

# Transnational Social Practices: A Quantitative Perspective

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## Abstract

Transnational social practices (TSP) can be defined as sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges between individuals across national borders. Over the last decades, TSP have not only become more common, but they have also developed into an increasingly salient subject of quantitative sociological research. After highlighting seminal foundational research, we introduce a set of salient topics in this emerging strand of research, including the social stratification of TSP, the link between TSP and cosmopolitan attitudes, and the issue of classifying TSP into meaningful subdimensions. We conclude with a discussion of several avenues for future research, including the relation between TSP and the increasing societal polarization between “locals” and “globals,” the need to go beyond the field’s current Eurocentrism to study TSP comparatively in all parts of the world, and the prospects of methodological and technical advances in research on TSP, including network-analytic approaches and geo-tagged digital-trace data.

## INTRODUCTION

Transnational practices refer to sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among nonstate actors based across national borders (Vertovec, 2009, p. 3). The sociological approach to this topic covers mainly transnational practices *between individuals* (hereafter transnational *social* practices, TSP), which has also been referred to as the social dimension of transnationalization. Since the early 2000s, this social dimension of transnationalization has received a great deal of attention from scholars in the field of migration research. Following an ethnographic approach, these scholars have been investigating the way particular migrant groups cross national borders in their everyday life (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007): owing to their assumed cross-national everyday experience, migrants have indeed been embodying the ideal types of transnational agents. By contrast, quantitative sociologists only started to tackle the issue of TSP systematically in the last decade (despite earlier

roots in the field of international relations, see below). The new aim of this emerging strand of research was to quantify and assess the relative importance of TSP among the overall population. Hence, within this quantitative perspective, the research focus shifted from TSP in the everyday life of the ideal types of transnational agents to TSP in the everyday life of the ordinary citizen. This quantitative perspective on TSP constitutes the topic of our contribution.

The quantitative analysis of TSP among the general population can not only make a significant contribution to the international academic debate but may also have important societal implications. The overarching scientific contribution of this research strand is to shed light on the human face of transnationalization. While the political and economic dimensions of transnationalization have already received plenty of attention from social scientists (for instance in the fields of international relations or political economy), the social dimension of transnationalization still remains understudied. The societal implications of TSP within the overall population are manifold, but we will restrict the discussion to three implications which are particularly relevant for the current societal development of (Western) countries in a transnationalizing world. First, TSP are assumed to go hand in hand with cosmopolitan attitudes, which we understand as openness and attentiveness to the world outside one's own community. TSP may thus strengthen the public commitment not only to respect the status of every human being as ultimate units of moral concern (moral cosmopolitanism) but also to an institutionalized global order of the rule of law and justice (legal cosmopolitanism) (Pogge, 1992). However, TSP might also have downsides for social cohesion, which leads us to two further implications: Some scholars argue that TSP constitute an emerging dimension of social stratification. For instance, the accumulation of TSP can act as a new status marker and thus become a novel form of social distinction mainly among the upper middle classes. Furthermore, the uneven distribution of transnational practices among the population might contribute to the growing sociopolitical polarization of citizens into groups of winners and losers who support antagonistic positions in respect of the opening up of national borders: Globalization's losers are citizens who view the opening of national borders as a threat to their chances in life, while globalization's winners perceive opportunities in the opening of national borders (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). Hence, the (non)involvement in TSP might constitute a central behavioral component underpinning this polarization.

In the following, we will develop these implications in more detail. But we will first begin this contribution by briefly describing the foundational quantitative studies of TSP. Then, we will present a subjective selection of

what we consider to be the cutting-edge research in this field. Lastly, we will conclude by highlighting some key issues for future research on this topic.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Precursory studies on TSP (which did not yet use this term) can be found in the field of international relations from the 1950s onwards. Building on the transactionalist paradigm of Deutsch (1957), they examined aggregated flows of people and their messages between countries as indicators of cross-national integration. Nye (1968), for instance, proposed to look at air passengers and students in neighboring countries as indicators of regional social integration. Puchala (1970) looked empirically at cross-border tourism, student exchange, migration, and mail flows. Typically, the number of country pairs examined in these early studies is still rather low, individual-level data is missing, and analyses of *sociologically* relevant questions (such as the social stratification of these practices) are still rare.

One of the pioneering sociological studies of TSP among the general population is the one carried out by Steffen Mau based on a survey conducted in 2006 measuring the German population's cross-border linkages and experiences (Mau, 2010). Mau's study pointed to three main findings that have been structuring the empirical debate on TSP ever since. First, TSP had become a mass phenomenon—at least within the German population: about half of the Germans surveyed stated they had physically crossed a national border at least once during the year preceding the survey and that they regularly communicate privately with persons living abroad. Second, these TSP tend to be unevenly distributed within the population: Involvement in transnational social activities increases with the level of education and with the level of urbanization of the place of residence but decreases with age. Lastly, being involved in TSP is significantly associated with cosmopolitan attitudes, such as openness toward foreigners or readiness to allocate more political authority to the supranational level.

Parallel to Mau's national study, cross-national studies on the TSP of the European population emerged in the mid-2000s. With these studies, scholars intended to map TSP throughout Europe and to investigate the segment of the European population most likely to demonstrate high levels of involvement in TSP. These studies were all based on specific waves of the Eurobarometer survey<sup>1</sup> containing several items on TSP. Two particularly influential studies paved the way for the cross-national comparative

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1. The Eurobarometer survey is a cross-sectional survey covering the population of all EU member states which takes place several times a year and is commissioned by the European Commission.

research strand on TSP. First, Fligstein's (2008) book *Euroclash* with its—at the time—provocative thesis has become a classical work in the field of European integration and political sociology. In this book, Fligstein showed that only the most privileged social strata (i.e., highly educated young Europeans occupying white-collar jobs) identify as European and make use of its rights to free movement by regularly crossing national borders within the EU. Thus, TSP and European identification follow a social class line. Fligstein argued that the segment of the European population that benefitted materially and socially from the EU, which he considered as prerequisites for consistent and lasting support of the EU, is not broad enough to promote a Europe-wide political integration project in a sustainable way. The second influential study based on Eurobarometer data is the one by Diez Medrano (2010). On the one hand, Diez Medrano made the same diagnosis as Fligstein regarding the social class divide in TSP, pointing to a significant positive association between having friends abroad and the occupational status and educational level. On the other hand, by investigating the increase between 1985 and 2007 in the proportion of Europeans who traveled abroad at least once a year, he showed that it was mainly citizens with a lower level of education who took advantage of the democratization of travel means over the past two decades.

Lastly, from the mid-2000s onwards, several international research consortia carried out ad-hoc quantitative data collection on TSP among Europeans across various EU member states. The overall research agenda of these consortia was to develop a sociology of the European Union (Favell & Guiraudon, 2011). Of particular interest for the topic of this contribution is the fact that these ad-hoc data collections helped overcome the limitations of the Eurobarometer survey data, either by focusing on the trajectories and everyday lives of intra-EU immigrants (e.g., the PIONEUR project, Recchi & Favell, 2009), by providing more detailed and more encompassing measures of TSP among the general European population (e.g., the EUCROSS project, Recchi, 2014), or by linking it to many other aspects of society-building beyond the nation-state, like intra-European solidarity, collective memories, and inequality (e.g., the Horizontal Europeanization project, Heidenreich *et al.*, 2012).

#### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

The studies discussed so far helped to launch a new research strand in quantitative sociology by providing the foundation for measuring TSP with quantitative analytical tools and by introducing puzzling research questions such as the link between TSP and social inequality or cosmopolitan attitudes.

TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL PRACTICES AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The idea that TSP are vertically stratified was introduced into the social sciences debate well before the rise of quantitative studies on TSP. For instance, Sklair (2001) discussed the rise of a “transnational capitalist class,” while Calhoun (2002) criticized cosmopolitanism as the class consciousness of the frequent travellers, “easily entering and exiting polities and social relations around the world, armed with visa-friendly passports and credit cards” (p. 872). The analysis of representative quantitative data on TSP has nevertheless enabled a more thorough assessment of the stratification of TSP within the overall population.

We would like to introduce two different types of studies on the stratification of TSP in particular: (i) studies on the unequal distribution of TSP among the European population and (ii) studies investigating the accumulation of TSP as a form of transnational human capital.

*Studies on the Unequal Distribution of Transnational Social Practices among the Population* Several scholars aimed to refine or challenge Fligstein (2008) diagnosis that the involvement in TSP follows a class dividing line. An example of a study refining Fligstein’s findings is that of Kuhn (2015), which corroborates Fligstein’s diagnosis by analyzing a larger number of TSP with a special wave of Eurobarometer data. According to Kuhn, the Europeans most involved in TSP are predominantly highly educated, young and working in higher status occupations. She argues that highly educated citizens have greater opportunities to interact across countries, better skills (such as language skills or intercultural communication) and more financial resources for getting involved in TSP. Similar mechanisms are likely to be at play for the association between higher occupational status and TSP. Regarding the role of age, the fact that young citizens tend to be transnationally more active is likely due to both cohort and age effects. The younger generations were socialized in times in which transnational activities such as traveling abroad were highly democratized and perceived as normal—the so-called transnationalization of everyday life. Besides this cohort effect, younger citizens tend to have fewer responsibilities and constraints in their private and professional lives, which make the involvement in TSP easier for them than for older citizens.

An example of a study challenging Fligstein’s diagnosis is provided by Delhey, Deutschmann, and Cirlanaru (2015). They argued that interpreting the unequal distribution of TSP solely in terms of vertical stratification is too narrow: While differences in the involvement in TSP according to education and occupational status indicate a vertical stratification, differences related to age or migration background should be understood as

horizontal forms of stratification or heterogeneities. In their analysis, they assessed the power of vertical inequality (i.e., operationalized among other things with the occupational status, education and self-placement in society) and of heterogeneities (measured by the migration background, gender, age, and the urbanization level of the place of residence) in predicting the volume of transnational activities of citizens across EU member states. While their analysis confirmed the relevance of vertical inequality, they also relativized its prominence as horizontal heterogeneities do play a similarly important role in predicting Europeans' volume of transnational activities.

Besides these studies focusing on the unequal distribution of TSP at the micro level, other scholars investigated the remarkable between-country heterogeneity in the propensity for transnational social activities. Based again on Eurobarometer data, Mau and Mewes (2012) investigated country differences in the probability that citizens have visited another country and have socialized with people from other countries in the year preceding the survey. They found that cross-national disparities in the population's propensity for TSP can be explained above all by economic and political macro factors: Citizens are more likely to be engaged in transnational social activities in countries with a high level of economic development and political integration (Kuhn, 2015 for a replication of the findings).

The abovementioned study of Delhey *et al.* (2015) shed light on an additional effect of national economic development on the propensity for citizens' engagement in transnational social activities: Involvement in transnational social activities is dependent on an individual's socioeconomic status to a significantly larger extent in more affluent countries. In other words, national economic development is not only associated with a higher propensity of the ordinary citizen to engage in transnational activities but also with the greater significance of vertical stratification in understanding the unequal distribution of TSP among the population.

*Studies on Transnational Human Capital* The second type of research investigates the extent to which TSP are used for the purpose of distinction with the aim of securing social reproduction. Based on a Bourdieusian framework, this strand of research considers the accumulation of TSP as a means to acquire transnational human capital.

Transnational human capital refers to the amount of knowledge and personal skills that enables a person to operate in different fields beyond the nation-state (Gerhards & Hans, 2013, p. 100). This may include proficiency in foreign languages, knowledge of other countries, or intercultural competencies (Gerhards, Hans, & Carlson, 2016). These skills are considered



as capital, as they constitute resources enabling an individual to act and interact in fields beyond the nation-state, thus providing a potential benefit. This capital can be acquired through TSP or international academic qualifications. Gerhards *et al.* (2016) argued that the acquisition of transnational human capital has recently been gaining in relevance due to the devaluation of educational degrees resulting from educational expansion. Accordingly, the acquisition of transnational human capital has become a means for the (upper) middle classes to secure their status. The possession of transnational human capital thus not only provides an instrumental added value for agency beyond one's own nation-state but also builds symbolic capital of social distinction (Gerhards *et al.*, 2016, p. 5).

The access to transnational human capital *has to be* unequal in order to function as a new status marker and thus as a component of stratification. Accordingly, the unequal distribution of transnational human capital among the overall population constitutes the main issue investigated so far by quantitative social scientists. For instance, Weenink (2008) analyzed the profile of parents in the Netherlands who show a strong inclination to provide their children with transnational human capital. According to his analysis, upper-middle-class parents were significantly more likely than parents from lower social classes to rate the acquisition of transnational human capital as important for their children. However, this relationship between parents' social classes and the perceived need to provide children with transnational human capital can entirely be explained by the facts that upper-middle-class parents are engaged more frequently in TSP and hold higher ambitions regarding the school work and achievements of their children. The link between parental social class and children's acquisition of transnational human capital has been corroborated by a study by Gerhards and Hans (2013), which showed that, among German adolescents, embarking on a high school exchange is largely dependent on parental economic resources.

In a similar vein, studies on German university students highlight the fact that the acquisition of transnational human capital through participation in student exchange programmes is significantly stratified along socioeconomic lines (Finger, 2011). By contrast, a survey among students from six EU countries showed that students' socioeconomic status only played a marginal role in explaining their decision to spend a period of time studying abroad (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). The authors related this finding to the social selectivity in access to tertiary education in most EU countries. Following their argument, the national context is likely to be a strong determinant in the unequal opportunities available to acquire transnational human capital through participation in educational exchange programmes.

## TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL PRACTICES AND COSMOPOLITAN ATTITUDES

Another strand of cutting-edge research focuses on the association between TSP and various forms of attitudes and senses of belonging. This line of research tends to use Deutsch's abovementioned transactionalist theory (Deutsch, 1957) as its framework. This theory states that (ongoing) transnational interactions give rise to a feeling of collective identity, trust, mutual consideration, and cooperative action between members from distinct nation-states (Kuhn, 2015). Two different mechanisms are likely to be at play here. First, following the common ingroup identity theory (see for instance Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993), positive contacts and interactions with members of an out-group blur group boundaries and can contribute to the development of a common in-group identity. Hence, citizens who regularly interact with citizens from other nation-states are more likely to perceive these citizens as belonging to the same in-group or community. TSP are thus expected to lower intergroup boundaries and to raise the awareness of transnational interdependence. The second mechanism is based on a utilitarian perspective. Accordingly, individuals with a high volume of TSP are the ones who must take advantage of the facilities provided by the transnationalization of everyday life. Since they directly experience the benefit of transnationalization, they are more likely to endorse open attitudes toward transnationalization.

Deutsch's transactionalist theory has been successfully applied to a variety of attitudes and senses of belonging related to the opening of national borders: TSP have repeatedly been shown to be significantly and positively related to a sense of identity as European (Recchi, 2015) and as a citizen of the world (Helbling & Teney, 2015), to attitudes toward immigrants (Mau, Mewes, & Zimmermann, 2008), EU support (Kuhn, 2015), attachment to other countries (Deutschmann, Delhey, Verbalyte, & Aplowski, 2018), readiness to allocate authority to supranational political entities (Mau *et al.*, 2008), or moral cosmopolitanism (i.e., a moral obligation to help citizens from other countries who are in extremely difficult situations through no fault of their own) (Helbling & Teney, 2015). These studies are, however, all based on cross-sectional data, leaving the causal mechanism behind the association between TSP and this set of attitudes unexplored.

## MEASUREMENT REFINEMENT

TSP can take various forms, ranging from studying and working abroad to undertaking city trips and having regular contacts with friends, relatives, or acquaintances abroad. Distinguishing between these various forms of TSP is important since they might be related in different ways to a range of attitudes and values or to sociodemographic characteristics. A helpful contribution



to this task of measurement refinement is Recchi's (2014) article in which he introduced four dimensions relevant for classifying the TSP of the overall population in a comprehensive way. First, a *physical dimension* enables a differentiation between virtual and physical border-crossing practices (e.g., contacts with friends abroad through social media vs visiting these friends). Second, a *spatial dimension* might be a further pertinent distinction: Does the TSP involve the crossing of continental borders or does it happen between neighboring countries? Third, the *duration* of the transnational social practice might be of relevance. The last dimension refers to the distinction between *personal and impersonal* TSP (e.g., contact with loved ones living abroad vs. interacting with foreigners on the internet).

These four dimensions are not exhaustive (one could think, for instance, of the *frequency* or *purpose* of TSP as further dimensions). Nevertheless, differentiating according to (at least some of) these dimensions is an important research avenue in order to refine our knowledge of TSP and their association with other phenomena. For instance, Teney, Hanquinet, and Bürkin (2016) pointed to the diverging relationships of virtual and physical TSP among immigrants with their identification as European. Another example highlighting the importance of refining the measurement of TSP is provided by Delhey, Deutschmann, Graf, and Richter (2014): In their analysis of European cross-national surveys, they distinguish between social practices carried out within the nation-state, within Europe, and beyond Europe. By taking the geographical scope of TSP into account, they are able to assess the relevance of the European reference frame compared to the national and global reference frames for the (transnational) social practices of Europeans (Delhey *et al.*, 2014, p. 360).

## OUTLOOK: KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We conclude this short and selective essay with an outlook highlighting promising research avenues regarding the content and the methodological approaches for studying TSP.

### CONTENT-RELATED ISSUES

Two promising research issues could advance our understanding of transnational human capital and contextualize the role of TSP in the broader sociopolitical space. First, as highlighted in the previous section, most existing studies have focused on the unequal opportunities available to acquire transnational human capital. However, with the exception of studies on returns from foreign language proficiency, research on potential inequalities resulting from the (non)possession of transnational human capital is still

in its infancy (but see Diez Medrano, 2016). Future studies could tackle the following research questions: What kind of returns does transnational human capital yield in different fields of work and institutional settings? Do different types of transnational human capital (such as foreign language proficiency, intercultural competencies) yield similar returns? Do the returns of transnational human capital differ across social groups and national contexts?

Second, future studies could assess the role of TSP in the growing sociopolitical polarization regarding issues of open borders, immigration, and globalization. This research avenue builds on the abovementioned conclusive findings of a positive association between TSP and a broad range of attitudes on transnationalization and cosmopolitanism. TSP might constitute one of the behavioral components structuring the sociopolitical space according to the globalization cleavage in most Western societies. According to the globalization cleavage literature (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008), globalization pressures lead to the polarization of citizens into groups of winners and losers who support antagonistic positions on a variety of transnationalization issues: Globalization's losers tend to endorse positions favouring more national closure, while winners tend to support positions favouring more transnational integration and denationalization. Studies on this globalization cleavage have so far shown that sociodemographic characteristics such as the socioeconomic position or educational level (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008) and collective identities (Teney, Lacewell, & de Wilde, 2014) structure this societal conflict among the population. The (non)involvement in TSP likely constitutes (one of) the behavioral component(s) structuring the overall population along this globalization cleavage (Helbling & Teney, 2015 for a first attempt to assess it). Investigating this open empirical research question would help to link the study of TSP to the broader debate on political cleavages in the age of transnationalization.

#### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Quantitative research on TSP has, so far, a heavy Eurocentric bias. The topic started to receive attention from quantitative social scientists who were foremost interested in understanding the process of transnationalization within the European population. While European integration has undeniably greatly facilitated the involvement of the ordinary citizen in TSP in Europe, TSP are evidently not an exclusively European phenomenon. Studying TSP in non-European contexts would, therefore, enable scholars to not only move beyond this Eurocentric perspective but also to assess the extent to which TSP as a mass phenomenon is a European exceptionalism due to European institutional integration (Deutschmann, 2017). Doing so

will also require us to develop new conceptual and methodological tools and to think about whether and how TSP (and its attitudinal correlates) can be compared across global regions that vary drastically in geographic size and are culturally diverse (which may go hand in hand with different response patterns in survey situations). Only by finding convincing answers to these problems can research on TSP be brought to the next stage and become a truly globalized field of study.

Second, most past studies on TSP have relied on the quantitative analysis of survey material using conventional regression modeling techniques. An important innovation may be alternative data sources and, correspondingly, more sophisticated analytical techniques. This may include network data on actual interactions across specific national borders, obtained either from administrative processes such as the registration of tourists or digital traces obtained via tracking devices such as smartphones. An important aspect of this is the possibility of precise geo-tagging which may lead to more fine-grained analyses and may thus contribute to overcoming some of the methodological nationalism that still haunts the field (while at the same time raising new ethical questions). Furthermore, fully-fledged network analyses that take the actual relational structures of TSP into account may uncover connections that the methodological individualism of survey data cannot (Deutschmann *et al.*, 2018). Geographically weighted regression modeling may be another technique that could contribute to refined assessments (Teney, 2012). Finally, the potential future availability of high-quality longitudinal (panel) data may help shed light on the causal mechanisms behind the relation between TSP and cross-border sense of community that have so far been disregarded (see the earlier discussion). Natural experiments are another innovation that may allow us to address the question of causality. While they have become increasingly popular in other sociological fields, they have, to the best of our knowledge, not been used in research on TSP yet. Overall, these new paths may contribute to advancing the emerging field of quantitative research on TSP and secure its relevancy in the decades to come.

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