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High-Resolution Image(s) of Intercultural Contact

Understanding Interculturalism with Personal Networks

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Intercultural contact is a well-studied phenomenon and particularly relevant in the context of migration. However, research in this field often treats immigrants as independent entities and ignores their role in social structures. An approach that can account for the complex dynamics and relational interdependencies underlying immigrants' acculturation processes is the social network approach. We illustrate the value of bringing in a personal social network perspective to the study of intercultural contact with two cases: (1) Eritrean and Syrian refugees in Germany and (2) Ecuadorian, Moroccan, Pakistani, and Romanian immigrants in Barcelona, Spain. We conclude with some thoughts on the conceptual and methodological benefits of the social network approach and some reflections on policy implications.

Keywords: intercultural contact, personal social networks, migration, acculturation, measurement, refugees, integration, interculturalism

Individuals are embedded in a web of social relationships. These relationships do not only span different social contexts, villages, cities, and regions but also countries and continents. The days when people remained and mainly interacted with their own cultural group are long gone. Intercultural contact is omnipresent and has already become the order of the day. May it be the foreign saleswoman in the smoothie bar around the corner, the new friend your daughter brought back from her exchange year in another country, or a colleague in your company who sits in another branch in the world. If we start looking, we can find intercultural relationships everywhere. Probably most of us have experienced

encounters with people from other cultures or other ethnocultural backgrounds at some point in our lives. Some more often and maybe more meaningful, others less frequently but not necessarily less consequential.

So, it comes as no surprise that intercultural contact, its antecedents, and outcomes have become well-studied research topics in social and cultural psychology, sociology, and related social sciences. But generated knowledge from this research does not only advance science, it also brings tremendous societal value. Only by understanding the dynamics between people can we work on building healthy and well-functioning societies.

Migration and Acculturation

Maybe one of the most studied social phenomena in the context of intercultural contact is international migration. When people move from one country to another, they get exposed to a new culture and undergo acculturation processes. Acculturation describes the resulting cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes in these individuals (Berry, 2003). Traditionally, researchers assumed that acculturation was a unidimensional, one-directional, and irreversible process in which individuals would leave their heritage culture behind and absorb the new culture instead (Trimble, 2003). While this idea often continues to prevail in policy and public discourse, research over the past three decades has shown that this view is outdated and that acculturation is a more complex, multidimensional process in which individuals cope with at least two tasks (Berry, 1990, 2003): maintaining and cultivating their culture of origin and participating in the new host culture.

Migration and Human Embedding in Social Structures

But migrants, like all individuals, do not operate in a social vacuum. They do not necessarily decide for themselves which culture to engage with. Instead, they live in relationships with other individuals and, as such, influence and are influenced by each other's opinions, behaviors, emotions, and identifications. In acculturation processes, the migrant is only one actor within a network of complex social relationships alongside individuals from the home country, other migrants, and, above all, people from the host society. The vast majority of research in this field, however, treats

migrants as separate, independent entities. It focuses on what happens *inside* migrants' minds by investigating their acculturation-related attitudes, behaviors, and preferences or just demographics. This perspective ignores that acculturation occurs between migrants and host individuals and, thus, does not account for the dynamics *between* them (Brown & Zagefka, 2011; Postmes et al., 2015). An alternative research perspective that accounts for these relational interdependencies is the social network approach. In its logic, the patterns of social relations (e.g., friendships, interactions) among actors (e.g., people) can be described in the form of a network. For analytical purposes, network researchers summarize these social networks in terms of (a) their *content*, that is, the characteristics of *who* is in the network, and (b) their *structure*, that is, *how* these network members are connected with one another.

» **Only by understanding the dynamics between people can we work on building healthy and well-functioning societies.** «

As stated above, a migrant's network often consists of contacts from the home country and the host society, but also of other migrants, and each might be helpful in distinct situations. How much inter- and intraconnected these groups are, and the extent of these connections usually change throughout the migration process. For example, over time, migrants may lose touch with some contacts in the society of origin while establishing more and more new relationships in the host society. Some of these new contacts are useful in providing access to necessary information and help build essential competencies for surviving and building a new life. At the same time, staying in touch with contacts "back home" and finding similar migrants at the new place can provide social

support, help find a new job, and protect the migrant’s ethnic identity.

How big and connected the groups in a migrant’s network are may be related to various acculturation-related outcomes such as well-being, socio-cultural adjustment, and attitudes towards people from other cultures. Looking at content and structure of these networks provides detailed information and gives a higher resolution image of intra- and intercultural contact. In the following, we will provide two research cases.

Case 1: Eritrean and Syrian Refugees in Germany

The first case examines the content of the personal networks of Eritrean and Syrian refugees residing in Germany. Between 2010 and 2019, Germany was worldwide one of the most important refugee receiving countries, with Eritrea and Syria being two important countries of origin of forced migration to Germany (Destatis, 2020). As part of the research project “Forced Migration and Transnational Family Arrangements. Eritrean and Syrian Refugees

in Germany” (TransFAR) in 2020, 1,458 randomly selected individuals with Eritrean or Syrian citizenship were interviewed about their migration experience, family arrangements, subjective well-being, and personal social networks. The interviewers went to the participants’ homes and asked them questions about the most important people in their lives, using three network questions (BiB & BAMF, 2021): (1) “With whom do you discuss important personal matters?” (*discussion network*), (2) “With whom do you regularly spend your free time?” (*leisure network*), and (3) “Who helps or supports you here in Germany?” (*instrumental support network*). Each respondent listed up to five people for each of the three network questions and was then asked to indicate their sex, age, country of origin and current whereabouts, the place they usually meet, and whether they met each other for the first time in Germany or already before.

Interestingly, on average, participants’ leisure networks were larger than their discussion and support networks, while the latter contained by far the smallest number of people. If you take the three network dimensions and combine them into one network, the number of contacts is, on average, 3.8 and 3.9 for Eritrean men and women, respectively, while Syrian men had 4.3 contacts and Syrian

Figure 1 Network Size for Three Network Types and the Overall Network, by Country of Origin and Sex of the Respondent

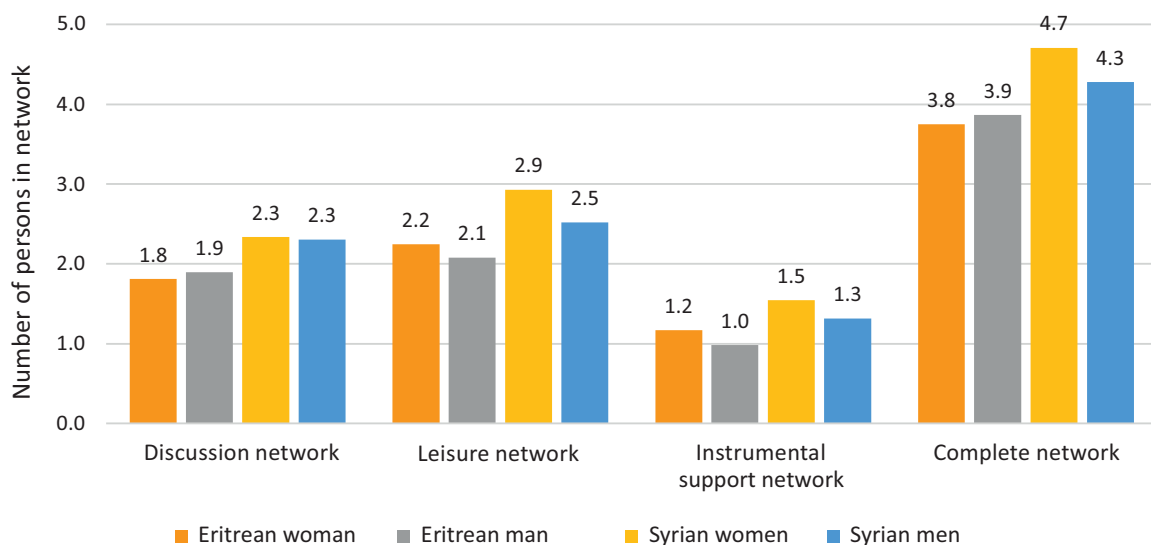


Table 1 Percentages of Respondents with at Least One Network Contact from their Country of Origin, Germany, or Elsewhere, by Country of Origin and Sex of the Respondent

Cultural background of network contact	Eritrea		Syria		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Coethnic	84.4%	82.3%	92.9%	83.6%	86.5%
German	51.8%	53.6%	29.1%	38.2%	37.1%
Other	8.5%	7.2%	7.4%	10.3%	9.1%

women had 4.7 contacts on average, a difference of almost up to one person across these four groups (Figure 1).

When considering the country of origin of the people being named by the respondents, three groups emerged: (1) *coethnics* (people coming from the origin of the respondent), (2) *Germans*, and (3) *others* (people coming neither from Eritrea or Syria nor Germany). Considering all three network types, the vast majority of respondents had at least one person in the network who came from their country of origin (Table 1). Most of these coethnic contacts were family members residing also in Germany. At the same time, more than one-half of the Eritrean men (53.6%) and women (51.8%) mentioned at least one German person among their confidants. In contrast, Syrian respondents were less likely to name at least one person from Germany (men: 38.2%; women: 29.1%). Establishing close ties with people from countries other than Germany or the country of origin was rare. In total, only 9.1% of the respondents had at least one contact originating from somewhere else (see Table 1).

The presence of intercultural contacts within the network is related to demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondent: People in a relationship, parents, individuals with a higher educational level, or individuals who were currently working or in vocational training were more likely to mention at least one contact from a cultural

background other than their own. Moreover, the longer Eritrean and Syrian refugees had stayed in Germany, the more likely they were to come into intercultural contact. Though Syrians, particularly Syrian women, had a lower probability of having intercultural ties compared to their Eritrean counterparts.

This case illustrates how the cultural composition of refugees' networks depends to a large extent on other factors, such as their family situation. For example, having children may increase the chance of meeting people from the host society or from a different ethnocultural background, as new interethnic contacts can be made through the children's schools or daycare centers. In particular, Syrian women are strongly embedded in their family networks, and extra-familial intercultural ties may be less important or less accessible for them, at least in the initial phase of their stay in Germany. Also, the respondents were refugees, setting them apart from economic and other types of immigrants. This is reflected in the fact that most of them (especially Syrians) lived together with their partner and/or children in Germany, as leaving the partner and children behind in a war-torn country was not an option (BiB & BAMF, 2021). These precarious reasons for migrating and the resulting family situations may lead to different network formation mechanisms than for other types of immigrants.

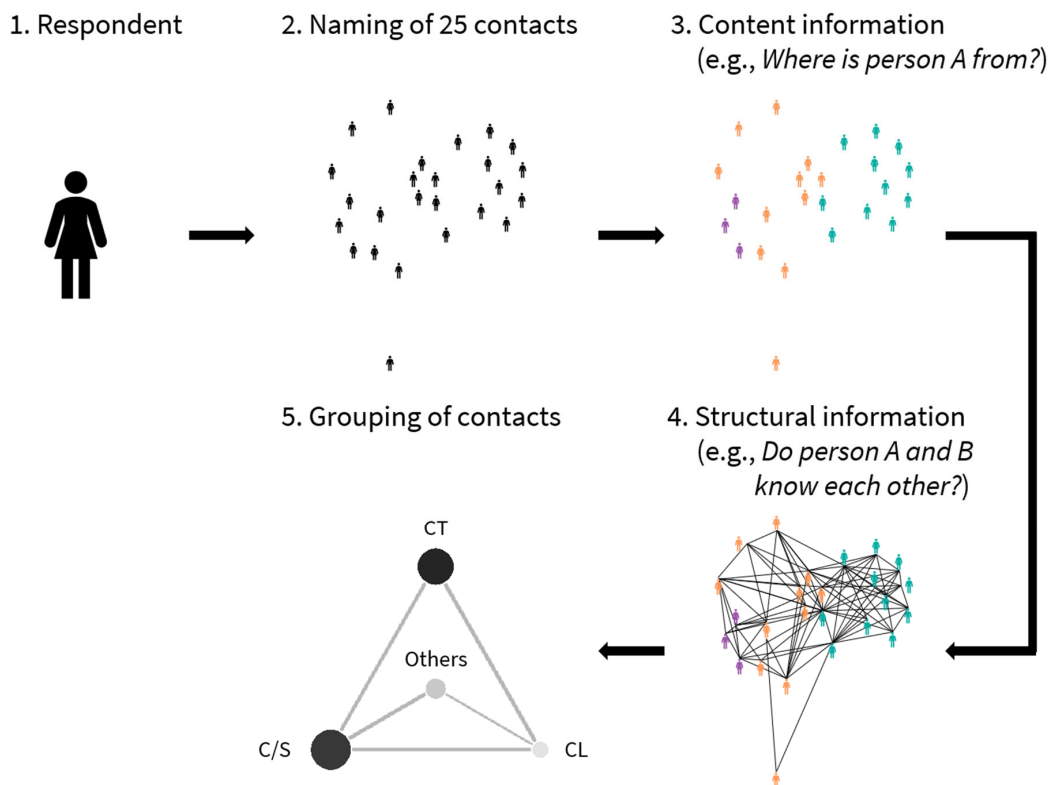
Case 2: Ecuadorian, Moroccan, Pakistani, and Romanian Immigrants in Barcelona

Our second case focuses on the structure of the personal networks of Ecuadorian, Moroccan, Pakistani, and Romanian immigrants in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. From an intercultural perspective, Catalonia is a fascinating region as it is not only a bicultural and bilingual context (Spanish and Catalan) but also receives large amounts of immigrants from within the country and abroad. In a study conducted in 2011 and 2012 by Repke and Benet-Martínez (2018), 216 adults with an immigrant background were each asked to give 25 names of people they knew (of any culture or ethnicity), with whom they had regular contact in the past two years (either face-to-face, by phone, mail, or e-mail), and whom they could still contact if they had to. The study

participants also provided information on the ethnocultural background, place of birth and residence of each of the 25 contacts in their network, the type of relationship they had with them, and who knew whom among the 25 people. Two years later, 122 of the 216 people participated in another survey and were asked to fill in a questionnaire on personality traits, among other things (see Bobowik et al., 2021).

Based on the ethnocultural background of the network contacts and their place of residence, the network members of each respondent fell into four groups: (1) *coethnic transnationals* (people of the same ethnocultural background living in the country of origin), (2) *coethnic locals* (people of the same ethnocultural background but living in Spain), (3) *hosts* (Spaniards and Catalans), and (4) *others*. Repke and Benet-Martínez (2018) calculated each group's size (i.e., the number of people belonging to that group), the connectedness among the group members, and the connectedness between the groups. Figure 2 summarizes the study design.

Figure 2 Study Design of Case 2



Note. CT = coethnic transnationals. CL = coethnic locals. C/S = Catalans/Spaniards.

The authors showed that respondents with culturally more diverse networks also had higher levels of socio-cultural adjustment. They also perceived their different cultural identities as more harmonious (instead of conflicting) compared to those with culturally more homogenous networks. A key role seemed to be played by the connectedness between coethnic locals and host contacts in the respondents' networks. Repke and Benet-Martínez showed that the relative amount of coethnic locals is negatively associated with psychological wellbeing and socio-cultural adjustment, leading to the idea that the relative amount of host individuals may be positively associated with those two, as previous research has found. Undoubtedly, for successful integration, it is beneficial that immigrants have contact with people from the host society as host individuals may assist them in finding a job and facilitate access to resources such as acquiring culturally appropriate skills. However, there is another part to the equation of successful integration. Repke and Benet-Martínez surprisingly showed that connecting the "coethnic world" with the "host world" was an important predictor of immigrants' adjustment to the host society and the management of their cultural identities. This contributes to the idea that experienced interculturalism at the personal level is not only a subjective feeling. Instead, it may lead to or result from interculturalism at the network level. Personality, also, is another driving part of this equation. In particular, agreeableness (i.e., a personality trait related to being kind, cooperative, and considerate) and extraversion (i.e., a trait associated with being outgoing, talkative, and energetic) play an essential role in forming and developing networks that bridge both worlds (Repke & Benet-Martínez, 2020).

Benefits of a Network Perspective in Research

Research on intercultural contact can benefit conceptually and methodologically from incorporating a network perspective. Social phenomena such as migration involve people being in direct and indirect contact with different cultures. The social network perspective can help account for these complex social interdependencies by actually focusing on inter- and intragroup behaviors and interactions, thereby giving a high-resolution picture of intercultural contact dynamics. In particular, the focus on structure opens up new ways for theory building in the field. People are usually unaware of their network structure, that is, not with whom they have social interactions, but with whom their contacts—the "others"—have relations. Although it is well known that our interactions and behaviors influence others, and their interactions and behaviors, in turn, influence us, this idea is not yet implemented often enough in research on interculturalism.

Methodologically, the social network approach can improve data quality compared to traditional self-reports like surveys that ask about a person's behavior or attitudes. These self-reports often suffer from social desirability and recall biases, which are also correlated to survey-related factors (e.g., questionnaire design, survey mode, etc.). Of course, the network approach is not free from such biases. However, if applied carefully, the data collection mode can be less intrusive and more implicit, allowing for measuring one's concept of interest more accurately and with more detail (e.g., immigrant's integration into the host society).

How to Measure Friendship

In fact, research that compared the network method with classic self-reports for measuring the number of interethnic friendships has shown that people seem prone to overreport the number of interethnic friends (e.g., friends with a different ethnocultural background from oneself) when asked directly. Specifically, Smith (2002) implemented an experimental design using a representative sample of U.S. adults in which he included three distinct friendship measurements. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of these methods. The first method included only one direct yes or no question about whether white respondents had any black friends and black respondents any white friends: “Are any of your good friends that you feel close to Black/White?”

The second was a three-step method in which participants were first asked whether they had good friends, then how many good friends they had, and lastly: “How many of your good friends are White/Black?” In the third method (the network method), participants were asked to name their good friends. Once these names were elicited, the interviewer asked about each friend’s age, gender, education, and ethnicity. In contrast to the first two methods, the network method did not ask participants directly about their interethnic friendships. Table 2 shows the percentages of white and black respondents who reported having interethnic friends (i.e., not the number of interethnic friends but just whether they

had any) with each of these three methods. When comparing the first two methods with the network method, there are differences of up to 36.1% for white and up to 46.7% for black respondents in reporting whether they had any friends of the other ethnicity. This might suggest that both white and black respondents overreport having interethnic friends in the traditional methods (because socially it seems to be the desirable answer), while the network method possibly gives a more realistic picture (see Smith, 2002).

» *Social structures determine successful integration – not necessarily the qualities of a person or group.* «

How having interethnic friendships is measured is not only relevant for studying integration but also for theories like the contact hypothesis, which postulates that interactions with people from other cultures promote more positive attitudes and less prejudice. There is research suggesting that the positive effect of interethnic contact might be overestimated when using traditional measurement methods (Davies et al., 2011). A finding that Silber et al. (2020) confirmed when re-analyzing the classic experiment of Smith (2002). Altogether, social network research can contribute to studying intercultural contact and help to give a new view on established patterns or even uncover new structures.

Table 2 Percentage of Respondents Reporting to Have Interethnic Friends by Measurement Method

	Method 1 Single question	Method 2 Three-step method	Method 3 Network method
White respondents	42.1%	24.0%	6.0%
Black respondents	61.9%	45.1%	15.2%

Policy Implications

An important take-home message from applying a social network perspective to the migration context is that it is not necessarily the qualities of a person or specific group (e.g., language skills, religion) that determine successful integration but the social structures that shape and constrain human interactions. As such, a social network lens can create awareness of the structural constraints and challenges that certain cultural groups face (e.g., urban segregation). Consequently, it can help understand how overcoming and changing these structural forces may facilitate the integration process. Policy-makers should think of creating spaces and opportunities where intercultural contact can take place, as this positively affects psychological and behavioral adaptation. Acculturation is a multidimensional process that involves not only immigrants but also members of the host society. Thus, policy-makers should think about interventions that help bridge the different cultural worlds. In the end, what is needed for the development of harmonious intercultural relations is mutual respect, understanding, and trust, all of which may be facilitated by culturally diverse and interconnected networks.

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