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Svitlana Iarmolenko

Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, Pennsylvania State University

Peter F. Titzmann

Jacobs Center for Productive Youth Development, University of Zurich

Rainer K. Silbereisen

Center for Applied Developmental Science, University of Jena

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Iarmolenko, Svitlana; Titzmann, Peter F.; and Silbereisen, Rainer K., "Between Here and There: Patterns and Predictors of Transnationalism among Three Immigrant Groups in Germany" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 17.

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Between Here and There: Patterns and Predictors of Transnationalism among Three Immigrant Groups in Germany

Svitlana Iarmolenko
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management
Pennsylvania State University

Peter F. Titzmann
Jacobs Center for Productive Youth Development
University of Zurich

and

Rainer K. Silbereisen
Center for Applied Developmental Science
University of Jena

ABSTRACT

The increasingly global world is giving rise to the new form of immigrant movement called transnationalism, characterized by immigrants' close ties with both host and home nations as well as frequent trips between the two countries. Despite lively theoretical discussion of transnationalism there is very little empirical research on patterns and predictors of transnational migration. The current study investigates predictors of group and individual variability in transnationalism within three largest immigrant groups in Germany: ethnic Germans, Russian Jews, and Turks. Impacts of context of exit and entry, demographic variables, and sociocultural retention variables on transnationalism are investigated. Results show that ethnic groups are indeed different in the frequency of visiting the country of origin, and demonstrate the importance of cultural and identification variables in predicting between-individual variability in transnationalism.

Keywords: *transnationalism, immigration, Germany*

INTRODUCTION

Until recently migrant exodus meant a one-way ticket, but migration processes today have been indicative of transnationalism: a new class of migrants who travel back and forth across borders, conduct regular sociocultural activities in two societies (Leyendecker, 2011). Transnationalism is assuming a growing importance in tourism (Go & Ritchie, 1990), with migrants contributing to travel expenditures (even more so than regular tourists due to the frequency of travel), cultural exchange, and heritage enrichment.

However, the scarcity of research in this domain is limited to sex tourism (Brennan, 2001) and cruises (Wood, 2000), largely ignoring the paramount activities of transnational migrants. For a deep understanding of this phenomenon and its contribution to tourism “more in-depth comparative empirical studies of transnational human mobility” (Kearney, 1999, p. 456) are needed. In response to such demands, this study explored between-group differences and individual level predictors of transnationalism for three immigrant groups in Germany (Turks, Ethnic German repatriates from the former Soviet Union, and Russian Jews).

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Hitchcock (1999) believed that “ethnicity permeates every aspect of tourism, but remains poorly understood in this context” (p. 17). Heritage trips to ethnic homeland are unique and different from regular domestic and international travel, and thus need further investigation. Thanopoulos and Walle (1988) call ethnic heritage travel “a tedious and expensive purchase” (p. 11), thus transnational migrants make a significant economic contribution by frequent travel.

Defining transnationalism as ethnic immigrants’ frequency of traveling back to their home country is in line with more general notions of transnationalism proposed by Portes (1999). But immigrant groups vary greatly in their transnational activities (Portes, 2003), and we expected this to be the case for groups in Germany. We anticipated that Turks to go home the most, followed by Russian Jews, and Ethnic Germans take the least frequent trips to the homeland (Hypothesis 1). This expectation was based on different migration histories and incorporations into host society: ethnic Germans and Jews escaped discrimination at home and were well received in Germany, whereas Turks have experienced difficulties within German society, all the while maintaining contacts and property in Turkey (Kaya, 2007).

In addition, we expected heterogeneity within the three ethnic groups studied and identified three groups of predictors that are likely to have an impact on inter-individual differences in transnationalism within the groups. Besides examining demographic control variables (Sirkeci, 2003), we expected variables indicative of host culture adaptation to be negatively (Vertovec, 1999); and variables reflecting sociocultural retention (Nauck, 2001) to be positively related to transnationalism (Hypothesis 2).

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected in 2007/08. Ethnic German and Turkish participants were randomly selected from registry data provided by two cities in Western Germany, whereas snowball sampling had to be applied in Russian Jewish population. Trained interviewers fluent in German and the language of the respondent conducted structured interviews with 894 female subjects. Questions targeted the frequency of travel to the homeland as well as the three groups of predictors (demographics, context of exit and entry, and sociocultural and language retention). All indicators showed sufficient psychometric properties to be used in the analyses.

ANOVA analyses were used to determine between-group differences, while ordinary least squares regression identified significant individual level predictors of transnationalism for subjects in each ethnic group separately.

RESULTS

Descriptives showed transnationalism to be pertinent in all migrant groups, with 53% participants traveling home every 2-3 years or more. Univariate ANOVA provided partial support for Hypothesis 1, with transnationalism scores differing in the predicted direction ($F=62.49$, $df=5$, $p=.000$). However only the Turkish group differed significantly from two other groups (MTurk=2.4, $SD=.8$; MRJ= 1.4, $SD=1.1$; MEG=1.2, $SD=1.1$).

The OLS regression, in which the groups of predictors were entered in separate steps, provided partial support for Hypothesis 2. Unexpectedly, however, the results varied across groups. Table 1 shows the standardized Beta values for the associations of predictors and transnationalism in the multivariate analysis. The explained variance for each regression step is also shown. In the third and final regression step, various predictors were related to transnationalism.

Consistent associations were found with regard to length of stay, thoughts about leaving, and social networks variables. Results for ethnic identification were contradicting. High levels of ethnic identification predicted lower levels of transnationalism for ethnic Germans and Russian Jews; relationship was positive for Turks.

Table 1

Standardized Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Transnationalism

	Ethnic German Repatriates			Russian Jews			Turks		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Age	-.069	.113	.129*	-.046	.083	.019	.044	.029	.055
Education	.243**	.155*	.100	.118	.064	.098	.194**	.172*	.155*
Financial situation	.089	.053	.093	-.090	-.016	-.102	.205**	.201**	.144*
Length of stay		-.389***	-.260**		-.239**	-.122		-.022	-.096
Discrimination		-.143*	-.077		-.210**	-.189**		.032	.027
Thoughts of leaving host country		.169**	.122*		.151*	.125		.193**	.204**
Real estate in host country		.113	.141*		-.041	-.004		.043	.025
Real estate in home country		.369***	.287***		.136	.107		.078	.079
Language use			-.089			-.123			.153*
Acculturation to ethnic values			.130*			.080			.012
Acculturation to host values			-.052			.008			.062
Social network (host country)			-.065			.083			.017
Social network (home country)			.133*			.164*			.172*
Social network composition			-.218**			-.230**			-.083
Identification (ethnic)			-.224***			-.170*			.259**
Identification (host)			-.116			-.048			.025
R squared model	.071	.380	.478	.018	.136	.256	.082	.127	.186

Note.*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study is one of the first attempts to research immigrant transnationalism with empirical data. It provides support of transnationalism among three immigrant groups in Germany, and evidence of its relative frequency. Thanopoulos and Walle (1988) suggest that many ethnic groups “have the discretionary income which makes investing in one’s heritage a financial possibility” (p. 11), making transnational migrant activism a lucrative opportunity for entrepreneurs who wish to satisfy the need of ancestral home visits.

However, the evidence suggests ethnic differences in this regard that need to be considered before any benefits can be received. Groups show a different pattern of transnationalism, possibly due to cultural differences in dealing with extended family or different tourism policies in the heritage country. In addition, some of the factors that could explain variance within groups may account for inter-ethnic differences.

Most unexpected findings pertain to ethnic identification which for two of the groups had significant negative impact on the frequency of home visits whereas it was positively related to transnationalism among Turks. While enhancing ethnic identification was long believed to encourage heritage trips (Hitchcock, 1999), our findings show that a group-specific tailored marketing approach might need to be employed by practitioners. Transnational migrants are a lucrative market for heritage travel, but we need to understand this population a lot better before we can benefit from offering them a quality tourism product.

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