

How I've used mixed methods (or not) over 20 years of doing migration research

Jørgen Carling

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

August 2021

As part of preparations for two podcast episodes and a keynote lecture on mixed methods, I looked back at how I have actually mixed methods (or not) in my own research. Below is an overview of examples. I've specified the qualitative and quantitative component of each and commented on why or how they were combined in this way. I keep it simple and use the labels 'qualitative' and 'quantitative', but refer to Mario Luis Small's (2011) review of mixed-methods research for more nuanced distinctions.¹

These are my take-aways from creating the overview. First, mixing is often uneven, and that's fine. The publications range from only qualitative to only quantitative, with differently balanced mixing in between. Relatively few combine quantitative and qualitative methods in roughly equal measure. Second, experience with both qualitative and quantitative methods has been valuable even for single-method publications, for instance for introducing contextualizing information or critical perspectives. Third, mixed-methods projects don't necessarily produce mixed-methods publications. Sometimes that's by design, but it can also be a missed opportunity. Fourth, if a paper mainly aims to make a theoretical contribution, including both qualitative and quantitative analysis is often not sensible, especially within the scope of a standard-length journal article. But for understanding and documenting empirical mechanisms, full-fledged mixing can be great.

Carling, Jørgen (2002)
'Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences.'
Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 28(1):5-42.

[Full text](#) (subscription)
[Full text](#) (green open access)

Qualitative

Ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured interviews (secondary-school students in Cape Verde)

Quantitative

Regression analyses of primary survey data (secondary-school students in Cape Verde, n=264,); regression analyses of secondary survey data (general population in Mindelo, Cape Verde, n=404)

Before starting postgraduate research, I took a semester off and travelled to Cape Verde to get acquainted with the country and the language. This provided foundations for doing ethnographic research. When I later carried out the survey of students, I conducted all the survey interviews myself – for the first and probably the last time. This was a formative experience that taught me a lot about surveys. I recruited interviewees for semi-structured interviews primarily among the survey respondents. In this way, I was able to set up a diverse group of interviewees. The secondary survey data were only documented in descriptive tables, but I was able to access the original forms and manually digitize them in order to do regression analyses. The article includes analyses of all three data sets, but it is one of the longest ever published in the journal.

Haugen, Heidi Ø. and Carling, Jørgen (2005) 'On the edge of the Chinese diaspora: The surge of *baihuo* business in an African city.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(4):639-662.

[Full text](#) (subscription)

Qualitative

Semi-structured interviews and observation (Chinese business owners and Chinese and local employees, Cape Verde)

Quantitative

Complete mapping of all the Chinese shops in the city

The research was entirely qualitative, and the division of labour was shaped by our ability to speak Mandarin and Kriolu, respectively. Not only were the numbers of businesses and individuals small, but large differences in the levels of trust and suspicion towards us required an adaptive and flexible (i.e. qualitative) approach. However, we systematically mapped all the Chinese shops and their ownership structure. This mapping provided supporting contextual information. In terms of reader experience, the map with the shops also represented an empirical overview that supplemented the discussion of insights from interviews.

¹ Small, Mario .L. (2011) 'How to Conduct a Mixed Methods Study: Recent Trends in a Rapidly Growing Literature.' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37(1):57-86. [Full text](#) (subscription)

Carling, Jørgen (2008) 'The human dynamics of migrant transnationalism.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(8):1452-1477.

[Full text](#) (subscription)
[Full text](#) (green open access)

Qualitative

Ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured interviews (Cape Verdean migrants in the Netherlands and their non-migrant relatives in Cape Verde)

Quantitative

None

This article addresses conflicts and tensions within transnational families, and much of the data comes from participant observation, rather than from interviews. I combined my own ethnographic analysis with insights from qualitative research elsewhere in order to make theoretical advances regarding the asymmetry of transnational relationships. Adding quantitative analysis would have distracted from the theoretical argument, I think.

Carling, Jørgen (2008) 'Toward a demography of immigrant communities and their transnational potential.' *International Migration Review*, 42(2):449-475.

[Full text](#) (subscription)

Qualitative

Ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured interviews (Cape Verdean migrants in the Netherlands and their non-migrant relatives in Cape Verde)

Quantitative

Demographic analyses of register data (population of Cape Verdean origin in the Netherlands, N≈21,000)

I wanted to trace how a migrant community and its transnational ties had developed since the 1960s and contribute to understanding the intersection between demography and transnationalism. I combined detailed demographic data with my own ethnographic data on family migration histories, and analysis of policy changes. By using the so-called Lexis diagram in new ways, I could relate ethnographic case studies directly to their demographic context. Caroline Brettell (2015) discusses this article as an example of engagement with demography in her book *Anthropological Conversations. Talking Culture across Disciplines*.

Hernández-Carretero, María and Carling, Jørgen (2012) 'Beyond "kamikaze migrants": Risk taking in West African boat migration to Europe.' *Human Organization*, 71(4):407-416.

[Full text](#) (subscription)

Qualitative

Ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured interviews (boat migrant returnees and aspiring migrants in Senegal)

Quantitative

None

My co-author María carried out all the primary data collection as a graduate student and we jointly developed the theoretical analysis of risk-taking. It was the ethnographic approach that allowed for an innovative contribution on a topic where political commentary and superficial reporting of numbers dominate. Any quantitative analysis here would have been a distraction, I think.

Åkesson, Lisa, Carling, Jørgen and Drotbohm, Heike (2012) 'Mobility, moralities and motherhood: navigating the contingencies of Cape Verdean lives.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(2):237-260.

[Full text](#) (subscription)

Qualitative

Ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured interviews (Cape Verdean migrant mothers, their children and fosterers, in Cape Verde and the diaspora)

Quantitative

Descriptive analysis of secondary survey data (survey on demography and reproductive health, Cape Verde)

This is essentially an all-qualitative article. Lisa, Heike (both anthropologists) and I had all done ethnographic research on the same theme. To contextualize our data, the article includes a table that displays the living arrangements of children in Cape Verde – for instance that a quarter of 10–14-year-olds don't live with any of their parents. It is simply a descriptive table, but it was extracted from survey data to meet the specific needs of this article.

Carling, Jørgen, Erdal, Marta B. and Horst, Cindy (2012) 'How does conflict in migrants' country of origin affect remittance-sending? financial priorities and transnational obligations among Somalis and Pakistanis in Norway.' *International Migration Review*, 46(2):283-309.

[Full text](#) (subscription)

Qualitative

Semi-structured interviews (Pakistani and Somali migrants in Norway and among remittance recipients in Pakistan and Kenya)

Quantitative

Regression analysis of secondary survey data (immigrants in Norway from Pakistan, n=308, and Somalia, n=245)

My co-authors Cindy and Marta carried out interviews and I analysed secondary survey data covering the same population. The combination of methods revealed that the moral and financial dynamics of remittance-sending are completely different among Pakistanis and Somalis. What seemed like a puzzling result from the regression analysis made perfect sense in light of the qualitative material.

Carling, Jørgen and Pettersen, Silje V. (2014) 'Return Migration Intentions in the Integration-Transnationalism Matrix.' *International Migration*, 52(6):13-30.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative
Indirect (see comments)

Quantitative
Regression analysis of secondary survey data (immigrants in Norway, n=3053)

My co-author Silje and I collaborated on the quantitative analysis of survey data, and there was no qualitative component. However, the article was part of a larger mixed-methods project and our approach and interpretation were shaped by discussions with team members who collected and analysed qualitative data.

Brown, Richard P.C., Carling, Jørgen, Fransen, Sonja and Siegel, Melissa (2014) 'Measuring remittances through surveys: Methodological and conceptual issues for survey designers and data analysts.' *Demographic Research*, 31:1243-1274.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative
Indirect (see comments)

Quantitative
Methodological discussion of survey data collection and analysis

This article discusses survey research methodology and lies firmly within a quantitative approach. But part of the article's strength is that it addresses data collection challenges that are more easily revealed through qualitative research, such as the fluidity of households and limited information-sharing among household members. Our complementary backgrounds with different expertise in ethnography, econometrics, and data collection logistics, for instance, were therefore more important than the narrow focus of the article suggests.

Carling, Jørgen (2014) 'Scripting remittances: making sense of money transfers in transnational relationships.' *International Migration Review*, 48(s1):S218-S262.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative
Analytical review of a large body of ethnographic literature

Quantitative
None

The objective of this article was to formulate general theoretical insights on the basis of a large body of ethnographic case studies. It uses the notion of 'scripts' to understand the multi-faceted transactions that remittances represent. Like a couple of the other articles included here, it uses ethnographic data to advance a general theoretical argument, and it is hard to see how quantitative data or analysis could have been more than a distraction.

Carling, Jørgen (2016) 'Making and breaking a chain: Migrants' decisions about helping others migrate.' in Bakewell, O. et al. (eds) *Beyond Networks: Feedback in International Migration*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 156-182.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative
Indirect (see comments)

Quantitative
Regression analyses of primary survey data (Brazilian, Moroccan and Ukrainian migrants in the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom, n=2859)

This chapter stems from a large mixed-methods project and examines key mechanisms in chain migration. Our survey data provided a unique possibility for doing so, but the same themes were not covered in the qualitative interviews. The topic of the chapter would have been ideal for mixed methods, so this gap was unfortunate. The project used a sequential design with survey data collection following qualitative interviews. However, we had not allowed sufficient time for analysis of the qualitative data to inform the survey instrument. The sheer complexity and amount of data (including 633 qualitative interviews) also became barriers to joint analyses.

Carling, Jørgen (2017) 'Visualizing the transnational connections of China's most African neighbourhood.' *Environment and Planning A*, 49(6):1209-1213.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative
Indirect (see comments)

Quantitative
Visualization of observational data on international telephone services (China)

I used information from the display of rates at small international phone service providers to map the geographical distribution of transnational ties. The methodology itself was purely quantitative, but I would never have become aware of the data source, understood its significance, or been able to do collect the data without the experience of living in the neighbourhood for a year.

Carling, J. (2017) 'On conjunctures in transnational lives: Linear time, relative mobility and individual experience.' in Mavroudi, E. et al. (eds) *Timespace and international migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 33-47.

[Full text](#) (subscription)
[Full text](#) (green open access)

Qualitative

Ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured interviews (Cape Verdean migrant mothers, their children and fosterers, in Cape Verde and the diaspora)

The data for this chapter is entirely qualitative in the sense that it is based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. However, I traced family migration histories with attention to time as a measurable dimension, reflected in the title's mention of 'linear time'. This contrasts with dominant approaches to temporalities in migration studies.

Quantitative

No large-N data or analysis, but active use of the quantifiable aspects of time

Carling, Jørgen (2019) *Measuring migration aspirations and related concepts*, MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative

Analytical review of existing survey instruments; audio-recording of responses to survey questions

This paper (and related ones in the pipeline) mix methods in ways that I find hard to classify. I used questions from existing survey instruments to theorize about distinctions in ways of thinking about the prospect of migration, essentially reading the tools of quantitative data collection with a qualitative perspective. I also posed survey questions to respondents in the field and audio-recorded their full response, as opposed to just selecting the appropriate response option. This served not only to inform survey design, but also to further tease out distinctions in ways of thinking.

Quantitative

Methodological discussion of survey data collection and analysis

Schutte, Sebastian, Vestby, Jonas, Carling, Jørgen and Buhaug, Halvard (2021) 'Climatic conditions are weak predictors of asylum migration.' *Nature Communications*, 12(1):2067.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative

None

We sought to compare climatic, socio-economic and violence-related predictors of asylum migration, using vast amounts of data and methods that I would not have been capable of using on my own. I brought migration expertise to the team and could contribute to the choice of variables and framing of the discussion, for instance. Since the analysis is situated at the macro-level of predictors of aggregate flows, rather than at the level of individual decision-making, it's an example of a study where mixed methods would not have been helpful.

Quantitative

Machine-learning prediction analyses with large-scale datasets (climatic conditions, political and socio-economic indicators, asylum applications)

Carling, Jørgen, Erdal, Marta B. and Talleraas, Cathrine (2021) 'Living in two countries: transnational living as an alternative to migration.' *Population, Space and Place*(n/a):1-11.

[Full text](#) (PDF)

Qualitative

Semi-structured interviews (people who split their lives between two or more countries)

This article introduces a special issue and synthesizes from a larger project. It makes the case that, while migrant transnationalism is generally understood as a consequence of migration, the niche phenomenon of transnational living is rather an alternative to migration. The article includes a figure that shows how our interviewees split their time between countries, which is valuable information about the qualitative data we use as a basis for theorizing. However, we emphasize that the quantitative distribution 'does not constitute meaningful data in its own right'.

Quantitative

None (but a quantitative description of the qualitative data)
