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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Measuring migration motives with open-ended survey data: Methodological and conceptual issues

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Abstract

Motives for migration are difficult to measure. Open-ended data collection can be an attractive option, but also comes with pitfalls. We use the "Motives for Migration" survey on internal migration in Sweden to identify some of these pitfalls. We identify five categories of methodological issues: how the respondents—and we—dealt with multiple motives for migration; who the motive pertained to (i.e., the respondents themselves or someone else in the household); whether the motive was related to a status or an event; which third-party person(s) the respondent meant to refer to; and which geographical unit the motive pertained to. We also identify two conceptual issues: (1) the distinction between reasons for moving and location choice and (2) the distinction between moving "from" and moving "to" somewhere. We present some suggestions that will be useful for future attempts to study the topic and possibly such other topics as motives for immigration, getting married, or leaving the parental home.

KEYWORDS
migration, motives, survey methods

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the literature on why people migrate (that is, make a relatively long-distance move to a new home), there has long been an interest in the motives, or reasons,[1] migrants report for their moves (e.g., Gillespie & Mulder, 2020; Lansing & Mueller, 1967; Niedomysl & Malmberg, 2009). Motives for migration are of interest to researchers for several reasons. First, migration motives can be considered a reflection of the diverse goals people may want to accomplish by migrating. De Jong and Fawcett (1981) identified seven categories of such goals. These categories of goals are related not only to economic well-being (wealth and status) but also to personal well-being in other domains (comfort, stimulation, and morality) and social relations (autonomy and affiliation).

Second, self-reported motives can be useful to assess whether common assumptions about migration are justified. Researchers have traditionally inferred individuals' migration motives based on other characteristics of the move. For example, local moves have typically been linked to neighbourhood satisfaction, housing consumption, and life course transitions (e.g., family formation and dissolution) while longer distance moves were thought to be motivated by employment and educational considerations (e.g., Böheim & Taylor, 2002; Boyle et al., 2008). However, several recent studies have shown that this picture is too simple. For example, Thomas et al. (2019) compared reasons for moving in three different countries and found that individuals cited family as an important reason regardless of migration distance.

Third, unlike some other life events (e.g., having a child or starting a relationship), migration is unlikely to happen without a conscious decision, thought, and planning (Kley & Mulder, 2010), save for those

circumstances where individuals are forced to relocate. Consequently, survey respondents are likely to be able to reflect on these considerations and provide a meaningful answer to questions about motivations.

Migration motives have been studied using a variety of different formats, but there still remains no consensus or standard for measuring them. This is not surprising, because migration motives are complex. Because migration entails a change of location, its motives always have to do with the match between an individual or household and a location. Motives can exist—and be expressed—at the individual or the household level. At the same time, in their evaluation of the location, internal migrants may refer to characteristics at different spatial scales, ranging from the dwelling to the neighbourhood to the region. Moreover, migrations have starting and end points, meaning that motives might be rooted in the origin (e.g., housing grievances), destination (e.g., to attend university), or both.

One solution to acknowledge the complexity of migration motives could be to measure them using open-ended questions. However, although using open-ended questions solves some problems, it introduces others. In this paper, we use our experience employing open-ended survey data on migration motives to reflect on the problems and opportunities associated with such data.

We have two broad objectives. First, we aim to identify some pitfalls of open-ended data collection for future researchers studying migration motives. As Krosnick and Presser (2010, p. 299) recognise, "the design of questions and questionnaires is an art as well as a science and some previous questions are likely to have been crafted by skillful artisans or those with many resources to develop and test items." From our experiences, we learned that it is no simple task for migration researchers to collect the information on migration motives that they seek. Although we provide no ready solution to this problem, we do present a few suggestions that we think will be useful for future attempts to measure migration motives.

In addition to potential issues with the question format, open-ended response coding is also susceptible to data processing errors. The scheme for assigning codes to specific responses can sometimes be ambiguous and/or inconsistent and therefore prone to error between, and even within, coders. Differences in seemingly arbitrary coding decisions can lead to significant error. Therefore, our second objective is to document coding decisions for future research on the topic that uses open-ended questions. To that end, we not only provide the decisions we made to address the pitfalls we discuss, but also provide the coding scheme (Appendix A).[2] As supporting information, we further provide a detailed memo with decisions and justifications that future researchers might encounter.

We use the "Motives for Migration" ("*Varför flyttade du*") survey from Sweden (Niedomysl, 2011; Niedomysl & Malmberg, 2009). Although our discussion centres on migration motives, many of the methodological issues we identify could easily apply more broadly to other social contexts. For example, they could apply to open-ended self-reports on reasons for leaving the parental home, reasons for getting a divorce, or reasons for marrying.

2 | MEASURING MIGRATION MOTIVES

"If you want to know why a person migrated, why not just ask them?" This is the intuitive logic behind open-ended survey methods that tap into individuals' self-reported migration motives and behaviour. Despite the popularity (and demonstrated utility) of this approach, there remain questions as to whether it is possible to accurately measure migrants' multidimensional and multifaceted motivations for migration.

Responses to open-ended survey questions are often very short—and the absence of context might create issues for subsequent coding. And there are clear differences when compared with the amount of information gleaned by interview methods. Some argue that open-ended survey responses—where the allotted space is usually restricted—cannot produce data rich enough to achieve the level of rigour required to understand complex social phenomena (LaDonna et al., 2018). Thus, regardless of the number of survey respondents, a few words or sentences might lack the context and conceptual detail to understand individuals' narratives. As such, very few profound qualitative results are produced using open-ended survey items. Indeed, the coding (and subsequent analyses) is often more quantitative than qualitative, focusing on counting the occurrences of certain words to build themes, rather than focusing on the robust, interpretive, and discursive insights garnered from qualitative methods, namely, semi-structured interviews.

Because of their efficiency and range, it is commonplace to gather valuable data using questionnaires, especially for studying the motivations that energise individuals' behaviour. Open-ended questions may help give voice to respondents and may in turn provide valuable information about their lived experiences. Further, with a larger response base, open-ended replies can be analysed in tandem with closed-ended survey responses, potentially focusing on key subgroups of interest for more intensive analysis. Thus, we promote the judicious use of open-ended questions to supplement insights from survey data and support new areas of inquiry.

3 | CLOSED-ENDED OR OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS?

When designing a survey question, among the first decisions a researcher must make is whether to make the item open-ended, allowing respondents to answer in their own words, or closed-ended, where respondents must choose the most appropriate response from a set of options. The use of open-ended—or free response—items is far less common than closed items in survey research. Still, open-ended questions add a richness to survey data that would be difficult or impossible to yield with closed-ended items.

Open-ended questions do not force potentially invalid responses. Respondents are not limited in their responses, and so they are able to explain, qualify, and clarify their answers. Often, data from open-ended responses have more nuance, depth, and substance than closed-ended responses. These questions are often more

straightforward to design when compared with the many types of closed-ended questions and scales, like matrices that tap into multi-dimensional concepts (Ruel et al., 2016).

However, a number of drawbacks to open-ended responses are responsible for the widespread use of closed-ended questions. Because open-ended questions take longer for respondents to answer, there are data quality implications (as well as, often, impacts on survey cost). Respondents also provide very different degrees of detail in their responses, especially when the questions are overly general. This is mainly because free-response questions require more response time, thought, and effort than forced-choice questions. Responses might also be unrelated to the question—for example, because the respondent did not understand the question—or contain extraneous detail. Moreover, the responses must be classified according to a coding frame, which is relatively costly and can be time consuming to design and implement (Krosnick & Presser, 2010). Another issue is missing data; respondents are more prone to skip or give nonsense answers to open-ended items (e.g., Denscombe, 2009), and this tendency can be related to important respondent characteristics, like age and education (Craig & McCann, 1978). Finally, the answers to open-ended questions need to be coded to allow statistical analyses of the data. In this coding, much of the nuance in the responses will inevitably be lost, and coding decisions could introduce measurement bias. For a less fine-grained version of the coding than we employed for the same data, Niedomysl and Malmberg (2009) demonstrated that inter-coder variability was not a major issue, but they did identify some issues with ambiguous responses that were open to differences in coders' interpretations.

Of course, differences in the quality of measurement might not be based on the type of question so much as the content that is being measured with closed versus open-ended items. Some items can be measured precisely regardless of open- or closed-ended format (e.g., age). Opinion-based items might be better measured with closed-ended questions because open-ended items might elicit vague responses (e.g., "how do you feel about the 45th president of the U.S.?"). By contrast, individuals' self-reported motives for their behaviour are notoriously difficult to access with closed-ended, forced-choice questions because the response is not always clear-cut and obvious.

4 | APPROACHES FOR ASSESSING INDIVIDUALS' REASONS FOR MIGRATION

To highlight the wide array of approaches for assessing individuals' reasons for moving (as well as the trade-offs between efficiency and detail), we provide a discussion of the major approaches to collecting information on migration motives. Additional details are provided in Table 1.

Most surveys rely on closed-ended questions with varying levels of detail in the response options. The U.S. Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS ASEC) has a very broad approach to measuring individuals' reasons for moving, where respondents must choose *only one* of 17 possible options. Similarly, in Japan, the National Survey on Migration asks about individuals' reasons for moving separately for each individual within the household. Respondents are provided with 18 possible reasons and are instructed to select only the main one—if the reason is not provided in the list, the respondent is directed to select option 19 ("other reasons"). Other datasets take a more flexible approach to handling multiple reasons for moving. For example, the U.S. Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) provides interviewers with nine response options and allows individuals to provide multiple reasons. Up to three reasons are subsequently collapsed into economic domains that are made available to researchers: purposive productive, closer to work, purposive consumptive, involuntary, ambiguous, and homeless. In Australia, the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA) also allows multiple responses. Those who reported moving in the last year are asked, "What were the *main* reasons for leaving that address?" with a list of 23 possible responses. Respondents are able to choose all the "main" motives that apply to their situation and identify any others in an open-ended format.

Another approach is to assess a broad set of reasons for moving and then ask respondents to hone in on more specific subclassifications. The United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS or *Understanding Society*) collects information based on the following closed-ended question: "Thinking about the reasons why you haven't lived continuously at this address since we last interviewed you, did you move from this address for …? " The respondents are then provided with six possible response options: Area, Education, Employment, Family, Housing, and Other. Once a given category is selected, the respondent is then prompted to select one or more specific reasons for moving (see Thomas et al., 2019, Appendix). The Housing Research Netherlands survey is specifically designed for estimating housing demand, and asks for respondents' "reason for moving to your current address." They are then provided with four options: (1) marriage/cohabitation, (2) divorce/end of relationship, (3) wanted to live independently, and (4) other reason. For those who report an "other"' reason, a second question lists eight additional reasons, among which is a second "other" option. For this second question, multiple answers are allowed. Respondents who give more than one answer get the question "Which of these was the most important reason?" Those who respond "other" a second time are asked an open-ended question: "What was this other reason?"

Other surveys have used yes/no questions asking whether particular reasons are applicable. For example, the American Housing Survey asks separate yes/no questions about whether the respondent moved for any of eleven different reasons. Because the nature of the survey is to collect information on housing conditions, supply, and demand, the options sometimes provide detail not found in other surveys (e.g., moving because of a natural disaster or fire) but lack specificity in others (e.g., "to be closer to family, including for health reasons, economic reasons, or for any other reasons"). Individuals who respond yes to item 11 ("Did you choose to move for *some other reason*?") are then prompted to provide the reason in open-ended format.

TABLE 1 Some major data sources for studying motives for residential mobility and internal migration

Data	Origin	Years	Universe	Type	Measures	Observation unit and migration designation
American Housing Survey (AHS)	United States	Annually 1973–1981; Biennially 1983–Present	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Panel Study of Housing Units	11 different options (yes/no) and the 11th option is "other" with the possibility of adding an open-ended response.	Becoming a new inhabitant of the sampled housing unit.
Attitudes and Expectations of the Labour Force toward Spatial Mobility	Spain	Cross-Section (2019)	Employed Adults (18–55)	Cross-Section	Open-ended. Reasons for *expected* migration among individuals considering a move.	Individuals considering a migration "out of town."
British Household Panel Study (BHPS)	United Kingdom	1991–2008	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Panel	Closed-ended. Nine possible reasons (each related to employment). A separate open-ended item asks the respondent to report any "other" reasons for moving.	Respondent moved into their dwelling within the previous year.
Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC)	United States	Annually since 1948 (with some missing years)	Civilian, Non-Institutionalized Population	Repeated Cross-Section	Closed-ended. Choose 1 of 17 possible options.	Household head changed addresses in the previous year.
Health and Retirement Study (HRS)	United States	Biennially (1992–Present)	Nationally Representative Sample of Older Adults (50+)	Panel	Open-ended interview question. The interviewer is then directed to report up to two reasons from a list of 41 possible options, with an open-ended possibility for "Other."	The month and year of moving into the current dwelling. Questions about motives are asked for those who moved within the previous 5 years.
Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)	Australia	Annually since 2001	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Panel	Choose the *main* reason from 23 items. It is possible to identify additional reasons with an open-ended option for "other."	Household head changed address since the previous interview date.
Housing Research Netherlands (WoON)	Netherlands	Triennially since 2006	Nationally Representative Sample of Adults Living in Private Households	Repeated Cross-Section with Option to Match to Register Data	Select from 4 main options, including "other," which then includes eight	Respondent moved into their dwelling within the past 2 years.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Data	Origin	Years	Universe	Type	Measures	Observation unit and migration designation
					subcategories (multiple reasons allowed).	
Motives for Migration (Varför Flyttade Du?)	Sweden	Cross-Section (2007)	Sample of Migrants (20+ km) in 2007	Cross-Section	Open-ended (primary reason, secondary reasons, and motives for moving to and from specific locations).	Sample consists only of migrants over 20 km in the prior year.
National Migration Survey (NMS)	Philippines	Cross-Section (Possible Panel) 2018	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Cross-Section	Open-ended. Collapsed into 15 categories. Also includes motives for *not* moving.	Any relocation within the country.
National Survey on Migration	Japan	1976, 1986, since then every 5 years	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Repeated Cross-Section	Closed-ended. Choose 1 of 18 possible options. "Other" is a 19th option.	All Individuals in the household identified their most recent relocation to the current residence.
Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)	United States	Annually 1968–1997; Biennially 1999–Present	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Panel	Choose multiple possible responses from nine options. Up to three are then collapsed into four broad (economic) reasons.	Household head moved since January 1 of the prior year
Person, Family, and Society (RANEPA)	Russia	Cross-Section (2013)	Nationally Representative Sample of Adults	Cross-Section	Closed-ended reasons. Choose 1 of 5 possible options for each reported move.	Respondent's five first moves (starting at age 15) from one locality unit to another for more than 6 months.
Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)	Germany	Annually since 1984	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Panel	Choose up to 3 of 19 possible reasons. The 20th option is "other" with an open-ended option.	The month and year of moving into the current dwelling.
Survey of Dynamics of Motivation and Migration	New Zealand	Cross-Section (2007)	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Cross-Section	Open-ended (moving to and moving from). Collapsed into seven broad categories. Also includes motives for *not* moving.	Individuals moved in the 2 years prior to the interview.
UK Housing Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) or	United Kingdom	Annually since 2009	Nationally Representative Sample of Households	Panel	Select multiple reasons from six broad categories. Hones in on more specific	Most recent move to current address.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Data	Origin	Years	Universe	Type	Measures	Observation unit and migration designation
Understanding Society					subcategories for each reason.	

Note: The information in this table provides only a broad overview of data and measures available in these datasets. For example, in multi-wave surveys, the relevant data and measures might be unavailable in some waves or measured differently at different times.

Although several of the surveys mentioned above adopted a hybrid closed-/open-ended approach, only a few surveys have taken a fully open-ended approach to probing individuals' reasons for moving. In New Zealand, the Survey of Dynamics of Motivation and Migration asked respondents who moved within the previous 2 years to provide a primary reason and any other reasons for moving (a) *from* the previous location and (b) *to* their current usual residence (see Nissen & Didham, 2008). Responses were grouped into specific categories, and the categories were subsequently collapsed into seven broader classifications made available to researchers: Economic, Education, Employment, Environment, Housing, Social, and Other.

To date, the Swedish "Motives for Migration" survey has provided the most elaborate open-ended treatment of migration motives. This postal survey, which had about 40 questions in total, contained four open-ended questions for respondents to report their reasons for moving. Two of these questions related to individuals' primary and secondary reasons for moving (Questions 1 and 2), and two others related to reasons for migrating from (Q15) and to (Q20) specific locations. The focus of this paper is on our experiences detailing the codes for Q1 for the more specific purpose of investigating migration for family reasons and coding Q2, Q15, and Q20 with the same degree of detail.

5 | THE DESIGN OF THE "MOTIVES FOR MIGRATION" SURVEY[3]

The data are based on a stratified sample of 10,000 migrants in 2007 from the population of 244,704 migrants who had moved at least 20 km within Sweden in the prior year, derived from the Swedish population register.[4] The sample was stratified by gender, age (four groups between 18 and 74 years old), and migration distance (four categories). After two reminders, 4909 migrants returned completed surveys. Individuals' responses to each item were translated from Swedish to English and then more than 60 codes were developed for analysis (see Appendix A).

There were four open-ended items in the survey, designed to capture individuals' migration motives. The first free-response question (Q1) asked: "What was the most important reason for your move?" A follow-up question (Q2) asked respondents "Were there also other important reasons for you moving?" Those who selected yes were asked, "which ones?" Later in the survey (Q15), respondents were asked, "Was there any particular reason you moved from the

place you used to live in?" Those who reported yes were asked "which ones?" A fourth and final follow-up question (Q20) asked, "Was there any particular reason you moved to this specific place/ region?" The coding for all four open-ended items totalled at 64 codes and just over 27,000 pieces of coded data. After the initial coding, all responses and codes were double-checked for accuracy and consistency.

The survey also contained a series of closed-ended Likert-type questions (Q6 a-l) which we do not discuss further. Individuals were asked, "How important were the following factors for your decision to move?" with the following categories: (a) Housing costs, (b) Housing surroundings/neighbourhood, (c) The dwelling, (d) Being close to relatives, (e) Being close to friends, (f) Culture/leisure supply, (g) Outdoor activities/nature, (h) Work, (i) Career opportunities, (j) Education, (k) Public transportation, and (l) Your/household economy. The response options ranged from (1) *Not Important* to (6) *Extremely Important*.

6 | METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

For the researcher, the goal in designing a survey item is to make sure respondents understand the question in the same way that the researcher does. In turn, codes for the responses must also be standardised so that there is reliability in the coding process. In practice, these goals can be difficult to achieve given the subtleties and ambiguities of language. This section details some of the methodological complications we encountered—all linked, in one way or another, to discrepancies between what migration researchers would want to learn about migration motives and the information respondents provide. We identified five categories of methodological issues: how the respondents—and we—dealt with multiple motives; who the motive pertained to (i.e., the respondents themselves or someone else in the household); whether the motive was related to a status or an event; which third-party person(s) the respondent meant to refer to; and which geographical unit the motive pertained to (e.g., dwelling, neighbourhood, or region).[5]

6.1 | Multiple responses and arbitrary ordering

An overwhelming majority of individuals (83.3%) in the sample reported multiple, non-duplicated reasons for moving across all four

open-ended items. When considering the first two questions only (i.e., primary and secondary reasons for moving, without location-based items), the percentage with multiple reasons dropped to 58.2%. These percentages differ from other recent reports. For example, only 12.5% of BHPS respondents reported multiple reasons for moving, leading the authors to conclude that secondary reasons "may not be as important as is commonly thought" (Coulter & Scott, 2015, p. 367). These differences are likely because of the very open nature of the Swedish survey, which probed for and allowed opportunities for respondents to include additional reasons for moving.

When prompted up to four times, additional details surfaced for some respondents but not others, leading to sometimes drastic differences in the level of detail provided. At one end of the spectrum, a respondent identified several primary reasons in Question 1: "It was too expensive, the cost of energy and heating up the accommodation. We had a smaller income because we became dependent on our healthcare allowance." Additional details were provided as secondary motives (Q2): "Both of us became and still are ill and no longer could manage the house with the lot belonging to it." Then, when asked about the reasons for moving *from* their previous location (Q15), the individual added: "We had no relatives left. The children have moved and no particularly good friends. No work. No supply of shops, no bank, bad public transit to bigger cities. Boring people." And, in response to the question about the reasons for moving *toward* their current location (Q20): "The children are living here. It's close to sports arrangements for the youngest child. It's close to health care. It's also close to the bank, post office, shops, dentist, hairdresser, collective activities, etc." At the other end of the spectrum, a respondent simply reported "job" for Question 1 without additional details or responses to any other open-ended item.

In addition to dramatic differences in the detail provided, about one in five respondents—including the detailed response above—provided several reasons in Question 1 despite a prompt to provide *the most important* reason for moving. The distinction between primary, secondary, and other reasons became fairly arbitrary for some cases. In particular, some simply reported "closer to work, family, and friends" or just listed a number of unrelated reasons (e.g., "friends, my hometown, football").

For coding, when the list of multiple responses for a single question seemed to be random, a "top of mind awareness" view was applied, based on the consumer behaviour notion that individuals list the most important thing on their mind first (see Axelrod, 1968). Accordingly, the first response was coded as the primary reason, subsequent responses were classified as secondary, and so on. However, whether or not the first mention actually counts as the most meaningful/primary reason or if the order matters at all are subject to debate (Venhorst & Gillespie, 2019). For instance, life events that precede the move were sometimes listed *after* subsequent issues. One example of this is: "the house was way too big and hard to manage after all the children moved out." Even though dissatisfaction with housing size preceded the children moving out, our interpretation of this answer

was that the motive for moving was instigated by an "empty nest" and so was coded as such.

6.2 | Reference person for the motive

Ideally, the researcher would like to know to whom a motive for moving is linked: the individuals themselves, their partners or children, or the whole household. This was not always clear, and reasons related to others than the individual were mentioned much less frequently than one would expect. One clear reflection of this happening is for employment-related moves among partnered individuals. Among partnered individuals, there should ostensibly be similar numbers of individuals reporting their own and their partner's work as the primary reason for moving. In fact, based on the characteristics of individuals who are most likely to participate in a postal survey (i.e., unemployed and homemakers), we might even expect *more* people to report their partner's work than their own as the reason for moving. However, the partnered individuals in this sample reported their own employment (72.9%) significantly more than half of the time. These results are restricted to instances where individuals reported that their own *or* their partner's employment was the reason for moving, not both.

The fact that individuals report their own employment reasons more often than their partner's employment reasons indicates that individuals might be more inclined to report reasons that applied to themselves rather than their partners. First, respondents reporting employment-related moves might refer to their partner's reason without mentioning the partner (e.g., "get closer to work" if it is for their partner's commute), resulting in ambiguities that the coding scheme cannot easily resolve. Second, respondents might use post hoc rationalisation or retrofit the reason to match their own situation after the move (e.g., "I eventually found a job") or refrain from reporting their partner's reasons as the motive for moving (e.g., "I hated the house" when their partner's retirement instigated the move).

In our case, the number of instances where more than one household member filled out the questionnaire was too small to allow for any meaningful comparison. Future research should examine the degree of disagreement between household members in the reasons they provide for migrating and its implications, especially in light of research showing that partners frequently disagree in their desire to move (Coulter et al., 2012).

6.3 | Status versus event migrations

We often did not get the level of detail researchers may wish for, including whether or not an individual migrated in response to some event or if the migration was associated with their status before or after the event. For example, "I moved to get away from my ex" could mean that the reason for moving was a breakup/divorce but it might also be that the individual had been

broken up for some time and wanted to move farther away from the person. Additionally, when respondents reported "work," we could not ascertain if the respondents moved closer to work or changed jobs.

6.4 | Third-party references

It was also difficult to determine to whom respondents referred when reporting motives related to people outside of the household, especially when the responses were vague. For example, moves out of the parental household were difficult to discern from those who moved to "live on their own" more generally. It was often difficult to distinguish whether the individual was leaving their parents or a roommate or cohabitation situation, especially when the response was brief and used uncertain terms (e.g., "To get a place of my own where I could be independent").

Another example of complications with third-party references were with types of coresidential arrangements. One general code was designed for moves made because of love, as many individuals simply wrote "love" as their reason. Usually, these responses did not specifically mention moves into cohabitation versus moving closer to their partner or even because their already-coresident partner instigated a tied move. Ambiguous terms for family and friends created additional coding difficulty. For example, closer to "loved ones," which could be family, friends, or both. Other reasons, such as getting "closer to my social network" were also difficult to identify precisely.

6.5 | Reporting level

In addition to linguistic ambiguities, individuals often provided responses that could be interpreted to apply across a number of different geographical units. Many individuals reported only vague descriptors, like "too small," "the size," "crowded," or "discomfort." These responses were difficult to code as it was impossible to determine if respondents were referring to their previous municipality, neighbourhood, or dwelling unit.

Return migration provides an especially nice example of reporting at different levels since the term "home" can take on a variety of meanings. Moving "home" could refer to moving back into a specific house (e.g., the parental home), back to one's hometown or region, or back to family residing elsewhere. Some respondents explicitly referred to the place/region in their description: "I wanted to move back to my hometown" or "I wanted to grow old in my birthplace." Others specifically identified social reasons for return migration: "Back to my home, i.e., friends, family, social reasons" and "I grew up here, love it here, and have my mother here. This is where I belong!" However, most individuals reported return migration that was difficult to pinpoint. For example, "I was homesick," "I wanted to move home," and "I was longing for home." Future researchers might consider probing

whether and how individuals' reasons for moving exist at different levels in order to avoid subsequent complications with coding and analysis.

7 | CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Next to the aforementioned methodological issues, we also identified issues related to situations when conceptual distinctions created problems with respondents' understanding of the question(s). Although these issues can also be considered methodological issues, we present them separately from those above because their origin is in conceptual distinctions that the researchers who designed the survey deemed important.

7.1 | Distinction between reason for moving and location choice

In addition to primary and secondary reasons for moving (Q1 and Q2), additional open-ended survey questions were designed to tap into individuals' reasons for moving from one place (Q15) to another place (Q20). However, the conceptual distinction between these different types of reasons created some complications for responses and coding. Many respondents did not understand the subtle nuances between the open-ended questions despite attempts to underscore the important terms within the question—and we learned of this by reading through the responses to the open-ended items. The misinterpretation was evidenced by the large number of individuals who reported "how many times can you ask the same question?" Over 200 individuals explicitly referred to another answer in their response to Question 15 (e.g., "See answer to question 1"), while others described confusion over what distinguished the different questions: "I've already answered this question. See 1 and 2!" "I see no difference between this and question 1." "I moved for studies, as I've already said. Has Statistics Sweden got a bad memory?" Several responses to question 20 reflected similar confusion and respondent burden: "My answer is the same as I wrote in Q15 except the other way around ..." and "How many times can you ask the same question before it gets ridiculous?"

In some cases, an introduction to the question might have helped to signal to the respondent exactly what was being asked in the hopes that they would provide a more valid response that differed from Q1 and/or Q2, if applicable. For example, a buffer for Q15: "People sometimes move in order to change something about their living arrangement ...?" However, such a lead-in could create a new problem where respondents answer questions about the past by using their present status as a benchmark against which to estimate their previous status (Sudman, Bradburn, & Schwarz, 1996). A prompt might elicit individuals to think *in hindsight* about moving from something that was not necessarily part of their initial motivation.

7.2 | Distinction between moving "from" and moving "to"

In addition to the conceptual distinction between moving and location choice, the distinction between Q15 and Q20 was not altogether clear to many respondents. Although it may be straightforward in some cases to delineate reasons for moving "from" a place and reasons for moving "to" another place, this is inherently a double-sided concept. Any reason for moving "to" a place is the inverse of a reason for moving "from" another place and vice versa (e.g., moving to be near friends is the "moving to" version of a "move from" a lack of friends). To the extent that respondents think about both sides of the push/pull motives in the case of their particular move, they may have difficulty answering these items distinctly.

In this case, individuals were far less inclined to report a reason for moving "from" some place rather than "to" some place. There are a number of potential causes for this difference in reporting frequency. First, it might be psychologically more appealing to report on development (i.e., moving forward and toward something) as part of a consistent and positive narrative. Studies of informant accuracy show that individuals distort responses in order to manage their own self-image when the accurate response is not the way the respondent wants to think about themselves (Fowler, 1996). Second, and relatedly, it might be easier to report moving toward something rather than away from something since, in some cases, the reason for moving away might be perceived as personal and/or sensitive (e.g., dislike family and leaving an abusive relationship). Third, retrospective questions are known to be subject to memory error (Auriat, 1991; Ruel et al., 2016). Respondents might be better at remembering motives related to the current than the previous residence.

It might simply be that individuals misunderstood the question—especially since there were four somewhat-related open-ended questions in the survey. In some cases, it was clear the respondents indeed meant to say they were moving away from someone or something. For example: "I also had problems with the neighbor above me. Namely, he was feeding the birds on his balcony which made it impossible for me to go out on mine because of bird shit." But in other cases, whether respondents really meant moving away was not clear at all. For example, if individuals simply wrote "friends" in their response to Q15, the implication (given the question) would be that they moved from this place *to get away from friends*. However, a likely explanation is that the individual misunderstood the item and reported a reason of moving *to* friends rather than away from them.

Some argue that motives grow and change over time (Coulter & Scott, 2015; Halfacree & Boyle, 1993). Thinking of it this way, retrospective reasons for migrating might not match the reason the respondent would have provided prior to moving. In other words, it might be easier to report on having moved toward something since the question was asked *after* the relocation took place. Respondents might be more inclined to report on moving

away from something (e.g., bad housing or a problem landlord) if asked prior to the move when the issue was still palpable. Nevertheless, it would be nearly impossible to test whether motives change before and after moving without a very large sample in order to capture a subsample of individuals planning to move in the very near future to compare their reports prior to and after moving. (Even this would probably suffer some type of testing error.)

Another problem with the location-based items was that moving *to* or moving *from* was not always explicit or even implied. In fact, many individuals identified reasons for moving to a new location as the rationale for moving from their old one (e.g., "I moved from the old place because I wanted to live in a bigger city"). As another example of this ambiguity, a move because an individual has no social network might be (a) an implied move toward friends or (b) a move away from loneliness (as discussed above, in this case it could really be either or both of these depending on how the respondent conceptualises the move motives).

The possible misinterpretations made coding the responses to Q15 and Q20 complicated and unreliable, at best, and impossible at worst. Furthermore, the responses for Q15 were often difficult to be "fit" into the codes designed for Questions 1 and 2. To code Q15 in a precise way, an entirely different system of codes would be needed than the system used for the other open-ended survey items. For example, if a person moved from a place because they thought it was "too small," some researchers may want to use a different code than "bigger housing" which was used for Q1 and Q2. For the purpose of our research, we did not need this precision and the actual code for the response "[*from somewhere*] too small" to Question 15 became "[*to*] bigger housing." In other words, in many cases, we used "pull" codes to classify "push" factors. This is not necessarily accurate since there was no way to determine that the person did indeed move to a larger dwelling, just as moving to a "nice area" does not imply that the previous area was not nice. Perhaps the question order (e.g., Q20 [to] → Q15 [from]) might have elicited more reliable responses. However, any configuration of questions would likely still lead to respondent fatigue.

8 | DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

While we have pinpointed some methodological and conceptual issues we encountered, it bears repeating that there are a great number of benefits to working with open-ended survey items. Free responses allow individuals to answer in detail to clarify their responses to complex questions. This makes them a particularly attractive option for unpacking complex topics, like individuals' motives for migrating. Closed-ended survey items that force only a single option about individuals' reasons for moving might be missing out on other important reasons for moving. Allowing an open-ended approach to primary, secondary, and location-based motives picked up on many more reasons, albeit not necessarily primary ones. One additional benefit of working with open-ended data is that it

provides flexibility to change or revise the coding scheme to accommodate fresh perspectives/ideas, different research topics, and new projects.

Even though we often use open-ended questions to increase the amount of detail that respondents provide, sometimes a more-focused, closed-ended approach might be warranted. For example, recent research indicates that the presence of siblings might be an important reason for migration to a particular destination (Mulder et al., 2020). However, in open-ended responses, individuals did not commonly report "siblings" as their reason for moving. The majority of respondents provided only very general references (e.g., just mentioning "family"). Thus, open-ended responses might not have the level of specificity required for a study of siblings. In other cases, very thorough and specific responses can get lost in excessive detail. Therefore, the guidance provided by closed-ended questions can be immensely helpful, especially when the researchers have a specific research agenda in mind.

Although the merits and difficulties of using open-ended questions have long been the subject of discussion among survey methodologists (e.g., Schuman & Presser, 1979), our earlier review of mobility items in international surveys demonstrates that the field has decidedly tended to favour closed-ended questions, at least in recent years. Given the manner in which the data are intended to be used and disseminated, it is not surprising that government-administered surveys in particular would favour the collection of the most cost-effective, speedy, and unambiguous data possible. Concerns about declining response rates and respondent burden (Ruel et al., 2016) do not add to the appeal of open-ended questionnaire items, which as we mentioned can be costly and time-consuming to collect as well as to classify and analyse.

It is unlikely that large-scale surveys will begin to favour open-ended items, but we would like to argue that carefully crafted open-ended items can provide either a useful starting point for learning about how to measure concepts that will later be captured in closed-ended questions (e.g., Schuman & Presser, 1979) or a rich supplement to well-designed closed-ended questions. Deciding which survey topics are worth exploring with costly open-ended items is a matter that must be evaluated case by case. Ideally, a cost–benefit analysis would take into account survey cost, coding difficulty, respondent burden, stakeholder needs, quality of open-ended responses, and likelihood of obtaining additional information from open-ended responses (that would likely be missed by a closed-ended approach). At the very least, researchers must consider the same two questions that apply to any data collection effort: (1) whether anyone really needs the data and (2) whether they can afford to collect the data.

To give a specific example of how this might look in a survey of migration motives, it would be useful for household panel studies like the PSID to ask other members of the household about their reasons for moving so that the responses can be corroborated. One approach for future research on the topic might be a hybrid drop-down menu and open-ended follow-up question about primary and secondary reasons for moving. This would help clarify vague responses with some added specificity and also highlight the differences between primary, secondary, and other reasons for moving. This configuration ensures reliable data collection about migration motives, but also opens the floor to detailed elaboration, or even novel issues, that the researcher finds interesting or important as well.

By the same token, interesting and unexplored themes can be uncovered with open-ended responses that could guide future research on the topic. For example, after moving to coreside with their partners, some recent migrants reported making an additional move into something mutually desirable. These respondents reported making a corrective move because their partner's accommodation "didn't feel like home." Additionally, more than 70 respondents included their pets as part of their reason for moving (e.g., "the dog needed more space"). Exploring these concepts with open-ended questions initially (perhaps as part of a content test or other experimental data collection) could lead to the addition of new response categories to existing closed-ended questionnaire items.

The most obvious option to analyse survey data that include open-ended information on motives is to use the coded version and perform statistical analyses. This has been the analytical strategy in previous research using these data (e.g., Gillespie et al., 2020; Niedomysl, 2011; Niedomysl & Amcoff, 2011). There may also be options to perform qualitative analyses of the original free-text responses. One could think of selecting a subsample of respondents with specific characteristics and exploring which motives they report. However, the methodological and conceptual issues we identified above could be just as problematic for qualitative as for statistical analyses, and possibly even more so.

Though many surveys have tended to favour a "safe" closed-ended approach to data collection, for a variety of understandable reasons, there is much information that is potentially missed by this approach. For example, we were able to disaggregate the different "social motives" in open-ended responses in order to compare the role of nonresident family versus friends in migration (Gillespie & Mulder, 2020). But it does not have to be an all-or-nothing decision. When the need for more detailed or complex information warrants it, the creative use of open-ended questions can be worth the potential challenges and can provide new insight that might otherwise be unattainable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Although there are some minor distinctions between the two, we use the terms *reason* and *motive* interchangeably in this paper to refer to respondents' answers to questions about why they moved.

[2] Because the codes were developed in the context of research on migration related to nonresident family, the codes for motives related to family are more detailed than those for other motives.

[3] The Swedish microdata are not publicly available. For information on accessing the survey and proprietary data, contact the corresponding author. Additional details about the survey design and data collection can be found in Niedomysl and Malmberg (2009).

[4] One issue we are unable to explore is the extent to which open-ended responses are met with recall bias; however, issues of recall for recent migration—a singular, major event—are not as big a problem as it would be in contexts that cover longer timespans or include multiple events and timeline sequencing (Schwarz, 2007).

[5] Of course, some issues we discuss might be linked to the survey administration method rather than the questions asked. Postal surveys cannot avail themselves to probing or clarifying that can be done with human interviewers. Postal survey respondents might also be more likely to skip open-ended questions or write very brief responses that are too vague to be meaningful.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

APPENDIX A: CODING SCHEME

Reasons for Moving
1. WORK RELATED
110 Work/Job
120 Commuting/Distance to Work
131 Better Work/Career Opportunities
132 Better Labor Market
141 Partner's Work/Job
142 Partner's Commuting/Distance to Work
151 Other Work-Related
160 Retired or Planning Retirement
161 Partner's Retirement
170 Unemployed/Lost Job
2. LIVING ENVIRONMENT
211 Boring/Uncomfortable/Change of Environment
212 Living Environment
213 Quality of Life
221 Bigger City/Place/Urban Environment
222 Better Services and/or Cultural Supply
223 More Central Location
231 Nature/Scenic/Water/Coast/Clean Air
232 Rural Environment/Countryside
233 Calm/Quieter Environment
234 Smaller Area/Fewer People/Less Traffic
241 Better Environment for Children/School
242 Safety/Criminality/Xenophobia
243 Climate
244 Other Environment Reasons
250 Return Migration (Place of Origin)
251 Return Migration ("Home")
3. HOUSING
311 Smaller Residence
312 "Easier" Dwelling (Less Work)
313 More Comfortable Housing
321 Larger Residence
322 To Detached Residence
331 Unaffordable/Expensive Housing
332 Cheaper Housing/Better Price

Reasons for Moving
333 "Evicted" or Contract Issues
334 Other Housing Economy
341 Neighbors
351 Moved (Closer) to 2nd Home
352 Better or Newer Accommodation
353 Left Home/Live Alone/Independence
354 Other Housing Related
360 Inherited Parental Home
370 General Financial/Economic
380 Children Left Home/"Empty Nest"
4. SOCIAL REASONS
411 Got Married/Started Cohabiting
412 Closer to or for Love
420 Separation/Divorce
431 Closer to Children/Grandchildren
432 Closer to Family/Kin
433 Close to Friends
441 Other Family Situations/Reasons
442 Other Social Reasons
450 Isolated/Lonely/Depressed
460 Became Widowed
470 Moved in with Parent
5. EDUCATION
510 Study/Education
520 Commuting/Distance to Education
530 Partner's Studies/Education
541 Other Education Related
550 Finished or Left School
6. OTHER REASONS
610 Aging-Related
611 Health or Disability (Self or Unspecified)
612 Health or Disability (Partner)
613 Health or Disability (Other)
690 All Other Reasons
Type of Move
1 Toward/Closer
2 Into Coresidence
3 Together with
4 Farther Away
5 Out of Coresidence
6 Unspecified
Family Members
Parents
1 Unspecified or Both Parents
2 Mother
3 Father
Children

(Continues)

Reasons for Moving
1 Unspecified or Multiple Children
2 Daughter(s)
3 Son(s)
Siblings
1 Unspecified or Multiple Siblings
2 Sister(s)
3 Brother(s)