

Understanding the Importance of Social Support Networks: Integration Process of Migrants

Stefanos Spaneas ^a

Department of Social Sciences / Social Work Program, School of Social Sciences and Humanities,
46 Makedonitissas Avenue, CY-2417, P.O.Box 24005, CY-1700, Nicosia, Cyprus

Received 17 February 2018, accepted 30 March 2018

Abstract. This article examines the state of knowledge concerning the different types of social networks that exist for the migrants to assist them to be integrated into a new country at local level. It displays the kind of support they offer and reflects on the significant role that they play towards their effort to build a "new" life. The main concepts and debates are presented aiming to understand their role in social and economic integration, the influence of inter-ethnic contact and how policy and legislative contexts should include them when designing multi-cultural coexistence as well as integration policies that prevent tensions.

Citations: Stefanos Spaneas. Understanding the Importance of Social Support Networks: Integration Process of Migrants – *Innovative Infotechnologies for Science, Business and Education*, ISSN 2029-1035 – **1(24)** 2018 – Pp. 22-25.

Keywords: migration; loss; grieving children; socialization; behaviour; emotions.

Short title: Integration process of migrants.

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges of the recent time is managing global migration flows across the borders. Particularly into the countries of European Union (EU), over the last decade, sharply increasing number of migrants has become a challenge to European solidarity: in terms of both a core social principle as well as 'shared responsibility' between the governments and the civil society to help people in need by adopting a humanitarian perspective. The attention is focused on the need to actively integrate migrants into the host societies as the most effective way to become both: actors and partners into a society development. The Council of the European Union indicates [1] that the integration of third-country nationals in the Member States is a key element in promoting economic and social cohesion.

A huge number of actors worldwide are looking for ways how to make migration efficiently developing, and at the European Union level this has been translated into an increased embedding of migration in EU development policies, with increasing awareness of the importance of migration as a key development factor. It is considered that the only way to meet the challenges which migration brings is by working together, by initiating the core services and infrastructure migrants' formal and informal social networks.

Social networks are widely recognised to be influential on people's lives as they fulfil different functions [2]. They provide either direct or indirect benefits and have the potential to supply tangible resources and contacts [2-4]. With regard

to the migration, their values and importance are identified in multilevel facets: they provide information on the migration process itself, support migrants in the first steps of their integration process and have an influence on the perspective of migrants' residence strategies evolve over time [5, 2, 6-8]). Assessing the relative importance of these roles is crucial to understand the trend of migration and to the design of relevant immigration policies.

The paper discusses the types of networks that are created for the migrants to help them integrate into a new country, the kind of support they offer and reflects on the significant role that they play towards their effort to build a 'new' life in an EU member state. The entire intention is to better understand the expectations, anticipations and strategic reactions of migrants in relation to immigration policy that has been founded in EU territory.

1. Types of Networks

Each person has a certain number of family members and close friends, who are regularly in touch with one another and it is this type of connection which forms a network consisting of ties [4, 9]; if the members have developed strong bonds, their network is identified that has strong ties. Everyone is also in touch with a certain number of people (acquaintances, colleagues, relatives' acquaintances) who usually do not know each other and who are connected to one another by a set of weak ties [9].

Both types of networks are valuable. The personal net-

^aCorresponding author, email: spaneas.s@unic.ac.cy

works, quite often, the existence of family bonds can (and usually does) help the newcomers to adjust to the new environment. However, attention must be given to strengthen the weak ties of social networks. Those networks can bridge the gap between separate personal networks as they can provide access to resources and information beyond those directly available to them [4].

Woolcock and Narayan [10] argue that people with extensive and diverse networks are in a better position than those who lack them. They acknowledge that a dynamic process exists which combines the different types of networks among contexts and individuals [10]. Some migrants can activate certain networks to obtain the resources they need, depending on the social networks they have and their individual skills. It is these cases, which make many officials to believe that all migrants have known each other in the country they live. In contrast, it has been observed that when a migrant lacks extensive networks, they strive much harder to 'get ahead' and improve their status over time [5, 8, 11-12].

The technological progress which enabled cheap and efficient global connections along to the increased transnational flows of migrants from same nationalities or groups, increasingly enable them to maintain and develop social relations across distant locations [13]. It is those border-crossing that boost and promote social relations and favour the establishment of transnational networks which help the newcomers during the first period in the host country. The existence of network influence also the migrant's ability to move to a destination, find a job and housing, open a business, participate in the development of their home country, and access health care can all be directly impacted by or even dependent upon the migrant's social network. The migration flows also demonstrate that about half of all movements across international borders take place where large groups of people from the same country of origin or neighbouring countries are living. People do not simply look around the world and arbitrarily decide where they might like to pick up and relocate. Most potential immigrants seek to minimize their risks when they move and consider places where they know other individuals or organizations that can help them to make the trip and settle most easily. Social networks provide the kinds of connections needed to make migration possible.

It is important to understand the value of social networks as they connect communities together. Zitek and Hebl [14] argue that social networks play an important role in attitude formation and/or change. They create social norms within which individual cognitive processes take place. Shifting then the discussion to the migration it is argued that they shape attitude formation because they provide the context within which individuals process messages about asylum and immigration they may either reinforce or undermine the attitude formation about the discussed item [15].

The different sources of support they may receive from their networks are displayed in the following section.

2. Sources of Support

Sources of support are usually less clear. Portes [12] argues that such interactions have four potential sources. People agree to act in a certain way because they have internalised certain social norms and values; it is the case in which support is underpinned by strong collective values [5]. Variation in the nature of the actors within a network and of the contents of the bonds linking them influences the form of network activities and solidarity displayed. Social relationships are progressively transformed into social obligations, and well-settled migrants feel indebted to assist newcomers, because it is a norm in their society. In this case, support is based upon personal values. This perhaps explains why certain people or institutions assist certain groups that have been socially marginalized.

When expressions of support emerge from the feeling of sharing common situational circumstances, support is the result of a bounded solidarity [16]. People who share a common fate identify with one other and support each other's initiatives [5].

Solidarity is not necessarily bounded by the limits of the ethnic group or by a nationality. When the motivation for making resources available to migrants is the expectation of payback, support is driven by instrumental motives. When support groups give access to the resources expecting them to be fully repaid in future, exchanges are based on the norm of reciprocity.

3. Service provision via formal and informal channels

The groups that support migrants with basic services are both formal and informal in nature. There may exist formal support groups of origin, created in response to migrants' needs, and acting in accordance with a specific mandate. There are also cases in which they setup membership organizations that provide the assistance to their members, while others provide support regardless of membership. Other formal institutions are not "ethnic-based" and instead base their support on a certain view on human rights. NGOs act according to the principle that everyone, as a member of society, has the right to a minimum standard of living, which includes food, clothing, housing, medical care, and basic social services.

Other support mechanisms are not part of any institutionalised process; they simply emerge from an encounter with someone in difficulty. They are informal in nature. It is usually their own personal history that led them to help other migrants from their country of origins [5]. Expressions of support emerge from the feeling of having shared; if not an entire past, at least certain parts of it. This generates a certain form of bounded solidarity [12].

However, solidarity is bounded by the limits of each migrant community at large, and crosses ethnic groupings, lan-

guage and countries of origin [5].

The good case scenario is observed when one ethnic group is willing to help the other ethnic groups. Although they may have, or still face similar difficulties, the level of support may not exist. Furthermore, even in cases where support is provided, a limited duration of support is, in several cases, observed. Across countries, newcomers are helped by peers for a few days, and then the responsibility is transferred to someone else. That reality also explains why those newcomers have little choice but to rely on the goodwill of strangers (i.e. from locals and activists) at the beginning of their stay, which can have positive effects on their lives, or, in contrast, they can be wrongly informed and take the wrong decisions for the regularisation of their lives in Europe.

Finally, there is the case in which the State plays a significant role. It is often observed the non-governmental channels of support to play an increasing role in 'providing the basics' to this fringe of the population. It is acknowledged that their role in the field of pro-migrant programmes cannot be compared to the role of volunteers and informal networks. Their intervention is characterised in reference to the original identity of a non-profit organisation and to the cultural values related of the community norms from which they originate. Such situations challenge the professional values and ethics of both individuals and professionals. A constant threat for the sustainability of providing services and response to migrant needs prohibits the continuation in planning an active integration. Given that support groups have both limited resources and a limited mandate, they cannot afford to offer long-term assistance to everyone in difficulty. Their main contribution is to offer short-term relief and to provide contacts, assuming migrants will eventually meet someone who will be able to help them for a longer period. On the other hand, there seem to be few alternatives for migrants who fail to secure good contacts [17]. If they fail to attain a sustainable livelihood, they will continue to rely on charity, move to the other places or even to return to their countries of origin.

Conclusions

It has been shown in this article the different types of social networks that exist for the migrants to become integrated into a new country. Positive and negative aspects of the existing channels of support reveal the incompatibilities in the integration process. It is suggested that unless intensive and specialised planning and comprehensive social inclusive po-

licy is introduced and organisations are prepared to support such initiatives, the integration will remain limited.

Communication and activities combine both sides – foreigners and most indigents contribute to a harmonious co-existence and the prevention of tensions. Social networking and the development of dialogue between cultures and religions is necessary for promoting tolerance, as well as for eliminating racism and xenophobia and other negative phenomena. It is also important to understand the difficulties migrants face in the host countries at multiple levels. The absence of a coherent supportive network to assist their initial settlement to the new country increases the possibilities of negative attitudes and misunderstandings of responsibilities. Non-governmental channels of support play a significant role in providing the assistance to migrants in difficulty. Support is based on bounded solidarity, humanitarian principles, or on strong personal values. Individuals and NGOs act in accordance with the certain view on human rights and rely on the principle that everyone has the right to a minimum standard of living, regardless of their being a legal resident or not.

Further research is called for the exploration of hypothesis that there is a shift from state to non-state actors. If there is a shift, non-governmental actors must be given the necessary means to relay the State efficiently. It has also to be noted that shifting the burden of unwanted migration to non-governmental groups is not a new trend. It has been observed that in European policy making for nearly a decade now, a systematic effort to actively involve NGOs into the migration, by limiting at the same time any public expenditure. However, it cannot be called a shift, if they are not given sufficient resources towards this direction. It merely comes down to the failure to protect a whole segment of the population that is still within the state boundaries, and it flings open the door to social exclusion.

It is argued that unless both the organisations and professionals re-examine their value basis, the integration efficiency will remain limited. Since integration has been a two-way process, which is supposed to be based on the will to integrate and on mutual benefits for both parties, it is necessary to encourage migrants to actively participate in common societal activities. In times of political uncertainty, a need to build alliances is more than a theoretical plausible scenario. The above-mentioned circumstances call for learning a lesson about social solidarity in responding to global crises in more sensitive and culturally relevant manner.

References

1. Council of Europe. Council Decision on establishing the European Fund for the Integration of third-country nationals for the period 2007 to 2013 as part of the General programme Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows, 2007/435/EC: 25 June 2007. – <<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/569026ce-8f9b-4610-9665-3386a0cdee7f/language-en>>.
2. Dolfin S. and Genicot G. What Do Networks Do? The Role of Networks on Migration and "Coyote" Use. – *Review of Development Economics* 14 (2006) 343–359.

3. Bourdieu, P. 'The forms of capital', in Richardson, J.G. (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology and Education*, New York: Greenwood Press, (1986) pp.:241–258.
4. Granovetter M. The strength of weak ties: a network theory revisited. – *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983) 201–233.
5. Chelpi-den Hamer M. and Mazzucato V. The Role of Support Networks in the Initial Stages of Integration: The Case of West African Newcomers in the Netherlands. – *International Migration* 48 (2) (2010) 31-57
6. Alitolppa-Niitamo A. Somali youth in the context of schooling in metropolitan Helsinki: framework for assessing variability in educational performance. – *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30(1) (2004) 81–106.
7. Engbersen G. and J. van der Leun . The social construction of illegality and criminality. – *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 9 (2001) 51–70.
8. Guarnizo L.E., Portes A. and Haller W. Assimilation and transnationalism: determinants of transnational political action among contemporary migrants. – *American Journal of Sociology* 108(6) (2003) 1211–1248.
9. Henning C. and Lieberg M. Strong ties or weak ties? Neighbourhood networks in a new perspective. – *Scandinavian Housing and Planning Research* 13(1) (1996) 3-26
10. Woolcock M., and Narayan D. Social capital: implications for development theory, research and policy. – *World Bank Research Observer* 15(2) (1999) 225–249.
11. Palloni A., Massey D.S., Ceballos M., Espinosa K. and Spittel M. Social Capital and International Migration: A Test Using Information on Family Networks. – *American Journal of Sociology* 106(5) (2001) 1262-1298. – DOI: 10.1086/320817, available online <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/320817>>.
12. Portes A. Social capital: its origins and applications in modern sociology. – *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998) 1–24.
13. Castle, S. and M.J. Miller. (). *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Fourth edition. – New York and London, the Guilford Press, 2009.
14. Zitek E.M. and Hebl M.R. The role of social norm clarity in the influenced expression of prejudice over time. – *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 43(6) (2007) 867-87.
15. Levitan L. C., Clarke P. S. The impact of the social context on resistance to persuasion: Effortful versus effortless responses to counter-attitudinal information. – *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44 (2008) 640–649.
16. Portes A. and Sensenbrenner J. Embeddedness and Immigration: Notes on the Social Determinants of Economic Action. – *The American Journal of Sociology* 98(6) (1993) 1320-1350
17. Christou A. Agency, Networks and Policy: The Case of Poles in Greece. – *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 6(3) (2008) 312-325