reply ‘don’t know’ to the survey question? The data can easily be used to differentiate between ‘those who want to migrate’ and ‘those who want to stay’ but many in the latter group might be just as keen to leave, just not with a determination to live abroad forever (Carling and Schewel, 2018).

Deconstructing survey questions

The analytical review of survey questions on migration aspirations showed that each question can be deconstructed into a small number of abstract components (Figure 1). Subsequent sections of the paper thoroughly address the variations of each component. But first I account for the deconstruction itself, with reference to the following example:

Do you intend to emigrate in the near future? (van Dalen and Henkens, 2008)

Each question such as this one contains reference to a *mindset* and an *action*. I use the term ‘mindset’ to denote the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or judgements that the question enquires about. Here, the mindset is *intention*. The *action* is what the mindset refers to. In the example, the action is represented by ‘emigrate in the near future’.

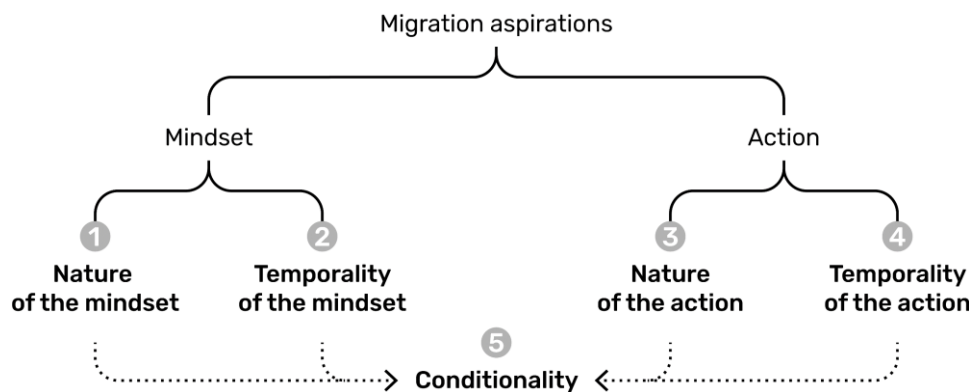


Figure 1. Deconstruction of survey questions on migration aspirations

The *mindset–action* pair resembles the *attitude–object* pair that is well established in public opinion research (Tourangeau and Galešić, 2008)(Tourangeau and Galešić, 2008). In the context of migration aspirations, it more appropriate to speak of mindsets than attitudes, since not all the relevant thoughts and feelings are evaluative. On the other side of the pair, I propose ‘action’ rather than ‘object’, since the questions invariably concern respondents’ own spatial behaviour.

Each of the two main components (mindset and action) are defined by their *nature* and their *temporality*. In the example, the nature of the mindset is represented by the word ‘intend’. Replacing it with ‘desire’ or ‘expect’, for instance, would change the nature of the mindset. Similarly, ‘emigrate’ could be replaced with an action of a different nature, such as ‘staying here’.

Both the action and the mindset have a temporal element, which may or may not be explicit in the question. In the example, the temporality of the action is expressed as ‘in the near future’. The temporality of the mindset is implicit, but nevertheless clear: the wording ‘do you intend’ refers to the present. It differs from formulations such as ‘have you considered’ (Hoppe and Fujishiro, 2015), which refer to the past.

The ‘nature’ and ‘timeframe’ elements can be analytically separated, but are not fully independent of each other. In particular, the *nature of the mindset* can be explicitly future-oriented – as with hope, expectation, or planning – and therefore linked to the *timeframe of the action*.

Finally, the questions contain variable *conditionality*. The initial example (‘do you intend’) has no conditionality, whereas other questions relate the mindset or the action to more or less specific hypothetical conditions:

If, at this moment, you had the means and opportunity to go live in the United States, would you go? (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009)

Such elements of conditionality have weighty implications for how the data should be interpreted and connected to migration theory and policy.

Words, concepts and levels of abstraction

The previous section deconstructed the broad and complex concept ‘migration aspirations’ into five specific components. This deconstruction helps pinpoint how questions differ from each other, and it makes it possible to construct batteries of questions that, in combination, give a multi-dimensional picture of migration aspirations.

Such analytical work is situated in the critical gap between abstract concepts and specific survey items – in the middle of the hierarchy of abstraction that survey research navigates (de Leeuw et al., 2008; Gideon, 2012).² At the top of the hierarchy are potentially quite complex concepts, such as migration aspirations. At the bottom are the specific wordings in the survey instrument. Connecting the layers of abstraction is easy when the concept at the top is a simple, factual piece of information such as the respondent’s age. More complex concepts, such as psycho-social wellbeing, labour market status, or migration aspirations, might need to be broken down into several components or dimensions, which in turn can be addressed in one or more survey items. (See Box 1 on survey terminology.)

Each of the analytical components in Figure 1 exist in a limited set of variants. For instance, I identify eight variants of the *mindset*, including preference, expectations, and consideration of migration. These variants are analytical categories, in the sense that ‘expectation’, for instance, can be represented in many ways in the formulation of questions:

Do you expect to be living here in five years’ time?

Do you think you will be living here in five years’ time?

In five years’ time, will you most probably live here or elsewhere, you think?

² In the survey research literature, this hierarchy of abstraction is described and labelled in slightly different ways, though not in ways that match the approach taken in this paper.

Box 1. Survey research vocabulary

A survey instrument is the data collection tool, the set of questions that are asked to respondents. The term ‘instrument’ is neutral to whether data is collected through interviews, self-administered questionnaires, or a computer interface, for instance.

A survey module is a section of the survey instrument, such as a set of thematically related items. Transitions from one module to another may or may not be communicated to the respondent, depending on what is best for the flow of the survey interview.

A survey item is the same as what is often called a survey question. However, ‘item’ is more precise because formats such as stating degrees of agreement with a statement are not, strictly speaking, questions.

Such differences in wording could give different flavours to the notion of expectation, but still fall within the analytical category ‘expectations’, as opposed to ‘intentions’ for instance.

Alternative wordings can, of course, differ in other important ways with an impact on the data. These include ease of comprehension, ease of translation, and the presence of subtle biases. For instance, just adding ‘still’ and asking ‘do you think you will still be living here in five years’ time?’ might subtly nudge more respondents in the direction of saying that they expect to leave.³

Differences in wording also matter for description of the *action* (cf Figure 1). For instance, questions on migration aspirations variously refer to the act of migration as ‘moving to another country’ (Bahna, 2008) ‘living in another country’ (Wood et al., 2010), ‘going abroad to live or work’ (Van Mol et al., 2018) or simply ‘emigrating’ (van Dalen and Henkens, 2008). These formulations all belong to the same analytical category (‘leaving’) but might produce different results because they have different connotations.

In the following sections I address the five analytical components in Figure 1 in turn and discuss the variants of each one, illustrated with examples. Some of the examples I use raise many issues worth discussing. But in order to focus on the analytical deconstruction, I raise the issues in turn and bring back the same example in later sections if it is relevant.

Nature of the mindset

The mindset of interest in studies of migration aspirations can broadly be described as *a person’s thoughts and feelings about the prospect of changing their place of residence*. The review of survey questions identified eight distinct variants of the mindset:

³ This is because the addition of ‘still’ can make the departure seem overdue. Such nuances can easily differ across translated versions of the survey instrument.

- Consideration
- Preference
- Willingness
- Necessity
- Intention
- Planning
- Expectation
- Likelihood

Consideration

In order to form an opinion about migration, individuals first need to be aware of migration as a possibility. Such awareness can come from knowing – or simply knowing of – others who have migrated. Awareness of migration can also come from migration infrastructure, such as agencies and brokers, from the media, or social media. The next decisive step is to think of migration not just as an abstract possibility, but as a potential course of action for oneself. One variant of survey questions captures this basic *consideration* of migration, regardless of the respondent's subsequent conclusion:

Have you and your family seriously considered living in another country?
(Wood et al., 2010).

Have you ever thought about moving from your current residence
sometime in the past three years? (De Jong et al., 1996).

Key verbs in the questions include 'consider' and 'think about' as in these examples. Such questions about consideration stand out because they are, strictly speaking, factual questions rather than attitude questions. That is, they ask whether respondents have done something specific (e.g. 'seriously considered' migration) in the past. The answer can therefore be regarded as a fact, not an opinion.

There is substantial ambiguity, though, in what it means to 'consider' or 'seriously consider' migration. People would presumably not give migration serious thought if immediately see it as unrealistic or undesirable. *Consideration* of migration is thus an ambiguous blend of awareness and evaluation. This ambiguity does not make the concept a flawed one for survey questions, but points to its limitations. It is difficult to relate to a finding that, say, '24% of the respondents have considered migration' because it immediately raises the question of what it means to 'consider'. Still, these 24% could differ from the other 76% in important ways that make it possible to examine the drivers of migration aspirations.

Preference

Do respondents see migrating as preferable to staying? This comparative evaluation defines the theoretical concept 'migration aspirations' (Carling, 2002). 'Preference' is a rather bland word that serves as an umbrella term for the ranked desirability of the imagined scenarios of migrating and staying. The actual comparisons differ widely. A highly-skilled worker who is offered a position in another country might see it as a slightly better alternative to staying; a civilian in an area of armed conflict might see leaving as the best

strategy for staying alive. Both have a preference for migration, which, despite the differences, is a distinct mindset.

Survey questions best address preferences for migration or staying by making the two alternatives explicit and asking respondents to choose. Asking whether respondents ‘want to’ or ‘would like to’ migrate must also be classified as enquiring about preferences. However, this type of wording is less precise since the comparison with staying is not explicit. Moreover ‘wanting’ to migrate could be a misleading choice of words when migration is seen as the lesser of two evils, or a strategy for survival.

The first of these examples best reflects this notion of preference as the outcome of a neutral comparison:⁴

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country? (Gallup, 2008).

Do you want to move within the next two years? (de Groot et al., 2011).

Would you like to live in the United States someday? (Becerra, 2012).

Do you want to emigrate? (Instituto de Emprego e Formação Profissional, 2002).

All these questions plainly address the desirability of migration, regardless of whether respondents see it as feasible or actively pursue it. The first three examples treat staying as the implicit default option, which raises methodological and theoretical issues that I return to in a later section.

Willingness

Migration aspirations have also been examined as a matter of ‘willingness’ to move, especially in studies of labour market dynamics. This perspective is based on an underlying assumption that respondents would prefer to stay. The empirical question, then, is about their responsiveness to geographical differences in job opportunities and living standards:

If you could improve your work or living conditions, how willing or unwilling would you be to move outside your country? (Drinkwater, 2003).

How willing would you be to live in another European country where the language is different from your mother tongue? (Bahna, 2008; Krieger and Maitre, 2006).

Such questions are fundamentally challenged by the assumption that mobility is unwanted and only occurs in a trade-off with material benefits. Some respondents might be eager to move regardless of work or living conditions. They could, of course, answer that they are ‘very willing’. However, it would be misleading when the results are presented as a given percentage being ‘willing to move outside their country if they could improve their work or living conditions’. In general, assumptions that clash with respondents’ own experiences or perceptions can be damaging for the

⁴ However, analyses of the data sometimes use the more loaded term ‘migration desires’ (Cai et al., 2014; Esipova and Ray, 2011).

interaction during data collection (such as a survey interview) and for the interpretation of the data.

Necessity

Inquiring about the perceived necessity of migration resembles asking about willingness to migrate. In both cases, there is an underlying assumption that people only migrate in order to solve a problem. The review of survey questions found only one example that specifically referred to necessity:

I feel that I'm going to have to migrate to the U.S. when I graduate in order to find a job to support myself or my family [response indicating degree of agreement] (Becerra, 2012).

Although questions about the perceived necessity of migration are uncommon, this is a variant of the mindset that is relevant to include. For instance it can be meaningful to ask whether respondents think migration will be necessary under specific future scenarios. However, such questions suffer from the same weaknesses as those about 'willingness', due to the embedded assumptions.

Intention

Migration intentions is a favoured concept in the literature. At times, though, the supporting data is not based on questions that strictly speaking address intentions, but rather cover preferences and necessity (Becerra, 2012), or preference and expectation (Seyfrit et al., 2010). Regardless of nuances in the data, the concept 'migration intentions' is a powerful one, not least because of its implied significance for future migration flows (Tjaden et al., 2019; van Dalen and Henkens, 2008). While migration intentions is often applied quite loosely as a theoretical concept, there are also survey questions that explicitly ask about intentions:

In the next five years, do you intend to move to another country within Europe? (Bahna, 2008).

Do you intend to move away from [district] within the next two years? (De Jong et al., 1986).

Do you intend to migrate abroad? (van Dalen et al., 2005).

In my opinion, the notion of 'migration intentions' is a troubled one, for three reasons. First, intentions are an ambiguous blend of the desirability and feasibility of migration. When someone has a burning desire to migrate but knows that doing so is next to impossible, what does it take to assert an 'intention' to migrate? Intending to migrate implies a degree of control that is often illusory. You can intend to do something that requires great effort on your part, but can you intend to do something that is largely determined by others – such as winning a prize, being admitted to a top university, or being granted a visa? There are undoubtedly high-school students who say that they 'intend' to go to Harvard, but it is hard to interpret how personality, desire and realism interact to produce such a statement.

Second, the precise meaning of ‘intend’ cannot be expressed with any other words.⁵ However, this word is rare in normal conversation and easily sounds clunky and potentially alienating in an interview setting. Respondents’ mindset concerning the prospect of migration can be elusive. The choice of words then affects how respondents relate to the question, and whether or not they can answer it with confidence.

Third, in multi-language surveys, it is a challenge that ‘intend’ is not easy to translate. Very similar meanings might be possible to express, but with words or phrases that introduce unknown sources of variation. In some languages, translated versions may need to resort to noun-based constructions like ‘do you have the intention’ which renders the question even less conversational.⁶ In other languages, the word ‘intention’ is excessively technical and would be replaced by idiomatic expressions that have a similar, but perhaps not identical, meaning.⁷

Planning

‘Planning’ to do something resembles ‘intending’ to do it. However, planning typically implies more specific thoughts about how and when to act. In psychology, ‘planning’ is also referred to as ‘implementation intentions’, as opposed to the less specific intentions that concern the ultimate outcome (Rhodes et al., 2006). Survey questions that refer to planning are primarily used to follow up with respondents who have expressed a preference for, or consideration of, migration:

Are you planning to move permanently to another country un the next 12 months, or not? (Cai et al., 2014).

Do you plan to move away from [district] within the next 12 months? (Kley and Mulder, 2010).

Compared to the word ‘intending’, ‘planning’ appears to be more robust to translation. For instance, when the phrase ‘do you intend to migrate?’ is translated to other languages in Google Translate and back-translated to English, it often ends up as ‘are you planning to migrate?’.

The preceding variants of mindsets concern respondents’ normative evaluation of migration and preparedness to act. The remaining two types of mindset concern beliefs about the future.

Expectation

Several survey questions ask respondents to state where they think they will be living in the future. These questions bypass the preference for migration, the steps required to realise it, and the determination to act, and directly requests an opinion about the most likely outcome:

⁵ ‘Plan’ comes close but is addressed separately below.

⁶ This is the case in Spanish: (¿Tiene intención de emigrar?) and French (Avez-vous l’intention d’émigrer?) for instance.

⁷ This is the case in German (Haben Sie vor auszuwandern?) and Dutch (Bent u van plan te emigreren?)

Do you expect you will move in the coming year? (Coulter and van Ham, 2011).

Do you expect to be living in [city] in the next two years? (Madhavan and Landau, 2011).⁸

In what type of community will you most likely live in the future?
[community types listed] (Seyfrit et al., 2010).⁹

A slightly different way of inquiring about expectations, is to ask whether respondents envisage a specific mobility outcome:

In the future, I see myself always living in [COUNTRY] (Cairns, 2014).

Do you envisage working in a country outside [COUNTRY] at some point in the future? (Dustmann and Okatenko, 2014).

These formulations potentially introduce some ambiguity that could affect the answers. In particular, ‘envisaging’ working abroad seems to have a lower threshold than ‘expecting’ to work abroad at some point in the future. The connection between such questions and the concept of ‘expectations’ is therefore weaker, and there is no other theoretical concept with which they align. Formulations that more clearly refer to expectations are therefore preferable.

Likelihood

Questions on expectations relate to a tipping point where one outcome becomes more likely than others. Greater differentiation is introduced with questions that ask respondents for the degree of likelihood of a specific outcome:

How likely is it that you will move to Western Europe? [Definitely; Probably; Probably not; Definitely not] (Papapanagos and Sanfey, 2001).

How high is the probability that you will go to work and live outside [country] within the next year? [very low; rather low; rather high; very high] (Ivlevs and King, 2015).

The questions covered in the review have answer scales ranging from 3 to 6 steps. This differentiation of answers is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it adds nuance in a way that can reflect important differences between individuals, groups or countries. On the other hand, it increases the burden on respondents (Dolnicar et al., 2011). Going from a binary question to a scale requires greater effort on the part of respondents, and this shift is even greater if respondents are not accustomed to comparing degrees of likelihood.

Timeframe of the mindset

Survey questions can refer to respondents’ thoughts and feelings at present or in the past. These timeframes of the mindset can be explicit or implicit, and the past can be described in different ways.

⁸ Inferred from description in the text; the exact wording is not available.

⁹ Inferred from description in the text; the exact wording is not available.

Present

Most survey questions on migration aspirations refer to the present, simply by formulating questions in the present tense:

Do you consider migrating to another country? (Jensen et al., 2016).

Do you expect you will move in the coming year? (Coulter and van Ham, 2011).

How likely is it that you will move away in the next two years (McDevitt and Gadalla, 1985).

Where would you like to live for the majority of your adult life (Frieze et al., 2006).

While the timeframe of the *action* differs between these examples, the timeframe of the *mindset* is constant: all refer to respondents' current thoughts and feelings, not how they have regarded migration in the past.

Past

There are two main reasons for asking retrospective questions about the mindset. First, it may be relevant to try to assess changes over time, even in a crude way. De Jong et al. (1996) did so by first asking respondents if they had, at some point during the past three years considered migrating. Those who answered affirmatively were then asked if they currently intend to migrate. By combining questions, the authors distinguish between respondents who (1) currently intend to migrate, (2) previously did but have reconsidered, and (3) have not intended to migrate.

A second reason to ask questions about the past is that migration aspirations can be volatile. In societies where migration is widespread, and therefore an option that is easily considered, people could shift back and forth between preferring to leave and preferring to stay. Put simply, having a bad day could be enough to tip the balance in favour of wanting to leave. Such volatility makes it more difficult to identify the drivers of migration aspirations based on surveys that examine current attitudes. Covering a period of time, retrospectively, can make up for some of the volatility.

Survey questions could, in theory, ask retrospective questions about each of the variants of the mindset: for instance, 'Two years ago, were you expecting that you would still live here today?' or 'During the past year, have you intended to migrate to another country?'. However, such questions would be vulnerable to unpredictable recall biases. It can be difficult to report on expectations and intentions in the present, and this difficulty is exacerbated by going back in time. Not surprisingly, therefore, all the retrospective questions that were reviewed refer to *consideration* of migration. It is presumably easier to remember whether or not one has given serious thought to migration, than to accurately describe the nature of those thoughts:

Have you considered migrating to Germany? (Hoppe and Fujishiro, 2015).¹⁰

¹⁰ Paraphrased from description in the text; the exact question formulation is not available.

Have you and your family seriously considered living in another country?
(Wood et al., 2010).

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These two examples refer to the past without further specification, simply by formulating the question in the past tense. Such questions implicitly cover the entire (adult) life of the respondents, though it is probable that people who have considered migration more recently are also more likely to answer affirmatively. Other questions make the expansive timeframe explicit by inserting the word ‘ever’:

Have you ever thought about leaving here to go and live somewhere else?
(Sly and Wrigley, 1986)

Unless the sample consists exclusively of young adults, referring to the past in such undefined or expansive ways makes the data difficult to interpret. Older respondents will, other things being equal, have a higher likelihood of answering affirmatively, simply because they have lived longer. However, it is also less likely that they considered migration *recently*, and the variable ‘consideration of migration’ might therefore be weakly related to their present circumstances.

Other surveys therefore limit retrospective questions to the recent past:

Have you recently thought about moving away from [district] to live somewhere else? (Kley, 2011)

During the past three years, have you ever thought about moving from your current residence? (De Jong et al., 1996)

Such questions are uniquely well-suited for analyses of migration aspirations that fluctuate. If migration aspirations are unstable, it is perhaps most pertinent to distinguish between respondents who *never* consider migration and those who do from time to time. Whether or not respondents happen to favour migration on the day of the survey is perhaps less consequential.

Nature of the action

We now shift attention from the mindset itself to the object of the mindset – the action. In other words, about what form of action is it that we ask respondents for their thoughts and feelings? The obvious answer is ‘migrating’ but there are many approaches to conceptualising and describing this action in survey questions.

Leaving

Most of questions that were reviewed ask about *leaving* the current place of residence. This is unsurprising since the research is often focused on understanding migration decisions:

Do you consider migrating to another country? (Jensen et al., 2016).

Do you intend to emigrate in the near future? (van Dalen and Henkens, 2008).

A potential risk in using the words ‘migrate’ or ‘emigrate’ is that respondents might interpret these words in other ways than the researchers. For

instance, emigration can be perceived as something definite and permanent that many respondents would not relate to, even if the question is meant to cover all international mobility with the intention of staying for an extended period of time.

In general, using everyday, simple words can yield more predictable responses. Other questions therefore use the term ‘move’ instead, also for international migration:

Are you currently planning or considering moving to another country?
(Tabor et al., 2015)

If you could improve your work or living conditions, how willing or unwilling would you be to move outside your country? (Drinkwater, 2002)

Yet others avoid migration jargon by referring to ‘living’ or ‘working’ in another country:

How high is the probability that you will go to work and live outside [country] within the next year? (Ivlevs and King, 2015).

If, at this moment, you had the means and opportunity to go live in the United States, would you go? (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009)

Many such questions refer to living *and* working, which, intentionally or not, might exclude respondents who consider migrating but not for the purpose of working. The advantage of including a reference to work is that some forms of labour migration can be seen as working in another country without truly living there, as when a Bangladeshi man leaves his family behind to work on a remote construction site in Saudi Arabia, and thinks of himself as still ‘living’ in the family home in Bangladesh. A possible solution to the unpredictable interpretations is to refer to ‘living *or* working’ in survey questions (Ersanilli et al., 2011).

Staying

Recent development in migration theory have reconceptualised staying as an expression of agency, not merely as a passive counterpart to migrating (Barcus and Werner, 2016; Mata-Codesal, 2015; Schewel, 2019). This is a general theoretical point, but a particularly important one in contexts where migration is widespread. A few surveys include questions that ask specifically about the prospect of staying:

I see myself always living in [country] in the future (Cairns and Smyth, 2011).

Do you expect to live in [district] in five years? (Von Reichert, 2006)

Do you expect to be living in [city] in the next two years? (Madhavan and Landau, 2011).¹¹

¹¹ Inferred from description in the text; the exact wording is not available.

Balanced

Surprisingly few questions are phrased in a way that gives equal weight to staying and leaving, treating them as equivalent options. Exceptions include the following:

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country? (Gallup, 2008).

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to go abroad to live or work some time during the next five years, or would you prefer staying in [country]? (Carling, 2013).

If you could choose, would you stay here in your present home or would you prefer to move somewhere else? (Coulter, 2013).

If the purpose is to give an unbiased picture of the distribution of respondents' opinions or attitudes, best practice in survey research is to formulate questions with such equivalence between the options. If a binary question only specifies one option and lets the other remain implicit, the resulting data is potentially biased. Consider the following example:

Would you like to live abroad someday?¹²

This type of question is prone to *acquiescence response bias*, i.e. the tendency to agree with questions regardless of their content (Lelkes and Weiss, 2015). In theory, the resulting data could be used to claim that, say, 35% of respondents want to migrate to another country while 65% prefer to stay. However, the 35% most likely include many respondents who have not given migration much thought and instinctively acquiesce. In this case, the wording of the question also inspires thinking 'sure, why not?' and signalling an open and positive outlook.

Despite this bias, the question does differentiate. Perhaps respondents without a strong opinion are swayed towards agreeing, while the determined stayers reply 'no'. If this is the case, the data are nonetheless valuable for analysis of the *determinants* of migration aspirations. Put differently, descriptive statistics should be interpreted with caution, but regression coefficients could be just as valid.

Neutral

A final way of formulating questions on migration aspirations or expectations is to go beyond staying versus leaving and instead compare options in a way that is neutral to respondents' current place of residence:

Where would you like to live for the majority of your adult life? (Boneva et al., 1998; Frieze et al., 2006).

In what type of community will you most likely live in the future? [community types listed] (Seyfrit et al., 2010).¹³

¹² Paraphrased from Becerra (2012) whose question referred specifically to migration to the United States.

¹³ Inferred from description in the text; the exact wording is not available.

Such questions take a bird's eye view and invite an active choice by respondents, whether that means indicating the (type of) place where they currently live, or not.

Timeframe of the action

Questions about migration aspirations invariably concern the future; they are about potential migration that has not yet taken place. Yet, questions still differ in the temporal distance between the mindset and the action.

Implicit near future

Many survey questions on migration aspirations have no explicit reference to *when* migration would take place. Such questions, I would argue, implicitly place the action in the near future. Consider the following examples:

How willing would you be to live in another European country where the language is different from your mother tongue? (Bahna, 2008; Krieger and Maitre, 2006).

Would you be inclined to go work and live in the United States without authorization? (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009)

Would you consider moving to another country? (Uebelmesser, 2005)

Answering affirmatively to these questions seem to require a willingness to move reasonably soon and not, for instance, at retirement or in the distant future.

The examples above all enquire about current thoughts and feelings. In other words, the timeframe of the *mindset* is the present. When questions refer to a mindset in the past – as will be discussed in a later section – the action is placed in the near future relative to the time of the mindset, not the time of the survey. Consider the following example:

Have you ever thought about leaving here to go and live somewhere else? (Sly and Wrigley, 1986).

If the respondent was considering leaving ten years ago, the hypothetical move was also in the past, though in the future relative to the consideration.

Explicit near future

Other questions examine thoughts and feelings about migration with an explicit near-future timeframe. In most cases, such questions specify a number of months or years into the future:

How likely or unlikely is it that you would leave [country] within the next six months? (Kuddusov et al., 2010; Sabadie et al., 2010)

Do you intend to move away from this [district] within the next two years? (De Jong et al., 1986; Gardner et al., 1986)

Do you expect to be living in [city] in the next two years? (Madhavan and Landau, 2011).¹⁴

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to go abroad to live or work some time during the next five years, or would you prefer staying in [country]? (Carling, 2013).

In the surveys that were reviewed, such time frames range from six months to ten years. The last example above is from the EUMAGINE survey, where we decided on a five-year timeframe (Ersanilli et al., 2011). The reasoning was that a longer period could make the prospect of migration seem distant or abstract, whereas a shorter period could give undue weight to temporary circumstances. For instance, a woman who is generally inclined to migrate might not want to migrate during the coming year if she is pregnant at the time of the survey.

Other questions relate to migration in the near future without specifying the time frame in months or years:

I feel that I'm going to have to migrate to the United States when I graduate in order to find a job to support myself or my family (Becerra, 2012; Becerra et al., 2010).

Do you intend to emigrate in the near future? (van Dalen and Henkens, 2008)

The latter example could introduce unnecessary uncertainties in the data, since respondents might interpret 'the near future' in very different ways. Minimising technical specifications can make the survey interview more conversational but referring to 'the next few years' for instance, would have the same effect without problematic uncertainty.

Expansive future

A few surveys have questions that explicitly broaden the timeframe and refer to the future in a more expansive way:

Would you like to live in the United States someday? (Becerra, 2012).

Where would you like to live for the majority of your adult life [asked to a sample of university students]? (Boneva et al., 1998)

Do you ever intend to return to your 'home country', to live there permanently, at some or any time in the future? (Ahlburg and Brown, 1998)

These questions might have an even looser link with behaviour than questions about intentions for the near future, but nevertheless yield important data. For instance, Ahlburg and Brown (1998) examined how return intentions affect remittance-sending.

Elements of conditionality

The four preceding sections examined the mindset and the action, and their respective timeframes, which together account for much of the variation in

¹⁴ Inferred from description in the text; the exact wording is not available.

survey questions about migration aspirations. The fifth decisive source of variation is the conditional or hypothetical nature of many such questions.

No conditionality

Survey questions with no conditional element simply ask about thoughts or feelings that respondents have or have had:

Have you ever thought of moving one day out of the locality which you are now living in? (Chort, 2014; Creighton, 2013)

In the next five years, do you intend to move to another country within Europe? (Bahna, 2008; Krieger and Maître, 2006)

Do you expect to live in [district] in five years? (Von Reichert, 2006)

Explicit conditionality

Other questions ask about the respondent's mindset in specific circumstances that presumably differ from their actual situation. Some describe situations that could motivate migration:

If you could improve your work or living conditions, how willing or unwilling would you be to move outside your country? (Drinkwater, 2002)

In case you would not have a job but you would have a possibility to get a job and a flat in another, distant municipality, would you be ready to move? (Fidrmuc and Huber, 2007)

A possible challenge with questions like these is that they lack the detail and context of an actual decision-making process. In the first example, how much of an improvement are we talking about? And would it the move be alone or with family members? In the second example, does staying mean remaining indefinitely jobless, or is it possible to keep looking for a while before taking up the distant offer?

Specific scenarios are also risky in the sense that some respondents could identify with them much more easily than others. Consequently, differences in answers might reflect not only variable willingness to migrate in the sense that the questions assume.

A different form of conditionality appears when questions do not add motivating circumstances, but instead remove major *obstacles* to migration:

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country? (Gallup, 2008)

If you could choose, would you stay here in your present home or would you prefer to move somewhere else? (Coulter, 2013; Coulter and van Ham, 2011)

If someone were to give you the necessary papers for going to live or work in Europe, what would you do? Would you stay here or go to Europe? (Carling, 2013)

The first of these, from the Gallup World Poll, is the most widely asked survey question on migration aspirations, posed to several hundred thousand respondents over the course of more than a decade. The conditional

introduction is a potential weakness. On the one hand, it makes sense, in a world where migration is tightly regulated, to ask for preferences in the absence of constraints on mobility. On the other hand, it is hard to interpret ‘ideally, if you had the opportunity’. For instance, if caring for elderly parents makes migration unfeasible, is this the type of constraint that should be disregarded? The word ‘ideally’ could also be problematic because many migrants would, under ideal circumstances, prefer to remain in their country of origin. Ideally, there would be no poverty or insecurity in the first place.

The second example, from the British Household Panel Survey, uses the formulation ‘If you could choose’ which has the advantage of being simpler and more direct. Moreover, this wording seems to produce a more balanced question: the idea of a choice between two options. By contrast, the Gallup World Poll formulation ‘if you had the opportunity’ sets up a loaded contrast between seizing an opportunity and letting it pass, possibly nudging respondents in the direction of saying they would move.

The third example, from EUMAGINE survey, applies a more precise and specific condition: ‘If someone were to give you the necessary papers for going to live or work in Europe’. This makes it clear how the hypothetical situation differs from the actual one. A question such as this one, in combination with others, is suited for assessing the extent of involuntary immobility (Carling, 2002).

Implicit conditionality

Finally, some survey questions are ambiguous with respect to conditionality. These are phrased with the word ‘would’ which, in general, can be used either to signal conditionality or simply as a courteous way of rendering a question less blunt or direct. Here is one example:

Would you consider moving to another country? (Uebelmesser, 2005).

Asking in this way is different from asking ‘are you considering moving to another country?’. The wording suggests that moving to another country is something to consider under certain, undefined circumstances. The ambiguity introduces unnecessary uncertainty in the data.

Combining questions

Many surveys assess migration aspirations and related concepts through several questions. For instance, the relevant section of the Gallup World Poll and the EUMAGINE survey start with a question on preferences and proceed with a question about planning. In addition, there are questions on preparatory actions and preferred destinations which, as mentioned, are not included in this review.

Such question sequences typically show that while many people want to migrate, much fewer have concrete plans, and fewer still are making preparations (Laczko et al., 2017). This pattern is no argument for dismissing migration aspirations as marginal. For instance, a person with a strong desire to leave would have little to gain from applying for a visa if it is certain that the application will be denied.

Differently phrased questions can complement each other and add depth to our understanding of migration aspirations. This was evident in the EUMAGINE survey, which showed that, in some countries, many people who would ideally prefer to remain at home, would nevertheless go to Europe if they were given the necessary papers (Carling et al., 2013). This finding reflects a culture of migration where migration is regarded as a scarce and coveted opportunity to be seized, regardless of personal preferences.

Questions on preferences and expectations can be combined to construct categories that combine the two. Seyfrit et al. (2010) did so in a study among rural youth in Iceland and labelled the categories *reluctantly leaving* (expect to leave but prefer to stay), *willingly leaving* (expect and prefer to leave), *reluctantly staying* (expect to stay but prefer to leave), and *willingly staying* (expect and prefer to stay).

Context effects

Most survey questions about migration aspirations are evaluative rather than factual. They resemble *attitude questions*, which are extensively discussed in the survey research literature (Bradburn et al., 2004; Foddy, 1993; Sudman et al., 1997; Tourangeau and Galešić, 2008; Tourangeau et al., 2000). Responses to attitude questions are, to a greater or lesser extent, formulated on the spot, in the context of the interview. Attitude questions are therefore particularly vulnerable to *context effects*, which can sway responses in particular directions. These effects include *priming* via preceding questions in the survey. For instance, a series of questions on violence, crime and corruption could influence subsequent answers about migration aspirations. The same negative factors might, of course, be important to respondents' thoughts about migration outside of the survey context, but it matters how the survey gives certain themes a prominent place in the respondents' consciousness.

Planning with context effects in mind

Survey instruments can be planned so that context effects and related biases on responses are reduced. At the level of individual questions, formulations can seek to avoid unintended prejudices. When the purpose is to measure preferences for migration, it is preferable to use balanced formulations that make both 'leaving' and 'staying' options explicit. This is a general methodological point, which also resonates with recent developments in migration theory that recognise the agency of staying (Carling and Schewel, 2018; Mata-Codesal, 2015; Schewel, 2019).

However, biases can also be more subtle, and occur even within balanced formulations. Consider the Gallup World Poll question:

Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?
(Gallup, 2008)

What is the effect of immediately labelling migration an 'opportunity'? Does it make the question a matter of 'seizing an opportunity' versus 'letting it pass'? If it is understood in this way, responses in favour of migration should

perhaps be seen as assertions of identity rather than expressions of aspirations (cf. Carling, 2014; Frye, 2012).

Beyond individual questions, their sequencing and grouping should be planned with possible priming effects in mind. For instance, a question about preferences for migration should probably not be preceded by other questions related to migration. Even if the question itself uses a formulation that balances ‘leaving’ and ‘staying’, preceding references to migration can undermine this balance.

If a survey contains several questions regarding migration aspirations, how should they be ordered to reduce priming? They could potentially be placed in separate modules if there are meaningful connections with other questions. For instance, questions about migration expectations could be grouped with other questions regarding the future. This would not eliminate priming, since it could also occur among the various questions about the future. However, the option of dispersing questions about migration aspirations adds flexibility in designing the survey instrument.

If questions on migration aspirations are grouped together, the effects of sequencing depend on the particular set of questions. Questions on past consideration of migration are presumably less sensitive to priming, since they are factual rather than evaluative. This makes it feasible to place them after questions on preferences for migration.

Questions on expectations for migration are not evaluative, but possibly quite vulnerable to context effects. If they follow questions of preferences, they could highlight the dissonance between desires and opportunities. Such a sequence might influence the answers, and also increase the emotional burden of participation in the survey.

How do context effects matter?

Context effects require attention, but there is no such thing as an unbiased survey instrument that accurately measures respondents’ ‘true’ migration aspirations. The notion that respondents can retrieve a mentally stored attitude, independently of contexts, is largely abandoned in survey research. Dominant approaches today recognise the contextual formation and expression of attitudes (Albarracin and Shavitt, 2018; Bohnert and Dickel, 2011). In light of this insight, how do context effects matter?

Context effects limit the value of comparing results on migration aspirations from different surveys, even if individual questions are identical. Coupled with slight differences in question wording, they can contribute to stark differences in results, even between surveys of the same population (Carling and Schewel, 2018).

Within a single survey, the effects of context and wording mean the overall *proportion* of respondents who express desires or intentions to migrate should not be regarded as a hard fact. This proportion will be influenced by the formulation of individual survey items, the overall design of the survey instrument, and other contextual factors.

However, *differences* between respondents – patterns of who wants to leave and who wants to stay, for instance – can be examined regardless of context effects on the overall distribution of answers. What is decisive, then, is whether context effects vary systematically between groups of respondents. This is an obvious risk in multi-language surveys, and an argument for emphasising the translatability of original questions and considering the nuances between alternative translations.

Systematic differences could also arise among respondents interviewed in the same language. For instance, consider an instrument that first asks about family members abroad, and subsequently turns to migration aspirations. We would generally expect that having migrant relatives is associated with a higher likelihood of migration aspirations (Migali and Scipioni, in press), but this connection could easily be inflated by the survey instrument.

Field-based exploration

The analytical review of survey questions was combined with a field-based exercise to test different formulations. Whereas past surveys serve only as inspiration, the field-based exploration provides empirical data on the potential and limitations of different types of questions.

Conventional pilot-testing and pretesting in survey research takes a complete draft questionnaire as the starting point and seeks to identify potential problems and opportunities for improvement. The current exercise, by contrast, examined only one theme and served to inform questionnaire development in advance. Consequently, the set of questions did not represent the most probable questionnaire content, but questions for which the analytical gains from field testing would be greatest. Factual questions about preparatory steps such as obtaining a passport, for instance, can more easily be included with only regular pilot testing.

Methodology

The methodological approach was to pose questions in the format of a survey interview, but to record and transcribe the answers in full, in the way one might do with a semi-structured interview. The transcriptions can be used to evaluate how respondents interpret and react to the questions, and how easy or difficult it is to place responses within the fixed answer categories.

The field exploration took place in Cabo Verde, which is one of the ten countries where data collection for MIGNEX will be carried out, and where it was possible to conduct the exercise in the local language (Kriolu) and draw upon contextual knowledge (see Carling and Åkesson, 2009). Cabo Verde has the advantage of high levels of migration aspirations, which meant a large number of relevant responses even with a small sample. The field site was urban São Vicente, the country's second-largest city, with a population of approximately 75,000. Interviews were carried out in March 2019.

Sampling and interviewing

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Respondents were sampled with a simple intercept methodology. First, ten sampling locations were identified based on previous knowledge of the city. Each location met the following criteria:

- Some passers-by could be expected
- An undisturbed conversation was possible
- There was shade

Taken together, the locations ensured socio-economic diversity. Three were in the city centre and the remaining seven were scattered across suburban intersections and residential areas with different profiles. Data collection took place over three days, with the city centre covered during mornings and the suburban locations covered during afternoons.

At each location, three passers-by were interviewed. They were approached on the basis of three criteria:

- Appearing to fit the 18–39 age range
- Walking alone
- Not appearing to be in a hurry

There were two refusals by individuals who did not have time, and one by a person who did not want to participate. Moreover, one interviewee was outside the age range. The 30 interviews that are analysed thus result from 34 initial requests.

The methodology would not have qualified as random sampling in a survey, but it served the purpose of the field exploration in yielding a diverse set of interviewees. Table 1 gives an overview of sample characteristics.

Informed consent was obtained orally before the interview began. Given the context and content of the interview, the information was condensed to the essential elements of anonymity, voluntariness, and possibility of withdrawal (Carling, 2019). Respondents were given a flyer with basic project information and contact details and had the opportunity to ask questions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

Variable		Number	Proportion
Sex	<i>Female</i>	15	50%
	<i>Male</i>	15	50%
Age	<i>18–19</i>	3	10%
	<i>20–24</i>	8	27%
	<i>25–29</i>	8	27%
	<i>30–34</i>	4	13%
	<i>35–39</i>	7	23%
Migrant status	<i>Born on São Vicente</i>	25	83%
	<i>Born on other islands</i>	5	17%

Source: Author's fieldwork.

Selection of questions

Based on the analytical review of questions from past surveys, an interview guide for the field-based exploration was developed. It contained primarily binary questions, which are a comparatively quick, simple and reliable format for survey interviews (Dolnicar et al., 2011). If questions with a Likert-type¹⁵ response scale are considered, they should be pilot-tested with a larger sample to ensure that responses are distributed across the categories in a way that justifies including a more complex question.

Questions were selected with respect to the different components identified in the review of survey questions. A priority was to capture several variants of the *nature of the mindset*. The total number of questions was kept low, not only to allow for intercept sampling and on-the-spot interviewing, but also to ensure that perceived repetitiveness affected the responses.

The selected questions covered three variants of the nature of the mindset: expectation, preference and consideration. Preference was covered by two questions that had different forms of conditionality. The question on expectation was deliberately placed first to minimise priming effects. The reasoning was that if respondents were first asked about their preference, and then about their expectation, divergence between the two would more easily feel as a form of failure.

Two of the questions were formulated in alternative versions that were each asked to half the sample. In both cases, one version was binary while the other asked openly about their expected and preferred place of residence in five years' time. The more detailed reasoning behind the formulations is presented together with the experiences in the field.

Interview guide

Respondents were asked the following seven questions:

1. Have you always lived in São Vicente?
- 2a. In five years' time, where do you think you will be living? *Or*
- 2b. In five years' time, do you think you'll still be living here?
- 3a. If you could choose, where would you like to live in five years? *Or*
- 3b. If you could choose, would you like to go and live in another country, or would you prefer to stay in Cabo Verde?
4. During the past year, have you thought seriously about leaving Cabo Verde?
5. During the past year, have you thought seriously about moving to another place in Cabo Verde?
6. If someone were to give you the necessary papers to live and work in Europe, would you go, or would you stay in Cabo Verde?
7. What is your age?

¹⁵ Rating scales like 'strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree nor disagree; agree; strongly agree.

Question 1 was intended to provide the most essential background to subsequent answers. (For instance, recently arrived internal migrants could then be told that question 5 concerns consideration of further migration after they arrived in São Vicente.) Question 7 was a filtering question for eligibility. It was placed last to preclude any influence on the questions of interest.¹⁶

The substantive questions (2–6) all address the stay/leave dichotomy in a specific way, complementing each other in painting a picture of the respondent’s orientation.

Results and evaluation

This section examines responses to questions 2–6 and evaluates each question’s performance in the field. The focus is on how the range of answers map onto the dichotomy that underlies the question. I have represented this graphically with selected answers that are tentatively placed along a continuum between poles that represent unambiguous orientations to staying and leaving, respectively. This analysis was carried out on the basis of the transcripts.

I have deliberately not compiled or reported the numerical distribution of answers. First, the sample is so small that the distribution would be of limited value. Moreover, the focus should be on the ease and validity of sorting questions into the fixed response options, not on what the resulting distribution of responses would be.

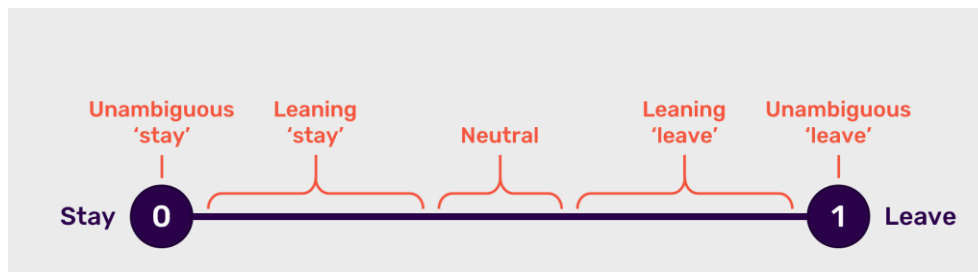


Figure 2. Schematic categorisation of responses.

It is useful to think of the responses falling into five categories Figure 2. In a survey interview situation, the interviewer would be expected to code the first two categories as 0 (stay), the middle category as ‘don’t know’ and the last two categories as 1 (leave). In assessing the question, we should examine whether the responses that lean towards stay and leave, respectively, can legitimately be coded in this way, or whether the ambiguity in responses reflect a weakness in the question.

¹⁶ Since Question 1 was a yes/no question, another quick factual question at the beginning could have set off the interview with a faster pace than was needed to respond well to questions on expectations and attitudes.

In addition, we should examine how the neutral responses can best be handled. For some of the questions, these responses have substantive value and should not be regarded as ‘missing’ and left out of the analysis. It is particularly important, therefore, to follow best practice in survey methodology in terms of differentiating between non-response categories in the data entry interface and in the dataset.¹⁷

Expectations

Questions 2a and 2b each addressed respondents’ expectations of where they would be living in five years’ time. Expectation is a valuable complement to aspects of migration aspirations such as preference or planning, not least because of the potential link with current behaviour. People who expect to leave might, for instance be less inclined to invest in local livelihoods or instrumental relationships in the local society.

The difference between the questions is that 2a asks openly ‘where’ respondents expect to be living whereas 2b simplifies it to a yes/no question about expecting to still live ‘here’ or not.¹⁸

The two questions, each asked to half the sample, gave similar results. (Figure 3 and Figure 4). In both cases, responses occurred in all the five categories outlined above (Figure 2). What is striking is that, for both questions, some of the ambiguous answers leaning to either side were expressed in terms of hope. One of the responses to question 2b ‘In five years’ time, do you think you’ll still be living here?’ was ‘I hope not’ (labelled E in Figure 4). Can this legitimately be coded as ‘expecting to leave’? Hope is a fundamental aspect of migration experiences (Kleist and Thorsen, 2016; Pine, 2014), and clearly different from the more technically tilted ‘expectation’. One could even argue that engaging with expectations is a betrayal of hope.

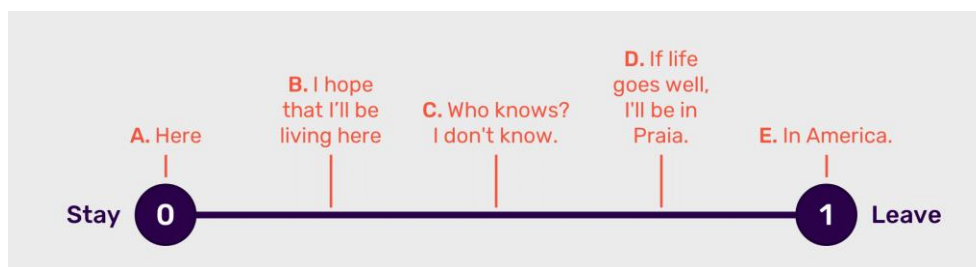
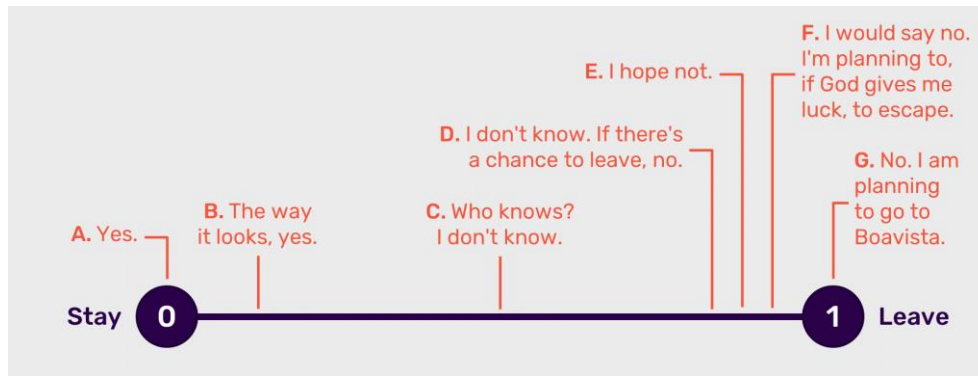


Figure 3. Selected responses to question 2a ‘In five years’ time, where do you think you will be living?’

Source: Field-based exploration interviews in Cabo Verde, 2019.

¹⁷ For instance, separate codes for (1) Unsolicited don’t know, (2) Refusal to answer (3) Question not applicable, and, in the dataset, (4) Interviewer error.

¹⁸ The meaning of ‘here’ was unambiguous in this case, given the preceding question ‘Have you always lived in São Vicente?’. Moreover, the fact that the interview took place on an island created a clear distinction between here and elsewhere. In other contexts, the ‘here’ in the question would need to be changed to a more clearly defined area.



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Figure 4. Selected responses to question 2b ‘In five years’ time, do you think you’ll still be living here?’

Source: Field-based exploration interviews in Cabo Verde, 2019.

Another noteworthy response to question 2b is F, which invokes divine will and ‘luck’. These elements, too, are well-known from the ethnographic literature on migration and uncertainty (Gaibazzi, 2013, 2015; Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012).

The responses to question 2a and 2b have several implications for data collection. When respondents formulate their answers in ways that deviate from the notion of expectation – for instance by referring to hope, luck, or divine will – the interviewer should probe with a follow-up question such as ‘what do you think is most likely?’. If the respondent is uncomfortable with the notion of likelihood – for instance between these matters are seen to lie in God’s hands – and responds ‘I don’t know’, this is a valuable clarification.

For questions on expectations, ‘don’t know’ answers are substantively meaningful and should be excluded from analyses. Even if the question is a binary one, the responses divide the respondents into three groups:

- Those who expect to stay
- Those who have no expectation either way
- Those who expect to leave

If the variable is analysed as a dichotomous one, it might be appropriate to combine the middle category with one of the other two, depending on the analysis. For instance, one might want to differentiate those who have an expectation to stay from those who do not, meaning that the latter group would also include those who have no expectation either way.

Questions about expectations are valuable, but potentially demanding for the interviewers. When answers are ambiguous, interviewers must decide whether they are truly about *expectations*. For instance, the answer ‘I hope that I will stay’ should *not* be coded as an expectation to stay. Such answers must be met with additional questions for clarification. If they, after gently probing, remain defined as *hope* to leave, for instance, the answer should be coded as ‘don’t know’.

Some of the answers that contain reservations are, nevertheless, clear expressions of expectations. For question 2b, a case in point is respondent B who, ‘the way it looks’ expects to still live in São Vicente in five years.

The field exploration did not give clear indications that either 2a or 2b works better than the other. Question 2a – openly asking where respondents expect to be living – should be more difficult to answer, since responses other than ‘here’ require naming another place. There was no clear difference in the number of ‘don’t know’ responses, though the sample is too small to draw conclusions on this basis.

Regardless of the number of responses, it matters that ‘don’t know’ has a slightly different meaning in the two questions. When respondents are asked where they expect to be living (2a) and respond ‘don’t know’, it might be that they expect to leave and just don’t know where to. This is an argument in favour of 2b which sets up a dichotomy between staying or not.

Question 2a yields additional information, though, in the form of destinations that are named. For instance, it may be of interest whether respondents expect to be living abroad or elsewhere in the same country. If this information is deemed sufficiently important, it appears better to include a follow-up question to those who expect to live elsewhere. Even if this gives a hinger number of questions, it might not increase the average response time. Moreover, only this approach would identify respondents who expect to leave without having a specific destination in mind.

Unconstrained preference

Preference is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of thoughts and feelings about the prospect of migrating. A preference for migration corresponds to aspiration in the aspiration/ability model (Carling, 2002), in the sense of a conviction that leaving is preferable to staying.

Questions 3a and 3b addressed preferences with a broadly formulated removal of constraints: ‘if you could choose...’. In line with the previous discussion about explicit conditionality (page 18), this simple formulation was preferred over ‘ideally, if you had the opportunity’. Even so, the answers revealed the ambiguity of what it means to remove constraints and be able to choose (Figure 5 and Figure 6). Several responses illustrated the role of not only the mobility constraints on leaving, but also the livelihood constraints on staying: ‘If I could choose, I would stay here, in my island. But there aren’t any opportunities for work here.’ The field exploration thus confirmed the risks of ambiguous conditionality in survey questions.

The difference between 3a and 3b mirrors that between 2a and 2b: openly asking ‘where’ versus setting up a stay/leave dichotomy. When respondents were asked where they would like to live, several requested clarifications, wondering if could be either in Cabo Verde or abroad, for instance. Stating that it could be ‘anywhere in the World’ or ‘wherever you want’, as the question implies, might bias responses. In general, any question that frequently requires clarification is prone to being unduly influenced by interviewers’ improvisation. As with question 2a, it is also a weakness that ‘don’t know’ responses could be given by respondents who would prefer to leave, but don’t know where to.

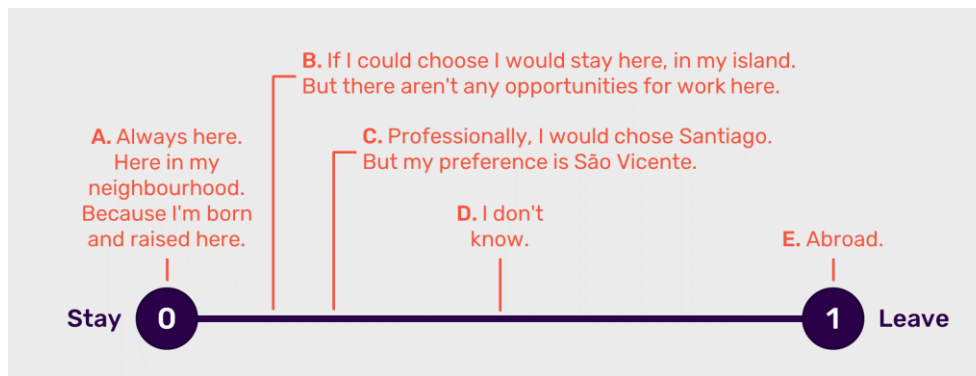


Figure 5. Selected responses to question 3a 'If you could choose, where would you like to live in five years?'

Source: Field-based exploration interviews in Cabo Verde, 2019.

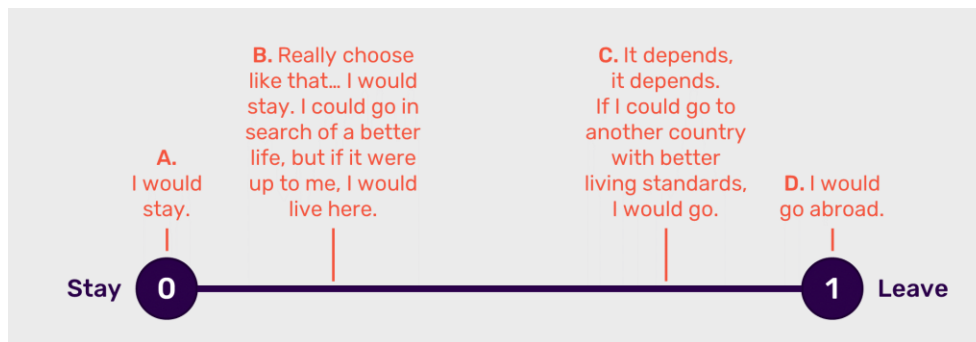


Figure 6. Selected responses to question 3b 'If you could choose, would you go and live in another country, or would you prefer to stay in Cabo Verde?'

Source: Field-based exploration interviews in Cabo Verde, 2019.

Question 3b was consistently answered without needs for clarification and confirmed the advantages of binary questions. The dichotomy between staying in the country and going abroad can be combined with a question about the preferred place of residence within the country.¹⁹ One advantage of this separation is that the resulting data allow for more comprehensive analyses of the interaction between internal and international migration.

In summary, the binary question 3b appears to be better than the open question 3a. The binary question is easier for respondents to relate to, which also means that the 'don't know' responses have greater substantive value. However, both versions of the question are challenged by the ambiguity of what it means to be able to choose.

In retrospect, it might have been better to avoid the introductory phrase 'if you could choose'. The intention was to assume an absence of constraints on migration, but, as the examples showed, some respondents instead assumed

¹⁹ In the EUMAGINE survey, question A31 did so, asking all respondents 'if you were to stay in [country], would you prefer to (1) stay in [research area], (2) move within [country] to a village or rural area, or (3) move within [country] to a town or city.'

an absence of reasons to migrate. The introductory reference to choice can be dropped without a loss of meaning, since the element of choice is still implicit in the question. A better formulation of 3b might have been simply ‘would you prefer to go and live in another country, or would you prefer to stay in Cabo Verde?’

Consideration

Consideration was included in order to capture fluctuating migration aspirations that might be particularly weak or strong at the time of the interview. For this reason, the question used the timeframe of the past year. With a longer timeframe, responses would be more prone to reflect a combination of fluctuations and trends over time. There were separate questions of consideration of international and internal migration (Figure 7 and Figure 8).

The question on consideration of international migration stood out with very few ambiguous responses. About two thirds of the respondents said that they had thought seriously about migrating and one third said that they had not. Such a clear empirical distinction makes the question particularly valuable. The clarity of the responses resonates with the point that retrospective questions about considering migration are factual questions rather than attitude questions (cf. page 7).



Figure 7. Selected responses to question 4 ‘During the past year, have you thought seriously about leaving Cabo Verde?’

Source: Field-based exploration interviews in Cabo Verde, 2019.

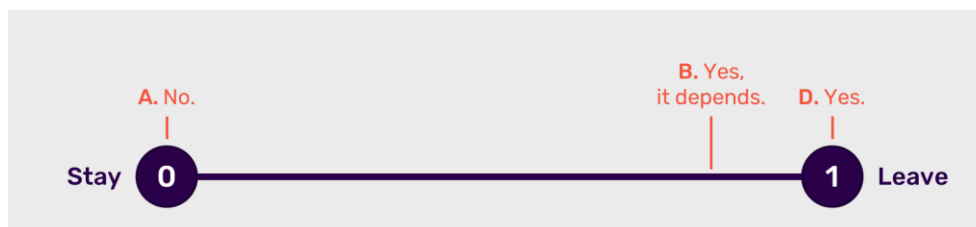


Figure 8. Selected responses to question 5 ‘During the past year, have you thought seriously about moving to another place in Cabo Verde?’

Source: Field-based exploration interviews in Cabo Verde, 2019.

It is also obvious, though, that thinking seriously about migrating can mean different things. Other questions are needed to differentiate between the respondents who answered affirmatively.

A potential source of ambiguity arose when respondents had thought seriously about migration but decided against it no longer gave it thought (e.g. response C in Figure 7). A follow-up probe was then needed to ascertain whether or not it was something they had considered during the past year.

Response B in Figure 7 also requires attention. The respondent answered that ‘well, Cape Verdeans are always thinking about going abroad’ with the implication that he was no exception. Does this reference to collective awareness of migration make his answer invalid? I would say no, since, in a culture of migration the distinction between personal preferences and collective norms regarding migration can be blurred.

One respondent appeared to not distinguish this question from the previous one (3b) and repeated ‘yes, I would go’. This confusion is a reminder of the risks with consecutive questions that may appear more similar than they were intended to be.

Question 5, about consideration of *internal* migration, produced responses that were almost as clear. A complicating factor was that many respondents had experience with internal migration and gave responses that mixed experience and consideration. In fact, this question is less meaningful when respondents have recently migrated and their presence in the research area is *the result of* considering migration and acting upon it.

Hypothetical preference

A second preference question used the same specific conditional element as the previously mentioned example from the EUMAGINE survey: ‘if someone were to give you the necessary papers...’ (question 6, Figure 9). While question 3a and 3b addressed future residential preference as a choice, this question describes a specific opportunity and asks whether respondent would seize it or let it pass.

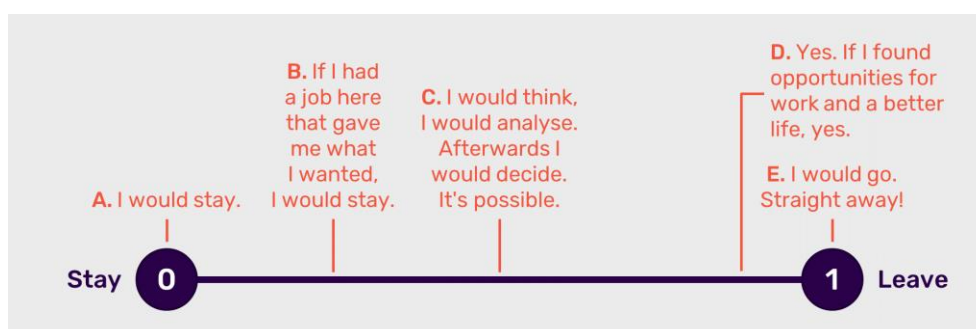


Figure 9. Selected responses to question 6 ‘If someone were to give you the necessary papers to live and work in Europe, would you go, or would you stay in Cabo Verde?’

Source: Field-based exploration interviews in Cabo Verde, 2019.

More than three quarters of the respondents said clearly that they would leave or that they would stay. An additional few added caveats about the conditions under which they would stay or leave. Cases in point in Figure 9 are responses B ('If I had a job here that gave me what I wanted, I would stay.') and D ('Yes. If I found opportunities for work and a better life, yes.'). These are challenging responses that would require probing. The choice that respondents are asked to make is between staying in their current circumstances or going to Europe with a residence and work permit, not with a guarantee of a better life.

The two responses (B and D) could easily be coded as 'stay' and 'leave', respectively, since they include phrases to that effect. But they are based on additional assumptions, not on the alternatives provided in the question. It is likely, therefore, that probing for clarification could increase the proportion of 'don't know' responses. This is not a problem, but rather strengthens the quality of the data, as long as these responses are not regarded as 'missing'.

Another set of respondents accepted the terms of the question but deemed them insufficient for making a decision on the spot. As respondent C put it, 'I would think, I would analyse. Afterwards I would decide. It's possible.' Responses such as this one should be coded as 'don't know', with the understanding that it is a substantively important, in-between category of respondents who are neither ready to go nor determined to stay (see Carling, 2014). It exemplifies a response that is confident and does not use the phrase 'I don't know', but which should nevertheless be coded as such by the interviewer.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper set out to address three questions about attempts to measure migration aspirations:

- *Why* should we measure?
- *What* are we measuring?
- *How* can we measure?

The motivations for attempting to measure migration aspirations are threefold: (1) to make use of their associations with actual migration and thereby seek to understand or predict migration patterns; (2) to better understand the drivers of migration, whether or not actual migration is obstructed, and (3) to understand the effects of migration aspirations on well-being and behaviour beyond migration.²⁰

The question of *what* we are measuring was addressed through the analytical review of survey questions. Within existing survey research on migration aspirations and related concepts, there is great diversity in what exactly is being asked about. Sometimes these differences are deliberate, while in other instances they receive scant attention when data is analysed and presented.

²⁰ See discussion on pages 2–4.

This paper provides the first systematic ordering of the diversity in survey questions on migration aspirations. The diversity was analytically deconstructed into variation of five components (as illustrated in Figure 1):

- Nature of the mindset
- Temporality of the mindset
- Nature of the action
- Temporality of the action
- Conditionality

The review of variation within each of these five components served the purposes of *laying out the options* for formulating survey items, highlighting the *significance of particular choices*, and *warning against problems* with several concepts and formulations.

The question of *what* we are measuring can also be addressed at a more fundamental level, as researchers on the psychology of attitudes have done. Do people ‘have’ migration aspirations that are simply retrieved in the context of the survey, or are expressions of aspirations entirely contextual constructs? With respect to attitudes more generally, most analysts would adopt a middle position, though with considerable differences in view. I engaged with these perspectives in the discussion of context effects (page 22), but this is an area of research that can be developed further.²¹

Surveys are invaluable for understanding the patterns and processes of migration aspirations, and in turn, generating new insights into migration dynamics. However, there are also theoretical and methodological challenges with posing explicit questions in an artificial setting such as a survey interview. To put it bluntly, one might, for instance, argue that asking questions about migration aspirations in a survey could, in itself, *produce* migration aspirations. It bears repeating, therefore, that surveys represent one methodology among others, which all have their strengths and limitations. For instance, ethnographic research has been essential for understanding how migration aspirations function in everyday life (Åkesson, 2004; Alpes, 2014; Newell, 2012).

Within the fundamental limitations of survey research, there is scope for increasing the value of surveys on migration aspirations. This paper has sought to apply theoretical, methodological and empirical knowledge to that effect, and thereby addressed the third initial question: *how* can we measure migration aspirations. It is possible to go further and explore additional methodological techniques, such as implicit association tests (Hofmann et al., 2005), but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The field-based exploration demonstrated both the opportunities and constraints of examining migration aspirations through survey methodology. It reiterated the value of questions that are *simple* in the sense of (1) being easy for respondents to understand, (2) not embodying ambiguous or inappropriate assumptions, and (3) having a binary format – often with ‘don’t know’ as an implicit but substantively valuable third option.

²¹ I will do so as part of the project *Future Migration as Present Fact (FUMI)*, funded by a European research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant. See www.prio.org/fumi.

However, the field-based exploration also showed how simple questions can yield complex answers. Coding these responses correctly, or probing in appropriate ways, can be difficult. If the interviewers are unprepared, data quality can suffer. Pilot testing can help reduce this problem, as long as ambiguous responses are monitored. First, it is possible to change or remove questions that are found to produce many ambiguous responses. Alternatively, these questions can be accompanied by specific instructions for handling common types of ambiguous responses.²²

Based on the analytical review of survey questions and the results from the field-based explorations, I propose the following recommendations for surveys on migration aspirations and related concepts.

1. Surveys should, if possible, include complementary questions that cover different variants of mindsets with respect to migrating or staying – especially *expectation, preference* and *consideration*.²³
2. Retrospective questions about consideration of migration should be given priority, since they have two key advantages: they give few ambiguous responses and they are relatively robust to short-term fluctuations in sentiments about migration. However, additional questions are needed to differentiate between the (potentially very many) respondents who have considered migrating.
3. The timeframe for retrospective questions about consideration of migration should not be too long. One year may be best. Longer timeframes can confound fluctuations and long-term trends; shorter timeframes could increase the influence of seasonal factors.²⁴
4. Questions with ambiguous elements of conditionality should be avoided. That is, questions about migration preferences should either relate to respondents' actual situation or to a precisely defined counterfactual situation.²⁵
5. Series of binary questions can be preferable to fewer but more complex questions, both in terms of the burden on respondents and in terms of the quality of the data.²⁶

²² Such instructions could include a standard probe, rules for assigning non-standard responses to the standard categories, or instructions regarding the use of 'don't know'.

²³ Further specifications, for instance about preferred destinations and preparatory actions, would come in addition. They are not covered in this paper.

²⁴ For instance, interviews conducted soon after a season with many return visits by migrants are likely to produce a higher proportion of affirmative answers. This effect will be even stronger if questions refer to 'the past month' for instance, and interviews conducted at different times of the year therefore refer to different seasons.

²⁵ See discussions on pages 20 and 30 regarding ambiguous conditionality. Question 6 in the field-based exploration exemplifies a sufficiently specific counterfactual situation (page 33).

²⁶ See Dolnicar et al. (2011) for a discussion.

6. For some questions, especially about expectations and preferences, ‘don’t know’ responses have substantive value. Interviewers should be trained to use differentiated codes for non-standard responses.²⁷
7. In the analysis, the treatment of ‘don’t know’ responses should be carefully considered for each question. Data from certain binary questions should either be analysed with ‘don’t know’ as a third, in-between variable value, or ‘don’t know’ should be merged with one of the two standard responses to produce a dummy variable. For other questions, ‘don’t know’ responses should be excluded from analysis.
8. ‘Don’t know’ should not be given as a response option but recorded when the response is similar to ‘I don’t know’ or the interviewer concludes that a non-standard answer is equivalent to ‘don’t know’.²⁸
9. Surveys in several languages require not only high-quality translations, but also attention to *translatability* in the original formulation of questions. For instance, the distinction between ‘intention’ and ‘planning’ is easily lost in other languages, even though the concepts are distinct in English.
10. Nuances between concepts such as expectations, hopes and plans can be missed by informants. Ideally, interviewers should be trained to prompt for clarification, for instance when questions about expectations are answered with reference to hope.²⁹ The need for probing or clarification should also be minimised in the development of the survey instrument by keeping questions simple and making the difference between successive questions as clear as possible.

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²⁷ That is, ‘don’t know’ must be recorded separately from ‘refuse to answer’, for instance. See also page 28 and footnote 17.

²⁸ See discussion under Hypothetical preference (page 33).

²⁹ See discussion on page 28.

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