
11. Re-socializing migrant networks: moving beyond dominant migrant-network approaches

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INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of migration has a long history of explaining international migration and, especially, the perpetuation of international movement, through focusing on the dynamics within people's social networks (Massey et al. 1998). A dominant perspective on the role of social networks for the continuation of international movements is presented by Massey and his colleagues (1998, 42), who define migrant networks as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin". Within these network linkages, social capital can be mobilized to reduce the risks of movement across international borders (Portes 2010). This network approach has been widely recognized, although it has also received some criticism, as it is assumed to inadequately include the (contemporary) context in which migration flows are being shaped (Collyer 2005, Krissman 2005, Portes 2010). We also observe that this conventional migrant-network approach fails to adequately explain contemporary international mobility in the context of irregular migration. Firstly, it fails to integrate the many significant global processes, among them – especially – the increased migration controls that have fundamentally changed the opportunities and conditions for international migration. Secondly, on a conceptual level, the definition of migrant networks by Massey et al. is a too-narrow and static vision on personal networks. In addition, their definition of migrant networks does not match the realities of current irregular migration flows in which, among other things, the distinction between countries of origin and of destination have been blurred and where other actors, next to relatives and friends, have become equally important in shaping their journeys.

Despite these limitations, we still believe in the explanatory power of a social-network approach as it best enables an understanding of the choices of migrants during their journeys and gives them the agency they deserve (cf. D'Angelo 2021). However, the approach requires an alternative view on migrant networks that returns to the origins of network theory, as it is based in sociology and anthropology (Bott 1957, Boissevain 1974) and simultaneously fits the contemporary world in which migration flows are being shaped within a context of increasingly expanded migration control. In this chapter, we sketch out an alternative view on migrant networks that better suits contemporary migration trajectories in the European context. In what follows, we first discuss the limitations of the dominant migrant-network approach. Then we draw on studies in the field of migration infrastructures to show a wide range of actors who shape the irregular movements of migrants in contemporary society. While some believe these migration infrastructures are promising for explaining how migration is being mediated – and prefer this concept over the migrant-network approach (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) – we argue that this concept lacks sufficient explanatory power. In the next section, we therefore present

insights from network studies that help to develop an alternative, more holistic understanding of networks that better fits the current geopolitical and digitalized context, and helps in understanding contemporary clandestine migration trajectories. Finally, we end with a plea for a return to a wide social-network approach that incorporates a broad spectrum of existing and developing linkages with a keen eye for the reciprocal exchange in the interaction between the migrants and their linkages in their social networks. Such a migrant-based perspective should contribute to a better understanding of how migration trajectories are being shaped in the contemporary world.

1. THE MIGRANT-NETWORK APPROACH AND ITS LIMITATIONS

The focus within Massey et al.'s definition of the migrant-network approach is on (1) a rigid understanding of localities, (2) a narrow focus on linkages that matter and (3) a narrow interpretation of how support is mobilized. It is our argument that these characteristics of migrant networks and their migration-mediating capacity have fundamentally changed due to their interaction with increased and diversified forms of migration control. We unfold our arguments below.

1.1 A Rigid Understanding of Localities

The dominant network approach has a bipolar interpretation of the localities that matter in migration and mainly limits its scope to the countries of origin and destination. Studies on irregular migration to Europe have stressed how migrants moved directly from their home country to the country of destination by way of a (falsified) tourist visa obtained through the support of relatives already living in these countries of destination or by human-smuggling networks that were operating between the countries of origin and of destination. In many cases, the journeys of these visa overstayers or smuggled migrants were characterized by quite short and direct journeys of days or weeks (Staring 2004, Collyer 2005). This justified the focus on two countries in the network approach.

Although irregular migration still takes place in this way, the mobility of contemporary migrants – especially those who travel clandestinely – is increasingly shaped differently (cf. Caarls et al. 2021). Due to the migrant's interaction with internal and external forms of migration control and the support from within the transnational network that often diminishes across generations, the linear and unidirectional movements from home to destination country have been transformed into much more dynamic journeys (Crawley and Jones 2021). Of course, migration control is not a new phenomenon, but the number and nature of borders and their controls have substantially changed in recent decades, especially for those who are not labelled as “bona fide travellers” but are referred to as “crimmigrants” (Aas 2011), bogus travellers, irregular migrants and asylum shoppers. These migrants face the difficult and often dangerous task of crossing and navigating through different external and internal borders, despite rosy stories about a “global village”. Not only has the number of borders increased but they have also become fluid as they were moved outside national territories in order to protect countries – as well as political and economic unions – against the perceived threats of transnational organized crime, pandemics, terrorism and unwanted migration (Parker and Vaughan-Williams

2009). This externalization of borders through (financial) support and bilateral agreements with other countries led to a relocation of borders far beyond the geographical borders of nation-states. In addition, borders have been renewed, reinforced, (temporarily) reactivated, digitalized and transformed. Governments increasingly stimulate or enforce private parties to take on the responsibility for controlling their companies – and ultimately their borders – in respect to irregular migration. Borders are also embodied in the different kinds of measures and policies of nation-states that guard access to welfare-state provisions and through the merging of criminal and immigration law (Staring and Van Swaaningen 2021). All these mixtures of migration control within Europe, at its external borders and far beyond lead to immobility and fragmented journeys in which labels such as “countries of destination” and “transit countries” increasingly get mixed up (Schapendonk 2012). Migrants’ journeys are currently defined as much by immobility and fragmentation as by a direct movement from the country of origin to that of destination (Collyer 2010, Snel et al. 2021). This has implications for migrant networks and the localities where these networks are being constituted and used, which is not yet integrated in the classic migrant-network approach.

1.2 A Narrow Focus on Linkages that Matter

Furthermore, current migrant-network approaches have a strong focus on specific linkages with relatives, friends and co-nationals. These are still important in the contemporary globalized world, with its increased transnational interconnectedness. However, the changed position and nature of borders have not only brought about different localities en route but other unknown and socially distant actors have also come into play to facilitate unauthorized migration (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Weak ties have become more important for migrants to shape their mobility (Collyer 2005). For instance, migrants make use of travel agents, recruiters, smugglers and mediators who are based in their home countries and organize the (legal documents for) their clandestine migration trajectories, given the increased migration controls (Adugna et al. 2019). En route, too, migrants may still turn to their kin and friends for support (Adugna et al. 2019, Vammen 2019) but increasingly use other migrants, smugglers, humanitarian organizations, etc., to facilitate their (temporary) stay or onward journey. They may use social media to connect with others en route or facilitators who are available but, until then, unknown to them (Latonero and Kift 2018). They may physically visit localities en route such as the “Afghan Park” in Belgrade or the Ramazan Efendi Park in Istanbul, which both function as gathering places where migrants can both acquire material support from humanitarian organizations and concerned citizens and find ad hoc connections who may organize their onward migration (Staring 2018, Bobić and Šantić 2020). They may also join forces with fellow unauthorized migrants who look for opportunities to travel to the European Union (EU). Often, the resources of different actors are combined and connected in order to move forwards (Belloni 2020). This implies that a wide range of human and non-human, commercial and humanitarian actors, together with kin, friends and compatriots, have started to facilitate the migrants’ journeys. These other actors are, in many cases, well known in the academic literature for their facilitating role in migrants’ international movements (Andersson 2014, Meeus et al. 2019) but are not included in the dominant migrant-network approach. Focusing on national frameworks, however, runs the risk of ignoring transnational connections and methodological nationalism, in which the social boundaries of the migrant network are equated with state boundaries (Aas 2011).

Additionally, the migrant-network approach draws only on those actors who facilitate the migrants' mobility. However, "nothing invalidates traditional approaches to migration as effectively as border control policies" as Massey et al. (1998, 14) argue. A focus on facilitators prevents the presentation of a full and meaningful image of migration trajectories and comes at the expense of other actors who likewise hinder or delay migrants' mobility. Possible constraints and potential conflicts between migrants and their relatives and friends, for instance, may also obstruct mobility (Cole and Groes 2016, Schapendonk 2020). Actors may also have a more diffuse role in the migrants' journeys. For instance, in response to increased and changed migration controls, unauthorized migrants increasingly make use of non-personal actors such as Facebook and WhatsApp to find facilitators, locate important places to stay and safe routes and keep in touch with family and friends elsewhere. At the same time, states increasingly use these digitalized tools to control unauthorized migration, asylum and residence applications. They may confiscate unauthorized migrants' mobile devices and/or use their activity and traceability on social-media platforms as part of their identification and deportation practices (Dekker et al. 2018, Latonero and Kift 2018). This shows that these digital actors, at short notice, may both serve as a lifeline for unauthorized migrants and harm their own interests en route/on arrival in the long run. A similar line of reasoning is related to humanitarian organizations which support unauthorized migrants by providing relief to them and lessening their suffering en route and on arrival. Simultaneously, state authorities increasingly criminalize these organizations and/or try to incorporate them in their controlling system, which has resulted in a more diffuse role for the actors in the migrants' journeys (Fassin 2011, Kox and Staring 2020). While these actors shape the mobility of migrants in a unique way, they are not usually included in conventional social-network theories.

1.3 Neglecting Reciprocal Exchange and Obligations

Finally, migration scholars drawing on the dominant migrant-network approach explain movement by focusing on migrants' social capital, arguing that migrants may mobilize the social capital that is potentially available within these network connections in order to reduce the risk of movement across international borders. The central logic of social capital within migrant networks is that different forms of support that come with such ties will facilitate not only the journey but also access to the labour market and housing in countries where former migrants are located, as well as other relevant issues that newly arrived migrants encounter in their daily lives. Social capital within the migrant-network approach is primarily defined and perceived as a key resource of network-mediated benefits within and beyond the immediate family (Portes 2010). According to scholars who adhere to social-capital theory, international migration and its directions are very much "network mediated" (2010, 37). The migrants' appropriation or conscious mobilization of social capital from dynamic linkages within their broad networks is crucial in understanding how they navigate their journeys in changing contexts and whether they are successful in so doing (cf. Van Meeteren and Pereira 2018).

However, these benefits never come for free, as exchange along social lines of interaction is always embedded in a context of reciprocity based on culturally embedded norms of what we can expect from other linkages and what is expected in return (Sahlins 2004). In order to meet this reciprocal exchange, Sahlins discerned a spectrum of reciprocities – from generalized reciprocity (the "solidary extreme") that comes closest to the pure gift and altruism, to balanced reciprocity ("the midpoint"), which refers to direct exchange, and negative reciprocity ("the

unsociable extreme”) in which one attempts to receive things or support for nothing, trying to maximize one’s own interest at the expense of others (2004, 195). In the context of irregular migration and mobilizing and maintaining support within one’s network, this implies, firstly, that the support mobilized by migrants always comes with specific “costs”. Secondly, these costs differ along the lines of social distances that are not fixed in themselves but can change accordingly (Pathirage and Collyer 2011). The further the social distance between the support receiver and the support giver, the higher the material or immaterial costs will be for the former. The migrant-network approach, with its strong focus on how social capital facilitates and supports mobility, barely deals with this downside of social capital (cf. Portes 2014) while it seems increasingly important in the context of other, less-close linkages that contribute to shaping the migrants’ journey. Until now, little is known about the kinds of obligation that accompany these interactions and how they influence the migrants’ journey.

2. DRAWING ON “MIGRATION INFRASTRUCTURES”

In response to the limitations of the migrant-network approach, some scholars are moving away from migrant networks and have developed alternative approaches to understand migrants’ clandestine journeys. These scholars believe that migration is a multidirectional and self-adjusting process produced by a wide range of actors, structures and technologies (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, Lin et al. 2017). Xiang and Lindquist (2014, S124), for instance, argue that it is not the migrants themselves who migrate but that migration is the result of “constellations consisting of migrants and non-migrants, of human and non-human actors”. These constellations are supposed to transcend individual migrants and their networks – in other words, all elements within these constellations should be addressed within migration studies (Lin et al. 2017). Therefore, Xiang and Lindquist (2014, S122) have coined the concept of “migration infrastructures”, which refers to the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions and actors that facilitate and condition mobility, infrastructures which should be understood as socio-technical platforms (Larkin 2013, Collins 2021). Drawing upon this infrastructural approach, they try to open the “black box” of infrastructures that produce and shape migration processes in order to better understand these constellations and the role of different actors within them (see also Lindquist et al. 2012). As such, this approach moves beyond the level of the individual migrant and the state and includes different actors, structures and technologies that all direct and underpin migration (Lin et al. 2017, Lindquist and Xiang 2018).

Xiang and Lindquist (2014) present five infrastructural dimensions which work in interaction with and interdependently from each other (see also Lin et al. 2017, Lindquist and Xiang 2018). Each dimension includes several actors who have a role in the facilitation or obstruction of migration trajectories. Firstly, they introduce a commercial dimension that includes a wide range of intermediary actors who try to connect (potential) migrants and employers and facilitate migrants en route from a more commercialized perspective (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, Collins 2021). Secondly, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) discuss the regulatory dimension that includes state and non-state actors who regulate and control unauthorized migration before departure, en route and on arrival. This includes state actors such as border-control organizations, Frontex, the police and immigration services (Meeus et al. 2019) and non-state actors who have obtained a role within migration control policies and practices, such as carriers (Scholten 2014), employers (Mitsilegas 2013), citizens (Aliverti 2015) and humanitarian

organizations (Kox and Staring 2020). Thirdly, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) highlight the technological dimension and discuss how ICT (information and communications technology), social media and social devices are being used both by migrants to communicate with their families, find all the resources they need and contact travel agents, and by states to obstruct unauthorized migration. Fourthly, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) describe the humanitarian dimension of migration infrastructures, referring to a wide range of humanitarian actors who have become involved in – and shape – migration *and* return trajectories. Finally, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) present the social dimension. Referring to the work of Simone (2004) – who argues that people may also function as infrastructure if adequate formal, physical structures are lacking – they posit that people or institutions who support migrants’ mobility “directly take an infrastructural form” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, S133). These five infrastructural dimensions (Lindquist and Xiang 2018) are supposed to enable and direct migrants’ clandestine journeys (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, Lin et al. 2017, Lindquist and Xiang 2018).

In contrast with the migrant-network approach, the migration-infrastructure approach takes the proliferation of borders, the different localities and a wide range of other actors into account to explain how (unauthorized) migration trajectories are being shaped. It shows the coming-togetherness of these actors with their overlapping roles, possibly conflicting objectives and opaque boundaries. Given its potential to introduce insights from a wide range of academic disciplines that focus on (the inner workings of) these infrastructural dimensions, the migration-infrastructure approach is considered promising (Collins 2021, Wajsberg and Schapendonk 2021). As there is an increasing number of empirical studies that draw upon this perspective to explain unauthorized migrants’ clandestine journeys (e.g. Chan 2017, Lin et al. 2017, Adugna et al. 2019, Vammen 2019, Wajsberg and Schapendonk 2021, Yassine et al. 2021), it is important to critically examine the potential pitfalls of this approach.

3. THE EXPLORATORY LIMITATIONS OF THE MIGRATION-INFRASTRUCTURES APPROACH

Migration-infrastructure scholars argue that these infrastructural dimensions should function as a starting point – or a knowledge repository – to understand how migration trajectories are being shaped (Lin et al. 2017). However, we see several explanatory limitations of this approach that have to be dealt with. Firstly, a sole focus on the infrastructures comes at the cost of understanding the socially embedded choices that migrants make. Migrants might be given “significance and direction through the infrastructuring process”, as Lin et al. (2017, 168) argue, but this does not mean that migrants do not – (un)deliberately – make individual or network-embedded choices within the constraints of these infrastructural dimensions that directly impact on their migration trajectory (cf. Khan 2019, 2020; Kleist and Bjarnesen 2019). Previous research has shown that unauthorized migrants (consciously) develop strategies and make decisions en route, as well as improvising, negotiating and adjusting their migration plans (Schapendonk 2018, D’Angelo 2021). As such elements are not included in the migration-infrastructure approach, migrants’ agency tends to be overlooked, even though they are neither passive recipients on their own journey nor socially isolated individuals. As a consequence, this approach does not adequately address the possible differentiation in migrants’ trajectories. Xiang and Lindquist (2014, S127) argue that migration experiences may differ per country, and seek to explain these differences on the basis of the development of a migration

infrastructure in order to move away from the “people who move” category (Lin et al. 2017, 169). However, migrants differ in their opportunities to access these infrastructures (see Kleist and Bjarnesen 2019, Wajsberg and Schapendonk 2021). This means that unravelling the different infrastructures, as Xiang and Lindquist (2014) propose, does not provide sufficient insight into why one migration trajectory succeeds while another fails in a context of similar infrastructures. Understanding individual trajectories as well as differentiation within the migrants’ trajectories requires centralizing the migrants in the approach.

Secondly, on a conceptual level, Xiang and Lindquist (2014, S133) discern social networks as a separate infrastructure in order to “examine how networks work by serving as part of migration infrastructure” while including different kinds of actor within the other dimensions of migration infrastructures. In our view, considering networks as a separate infrastructure seems contradictory, as all discerned infrastructures involve actors and possible linkages that can be included in the migrants’ social networks. Finally, we believe that these infrastructures are the context in which clandestine migration trajectories are situated and in which the migrants themselves – in direct interaction with their constantly developing networks – have to find their way. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) believe that these infrastructures are relatively stable and coherent, unlike migrants’ fragmented and changing trajectories. We believe that this context is also subject to (sudden and ongoing) change. The recent crisis of the EU around the influx of Syrian refugees, for instance, has shown how migrants’ trajectories continuously change through, for instance, new border regulations, sudden controls, information on social media and search-and-rescue teams from humanitarian organizations. Within these structured and constantly changing settings, migrants in direct interaction with existing and new actors that pop up in their social networks move and organize their journeys. Therefore, starting from the migrants’ perspective seems more appropriate to understand how they make use of these interlinked and changing dimensions of the migration infrastructure to shape their migration trajectories in the contemporary world (cf. D’Angelo 2021).

4. MIGRANT AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH ON NETWORKS

In our view, a broad social-network approach – with a dynamic perspective on linkages and its accompanying concepts of mobilizing and maintaining social capital in a context of reciprocal exchange – offers better opportunities for understanding how socially embedded migrants shape their mobility. However, we believe that we need to debunk network determinism (Schapendonk 2015, D’Angelo 2021) and extend the view of networks in the migrant-network approach, as the world in which migration trajectories are situated has changed under processes of globalization, increased bordering and digitalization. The migration-infrastructure approach provides us with valuable insights into a wide range of actors, structures and technologies that interrelatedly shape contemporary migration trajectories and which are lacking in the migrant-network approach. This enables us to explore an alternative understanding of networks in the context of the migrant-network approach that better fits the current geopolitical and digitalized context and helps us to understand contemporary clandestine migration trajectories. Ironically, we have to move further back in history to create analytical room for this alternative approach.

Drawing on insights from older social-network studies, we would favor a more holistic view on *social* networks, not mainly focusing on *migrant* networks. An alternative understanding of migrant networks would first imply a much more “neutral focus” – i.e., not only on these supportive actors but also on those individuals who somehow hinder, oppose or seek to control individual journeys or irregular flows on a more general level. We believe that the interaction between the migrant and these different actors within the formers’ network is far more promising in explaining the clandestine journeys, as all somehow shape these journeys. We want to follow up on Elisabeth Bott, one of the pioneering academics on qualitative-network analysis, who describes networks as a “set of social relationships for which there is no common boundary” (1957, 59). She argues in line with the anthropologist Barnes, who defines a network as consisting of persons who are

in touch with a number of people, some of whom are directly in touch with each other and some of whom are not. [...] The image I have is of a net of points, some of which are joined by lines. The points of the image are people, or sometimes groups, and the lines indicate which people interact with each other. (Cited in Bott 1957, 59)

Such a less-pre-defined image of a person’s network, focusing on different roles and interaction, makes room for a much broader inclusion of different actors beyond the usual “suspects” – relatives, friends, co-nationals – within a person’s network, including non-humans who come and go or stay for a lifetime and interact with the migrant and his or her journey. Some of them have single roles; others have multiple roles and, of course, roles can also change over time. As Bott (1957) notes, some people within the network know and are in touch with each other, whereas others are not. We would like to add that some actors in a person’s social network have a role that is somehow connected to the migrant’s journey, while many other linkages are aside from it. Some persons come and go within these personal networks and others are there for a lifetime. The interactions and relationships within a personal network all come with obligations guided by specific norms (Mauss 1966).

Using such an alternative approach as unbounded networks enables us to include a wide range of actors at different localities, with varying types of relationship and costs for migrants, in our explanations of how clandestine migration trajectories are being shaped. This increases the explanatory power of the network approach in our contemporary bordered world. For instance, in response to the totalitarian regime in Eritrea, Eritreans may migrate and stay in Sudan and/or Libya. Instead of perceiving these as transit places through which people merely pass on their journey to Europe, they could be much more characterized as places where people live and try to make a living (Crawley and Jones 2021, 3238). Depending on the political, economic and social conditions, migrants will decide to stay or move to another locality which offers them and their family greater opportunities (Staring 2018). During their stay in these places, migrants not only rely on close interpersonal ties that were built in their home country. Within the context of migration controls, regulations and limitations, they also (try to) reach out to and interact with physical and virtual actors such as other migrants, employers, smugglers, humanitarian organizations, border-control officers and others to facilitate their (temporary) stay or to move on. They actually start networking by creating new or repairing old linkages as part of their trajectory, which shows the dynamic nature of the migrants’ networks (Schapendonk 2015).

Following up on Bott (1957), we believe that this “net of points” is relationships with actors that are part and parcel of the migrants’ social networks, in which not all “points” are mobilized

on the migrants' journey (see also Ryan and D'Angelo 2018). In a context of meeting other actors along the road, the importance of social proximity is absent, meaning that new, weak ties at these new localities can become increasingly important (Collyer 2005). Simultaneously, these weak ties may develop into strong, close ties over time, given the dynamic nature of such networks (Schapendonk 2015). Weak ties, as strong ties, have their downsides, too. Whereas family members can support the movement of relatives in return for long-term friendship, respect and gratitude, the support of these other actors will probably lie somewhere between balanced and negative reciprocity depending on their social distance towards the migrants who seek support. This explains why some migrants pay a reasonable amount of money for their clandestine journey to a "good smuggler" and are taken care of (Achilli 2018), while others can be economically exploited and physically abused while being smuggled into a country they did not even want to go to. Migrants will somehow have to engage with all these different actors they encounter, as well as with the obligations that go along with the interactions. It is within the dynamics between these actors and the opportunities and difficulties that arise during interactions that are situated within broader structures of migration control that these contemporary irregular migration journeys should be understood.

5. TO CONCLUDE

In this contribution, we have tried to outline an alternative view on migrants and their social networks that helps us to understand how irregular migration trajectories are being shaped in the contemporary European context. While we see how the dominant migrant-network approach contributes to our understanding of these trajectories, we also observe several limitations within this approach in terms of the rigid understanding of localities, the narrow focus on linkages that matter and the neglect of reciprocal exchange and obligations. This comes at the expense of the explanatory power of this approach in contemporary society, where "borders" are omnipresent and migrants' journeys are much more fragmented in time and place. At the same time, ignoring the migrant-network approach would be like throwing out the baby with the bath water, as this approach best enables us to understand the (differentiated) choices of migrants during their journeys while not denying their agency (D'Angelo 2021). From the migration-infrastructure approach and its different dimensions, we added some elements and several human as well as non-human actors into our migrant- and social-network approaches. We believe that different ties are part and parcel of migrants' social networks and shape their migration trajectories. This implies that we should not only restrict ourselves to the given points in our social networks (relatives, friends, co-nationals) that facilitate the migrants' journeys but, instead, opt for a broader, more holistic and dynamic perspective on them, in which strong and weak ties, old and new linkages as well as the obligations that exist and are created within these interactions should be centre stage.

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