Irregular Migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands

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3 Studying Aspirations

3.1 Grounded theory approach

Since I aim to study irregular migrants as active agents, I need methods that enable me to study the practices and actions of irregular migrants. The grounded theory approach provides a suitable methodological framework. In the grounded theory approach, human beings are ‘viewed as active agents in their lives and in their worlds rather than as passive recipients of larger social forces’ (Charmaz 2006: 7). Furthermore, as the aim of grounded theorists is to construct theory, it perfectly suits the inductive approach argued for in the previous chapter.

Grounded theory methods are advocated by Glaser and Strauss in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Grounded theory methods ‘consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories “grounded” in the data themselves’ (Charmaz 2006: 2). The aim of researchers who adopt this approach is to develop theories from research grounded in data rather than to test existing theories by deducing testable hypotheses from them. Instead of verified or falsified, theory is *constructed* through comparative analyses (Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2006). The aim is not ‘to provide a perfect description of an area’ as ethnography aims to do, ‘but to develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behaviour’ (ibid.: 30). The formation of analytical categories – typologies – is what grounded theorists aim for. These analytical categories should ‘yield a “meaningful” picture, abetted by apt illustrations that enable one to grasp the reference in terms of one’s own experience’ (ibid.: 38).

According to Glaser and Strauss ([1967] 2006), researchers adopting a grounded theory approach should not start their research endeavour by analysing the literature, because the theory should emerge inductively from the data. This idea that researchers approach reality as a *tabula rasa* has been heavily criticized as naïve (Charmaz 2006; Layder 1998; Strauss & Corbin [1990] 1998). According to this new branch of scholarship, it is best not to develop systematic theoretical ideas before entering the field, but to have a sense of theoretical direction. This way, researchers ensure that preconceived ideas or theories are not forced upon the data, but that concepts emerge from the data. Instead of a fully outlined theory, they argue, it is advisable to enter the field with some sensitising concepts (Blumer 1969), providing the researcher with some initial ideas to pursue (Charmaz
2006; Layder 1998; Strauss & Corbin [1990] 1998). For me, concepts such as incorporation, social mobility and transnationalism offered valuable ‘points of departure’ (Charmaz 2006: 17) to select interview topics and formulate questions and to think analytically about the data I gathered. Sensitising concepts primarily serve to guide the research process; the theoretical concepts are filled with content and are adjusted while the research unfolds. The sensitising concepts provided me with ‘theoretical openings that avoid importing and imposing packaged images and automatic answers’ (ibid.: 135). They enabled me to form meaningful analytical categories inductively, while still having a sense of direction.

Grounded theory methods offer a ‘set of principles and practices’ rather than ‘prescriptions or packages’ (Charmaz 2006: 9). One of its core principles is that data collection and analysis are not separate phases in the research process, but take place simultaneously (Charmaz 2006; Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2006). The research process unfolds in different stages, and in each stage data analysis and collection inform one another. Crucial to all phases in the research process are ‘constant comparative methods’ (Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2006). Researchers constantly look for patterns in the data. Coding and writing memos are crucial tools for making comparisons in grounded theory. Writing memos prompts researchers to analyse the data and codes early in the research process, helping to increase the level of abstraction of ideas that emerge. Memo writing allows researchers to make conjectures, after which they can go back to the field and gather more data to check these conjectures. Through writing memos and focused codes in the current research, I built and clarified categories and became aware of variations within and between categories. Furthermore, I identified gaps in my analysis, which I could take back to the field to fill by theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling involves sampling to develop the properties of the categories until no new properties emerge. In other words, the categories are saturated with data and subsequently sorted to integrate into an emerging theory (Charmaz 2006).

While the previous chapter suggested taking aspirations as a starting point for the conduct of research, this was by no means the case in the current study. Rather, during my research, a typology of aspirations was constructed. When I started my research I began with some of the same preconceptions I argued against in the previous chapter. It was only during my fieldwork – especially in the writing of memos – that aspirations became my central categories.

Inductive research does not easily fit the standard formats for scholarly writing because the latter uses deductive logic. As there are no clear-cut
ways to deal with this tension in terms of typical formats used in qualitative studies, I have decided to present the reader ‘reconstructed logic’ instead of ‘logic in use’ (Kaplan 1964). Kaplan (ibid.) argues that science as a process is guided by ‘logic in use’ and that science as a product is guided by ‘reconstructed logic’. It is the product of my scientific endeavour that is relevant and therefore presented here.

3.2 Researching the lives of irregular migrants

From the outset of this project I was in the privileged position of already having relevant data at my disposal: more than 300 semi-structured interviews with irregular migrants. These had been gathered by research assistants in connection with large-scale projects in Belgium¹ and the Netherlands.² The initial plan was to lump these interviews together for analysis. However, after I carefully studied these, the data seemed less suitable than originally thought. In the previous chapter it became clear that researching irregular migrants as active agents by means of standard survey techniques can be problematic. Even though the interviews I had at my disposal included open questions and contained a lot of relevant information, they did not provide me with enough understanding of irregular migrants’ actions. I needed to enter the field myself. The semi-structured interviews did allow me to distinguish different patterns of incorporation. In addition, they provided me with a preliminary appreciation of how these patterns are shaped. However, in order to arrive at a more profound understanding that included dynamics and practices, additional fieldwork was required.

During the course of this project I choose to supplement the semi-structured interviews with participant observation in combination with in-depth interviews with irregular migrants and the organisations that interact with them. I therefore lived in the cities of Antwerp and The Hague in 2006 and 2007 for several months each. For purposes of fieldwork, I rented a room in both cities in centrally located areas where many irregular migrants live. In what follows, I first discuss the semi-structured interviews and then deal with the different types of data gathered during my own fieldwork.

¹ See for more information: Van Meeteren et al. 2007b; Van Meeteren et al. 2008.
3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Research assistants, who were selected because of their specific ethnic backgrounds, their experience with the research group and their interviewing skills, carried out 120 semi-structured interviews in Belgium in 2004 and 2005. The interviews generally lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours and were conducted in respondents’ mother tongues, except for those with Congolese respondents, which were held in French. Quotations from the interviews used in the empirical chapters were translated into English by me. The interviewers had located respondents through community leaders, and they contacted respondents in bars, teahouses or churches. Furthermore, respondents were asked if they could refer the research team to other irregular migrants. This so-called ‘snowball method’ has been successfully applied in other studies involving irregular migrants (e.g., Burgers & Engbersen 1999; Chavez 1998; Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2004; Paspalanova 2006; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009). It helps to develop rapport, since contact is made through an established and trusted personal relation (Chavez 1994). Snowball sampling is now widely recognised as a near prerequisite for meaningful surveys in the field of irregular migration (Black 2003). The downside of snowball sampling is its tendency to produce bias, which is why the number of referrals per respondent was kept to a minimum. In total, 120 semi-structured interviews were held with irregular migrants in Flanders and Brussels. Among these, 11 were with women and 109 with men. Respondent ages ranged from 19 to 47, and they had arrived in Belgium from as early as 1980 to as recently as 2005 (see appendix 1 for an overview of respondent characteristics). To capture variety in aspirations and social networks, various migrant groups were interviewed in different localities (see Chavez 1994). Moroccans were interviewed in Antwerp, Turks and Bulgarians in Ghent, and Congolese in Brussels, because these groups are heavily represented in these cities (Van Meeteren, Van San & Engbersen 2007b). The Bulgarians in Ghent are of Turkish origin. The Congolese group largely consists of former asylum seekers.

Unfortunately, the interviews that were held with irregular migrants in the Netherlands did not provide enough information about the aspirations of the respondents. After aspirations became a central focus, I therefore chose to use only the semi-structured interviews collected by research assistants in Belgium and to omit those carried out in the Netherlands from my analysis.
3.2.2 Participant observation

Participant observation is a research method that is not standardised and can be applied in multiple ways. It is therefore important to be clear about how this method has been used in this study in order to be able to judge the quality of the research. This section therefore describes my fieldwork, especially with regard to my observations of irregular migrants during this period.

I conducted fieldwork in Belgium for almost six months. When I started my fieldwork in Belgium in the spring of 2006, I was lucky to discover that at that time, irregular migrants were actively engaged in large public actions in order to enforce ‘regularisation for all’. The emergence of this ‘pro-regularisation movement’ (Laubenthal 2007) made it easy for me to come into contact with irregular migrants. Throughout Belgium they had occupied churches, held protest marches and some were even engaged in hunger strikes. These actions were organised by UDEP (Union pour la Défense des Sans-Papiers), which is a collective of irregular migrants fighting for rights. In Flanders, their actions were coordinated with local churches and welfare organisations and became known as ‘church asylum’. UDEP consists of several departments that work at both the local and national levels. I took part in the weekly meetings of the local department in Antwerp, and I visited all the events it organised during church asylum. I also joined in the national protest marches held by UDEP.

During the time when the Antwerp branch occupied a church (June-July 2006), I visited the church and its temporary inhabitants almost every day. Thirty irregular migrants slept in the church they occupied, and many other irregular migrants visited them throughout the day. These others helped those who slept in the church, for example, by cooking, being present at organised events and attending the meetings that took place. Usually, however, they just came by to keep up with the latest news on UDEP actions and to keep the sleepers company. During my daily visits, I got to see the inhabitants and their helpers in their daily routines, and I was able to build trusting relationships with them, as they were there every day, almost the entire day, playing cards or chatting with each other and with their visitors. One of the most important recurring events was the ‘change of church’ that took place every two to three weeks. Holding their mattresses under their arms, the irregular migrants loudly paraded as they moved from one church to the other, escorted by the police.

I was also often invited to eat with them, which gave me opportunities to follow the discussions they held amongst one another. I heard a number of
life stories told over the dinner table or over coffee afterwards. At the end of each day I wrote up field notes. From the moment I introduced myself to the participants in church asylum, I was clear about my objectives. I told them I was a PhD student in sociology writing a book about irregular migrants. I never expressed my own views on their political demands, yet some introduced me to others as ‘Masja, our biggest supporter, she comes to see us every day’. I am therefore aware of the possibility that some of the irregular migrants involved in church asylum might have interpreted my presence as support. Every now and then I therefore found it appropriate to remind them that I was ‘writing a book’ about irregular migrants. Nevertheless, I was under the impression that they appreciated my daily company, especially on days when I was their only visitor.

Whereas I met close to a hundred irregular migrants through church asylum, I chose to interview only nine of them intensively, as described in the next section. Irregular migrants who are involved in such political actions constitute a very particular group and should not be regarded as representative of the population. Although I did not strive for a representative sample, I did aim for variety.

Apart from the observations I made in church asylum, I met many other irregular migrants whom I managed to observe in their daily activities. In order to capture variety, I used as many entries as I could think of (see Burgers 1998). I encountered irregular migrants in the streets, in churches that were not involved in church asylum, through organisations, and through snowball sampling using my own personal network as well as those of migrants. Over the course of my fieldwork, I was invited to lunch or dinner with informants in their houses and on occasion in a restaurant. In return, I invited some of them to dinner or for drinks in my fieldwork apartment in Antwerp or The Hague. Furthermore, I frequently went to a bar for a drink with a respondent, especially during my stay in Belgium when the world soccer championships were being held. With my respondents, I supported the soccer teams of various countries, and many respondents showed their sympathy towards me by supporting the Netherlands. Belgium did not qualify that year, but Ecuador and Ghana got very far, to the joy of some of my respondents.

In addition to social gatherings connected to food and drinks, I often went for a walk with a respondent through the city or in one of Antwerp’s parks. On Sundays, I accompanied some to church. Moreover, I was invited to parties and went swimming at a local lake with a group of 25 Latin American migrants. Some introduced me to their friends who then invited me to dinner at their house. Sunday dinners were particularly special, as in many cultures, extended families, neighbours and friends are all invited to
dine together on this day. In all of these different ways I gathered a lot of field notes. Again, all of these people knew that I was a student writing a book about irregular migrants. Outside church asylum, the irregular migrants I observed always introduced me to others as such. Nevertheless, I realise that people may have forgotten about my social scientific occupation on occasion. Although data tend to get better when they do (see also Hagan 1994), I made a habit of subtly reminding them every once in a while.

In exchange for the information they provided, respondents sometimes asked me for a favour in return. I therefore translated letters that people received and did not understand, I arranged for payment by instalment for some who had received a fine they could not afford to pay at once, and most importantly, I gave a lot of advice. This usually concerned places to go for free language lessons, shopping and medical care. I did not give any advice regarding possibilities for legalisation. Other research has indicated that living amongst the research population and assuming multiple roles besides being a researcher is a successful method of assuring good data (see, e.g., Hagan 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Mahler 1995).

I spent time with those migrants I interviewed in-depth. This enabled me to validate the answers they gave during the interviews, and I was able to reflect, together with the respondents themselves, on their actions in relation to what they told me in the interviews. Thus the combination of participant observation and interviewing yielded a more accurate portrayal of the lives of irregular migrants than I could have gathered using self-report methods alone (see also Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

Unlike in Belgium, there were no political actions in the Netherlands in which irregular migrants were actively involved. I did, however, observe irregular migrants in other contexts in both countries. Nevertheless, I gathered more material in Belgium than I did in the Netherlands. This is because I started my fieldwork in Belgium, and by the time I began fieldwork in the Netherlands my categories were becoming theoretically saturated. After almost three months of fieldwork there, I therefore decided to stop, even though I had not collected the same amount of information as in Belgium. Furthermore, as my research does not aim to systematically compare experiences between the two countries, it does not need two comparable sets of data.

3.2.3 In-depth interviews with irregular migrants

I selected only a limited number of the irregular migrants I observed for an in-depth interview. I usually invited a person only after I had gathered
enough information through participant observation to determine whether the respondent’s story was sufficiently interesting for an interview. This way, I was able to determine beforehand if a respondent would provide me with a story that I had more or less heard before or if an interview would yield new insight. In other words, participant observation allowed me to sample theoretically, to fill incomplete categories or gaps in my analysis. Participant observation enabled me to predict which respondents would help me in this process. The basic criterion governing the selection of respondents was their predicted theoretical relevance for furthering the development of emerging categories and their properties (see Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2006). Although in grounded theory methods, theoretical sampling is about saturating conceptual categories and not about representing a population or increasing the statistical generalisability, I did try to capture as much variety as I could (see chapter 2) – not only in terms of stories but also with respect to gender, socio-economic background, education, country of origin, age and length of stay.

All respondents consented to serve as ‘human subjects’, although their perceptions of what this involves diverged considerably. I explained as best I could, but I am aware that some interviewees might not have fully understood what social scientific research entails. In any case, I did my best to convince my respondents that I would safeguard their anonymity, though their concerns about this aspect varied greatly as well. Some people were initially anxious about supplying personal data, while others asked if their picture could be on the cover of my book. In cases such as the latter I chose not to interview the person for reasons of personal protection, as I believed such persons could not properly foresee the consequences of participating in my research. In other words, in some cases I felt I had to protect the migrants in question, even though I had their consent, because I felt that they did not have sufficient knowledge of what they had consented to.

Most respondents agreed to be interviewed because they wanted to help me get ahead in my career. After all, I knew most respondents quite well through my involvement in their lives by participant observation. In other cases, they granted me an interview as a favour to an intermediate person or to draw attention to the plight of irregular migrants. The latter category were particularly difficult to interview, as they tended to talk about the injustice they felt was being done to irregular migrants in general. They talked a lot about other people who had been less fortunate, because their own lives did not serve well as an illustration of the struggles they believed many irregular migrants went through. In some of these cases, it took much effort to get them to talk about their own lives instead.
I did not give participants monetary compensation for their time, although I always bought them a small gift as a token of my appreciation. Gifts usually consisted of fresh fruit. After the interview, most people were thankful, not so much for the gift, but for the fact that someone had taken that much time to listen to their story. All respondents offered to answer more questions if necessary, and many asked if I wanted to interview other people they knew. As I did not want to interview too many people belonging to the same social networks, I accepted this offer in only a limited number of cases.

I used a reflexive and conversational approach in the interviews, because this had proved useful in other studies involving irregular migrants (see, e.g., Hagan 1994). During the first few interviews I brought a paper listing the interview topics I wanted to discuss, but I no longer needed this structure in later stages. The shortest interview took about an hour, whereas the longest interview lasted over nine hours (in three sessions). Most interviews took between two and three hours and were held in Dutch, English, French or Spanish. Quotations were translated into English by me. Many of the respondents invited me to their homes, so the interview could take place there. When someone did not want the interview to take place in their home, I invited them to mine. Apart from private homes, I also interviewed in a park (if weather conditions allowed), in a public library and in an office supplied by organisations for welfare work. Two respondents did not want the conversation to be recorded. In one of those cases the woman said that she did not like the way her voice sounded on tape. In the other case, the man was very emotional and indicated that he did not want evidence of his crying on tape. In these two cases I made extensive notes.

Asking open questions enabled me to pick up and pursue specific themes that came up during the interview. Furthermore, after each interview I listened to it again and wrote codes and memos. Following grounded theory methods, I analysed my data while I was still in the process of gathering material. By comparing each new interview to the previous interviews, I could return to the field and gather focused data that enabled me to answer analytic questions or to fill conceptual gaps (see also Charmaz 2006). In this sense, the interviewing I did came to differ from conventional interviewing, because I narrowed the range of interview topics as I proceeded with my research in order to develop my theoretical framework.

As the migrants who were interviewed by the research assistants belonged to large ethnic communities, I made sure to interview members of smaller communities as well in order to capture enough variety. The migrants I interviewed myself were from a diverse group of countries: Algeria, Bang-
ladesh, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Congo, Cuba, Ecuador, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Mauritania, Moldova, Nepal, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Suriname, Syria, Turkey and Uzbekistan. In total, I conducted 45 in-depth interviews with irregular migrants, 37 in Belgium and 8 in the Netherlands, 30 of which concerned men and 15 with women. Respondents varied in age from their early twenties to their late fifties, and their length of stay ranged from 2 to over 20 years (see appendix 2 for an overview). This explicit aim for variety is what distinguishes the current research from many other studies, as these have mostly focused on one or a few nationality groups or on a specific type of migration, such as labour migration (see, e.g., Engbersen et al. 2006, 1999; Grzymala-Kazlowska 2005; Leman 1997; Mahler 1995; Hagan 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Jordan & Düvell 2002; Kalir 2005a; Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2004; Lazaridis & Romaniszyn 1998; Leerkes et al. 2004; Massey et al. 1994; Paspalanova 2006; Portes & Bach 1985; Roer-Strier & Olshtain-Mann 1999; Staring 2001; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009).

3.2.4 In-depth interviews with organisations

I conducted open-ended interviews with organisations in Flanders and Brussels in 2006 and in the Netherlands in 2007. These organisations all had contacts with irregular migrants, albeit in very different ways. The organisations included, for example, those involved in general welfare work, governmental and semi-governmental policy institutions, local authorities and NGOs. Other respondents who worked for government-sponsored organisations were active in the fields of drug addiction, education, health, local welfare and prostitution. I used some of these organisations to come into contact with irregular migrants. In total, I conducted 61 in-depth interviews with organisations, 51 in Belgium and 10 in the Netherlands (see appendix 3 for an overview). These organisations in Belgium were located in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Mechelen, Sint Niklaas and Leuven; and those in the Netherlands were in The Hague and Utrecht. The interviews provided me with insight into what both non-governmental and governmental organisations can do for irregular migrants in practice. They offered insight into local policy practices beyond the level of policy documents. Moreover, the experiences of several organisations that have daily contact with irregular migrants allowed for cross-validation of the materials I gathered from the irregular migrants themselves.

Almost all interviews with organisations were conducted in Dutch and recorded on tape. In a few cases I considered the notes to be insufficient.
These concerned organisations that were active in the so-called ‘second’ or ‘third line’, which involves policy-related work rather than daily contact with irregular migrants. All quotations were translated into English by me.

3.3 Difficulties in studying irregular migrants

Scholars who use qualitative research methods – especially when participant observation is included – often face questions about the methods they used to collect, analyse and interpret their data. Unlike quantitative research, methods are not standardised. The success of qualitative research, therefore, depends on the competences of the researcher and their actions during the research process. To be able to judge the quality of the research, it is important to have insight into the research process. The previous sections already provided much information about the research process. This section offers a more detailed discussion of the difficulties I sometimes faced and my techniques for maintaining high-quality data.

Validity is considered a major strength of participant observation because researchers live with their respondents for a long period during which they get to know their subjects well (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999). This allows for both continuous data analysis and opportunities to refine constructs so that they match sociological categories as well as participant realities. However, participant observation also brings some risks for validity, risks that I tried to avoid as much as possible. Observation is, for example, always filtered through the researcher’s interpretative frames. The challenge for me was therefore to transform the observations I made during my fieldwork into complete and accurate field notes. In doing so, I separated the observations themselves from my reflections on them and kept exact quotes of respondents as intact as possible.

3.3.1 Establishing trust

The most important risk for validity in my research is that the irregular migrants I observed and interviewed might have lied to me. Establishment of trust between the researcher and the irregular migrant is a major issue in this type of study. Very few migrants would consent to be interviewed without knowing the researcher and the context and objectives of the research. To a certain extent this is an issue in all social science research. But there are reasons why it is more problematic in research on irregular migrants compared to that on other social groups (see Düvell, Triandafyl-
Irregular Migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands (lidou & Vollmer 2009). First, irregular migrants are not allowed to live in the destination country; their presence is illegal. Respondents must therefore trust the researcher not to report them to the police. Second, many irregular migrants engage in illegal activities, such as informal employment, in order to make a living. Respondents therefore have to trust that the researcher will not report their illegal activities to the police. Third, some irregular migrants engage in activities that many people find morally questionable, such as bogus marriages. Some are reluctant to talk about such issues with a stranger who ‘might not understand’. Fourth, some people live with lies, such as untruthful asylum or regularisation applications, and do not want their true stories to become known for fear of some kind of repercussions. Fifth, irregular migrants may not want to talk about their engagement in illegal or morally questionable activities, not so much out of personal fear for the police, but because they do not want to damage the image of irregular migrants in general.

All this means that research on irregular migrants is difficult, as the researcher has to dispel any initial distrust, and construct trust, which involves hard work and thorough planning. With regard to the semi-structured interviews, trust was usually established by the interviewers’ similar ethnic backgrounds. But even then, it was very useful if respondents were referred by people they knew, as this greatly contributed to the establishment of trust. The interviewers made notes concerning the behaviour of the respondents during the interview. From these notes, it appeared that most respondents were open and cooperative. Only a few respondents refused to answer some questions. These mainly concerned questions about the area they lived in.

I used participant observation and referral by other people as a means to establish trust for the interviews that I conducted myself, which I believe worked well. In a few cases I met irregular migrants in the street, which meant that trust had to be built from scratch. I met with these respondents a few times for more casual talks before I asked them for an interview. These casual talks took place in public spaces to ensure my own safety. Partly for the same reason, I usually waited until I had met some of their close friends or family members before inviting them for an interview. Being acquainted with their kin and friends enabled me to verify a lot of the information these respondents gave and thus contributed to validity.

Overall, I have good reasons to suppose that the people I interviewed told me the truth about their lives. If I questioned an individual’s honesty or openness, I chose not to interview this person. Moreover, during participant observation some people told me stories of their life. Later on, some confided
in me that they had lied before, and offered to tell me their real life story. This is especially salient since for some of them, this new story differed from the story they continued to sell to the press and to the organisations and churches that supported them. In none of these cases had I interviewed these respondents before, because I doubted their honesty. These turned out to be valid judgments. Moreover, many people told me things that were not in their interest. Some, for example, told me they had applied for asylum using made-up stories. Others told me they were in a bogus marriage to get legalised, or that they intended to do this. Because I was involved in their lives through participant observation I could verify their stories to a great extent. My interviews with people in organisations that interact with irregular migrants enabled me to cross-validate much data in multiple ways.

3.3.2 Reflections on the personal identity of the researcher

Apart from validity issues concerning trust, I am also highly aware of the fact that my personal identity as a Dutch woman might have influenced the answers respondents gave me. While it was easy for respondents in Belgium to speak badly of Belgium or Belgians, interviewees in the Netherlands might have refrained from criticizing Dutch customs due to fear of offending me. I do not believe that such issues seriously affected the quality of the data, as respondents in the Netherlands usually openly expressed negative opinions of the Dutch and the Netherlands. However, it is possible that they toned down their criticism. It is therefore important to be aware of this possibility to be able to see how it might have influenced the results.

My identity as a woman had the benefit of making it relatively easy to interview and observe women. For example, a man could not have participated in the monthly event in The Hague where irregular migrant women from all kinds of nationalities came together to cook and dine. My female identity also inspired some male respondents to participate. From the outset of my study I noticed that some men were eager to talk to me and they actively tried to acquire information about my marital status. A few went as far as to actually propose marriage; in only one case was I made an indecent proposal. These men ceased their efforts after I told them nicely that I knew what they were doing and why they did it, but that their attempts were futile. On occasion, my bluntness inspired a lively discussion on the ethics of bogus marriages. My identity as a woman could have caused a sample bias towards men who were trying to get papers through marriage. For that reason, I made sure to also include men who were already married or who were morally opposed to bogus marriages.
Furthermore, I do not believe that my female identity influenced the answers men or women gave on gender-related issues. Although I never expressed my opinion on such matters, respondents could have believed that I do not adhere to traditional gender roles, because I am both highly educated and work full-time. Nevertheless, many men and women did not hesitate to express very conservative opinions concerning the division of housework and care for children. Some men felt free to label women as bitches and whores or to claim that men and women are unequal in other than biological respects. Perhaps my efforts to come across as gender neutral in terms of clothing were successful. Overall, I think my identity as a woman was more likely to have been a benefit than a disadvantage.

3.3.3 Use of data throughout the book

To conclude this chapter, researching a hidden population like irregular migrants is always difficult. I have described how I tried to ensure the quality of the data that I gathered. Nevertheless, some problems may have remained. In such cases, awareness of how these might have influenced the results and openness about such possible effects are crucial in enabling people to evaluate the quality of the research. Throughout this book, I have therefore tried to be as open as possible, without giving away too much information that could lead to the identification of individual participants (see Düvell et al. 2009).

For the same reason, respondents have been assigned fictitious names. This has also been done for reasons of readability and to demonstrate that I quote different respondents. The names reflect the ethnic background of the respondents, meaning that Turkish respondents are given Turkish names, Moroccan respondents have been given Moroccan names, etc. Any religious affiliations or cultural meanings attached to these names are unintentional. This is common practice in qualitative research involving irregular migrants (Chavez 1998; Hagan 1998; Mahler 1995). Appendices 1 and 2 provide an overview of respondent background characteristics corresponding to the fictitious names.

The typology constructed in this book relies mostly on the in-depth interviews with irregular migrants and the participant observation. The semi-structured interviews with irregular migrants mainly served as a means of comparison in the initial stages, and later on they served as checks for the conjectures developed during the research process. Hence, whereas the analytical categories were formed during my own fieldwork – in my interactions with irregular migrants – the semi-structured interviews...
provided empirical content and allowed me to achieve saturation of my categories much faster than I would have without them. In other words, the typology is grounded in both types of interviews, as well as in the participant observation.

The interviews with organisations served as a means of cross-validation; they are not part of the backbone of the analysis. After all, this book is about the lives of irregular migrants, and they do not necessarily interact with organisations. The interviews did greatly help in getting a sense of the context in terms of laws and regulations and therefore highly informed the next chapter. Sometimes they gave me ideas about themes to pursue in interviews or talks with irregular migrants. All in all, although the typology is not so much grounded in these interviews, the research process and hence the process of theory construction was informed by the interviews held with organisations.