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Habilitation-Project
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The social construction of biographical (dis)continuity in the course of migration

Social inequality, participation and belonging in transnational spaces of migration between the “Global North” and the “Global South”

My research project is a study of (migrant) biographies in terms of the production, reproduction and transformation of social inequality in migrant and migrantized fields of action between societies in the “Global South” and the “Global North”. The aim is to make a contrastive comparison of migrations to Germany from Syria and from West African contexts. I seek to explore the following aspects using biographical research approaches that take into account the life histories, family histories and collective histories:

- a) The meaning of biographies as patterns of orientation, interpretation and self-presentation in relation to positioning/positionality and actions of migrants in transnational spaces.
- b) Processes and constellations during the course of migration constituting biographical (dis)continuity
- c) Reconstructing structures of social inequality with a biographical research approach.

My empirical findings to date suggest that a contrastive comparison of the experiences of migrants from West Africa and Syria before their arrival in Germany is fruitful to explore the interrelation of biographies and social inequality. On the level of established social discourses and ascription practices in Germany, migrants (as self-description or description by others) from West Africa and Syria occupy similar structural positions: the dominant tendency is (racist) homogenization and deficit-based ascriptions. Migrants from societies in the “Global South” are commonly imagined as homogeneous groups. Refugees and migrants are generally regarded as a problem and in terms of their otherness. As has already been shown in biographical and transnational research, these ascriptions blot out the fact that “otherness” is constructed relationally, in interrelation with others, especially in the country of arrival. In public discourses, the differences between migrants are lost, especially their *different* chances for biographical continuity and their *different* experiences of biographical discontinuity before arriving in Germany. Biographical research can help to raise awareness of the complex socio-historical backgrounds and networks of social relationships in which different migration courses are embedded – and which are produced in the course of migration.

Although they share structural similarities, migrants from West Africa and from Syria are very differently positioned: they represent the binary opposition often made in public discourses between refugees fleeing from war, on the one hand, and economic migrants on the other. The

effects of this discursive formation on the chances for participation and constructions of belonging of migrants is one dimension of my research. In addition, I will reconstruct the different figurations of the migrants within their life history, family history and collective history, and the associated power balances in which they found themselves before and during their migration. I will focus especially on the significance of the constitution and construction of biographical (dis)continuity for the actions and power chances of migrants in transnational figurations. This will enable me to shed light on the processes in which power inequalities are produced, reproduced and transformed in transnational fields of action, and what consequences this has for chances and experiences of participation.

From a theoretical point of view, the example of transnational spaces serve to show how the methods of biographical research and research on inequality can be fruitfully combined. In particular, attention will be paid to temporality or temporalization of the life course and life course planning, which is central to biographical constitution processes.