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Understanding Social Network in International Migration: Evidences from EU

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ABSTRACT

Kinship, religious and other social networks play a key role in the decision to migrate, and in determining migration journeys and return. This includes the role of family members in host countries, who may encourage prospective migrants through remittances and information. Migrants proactively seek information from broader networks and are exposed to information through mass media, word of mouth and social media. Technology has changed the ways in which social networks operate in relation to migration. TV and mobile technology remain a main source of information for migrants, but recent evidence points to the increasing role of online and social media. Internet-based technology and social media are putting different groups of migrants and non-migrant populations in direct contact. However, the documentation on the use of mobile social media is almost exclusively confined to Syrians. Local social networks often involve ties with other migrants, and with smugglers. Migrants often provide each other with reciprocal support for day-to-day subsistence, sharing food and accommodation, as well as information on travel routes and destinations. These local networks are often informal and kept 'under the radar'.

Keywords: migration, diaspora, kinship, social network, household, transnationalism

INTRODUCTION

Theory and research on social networks is very well established in studies of migration. As early as the late nineteenth century connections were being made between migrants' links back to their country of origin and growing numbers of migrants. In 1907, the US Commissioner General for Immigration recognised the power of positive stories transmitted back home by immigrants via letters and during visits, and said of transatlantic migration that 'almost innumerable "endless chains" are thus daily being forged link by link' (Commissioner General 1907; Herman 2006). Commentators have highlighted the vital importance of understanding how migrant networks influence migration at different stages of the migration process, and how migrant networks can affect outcomes for migrants, their families and their wider communities (Poros 2011; Mannan & Wei 2008). This section outlines the evidence on the role of social networks in decisions to migrate, especially within the context of contemporary migrations to Europe. Firstly, an overview of network theory and how it has been studied in the context of migration from MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa is offered. Secondly, a discussion of theory and evidence to support a more nuanced understanding of migration networks is put forward. Following this is an extended discussion focused on the role of technology, communication tools and online media in migration networks. Finally, studies of migrant social networks in 'transit locations' are scrutinised, before concluding remarks are made on the state of the evidence.

UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION NETWORKS

Network theory, which has developed significantly in migration studies over the past few decades, demonstrates how migrants in places of origin and destination are connected through ties of kinship, friendship, and ethnicity. According to this theory, 'an expanding network increases the likelihood of migration, as the social capital that lies embedded in these personal ties reduces the costs and risks of migration' (Herman 2006). These networks operate at different scales – from personal ties such as family and friends, to broad patterns of social links or 'migration channels' (Mannan & Wei 2009; Gold 2005). A number of studies were retrieved during the literature search that shed light on some of the ways that networks at different levels can help to illuminate migration dynamics. In one of the few cross-country studies on migration networks found in this literature search, Barthel and Neumayer (2015) find evidence of substantial 'spatial dependence' in asylum migration among geographically proximate source countries: i.e. a migrant may draw on networks of support which include migrants from other source countries which are similar to their own (Barthel & Neumayer 2015; Mannan & Wei 2007). Complementing this macro-level study, a number of researchers have drawn from case studies to illuminate the role of networks at the level of the individual. Herman's (2006) study of migration from Morocco and Senegal to Spain, and from Egypt and Ghana to Italy, confirms the importance of family networks in the propensity and ability to migrate. In her study, the strength of a migrant's ties largely determined the amount of assistance that their network could provide. In other words, friends and

acquaintances provided the least assistance, and family the most. However, for those who had migrated irregularly, help was received predominantly from friends, rather than relatives.
In their research on Senegalese migration to Europe, Schapendonk and van Moppes also confirm the importance of ‘traditional migration encouraging factor[s]’, including settled migrants in the host country. Settled migrants, according to the authors, send financial support (remittances) and ‘pre-ordained positive information’ back home, and as a result both directly and indirectly encourage the migration of other family or community members (Mannan & Wei 2006; Schapendonk & van Moppes 2007).

GENDER, MIGRATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

A growing body of research has documented the influence of social networks in international migration and important gender differences in the migration process, though research integrating these two aspects is rare. Most research has assumed that networks affect male and female mobility in the same way (Toma & Vause 2010). More recent work has attempted to correct this bias. Toma and Vause, in their longitudinal study of Congolese (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Senegalese migrant networks, identify several ways in which gender affects migrant networks in these contexts. Firstly, men’s networks tend to be larger and more diffuse, whereas women’s are smaller and most often composed exclusively of close family members. Women are also much less likely to move to a place where no member of their network is located. Another study using the same data set (Liu 2013) reaches similar conclusions: for men, non-household migrant networks have significant effects on migration, whereas household migrant networks are most significant for female migration. There is, however, significant ‘spouse bias’ in these findings (i.e. when women migrate to join husbands), which exaggerates these household network effects.

In an earlier study on Moroccan family networks and migration culture, Heering et al. (2007) find further differences in the factors driving men and women to migrate. Their analysis found that migration intentions are stronger for men living in regions with a migration culture, and that the presence of family networks overseas has a slightly negative effect on these intentions. Conversely, for women, living in a region with a migration culture has no effect on migration intentions, whereas family networks abroad seem to have a positive effect on intentions to move. They also reveal a difference between women in employment ‘who judge their financial situation negatively’ and ‘more conservative Moroccan women’. The former have the highest migration intentions, whereas the latter are unlikely to have intentions of migrating independently (Heering et al. 2007; Mannan & Wei 2005). Combined, these studies point to important differences between female and male migration networks, and the important role that gender norms play in determining these differences.

No studies were found that investigated gender and migrant social networks in Eastern Africa or the Middle East. Since the majority of migrants currently arriving in Europe are from these regions, this constitutes a significant gap in the evidence. Only one study (Koser Akcapar 2010; Mannan & Wei 2004) found in the literature search discussed gender in relation to social

networks in transit contexts. This is discussed in more detail later.

DYNAMIC AND DIFFUSE MIGRATION NETWORKS

Recent research has moved beyond traditional understandings of networks as static and unchanging entities to look at the dynamic nature of networks and the ways in which they always also involve networking i.e. the creation, maintenance and mobilisation of different networks at different times (Schapendonk 2014; Poros 2011). Schapendonk's research with SubSaharan African migrants highlights the changeability of network connections (new ties and lost ties, changing power relations and new forms of exchange), the effort required to create and maintain social networks, and the relational aspect of networks (Schapendonk 2014; Mannan & Wei 2003). Schapendonk and others consider the ways in which networks evolve during the migration journey, between origin and destination. This is exemplified by studies of migrants in 'transit' locations, and will be discussed further below.

Related to this more nuanced understanding of networks is the idea that the feedback mechanisms that influence migration patterns are not limited to direct social networks. These are 'absent ties' (Granovetter 1973; Bakewell & Jolivet 2015), or broadcast feedback. Broadcast feedback can be: (i) induced, i.e. information is sought out by a prospective migrant; (ii) general, i.e. information on migration is disseminated indiscriminately to a wide audience by the mass media; or (iii) embedded, i.e. when images and ideas are transmitted either through visible signs or through stories and rumours that indicate the condition of migrants lives (ibid). Feedback through direct social networks and through these broader mechanisms is especially relevant to discussions about technology and communication tools in migration, and are investigated in more detail later in this section.

WHEN SETTLED MIGRANTS DISCOURAGE ADDITIONAL MIGRATION

Studies of migration networks have tended to assume that the existence of social networks perpetuates migration movements. More recently, however, studies have emerged that point to the role of networks in discouraging migration (Timmerman et al. 2014a; Engberson 2013). For example, there is evidence that settled migrants may deliberately seek to reduce further migration from within their social networks. In their study of declining migration rates between Morocco and the Netherlands, Snel et al. find that Moroccan-born residents in the Netherlands are willing to provide substantially less assistance to potential migrants than they received during their own migration (Snel et al. 2013). They argue that, in the case of the Netherlands, macro-level developments, such as declining work opportunities, more restrictive immigration policies and growing hostility in public opinion towards immigrants, have not just direct negative effects on migration rates, but also affect the willingness of settled migrants to support potential newcomers (Engberson, 2013).

TECHNOLOGY, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND MIGRATION

The role of technology and communications tools in migration has gained increasing prominence in studies of social networks and

migration. Modern means of communication, especially TV and the Internet, shape perceptions towards migration and expose people to the idea of migrating (Timmerman et al. 2014; Schapendonk & van Moppes 2007). Schapendonk and van Moppes, in their study of migration aspirations in Senegal, find that biased images of wealth and Western luxury spread by these media contribute in the eyes of young people in particular to 'the widely acknowledged view that "Senegal is misery and Europe is paradise"' (Schapendonk & van Moppes 2007). However, although many Senegalese migrants arrive in Europe misinformed and ill-prepared, a large number of migrants, possibly even the majority, are aware of and ready for the difficult conditions they may face in Europe, underlining their determination to migrate.

Several scholars demonstrate the importance of mobile telephones in migration. Collyer, for example, claims that trans-Saharan migration 'would be virtually impossible without cheap mobile communications' (Collyer 2005; Schaub 2012). Schaub's research with Congolese migrants in Morocco concludes that mobile phones are central to the migration process, and that 'migrants draw on the unprecedented accessibility of contacts equipped with mobile phones to tie together novel, geographically expansive networks' (Schaub 2012). Chatelard's (2005) study of Iraqi migrants in Jordan argues that the country is an important migration hub because 'Iraqi prospective migrants to the West can … obtain information on where best to leave to by calling their relatives who are already in the West, or get information on asylum procedures via the Internet'.

New media sources, particularly social media, are playing an increasing role in communication between migrants in Western Europe and non-migrants in origin countries (Dekker et al. 2015; Dekker & Engbersen 2012). These new media sources provide a forum where information, stories, photographs, and videos are exchanged, and, unlike traditional media, which mainly allows for one-to-one communication, online media are often also accessible to people beyond the migrant's direct social network (Dekker et al. 2015). Dekker et al., in their study of migrants in four Western European destination countries (the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the UK) and non-migrants in three origin countries (Brazil, Morocco, and Ukraine), find that online media have become important channels of communication. Using social media helps migrants to maintain strong ties with family and friends, facilitates communication that can be useful in the migration process, establishes new networks, and is also 'a rich source of unofficial insider knowledge on migration' (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012).

Work by Dekker and Engberson (2012) finds that newly-established ties are only a small part of online transnational communication, but are actively transforming migration networks and facilitating migration (Dekker and Engberson 2012). However, there are to date no quantitative studies that test the relationship between international migration decision-making and the use of online media (Dekker et al. 2015). This is a significant gap in migration research.

A 2014 report from the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) is the only publication by a research centre found during this evidence search that discusses social media in relation to irregular migration to

Europe (RMMS 2014). In the study, many respondents highlighted using social media (including Facebook, YouTube and online fora) to obtain up-to-date information, for instance on irregular migration routes and weather conditions.

The role of technology and the Internet as a tool in irregular migrations to Europe has been extensively reported in the mainstream press, notably Brunwasser's 2015 New York Times article entitled 'A 21st-Century Migrant's Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone' (Brunwasser 2015; Byrne & Solomon 2015; Price 2015; Watson et al. 2015). Brunwasser highlights the use of tools including smartphone maps, GPS apps, social media and messaging apps like WhatsApp by migrants travelling to Europe. Reporting from Belgrade, Serbia, he claims that migrants there 'depend on them to post real-time updates about routes, arrests, border guard movements and transport, as well as places to stay and prices, all the while keeping in touch with family and friends' (Brunwasser 2015). Watson et al. (2015) for CNN quotes UNHCR official Alessandra Morelli as saying 'There's a lot of technology … the level of organization that I see here in this context is new', and that 'Facebook indeed is playing an incredible role'. Brunwasser explains that Syrians' migration journeys are helped by Arabic-language Facebook groups such as 'Smuggling into the EU', with over 23,000 members, and 'How To Emigrate to Europe', with more than 39,000. He indicates that traffickers and smugglers may also be connected to these online networks; on the Arabiclanguage Facebook group 'Trafficking to Europe', one 'trafficker' gives information on the costs and services provided for the journey from Turkey to Greece, and even offers a 50% discount for children under five. Brunwasser also suggests, however, that technological tools are allowing migrants to bypass smugglers and undertake large parts of their journeys independently.

Aid organisations are responding to the Internet capabilities of 'refugees from Syria and other countries' in Europe. The International Rescue Committee (IRC), in partnership with Google and Mercy Corps, has recently launched a smartphone-accessible website providing up-to-date, location-specific information to refugees arriving in Europe (ibid.). Business Insider UK reports that aid workers in Belgrade have developed a web-based app providing information about essential services, such as the correct cost of taxis, toilet locations and places to buy food (Price 2015). New Scientist recently ran an article featuring an interview with Kate Coyer, director of the Civil Society and Technology Project at Central European University in Budapest, who has been working with others in Hungary to provide power outlets and Wifi hotspots for migrants because 'people were desperately trying to find ways to charge their phones' (New Scientist 2015).

These articles indicate some of the ways in which feedback mechanisms via the Internet and online social media platforms are being used to gather information and obtain assistance from networks that go far beyond family or kinship. This can come from official news sources, but also from public online forums where conationals and other stakeholders in the migration journey (in this case, smugglers) can feed information back to prospective migrants.

This evidence is of course anecdotal, and there has as yet been no systematic research on the role of technology and the Internet in

current migration to Europe, nor any attempt to test the relationship between migration decision-making and online media use. In particular, the role of technology and the Internet in Syrian migration requires systematic research. One survey in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan found that '89% of respondents own a mobile handset and 85% own at least one SIM card', and 'more than 60% reported accessing the internet via their mobile phone only' (Maitland & Xu, 2015). This may be indicative of a generally high level of mobile technological connectivity among Syrian refugees (migrants discussed in these news articles are exclusively Syrian). Although Brunwasser and Byrne and Soloman (for the Financial Times) suggest that these technological tools are used by migrants from across Africa and the Middle East, and previous research points to the use of mobile technology and the Internet by migrants of other nationalities, the RMMS report is the only source of information referencing the use of social media by migrants of other nationalities in current irregular migrations to Europe. Given that both migrants and non-migrants 'are likely to be subject to digital inequalities' (Dekker et al. 2015), it is important not to generalise from these findings, especially since systematic research in this area is entirely absent.

LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL TIES IN TRANSIT

As discussed earlier, both transnational and local ties are of great importance for migrants in transit contexts. Transnational networks radiate from the transit area back to the country of origin, and forward towards contacts in Europe and other destination countries. Local contacts are forged in the transit location, often with other migrants from the same ethnic group or religion, but also with others, including smugglers. Several studies have detailed the ways in which networks are being used in these contexts to cope with the day-to-day precariousness of being an irregular migrant in a transit zone, and to facilitate migrants' onward movements. Wissink et al.'s (2013) study in Turkey concludes that local and transnational social networks were of utmost importance in a transit context where migration intentions are in the process of being shaped (Schapendonk, 2014; Koser Akcapar 2010; Kuschminder et al. 2015; Schapendonk & van Moppes 2007). Much of this research in transit zones also demonstrates 'network failures, disconnections, social frictions, and hard network work' (Schapendonk 2014).

Maintaining and consolidating transnational contacts with relatives and close friends both at home and abroad, as well as creating other personal contacts through ethnic and religious links, are what Koser Akcapar says are 'the outcomes of living in a transit country' (Koser Akcapar 2010). Wissink et al. argue that the financial and emotional support of transnational networks, both in the country of origin and with relatives in Europe, is vitally important in the formation of migrant intentions. In addition to this, some migrants maintained ties with other migrants whom they had met en route, but who had since reached Europe. According to Wissink et al., networks connecting migrants with their countries of origin influence the migration pathway by 'encouraging a certain strategy', whereas the existence of ties in Europe was mainly utilized in order to facilitate onward migration or to access resources for day-to-day subsistence (Wissink et al. 2013).

These transnational links are not static, however, and can be subject to failures and disconnections over time. Wissink et al. show how support from a network can be interrupted if, for example, mobile phones are confiscated upon arrest, or if families abroad decide or are compelled to stop providing financial assistance (Wissink et al. 2013). In his study of Iranian migrants in Turkey, Koser Akcapar suggests that, although existing contacts in Turkey can lower the initial costs of migration, they cannot be depended on for continuing support, especially if a migrant's stay is extended in another transit country. However, his study also demonstrates how local networks that are (re)created in Turkey among Iranians 'sometimes provide better opportunities and access to information and assistance' (Koser Akcapar 2010).

Local social networks are key to understanding migration in transit locations. Migrants often provide each other with reciprocal support for day-to-day subsistence, sharing food and accommodation with fellow migrants in transit locations (Wissink et al. 2013). According to Schapendonk and van Moppes, Sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco 'form collectives, often along ethnic lines, in which information on security matters and work possibilities is shared' (Schapendonk & van Moppes 2007). Migrants also access information within these social networks about travel routes and destinations, informing their subsequent migration decisions and onward movements (Kuschminder et al. 2015). The transient nature of migrant populations in these locations means that these local networks are highly dynamic and changeable. Wissink et al.'s study in Turkey found that local ties are generally both weak and short-lived, but nevertheless vital for the exchange of information regarding onward migration to Greece (Wissink et al. 2013, p. 1,099 PS-8).

Despite the seemingly high levels of connectivity and information-sharing between migrants in transit contexts, individual migrants may keep certain information secret. Wissink et al. (2013) and Schapendonk and van Moppes (2007) argue that migrants do not tend to disclose concrete plans for border crossings, for fear that these plans may be jeopardised through disclosure to other migrants. Schapendonk and van Moppes even detect a level of competition between Sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco. Nevertheless, local, as well as transnational, networks clearly provide a vital resource for many migrants travelling to Europe (Schapendonk & van Moppes 2007).

GENDER AND RELIGION IN TRANSIT MIGRATION

The only study of social networks and transit migration found in the literature search that includes an extended discussion of gender is Koser Akcapar's (2010) study of Iranian migrants in Turkey. Like studies of men's and women's social networks in countries of origin, his work suggests that gender affects the nature of an individual's networks. He argues that, in the context of Iranians in Turkey, men are obliged to work in the informal economy, while women are in touch with other members of their social groups, creating connections and sourcing information. Whilst some of his respondents retained links with Iran, and others received assistance and financial help from relatives in 'the West', women also worked to create new networks in Turkey to provide local mutual support. These networks, predominantly made up of close friends, co-ethnics/religionists, and kin, are similar to the

networks respondents had in Iran (ibid., p. 183).

Koser Akcapar's research is also one of two key studies found that discuss the role of religious networks for migrants in transit. Both of these studies concern the role of Christian (and Baha'i, for Koser Akcapar) churches and networks and their connections with migrants. Chatelard's study of Iraqi migrants in Jordan discusses how, in the absence of relief from foreign NGOs or Jordanian institutions, Jordan's thriving Christian community and church charities provide assistance to Iraqis. She notes, however, that the vast majority of Iraqis connected to these charities are Christians or Sabeans, and, 'in practice, it is true that Christian charities offer some of their services more willingly to Christian than to Muslim Iraqis' (Chatelard 2005). Similarly, Koser Akcapar's study finds that non-Muslim social networks (Christian and Baha'i) offer more to Iranians than Islamic institutions (Koser Akcapar, 2010). Beyond basic assistance, Koser Akcapar argues that religion may also provide a way for migrants to forge new social networks, stating that some respondents 'received psychological, financial and institutional support from churches and Baha'i spiritual assemblies in Turkey and abroad'; others ended up converting to Christianity (ibid.). He also mentions cases where Iranians have gained resettlement through sponsors found by the churches as a result of their global networks (ibid., pp. 180–81). These studies, though important in highlighting the role that factors such as gender and religion can have on social networks for migrants in transit locations, are both context- and time-specific. There also appears to be a gap in research on the role of identity characteristics, such as age and ethnicity, and reasons for migrating in shaping the networks of migrants of other nationalities during their journeys to Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

Social networks and information flows are vital components of migration systems and migrant decision-making. Despite this, evidence on the role of networks in current irregular migrations to Europe remains scarce. To quote Poros, policy-makers (and indeed researchers) 'might do well to focus more on the effects social networks can have on migration flows' in this rapidly evolving context (Poros 2011). Gaps in evidence on the role of networks and information flows in the current crisis that require further investigation include: the role of networks in informing initial decisions to migrate; the role of networks during the journey and in transit locations; the way that technology, communication tools and online media are shaping these networks and affecting decisions; and how individual characteristics, such as age, gender and religion, relate to these networks. As the research outlined above demonstrates, a better understanding of migration networks is essential to developing a clearer picture of current movements from MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe.

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