In transit: Changing social networks of sub-Saharan African migrants in Turkey and Greece

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ABSTRACT

Research on the role of social networks in human migration has mainly relied on single snapshots in time. This paper focuses on the changes in composition and usage of the transnational networks of migrants and why these changes occur. It is based on ethnography and network analysis with forty sub-Saharan African migrants in two transit contexts: Turkey and Greece, over a 17-month period. Findings show that relationship preferences, resources and communication infrastructures constitute an individual opportunity infrastructure affecting how critical events produce network changes. This process is ongoing through the continued experience of critical events, suggesting that the role of networks fluctuates over time.

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1. Introduction

Early 2009, one of us met with Senait, an Eritrean woman in her late twenties, while she was in between attempts to clandestinely cross from Turkey to Greece by boat. At that time she kept her family in Eritrea and Europe well informed about her journey. Over the following years we regularly met and kept in touch with Senait. When in 2012 we met in Athens, Senait had changed her communication patterns. She was no longer in touch with her family abroad. She would not respond to their phone calls and she had closed down her Facebook account in order to avoid contact. Yet a year later, while still in Athens, Senait's ties with her family and friends were restored, while her local network in Athens had been changing on a weekly basis. Essentially, over this five year period, Senait's social network underwent considerable changes. This paper explores why changes occur in the social networks of irregular migrants residing in transit migration hubs in Turkey and Greece. In particular, we analyse migrants' *transnational* social networks, that is, networks composed of relationships that are created and maintained beyond the borders of nation-states (see Editorial Introduction of this issue).

The literature on migrants' transnational social networks has highlighted the crucial role transnational social networks play in inciting and facilitating migration processes, yet the composition of these networks is often taken for granted (Ryan et al., 2008; Schapendonk, 2014) and, in part due to a lack of longitudinal data, hardly any attention is given to the fact that they change over time (Hollstein, 2003; Mazzucato, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2010). This study contributes to an emerging literature on the dynamics of network change by investigating why migrants' networks change.

Our study was situated in the transit migration hubs of Istanbul (Turkey) and Athens (Greece). In these cities, we followed 40 sub-Saharan African informants for a period of 17 months between early 2012 and late 2013, and some up to four years starting from early 2009. Transit migration hubs in Europe's border regions differ from origin-destination contexts in which migrants' networks are commonly studied, because of their highly volatile social and institutional environment (Düvell, 2012; Wissink et al., 2013). This volatility entails critical events that bring about rapid and radical changes to a migrant's social environment, or personal circumstances. Examples of such critical events are policy implementations regarding access to asylum, continuous and sudden arrivals and departures of other migrants, or getting caught at the border by migration police. Such critical events alter migrants' ability to manage their social networks and subsequently lead to network changes.

The association between critical events and network changes is central in social network analysis (SNA), which has only been scarcely and recently applied in a migration context (Bilecen, 2016; Lubbers et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2008). Most SNA studies aim to predict or explain specific network outcomes by assessing the characteristics of individuals, the network members, or the relationships among them. Little scholarship exists on why changes

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take place. This is crucial for understanding why, after experiencing a similar event, people's networks do not always develop in a similar way (Hollstein, 2003). Furthermore, unpacking the process of network change is essential for understanding how migration processes and networks interact. We study the process of network change by investigating the factors that affect the relationship between critical events and network changes (Hollstein, 2003).

2. Transit migration in Turkey and Greece

The study was situated in transit migration hubs in Turkey and Greece. Transit migration hubs are places frequently transited by substantial numbers of migrants on their way to a third country (Düvell, 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008). While in the literature common reference is made to 'transit migrants', we do not apply the concept of transit to individuals because a state of being in transit can only be identified after someone has migrated elsewhere, and migration intentions fluctuate. The classification of an individual as a 'transit migrant' could therefore incorrectly presume that he or she will migrate elsewhere or intends to do so.

The concept of transit migration remains helpful to understand a context of temporal migration in which individuals shape their migration processes, but not to determine the direction and outcome of these processes (Wissink et al., 2013). A context of temporal migration entails that the presence of people can change on a daily basis; migration brokers offer their services; and policies are in place to manage onward migration. The social and institutional environment in transit contexts is therefore rather volatile, which, as we will argue, helps to understand why migrants' social networks change. A transit context is therefore a very suitable context to study network changes.

Transit migration in Turkey and Greece is often irregular in nature, which entails that parts of the migration process (e.g. entry, residence, employment and departure) are clandestine (Jordan and Düvell, 2002). In Turkey and Greece, options for sub-Saharan African migrants to obtain and sustain travel and residence documents are scarce. Turkey's application of a geographical limitation towards the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, means that non-European asylum seekers cannot qualify for a refugee status and a permanent residence permit. Recognised refugees need to be resettled to a third country, and legally remain asylum-seekers until then (Içduygu and Yükseker, 2012). In practice, only few refugees are resettled. Asylum-seekers are appointed to reside in a 'satellite city', usually a rural town. Because asylum-seekers are not allowed to work and are usually themselves responsible for arranging accommodation in the satellite cities, many leave their satellite cities and reside in Istanbul where some find work in the informal economy.

Access to asylum in Greece is problematic: while hundreds of people line up weekly, the Immigration Office in Athens only takes 20 applications per week in consideration (UNHCR, 2012). There are no asylum seeker centres in Greece, and most asylum-seekers reside in the bigger cities of Athens or Thessaloniki. Positive decisions over cases are almost non-existent, and a second review in case of an appeal, is virtually impossible (Human Rights Watch, 2008). In both countries, NGOs have reported severe violations of migrants' rights, in particular related to indefinite periods of detention, restricted access to asylum, push-backs, and violence by state officials (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Amnesty International, 2009; ProAsyl, 2012). Notably in Greece, institutionalised and widespread xenophobic sentiments across the country further contribute to precarious circumstances for non-European migrants in the country (Wissink and Ulusoy, 2016).

In a context of dysfunctional asylum systems, restrictive EU-supported border regimes, the rules of the game pertaining to asylum and migration rapidly change. The volatile social and institutional environments that characterise these two countries is manifested in migrants' daily lives through events such as constant arrivals and departures of people, arrests, displacements, resettlement, and decisions on the refugee status determination procedure.

While studies have shown that in precarious contexts where state and civil society support is weak, migrants often depend on social networks for their daily survival (Broeders and Engbersen, 2007; Chelpi-den Hamer and Mazzucato, 2010; Engbersen et al., 2006; Koser Akcapar, 2010; Suter, 2012), we expect that these events can be critical for the management of and change in local and transnational social networks.

3. A dynamic perspective on migrants' social networks

It is widely recognised that migrants' social networks play a crucial role in inciting and facilitating migration processes through the circulation of support. Networks inform migration plans and foreseen destinations (Faist, 1997; Fawcett, 1989; Massey, 1987), reduce the risks and costs of migration (Faist, 1997; Pries, 2004), enable the crossing of borders (Böcker, 1994), and assist with finding employment and accommodation (Boyd, 1989). In particular for migrants for whom legal channels to migrate are inaccessible, social networks have been crucial to assist them with their migration strategies (Broeders and Engbersen, 2007; Collyer, 2007; Devillanova, 2008; Koser Akcapar, 2010; Suter, 2012; Van Wijk, 2010).

Yet not always do networks explain migration processes or facilitate migration. For example, networks cannot explain migration when people migrate to countries where they did not have a network, or vice versa, when they do not migrate despite the presence of networks (Collyer, 2005; De Haas, 2010; Kalir, 2005). Furthermore, migration policies can hamper the role of networks, for example due to border controls and restrictive family reunification policies (Broeders and Engbersen, 2007). Likewise, social networks can impede instead of facilitate migration, for example when migrants do not assist newcomers due to job market competition (De Haas, 2010).

Both when networks are seen as explaining and facilitating migration as well as when they are not, there is a tendency to view networks as static and independent factors (Somerville, 2011). More recently, studies have argued that networks are both shaping and shaped by migration, suggesting that the relation between the two is interdependent (Krissman, 2005; Pathirage and Collyer, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Schapendonk, 2014). This implies that migrants' networks change as the migration process evolves. Thus in order to understand the relation between networks and migration it is essential to analyse the inherently changeable nature of networks (Lubbers et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2008; Schapendonk, 2014).

Thus far, the changeable nature of social networks has mainly been demonstrated by cross-sectionally comparing the networks of migrants in different migration phases, such as emigration, transit, immigration, settlement, integration and return (Chelpi-den Hamer and Mazzucato, 2010; Haug, 2008; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Massey, 1987; Muanamoha et al., 2010; Van Meeteren et al., 2009). These studies show that relationships are formed in accordance with opportunities and needs associated with the particular phase of the migration process. While these studies suggest that networks change over time, their results cannot be disaggregated at the level of individual migrants to explain why their networks change over time. This would presume that migration processes of individuals, and hence the evolving of their networks, follow a predictable, step-wise development along defined migration phases. Research has shown that this is not the case: migration is often non-linear, particularly in the context of irregular migration in transit contexts (Wissink et al., 2013; Schapendonk, 2014).