

Later-life social networks and family life: differences between migrants and non-migrants

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Background and research questions

As many countries worldwide face demographic ageing, well-being in old age is an important topic to study. Social networks are an essential predictor of well-being and loneliness (Djundeva & Ellwardt, 2020). Social networks offer individuals a feeling of belonging and social embeddedness in wider society and provide an essential exchange of support (Coleman, 1988; Domènech-Abella et al., 2017). Hereby, different types of networks are associated with different types of support as having a diverse and extensive network can be more helpful than one which is very family-focused (Ajrouch et al., 2001).

The composition and structure of social networks is, however, dynamic. The theoretical concept of the convoy model states that some close relationships are very stable over the life course, while more distant relationships change with life circumstances (Antonucci et al., 2014). Significant family and work events throughout life have been shown to change the social network structure and composition (Lubbers et al., 2021; Mollenhorst et al., 2014; Wrzus et al., 2013). Studies show that the transition to parenthood often reduces social networks (Bernardi, 2003), and separations decrease contact frequency or evoke a loss of contacts (Terhell et al., 2007) while starting employment due to the inclusion of coworkers (Wrzus et al., 2013). When children move out in mid-age, the distance to children may reduce everyday conflict (Papastefanou, 2000).

Previous studies comparing the social networks of migrants and ethnic minorities with the majority population report that ethnic minorities have smaller networks than Whites (Cornwell et al., 2008, for the US). Research on Germany further finds migrants to have smaller and more family-centered networks compared to non-migrants (Laier et al., 2022). Differences in social networks between migrants and non-migrants may be based on the societal context in the countries of origin (Conway & Potter, 2007). Nevertheless, due to an average young age at migration, older migrants often are long-settled migrants, and their social networks at older ages reveal how rooted and integrated they are in the local environment (Korinek et al., 2005). As individuals are more likely to form ties with others who share similar socio-demographic characteristics, it could be expected that migrants face different social network ties due to their different social contexts. Consequently, we address **two research questions**:

- I. *How do social networks in later-life differ between migrants and non-migrants?*
- II. *How are social network types in later-life associated with family status for migrants and non-migrants?*

Data and Method

The study draws on data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP, v38). We use a sample of individuals aged 55-65 in the years information on networks was collected (2013 or 2018). The individuals in the sample either migrated to Germany or were born in Germany (non-migrant population), which yields a sample of 3,658 non-migrants and 456 migrants. Most migrants migrated around the age of 30 and were born in former labor recruitment countries (23%), EU-Extension countries (27%), countries of the (former) Soviet Union (27%), or in countries of the MENA region (23%).

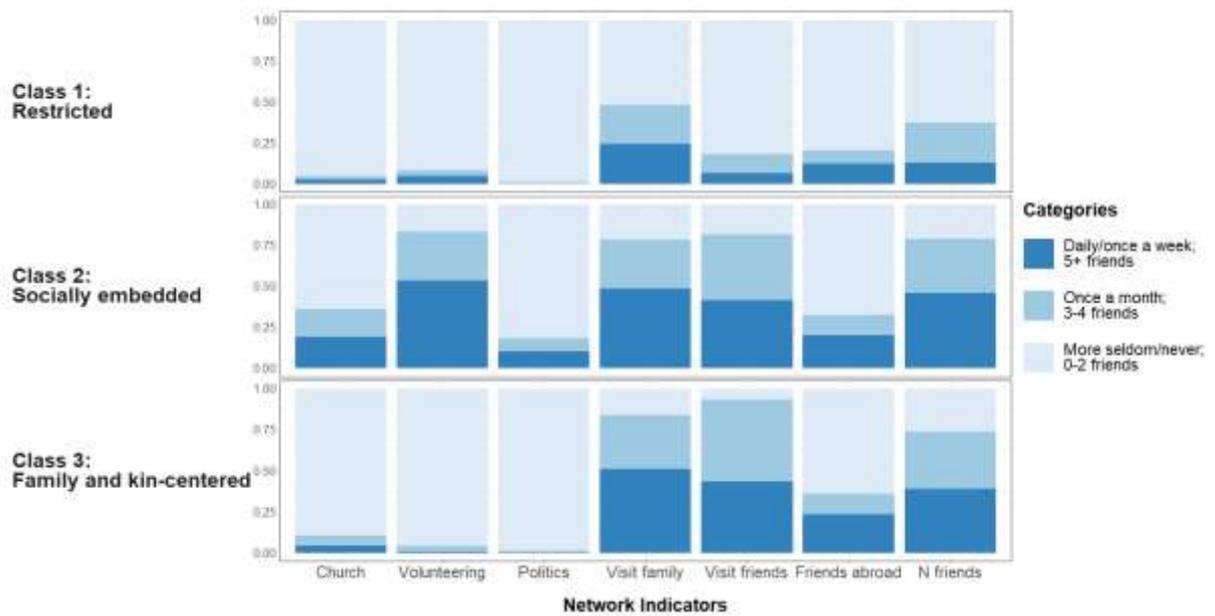
The analysis consists of two steps. In the first step, we use latent class analysis to find typical social network clusters in later-life. Latent class analysis is a model-based way to group data and sort individuals into groups probabilistically (Oberski, 2016; Weller et al., 2020). The indicators used for the network typologies are engagement in social activities (religious events, politics, voluntary work), the size of the friends' network and the frequency of contact with kin and non-kin and kin abroad. The variables on frequencies were recoded into three categories to facilitate the latent class analysis and allow for more normally distributed variables (daily/once a week, once a month, more seldom/never). The number of close friends was recoded into (0-1, 2, 3-4, 5+). After we ran models with 1-7 classes, we used the BIC to determine the optimal number of classes, resulting in three network classes.

Second, we examine whether being a migrant is associated with different network types in later life using regression analysis with the most likely network class (for now). To adjust for differences in the composition of the migrant and the non-migrant population, we further control for age, gender and educational level (primary, secondary, tertiary). Furthermore, we interact migration experience with the family status (single 0+ children, partner 0 child, partner 1+ child) to see whether there are differences in the link between network types and the family situation.

Preliminary results

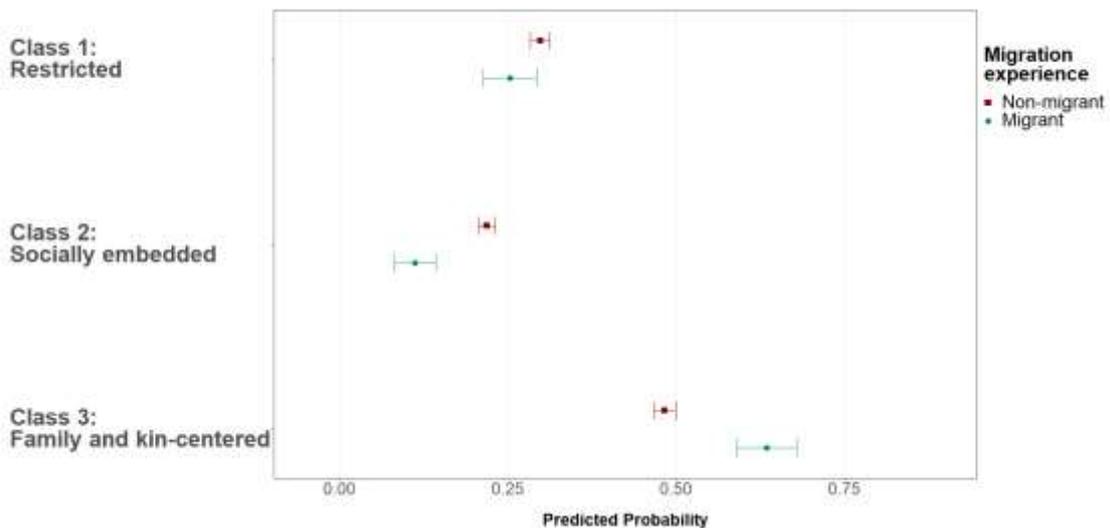
The optimal number of classes was three. The distribution of response patterns by network class are shown in Figure 1. In the first network, called *restricted* (29%), engagement in social activities is infrequent, friends and family visits are rare, and the number of friends is small. The second network class, *socially embedded* (21%), is characterized by frequent visits of family and friends, a high number of close friends, frequent involvement in voluntary work and religious activities and somewhat frequent involvement in politics. Although the third network cluster has equally frequent visits of family and friends and the number of close friends, individuals associated with this class are less frequently engaged in social activities, which is why it is called the *family-and kin-centered* cluster (50%).

Figure 1. Indicator patterns by network class



Examining whether migrants differ from non-migrants in belonging to one of the three network classes (Figure 2), we see that there is no significant difference between migrants and non-migrants in belonging to the *restricted* social network class. Compared to non-migrants, migrants are less likely to belong to the *socially embedded* network class but are more likely to belong to a *family and kin-centred* network class than non-migrants.

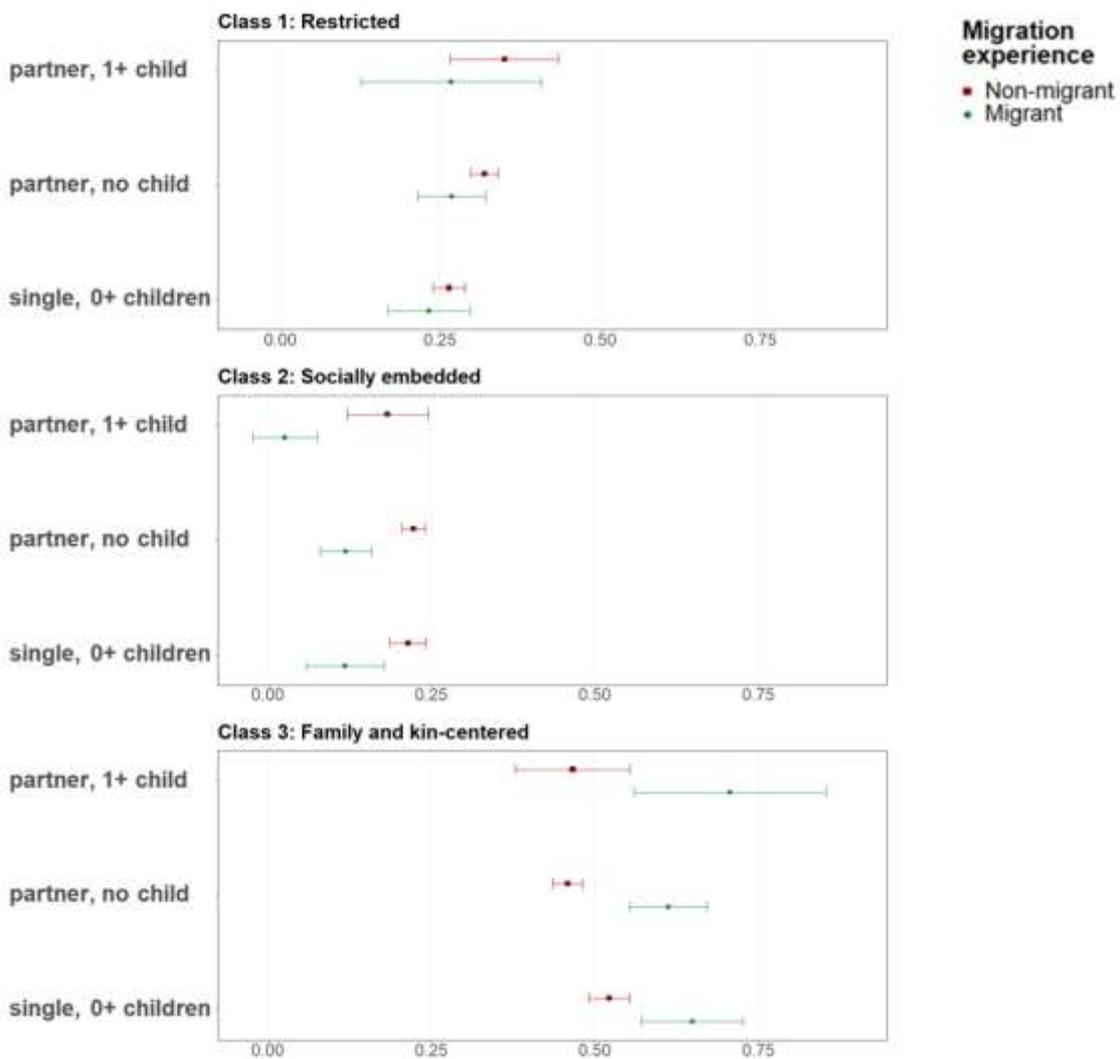
Figure 2. Multinomial logistic regression for social network class membership by migration experience



Note: SOEP, v38, predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals, controlled for age, gender and education.

An examination of the link between social network classes and migration experience dependent on family status (Figure 3) shows overall similar patterns between migrants and non-migrants. There are no differences between migration experience and family status in the restricted class. However, non-migrants are more likely to be in the *socially embedded* network class, whereby the differences with migrants are especially pronounced for individuals who live with a partner but not with a child in the household. Regarding the *family and kin-centered* network class, migrants living with a partner and no child seem to drive the differences between migrants and non-migrants in belonging to this network class. These differences may be driven by different reactions of migrants and non-migrants when children leave home or they become grandparents.

Figure 3. Multinomial logistic regression for class membership by migration experience and family status



Note: SOEP, v38, predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals, controlled for age, gender and education.