Assessing a New Perspective

Analysing aspirations: The merits

This book has sought a better understanding of the lives of irregular migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands. It focused, in particular, on irregular migrants’ patterns of incorporation, their transnational activities and the role played by different forms of capital in their realisation of their aspirations. I outlined a research approach that takes the aspirations of irregular migrants as a starting point. Following this approach, we arrived at a better understanding of the way patterns of incorporation and transnational activities of irregular migrants are shaped. The literature on irregular migrants has in the past overemphasised structure while neglecting agency. The current research sought to connect the two by bringing aspirations into the analysis. Aspirations provide ‘a conceptual link between structure and agency in that they are rooted firmly in individual proclivity (agency) but also are acutely sensitive to perceived societal constraints (structure)’ (MacLeod 2009: 139).

The analysis revealed three types of aspirations. Investment migrants strive to acquire financial means for investment in their home country. They aspire to work and make money in the country of destination, and then return to their country of origin once they have acquired enough savings. These migrants strive for future upward mobility in their country of origin and are usually ‘target earners’ (Massey et al. 1987). That means they save for very specific projects, ranging from starting a business to financing a wedding in the country of origin. Whereas investment migrants mean to stay in the destination country only temporarily, settlement migrants aspire to start a new life in the destination country. They do not intend to return to the country of origin. Settlement migrants indicate that they do not necessarily require a legal status in order to lead the better life they aspire to. This stands in sharp contrast to the aspirations of legalisation migrants, for whom leading a better life is inextricably bound up with obtaining a legal status. For them, obtaining legal residence represents the start of a new life, unlike settlement migrants who say they can start to build a new life without papers. Legalisation migrants do not want to live as irregular migrants. They therefore actively work to obtain a legal status.

As aspirations may change over time, it is important to emphasise that I have not constructed a typology of migrants, but a typology of aspirations. The concepts of investment migrants, settlement migrants and legalisation migrants are used to refer to irregular migrants who have these specific
aspirations at a certain point in time, but the core analytical categories are types of aspirations. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 demonstrated that these three types of aspirations underlie distinct patterns of incorporation and transnational activities. Chapter 9 demonstrated that irregular migrants with different types of aspirations require different forms of capital to realise these. The main empirical findings of these chapters are recapped below. As a means of achieving synthesis, they are not discussed by chapter, but by type of aspiration. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of this study and suggestions for future research.

10.1.1 Investment aspirations: Preferring work over leisure and comfort while oriented towards ‘home’

Investment migrants try to work as much as possible during their stay in the destination country because this facilitates a quick return. They therefore tend to work long hours, six or seven days per week. Because they are in the destination country to work and make money, they place little value on leisure time. They seldom engage in recreational activities and usually stay at home, mostly in the company of family or flatmates. Moreover, they have a very small network of social contacts. Not wanting to stay in the destination country, investment migrants remain socially oriented towards their country of origin. They invest time and energy in maintaining social relations with relatives and friends there, putting little effort into building social relations in the destination country. These migrants do make efforts to keep up with the latest news developments in their home country and they keep in touch with loved ones. Most investment migrants call or send text messages on a daily basis, because they indicate they miss their loved ones very much.

Investment migrants live as cheaply as possible in order to save money and ensure a quick return. They tend to inhabit cramped houses, often sharing rooms with multiple persons. They economise on virtually everything, spending very little money in the destination country. Instead, they may remit a large share of their income: approximately €2,000 to €5,000 per year. Others save a similar amount of money, safeguarding it until they have acquired enough to return and invest in their country of origin.

Investment migrants usually live in immigrant districts where they can profit from the infrastructure that caters to irregular migrants. In such areas, contractors in search of employees visit tea houses and bars, and vans that drive irregular migrants to job sites usually leave from locations within immigrant districts. As work is a top priority for investment migrants, they take exploitative conditions and low pay for granted. They are not overly
troubled by low pay, because they aim to spend their earnings in the country of origin where life is much cheaper and wages are even lower. The exploitative conditions can be tolerated because they are only temporary. Investment migrants therefore usually work in the sectors that are typically associated with informal migrant labour, such as horticulture, construction and restaurants. In these sectors, they do the types of work that natives typically reject. Investment migrants do not mind working in these sectors, even though these jobs are often tightly controlled. If they are caught doing informal labour and expelled, most can easily return, because most come from countries nearby.

If investment migrants have specific job competencies that they are able to deploy in the destination country, they are relatively well paid. Furthermore, having arranged for work and lodging prior to their actual migration proves very helpful in realising investment aspirations, because it allows them to find jobs in which they can use their competencies. For investment migrants, cultural capital (such as job competencies below the ‘legal ceiling’), which can be activated by social capital, is decisive in determining their chances of success on the informal labour market in Belgium and the Netherlands, and consequently in attainment of their aspirations.

Investment migrants without job competencies earn low wages and have difficulty finding employment. As a result, they either have to stay longer than they envisioned, or they have to go back without having realised their aspirations. My respondents had as yet chosen to stick around; otherwise I would not have encountered them. These unsuccessful or not yet successful investment migrants indicated that they had to live off their savings or reach out to others for help when they were without employment. Investment migrants who have family members in the destination country can usually turn to them for help. Those who do not have family in the destination country depend on the commercial infrastructure for additional income or support. Investment migrants seldom receive support from migrant assistance organisations. Sometimes they are unaware of these organisations’ existence, and besides, they do not expect the state to provide them with help in case of difficulties or illness. They have come to make money and return and do not want to depend on state support.

10.1.2 Settlement aspirations: Enjoying a better life in quiet suburban neighbourhoods

Unlike investment migrants, for settlement migrants ‘home’ is the destination country. Their lives are not all about working. They want to lead a regular life that they regard as better than that which they had in their
country of origin. Settlement migrants prefer to work in relatively stable, non-seasonal, Monday-to-Friday types of arrangements, so that they have the weekends off, and they preferably work during the day, so they can be at home in the evenings. For many settlement migrants, this is often because they live with their family, which may include children.

Because settlement migrants aim to live a good life, they are willing to spend some money on a nice apartment. These migrants prefer the privacy of their own room and only live in shared arrangements out of economic necessity or during the initial period of settlement. Many settlement migrants opt for an apartment in the suburbs, because they prefer to live in a nice and quiet area with good schools for their children and recreational amenities. Settlement migrants whose ethnic background is largely represented in immigrant districts – like Turks and Moroccans – form an exception: they want to live in immigrant districts because for them these neighbourhoods have specific advantages.

Suburban areas provide proximity to settlement migrants’ preferred employment, which is in native private households. Settlement migrants seek work there because private households have the least chance of being controlled. Migrants with settlement aspirations generally have a lot to lose if they are expelled, as they have built their lives here. Furthermore, private households offer the possibility of working for several employers, which allows settlement migrants to spread the risk of job loss, exploitation and low pay. In addition, settlement migrants are attracted to Belgian and Dutch private households, because these are reported to pay the best and to treat irregular migrants well.

If they do not manage to find this type of employment, settlement migrants have to accept other jobs, usually of the kind typically done by investment migrants. As settlement migrants cannot cope for long with the hard conditions and working hours that accompany such employment, they usually work at intervals. Settlement migrants in jobs that investment migrants typically do are dissatisfied with their working conditions, because they do not allow them to live a regular life. Moreover, they feel exploited because of the low wages they receive. This prevents them from leading the good life that they aspire to in the destination country.

Since settlement migrants want to stay permanently in the destination country, they want to get to know the country. They sometimes travel and take part in a range of leisure activities. In addition, they frequent all kinds of social gatherings. Many settlement migrants take part in activities organised by formal and informal socio-cultural organisations. Through these social gatherings, settlement migrants meet many people and create
a large social network. Furthermore, through the activities organised by socio-cultural organisations cultural symbols associated with the country of origin are reproduced, which adds to the sense of 'home' in the destination country (see Coutin 2005a). While settlement migrants do maintain personal contacts within their country of origin, they do not keep up with the latest general news there. Their frame of reference is the destination country. They tend to have enough contact with co-ethnics in the destination country to fulfil their cultural needs. For settlement migrants 'home' is in the destination country, so they spend the largest share of their income there and send only small sums to their relatives back home. These sums are usually in the order of €1,000 per year or in case of special needs.

To lead the good life they desire, settlement migrants have to mobilise social leverage (Briggs 1998) from their weak ties. The social gatherings they visit are helpful, because they enlarge migrants' social networks and provide access to the job information that circulates within these networks. Effective mobilisation of the social leverage potentially available in these networks requires settlement migrants to maintain a good reputation. Next to the relevance of social leverage, settlement migrants need family members nearby or close friends who can support them in case of a temporary setback. Social leverage and social support are thus complementary to one another; settlement migrants need both to secure the life they aspire to.

However, many settlement migrants do not manage to mobilise both social leverage and social support, and consequently fail to secure the stable working conditions they need to fulfil their aspirations. Some, for example, do not have family to whom they can turn for unconditional support. These settlement migrants have to avail themselves of informal social solidarity systems. However, such systems are not easily accessed, as migrants need to invest in and contribute to them. Furthermore, these function based on trust. This means that in order to partake in social solidarity systems, a migrant needs other participants who can vouch for them, and they must repay borrowed money as promised. The social gatherings that settlement migrants frequent serve to enhance solidarity in such systems, because information on who is 'serious' is exchanged there.

Settlement migrants who do not have the resources to invest in such systems can turn to organisations for help. Most organisations help settlement migrants temporarily by providing them with material support. However, this is usually offered only early in their stay and certainly not on a structural basis. Organisations try to avoid helping irregular migrants install themselves in illegality. Information is the only type of assistance they offer to settlement migrants on a structural basis.
10.1.3 Legalisation aspirations: Sacrifices in the pursuit of a legal status

Legalisation migrants work as little as possible, because they perceive informal labour to be a risk that could obstruct fulfilment of their aspirations. Getting caught while engaged in informal work severely reduces the chances of legalisation and simultaneously increases the chances of being deported, which is why legalisation migrants avoid it if they can. Many legalisation migrants do work part-time in order to cover their basic needs. They spend the rest of their time in search of a marriage partner or in pursuit of ‘integration’. They believe that learning to speak the local language and associating with native citizens will increase their chances of legalisation on the basis of their being well integrated. Because legalisation migrants work only the minimum necessary to sustain themselves, they do not send money to their country of origin. Furthermore, they are picky about the jobs they are willing to do. They consciously seek jobs that have least chance of being controlled: jobs in private households. Such employment is relatively risk-free, and it offers the possibility of working only a limited number of hours.

As legalisation migrants wish to refrain from work as much as possible, they need a lot of support to sustain themselves. In fact, they prefer to generate resources from support rather than through informal labour. They therefore spend a lot of time looking for monetary gifts with which they can pay the rent and buy food. They furthermore prefer not to ask for help within their own community, so they turn to native Dutch or Belgian citizens instead. Some legalisation migrants even live with native citizens. These legalisation migrants usually receive free room and board in exchange for light housework. In these arrangements they find not only support, but also additional means to integrate themselves. Contacts with natives are perceived as strengthening their applications too. Legalisation migrants who aim to get married also need support, but family members usually provide them with room and board until they manage to find a partner. If they do not have family in the destination country, they depend on the commercial infrastructure, or they must work more than they would like to.

Legalisation migrants who are involved in procedures also receive substantial support from organisations, usually for a long period of time. As these migrants are considered to have ‘a perspective’, they can get food packages and sometimes even long-term financial support. Even though the informal support provided by organisations is limited, support accumulates
because legalisation migrants tend to shop around and combine this type of support with assistance from within their personal networks. Legalisation migrants who aim to get married cannot turn to organisations for support, as they are not considered to have ‘a perspective’.

Furthermore, it is not in the interest of this category of irregular migrants to hang around organisations, because this is not a good place to meet a partner to marry. In contrast, legalisation migrants who are involved in procedures spend a lot of their free time calling in at organisations for a chat, for social support, to do voluntary work or to take part in the activities organised there. They may hang around at organisations all day, as these offer a wide range of social and recreational activities for free. In the absence of full-time work, they keep themselves busy this way, and they believe that visiting organisations is good for their integration. Through these visits, legalisation migrants develop rather heterogeneous networks in terms of ethnic background. However, their social circles are quite small, because they primarily associate with other irregular migrants who visit the same organisations each day. Furthermore, they have little opportunity to meet people through work, and they seldom participate in recreational activities outside the scope of organisations.

Legalisation migrants who aim to get married usually have a larger social circle. They realise that others can introduce them to a potential future spouse, so they put great effort into building a large social network. They also maintain contacts with their relatives and friends back home, although these types of contacts may become frustrated if it takes the migrant in question a long time to become legalised. Many legalisation migrants who are involved in procedures have lost contact with family and friends in the country of origin due to political problems there. However, they do try to keep up with the situation there, especially politics. Political issues in the country of origin are often the reason for their migration. More importantly, many legalisation migrants are afraid to go back. They want to become legalised because they feel they have no other place to go. The political activities that legalisation migrants engage in are usually coordinated through migrant organisations. These organisations not only devote attention to improving the political situation in the country of origin, but they also look out for the well-being of those who live in the destination country.

It is difficult to determine what could make legalisation migrants who are involved in procedures successful in their quest for legalisation. Due to the lack of transparency of the procedures legalisation migrants are involved in, it is impossible to realistically assess the chance that an ir-
regular migrant has of achieving regularisation. My analysis of the forms of capital that legalisation migrants require to fulfil their aspirations was therefore focused on legalisation migrants who aim to get married. Migrants who try to find a co-ethnic to marry need social capital from family members. The presence of family members in the destination country allows for a relationship of trust to evolve between the two families and can compensate for the potential lack of social status and trust attached to the marriage candidate. Legalisation migrants who try their luck on the Belgian or Dutch marriage market have to speak Dutch or French to be able to communicate with potential spouses. Furthermore, those who pay money in order to enter a bogus marriage require economic capital, which they may mobilise by means of their social capital.

10.1.4 Overview

Aspirations reflect the dreams and wishes of irregular migrants, but they must also be understood as responses to objective structures. These structural opportunities and constraints are located both in the country of origin and in the destination country, as well as within the personal social networks of irregular migrants. This book presented many examples of how aspirations reflect the structural conditions which irregular migrants face. Patterns of incorporation and transnational activities of irregular migrants can therefore best be understood in relation to both the agency that individual migrants have and the structures they are embedded in. For example, specific conditions in countries of origin shape specific aspirations. Furthermore, my respondents’ aspirations were formed in specific structural contexts. We saw in the empirical chapters of this book that perceptions of structural barriers, like specific policy measures and chances of encounters with the police, have different effects on irregular migrants with different aspirations. Furthermore, we saw that migrants from the same ethnic group may be embedded in different social networks because of their different aspirations. The approach outlined here does not imply that structural barriers and embeddedness in social groups are not relevant for understanding how patterns of incorporation and transnational activities are shaped; instead, it implies that our understanding is improved by taking aspirations into account as well.

Obviously, the picture portrayed up to now does not do justice to all empirical diversity. The categories represent ideal-type images of irregular migrants with different types of aspirations. Furthermore, as the aspirations
of irregular migrants may shift over time, respondents sometimes find themselves between the ideal types outlined above. When reading the main findings, as summarised in table 10.1, it is important to keep their ideal-type nature in mind.

### Table 10.1 Main findings by aspiration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Investment</th>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>Legalisation</th>
<th>Legalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marriage</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functional incorporation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Cheap and crowded</td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>With family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Immigrant district</td>
<td>If group is</td>
<td>If group is</td>
<td>If group is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>represented:</td>
<td>represented:</td>
<td>represented:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>immigrant district.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Otherwise: suburb</td>
<td>Otherwise:</td>
<td>Otherwise:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>suburb</td>
<td>suburb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work hours</td>
<td>As many as possible</td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>As little as</td>
<td>As little as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Typical’ irregular</td>
<td></td>
<td>possible</td>
<td>possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>migrant sectors</td>
<td></td>
<td>In native private households</td>
<td>In private households or ethnic businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of work</td>
<td>No perception</td>
<td>Certain types of</td>
<td>Fundamental</td>
<td>Fundamental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of exploitation</td>
<td>work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exploitation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other sources of income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift and barter economy</td>
<td>Commercial networks</td>
<td>Social solidarity systems</td>
<td>Native citizens</td>
<td>Family, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisations</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Occasional material support</td>
<td>Intensive</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social incorporation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure time</td>
<td>As little as possible</td>
<td>Highly valued</td>
<td>Nothing special</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways of spending leisure time</td>
<td>Indoors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recreation activities</td>
<td>Organisations</td>
<td>In the streets, going out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic mobility</td>
<td>Immobile</td>
<td>Mobile (across national borders)</td>
<td>Mobile (within national borders)</td>
<td>Immobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Span of social contacts</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Large circles</td>
<td>Small circles</td>
<td>Large circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10.1.5 Shifts in aspirations

Although I took aspirations at one point in life as a starting point of my analysis, I was typically able to distinguish a sequence of aspirations throughout the migrant careers of the people I interviewed during my fieldwork. However, for the respondents who were interviewed by research assistants, I could usually assess merely one point in life. Analysis of my own interview results indicates that there is no firm hierarchy of aspirations and that no fixed trajectory exists. Van Nieuwenhuyze (2007) found a typical trajectory from investment, to settlement to legalisation aspirations among the Senegambians she studied. The diversity in my sample allowed me to demonstrate that this trajectory is surely not uncommon, but that other variations occur as well. The only trajectories I did not come across were those in which settlement or legalisation aspirations turned into investment aspirations. This does not mean, however, that these trajectories do not exist. But it is likely that migrants who have followed these have already returned and are consequently difficult to encounter in the destination country.
The current study demonstrated that if irregular migrants change their aspirations, their functional and social incorporation and the transnational activities they engage in change as well. In addition, irregular migrants require different forms or combinations of capital if their aspirations shift. However, the relationship between aspirations and incorporation, transnational activities and configurations of capital are not necessarily one-directional: changes in each of these domains may foster shifts in aspirations as well.

Because aspirations mediate what an individual desires and what society can offer, they are inextricably connected with assessments of available opportunities and possible constraints. This means that aspirations may change as a result of changes in perceptions of the opportunity structure. Although I did not systematically study factors inspiring changes in aspirations, this study did demonstrate that aspirations are intertwined with functional and social incorporation, transnational activities and configurations of capital.

10.2 Implications

The qualitative nature of the current study does not allow me to draw quantitative conclusions about the patterns I found. However, the strength of my analysis does not lie in quantitative description, but in the understanding that it provides of how these patterns are shaped. The current study sheds new light on existing findings and contributes to scholarly debates about how irregular migrants live in Western societies. Moreover, the results have implications for the way research on irregular migrants is conducted. These contributions to the literature are discussed below.

10.2.1 Beyond a ‘victim perspective’

I argued that many studies of irregular migrants in Western societies share a ‘victim perspective’. Scholars commonly perceive irregular migrants as passive recipients of structural forces who have little control over their lives. Whereas they overemphasise structure, they neglect the agency that irregular migrants have to act within structural boundaries and which sometimes enables them to overcome structural barriers. My analysis demonstrates that a survival perspective does not do justice to the empirical reality.

A perspective that includes agency more prominently deepens our understanding, because, as the current study shows, irregular migrants may
act differently under similar circumstances. Their diverging actions can be understood by recognising the different aspirations they have. Instead of being passive victims, I showed that irregular migrants actively strive for specific goals. Furthermore, my findings demonstrate that not all irregular migrants are engrossed solely in ‘survival’. Many irregular migrants do achieve success; some even manage to realise their aspirations. In addition, even though not all irregular migrants realise their aspirations, a focus on aspirations helps us to understand why irregular migrants prefer certain jobs or accommodation over others and therefore adds to our understanding of how outcomes are shaped.

Most previous studies have raised only the question of why some irregular migrants ‘survive’ better than others. This dominant perspective has obstructed our understanding of the social mobility that some irregular migrants achieve. It is of crucial importance to distinguish between ‘survival’ and social mobility, and my results clearly demonstrate that each requires different resources. Moreover, irregular migrants with different aspirations ‘survive’ differently as well. Future research should therefore rise above the victim perspective by taking aspirations into account. The sections below discuss the main advances that can be expected in this way.

**10.2.2 Functional incorporation and ethnic community patterns**

The analysis presented in this book took individual aspirations as a starting point and produced insights relevant to a number of theoretical debates and diverging research outcomes pertaining to the functional incorporation of irregular migrants. These concern issues such as the relationship between income and money spent on accommodation, the spatial distribution of irregular migrants, and the hours they work and the types of work they do. These insights were discussed in detail in chapter 6 and will not be repeated here. These insights could be gained because this analysis inductively focused on individual aspirations instead of on groups or on structural constraints.

Researchers have traditionally investigated why some groups of irregular migrants have different outcomes than other groups. According to Piore (1979), migration and settlement must be understood as processes relating to communities rather than to individuals. Likewise, Engbersen et al. (1999, 2006) speak of ‘ethnic community patterns of incorporation’ and explain why ethnic groups display different outcomes in terms of income, labour and housing conditions by referring to the support patterns dominant
within these ethnic communities. My analysis reveals that it is problematic to explain outcomes by referring to patterns at the level of the community. I demonstrate that an analysis that focuses on the group instead of the individual yields different results than an analysis that starts with individual aspirations.

For example, my Turkish respondents were more often employed and more often employed full-time than my Moroccan respondents. On the basis of these results one could conclude that Turkish migrants manage to survive better than Moroccans, who manage to acquire only part-time employment. One could interpret these results by referring to the different characteristics of the two communities, the Turkish being a stronger, more tightly knit community than the Moroccan, with higher levels of ethnic entrepreneurship, consequently offering better employment opportunities to irregular migrants (see, e.g., Engbersen 1996; Engbersen et al. 2006).

In addition, one could attribute these differences to levels of solidarity. After all, successful communities display more solidarity. Although such explanations are likely to be partially valid, they obscure the fact that many Moroccan irregular migrants are legalisation migrants who choose to work as little as possible so as not to endanger their possibility of acquiring legal papers. Hence, for these migrants, the fact that they work part-time is not primarily the result of lack of employment opportunities or solidarity within their ethnic community, but due to the aspirations they have. This means that outcomes are not simply determined by structural conditions, such as community characteristics; they can be better understood by taking aspirations into account as well.

Apart from issues such as housing and income, previous research has discussed ethnic community patterns of incorporation in relation to the support irregular migrants garner from these communities. I found that not all irregular migrants belong to an ‘ethnic community’. Some irregular migrants are assisted by family members, who are obviously also co-ethnics, but this has nothing to do with their ethnic community in general. Some of my respondents who indicated receiving assistance from family members had little contact with other co-ethnics. If strong family relations are frequent within a certain community, they produce a spurious ethnic community pattern. I believe, for example, that I could have easily misinterpreted the support my Turkish respondents received as ‘community support’. Many Turkish investment migrants live with and are supported by family members. Many Turkish legalisation migrants who aim to get married are supported by family members as well. Combined with the fact that there is a large presence of Turks who can construct social solidarity systems
for Turkish settlement migrants, one might easily conclude that there is a lot of solidarity within the ‘Turkish community’. However, although many Turks are supported by other Turks, this is hardly a dominant support pattern within the ‘Turkish community’, because different mechanisms are in play here.

In addition, even though irregular migrants might have a specific ethnic background that could theoretically provide access to an ‘ethnic community’, this does not always happen in practice. Chapter 6 described how informal systems of social solidarity operate: if migrants want to access them they have to contribute as well. For settlement migrants who aim to spend their lives in the destination country, this seems a wise investment, but this is less so for investment and legalisation migrants. Having only temporary engagements in the destination country, investment migrants see no need to invest in such social systems and therefore cannot access them either. Because legalisation migrants wish to refrain from work as much as possible, it is not possible for them to occasionally contribute any surplus income to help others in need. In addition, legalisation migrants do not usually seek support from informal systems of social solidarity, but primarily derive social support from native citizens and organisations. In fact, they prefer to stay away from their own communities and consciously seek solidarity with native citizens.

Even if migrants have access to support within social solidarity systems, this does not mean that every individual is able to mobilise it to the same extent. By looking at some general level of solidarity or dominant support pattern for a group as a whole, one fails to see that migrants are assisted in some situations and not in others. In order to get support, irregular migrants have to contribute to these systems, and they must maintain a solid reputation. They need to be known as a trustworthy employee or tenant and as someone who will repay a loan. In other words, simply having a Turkish background does not guarantee access to social capital invested in social networks of the ‘Turkish community’. Whereas much migration research takes social capital in social networks for granted (Ryan et al. 2008), this study found that it requires an investment of time, effort and resources to effectively mobilise social capital (see Portes & Landolt 2000). Furthermore, my analysis reveals that migrants with different aspirations vary in their willingness to make such investments.

All in all, whereas many scholars explain outcomes by referring to ethnic communities, my findings indicate that this is problematic. Although patterns of incorporation and solidarity may sometimes appear to be
ethnic-community related, this study demonstrated that they are shaped by different mechanisms than dominant community support patterns. In other words, these 'ethnic community patterns of incorporation' are spurious relationships, shaped by other mechanisms pertaining to individual aspirations. This is obscured if the analysis is carried out at the level of the group.

10.2.3 Social mobility: Objective measures?

This book also presents insights relevant to studies of social mobility of irregular migrants, since my findings indicate that it is difficult to ‘objectively measure’ success amongst irregular migrants. Irregular migrants have different definitions of success, which means that it is problematic to take a standard metric, like a certain level of income or hours of work, as is sometimes done in research (see, e.g., Powers & Seltzer 1998; Tienda & Singer 1995). The current study, for example, indicates that legalisation migrants prefer to generate social support instead of income through employment and that settlement migrants prefer leisure time over work. Not taking irregular migrants' aspirations into consideration would lead us to prematurely label some of these migrants as 'helpless victims', while they themselves regard their life in the destination country a success.

Since the way irregular migrants define ‘success’ depends on their aspirations, we need different standards to measure ‘success’. I therefore reframed the question of social mobility into the question of how irregular migrants realise their aspirations. I demonstrated that irregular migrants with different aspirations require distinct forms or combinations of capital. The relevance of various forms of capital has been extensively debated (see, e.g., Chavez 1998; Cranford 2005; Engbersen 2001; Grzymala-Kazlowska 2005; Hagan 1998; Mahler 1995; Massey et al. 1994; Staring 2001). But it has remained unclear in which situations which form or combination of capital is decisive, because the discussion has tended to focus on the question of what form of capital is important for irregular migrants in general. Clearly, it is not instructive to debate the role of different forms of capital for irregular migrants in general. After all, the current study shows that the significance of various forms of capital depends on irregular migrants' aspirations. These aspirations should therefore be the starting point of any analysis dealing with their success.
10.2.4 Social incorporation

Little research has devoted explicit attention to the social incorporation of irregular migrants, that is, to their leisure activities and their social contacts beyond the scope of social capital. In other words, while much has been reported about the role of social networks in irregular migrants’ ability to ‘survive’, the social dimension of irregular migrants’ lives as a feature in itself has been neglected. Not hampered by a victim perspective, my research perceived irregular migrants as active agents who may do things in their free time and who create social networks of friends and acquaintances around them, and I found that they do this in different ways, depending on their aspirations.

The finding that irregular migrants with different types of aspirations live different types of social lives provides insight into the implicit debate on the social incorporation of irregular migrants. This debate, thus far, seems to be dichotomised around two positions. The first and dominant position portrays irregular migrants as living a ‘survival’ existence; that is, migrants stay inside their houses with locked doors and closed curtains and do not participate in recreational activities. They live their lives in ‘geographically restricted areas’, show ‘immobile behaviour’ and are ‘chained to their home’ (Engbersen 1999a: 236). Furthermore, this perspective believes irregular migrants to associate primarily with their own ethnic group, usually with other irregular migrants, as they are cut off from mainstream society and have few contacts with native citizens. Yet a few scholars hold another position. They argue that this ‘cocoon’ image is misleading. They emphasise that their respondents spent their leisure time involved in all kinds of recreational activities in the company of co-ethnics.

Chapter 7 shed light on how these different outcomes were shaped by using a research approach that takes aspirations as its central focus. Whereas the dominant viewpoint seems to reflect the social lives of investment migrants, the lives of my settlement migrants corresponded more to the images portrayed by scholars holding the second viewpoint. Furthermore, the social lives of legalisation migrants indicate that there is more diversity to be found than has been reported in the literature so far. Legalisation migrants who are involved in procedures, for example, spend most of their abundant leisure time in the company of native citizens and visiting organisations. Hence, not all irregular migrants live in a ‘parallel world’ without contact with native citizens, and not all spend their leisure time participating in recreational activities with co-ethnics.
The findings presented in this book indicate that irregular migrants spend their leisure time differently and have different social networks depending on their aspirations. The analysis further demonstrates that the lives of irregular migrants are not always solely about survival, but that there may be room for leisure and social contact as well. In fact, settlement migrants prioritise their social lives over additional work, even though extra work would allow them to ‘survive better’ according to the dominant perspective. This indicates that irregular migrants should be perceived as social beings who engage in meaningful social interaction with others. Moreover, their social lives affect their aspirations and hence the choices they make in other domains of life. For example, investment migrants may come to enjoy the company of their flatmates, and other friendships may evolve that make it harder for them to return to their country of origin. This may eventually foster settlement aspirations. Likewise, social gatherings may be primarily for fun and cultural display, but new social encounters at these gatherings may lead to job opportunities or social support. Thus, in order to understand the ways in which irregular migrants live in receiving societies, their social lives have to be taken into consideration as well (see also Van Meeteren 2012b, 2010).

10.2.5 Transnational perspective

So far little research has been devoted to the transnational engagements of irregular migrants. My findings therefore fill a gap in our understanding of the transnational activities that irregular migrants undertake. Furthermore, the results are relevant, because they run contrary to expectations about irregular migrants’ transnational engagements in the literature, which presumes that transnational activities are uncommon among immigrants because of the obstacles they face.

My findings indicate that many irregular migrants frequently engage in transnational activities, therefore contradicting these claims. In addition, my analysis revealed that irregular migrants’ transnational engagements should be understood from a position of choice rather than limitations. This casts doubt on the assumption underlying other research, that irregular migrants engage less in transnationalism when faced with exclusion. Again, a focus on aspirations yields vital insights. In the event that settlement migrants earn more, they do not necessarily remit more. Instead, they usually choose to spend their extra earnings on their own family in the destination country. In addition, an increase in income is more likely to prompt legalisation migrants to work less rather than to remit more. Only
investment migrants increase their economic transnational activities if they earn more.

This study’s findings concerning the transnational activities of irregular migrants fill an empirical knowledge gap, but they also have implications for our understanding of the way irregular migrants live in receiving societies. Transnational engagements affect aspirations, which in turn affect incorporation. In fact, some irregular migrants are incorporated in a specific way because of their transnational engagements. Investment migrants, for example, sacrifice many things for their transnational economic projects. Moreover, increasingly troubled relations with family and friends in the home country sometimes explain why irregular migrants stay on even though their lives do not seem good from the perspective of most host-country nationals. Furthermore, the inability to see relatives and loved ones sometimes prompts migrants to shift their aspirations from settlement to legalisation. Thus, transnational engagements affect aspirations, and aspirations in turn impact outcomes in terms of incorporation.

While researchers have scrutinised the relation between incorporation and transnational engagements, they have overlooked the fact that both are intertwined with aspirations. Recent studies have distinguished different types of transnational activity, but they still need to contextualise findings in relation to the agency of migrants, in order to properly understand why migrants do or do not engage in certain types of transnational activities. Future research on transnationalism can therefore benefit from taking aspirations into account. At the same time, research that studies the way irregular migrants live in Western societies should consider a transnational perspective. Such a perspective acknowledges the intertwined nature of aspirations and transnational engagements, and hence outcomes in other domains as well (see also Van Meeteren 2012a).

10.3 Moving forward

This book has theoretically and empirically demonstrated the downsides of the dominant survival perspective, as well the benefits that can be gained by adopting an approach that better combines structure and agency. In addition, our understanding of the ways in which irregular migrants live can be improved by shifting the level of analysis from communities to the level of aspirations. Future research could significantly benefit from taking aspirations into account.
As indicated in chapter 2, aspirations form a conceptual bridge between structure and agency, as aspirations are fed not only by needs and wants, but also by perceived possibilities and constraints. Taking irregular migrants’ aspirations into account therefore does not imply neglect of structural barriers. However, one can only determine which barriers and possibilities are relevant once the aspirations of irregular migrants are known. For example, one first needs to know if an individual migrant aspires to work, before going on to analyse his or her opportunity structure in a labour market. Likewise, it makes little sense to analyse the horticulture sector when determining the opportunity structure of settlement and legalisation migrants, as they prefer to work for native private households. In other words, analysing irregular migrants’ aspirations enables researchers to better grasp what structural barriers and opportunities are relevant to the migrants under study. Hence, instead of studying the effects of structural barriers on irregular migrants in general, future research should put such barriers into context by focusing on the interplay between opportunity structures and aspirations – and more generally on the processes that mediate between structure and agency.

Furthermore, by focusing on individual aspirations instead of communities, I do not imply that communities are irrelevant for our understanding of the way irregular migrants live. Communities appear to be particularly crucial in the lives of settlement migrants. However, irregular migrants actively choose the communities they want to belong to, and membership may require a good deal of investment and effort. Moreover, the communities that irregular migrants are part of are not always comprised of co-ethnics. In other words, while embeddedness in communities is relevant for us to understand how irregular migrants live, these are not necessarily ‘ethnic’ communities or in any other sense connected to the country of origin. The results presented in this book indicate that researchers cannot determine in advance which ‘communities’ are relevant for immigrants. Future research should take better note of the possibility that immigrant community boundaries may well be different from the way they first appear.

The current study offers a point of departure for future research to develop contextualised theory. The typology constructed here cannot be simply abstracted to a general level, as it is situated in specific local contexts. Since aspirations are fed by perceived opportunities and constraints, they are connected to a particular context. Research conducted in other countries would therefore probably yield different proportions for each category. The same would apply if this research had been done at another point in time, because immigration policies are undergoing continual change (Broeders 2009). However, whereas a different or changed policy context would
undoubtedly result in different distributions of irregular migrants over the three categories of aspirations, future research has to determine if and how different structural contexts are associated with different types of aspirations and mechanisms. Moreover, future research should analyse if and how the configurations of capital required for the attainment of aspirations play a role under different conditions. It is by analysing the mechanisms connected to aspirations in different countries or after policy changes that a focus on aspirations will be able to take research on irregular migrants a step further. My analysis provides a theoretical point of departure that allows research to move beyond specific empirical contexts to engage in comparative efforts in order to arrive at contextualised theory. By analysing how patterns of incorporation, transnational activities and required forms of capital are associated with aspirations in different contexts, this approach provides insight into the interplay between structure and agency.

This possibility of constructing contextualised theory is beneficial for the advancement of research on irregular migrants, even though it is currently assumed that this is hardly feasible. Düvell (2006b), for example, argues that results from the United States cannot be easily applied to the European context. He claims that the theoretical conclusions from US research are biased, because most research there is concentrated on Mexican immigrants, whose characteristics tend to be too specific to be simply projected onto migrants of other origins (see Weeks, Stoler & Jankowski 2011). Düvell (2006c) also argues that irregular migration to Europe is unique, and he therefore calls for a separation of European and US research. I would argue the contrary. An approach that takes aspirations as a starting point of analysis allows for comparative studies to be done. Such studies would allow us to contextualise the grounded theory that has been constructed here within divergent contexts.

Scholars could assess the theory developed in this book by testing hypotheses derived from it. At the same time, quantitative research efforts may be frustrated by the impossibility of drawing random samplings and because of the dynamic nature of aspirations. Studying the latter is a worthwhile subject in its own right, since aspirations are not a fixed trait but change over the course of a migratory career (see Massey 1986: 671). Future research could further scrutinise what causes aspirations to change. Such an investigation would allow for a more systematic understanding of the ways in which irregular migrants’ aspirations are intertwined with their incorporation, their transnational activities and the forms of capital required for them to attain their aspirations.