



Relational constitution of social support in migrants' transnational personal communities



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Personal community
Social support
Ego-centred network
Multi-level regression analysis
Migration
Transnationalism

ABSTRACT

Migrants' personal communities are often composed of both local and transnational ties. So far little is known about how transnationality influences the provision of different dimensions of social support in migrants' personal communities. Structural and relational characteristics of personal communities as well as attributes of egos are seen to explain how social support is provided. The study addresses the question of which dimensions of support are transferred across national borders as well as what structural, relational and ego-attributive constituents of migrants' personal communities form social support. It presents data on personal communities from an online survey with $n = 234$ German migrants in Great Britain. The results show that household, local, national and transnational relationships provide a wide array of social support. Though being restricted in the tangible dimensions of social support (instrumental, social companionship), transnational ties provide more intangible (emotional) support. Conflicts are less prevalent in transnational relationships than within the household. Furthermore, the multi-level analysis of the ego-centred network data shows that both structural characteristics of personal communities (size, density) and ego attributes (e.g. age and gender of ego, time of residence in country of residence) are less relevant than relational characteristics (e.g. contact frequency, tie strength and esp. transnationality) in explaining how migrants receive social support. This result challenges a structural approach to the explanation of social support in personal communities of mobile people.

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1. Introduction: support beyond locality

Since the early 1990s, research into transnational phenomena has increased greatly and transnational approaches have contributed significantly to the understanding of current economic, social and political practices that transcend the boundaries of nation states (Vertovec, 2009). Transnational studies has introduced a perspective showing that there is a (rising) intensity and spread of circular movements of people, goods, information and symbols across national borders (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2008). Accordingly, studies show that migrants have both local, national and transnational relationships in their personal communities as they are in contact with people of their (current) place and country of residence while also staying in touch with relatives and friends in their country of origin and other countries. While research into migrants' personal communities shows, for example, the interrelationship between migrants' ethnic identifications (Lubbers et al., 2007) and constituents creating relationships to people living in the

host country (de Miguel Luken and Tranmer, 2010), little is known about transnational social support in migrants' personal communities (Ryan et al., 2008). This desideratum is mainly due to the fact that studies on social support were long based on traditional understandings of community, whereby social formations were examined in the context of kinship and neighbourhood relationships within a small geographical space. Less attention was paid to relationships between individuals living at great distances from one another, as the focus of observation lay on a sociality caused by synchronous co-location. Wellman criticized this unnecessary restriction as long ago as 1979: "They have thus assumed, a priori, that a significant portion of an urbanite's primary ties are organized by locality" (Wellman, 1979, p. 1203). Introducing a transnational perspective on personal communities makes a spatial restriction of social formations even more unreasonable, because transnational studies shows that communities of migrants and non-migrants are often characterized by cross-border relationships (e.g. Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Kearney and Nagengast, 1989; Mau, 2010). This transnational perspective on personal communities emerged jointly with conceptualizations of transnational migration, which no longer understands migration as a one-way movement induced by push and pull factors (e.g. economic hardships and comparative

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advantage in more “advanced” nation-states), where migrants go through a sequence of steps during their adaptation (Portes and Böröcz, 1989). Instead it sees migration as an ongoing movement between two or more locations in different nation states (Glick Schiller and Levitt, 2008; Gold, 2005; Pries, 2010). Subsequently, applying social network analysis to the study of social support in migrants’ personal communities helps to avoid unnecessary assumptions, because a social network perspective on migrants’ personal communities allows us to assume that social formations are not bound within geographical and national borders as neighbourhood entities, thus enabling the study of local, national and transnational social support (Herz and Olivier, 2012).

This paper undertakes a closer consideration of social support in migrants’ personal communities, with a focus on support from transnational relationships. The article investigates social support in the personal communities of German migrants in Great Britain from a transnational perspective using ego-centred network analysis. Two questions are central to this study. First, it asks whether there is dimensionality in transnational support relationships, meaning whether cross-border relationships are restricted to specific dimensions of support. Second, attention is given to micro-processes of social support, hence the relational and structural aspects of personal communities are studied as central constituents. The article is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces personal communities as infrastructures for different dimensions of social support and source of conflicts. Regarding the personal communities of migrants, there is a discussion on which dimensions of social support (tangible/intangible) are transferred in transnational relationships. In Section 3, the literature on the relational, structural and ego-attributional determinants of social support is reviewed. The paper follows a structural conceptualization of social support as a product of ties and networks. Sections 2 and 3 both present the research questions and pose hypotheses. In Section 4, there is an introduction to the sample of the study with $n=234$ German migrants in Great Britain. Because the current study is based on a web survey of ego-centred network data, which are less common in SNA so far, Section 5 discusses the data collection. Section 6, there follows a descriptive analysis, elaborating the transnationality of the respondents’ personal communities. Section 7 presents multilevel logistic regression models to assess the influence of the relational and structural characteristics of personal communities on three different dimensions of social support (instrumental, emotional and social companionship) and on social conflict. Section 7 summarizes the findings and directs the reader to future research.

2. Transnational social support in migrants’ personal communities

International migration has increased greatly over the last decades (e.g. Held et al., 1999; King, 2010). Migrant networks are often conceptualized in relation to migration patterns and migration channels (Koser, 1997), showing that relationships between migrants in the country of residence and non-migrants in the country of origin increase the likelihood of migration (Boyd, 1989; Palloni et al., 2001; Portes and Böröcz, 1989). In addition, these relationships are key units of the cross-border transfer of knowledge with expatriate communities (Meyer, 2001) in regard to ethno-national categorizations (Wimmer, 2004) or the importance of migrants’ personal communities for social support (e.g. Gold, 2005).

Personal communities are generally seen as the interpersonal environment of actors, being made up of the relationships an individual sustains, together with the relationships that exist between these others. They are especially important because of their integrative and protective functions (Allan, 2006; Chua et al., 2011).

For instance, social support coming from personal communities helps to prevent stress (House, 1987). Accordingly support is seen as “an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984, p. 13). Thereby social support can be divided into several dimensions: instrumental, emotional and social companionship. Instrumental support is defined as supplying material or tangible help through goods or services, and emotional support comprises giving advice and talking about personal problems, whereas social companionship means the sharing of social activities (House, 1988; van der Poel, 1993; Vaux, 1988). Especially close relationships are both a source of positive feelings and experiences as well as of social conflicts and disappointments (“paradox of close relationships”) (Antonucci et al., 1998; Rook and Pietromonaco, 1987). Though conceptually far less developed, personal communities also imply a constraint on dimensions such as conflicts or stress (La Gaipa, 1990; Lettner et al., 1996). Accordingly, Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) report and discuss possible negative effects of relationships with fellow migrants in the country of residence, associated with the pressure and control imposed by normative constraints by members of the community of origin.

Migrants’ personal communities serve different dimensions of social support not only for or during, but also after migration (Gold, 2005). For example, de Miguel Luken and Tranmer (2010) show for migrants of different backgrounds in Spain that material help is more likely to be exchanged with a Spanish support provider whereas accommodation and information support are much more likely to be exchanged with non-Spanish members of the personal community. “Finding a job” is equally associated with a Spanish or a non-Spanish alter. Especially when formal support systems are hard to access (e.g. institutions, programmes, services), migrants rely on support from their personal communities (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2004). Interest in the transnationality of migrants’ personal communities and social support has become particularly stronger in the last 10 years (e.g. Dahinden, 2005), though the importance of transnational relationships after migration is assessed differently. On the one hand it is assumed that migration represents a break in interaction with persons in the country of origin or the context of previous residence. For example, according to Sonn (2002), voluntary or involuntary migration “often entails the severing of community ties, the loss of social networks and familiar bonds – it can mean the loss of taken for granted sources and systems of meaning” (p. 205). Haug (2007) assumes that “origin-specific” social capital, in particular, is reduced by spatial mobility. On the other hand transnational studies shows that migrants’ personal communities are often characterized by cross-border relationships (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). While pointing to the cross-border practices and relationships of migrants and non-migrants, transnational studies shows that nation states cannot be conceptualized as geographically delimited national “containers” (Boccagni, 2012; Khagram and Levitt, 2008). For example Dahinden (2009) shows the importance of cross-border relationships in personal communities of migrants and non-migrants in the sample of residents of a small town in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Respondents report an average of 30% transnational ties. The study gives further insight into how personal communities can be described in terms of their transnationality and also the correspondence between relational patterns and transnational subjectivity (Dahinden, 2009). Thus, especially for migrants, it can be assumed that not only local or national but also transnational relationships generate various kinds of social support.

Which dimensions of social support are transferred via transnational relationships remains almost unknown. As transnational relationships often cover a wide geographical distance, cross-border relationships can be regarded as a special form of spatially

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