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Social embeddedness in a harmonized Europe: European bi-national couples in Belgium and the Netherlands.

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Abstract

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Internal mobility is getting ever more important in Europe. Although the migration move might be easier to realize for European migrants compared to those from outside the EU, it can still be experienced as socially disruptive. This paper for the first time studies social networks of European migrants in comparative perspective. First we question how European migrants succeed in inserting themselves into the social fabric of their new European home country. Second we relate the latter to the investment in transnational networks in their European country of origin. The national and transnational networks and its links are studied from the perspective of European nationals with a native partner in Belgium and the Netherlands. We apply structural equation models on unique survey data from the international EUMARR project including 728 Europeans for our study. We find clear differences in networks between traditional labor migrants, recent migrants and migrants from neighboring countries.

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Extended abstract

Background

Internal mobility is getting ever more important in Europe (de Valk, Huisman, & Noam, 2011). European migrants are an important share in the migration in many European countries. At the same time not much is known on these European migrants and even less so about their social networks both in countries of settlement and origin. Although the migration move might be easier to realize for European migrants compared to those from outside the EU, it can still be experienced as socially disruptive. This paper for the first time studies social networks of European migrants in a cross-national comparative perspective. First we question how European migrants succeed in inserting themselves into the social fabric of their new European home country. Second we relate the latter to the investment in transnational networks in their European country of origin.

Following the example of Korinek, Entwisle and Jampaklay (2005), we define social embeddedness as the social relationships that foster a sense of rootedness and integration. Social embeddedness in this sense is considered a positive asset. Many authors have pointed to the positive consequences of social embeddedness (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1992; Hechter, 1987; Korinek et al., 2005; Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 2013; Tönnies, 1887; Uehara, 1990). Socially embedded individuals can rely on group solidarity and informal social support for the pursuit of their personal goals. The social relationships in which they are engaged can also engender access to practical resources. Social embeddedness is moreover considered a necessary condition for an individual's successful personal development, social integration and political participation in society. Some authors point to the possible negative consequences of social embeddedness, linked to social pressure and social control (e.g. Portes, Sensenbrenner 2013).

Migration can have a disruptive effect on social embeddedness (Coleman, 1990). Carefully built up networks become fragmented when people move to a different country and migrants might need to build up new social networks in their new home country. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that migration can strengthen existing (intergenerational) ties within the family. According to transnationalist literature, social networks are preserved in the case of migration, but in a new form (Levitt, 2001). They are no longer localized, but the migrant remains embedded in a transnational network where solidarity and trust operate (Zontini, 2004). Such transnational networks are maintained even more easily in current times of modern communication and relatively cheap and accessible transportation.

Social embeddedness has been studied among non-European migrants mainly. Since the European Commission is heavily promoting intra-European mobility for the sake of European economic and social integration, it is important to understand the impact of this mobility on the social integration of individual European migrants as well. Although the migration move might be easier to realize for this group, they might still experience the move as

equally disruptive. The different family relation systems across Europe as well as the distance might have similar implications for maintaining social ties across borders among European migrants (de Winter, de Valk, & Koelet, 2013).

In this paper we look at the social embeddedness of European migrants from the perspective of bi-national couples, more specifically couples with one foreign European and one Belgian partner. According to social distance theory migrants with a native partner should have better conditions for a successful integration (Nauck, 2002). Rother (2008) has demonstrated that the partner's ethnic background plays an important role in the migrant's cultural, social and emotional integration. The native partner can be considered as the privileged bridge to the society of destination, representing easier and more rapid access to the social networks and economic resources of that society (Gaspar, 2009). Putnam (2000) has likewise pointed to the importance of looking at bridging ties when studying immigrants' integration.

Data

The data for this paper come from a recently conducted international comparable survey from the EUMARR project (<http://www.ibeio.org/projects/eumarr/>). This (web-) survey aimed at sketching the social contrasts between individual respondents from bi-national and uni-national couples and laying out the consequences of European integration for the European social structure, for identification patterns and for the practices of its citizens. The survey was administered in 2012-13 across eight European cities in four different European countries. In this paper we use EUMARR data from two neighboring countries, Belgium (N=805) (Koelet, de Valk, & Willaert, 2013) and the Netherlands (N=918) (Heering, Van Solinge, & Van Wissen, 2013). The data refer to 30-45 year-old individuals, belonging to couples with one European and one native partner. The European partner might be either born in Belgium or migrated from a different European country.

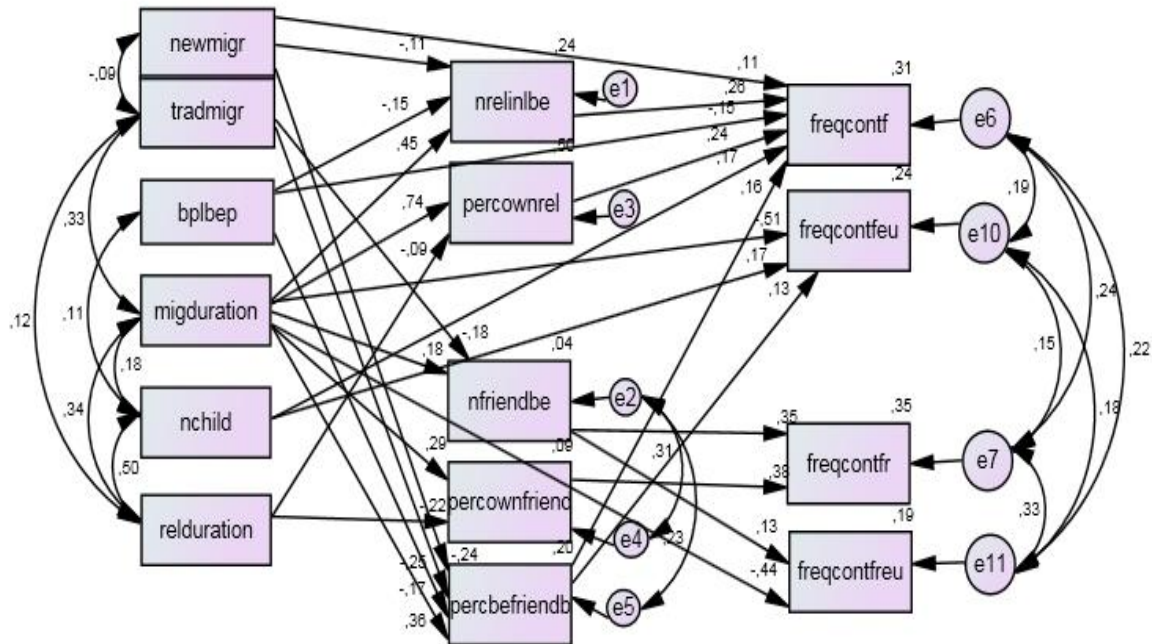
For this paper we are focusing on the European partners in the surveys (N=330 in Belgium and N=398 in the Netherlands), although the data from the native partners in the bi-national and native couples will also be used in the descriptive analysis. The European partners in the Belgian survey belong to a restricted number of nationalities. The selected nationalities represent the top six in recent European bi-national marriage combinations, namely Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Polish (married to a Belgian partner). Most survey countries have limited the number of European nationalities to control for too much diversity within the survey and in-between survey countries, but this was not possible for the Netherlands (targeted population was too small). Both the Dutch and the Belgian survey nevertheless allow for a distinction along migrant groups between migrants who belong to a European nationality with a long tradition of labor migration to the host country (for Belgium: Italians and Spanish), more recent EU labor migrant nationalities (for Belgium: Polish), as well as nationalities from neighboring countries (for Belgium: Germans, French and Dutch). This allows for a comparative approach to capture diversity in couples and their embeddedness in Belgian society.

We apply descriptive statistics followed by Structural equation models (using Amos) to study relationships between social networks in country of origin and settlement. Measures of social networks include both family and friends. In addition we cover not only the size of the network but also intensity of contact and relative importance of family and friends. The links with individual, couple history and migration history is studied in more detail.

Preliminary findings

Below we provide a first insight into the findings of our explanatory analysis based on the Belgian data. These findings will be further extended and tested on the Dutch survey data. Figure 1 shows the results of a SE path-analysis (using Amos) explaining frequency of contact with family and friends in Belgium for European migrants from traditional and new labor migrant groups in comparison to migrants from neighboring countries. The intensity of contact with the local network is studied in relation to contact with the transnational network (family and friends in the country of origin). The model accounts for the different dimensions characterizing the social network, including size and composition of the network of friends and family, besides intensity of contact. The three different dimensions are interrelated and explained in function of sex of the migrant, time since migration (or in case of second generation migrants: age) and characteristics of the migrants relationship (birthplace of the partner, number of children and duration of the relationship). Sex was however excluded from the final model since it has no significant relation with the predicted variables.

Figure 1: Path analysis for frequency of contact with local and transnational networks of family and friends for European migrants in bi-national couples living in Belgium (N=309, $X^2 = 63,042$, $p=0,510$, TLI=1,001, RMSEA= 0,000)



The model allows for a number of relevant conclusions. We will first concentrate on the relation between the local and the transnational network and the relations between the three dimensions of the social network (size, composition and intensity of contact):

- 1) It is clear from the model that the intensity of contact of European migrants with the local network is positively correlated with the intensity of contact with the transnational network. This is the case both for the network of family and friends. There is no trade-off between local and transnational social relations, even on the contrary. Moreover, frequent social contact with the family network seems to spill over into the friends network, and vice versa.
- 2) The intensity of contact with the local network of family or friends increases with the size of the respective networks. Larger networks with many social relations create more opportunities for social contact.
- 3) The intensity of contact with the local network of family or friends is moreover influenced by the composition of the respective networks. There is more frequent contact with the local family network as it is composed of more own relatives rather than in-law family members. There is also more frequent contact with the local network of friends as it is composed of more own friends rather than friends met through the partner. Strikingly, the composition of the local network of friends in terms of ethnicity does not seem to influence the intensity of contact with this network. The ethnic composition of the friends network is nonetheless positively correlated with the intensity of contact with the local/transnational family network.

- 4) In the network of friends, size and composition are also correlated. Europeans with a large network of friends have more Belgians and more own friends in their close circle of friends.

We have further found relevant differences between the nationality groups discerned in the model:

- 1) Europeans who belong to more recent migrant groups (i.c. Polish migrants) have a smaller local family network in Belgium as compared to European nationals from neighboring countries and Europeans from more traditional labor migrant groups. If we take the size of the network into account, however, they keep in closer contact with this network. They furthermore have less Belgians among their closest friends.
- 2) Europeans who belong to the more traditional labor migrant groups (i.c. Spanish, Italian), on the other hand, have a smaller network of friends than European nationals from neighboring countries and Europeans from more recent migrant groups. Like the Polish, they also have less Belgian friends in their close circle of friends than the Dutch, French or German.

An important predictor in the model is the time since migration, or better the time in Belgium since in fact the model also includes Europeans who have not migrated but who were born in Belgium:

- This might explain the large positive correlations between on the one hand time since migration and on the other the size of the local family network (Beta=.45), the share of own relatives compared to in-laws in the local family network (Beta=.74) and the frequency of contact with family members (Beta=.51) and friends (-.44) living in other European countries. Europeans who were born in Belgium or who came to Belgium as a child with their parents, have more own relatives in Belgium and by extension a larger local family network. They have less contact with their (extended) family and friends in origin countries.
- In addition, the longer European foreign nationals stay in Belgium, the more their local family network will grow and the less contact they will maintain with family abroad. Also the network of friends will grow with the number of years in Belgium, as well as the percentage of own friends within the closest circle of friends and the percentage of Belgians in this close circle.

Furthermore we can draw some first conclusions with regard to the characteristics of the relationship:

- If Europeans have a native partner who him- or herself is born in a foreign country, this will further reduce the size of their local family network. Furthermore, they will also have less contact with the local family network than Europeans whose partner is born in Belgium. The circle of close friends of these Europeans in addition also includes less Belgian friends.
- Children strengthen local and the transnational family ties. The more children in the couple, the more frequent contact Europeans will maintain with their local family network and with the transnational family network.

- Finally, as the relationship lasts longer, the share of own relatives in the local family network slightly reduces in favor of family in-law. This might be linked to the fact that as partners spend more time together, they get to know each others families better. Relationship duration is also linked to the share of closest friends that are met through mediation of the partner.

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