


Immigrant Associations and Social Capital: The Case of Older Turkish Immigrants in Germany

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Abstract: Transnational aging is one of the consequences of international migration and older migrants constitute a considerable part of the aging population in Europe and North America. Immigrant associations play a significant role in the life of older migrants. It can be claimed that the post-migratory circumstances cause a demand for immigrant associations as a response of needs that emerge through the migration process. This article evaluates immigrant associations with a perspective of social capital theory by phenomenological research design. The study group consists of interviewees who are healthy enough to participate social life unassisted. There are eighteen participants who were 60+ years-old. Respondents have been recruited using snowball sampling. In-depth interviews were performed in 2016 in Germany. The interviewees engaged with the following associations: faith-based associations, cultural associations, sports clubs, social clubs, and educational clubs. The majority of associations were isolated with a strong bonding social capital. Connected associations with bridging social capital was less common. While the main function of these associations was socialization and social support, cultural and fraternal purposes were pronounced as well. The horizontal social networks established in these associations formed a shared identity in addition to community building. They provided social support resources for their members and attendees but also migrants without any membership and also former members.

Keywords: migration • older adults • transnational aging • immigrant associations • social capital

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Atıf: Palaz, F. S. (2020). Immigrant associations and social capital: The case of older Turkish immigrants in Germany. *Toplumsal Deęişim*, 2, 157–187.

Transnational aging is one of the consequences of international migration. Immigrants constitute a considerable part of the aging population, especially in Europe and North America. While many studies exist on older immigrants' citizenship and retirement rights, their intentions to return to their country of origin, and access to healthcare services, the social aspect of the issue has recently sparked relative interest. Immigrant associations play a significant role in the life of older immigrants. This article evaluates immigrant associations with a perspective of social capital theory to contribute to the Turkish literature with a focus on the first-generation Turkish immigrants who live in Germany.

Although the establishment of immigrant associations is influenced by the civic habits of both the country of origin and the country of destination, it is mainly reinforced by the migration itself. It can be claimed that the post-migratory circumstances cause a demand for immigrant associations as a response of needs that emerge through the migration process. The basic function of immigrant associations is social network which implies more than the simple companionship in leisure time. Immigrants provide each other social support through these social networks. The governmental policies towards immigration and immigrant associations and the attitude of society toward migrants have an influence on these associations' administrative activities and how influential they can be as social actors.

The social support types that are embedded in these associations can be themed under economic issues such as sharing information about job market opportunities and start-up capital for entrepreneurs. The social support can occur as assisting each other with formal papers in the language of the destination country for health care and retirement procedures. Additionally, associations are a place to share the burden of being a new migrant in an unknown setting or, in case of being an older migrant, sharing the unique challenges of ageing out of the country that they were born. The associational life enables forming a collective identity and political representation, and integrates immigrants with the country of destination at the institutional level.

When it comes to assess the social capital of associations, a cornerstone of social capital research is the distinction of "bonding social capital" which refers to a more homogeneous social interaction within the group and "bridging social capital" which refers to a wider social network that includes different immigrant groups and the main-stream society. These associations can establish a strong bonding social which also can accumulate bridging social capital based on the character of the association which can either be "isolated" or "connected". Isolated associations embodies a social capital resource which is limited by their own members and they can produce a strong bonding social capital within the group. In turn, connected associations additionally offer their members the social support resources of other associations by being connected to wider society with a bridging social capital.

This study uses the phenomenological research design and aims to interpret the role migration associations have in the social capital of older immigrants who reside in the country of immigration after migrated from Turkey to Germany at a young age. Since the focus is on their engagements in associational activities, the study group consists of interviewees who are healthy enough in old age to participate social life unassisted. There are eighteen participants who were 60+ years-old. Respondents have been recruited using snowball sampling.

In-depth interviews were performed in 2016, five in Berlin, seven in Cologne, and six in Frankfurt. The research has been carried out in Turkish by using a semi-structured questionnaire form in faith-based associations, social clubs, cultural associations, and participants' homes. All interviews have been conducted individually. The problem-centered interview has been chosen as the data collection technique. The interviews give insight into 1) what types of associations the interviewees engage in, 2) what kind of social network and social support these associations embodies for the interviewees and, 3) the interviewees' contributions to these associations as attendees. Audio recordings of the collected data has been transcribed for systematic interpretation and descriptive analysis. After determining the themes, systematic analysis has been performed by defining the correlation between themes and transcripts.

The interviewees engaged with the following associations: faith-based associations, cultural associations, sports clubs, social clubs, and educational clubs. Some interviewees were official members but there were also ones without any official membership. The majority of the associations were isolated with a strong bonding social capital. Associations with bridging social capital was less common in the study group. While the main function of these associations was socialization and social support, cultural and fraternal purposes were pronounced as well. They play an important role for older immigrants in having social networks outside the family. As losing family members and friends is inevitable in old age, the function immigrant associations have of providing a social network and support gains even more importance for older adults. They were also important for creating a space that makes possible to socialize without paying any fees on the contrary to restaurants and cafes. Consequently, they are important for social inclusion of older migrants. The horizontal social networks established in these associations formed a "shared identity" in addition to "community building." A strong bonding social capital was embedded in these horizontal networks. The associations provided social support resources and solidarity for their members and attendees. But their sphere of social support included migrants without any membership and also former members who can no longer attend due to their limited physical mobility as a natural result of aging. The associations in this study differed greatly concerning their religious, cultural, and political tendencies and the interviewees preferred to attend one over another

purposefully. Some participants took part in the development of these associations as well as being a volunteer in their older years. These associations play a role in their civic participation.

One limitation of this study is that there was no attendee in the study group who participates hometown associations, politics-based associations, or work-based associations. Further research covering different types of associations, including unofficial ones, is needed. Associations have the potential to mediate between the immigrant communities and the host society. This function is affected by their either isolated or connected characters. This study did not achieve to give an adequate picture of connected associations. Another limitation is the gender division of the study group which consists more male participants (i.e. 13 men) and less female participants (i.e. 5 women) due to the difficulty of encountering female participants in public spaces that this research was conducted.

Further studies should take into consideration the gender and generation-based differences in socializing in these associations. Although there are studies on the political functions of associations established by migrants from Turkey to Europe, new studies focused on the social and civic dimensions are needed, especially there are focused on older adults.

Acknowledgements: This is an extended abstract of the article entitled “Göçmen Dernekleri ve Sosyal Sermaye: Almanya’daki Yaşlı Türk Göçmenler Örneği” published in *Toplumsal Değişim*.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Grant Support: The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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