

# Transnationalism in a Comparative Perspective:

## *An Introduction*

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Since the publication of 'Nations Unbound' (Basch et al. 1994), studies on transnationalism have mushroomed. Despite ongoing debates about the nature of the concept, and the newness of the phenomenon, there is a growing consensus about the importance of taking into account migrants' multi-stranded social ties which link together societies of origin and settlement. There is also a strong push to move away from 'methodological nationalism' in order to better understand the manifold ties, identifications and activities of migrants and non-migrants across international borders (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002; Vertovec 2009).

The first generation of transnational studies focused strongly on transnational practices, such as economic transnationalism (including remittances), political transnationalism (social movements, diaspora politics), and identity formation, social remittances and ethnic entrepreneurship (see e.g. Guarnizo et al. 2003; Khagram & Levitt 2008). While many of these studies were based in the immigration-receiving context of the United States (see e.g. Portes et al. 1999; Itzighsohn and Saucedo 2002; Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004), soon after transnationalism theory was also incorporated into European migration studies (Snel et al. 2006; De Haas & Fokkema 2011; Erdal & Oeppen 2013). The European context offers highly relevant research sites for transnational studies, mainly because many of the EU countries today can be considered immigration countries with considerably large permanent migrant groups and continuous inflows that create new connections with diverse countries of origin. In relation to this, it is important to mention that the European Union (EU) 2004 and 2007 enlargements created a borderless zone that boosted existing transnational patterns within the EU and generated complex new ones. Moreover, European welfare states offer particular structural conditions for both

societal integration and for transnational engagements. For example, while, marginal social security and social assistance schemes in the United States may make it more difficult for migrants who have a weak attachment to the labour market to engage in transnational activities, this is less likely to be the case in Europe. In European countries, like the Netherlands or Norway, where the welfare state arrangements are more robust, migrants may be less dependent on the labour market for their income and social position. The resources they receive from the state and the rights they have to social security, housing, education and health care can then be used both for societal integration and transnational activities.

In the last decade, the idea of transnationalism has been connected to further issues such as citizenship, integration and return migration. At the same time, the first generation of qualitative and quantitative studies have been complemented by comparative studies, between groups and continents, and studies focusing more on the country of origin. Increasingly studies of migrant transnationalism also cover other categories of migrants, such as refugees, second generation migrants, return migrants and intra-EU labour migrants (Al-Ali et al. 2001; Horst 2006; Favell 2008; Engbersen et al. 2013; White 2013; King and Christou 2014).

Moreover, while in the first generation of transnational studies *theory formation* – including the introduction of sensitizing concepts and ideal types - was central, we now witness a stronger emphasis on *testing* some of the new theoretical perspectives, and on *refining* theoretical concepts, typologies and social mechanisms that explain the complex interactions between transnationalism, integration and return (Erdal & Oeppen 2013; Carling & Pettersen 2014). As a consequence, general theories are being specified resulting in more precise typologies and more focused agendas for future research. The geographical contexts and dynamics of specific migration corridors between sending and destination countries and regions, including different migrant categories, are increasingly being taken into account. Furthermore, the refinement of theories also contributes to sensitivity toward the nature of categories in migration studies. Including central categories relating to the mobility of people, where it is increasingly becoming clear that it is, for instance, not always straightforward to define who is or is not a return migrant in the context of sustained transnationalism.

This special issue analyses interrelated processes of immigrant integration, transnational practises and return migration intentions and experiences through a *comparative transnational lens*. The aim is to unravel how processes related to integration, transnationalism, and return interact and

to specify the conditions under which these processes may affect each other. One example is the strong remittance pattern among unemployed Somali refugees in the Netherlands and Norway in comparison with refugees that have a stronger labour market position. This pattern can be explained by taking into account the specific combination of resources available to refugees in these welfare states as well as the extensive needs of family members in Somalia. In other words: insights into host and home countries characteristics, as well as into the transnational ties of refugees, are crucial for understanding the nature and extent of transnational activities (see contribution Bakker et al. in this issue and Carling et al. 2012).

Another example is the act of obtaining the nationality of the destination country. On the one hand this is considered an important indicator of integration, whereas on the other hand this makes it much more likely for refugees to visit their country of origin (which is an indicator of socio-cultural transnationalism). While at first glance this may seem counterintuitive, acknowledging the lived-realities of refugees in European contexts, it becomes clear that visits to the country of origin may only be feasible after citizenship in the country of residence has been obtained, either for security or mobility related reasons; hence, processes of integration and transnationalism run parallel to one another (see contribution Bilgili in this issue).

Furthermore, this special issue highlights that the interactions and linkages between integration, transnational practices and return differ between migrant groups, as well as according to the situation in sending and destination countries. This strengthens the argument that more systematic comparative work across differing categories of migrants and across geographic contexts is needed. While significant differences, which need to be mapped, exist we also observe surprising similarities, which can help address the inherent challenges of preconceived common knowledge in the highly politicized and mediatized field of migration studies. Last, by focusing on diverse migrant groups and paying attention to the diversity within these groups, this special issue presents a broad view on transnationalism, that acknowledges variation in the degree of transnational linkages across cases. This way we contribute to addressing one of the main criticisms of the first generation studies of transnationalism, which often focused only on those migrants that are transnationally active, running the risk of overstating transnational involvement.

The first three articles - mainly based on (ethno-) survey data - have a distinctive comparative focus and explain how the socio-economic and/or social cultural integration of different migrant groups (refugees, labour

migrants and family migrants) produce specific patterns of transnational homeland engagement. They also take into account the situation in the origin country and the spatial and cultural distance between origin and destination countries. **Bakker et al.** explain different patterns of transnational activities of Somali, Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees in the Netherlands in relation to their integration process (citizenship status, employment), and in relation to the economic and social situation in the origin countries. **Bilgili** shows that the socio-cultural integration of Afghan, Burundian, Ethiopian and Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands and their socio-cultural homeland engagement are positively correlated. She also shows that specific group differences can be explained by taking into account the political and economic situation in the origin countries. **Castañeda et al.** examines transnationalism across migrant generational statuses in three urban centres: New York City, El Paso and Paris. In Paris he finds evidence of 'reactive transnationalism', in New York for 'resource-based transnationalism', and in El Paso for 'border transnationalism' shaped by proximity to the home country.

The other two articles deal with subjective *post-return experiences* and *return considerations* of different migrant groups. These two papers, mainly based on in-depth interviews, show migrants' agency in organising return or in managing ambivalence with regard to home, identity and belonging. Both papers emphasize, next to differences, the *similarities* in post-return experiences and in return considerations of migrants who have a different ethnic or national origin and who have resided in different European countries. **Van Meeteren et al.** explore positive, negative and mixed post-return experiences of Moroccan returnees who have lived in Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK. Drawing on qualitative interviews with return migrants in Morocco, they refine and contextualize the theory of 'returnee's preparedness' (Cassarino 2004). They also show that the ability to maintain transnational contacts with the destination country after return adds to positive post-return experiences, but only for migrants with specific return motives. **Erdal** explores return considerations of migrants with a Pakistani and Polish background in Norway. She analyses the ambivalence of migrants' return considerations, how they change over time, and how they often have little to do with actual return plans. She also explores how notions of 'home' are related to processes of transnational involvement and integration. Despite the contrast in geographic distance to the country of origin from Norway, and the differing lengths of stay between the two groups, predominantly from the 1970s onward in the case of Pakistani migrants, and predominantly since the 2004 EU-enlargement in that

of Polish, she finds striking similarities in migrants' considerations about the possibility of return migration.

Overall, this special issue shows that a transnational comparative lens sharpens our understanding of patterns of integration and return. Comparative analyses encourage us to explain group differences by taking into account migrants' particular social position and feelings related to integration and return, but also by bringing in institutional characteristics of host and home countries. It also forces us to go beyond national and ethnic categorizations when discussing the shared experiences and similar patterns of integration, return and transnationalism among different groups of migrants.

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