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Transnationality as a fluid social identity

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How does the concept of transnationalism fit within the framework of social identity? What is the relationship between 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism'? Do transnational migrants define themselves as such, or are they labelled by others (researchers of simply 'others')? These are some of the questions we will try to answer in this paper by discussing the concept of 'transnationalism' through the lenses of several perspectives drawn from sociology, anthropology, psychology and political science. We want to highlight what is characteristic of 'transnationalism' as a concept by integrating it within the larger perspective of social identity and by comparing and contrasting it with nation/nationalism and diaspora. While belonging to one group implies exclusions from other comparable groups, we see transnationalism as fitting well within the postmodern idea of fluid identity, where defining one's self depends on the audiences without affecting the 'true' meaning of self.

Keywords: transnationalism; migration; diaspora; nationalism; social identity

Introduction

The last decade witnessed an increasing interest, from media and scholars, in employing transnationalism in various contexts, from migration to social movements and globalization. A Google search for 'transnationalism', for example, gives about 300,000 hits, out of which 23,500 are scholarly documents. Within the migration studies area, transnationalism stands between two other perspectives explaining immigrants' adaptation to the host country (assimilation and diaspora) and it is most often defined in opposition to assimilation.

In this paper we discuss the idea of 'transnationalism' in migration studies by combining several perspectives from sociology, anthropology, psychology and political science. We will focus our study of 'transnationalism' by using three main directions: 1) the history of the concept, highlighting its changing meanings during the twentieth century; 2) comparing and contrasting it with other concepts such as nation/nationalism and diaspora; and 3) integrating transnationalism within the larger perspective of social identity.

Transnationalism and the nation's boundaries

Transnationalism is often discussed as opposed to and different from nationalism. The question 'what is a nation?' received various answers over the years: while Renan

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(1996[1882]) defines it metaphorically as the moral conscience created by a large group of men 'healthy in mind and warm of heart' (p. 53), others defined it more precisely as a political and cultural community, sharing myths and memories, a community that has a historically well defined homeland (Smith, 1991). Nationalism is then the source of national identity, the adoration of nation, making people from the same community believe they are related to each other and enforcing their feelings of being connected and having a common destiny (Jusdanis, 2001). Nations did not form and are not necessarily based on the same principles everywhere: while in the Western nations the national identity is based on 'common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions', in Eastern Europe and Asia the 'ethnic' model of nation (nation as a 'community of common descent' with people being related through birth/blood) is prevalent (Smith, 1991, p. 11). This distinction implies that, while Western nations would eventually recognize foreigners/immigrants who adopt the values and norms of their nations as true members of their nation, this would be impossible or very difficult to achieve in Eastern European and Asian countries. This might be an important idea in migration studies because these different conceptualizations of nations have an impact on how and if an immigrant is accepted in the host country. It implies that an immigrant or his/her descendents can be accepted as part of a nation in various Western countries, given that s/he incorporates the myths, symbols and values of the new homeland, yet can have little chance to do the same in the Eastern European and Asian nations because of the lack of necessary blood connections.

The history of transnationalism as a concept can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, when a large number of immigrants of non-Anglo-Saxon (Eastern and Southern European) origin came to the US in search of a better life. The dimensions and ethnic structure of this new migrant group ignited a lot of concern among various 'native' groups, scared that these people, poor and unable to speak English, would have a hard time assimilating into the new society. It was precisely during this time that the new concept of transnationalism/transnational emerged to reflect the tensioned discussion around the new ethnic face of America. While some argued that the country had to melt its various ethnic groups into one, big, homogeneous pot and were worried that with the new immigrants it would be difficult to do so, Bourne (1916) was one of the voices discussing the issue in a new, non-assimilationist light. Immigrants, he said, socialized in different, non-American societies, and came here with their own, unique, cultural background. It was unrealistic to expect them to wipe that background off and replace it with an Anglo-Saxon American one (see also Faist, 2000). The United States needed to adapt to this reality that American nationalism ought to be qualitatively different from European (positive and creative, not jealous and negative), based on European modernity rather than on Middle Ages values. America, he said, as a country of immigration, is a nation of 'transnationals' rather than 'nationals' in the European sense, a nation where many different cultures weave into a multicultural thread rather than into a melting pot. Immigrants should be left to bring their own, specific contribution to the American life, and their perspectives needed to be incorporated into a new American culture. He emphasized transnationalism as a step up from nineteenth century European nationalism, a more modern and progressive perspective on immigrant integration. Instead of the full assimilation demanded in the past, corporations today are actually encouraging a transnational profile of their highly

skilled immigrants because it helps to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, skills, the movement and outsourcing of certain jobs, and the outflow and inflow of resources (Faist, 2000; Vertovec, 2001; 2002).

During the Great Depression years and World War II there was not much discussion on transnationalism, as few immigrants came into the US and foreigners were perceived as a threat, especially after Pearl Harbor. It was in the post-1970s era that this topic came back to life in Europe, North America and Canada, triggered by increasing globalization and an increasingly large number of migrants moving to these regions. Contemporary migrants (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995) are no longer uprooted individuals forced to adapt to a new culture and society; they are able to maintain strong connections to their homeland, while living in the new country. The pressure to 'integrate' in the new society is not necessarily as high as before, because they continue to have access to their networks of friends and family back home. They are 'transnational' as they navigate between two worlds, the origin and the host country, and they belong to both countries. Kivisto (2001) does not agree that transnationalism is a new phenomenon, as both circulatory and return migration occurred in the past. Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999) make homeland ties a defining part of a transnational profile by arguing that the unit of analysis in transnational studies should be the individual together with his/her support networks. They define transnationalism as a new 'social phenomenon', something that affects a significant part of a group or community, where immigrants live and work in one country but, at the same time, have cross-border businesses and participate in ethnic social events, such as music festivals with singers from their origin country. However, other studies point out (Portes, Guarnizo, & Haller, 2002) that only a minority of migrants get involved in cross-border entrepreneurship, while most of the others have loose contacts with their homeland. More than this, immigrants have always kept in touch with their motherlands, even when the Internet and other modern means of communication were not available (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1920). It should be noted that this perspective of transnationalism, as keeping strong ties to the origin country, brings the concept close to, and difficult to distinguish from, diaspora, defined as a group living out of their origin country, keeping a strong attachment to a 'homeland' and maintaining a distinctive profile within the host country. Although theoretically the transnationals have ties to both origin and host country, the examples offered by the literature on transnationalism emphasizes the relationships with the origin country, while the host country's ties (except for living there) are not usually discussed in much detail.

This post-1970s revival of transnationalism has a different accent from Bourne's (1916) concept: it argues for nation as a moribund idea, killed by the emergence of transnational corporations and globalized society. While in Bourne's perspective, migrants are seen as transnationals because of their previous socialization in a different culture; in the new perspective migrants are transnationals because, and if, they maintain strong ties to their homeland. *Transnationalism* is used here not only as a *beyond nation* and *across state borders* but also as 'more powerful than' national institutions and groups. In an overview of the achievements of transnational movements in the twentieth century, Florini and Simmons (2000), for example, use transnationalism within the framework of transnational civil society. They use examples such as Transparency International and NGOs outside Mexico (forcing the Mexican government to abandon a military repression of the Zapatistas in 1994) to

show how transnational organizations are able to fight and to win against national governments.

A wider perspective on transnationalism, seen not necessarily as a 'trans-state' but as a 'transnation' is defined by Verdery (1994). She argues that transnationalism does not necessarily equate with the 'processes flowing across state borders' (p. 3) because nations are not necessarily confined in a single state, and a single state can include more than one national group. Her perspective, coming from a researcher who worked mainly on Eastern European countries, is in line with Smith's (1991) ideas of nation as based on community of descent rather than community of territory or citizenship (see also Vertovec, 2001). Because the nations can be cross-border entities, there are two different types of transnational relations: those crossing state borders, but not necessarily involving more than one nation (trans-statal), and those going beyond the nation understood as ethnic community, but within the same state; of course, combinations of these two are also possible, and they do occur. Verdery (1994) argues for a two-dimensional definition of transnationalism as statal and (ethno) national.

This perspective brings in the relationship between citizenship (as a set of rights and duties of an individual toward a certain country) and transnationalism (as attachment/connection to more than one country). The two concepts might be seen as contradicting each other since citizenship requires loyalty toward a specific nation. In an attempt to address precisely this question, Fox (2003) examines various aspects of what he calls 'transnational citizenship' (p. 171). In the use of the term transnational citizenship, there is a difference, he says, between citizenship (having rights) and participation (demanding rights). If transnational citizenship is looked at as cross-border participation, it can take three main forms: 'parallel' transnational participation (an individual active in more than one organization, each of them having different national identity), 'simultaneous' (involvement in collective actions that are transnational themselves), and 'integrating' (which supposes multiple levels, thus participation not only crosses borders, but also brings in actors from local, regional, national and international levels) (Fox, 2003, p. 188). While other studies define transnationalism as beyond or against nationalism and nation-state, Fox tries to use it in the context of nation-state and shows that the two do not necessarily contradict each other.

From other perspectives, however, transnationalism is not a particularly useful concept precisely because it is defined in opposition to or 'beyond' nation. The nation-state, some argue, as regulator of the flows of people and goods over the border, is very much alive and there is no sign that it will disappear in the near future (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Often transnational communities are constituted from connections between specific, and sometimes multiple, localities in the sending and receiving countries (Levitt, 2001).

For Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) 'transnationalism' is used by migration scholars to describe 'highly particularistic attachments antithetical to those by-products of globalization denoted by the concept of 'transnational civil society' (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 1177). The connection between immigrants and their places of origin and destination is a local rather than national one, as most of the immigrants come from rural areas, with little or no apprehension of the nation as a whole. The double loyalty implied by the concept, loyalty to the origin as well as destination country, can become a problem when the two countries are in conflict, similar to what the Japanese experienced while living in the US during World War II.

Social identity and transnationalism

If we think of transnationals as a subset of migrants, a question that arises is 'what makes these people assume a transnational identity rather than defining themselves as diasporic (living in one country, but being part of their original national community) or trying to get assimilated?'. Why would a person adopt and how long would s/he keep a transnational profile? Although nation/nationalism are often discussed from a social identity point of view, transnationalism as an assumed social identity is not employed too often as a perspective, most likely because it is the researcher rather than the individual deciding who is and who is not a transnational.

Social identity is part of our personality and the personality, the situation, and the behavior form a deterministic triangle: theoretically, if there is enough knowledge about two of these elements, the other one can be easier to predict (Funder, 2001). If we define 'transnational' in terms of behavior choices, then the type of personality and the situation (how well s/he is accepted by the host country, why s/he left the home country, perceived benefits from keeping in touch with the origin country) could be framed and defined.

Leaving one's place of birth is not an easy decision and people leave a country either because their life is in danger or in search of a better life. As studies show (Massey, 1997; Sandu, 2001), in certain circumstances there is a circularity of movements, with migrants going back and forth between countries. These circulatory migrants are frequently defined as transnationals, although people involved in this type of migration might not see themselves as being equally linked to the two places. Some of them keep defining themselves through their place of origin and see the host country only as a means to achieve a better economic status back home. Others define themselves as host-country residents and use their skills (knowledge of the country-of-origin language and customs and social capital back home) to improve their lives in the host country (Vertovec, 2001; 2002). Even if they have a double citizenship, as Fox (2003) argues, this is not necessarily a measure of a double national commitment, as it often plays an instrumental role in facilitating their trade/business. For example, countries such as Mexico and the European Union countries do not allow non-citizens/non-EU citizens to own land. A person who owns land in one of these countries would eventually keep their citizenship to keep their land, not necessarily because they want to define themselves as transnationals. While the experience of living happily in two countries might make migrants willing to identify with a double nationality, those who left the origin country bitter might want to assimilate quickly in the new land because they no longer want to identify with their birth place. Happy to be accepted by the host countries, immigrants from this group would probably refuse to teach their children their native language and hope for them to be truly assimilated in the new country. Generally speaking, for second generation immigrants, the 'transnational' profile can be identified in rare cases: the parents' origin country is at best a place to spend the vacation or, most often, a distant place never visited. The parents' language might be spoken at home, but many of the children would have little willingness to ever learn anything about that distant culture.

A social identity is created and maintained through interaction with people belonging to the same social unit and language plays a major role in any human interaction. Therefore, an immigrant with little knowledge of the host country language has few chances of developing connections with the new culture, people and

society and, consequently, his national identity will experience little change. S/he will have to remain linked to the origin community or, eventually, will establish links only to ethnics living in the new land. A transnational identity can then develop only among those who not only master both languages (host and origin), but also come into contact and have the social skills to establish connections with people and communities from both the host and origin country. An immigrant rich in human capital rather than one who knows little or nothing about the origin and/or host country, would have higher chances of developing a transnational identity. With the revolutions in telecommunications and long-distance travel, creating and sustaining relations with the country of origin has really had a huge impact on transnational immigrants. It is easier now than ever before to be filled in on all the political and social happenings in the home country. In the past, this information might have been difficult or time consuming to obtain, but now the physical distance gap is closing, allowing immigrants to feel connected to their former society when they might not otherwise have had the ability to do so (Faist, 2000; Vertovec, 2001; 2002).

It is our natural inclination to assume a social identity by identifying ourselves in connection to a certain group, whether it is a national, ethnic, family or work-related social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As members of one group, we define our social identity not only by bonding with the in-group members but also in contrast with those belonging to other groups. The transnational, as a person who participates equally in two different national communities, has a rather peculiar type of social identity. If we define nationalism as loyalty to one's nation, transnationalism seems to be a 'double nationalism'. However, a transnational might also be seen as someone without a homeland (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). Once the connection with the homeland changes through migration, it is difficult to define a new relationship of the same quality and intensity. Can nationalism be additive – that is, can the loyalty to one nation be extended to more than one nation without losing the very substance of 'nationalist' feeling?

Social identity is an outcome of group pressure on the way people perceive themselves and often times refers to two different things: 1) the content of the identity itself, and 2) an indication of the strength of the association with a particular social category (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). For the particular case of national identity, a person can accept and recognize his/her belonging to a certain national group, but this does not necessarily mean s/he is also an active, committed participant to the political and social life of that specific community. This distinction between identification and commitment might solve the problem of transnationalism as double nationalism. A transnational is one who recognizes a connection with at least two different nations, but s/he is not necessarily committed to any of those. On the other hand, if we accept Smith's (1991) perspective on nation, the different definitions of nation employed in Eastern European/Asian countries versus Western countries make it easier for an immigrant to define him/herself as being a member of more than one nation. A person born in Asia/Eastern Europe remains a member of the origin nation because of the blood connection while s/he can become a member of a Western nation if s/he accepts the values of the new national group. The two national identities do not exclude but complement each other.

From this point of view, a diasporic migrant is one that not only identifies him/herself as a member of the home nation, but s/he is also strongly committed to that community, while living as a passive citizen in a different country. Diasporic

immigrants live with their soul at home and their body abroad. Their emotional life is connected to the origin country – that is their 'home' – and they are merely refugees in the new society. They have no interests in interacting with the social life of the new land, as they look forward to the moment of return.

Being considered 'one of us' usually means 'not being one of them' and national identity may lead ultimately to social inclusion or exclusion (McCrone, 2008, p. 1245). In terms of national identity, who we are depends on how well our claims are regarded by those around us. Some psychologists argue that one's identification with a group is stronger when the group allows for competition and social change and it is weaker if the group has permeable boundaries or the inclusion in the group seems illegitimate (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). If anybody can become part of that group, without any well-defined requirements, belonging to that group does not add much to one's identity.

As a study of Portuguese immigrants in the Netherlands reveals (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002), sometimes people might define themselves as 'transnationals' in order to emphasize some personal uniqueness or to avoid being looked upon as part of a marginal/inferior group. The Portuguese immigrants in the case cited above felt their status was higher by claiming a transnational profile (a community linked to both Portugal and Netherlands) than by defining themselves as a minority in the Netherlands. Being part of a stigmatized group is a challenge, and people from that group (in our case, immigrants) can fight against the stigma either by disassociating themselves from that community, by trying to get quickly assimilated into the majority, or trying to change the status of their group, by emphasizing their belonging to the origin country national group, as in the example above. The case of the Caribbean immigrants in the US is relevant for this situation as well (Waters, 1999) as they attempt to instill in their children a strong Caribbean identity as a way to escape from being identified as African Americans, perceived as a low status ethnic group.

Transnational identification depends not only on the group, host country and historical period but also on the combinations between these three elements. A French immigrant living nowadays in the UK has a lot of choices: s/he can define himself/herself as French, British or transnational. However, a German national who lived in the UK during World War II would probably have had a hard time in declaring his/her devotion to Germany while the German bombs were flying over London. As any social identity, being transnational is not fixed forever; it varies over time as people change through interaction: living in one country for a long time usually increases the immigrant's connections with the host country and cuts the emotional ties to the origin community. As studies on 'place identity' show (Cuba & Hummon, 1993) people tend to base their national identities on their sense of being at home in a particular place. From this perspective, second generation immigrants would have a hard time identifying with their parents' communities, because for them 'home' was always the host country. The relationship between transnational and ethnic identity is an interesting and rather understudied field, but probably these two can be connected as social phenomena affecting different generations. A child of a US.-Mexican immigrant, for example, would probably adopt an ethnic identity as a Mexican-American rather than keeping a transnational profile, precisely because 'home' is no longer Mexico, but the US. His/her relationship with the parents' country of origin is superficial and even if the knowledge of language is preserved, the connection with that distant culture is often weak or non-existent.

Because of the plurality of national identifications, a transnational identity brings up the problem of authenticity, as the answer to the question 'who am I?' (in terms of belonging to a certain national group) is not an easy one for somebody who is part of two or more national communities. A possible response to this is that 'being true' changes in the postmodern world: it is no longer required to be true to self in the same way in all situations, 'but rather of being true to self in context or self in relationship' (Howard, 2000, p. 387). A transnational would interact in one way with the fellows from his/her origin country while s/he would use a different set of rules and behaviors when interacting with the host country's natives, as a way to respond to different expectations. Language and gestures need to adapt to different contexts, and, together with them, the identity and the person would feel as comfortable in one context as in the other without seeing him/herself as schizoid. Dolby and Cornbleth (2001) make a similar point, when they talk about identity as being fluid rather than rigid. This fluidity of identity is not limited to the case of a transnational: Brubaker et al. (2006) discuss the relationship between citizenship (nation-ness) and ethnicity in a similar way. Ethnicity and nationness are not seen as grounded and salient, categories, rather they happen 'in the moment-to-moment unfolding of interaction' (Brubaker et al., 2006, p. 362). In other words, one's nationality is not always conspicuous; rather, it pops up in certain interactional situations, making it discontinuous in one's everyday experience. Through this lens, being 'transnational' makes more sense, as one can experience two different national identities in various interactional settings.

Conclusions

In this paper we used research perspectives borrowed from different disciplines to highlight various aspects of the concept of transnationalism as a concept in migration studies. Our study followed three directions: we overviewed various definitions given to the concept over the past century, we compared and contrasted transnationalism with nationalism, assimilation and diaspora, and we dedicated most of the third part to the understanding of transnationalism within the frame of social identity. Although assimilation and transnationalism are most often defined as opposite outcomes of migration (in the first case, the migrant blends into the adopted country; in the second case, s/he keeps in touch with both his/her origin country and the receiving country) new theories show that keeping a transnational profile can sometime be beneficial for a successful assimilation (as in the case of segmented assimilation). From a life course perspective, on the other hand, it makes more sense to define transnationalism and assimilation as complementary or successive stages in a migrant's life, with migrants tending to have a transnational profile immediately after they leave, by keeping in touch with their origin country, and becoming more assimilated later in life. The second generation, on the other hand, has few chances of ever developing a transnational profile, as their knowledge of their parents' origin country is usually superficial and even speaking the language is often problematic.

While 'transnational' is sometimes used as a synonym for 'diaspora', in this paper we tried to determine what distinguishes one from another. Although the diasporic and transnational migrants might have some common features such as keeping in touch with the origin country, they also differ in terms of their attachment to the host country. While transnationals are firmly rooted in the host country and are involved in the social life of the host community, the diasporic peoples' lives have little or no

mixing with their country of adoption as they live there due to the inability to go back home. They do not function; they survive in the new environment, while caring for their distant homeland.

The third direction – transnationalism as an assumed social identity – is one on which we emphasized more, in an attempt to connect the literature on social identity with transnational studies. Social identity is created and maintained through social contacts, so only those with a good knowledge of two or more languages, cultures and societies would be able to claim a transnational identity. While the definition of social identity implies the existence of both an in-group – with whom the individual identifies – and an out-group – from whom the individual distances him/herself – the transnational identity implies the concomitant identification with two different national groups. This is not impossible, however, as in some cases national identity is given by common ancestors, while in others it is given by accepting and respecting a certain set of rules and values. Defining social identity as a fluid rather than rigid characteristic brings up the idea of a fluctuating national identity depending on the contexts and relationships with other social actors. Different contexts require different sets of actions and behaviors and the one who knows both sets of rules well can feel comfortable and can function well in various situations. If national identity can be seen as a role, a transnational would be one that plays different roles in front of different audiences, a flexible social actor that internalized the rules and constraints of different social contexts. In this perspective, we can say that the self is on a continuum of transnationality. Of course, a conflict between the two different audiences would force him/her to give up one role or would put him/her in the dangerous situation of being perceived by both groups as an 'enemy' ally, but as long as the two countries are at peace, s/he can move back and forth and feels comfortable in multiple settings.

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