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► **To cite this version:**

Marie-Antoinette Hily, William Berthomiere, Dimitrina Mihaylova. The notion of “ social networks ” in migration. *Migracijske i etničke teme*, 2005, 21 (3), pp.243-253. halshs-00081078

HAL Id: halshs-00081078

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00081078>

Submitted on 21 Jun 2006

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The notion of « social networks » in migration

by Marie-Antoinette Hily¹, William Berthomière² and Dimitrina Mihaylova³

¹ Researcher , Migrinter/Poitiers (UMR Miti-CNRS).

² Researcher , Migrinter/Poitiers(UMR Miti-CNRS).

³ Associated researcher , Compas (Oxford University).

The notion of « social networks » in migration

“...if network is to be developed as an analytical tool and as a method whereby sociological explanation is achieved then it must be used in conjunction with a theory and not viewed as a theory in itself”, Kapferer, B. (1973) “Social networks and conjugal role” in Jeremy Boissevain and Clyde Mitchell (eds) *Network analysis. Studies in human interactions*, Hague: Mouton, pp.108.

Being frequently addressed to in the field of the sociology of migrations since the late 1970s, the notion of « network » has become a key word in the language used in numerous researchers' works on new migratory forms and more particularly on the migrants' production modes, the so-called ethnic economy. After twenty years of research, the notion of « network » remains described as a « vague set of approaches » (Emirbayer, 1994) and comes closer to a metaphorical use than an analytical one. This introductory article explores the notion of social network and its use in the works concerning the migrants' modes of organization. This is an attempt at understanding its contributions but also its limits.

1. The origins of the notion of « social networks »

Theoretically, the promotion of the notion of network in the 1950s was due to English anthropologists who could not find a satisfactory theory explaining social aspects in the structural-functional programme. The criticism mainly concerned the fact that individuals can not be only considered as « status holders ». Firth (1954), by the way, made the difference between social structures and social organizations, the latter coming within processes where the actions and relations operate with a view of meeting objectives. The use of the phrase « social network » was attributed to Barnes (1954) who, in a study on a Norwegian fisherman's village, tried to give an account of the friendly and familiar relations that the inhabitants had partly built. The social structure observed then can be described as « patterns » of inter-personal relations built within areas of activity rather than in terms of roles and status of the group members. Bott (1957) applied this concept to the study of the conjugal roles in families from London. She showed that in an urban context, the relations between friends, relatives and neighbours make up intermediate and organized structures, between the individuals and the institutions. She introduced the concepts of « close-knit network » and « loose-knit network » thus showing that the closer the network gets, the more it puts a normative pressure on its members. But only from the 1960s have researchers given a new field of

application to the concept of « social network » from studies on acculturation and change phenomena in relation to urbanization in Africa. Epstein (1969) showed that the social structure of the city of Ndola could be described from a complex series of links within a chain of numerous two-element interactions. For that he concentrated on systematically gathering the meetings of his informant. His analysis notably highlighted how new norms emerged in urban areas and how they disseminated from effective networks set up from individuals with a high level of prestige. Mitchell (1969) presented a synthesis of research on the networks and showed both the theoretical and methodological implications⁴. Within the whole works produced at that time the notion of network was presented as an abstract category, a representation of the social aspect and of social relations rather than a model of relations (Fortin, 2002). This framework allows to explore practices such as the opening-up of the labour market, the forms of sociability, etc. and the types of links are privileged in the analysis : total or partial personal network, sub-group as the neighbourhood, the occupational environment⁵ etc...

The contribution of the anthropologists' works however allowed to go beyond the simple collection of empirical data and allowed to design an approach of social aspects combining « the relation » and « the situation »⁶. The contribution of this idea of social network was underlined by Hannerz (1980:175) as well as Rogers and Vertovec (1995:20) who showed how it opened up a space for a social theory directed by the practices, thus forgetting the analyses based on an *a priori* acceptance of a community solidarity.

At this prospect, the understanding of a social fact is in line with both a macro and micro social context : social relations are the result of interactions between individuals structured according to larger contexts (political, economic and social).

⁴ There are four morphological criteria : The anchoring point (this is the specific individual whose observer wishes to interpret the behaviour) ; Accessibility (the number of steps required to contact a specific person from a given starting point); Density (defined as the measure in which the possible links between people really exist); The scope (refers to the number of the subject's direct contacts). The interaction criteria refer to the features of the interaction itself : its content, direction, duration, intensity and frequency.

⁵ Another trend was developed, different from the anthropological approach, and adopted a methodological approach which placed the social network analysis at the level of the quantifiable and verifiable theoretical model. We underline that the formalization of the networks was largely criticized with the classical argument that it forgets the dynamics of social relations.

⁶ Mitchell brought out three levels in the social aspect : the study subject (relations, events, the behaviours studied), the interpretation from the actors and the context in which the fact studied is placed as researchers build it (Fortin, 2002).

2. Network and immigrants' social integration

Created within the scope of urban anthropology the notion of network pursued its career in the field of the sociology of migrations. In France, the latter proved particularly useful to study the creation and the development of social networks of immigrants in an urban environment while giving importance to the system of interactions between differing agents and communities (Katuszewski and Ogien, 1978 ; Andezian and Streiff, 1981). In a research on the creation and development of social networks of immigrants, Katuszewski and Ogien tried to provide the word « network » with a theoretical status « to then draw a set of alternative assumptions to those produced from culture-oriented positions ». Their attempt at substituting an analysis in terms of « social networks » for the culture-oriented approach leading in the 1970s was a pioneer attempt insofar as it raised a number of questions which lied at the centre of the problems in subsequent years, i.e the question of integration.

As a reaction to the approaches in terms of « micro-societies » of immigrants or of « neo-culture » that developed at that time the authors had recourse to the concept of « total network » which is not a simple descriptive word qualifying some aspects of migrations within a system of concepts stemming from culture-oriented theories (acculturation, cultural contact, deculturation etc...) but the development of a « typical ideal of sociation, the definition of which is not based on the determination of the criteria of belonging to a community made up of members who consider themselves (or are considered) as a « we » opposed to other « we », likely to have a common objective and exerting a strict social control, the whole of the members knowing each other or recognizing each other according to « distinguishing features », but while considering « the network as an open chain of informal interactions without a central authority, the individuals in contact not necessarily knowing all the other individuals they are in connection with » (p. 15).

This type of method then allows to « substitute the analyses tending to separate closed units, the connections of which they then try to study, for a point of view giving analytical priority to the situations of interaction» (p. 163). Boyd's works (1989) sealed this approach of the network which compensated for the drawbacks of functionalist (based on the analysis of micro-economic processes) and structuralist approaches (based on macro-economic processes). The analysis of situations allowed the authors to show that « the collapse of the too clear limits between agents of separate communities and the emphasis put on the system of interactions allows to give an account of a set of daily

behaviours that can not be considered if we rely on a rigid pattern matching « the dominants and the dominated », the holders of « different cultures » or « the integrated and excluded ». The interest of this study was also to show, as a serious progress at that time, that the actors were not individuals divided between two worlds and that it was necessary to understand the manipulation spaces that the categorization of these « worlds » granted to them. For Boyd, this approach was an opportunity to provide for a pioneer contribution by introducing the question of gender in the social analysis of networks.

Other researchers (Rex, Joly and Wilpert, 1987 ; Campani, 1988) tried to limit the definition of the network and to make a difference between informal and formal networks. Informal networks can not directly be apprehended and do not mean any voluntary membership. In this way they are almost synonymous with « natural community » : « They "go without saying " in the minds of their members and thus do not need to be explained and all the more so instituted. This because they are based on family, biological or spiritual ties or on village relations (age, gender groups...) within a local society. These networks are thus included by values that can not be denied and leaving them is like withdrawing *ipso facto* from the community » (Catani and Palidda, 1987 : 7). On the contrary formal networks such as the associations for example are characterized by an « organized aspect » that founds them through regulations or judicial-administrative texts. But if the formal networks are open to volunteer members, the fact remains that in the case of associations established on the origins the informal networks provide the basis for these associations, even if the life of the first ones does not completely correspond to that of the second ones. In this sense G. Campani used the word of "network-community" to give an account of the double process consisting in using an existing legislation in the case of migratory movements (1901 law) to organize informal networks that the immigrants have maintained. Catani and Palidda noted that the result of this approach was double : « on the one hand a certain cohesion is maintained at least in one part of the migratory movement, the one that promotes these very important agregations, for example, for the education of the youth and on the other hand we come closer, even if unconsciously we do not really wish it, to the forms of agregation promoted by the society of residence» (ibid : 9).

In terms of theory, the problems of formal networks (or association networks) will be raised regarding the problems of integration *versus* identity and it is this paradigm that is behind the analysis. In its radical version, the integration is designed as a process that

allows on the one hand a society to integrate a new element without compromising its structure and on the other hand as a process of transformation of the immigrants into a cultural standardization. In this way using the network brings in both restrictive identity and social dimensions interpreted as an obstacle and an alienation of the individuals (above all towards women) and we will here talk about identity networks, or interpreted as a maintaining of solidarity or a social cohesion among immigrant groups presented as a place of resistance against standardization. Or again we will promote the idea that the networks considered as intermediate structures between individual migrants and the wider social context are moments of integration (what some researchers from the Chicago school promoted).

3. Networks and mobility

The phenomenon of globalization involves a set of economic, social, cultural and demographic processes transcending the nation-states. Then follows a new conceptualization of the notion of network notably informed by transnational migrations, the modes of communication and economic exchanges on a global scale. The mobility of manpower lets bridges being established between countries supplying and receiving this manpower, the migratory movements and the channels are one of those bridges. For Portes (1995), these networks do not necessarily obey the laws of the national or global economic market and to some extent work autonomously. In the field of sociological research we can then witness growing interest for the study of networks in relation with an approach of migratory movements retaining macro and micro dynamics (the individual context) as decisive elements. The networks are granted a role structuring the mobility of migrants beyond the national economic contexts.

When A. Tarrus for example described the transnational phenomenon, he mentioned a mobile population that was fully in line with modernity. « While in many ways the exchanges and movements intensify, distances are reduced and bridges between places are built, how can we ignore the modernity of those who move best, who bring the social link up to date when the nations offer the norm, the rule, the controls...» (Tarrus 1995 : 16). While he studied the economic space of North Africans in Marseilles he highlighted a movement territory where various economic exchanges are translated into the construction of open networks, that is to say both local and international, diachronic and synchronic networks where individuals with various origins and status mix, thus breaking with an approach in terms of « ethnic economic niche ». Peraldi (2001) was in the same line when he described the various commercial systems (Marseilles, Istanbul)

as frames of activities which make up a labyrinth of social networks which appear as relational arrangements (« the weak links »). Listening to the authors of this approach of the social network as a product of a trading activity, their analyses distanced themselves from a strictly structural reading of the social network as soon as they insisted more on the informal systems based on confidence, communication, commitment etc. We were rather dealing with an interaction of the trading exchange and with the co-construction of a trading social link which acts as a system. In this way they concurred with the partisans of an economic sociology of immigration paving the way to a mass of possible « patterns » in migratory situations in which the social networks play a major role.

4. Networks and territories

We have seen that the notion of social network as an analysis tool or as a frame of migrants' experiences allowed to break with a substantialist approach of migrants' groups considered as « closed communities », that it introduced complexity notably in the economic problems and finally that it allowed to question the collective dynamics of the migrants, the producers of social and economic initiatives. But the analysis remains limited as regards the understanding of the processes of construction of the networks.

The hardened notion of network places groups or populations in a situation of social and cultural exteriority, outside the national field and appears as a danger. The « ethnic » network becomes a sober category which, despite changes in belonging from individuals (Barth) is established as a global and limited category (Islamist networks...). This representation of the notion got reinforced by the multiplication of analyses in terms of transnational communities, the networks of which being the tools for a disintegration of (national) territories. Despite numerous analyses from a social geography underlining the recourse to the notion of network, not as the antithesis of the territory but rather more as « a new way of thinking free from the throes of the categorizing thought » (Chivallon, 1999 : 132), the tension between settling and moving remains visible.

To solve this tension one should maybe make two suggestions. First one has to recall that the geographical mobility, the fruit of market forces, led to taking into account the notion of migrants' network as an opposing force to the deconstruction of family structures engendered by industrialization at the beginning of the last century (Choldin, 1973). The observation of the content of these reticular organizations in migration as « the transmission of information, the accomodation for the first weeks, the advance for travel expenses, the job-seeking aid » are as many analysis elements allowing to

understand these « territories of mobility » (Faret, 2003) without for all that building at the same time community or ethnic frontiers within them. It is more a question of observing the social capital that these migrating systems can produce as the means of defying as much as strengthening the social frontiers of migrating groups (Sanders, 2002). This position then places the notion in a double reading grid where the homogeneity-heterogeneity and horizontality-verticality couples must be explored. These two fields of analysis are the core subject of the works in this issue. Seeking to go beyond the homogenizing category of the ethnic, community network etc. endlessly remains the prime objective. The notion yet gains in quality of analysis when its purpose is the deconstruction of the visible uniformity of these social formations. If the quest of these differences allows to confirm, while relying on the « idea of transversality », that « the social or spatial limit is easily crossed and surmountable » (Chivallon, 1999), it also provides the opportunity to think about the establishment of rules and norms within the networks. The pattern of an unavoidable expansion of the network is of course at the heart of the matter since this analysis makes the establishment of limits visible. This verticality of the network, very often forgotten or only addressed to in the case of the so-called informal networks remains a dimension yet to be explored.

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