A personal network approach to the study of immigrant structural assimilation and transnationalism

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A growing number of people move across national borders in contemporary societies. Migration trajectories have changed, becoming more complex and multidirectional in comparison to historical migration flows in the 1900s. Driven by diverse motivations, following different migration channels, and experiencing unprecedented technological advances in international communication and mobility, contemporary migrants may cyclically return home, move across several countries, and maintain simultaneous relationships with distant places and societies.

Throughout the 1900s, the adaptation of international migrants to receiving countries was explained by sociologists in terms of assimilation, conceived as the decline and ultimately the disappearance of social, cultural and economic differences between an immigrant minority and a native majority. Different dimensions of assimilation were identified, including structural, cultural, economic, and spatial assimilation. A central reference for canonical assimilation theory, Gordon (1964) emphasized the preeminence of structural assimilation, defined as the immigrant’s entrance into the “social cliques, clubs, and institutions” of the host society “at the primary group level”. Structural assimilation occurs when immigrants “have entered fully into the societal network of groups and institutions, or societal structure,” of the host country (Gordon, 1964:70). In Gordon’s account, structural assimilation is the “keystone of the arch of assimilation” (Gordon, 1964:81), and that it is a sufficient condition that leads to assimilation in other dimensions, including cultural assimilation, or acculturation, and economic assimilation.

Subsequent research has heavily criticized the idea, implied in the first assimilation theories, that assimilation occurs as a linear, one-way and inevitable process in which immigrants grow increasingly closer to a homogeneous mainstream society in the receiving country, to the same extent that they depart and disengage from the culture and society of origin. Alternative ideas have been proposed, such as the ethnic disadvantage model (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970), the “bumpy-line” theory of ethnicity (Gans, 1992), and the notion of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Especially in European migration studies, the notion of assimilation has been at times confused with assimilation, and associated with normative views that reject multiculturalism and see the abandonment of origin cultures as a necessary step in the way towards successful incorporation of immigrants in...
destination countries (Kivisto, 2005). Other research, however, has more recently reformulated the idea of assimilation as a specific social scientific concept, amenable to precise operationalization and measurement but devoid of any normative assumption or prescription. Evidence has been shown that the trajectories of contemporary immigrants to America can still be explained in terms of assimilation in socioeconomic status, language, residential distribution, and marriage patterns (Alba and Nee, 1997, 2003; Waters and Jiménez, 2005). This updated notion of assimilation is today effectively used in both American and European migration studies (e.g., Guarnizo et al., 2003; Diehl and Schnell, 2006; Qian and Lichter, 2007; Greenman and Xie, 2008; Mouw et al., 2014; Koopmans, 2016).

For all their strengths in the analysis of immigrant adaptation to receiving societies, assimilation models have tended to disregard the different types of relationships that immigrants may maintain with the origin country and the co-national diaspora. This bias was criticized in the early 1990s by proponents of the notion of transnationalism, who viewed the maintenance of stable and regular relationships between immigrants and their home country as a central and distinctive feature of contemporary migration (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Basch et al., 1994). Transnationalism refers to a situation in which immigrants live in receiving countries while continuing to participate in the political, economic and cultural life of sending societies and the co-national diasporas, in different domains and to various degrees (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Bauböck and Faist, 2010). While empirical research has suggested that regular practices of political and economic transnationalism characterize only a minority of contemporary immigrants (Landolt, 2001; Portes et al., 2002; Guarnizo et al., 2003), the maintenance of transnational social networks is likely a more widespread phenomenon (Mouw et al., 2014; Vertovec, 2004). In fact, from the very onset of this line of research, studies of immigrant transnationalism have invariably used network terminology and metaphors, describing economic, political and cultural transnational involvement as fundamentally sustained by stable cross-national social networks between immigrants and their country of origin, including family, friends, and political or business associates (Basch et al., 1994; Landolt, 2001; Portes et al., 2002; Guarnizo et al., 2003; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Dahinden, 2005; Rusinovic, 2008). In parallel with the notion of structural assimilation, we can refer to the maintenance of primary-group transnational social networks as structural transnationalism.

Since social networks have always been considered as a crucial factor sustaining immigrants’ movements and adaptation trajectories (extensive reviews are provided by Boyd, 1989 and Gold, 2005), it is not surprising that personal network data and methods are increasingly appearing in studies of immigrant assimilation and transnationalism, in conjunction with recent analytical and computational advancements of social network research (e.g., Dahinden, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2007, 2005; Brandes et al., 2016a; Haalkola, 2011; Richter and Nollert, 2014; Bolíbar et al., 2015; Bilecen and Sienkiewicz, 2015; Herz, 2015). Personal networks capture all direct and active relationships involving a focal individual (McCarty et al., 1997), and have been extensively used in anthropology and sociology to operationalize “personal communities” (Chua et al., 2011) or, in other words, primary groups. In line with the traditional sociological notion (Cooley, [1909] 2009), we define a primary group as any social group held together by direct, personal knowledge and interaction between people, established through regular face-to-face, telephone or online contacts.

Existing personal network studies have made important contributions to our understanding of immigrants’ personal communities and adaptation patterns, yet most of them have focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the composition of immigrant personal networks. On the other hand, the structure of personal networks has rarely, and only marginally, been taken into account in migration studies, although structural measures have been meaningfully applied to personal network data in other research (McCarty, 2002). We argue that personal network structure contributes to a better understanding of assimilation and transnationalism patterns among international immigrants. A central intuition in sociology and social network analysis is that a group is more than the sum of its members, and a network is more than the sum of its dyadic ties. A cohesive group of personal contacts exposes the individual to a fundamentally different set of constraints, resources and opportunities than a set of five separate contacts. We argue that this is also the case for international immigrants and their outcomes of assimilation and transnational involvement.

In general, we hypothesize that embeddedness in more cohesive structures within a given society results in deeper involvement, attachment, and identification with that society. Following this intuition, our study focuses on the different degrees and types of structural embeddedness in the host and home society that can be observed through immigrant personal networks. Theoretically, we aim to contribute to the development of a framework that links the sociological notion of embeddedness to the structural dimension of assimilation and transnationalism, and, in turn, to outcomes of assimilation and transnationalism in other dimensions, such as the cultural and the economic domains. Empirically, we use personal networks to operationalize the notion of embeddedness, and propose network compositional and structural measures to simultaneously describe structural assimilation and structural transnationalism. Consistently with the view, proposed by traditional assimilation theory, that structural assimilation is a sufficient condition which sustains assimilation in other dimensions, this study conceives of structural assimilation and structural transnationalism as independent variables that affect assimilation outcomes in the cultural and economic domains. These outcomes are measured at the individual level using non-network metrics, namely an acculturation rating scale for cultural assimilation, and net monthly income for economic assimilation.

This article is structured as follows. The remainder of Section 1 discusses the notions of structural assimilation and structural transnationalism in connection with the sociological concept of embeddedness in social networks. Section 2 introduces measures of structural assimilation and transnationalism based on the size and cohesion of classes of personal contacts, and formulates the main hypotheses of this study. Section 3 presents the data. Section 4 reports results from descriptive analysis and predictive models using the proposed measures of structural assimilation and transnationalism. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the hypotheses stated in Section 2, and Section 6 concludes the article.

1.1. Embeddedness, structural assimilation, and structural transnationalism

Structural assimilation is an eminently social network concept, evoking the immigrant’s embeddedness within primary-group

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