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# Do transnational brokers always win? A multilevel analysis of social support

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## ABSTRACT

Migrants often maintain relationships with significant others located in their countries of origin, which results in having transnational interpersonal ties in addition to local ones. The majority of previous studies indicate that financial and social remittances flow from countries of immigration to the countries of emigration through migrants and their networks. However, less is known about who is involved in those exchanges, what kind of supportive resources flow within and across nation-state borders, and what level of individual cross-border engagement of migrants is related to those flows. We ask whether and how transnationality as an individual attribute, together with other personal, dyadic, and supradyadic characteristics, explain received social support. Drawing on data from 100 ego-centric networks collected from Turkish migrants in Germany, the results indicate that not only the dyadic level but also network structure, the position occupied by individuals in the network and their level of transnationality explain supportive resource flows within and across borders.

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## 1. Introduction

In the ever more connected contemporary world, personal ties, ideas, aspirations, practices, and resource flows of both mobile and non-mobile populations cannot be confined to a ‘container space’ of one nation-state. Rather, these flows occur simultaneously at various geographical locales (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003). This increased mobility and migration across the globe has far reaching consequences on the ways in which people organize and negotiate their protective relationships with their significant others across nation-state borders. While migration is considered to be a strategy for overcoming social inequalities and securing better life chances, geographical mobility, especially across national borders, also exposes individuals to social risks in the realms of employment, health, education, and care. Social ties, regardless of where they are located and the support they provide, play a crucial role in cushioning those risks faced by migrants.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we investigate social support with a transnational lens by conceptualizing transnationality as a type of behavior: migrants’ level of engagement in activities that transcend national borders. Informed by network analysis, we take advantage of detailed egocentric data of 100 Turkish migrants living in Germany and investigate different aspects of migrants’ networks, including the amount of information, financial resources, and care received through social ties, as well as the inequalities these may cause. Not only do we analyze dyadic and supradyadic characteristics of the egonetworks, but we also explore the interplay between the individual level of transnationality and the benefits obtained by ego from occupying a brokerage position in social support networks. We argue that the dynamics of supportive resources can be best

and informal assistive elements, where the formal is understood as nation-state related protection through welfare policies, social assistance, and relevant institutions; the informal as the personal networks outside the realm of the state, including both kin and non-kin ties. Thus, social protection considers not only the personal side of assistive relationships, but also takes into account the nation-state frameworks, national and cultural discourses where migrants are embedded (Bilecen and Barglowski, 2015). Second, social protection serves as a foil upon which social inequalities are studied. In the case of migrants in particular, legal status and citizenship are important in understanding who has access to where and which kind of social protection in the formal realm. These studies also investigate the entanglement between the formal and the informal assistance that migrants’ make use of. In this article, the term ‘social support’ has been chosen due to its long-standing presence in literature, particularly in network studies and corresponds to informal social protection.

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<sup>1</sup> Closely related to the concept of social support is the notion of social protection. The term social protection refers to strategies, as well as ‘tangible and intangible resources to be assembled in order to overcome social risks which might restrain the accomplishment of life chances’ (Faist et al., 2015). There are two aspects of this conceptualization. First, social protection constitutes an assemblage of both formal

understood with a more inclusive research strategy that considers both the composition and the structure of networks (e.g. Lubbers et al., 2010) together with other personal characteristics of ego such as age, gender, class, and transnationality (Bilecen and Sienkiewicz, 2015).

The ways in which interdependencies among individuals, families, social networks, businesses, and civil society organizations operate within the opportunity structures of the countries of emigration and immigration have been the main focus of transnational studies (Basch et al., 1994; Faist, 2000; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). In migration studies, resource flows have usually been studied from the countries of immigration to the countries of emigration. One prominent example is financial and social remittances (Guarnizo, 2006; Levitt, 1998). In these studies, two major topics have been debated. First, there is social capital in the form of cohesive networks. Particularistic loyalties and trust in co-ethnic networks lower transaction costs and provide their members with valuable resources such as support (Coleman, 1988; Dahinden, 2005; Ryan et al., 2008). On the negative side, these same networks may exert pressure to conform to the group, impose social control, and place excessive claims on group members (e.g. Portes and Landolt, 1996). Despite the potential downside of tightly-knit networks, social capital embedded in co-ethnic networks of migrants in the countries of destination have proven to be crucial for migration decisions and the initial settlement process (Palloni et al., 2001). Social capital has been shown to be positively associated with transnational practices, such as having and visiting family across borders (Fauser et al., 2015). However, previous studies usually conceptualize social capital in terms of actor attributes rather than the patterns of connectivity within networks. Only a few empirical studies have embraced a network approach to investigate supportive resource flows within migrants' networks, analyzing in a more systematic manner manifold aspects of the phenomenon such as the geographical distribution of ties and the type of resources (Bilecen, 2014).

A second strand of research is concerned with whether transnational engagement through personal, political, and economic activities and practices with the country of origin hinder migrants' incorporation into the society of immigration (e.g. Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002; Morawska, 2004; Snel et al., 2006 and for an overview see for an overview see Bilecen et al., in this issue). The majority of these studies have focused mainly on resource flows from countries of immigration to the countries of emigration, leaving the crucial questions of whether and how the level of transnationality of migrants influence the availability or use of social support and what effect their positions within their social networks has.

By focusing on the structure of migrant networks and the position they occupy inside the network, together with their individual characteristics in resource flows realized by a multilevel design, this article distinguishes itself from previous studies in three ways. First, we offer a novel insight into the underpinnings of the interaction between transnationality and social support, which enables us to analyze the effects of personal, dyadic, and supradyadic correlates. In order to achieve this, we conducted a multilevel analysis that treats relationships (dyads) data as nested within egonetworks (Snijders et al., 1995). Second, based on our empirical analysis, we contribute to the discussion on the nexus between agency and structure in the provision of supportive resources. We do this by testing the interaction of brokerage with the individual level of transnationality. Third, we argue that our findings pinpoint inequalities, which result from a combination of migrants' attributes and their position in the support network, namely, the level of transnationality and brokerage. Advantages and disadvantages of positions within networks have been a long-standing

debate, and we empirically illustrate inequalities within personal networks (e.g. Ibarra, 1992; Tilly, 1998).

The following section of this article surveys the literature on social support across borders, the role of network size and structure in resource flows, and transnationality. We also introduce our hypotheses in this section. After introducing the research design and methods in Section 3, we report the results of our multilevel models using data on ego-networks of migrants from Turkey living in Germany. The last section discusses the role of transnationality as an individual attribute in social support, as well as brokerage as a social mechanism underlying social inequalities. We make the case for a perspective that combines structure and agency explanations fruitfully, particularly in understanding social inequalities within personal networks.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

For our analysis, we sought to connect three aspects of social networks: network flows (social support), individual characteristics (transnationality), and the position of individuals within their egocentric networks (brokerage).

First, social support is a relationship-based concept which highlights the assistive nature of personal relationships. This concept has been a major topic in social sciences as well as in health and well-being literature (see, for an overview, Song et al., 2011). Individuals are surrounded by a variety of personal ties, distant and close, which might provide different supportive resources (Agneessens et al., 2006), indicating the diversity of both the source and type of assistance (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). This is particularly true for migrants, whose networks are not limited to exchanging financial resources (Dahinden, 2005; de Miguel Luken and Tranmer, 2010; Stark and Jakubek, 2012). As summarized by Vertovec (2002: 3), '[f]or migrants, social networks are crucial for finding jobs and accommodation, circulating goods and services, as well as psychological support and continuous social and economic information'. In general, close ties are argued to offer greater social support, particularly emotional support and companionship (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Weak ties, on the other hand, are more relevant for information flows (Granovetter, 1973). Within close ties, family ties seem to be crucial for receiving support in terms of financial resources, physical needs, and help during periods of illness (Shor et al., 2013; Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

Besides emotional closeness, spatial closeness stills plays a decisive role in receiving social support. This is particularly relevant for international migrants, whose networks tend to be more geographically dispersed. For them, some of their personal contacts remain in their countries of origin while others might migrate to other countries as well. They also meet new people in their countries of destination. This results in networks with both transnational and local interpersonal ties. For example, a majority of studies pinpoint that migrants organize care of their children and elderly care through familial ties spread across several nation-state borders (Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Boccagni, 2012; Kraler et al., 2011). While having ties geographically scattered might entail benefits such as being more informed about the employment conditions of different countries (Boyd, 1989; Ryan et al., 2008), it can also be burdensome when it comes to those types of support that require personal face-to-face interaction.

Against this background, we analyze at the dyadic level the effect of emotional and geographic closeness on received support.

**Hypothesis 1.** Closer ties (kin, higher perceived importance of tie, higher frequency of contact, and ties in the same country as ego) are associated with more received social support.

Second, the concept of 'transnationality' indicates the degree of cross-border connectedness of social actors through diverse activ-

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