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Reconsidering the Importance of Social Capital for the Subjective Well-Being of Migrants in the Digital Era

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Abstract

Social capital is an often-used indicator when measuring and explaining the happiness or life satisfaction levels of migrants and it is frequently measured with the item "How often do you socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues?" Migration studies should reconsider the weight that social capital (measured according to the frequency of socially meeting relevant others) has in the subjective well-being of migrants seen that the paradigm of the uprooted migrant has been replaced by the paradigm of the connected migrant. The purpose of this article is to show that in the digital era, the subjective well-being of the connected migrant is not influenced by physically meeting friends, relatives and colleagues as much as it was for the uprooted migrant. As supporting case study, results about the impact of social capital on the life satisfaction of East European migrants are presented.

Keywords: *migration; digital; East Europeans; social capital; well-being.*

Migrants and social capital

A recent study (Popa, 2018) looked at the life satisfaction levels of East European migrants in three clustered European destinations, making use of data from the European Social Survey (ESS). There, as suggested by the literature in the field, the importance of social capital for life satisfaction levels was taken into consideration, together with many other factors. When it came to socially meeting friends, family and colleagues (a measure for social capital), the situation of never meeting them, meeting them less than once a month or once a month and several times a month, all had a negative and statistical significant impact on life satisfaction when compared to meeting them once or several times a week (Popa, 2018). However, taken as a whole, social capital was not very important for the life satisfaction of East European migrants after looking at social and economic factors, health and satisfaction with democracy in the destination country. Therefore, the present article looks theoretically and empirically specifically at the importance of social capital for the well being of migrants. The argument made in the present article is that in the digital era, social capital in the destination country is not as important for the connected migrant as it was for the uprooted migrant.

The existing research on social capital is vast and diverse. Social embeddedness or social capital has been used for explaining differences in economic development (Putnam, 1993) or for predicting the ease of finding a job (Granovetter, 1983). The components of, or what makes up social capital are still debated. For Putnam, social capital means networks that offer access to resources, norms that control behaviour and lead to common beneficial actions and trust that limits exploitation and encourages trade (Putnam, 1993). Coleman (1988) also includes trust, social

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interaction and norms and sanctions in the definition of social capital. Studies distinguish between bonding and bridging social capital, the former referring to ingroup ties and the latter to outgroup ties (Narayan, 2001). Some scholars argue that bonding social capital does not always have a positive effect in the case of migrants, because obligations towards the network could restrict further development (Woolcock, 1998). Social capital can therefore also have a downside, or rather a cost added to its benefits.

Oftentimes, scholars (Granovetter, 1983; Lin, 2001) study social capital based on its instrumental role: "the premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: investment in social relations with expected returns" (Lin, 2001: 6). Similarly, in the case of migrants, social capital has been studied as having an instrumental role, most often consisting in providing valuable information about and facilitating initial movement to the new host country. Other researchers consider social capital as one of the variables influencing happiness levels. Arpino & de Valk (2017), for example, looked at the importance of social capital in the reported levels of life satisfaction for both migrants and natives.

In the case of low-skilled workers and persons from the rural areas, migration flows are influenced in a positive manner by social capital (Faist, 2009; Sandu, 2010), by the networks of relation one possesses in the migration-country, as "entrepreneurs in their country of immigration become middlemen between their country of origin and their country of residence" (Castells, 2000: 131). The influence of networks is thus bound to affect the decision to emigrate, leading to the phenomenon of "chain migration" (Dalen & Henkens, 2009). Chain migration and migrants who benefit from these pre-existing networks are also found in the case of Romanian migrants. This could be one of the reasons why Italy and Spain are in the same time the first two migration destinations for Romanians and the two countries with the largest Romanian community of immigrants. However, East Europeans still choose to emigrate to countries where no such strong networks exist.

In the following sections, I take into consideration the current context of the discourses on e-diasporas (Diminescu, 2008), digital diasporas (Brinkerhoff, 2009) and digital migration (Leurs & Smets, 2018). In the digital era, migration studies should reconsider the weight that social capital (measured as socially meeting others face to face) has in the subjective well-being of migrants.

Social capital and migration in the digital era

In the digital age, the paradigm of the uprooted migrant has been replaced by the paradigm of the connected migrant, who can keep in touch with his roots despite physical distance (Diminescu, 2008). If the uprooted migrant was seen as double absent (Sayad, 1999), the connected migrant maintains relations of proximity via telephone or Internet (Diminescu, 2008). This new type of migrant is characterized by multi-belonging (to both territories and networks), hypermobility and flexibility in the labour market (Diminescu, 2008). Through digital technologies, migrants can remain or become connected to other migrants from their own country located in the same or in other host countries, thus maintaining a bonding social capital and they can also connect with members of the host country, thus developing a bridging social capital (Codagnone & Kluzer, 2011). Social media plays an important role in initiating intercultural contact between refugees and the local population (Alencar, 2017). The connected migrant is therefore placed somewhere on the "encapsulation" - "cosmopolitanization" continuum (Christensen & Jansson, 2015; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018) developing bridging and bonding social capital in the same time (Codagnone & Kluzer, 2011). With the help of digital technologies migrants don't merely preserve part of their bonding social capital. According to Fleischmann & Dronkers (2010) through these trans-national

networks, facilitated by mass media and affordable travel possibilities, the influence of the origin country is felt in the integration of the second generation of immigrants. Because new migrants can daily keep in touch with their routes via the Internet, the present article addresses the following question: Is social capital in the new country as important for the well-being of the connected migrant as it was for the uprooted migrant?

The case of East European migrants in Europe

Eastern European countries have low social capital scores and Southern Europe has lower scores than Western and Northern Europe (Rodrıguez-Pose & Berlepsch, 2014). East Europeans have a low frequency of socially meeting friends, relatives or colleagues (Table 1). Based on this foundation of values, it can be expected that East European migrants also have a lower frequency of meeting friends, colleagues and family, not only because of the objective lack of an existing network in the destination country (at least in the first stages of migration) but also as a reflection of internalised initial models of behaviour and values from the home country.

Table 1. Frequency of socially meeting friends, relatives or colleagues

	Stayers in Bulgaria*	Stayers in Poland*	Stayers in Romania*	East-Europeans stayers (cumulative)*
Never	1.7%	3%	7.1%	3.9%
Less than once a month	13.8%	13.2%	24.9%	17.5%
Once a month	7.8%	15.4%	13.2%	12%
Several times a month	16.1%	23.4%	19%	19.1%
Once a week	14.4%	18.2%	14.6%	15.5%
Several times a week	24.4%	17.6%	14%	18.7%
Every day	21.6%	9.2%	7.3%	13.4%

**stayers=respondents from the three countries, with yes for born in country, mother and father born in country. Data: ESS wave 4 - 2008*

In a previous research, I looked comparatively at the life satisfaction levels of East European migrants in three clusters of countries from Europe (Popa, 2018). The present article goes further with this analysis, focusing on comparing social capital levels of East European migrants and natives in the three clusters/groups. Data from the European Social Survey, waves 1 through 7 was used for this purpose. The European countries most often chosen by Romanian, Bulgarian and Polish migrants were selected and grouped into 3 clusters, based on their proximity on the Inglehart Cultural Map (2015). Consequently, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and The Netherlands were put in Group 1; Ireland and The United Kingdom were put in Group 2; Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxemburg and Spain were put in Group 3. The sample of East European migrants, from all three groups, consists of 1296 cases. East European migrants were compared with "natives" on several dimensions. The category "natives" comprised of 149.942 cases, obtained from the same datafile, by choosing from the countries mentioned above respondents who wore born in the respective country, with both parents born in that country. The differences between East European migrants and natives in the three clusters/groups regarding the frequency of socially meeting others are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues

		Group 1		Group 2		Group 3			
		East Europeans	Natives	East Europeans	Natives	East Europeans	Natives	Total East Europeans	Total Natives
Never	Count	5	367	13	669	8	801	26	1837
	% within Group	.9%	.5%	3.1%	2.5%	2.4%	1.9%	2.0%	1.2%
Less than once a month	Count	34	3088	45	2302	23	1890	102	7280
	% within Group	6.3%	3.9%	10.7%	8.5%	7.0%	4.4%	7.9%	4.9%
Once a month	Count	75	5497	52	2720	26	2664	153	10881
	% within Group	13.8%	6.9%	12.4%	10.0%	7.9%	6.2%	11.8%	7.3%
Several times a month	Count	126	16052	61	3640	50	7815	237	27507
	% within Group	23.2%	20.1%	14.5%	13.4%	15.2%	18.3%	18.3%	18.4%
Once a week	Count	101	14183	115	6612	88	7748	304	28543
	% within Group	18.6%	17.8%	27.4%	24.3%	26.7%	18.1%	23.5%	19.1%
Several times a week	Count	141	27556	90	7687	90	13794	321	49037
	% within Group	26.0%	34.5%	21.4%	28.3%	27.3%	32.3%	24.8%	32.7%
Every day	Count	61	13139	44	3528	45	8015	24682	24682
	% within Group	11.2%	16.4%	10.5%	13.0%	13.6%	18.8%	16.5%	16.5%
Total	Count	543	79882	420	27158	330	42727	1293	149767
	% within Group	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data: ESS aggregated file, waves 1-7

Looking at the social embeddedness of East European migrants (Table 2) we see that they meet less often than natives, but they meet more often than stayers in their origin countries (Table 1). Meeting patterns of East European migrants are closer to those of natives than to those of stayers. This can show, as other studies suggested (Heath et al., 2008), that in time behaviours of migrants become more similar to those of natives. The greatest difference between natives and East European migrants in terms of frequency of meetings is in the first group of countries, what Inglehart (2015) called the Protestant cluster. East European migrants from this cluster declare themselves the happiest, when compared with East European migrants from the other two groups of countries (Popa, 2018). However, we should take into consideration the importance of family and friends, as these could be influenced by cultural aspects. Is socially meeting friends, relatives or colleagues valued the same? In other words, should we use this variable as part of the model for predicting general life satisfaction or happiness, with an equal importance for all groups? Social indicators seen as objective factors influencing happiness might not matter for everyone or all migrant groups in the same way. In this regard, Bjørnskov (2008, 2003) has shown that social capital is relevant for happiness only if the country being analysed has reached a certain income threshold. Socially meeting friends as part of leisure time is important for happiness in post-modern societies, in cultures characterised by Inglehart (2015) as being oriented towards self-expression. In a review of the role of social capital on happiness, Rodrıguez-Pose & Berlepsch (2014) also show that results regarding this matter are not consistent and that there are significant differences in how social capital interacts with happiness across different areas of Europe, with the weakest connection being found in the Nordic countries.

Another problematic aspect is the inclusion of relatives in the survey item measuring social capital, next to friends or colleagues, because the importance given to each category could vary for respondents. Supporting evidence for this is found in the World Values Survey (WVS), which contains variables regarding the importance of friends and family. Looking at the importance of family measured in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden in wave 6 (2010-2014), we see that Germany has the smallest percentage of respondents saying that family is very important (77.6%) while Romania has the largest percentage of respondents saying that family is very important (93.1%). But as data from the WVS shows (Table 3 below), for

Romanian respondents family is often more important than friends. In relation to this observation about the importance given to friends in Romania, a Romanian researcher studying the values of Romanians rhetorically asks whether Romania is the country of those without friends (Voicu, 2013). The case for measuring separately different types of intergroup contact was also made by Savelkoul (2001), who rightly distinguishes between contact with friends and contact with colleagues.

Table 3. Evaluation of the importance of friends in life

	Germany	Netherlands	Spain	Sweden	Poland	Romania
Very important	50.93%	49.63%	52.43%	67.83%	38.33%	22.43%
Rather important	42.63%	45.13%	42.83%	29.53%	55.23%	52.23%
Not very important	6.13%	4.33%	3.53%	2.23%	53%	22.13%
Not at all important	0.33%	0.33%	0.13%	0.33%	1.23%	3.13%
No answer	-	-	1.13%	0.23%	-	0.13%
Don't know	-	0.73%	0.13%	-	0.2	-
(N)	2046	1.902	1189	1206	966	1.503

Data source: World Values Survey Wave 6: 2010-2014

The results suggest a difference in the case of Romania for the role of bridging social capital based on weak ties, and bonding social capital, based on strong, close, family ties. This is why not meeting relatives as often as the respondent would like, because these relatives remained behind in the origin country, could be much more important in the happiness levels of a Romanian migrant than socially meeting colleagues or friends in the host country. In this case, measuring life satisfaction based on social contact, as in the study of Arpino & de Valk (2017) could be problematic, as the importance given to friends by Romanian respondents, for example, is not that high when compared with respondents from target countries in Western or Northern Europe. This comparison suggests that, at least for Romanians, the variable for social contacts as part of the model for predicting life satisfaction should be weighed with the different degree of importance given by Romanian respondents to family/relatives and friends and these two reference groups should be investigated separately in future surveys.

The frequency of socially meeting others in the case of migrants should also be seen in the context of the connected migrant paradigm proposed by Diminescu (2008). How important is it for the connected migrant to socially meet friends, relatives or colleagues? Looking at the levels of Internet usage of East Europeans in the three previously mentioned clusters of countries, compared to natives, fewer East Europeans have no Internet access or never use the Internet. Almost half (47.9%, n=346) of East Europeans from the sample use the Internet daily, 13% more than the percent of natives who use the Internet daily. This is in line with findings of Codagnone & Kluzer (2011) in other studies, showing that "immigrants and ethnic minorities […] often are more intensive ICT users than the local population (Codagnone & Kluzer, 2011: 18). According to the authors, this can also be connected with the smaller age average of the immigrant group when compared to the natives' group. Migrants could thus make up for less face to face social interaction through digital communication. Online interactions with friends and relatives could (partially) make up for the fact that compared with natives in all three clusters, East Europeans show lower levels of the frequency with which they socially meet friends, relatives or colleagues. Of the East Europeans in the three clusters, the ones living in Group 3 (Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxemburg and Spain) have the highest frequency of social meetings (Table 2) but they are the least satisfied with life from the three groups (Popa, 2018). Therefore, even those who declare themselves to be the

happiest and most satisfied with life out of the three groups of East Europeans, namely those living in Group 1, have a lower frequency of social meetings than the natives. Also, comparing East Europeans in the three groups, the ones who declare themselves to be the happiest are not the ones with the highest frequency of social contacts. As Woolcock (1998) explains, there may be different types of social capital, which collectively are resources to be optimized, not maximized. In the present case therefore, frequency above a certain threshold would bring little extra benefits as "needgratification above the minimum is encouraged by positive affect, but this motivation typically follows the law of diminishing returns: the more friends we have, the less pleasure we derive from an extra one" (Veenhoven, 1991: 15). Social contact does matter in the subjective well-being levels, but less than other political and economic factors (Popa, 2018). Social and economic factors matter more than frequency of social contact for East Europeans, as this last aspect can be substituted with long distance relations mediated by virtual communication channels, as Diminescu (2008) has shown. According to Woolcock, there could also be such a thing as "too much social capital" which could have negative effects on an individual if the strong network attempts to condition the behaviour of the member it previously helped (Woolcock, 1998). As stated earlier, in the case of Romanians migrating to Italy and Spain there is evidence of chain migration, with the help of networks already established in the destination countries. Assuming that at least in the first stage of the migration process, new migrants interact more with their fellow nationals, and therefore have a higher frequency of socially meeting them, this does not result in a direct effect of increasing the level of life satisfaction or of happiness, regardless of other social factors.

Concluding remarks

Digitalisation has changed both migration and displacement: the media commented in the case of the 2015 refugee wave in Europe regarding the frequency with which refugees were making selfies with selfie sticks when reaching Europe (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018). Part of the media coverage was attributed to the fact that "the appearance of digitally connected refugees was perceived as incongruent with Eurocentric ideas of sad and poor refugees fleeing from war and atrocities" (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018: 6).

In the case of migrants, the work of Diminescu (2008) has shown that the uprooted migrant has been replaced by the connected migrant. What the present article wanted to show is that in the case of the connected migrant, the importance that social capital has for the subjective well-being should be reanalysed. East European migrants who have the highest frequency of social contacts (from the three country clusters) are not the happiest ones. Bridging social capital is important in self-expression cultures, when a certain threshold of objective well-being has been reached. Migrants in the first stages of their mobile life invest all time and energy in establishing themselves, economically and socially in the host country and could make up for being less socially active through online interactions with people back home. As new migrants can daily keep in touch with their routes through digital communication, social capital in the destination country could be less important for their happiness than it was for the uprooted migrant. Also, when measuring social capital based on frequency of socially meeting others, future research should distinguish between friends, colleagues and relatives/family, as these groups are valued differently.

Lastly, so far, the willing distancing of migrants from their co-nationals (either from "back home" or present in the host country) has mostly been subject of literature (for example Adichie, 2013), as theory still lacks the scientific gathered data to draw large scale conclusions. Scientists should however not assume that social contacts matter for all migrant groups in the same way and,

the other way around, that all migrants wish to keep their bonding social capital rather than invest in a new bridging capital with instrumental value in the new host country.

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