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Mobility types, transnational ties and personal networks in four highly skilled immigrant communities in Seville (Spain)

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explore how different mobility patterns influence the composition and structure of the transnational social support networks and how personal networks allow us to elicit insightful data of mobile individuals. Ninety-five mobile individuals were selected from four distinct communities based in Seville (Spain), namely: Erasmus students, Flamenco artists, musicians from the symphonic orchestra and partners of European Commission researchers. Data were collected through an electronic survey sent by email with multiple name generators and a structured face-to-face interview utilizing a network visualization tool, VennMaker. Two distinct methods, namely qualitative case studies and cluster analysis were used to characterize mobility types. Findings reveal a heterogeneous foreign population, in which different forms of mobility are reflected in the personal networks of mobile individuals. Respondents who were settled in the city were more likely to have networks in which social support was mainly derived by hosts and people in the host location and with whom they communicated predominantly through face-to-face communication. Those who were in the host location for a study exchange, knowing that return to the county of origin is imminent were more likely to have networks linked to the home location. They relied heavily on strong transnational ties in the home country using social media to sustain their relationship. Respondents with an itinerant mobility profile, also had networks dominated by strong transnational ties, however, such ties had a higher degree of geographical spread due to previous international mobility. Participants who had a high number of hosts in the network but low connection between the ties were more likely to be linked to a specific subculture in the host society. The integration in the host location follows a different pattern to other settled individuals, mainly because their connection in the city tends to be community specific.

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1. Introduction

Marie, a French student arrived in Seville in September 2011 as an Erasmus student. Iko moved from Japan to Seville, five years earlier to study flamenco dancing. That same year, Sofia, an Italian artist moved to Seville with her husband, after he obtained a research grant to work for a European Commission (EC) research institution. Sofia, a lover of classical music knew Boris: a Bulgarian violinist of the symphonic orchestra in Seville. Boris moved to Seville to work for the orchestra 20 years ago. The four share the same city. Their move to Seville was intentional. All are highly skilled and educated, but they differ in their mobility patterns.

Mobility, in essence, is moving from one residence to another. However, there is a wide variety of types of mobility depending on the distance, tempos and rhythms, as well as differences in the degree of stability and the expectations of permanence (Collins, 2011; Griffith et al., 2013; Robertson, 2014; Sheller and Urry, 2006). Initially, three core types have been distinguished for international migration, namely temporary labor migrants, settler-migrants and refugees (King, 2012). However, the past decades have seen a proliferation of new types of approaches that acknowledge ‘transnationality and temporariness of diverse kinds of migrants’ (Robertson, 2014, p. 3; cf.; King, 2012). Among these other forms are round trips (such as short stays for work or study), or new modalities of international work in continuous mobility (from international commuters to frequent extended business trips; Mayrhofer et al., 2008).

The degree of mobility, whether a migrant is seemingly settled in the new country or engaged in continuous transnational circulation has a significant influence on the transnational space developed

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(Dahinden, 2010), which can have consequences for the provision of social support and for individual well-being. Past research has had difficulties to capture the concept of transnational space empirically, but personal network analysis has been suggested recently as particularly appropriate to describe the transnational space that people develop individually (Maya Jariego, 2004; Molina et al., 2014b), as well as the provision of social support.

This paper examines how different types of mobility in different community settings are reflected in the composition and structure of the support network. Specifically, we expected that depending on the type of mobility, respondents differ in the way they reconfigure their personal networks to stay connected with close ties that are far away, fabricate a network of local ties and combine local and distant ties in a personal network on which they rely for different kinds of support.

For this aim, we selected four groups of immigrants within a highly qualified and skilled population in a single place of residence that allow us to distinguish between temporary stays with short-term return (Erasmus students); continuous displacements, in itinerancy (partners of workers of the European Community); recurring temporary stays (Japanese flamenco dancers); and permanent settlement on arrival (musicians of the symphonic orchestra). Ninety-five foreigners residing in Seville (Spain) were recruited and interviewed from the above-mentioned communities. Utilizing the *community* as a framework of analysis allowed us to extract four types of possible mobility patterns amongst a specific type of population. We compared the composition and structure of their support networks and illustrated the differences with case studies.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we explore how changes in migration have prompted the need for a transnational perspective, especially in the context of understanding the social support network for mobile individuals. Second, we present the data, instruments and methods utilized for this research. Third, we present a descriptive analysis of the relation between transnational social support networks and mobility patterns for all 95 cases, followed by a presentation of four case studies to visually illustrate some major differences between the composition and structure of personal networks. Fourth, we utilize a cluster analysis to examine typologies based on indicators of network composition and structure. The article ends with a discussion on the findings.

1.1. Transnational personal networks

Mobility has provoked a wide array of debates and research on the transnational dimensions of migrants' experiences (Vertovec, 2003). Unlike previous generations of migrants, migrants now stay in touch on an everyday basis with the people they leave behind (Diminescu, 2008), and although mobility may initially disrupt the social support network, it seems that more and more mobile individuals use different tools through which they sustain social ties on a distance (Axhausen and Frei, 2008; Boase et al., 2006; Castells, 2000; Urry, 2007; Wellman, 1996).

Western individuals routinely form social connections and communicate with people and institutions who are far away, continuously participating in ephemeral configurations of togetherness in different spaces. Meaningful social relations are increasingly widespread across the globe and no longer ever entirely linked to the location. In the early days of social media expansion, Albrow (1997) already found in his study in an inner London borough that respondents hardly knew their neighbors, because their paths rarely crossed, but they kept daily contact with people across the globe.

As more people live geographically apart, those who are close *emotionally* are possibly *geographically* far away. In order to identify transnational formations in a specific place, geographical informa-

tion about the ties' location is crucial (Featherstone et al., 2007). Personal networks are ideal because they can measure the different geographical locations where an individual's social ties reside and also where the movement of the individual takes place. Viry (2012) found that the further away people live from where they lived when they were 14 years old, the more geographically dispersed their networks were and the farther their social ties tended to live from one another. The ease of maintaining multiple social relations across time and space through different interactive media have some implications on how strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) are managed. The ways we make absent individuals present are varied and complex (Licoppe, 2004), as different strategies and resources are used to maintain strong ties over long distances (Larsen et al., 2006a,b; Urry, 2007; Wellman, 2001). Although far away emotional ties can be kept close through technology-mediated communication, distance still matters (Axhausen and Frei, 2008; Licoppe, 2004). People travel very often, spending considerable amount of money and time on the road to meet physically with their family and friends. Transnational ties are sustained and enforced through mobility, where 'roots and routes' (Clifford, 1994) are present in different transnational formations (Dahinden, 2010). This need to travel, given the wide array of opportunities of new communications technology for *virtual proximity*, is based on the idea that a tie remains active through co-presence (Larsen et al., 2006a,b) and "meetingness"¹ (Urry, 2003).

The recognition by migration research that migrants are "multiply situated, with relations stretched across space" (Geddie, 2013, p. 198) has prompted the need for a transnational perspective on migration. A broader understanding of migration, which also takes into account ongoing movement between different locations and with different duration, allows us to see migration as complex process with different spatial-temporal dimensions (Malmberg, 1997). Static or sedentary structures, which have traditionally defined western society, such as a life-long residence and stable employment are now replaced by a new defining characteristic, mobility (Urry, 2000, 2007). This has led to a diversification and intensification of migration, especially within the European borders. In general, research covers three major types of migration, namely: temporary labor migrants, settler-migrants and refugees (King, 2012), however, over the past decades a proliferation of new types of approaches acknowledging the diversity of migration can be observed (King, 2012; Robertson, 2014).

Although there is a rapidly increasing body of literature addressing different areas of intentional migration, namely: mobility of knowledge workers (Beaverstock, 1994), international student mobility (Bilecen, 2014; King et al., 2010), temporary and circular migration (Parreñas, 2010), it focuses more on the dynamics of acculturation, the migratory project and the influence of political and cultural factors and less on comparisons between various forms of geographical mobility (Maya Jariego and Armitage, 2007).² One of the few exceptions is a comparative study by Kyle (2000) of four Ecuadorian migration communities. In this study, Kyle explores how ethnic identity shapes divergent patterns of transnational migration to New York and Europe. Using everyday networks of social and ethnic relationships, Kyle found that despite similar socio-demographic characteristics, the respondents had geographic diverse experiences. Another study that distinguishes between different patterns of mobility among migrant groups is the

¹ This neologism was introduced by Urry (2003) in the studies of global mobility: This term represents the persistent need to meet face-to-face, even when much of the activities of social life are more and more networked and at-a-distance.

² In fact, if we look at geographical mobility, international migration can be understood as a form of ecological transition that is at least partly comparable to move house, change the city of residence, or even commuting between different cities.

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