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Social networks and feelings of social loneliness after migration: The case of European migrants with a native partner in Belgium

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Abstract

This paper studies the social networks and feelings of social loneliness of a group of migrants that, because of their European origins and their mixed relations with a native partner, might be easily integrating socially. The data are a sample of 237 (first-generation) European migrants with a native partner living in Belgium, drawn from the EUMARR study on binational couples. First, their social networks and feelings of loneliness are compared to those of natives in a uninational partnership. Second, structural equation modelling is performed to study the effect of various characteristics of local and transnational networks of family and friends (such as size, composition and intensity of contact) on feelings of social loneliness, as well as the link with migration history. Results reveal that European migrants with a native partner experience more feelings of social loneliness than do the native population. A larger local network, with more own relatives and more (own, not met through the partner) friends, as well as more frequent contact with local friends contribute to lower levels of social loneliness. Transnational contact and the share of natives in the local network have no impact. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the social life of European migrants and show how, even with a native partner, they are still affected by the migration move in relation to feelings of social loneliness.

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Keywords

Migration, European mobility, mixed couples, social networks, social loneliness, intermarriage

Introduction

This article focuses on the relationship between social networks and feelings of social loneliness after migration. Social loneliness has been defined as the feeling felt in the absence of an engaging social network of peers who (partly) share the same interests (Weis, 1973). When moving to another country, migrants leave behind their network of family and friends. Despite increased options to maintain contact across borders (with new technologies), social bonds are most likely transformed over time (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Lusic, 2012; Pries, 2001). This disruptive and transformative effect of migration on existing networks (Handlin, 2002/1951; Zontini, 2004) may contribute to feelings of social loneliness especially when new ties in the country of residence still have to be developed.

Social loneliness is an interesting subject from the perspective of migrants' integration. It can be considered a symptom of the deficit of social integration, in the sense that socially integrated people experience feelings of belonging, of being understood, appreciated and accommodated by a community, which socially lonely people miss. Social loneliness is thus an important factor to take into consideration when studying the consequences of migration, as it has been linked to poor health, low quality of life, lower levels of life satisfaction, lower levels of happiness, negative outlook, negative perceptions of self and others, anxiety and depression (Vancluysen and Van Craen, 2011: 437).

We focus on the social networks and feelings of social loneliness of European migrants in Belgium. European migrants in this study include migrants from the top five European countries of origin¹ (the Netherlands, France, Germany, Spain and Italy) and Poland (representing more recent East to West migration in Europe). European migrants take on an important share in migration flows of many European countries today (De Valk et al., 2011). In Belgium, 63% of recent migration is intra-European (EU27) (ADSEI data in Federal Migratiecentrum, 2014). Still, little is known on this group's networks and transnational relations. Free mobility agreements among Schengen countries make migration and settlement easier for European migrants compared to migrants from outside Europe. The average geographical and cultural distance is also smaller within Europe than it is for international migrants from outside the continent. Even so, intra-European mobility might not always be as frictionless as it is supposed to be (see also Favell, 2003) and can be a socially disruptive event for European migrants as well.

The European migrants in our study all have native partners (i.e. partners born in Belgium). While some are intermarried, others are cohabiting with a native-born partner. According to social distance theory, migrants with a native partner should likewise have better conditions for successful integration (Gordon, 1964; Nauck,

2002). It is believed that the partner's ethnic background plays an important role in the migrant's cultural, social and emotional integration (Rother, 2008). A native partner can function as a privileged bridge (Gaspar, 2009) or bridging tie (Putnam, 2000) to the host society, offering easier and more rapid access to social networks. Here again one should be careful with overemphasizing the automatic social integration of migrants with a native partner (Song, 2009).

Our aim is first to get more insight into the social networks of these European migrants and compare their feelings of social loneliness to that of non-migrants. Do they feel as socially embedded as the native population? Second, we want to understand what the main determinants of social loneliness are among European migrants with a native partner by covering their local and transnational networks. We expand previous studies by including both family and friends and covering network size, composition and quality (frequency of interaction). We do not aspire to measure the impact of intermarriage or European origin on integration, but to study the social integration of a group that, because of their origin and mixedness, might be considered a low-risk group for social exclusion or isolation.

Data come from the Belgian data of the EUMARR project, an international study on European binational couples. Because of its central political and geographical position within Europe, Belgium finds itself among the European countries with the largest percentage of European migrants amidst its population (Eurostat, 2013). Just under half (47%) of the foreign-born population has European citizenship, representing 7% of the total population, and their importance is still growing (Pelfrene, 2014). Sixty-four per cent of married or cohabiting European migrants in Belgium live with a native partner (Koelet and De Valk 2014). All in all a perfect case country for the study of European migrants.

Background

Social loneliness and social networks

According to Weiss' (1973) seminal work, feelings of loneliness are a response to a relational deficit. In the case of emotional loneliness this relational deficit is the absence of a close emotional attachment; in the case of social loneliness the absence of an engaging social network. While the first is associated with feelings of abandonment and emptiness, the second is associated with feelings of exclusion and marginality. Both types are not necessarily interdependent. One can feel emotionally alone in the presence of a broad social network, as much as one can feel socially isolated in the presence of close emotional attachment.

Social loneliness is not an objective situation, such as being socially isolated; it is a subjective state. To *be* lonely is to *feel* a lack or loss of companionship (Townsend, 1973). Social loneliness can nevertheless be related to objective network characteristics, even if the impact differs between groups (Green et al., 2001). While among older people, social loneliness is linked to the quality of existing contacts or closeness of contacts, among younger people it is rather the size of

the social network that matters, as well as the presence of a close other. In adolescence, the interconnectedness or density of the network determines how socially lonely one feels. Besides size, closeness and density, the diversity of the network also matters (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2006). A combination of weak and strong ties in the network seems to protect people more from loneliness than a network of strong ties only (Van Tilburg, 1990). Older people whose networks consist primarily, or entirely, of kin are more vulnerable to loneliness than people with more heterogeneous networks (Dykstra, 1990).

Overall women report higher levels of social loneliness than men, which seems related to men's reluctance to report loneliness in response to direct survey questions (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2006). Finally, personal characteristics and the perspective of being able to enlarge or upgrade the network also mediate loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, 1998).

Social loneliness and migration

Weiss (1973) points to geographical uprooting as a major determinant of social loneliness. As people move from one place to another, they move away from their network of family and friends that constituted a community to them and provided them with, for example, sociability, information, advice and help. In times of globalization and with the development of new travel and communication technologies, it has become easier to maintain transnational relations (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Lusic, 2012; Pries, 2001). Still, long-distance relationships are not always able to fulfil the same needs as localized relationships, especially if it comes to day-to-day support and practical help (Nisic and Petermann, 2013: 200). As a consequence, most migrants are forced to restructure and transform their social networks after migration. They look for support in a combination of established and newly formed networks in both the country of origin and arrival (Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2008). Putting down roots nevertheless takes time (Lubbers et al., 2010; Nisic and Petermann, 2013; Putnam, 2000) and the integration into newly formed or existing social networks in the country of migration might prove difficult. Ties with the network at home typically become weaker with time since migration, while new ties in the place of settlement become stronger (Lubbers et al., 2010). Without integration in existing or new networks in the country of arrival, migrants are likely to feel lonely or socially isolated (Galent et al., 2009; Weiss, 1973).

While little is known on the composition and distribution of social networks among ethnic groups in comparison to native groups (Völker et al., 2008), a Canadian study (Kazemipur, 2004) finds migrants having smaller and lower socio-economic status networks than natives. Their networks are less ethnically diverse and less frequently utilized. For ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, Völker et al. (2008) have similar findings despite differences between migrants from Western Europe and the US compared to non-European migrants. However, other studies do not confirm this ethnic deprivation (Lubbers et al.,

2010; Nisic and Petermann, 2013; Van Tubergen and Völker, 2015). Boyd and Nowak (2012) moreover, discuss the disproportional effect an international move can have on women. Their networks in the country of settlement are less developed to start with, while larger family responsibilities both in the local household and through the continuation of transnational family responsibilities create greater time constraints for them to develop new networks.

With respect to loneliness, Vancluysen and Van Craen (2011) find higher levels of loneliness among persons from Turkish and Moroccan descent in Belgium, as compared to the native white population. Preventing factors are migrants' social integration into the host society (many native friends and low perceived discrimination), their ethnic social attachment (many co-ethnic friends and more contact with family members in the home country) and language proficiency (Vancluysen and Van Craen, 2011).

European migrants with a native partner: A low risk group for social loneliness?

Existing research on loneliness among migrants mainly focuses on those of non-European origin (Vancluysen and Van Craen, 2011: 437; the elderly: Ajrouch, 2008; Dong et al., 2012; Fokkema and Naderi, 2013; Heravi-Karimooi et al., 2010; Kim, 1999; adolescents: Neto, 2002; international students: Kirova, 2001; Sawir et al., 2008; Wiseman, 1997). Very few studies exist on loneliness among European migrants to our knowledge (exceptions are Neto and Barros, 2000 and Nolka and Nowosielski, 2009).

European migrants might be a special case since the geographical distance to the network in the country of origin is on average smaller for European than for non-European migrants, while the freedom of mobility in the EU creates more travel opportunities to visit and be visited by family and friends. In a recent study, it was found that European migrants have more frequent contact with the network in the country of origin than non-European migrants (De Winter et al., 2013). Social networks of European migrants seem also to be more transportable as compared to those of non-European migrants (see Völker et al., 2008: 22). Various studies, moreover, show how high-skilled EU migrants (Kennedy, 2008) as well as less-skilled migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (Galent, 2013; Prelipceanu, 2008) easily make use of the fast developments in information and communication technology, as well as decreasing transportation costs, to maintain close ties in the origin country. Furthermore, Western European migrants are assumed to be in cultural and physical respects more similar to the host population, which makes it easier for them 'to blend in'. Research on perceived discrimination and well-being confirms this hierarchy among the host population regarding preferred immigrant groups (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006).

Previous studies nevertheless disprove popular generalizations that European mobility is 'effortless', if only because of 'the psychology of dealing with foreign culture and the weariness of distant family ties and contacts' (Favell, 2003: 13).

When compared to natives, direct contact with the original network is still reduced also for European migrants (De Winter et al., 2013). Emotional as well as cultural ties to family, friends, partners and the local area are found to play a role in the motivation of young Europeans not to participate in student mobility programmes for instance (Conti, 2013). Recent studies on East–West migration within the EU (more specifically in the UK) moreover demonstrate how eastern-European migrants experience considerable fragmentation and tension in the routine communication and socialization with their home country (Morosanu, 2013) and how they are confronted with structural constraints and tensions, associated with fulfilling competing familial obligations in the country of origin as well as destination (McGhee et al., 2013). The presumed effortlessness of professional mobility among highly skilled ‘elite’ migrants is being called into question (Beaverstock, 2001; Smith and Favell, 2006). These studies show how their interaction in the new country often remains limited to an in-group expatriate community (Beaverstock, 2001; Lundström, 2013).

Intra-European migrants face obstacles associated with the move as do migrants from elsewhere (Gilmartin and Migge, 2013). Few studies have, however, analysed loneliness: in an exception, Nolka and Nowosielski (2009) find that a quarter of the Polish migrants living in Ireland often feel lonely; half of whom find the greatest disadvantage of emigration is missing relatives who remained in Poland. Neto and Barros (2000) nonetheless compared loneliness between Portuguese adolescents living in Portugal and Switzerland and found no significant difference between the two groups.

To our knowledge, there are no studies on social loneliness among European migrants who have a native partner. This group is particularly interesting since partners can play a key role in facilitating access to a local social network after migration (Ryan and Mulholland, 2014; Scott and Cartledge, 2009). Native partners bring their own networks of relatives and acquaintances to the relationship and contribute to the development of new local contacts indirectly by familiarizing the migrant with local culture (Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra, 2006) and by facilitating personal–linguistic development (Berry, 1990). However, the nature and extent of social integration achieved by having a native partner still needs to be proved (Song, 2009). Veronica de Miguel Luken et al. (2015) for instance found in a recent study on Bulgarian migrants in Spain that, while belonging to a mixed union implied a greater presence of Spaniards in the personal network, these were mostly family members of the Spanish partner and there was no effect on emotional proximity with Spaniards.

Methods and data

Data

Our data come from the international EUMARR survey, which was the first survey designed to collect comprehensive data on European binational and uninational

couples, their lives and lifestyles in eight major European cities. The Belgian data (N = 805), used here, were collected in 2012–2013 through an online questionnaire in two internationally oriented cities: Brussels and Antwerp (De Valk et al., 2013). While Brussels represents a truly global city, Antwerp's connections are rather 'locally' oriented towards neighbouring countries (Derudder and Taylor, 2003). These urban areas were selected to achieve comparability in the international project, but also because more European migrants live in large cities. Obviously this focus on urban areas could influence the structure and composition of the personal networks at study here (Gómez-Mestres et al., 2012) which we will pay attention to when discussing our findings.

The Brussels sample was drawn randomly from the National Population Register and the Antwerp sample from the Municipal Population Register. Married and cohabiting couples were selected based on current nationality of the partners and age range in the couple (age 30–45), after which one partner was randomly chosen as (potential) respondent. The binational couples included one European and one Belgian partner, while a control group consisted of uninational Belgian couples. The choice for this control group was motivated by the research questions in the EUMARR survey which focused on European binational couples as forerunners of the European integration project in comparison to native European citizens. To control for too much diversity within and in-between project partner countries, a limited set of European nationalities was selected: Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Polish.

For this paper current nationality is less relevant, as we are interested in the experience of migration and thus use country of birth for distinguishing between groups. We select *foreign-born* European respondents with *native-born* Belgian partners (n = 237) and compare them to *native-born* Belgian respondents with *native-born* Belgian partners (n = 101). The mean age of migration of the European partners is 26 (including Europeans who moved to Belgium with their parents as a child).

The response rate of the Belgian EUMARR survey was 32%. Women (58%) and the highly educated (63% have a masters degree or higher) are overrepresented among the European respondents in the survey but do reflect the overall high educational level of recent European migrants in Belgium as reported in other data. According to the Belgian Labour Force Survey for instance, 45% of the EU citizens who have migrated to Belgium no longer than 10 years ago have finished tertiary education as compared to 26% of the native population (Martiniello et al., 2010). Language proficiency is high as well: 98.8% of the European migrants in our survey masters at least one of the two national idioms (Dutch or French).

Method

Descriptive analyses provide insight into the network characteristics and loneliness of European migrants with a native partner and those in a uni-native partnership.

In a second step, we focus on the European migrants only. By means of structural equation modelling (SEM), we measure how network characteristics relate to social loneliness, while at the same time understanding the mutual relations between the network correlates. IBM-AMOS software for SEM was used to carry out a path analysis estimating both the direct and indirect effects on social loneliness. We include the relationship between social loneliness and (1) the local network of family and the local network of friends of European migrants in Belgium; (2) different dimensions of these local social networks (size, composition and intensity of contact); and (3) the transnational network in the country of origin. Information on the different dimensions of the transnational networks is not available in the EUMARR data. The model also includes the time since migration and controls for gender.

Measures

We use the social loneliness subscale developed by De Jong-Gierveld and colleagues and widely tested, validated and evaluated in previous studies (De Jong-Gierveld and Van Tilburg, 1999, 2011). Out of the 11 items in the scale, we use the five items that refer to social loneliness: (1) There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems; (2) there are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems; (3) there are many people I can trust completely; (4) there are enough people I feel close to; and (5) I can call on my friends whenever I need them. Answering categories range from 'no!', 'no', 'more or less' to 'yes' or 'yes!'. The more one disagrees with the statements, the more socially lonely one is considered. 'More or less' is thereby not considered as a neutral answer but rather as an indicator of loneliness (De Jong-Gierveld and Van Tilburg, 2011). A factor score scale based on the five items is calculated to have a single variable to use in the multivariate analyses. In this calculation, respondents with two or more missing answers were excluded in line with the recommendations of De Jong-Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2011) ($n = 13$). The scale ranges from -4.80 to 3.68 and has a Cronbach's α of 0.88 .

A number of measures describing the respondents' social networks are included in the analyses. The first two refer to the local family network: the number of own relatives living in Belgium and the number of in-laws in Belgium (with both an upper limit of 'more than 10 relatives'). Relatives and in-laws are defined in the questionnaire as siblings, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces of the respondents or the partner. Seventy-nine per cent of the Europeans with a native partner indicated not to have any own relatives in Belgium, while 53% of the Europeans indicated to have more than 10 family in-laws in Belgium. The average age of migration of the migrants with own relatives in the country is lower than in the rest of the group (namely 17).

Three variables refer to the local friendship network. A first continuous variable indicates the total number of close friends in Belgium (maximum '10 or more friends'). Close friends are defined as people one feels at ease with, one can talk

to about what is on one's mind or call up for help. A quarter of all respondents indicate not knowing how many friends they have in Belgium. However, in the questionnaire the 'Don't know' box came right after a row of boxes ranging from '0' to '10+'. Many respondents may have interpreted this last box ('Don't know') as 'too many to know' or the maximum in the proposed scale. The fact that only one respondent checked the '10+' box seems to confirm this. Those who chose 'Don't know' also have the lowest score on the 'social loneliness' scale of all respondents (except for the one '10+' respondent). We therefore believe it is reasonable to classify these respondents under the category '10 or more friends'.

A second variable indicates the percentage of own friends among the core friendship group, pointing to friends who were not met through or introduced by the partner, and a third variable indicates the percentage of native-born friends among the core friendship group.

The final four variables measure frequency of contact with the social network. We include several variables as a factor score scale indicating frequency of contact with different networks. Frequency of contact with the local networks of family (Cronbach $\alpha = .83$) and friends (Cronbach $\alpha = .87$) are based on three items in the survey that measure frequency of (1) face-to-face contact; (2) telephone contact (fixed/cell phones or via internet); and (3) written contact (post/sms/e-mail, chat, social network sites, etc.). Frequency of contact with the transnational (European) networks of family (Cronbach $\alpha = .81$) and friends (Cronbach $\alpha = .78$) is based on four items, splitting the first item of the previous scales into: (1a) transnational visits; and (1b) transnational visitors. All items were Likert scales ranging from 1 'rarely or never' to 8 'daily'.

Our relatively small sample does not allow us to include a broad range of migration path variables. We do nevertheless include a measure for the duration of residence; a continuous variable indicating the number of years since migration to Belgium. Finally, sex is included as a dummy variable ('0' for men, '1' for women).

Results

Descriptives

We first (see Table 1) compare the social network characteristics and loneliness of European migrants with a native partner in Belgium to those of natives with a native partner. The social networks of European migrants differ considerably in size, composition and frequency of contact from those of natives (with a native partner). As expected, European migrants have a smaller local family network than natives. Even though the number of in-laws in their local network is comparable, due to the presence of a native partner, they have significantly less own relatives residing in the country (on average only one). Also the frequency of contact with the local family network, including relatives and in-laws, is significantly lower. Besides, European migrants with a native partner have a smaller local network

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for objective social network characteristics and social loneliness.

Variable	Europeans with a native partner (n = 286)			Natives with a native partner (n = 124)			Total (n = 410)			Min.	Max.
	\bar{x}	s	n	\bar{x}	S	n	\bar{x}	s	n		
Size local family network (relatives)**	0.97	2.56	237	8.70	3.62	98	3.23	4.57	335	0	11(10+)
Size local family network (in-laws)	7.99	3.96	224	8.29	4.09	96	8.08	4.00	320	0	11(10+)
Size local network of friends**	6.03	3.60	236	7.89	3.28	101	6.59	3.60	337	0	11(10+)
Share of own friends in local network of friends**	67.57%	34.87	223	83.92%	21.97	93	72.38%	32.46	316	0%	100%
Share of native friends in local network of friends**	57.61%	37.62	232	87.12%	25.18	100	66.50%	36.89	332	0%	100%
Frequency contact with local family network**	-.34	1.07	232	.45	0.93	100	-.10	1.09	332	-2.41	2.04
Frequency contact with transnational family network (EU)**	.13	.99	223	-1.58	0.78	98	-.39	1.22	321	-2.10	3.15
Frequency contact with local network of friends	-.20	1.28	229	-.19	1.11	100	-.20	1.23	329	-3.18	2.02
Frequency contact with transnational network of friends (EU)**	-.20	1.20	227	-1.52	1.02	99	-.60	1.30	326	-2.19	4.16
Social loneliness (factor score scale)**	.10	1.03	237	-.23	0.90	101	.00	1.00	338	-1.28	3.92

*p < .05; **p < .01.

Source: EUMARR Belgium survey.

of friends than natives with a native partner. While the natives have, on average, eight close friends in Belgium, Europeans on average have six. These friends are more often met through the partner and non-Belgians compared to the case of the native Belgian citizens. The frequency of contact with the local network of friends is nonetheless comparable between both groups. Finally, the transnational

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the five items in the de Jong-Gierveld scale for social loneliness.

Variable		Yes	Yes!	Yes	No	More or		
						Less	No	No!
There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems (*)	Europeans with a native partner (n = 237)	73.8%	45.1%	28.7%	26.2%	19.4%	4.2%	2.5%
	Natives with a native partner (n = 101)	85.1%	52.5%	32.7%	14.9%	13.9%	1.0%	0.0%
There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems	Europeans with a native partner (n = 236)	75.0%	36.4%	38.6%	25.0%	19.5%	4.7%	0.8%
	Natives with a native partner (n = 101)	80.2%	46.5%	33.7%	19.8%	17.8%	2.0%	0.0%
There are many people I can trust completely (**)	Europeans with a native partner (n = 235)	62.6%	24.7%	37.9%	37.4%	17.0%	17.9%	2.6%
	Natives with a native partner (n = 101)	71.3%	37.6%	33.7%	28.7%	21.8%	6.9%	0.0%
There are enough people I feel close to	Europeans with a native partner (n = 236)	66.9%	24.6%	42.4%	33.1%	20.8%	11.9%	0.4%
	Natives with a native partner (n = 101)	77.2%	32.7%	44.6%	22.8%	16.8%	5.0%	1.0%
I can call on my friends whenever I need them	Europeans with a native partner (n = 237)	74.7%	31.2%	43.5%	25.3%	20.7%	3.8%	0.8%
	Natives with a native partner (n = 101)	83.2%	39.6%	43.6%	16.8%	13.9%	3.0%	0.0%

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Source: EUMARR Belgium survey.

networks of family and friends are only measured in terms of frequency of contact and we find that this is higher for European migrants than for natives with a native partner.

Regarding loneliness, European migrants with a native partner in Belgium express significantly² higher levels of social loneliness than natives with a native partner ($\bar{X} = 0.10$ compared to $\bar{X} = -0.23$). If we take a closer look at the separate items of the scale (Table 2), we find that, among the European respondents, 25% feel there are not plenty of people they can lean on when they have problems (20% for natives); 25% feel they can not call on their friends whenever they need them

(17% for natives); 26% feel that there is not always someone they can talk to about their day-to-day problems (15% for natives); 33% feel there are not enough people they feel close to (23% for natives) and 37% feel that there are not many people they can trust completely (29% for natives). The most significant differences are found in relation to trust and the opportunities to talk about day-to-day problems.

SE path analysis for social loneliness among European migrants

Next we specify SEMs on the group of European migrants with a native partner (Figure 1 and Table 3; n = 237) to analyse how different network correlates relate to feelings of social loneliness. European women with a native partner are more likely than European men to maintain frequent contact with the transnational family network. However, this type of long-distance contact, be it with family or friends, turns out to have no impact on feelings of social loneliness.

It is actually the local network that matters. Regarding the local network of friends we find that European migrants with a native partner feel less socially lonely when they (1) have a larger circle of local friends ($\beta = -.29$); and (2) when they maintain more regular contact with this local network of friends ($\beta = -.24$). There is also an indirect effect of the size of the local network of friends and the share of own friends (not met through the partner) in this network on social loneliness, as both increase the frequency of contact with this network (respective indirect effects: $\beta = -.07$ and $\beta = -.11$). The share of native friends in turn has no effect. There is a link between the share of native friends and the frequency of contact with the local family network, indicating that family members of the native partner are included among the native friends, but this has no effect on social loneliness.

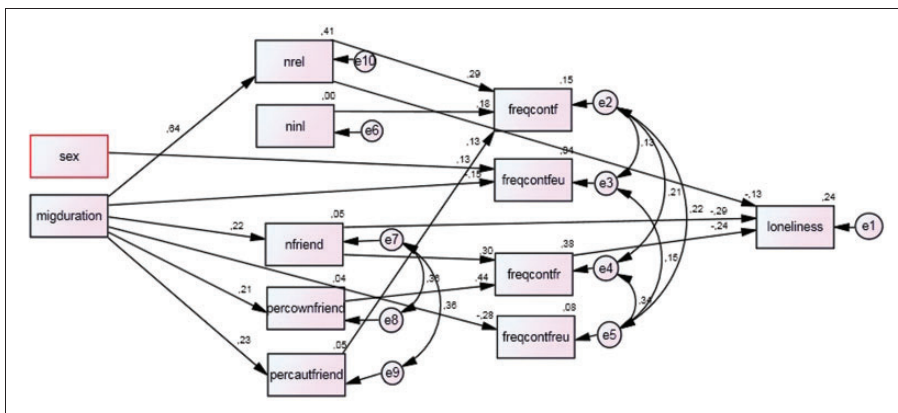


Figure 1. SEpath analysis for social loneliness among European migrants with a native partner in Belgium (n = 237, $\chi^2 = 43.564$, $p = .490$, TLI = 1.001, RMSEA = .000). Source: EUMARR Belgium survey.

Table 3. Standardized total effects of the basic model and model comparison (n = 237).

	Local network										Transnational network				
	Family					Friends					Family		Friends		
	# local relatives	# local in-laws	Contact frequency	# local friends	% own friends	% native friends	Contact frequency	# local friends	% own friends	% native friends	Contact frequency	Contact frequency	Contact frequency	R ²	
Local network	Family	# local relatives	# local in-laws	Contact frequency	# local friends	% own friends	% native friends	Contact frequency	# local friends	% own friends	% native friends	Contact frequency	Contact frequency	Contact frequency	R ²
		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	41%
		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0%
		0.219	0.000	0.180	0.000	0.000	0.131	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	15%
	Friends	# local friends			0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	5%
		0.208	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	4%
		0.230	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	5%
		0.155	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.436	0.000	0.000	0.299	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	38%
Transn.	Fam.	Contact frequency			0.000	0.000	0.139	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	4%
		-0.148	0.135	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.139	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	4%
	Fr.	Contact frequency			0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	8%
		-0.283	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	8%
		-0.185	0.000	-0.134	0.000	0.000	-0.361	-0.105	0.000	-0.242	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	24%
		Loneliness Model	AIC	BCC											
		Basic model	135,564	140,927											
		Saturated model	180,000	190,493											
		Independence model	628,212	631,010											

Source: EUMARR Belgium survey.

Besides friends, family matters as well: social loneliness is lower for European migrants (3) who have more own relatives living with them in Belgium ($\beta = -.13$). It is not so much the frequency of contact with these relatives but the fact of having them nearby that seems to matter. In-laws in turn do not prove to be able to fill the relational deficit created by the absence of the migrant's relatives (no direct effect on social loneliness). Direct and indirect effects in the model explain 24% of the variance in social loneliness within the group of intermarried European migrants. We conclude that there is an effect of the local network (and not the transnational network) on social loneliness and that the quantity, the composition and, especially for friends, the frequency of contact matters.

Adding migration duration to the model confirms that social loneliness decreases as European migrants are in the country longer ($\beta = -.19$). This is an indirect effect as it runs through the network correlates. First, there is a strong positive effect ($\beta = .41$) of time since migration on number of own relatives in the country, while having own relatives nearby leads to lower feelings of loneliness. Second, migrants who have spent more time in Belgium have had the opportunity to establish local friendships and to find more friends themselves (not via the partner). This all contributes to lower levels of social loneliness. With time, the frequency of contact with the transnational networks of family and friends diminishes, but as we have seen this has no link to social loneliness.

Finally, the co-variations between some of the network correlates in our model show that there seems no trade-off between the transnational and local contacts of European migrants. On the contrary, Europeans who have more frequent contacts with local family and friends also have more transnational contacts with family and friends. Furthermore, migrants with more own friends and more native friends among the closest local friends, often have a larger local friendship network (resp. $\beta = .34$ and $\beta = .33$).

Conclusion and discussion

Our study is one of the first to focus on European migrants, their social networks and social loneliness. We did so by studying European migrants in a binational union with a native partner, in comparison to natives with a native partner. Our results show that the social consequences of European mobility, at least for what social loneliness is considered, are substantial.

The European ideals of free and frictionless mobility, as well as the often-made theoretical link made between intermarriage with a local partner and inclusion/integration in society (see also Song, 2009), would suggest that this group is not prone to social loneliness after migration. Our analyses of the Belgian EUMARR data nevertheless show that social loneliness is higher among European migrants than among natives with a native partner. It is particularly striking that more than a quarter of the European migrants with a native partner feel that there is not always someone they can talk to about their day-to-day problems (as compared to 15% for the natives) and 37% do not feel that there are many people they can trust

completely (as compared to 29% for the natives). This suggests that even though European migration might be easy to realize, it still has major impacts on migrants and their relationships.

To further assess the importance of loneliness, more research is needed that directly compares our results on European migrants to those of non-European migrants. If social loneliness is already high among European migrants with a native partner, it is also relevant to study how this compares to European migrants with a foreign partner or those without a partner. While our data do not allow a comparison to non-European migrants or to European migrants with a European partner or even without a partner, studying social loneliness among this assumed low-risk group of migrants might be viewed as symptomatic for the social consequences of migration in other groups.

Our study further reveals that European migrants with a native partner have a smaller local network of family and friends to rely on than natives with a native partner, and that their network of friends is composed of fewer own friends and fewer native friends. This is important as our SE analysis confirms that local network development is also one of the main strategies for tackling social loneliness for this group (Schoenmakers et al., 2014; Weiss, 1973). Not only the size of the local network, but also the closeness to the local network (measured through frequency of contact) matters. Finally, the composition of the local network is important, too. Own relatives and own friends play a far greater role in reducing feelings of social loneliness than in-laws or friends met through the partner. In-laws are apparently not replacing own relatives. While the literature stresses the importance of transnational ties for migrants, we found that frequent transnational contacts play no role in lower levels of social loneliness but that it is local ties that matter. Apparently transnational contacts remain limited by geographical space and cannot replace a close-by engaging network of family and friends.

Strikingly, the positive effect of having native friends for reducing social loneliness as found in other migrant groups was not confirmed in our analyses for European migrants. Is it because this group of European migrants forms a high-status minority group with no need of association with the native population to feel socially accepted? If forming an own European community, their social integration becomes independent of the long-term residents in the new host society. And, if so, to what extent is this characteristic for the European migrants living in Belgium, for instance the highly homogenous community of Eurocrats in Brussels? The potential selectivity of the EUMARR sample in terms of higher educated and those who are in 'successful' intermarriages (divorced are not captured) might also positively affect the social networks of the European migrants in the sample. An alternative hypothesis might be that the increased relations with natives in mixed unions are mostly limited to intimate family incorporated after marriage while a successful relational integration with the host society is not established, as found by De Miguel Luken et al. (2015) for mixed couples in Spain.

Lacing native ties is, at any rate, a two-way process that might prove difficult especially in Belgium, a country with particularly high scores on Hofstede (2001)'s

individualism dimension compared to other European countries. People in Belgium seem to have a preference for loosely knit networks in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families. This might also explain the high percentages of foreign post-doctoral researchers and professors that express having experienced difficulties integrating in Belgium as shown in a recent study by Vandeveldel et al. (2014).

While sex was included in our model as a background variable, we found no gender difference in social loneliness. Our modelling however does not allow for assessing the mediating role of gender in the link between the objective network correlates and feelings of social loneliness: our sample is too limited to perform a multi-group analysis. A larger sample would also allow a distinction between (groups of) origins within the group of European migrants. Strong expectations of social cohesion in collectivist cultures might, for instance, bring about differences between migrant groups (Goodwin et al., 2001). A larger sample would finally help to refine the results by taking into consideration individual characteristics (such as language proficiency, work status and children), as well as migration pathways (such as previous migration patterns and life stage at migration) which influence the formation of ties and, as such, also subjective feelings of social loneliness. Including non-urban areas would be an interesting avenue for future studies, allowing for capturing the influence of the residential context on social loneliness. The higher presence of European migrants in Antwerp and Brussels might create more opportunities to make new friends than is the case elsewhere. Having said that, in less urban areas the influence of migratory chains might in turn result in more dense, homogenous personal networks (Gómez-Mestres et al., 2012).

Finally, our analyses demonstrate the dynamic character of the social networks of Europeans. The size of local networks of family and friends increases over time and the composition of the local network of friends changes to include more own friends and more native friends. Because of these changes, the contact with the local network is intensified, while contact with the transnational network fades over time. As they have spent longer time in the country, these European migrants' feelings of social loneliness decrease, but this is established only indirectly through the changes in their local social network.

Longitudinal research has demonstrated that feelings of social loneliness are often temporary (Newall et al., 2014). Being conscious of the temporary state of these feelings can help to reframe the situation. This could also help European migrants in tackling the subjective aspect of their social loneliness through anticipating feelings of loneliness and offering a perspective of change over the longer term, lowering their standards on current social relations and helping them to deal with these feelings (Schoenmakers et al., 2014). The emphasis in research and society is often focused on the social integration of non-European migrant groups. Broadening the scope to less evident groups can help heighten awareness for these groups and the implications a migration move might have for the individual, the family and society at large.

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Notes

1. As we will be looking at European migrants with a Belgian partner, this refers to the top five European countries of origin in this group for Belgium between 2005 and 2009.
2. Because of substantial differences in educational levels between Europeans with a native partner and natives with a native partner, the analyses were rerun to control for this compositional difference but findings remained the same.

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