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## **The missing link:**

### **Social network analysis in migration and transnationalism**

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## **Abstract**

The focus on social networks in migration studies marked a significant departure of understanding. Social networks are not only a mechanism through which the migration process is patterned, but they also have broader implications for migrants and non-migrants alike. Despite the fact that the network character of migration processes has long been recognized in migration studies, for a long time, Social Network Analysis has not been applied. Taking this scholarly omission as a starting point, we seek in this special issue to discuss recent research into social networks and migration that use SNA approaches.

*Keywords: Social network analysis, migration, transnationalism, personal networks*

## **Introduction**

International migration is a pressing concern in today's world. For 2015, the UNHCR reported that forced displacement due to conflict and persecution reached unprecedented levels, with an estimated number of 65.3 million displaced individuals (UNHCR, 2016). The hazardous itineraries of South-North migration, among others through the Arizona desert or crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and the often harsh conditions of refugee camps are experienced directly by millions of people, while for others they are frequent items on the evening news. Apart from forced migration, processes of globalization have led to growing numbers of people living permanently or temporarily in other countries for economic, social and other reasons, especially in urban environments, resulting in complex and "superdiverse" metropolises (Vertovec, 2007). Understanding the experiences, needs and resources of these large and heterogeneous populations is essential for the development of public policies. Furthermore, increased international migration and mobility also affect public opinion and social cohesion of destination countries. In a recent European survey (Eurobarometer 85, 2016), respondents ranked immigration higher than concerns like terrorism, the economic situation, unemployment, inflation, cli-

mate change, taxation or pensions. The saliency of immigration is reflected in the agenda of current and recent political campaigns in Western countries in general such as in national election campaigns.

Migration researchers have long recognized that migratory processes do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are embedded in social networks (e.g., Faist, 2000; Gold, 2001; Massey et al., 1993; Waldinger, 2004), and both migration and networks are embedded within wider international and national legislative, economic, political and social frameworks that structure the actions of individuals and the meanings they attach to them (e.g., Bilecen, 2014; Meyer et al., 1997; Pachucki and Breiger, 2010). Social networks are thought to play a role in initiating spatial mobility and in the choice of destinations for many migrants (e.g., Boyd, 1989; Castles and Miller, 2003; Fawcett, 1989; Jedlicka, 1978; Massey et al., 1987, 1993) as well as in processes of integration/assimilation in the new society of residence (e.g., Chelpi-den Hamer and Mazzucato, 2010; Lubbers et al., 2010; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Van Tubergen et al., 2004). By now it is also widely argued that international migration does not only alter the spatial, social, cultural, political, economic, emotional, and practical aspects of movers' lives, but also, through social networks, of the lives of stayers. In this latter respect, scholars have introduced the term "transnationalism" (e.g., Faist, 2000; Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Levitt, 2001; Vertovec, 2009), defined as 'the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders' (Basch et al., 1994: 7). Those cross-border structures are defined in relational terms and logic, although the main focus was not exclusively on networks, but also on other social forms including groups and organizations.

However, and despite the acknowledgement of the network character of migration and mobility processes, social network methodology has rarely been at the forefront of such studies until relatively recently. Instead, social networks

were often used either metaphorically or only describing dyadic relations (cf. Mitchell, 1969; Nelson, 2015; Krismann, 2005). For a long time, the absence of SNA in migration studies left relatively unexplored how these networks are composed and structured, how they evolve over time, which resources are exchanged through such networks, and how they are embedded in larger structures, so that links with migration processes and outcomes were often assumed rather than empirically investigated.

Taking this scholarly omission as a starting point, we seek in this special issue to discuss recent research into social networks and migration that use social network analytic approaches. In particular, all the contributions of this special issue explicitly map social networks and illustrate the role of networks in migration processes and outcomes. In so doing, the main goal of this special issue is to achieve a better understanding of migratory trajectories and outcomes by embedding them in relational structures. Social network analysis gives us the tools and vocabulary to exactly do this.

### **The current special issue**

The present collection of articles is set to inspire further research on migration and networks. The main premise of the articles in this special issue is that migrants are embedded in a variety of inter-personal relationships and subject to the rules and regulations of at least two different nation-states, therefore, their lives span across borders. The issue of the role of networks in migration processes is explored here both at the macro level, based on aggregate data of countries (Danchev and Porter, 2018; Windzio, 2018), and at the micro-level, based on individual accounts (all other articles). This special issue particularly offers the following contributions:

#### *Macro-level networks of regional and international variations of migration streams*

The articles by Danchev and Porter (2018), and Windzio (2018) use the datasets of the Global Bilateral Migration Database and the UN Migration Wallpaper, respectively, to investigate the mechanisms that trigger macro-level

international migration patterns. Danchev and Porter found that migration flows depend on a heterogeneous interplay of local and global tendencies. Windzio used temporal ERGMs to predict changes in migration flows over the last decades based on geographic, demographic, economic, cultural and historical characteristics of countries.

*The detailed account of the working of networks for migrants in transit*

The contribution of Wissink and Mazzucato (2018) draws upon a 17 month-long multi-sited ethnography and network methodology to illustrate the role of social networks for migrants in transit, a particularly understudied area. Through in-depth accounts, the authors argue that critical events such as death in the family or the increase in smugglers' fees during their journeys influence the formation and dissolution of personal ties.

*The composition and structure of migrants' personal networks after migration as indicators of assimilation and transnationalism*

Popielarz and Cserpes (2018) analyze migrants' and natives' core discussion networks and memberships in voluntary associations in the greater Chicago area. Rather than homogenizing immigrants as is often done, they recognize that the immigrant experience can be different as a function of citizenship, legal status, ethnicity/race, and their length of stay in the US. The authors show among others that migrants and non-migrants have quite similar discussion networks and memberships on various dimensions, but they differ in the ethnic composition of their networks.

Using a binational link-tracing design, Verdery et al. (2018) interconnect a large sample of ego-networks in two migration corridors to create a sociocentric transnational network. Using this innovative approach, they analyze communication flows between migrants and non-migrants located in Mexico and the US. Taking into account the time of residence of migrants, the authors find both tendencies of assimilation and transnationalism.

Vacca et al. (2018) propose network measures of structural assimilation and

structural transnationalism, namely the size of and cohesion within and among different alter classes in personal networks (based on alters' country of origin and residence). They use these measures to investigate relations between structural assimilation and transnationalism on the one hand and cultural and economic integration, on the other, for Moroccan and Senegambian immigrants in Spain, and Sri Lankan immigrants in Italy. Similar to the results of Verdery et al. (2018), the findings provide evidence for tendencies of assimilation, but they also show that sustained transnational ties are not harmful for integration.

*The reception of social support for migrants from their personal communities*

Bilecen and Cardona (2018) investigate the supportive relations of Turkish migrants living in Germany using a multilevel analysis design. They conceptualize transnationality as a personal characteristic of migrants, which together with mechanisms of brokerage and cohesion has an effect on the flows of different supportive resources. For instance, the authors show that while brokerage is important in information flows, high cohesion yields more advantages for migrants in the realm of care relations and in terms of financial returns.

Bojarczuk and Mühlau (2018) investigate personal support networks of migrant mothers from Poland living in Dublin. Drawing on a mixed-method approach, the authors argue that transnational ties are crucial for childcare, but when it comes to daily needs of childcare, weak local ties play an important complementary role.

Cachia and Maya-Jariego (2018) argue that specific mobility patterns influence the way migrants reconfigure their support networks. In a study of four communities of highly skilled migrants in Seville, Spain, the authors show that migrants who spent more time in the country of destination and who expect permanent residency, tend to receive social support primarily from natives and other local ties, persons who expect to return in a short term tend to turn to their transnational ties in their countries of origin, and recurrently mobile individuals have transnational networks with a larger geographical dispersion.

Kornienko et al. (2018) focused on the reciprocity of social support for immigrant women, arguing that resource scarcity, which is often experienced by migrants, may disrupt normatively expected reciprocal support. The study is also innovative as it focuses on migrant women in the Russian Federation. Although this country is second in the world in terms of the size of the migrant population, to our knowledge research has not investigated the role of social networks for immigrants in this country so far.

*The use of social capital for migrant entrepreneurs*

Sommer and Gamper (2018) investigated transnational entrepreneurial activities of self-employed migrants from the former Soviet Union living in Germany. The authors illustrate the diversity of entrepreneurial activities and how social networks sustain them. Their article does not only break with the binary view on activities of migrants in their countries of emigration and immigration, but it also illustrates the dynamic character of economic and social capital.

*The temporality in migrants' networks*

In the last article of this special issue, Ryan and D'Angelo (2018) use the concept of timescapes to address the role of time in the ego-centric and socio-centric networks of different migrant groups, also taking into account the wider macro-structures such as historical events and state policies.

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