

A Study on the Types of Social Networks and Influential Factors of Women in Shanghai's Migrant Population

--Social Network Theory Perspective

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Abstract: Female migrants face a double vulnerability due to their urban/rural status and gender, making it challenging for them to integrate into their new communities. Women in the migrant population are doubly disadvantaged in terms of both urban-rural and gender-based social categorization. This group faces difficulties integrating into the community, including limited social resources, cultural activities, and social support. This paper examines the social networks of female migrants in Shanghai, using social network theory as the framework and data collected from semi-structured interviews. The study explores the types and characteristics of their social networks and how strong and weak ties affect their community integration. The findings indicate that strong ties dominate the social networks of migrant women in Shanghai. However, the absence of weak ties, which are crucial for accessing new information, resources, and opportunities, hinders their integration into the community.

Keywords: migrant women, community integration, social network, weak ties, social capital.

1. Introduction

The implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s marked the beginning of China's urbanization process. The household registration system between urban and rural areas, along with the economic and welfare system based on it, led to a continuous widening of the gap between urban and rural development levels and welfare benefits, resulting in a dualistic economic system. The dual economic system constitutes one of the main drivers of population mobility: the desire of people in less developed areas to improve their living environment and move to the city creates a strong overcome constraints and obstacles to move into economically developed areas [1]. People living in cities, whether permanently or temporarily, whose place of residence does not coincide with the town or township where their hukou is registered and who have been away from their hukou for half a year or more, are defined as floating population [2]. According to the Seventh National Population Census, the total number of migrant populations in the country reached 376 million, with one out of every four people being a migrant; this is a 57-fold increase compared to the 6.57 million in 1982 [3]. The number of migrant women in the country is about 114 million, which is 46.91% of the total migrant population [4]. Factors affecting this phenomenon include the household registration

system, community environment, characteristics of migrant and local families, and attitudes of local citizens [5]. Among them, the social support network is an important factor affecting the access of the mobile female population to support such as information and resources, which is an important way to quickly and deeply integrate into the community.

This paper focuses on the migrant female population in Shanghai, especially women aged 35-55 years old working in the service industry. This study tries to explore the types and characteristics of social networks of this group and how strong and weak ties affect their integration into community life. This study uses social network theory as a theoretical framework and obtains information through semi-structured interviews. This study concludes that the social networks of Shanghai's migrant women are dominated by strong ties. However, weak ties play an important role in individuals' access to new information, resources, and opportunities, therefore, the lack of weak ties affects this group's community integration. Meanwhile, household registration, language, and welfare policies for migrants are important factors affecting the community integration of migrant women.

2. Literature Review

Social network theory emphasizes the important role of social relations and networks in the integration process of migrants. Social capital can be defined as “resources embedded in a social structure that can be engaged or mobilized in purposeful action” [6]. One of the major functions of social capital is to reinforce identity and recognition, whereby one's recognized and identified values serve as similar benefits and resources shared by individuals and members of a social group, not only to provide emotional support, but also to gain public recognition of certain resources [7]. Migrants obtain information, resources and support through social networks such as family, friends and fellow villagers, which can reduce the risks and costs of migration and facilitate their social integration.

In the measurement of social resources, resources embedded in social networks are seen as a central element of social capital. Measurement therefore focuses on the valuable resources (e.g. wealth, power, and status) possessed by others that an individual draws upon in his or her networks and relationships [8]. Some scholars have focused on the position of the individual in a social network to assess the actor's proximity to a structural position and see this as key to understanding social capital [9]. Relationship strength is also considered to be a valid network position scale for assessing an actor's distance from a structural position. Strength according to Granovetter, is a combination of time, affective intensity, intimacy (mutual trust), and reciprocal service of tie characteristics (which may be linear), and he defines occasional or superficial relationships as weak ties [10]. Granovetter emphasizes that Different types of relationships produce different resources: weak ties work most effectively in reducing social distance, providing people with information and resources outside their own social circles [10]. However, the value of weak ties is reduced if they do not connect people from different social positions. For people from groups with low social status, weak ties may merely connect one's friends and relatives with acquaintances, hardly serving as a bridge [10]. In addition to this, Bourdieu elucidates the exclusionary character of networks, which may concentrate economic capital by excluding outsiders [11]. Thus, the proximity of actors in a social network to structural positions, the strength of relationships in the social network, and social status affect access to resources and valuable information.

The concept of social capital provides an important tool for understanding how networks affect migrants [12], but related research has also faced criticism for conceptual confusion and neglect of female social capital and social network attributes. Social capital theory emphasizes the function of interpersonal social networks between migrants in receiving countries and their relatives in sending countries [13]. Immigration scholars have explored the impact and usefulness of social capital on immigrant communities [12][14][15][16]. However, the extent to which networks can be considered as a form of social capital has been questioned [17]. The sources of social capital, particularly access

to networks, are often confused with the resources that result from them. Social capital has received criticism for its lack of conceptual clarity [18]. The social capital literature has also been criticized for its lack of attention to gender [19]. Ross Edwards argues that classical theorists have either completely ignored women or completely ignored women's taken-for-granted familial roles in the non-normative conception of the traditional family [20]. Women's, and especially mothers', social networking strategies may differ from men's, being more localized and child-oriented, and may not involve participation in the public sphere in ways that policymakers recognize [13][20][21].

Research shows that the size of the social support network of married women migrants in China is relatively small, and the formation of interpersonal relationships in the network is mostly dominated by strong ties; in terms of the source and content of social support, informal social support such as relatives and friends bring a lot of material help and emotional support to married women migrants, while social interaction support is relatively lacking, and the formal social support from the government and the community is obviously insufficient [22]. The reasons affecting women marriage migrants' access to social support mainly include the social status of married migrant women, the time of marriage and the period of migration [22]. Zeng Jiazhi and others, in their study of the factors influencing the size of the social support network, the characteristics of migration and work, and the characteristics of migrant women of childbearing age, showed that the relevant factors include the duration of the migration to Guangzhou, the type of housing, the type of job position and the time of day at work, among others [23]. The social capital within social networks significantly impact the support migrant women receive. Exploring the types of these networks, and analyzing the factors and mechanisms influencing them, is crucial to improving social support, reducing survival pressures, and enhancing personal well-being, including mental health.

3. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this study. Semi-structured interviews are not only based on an interview guide that specifies the topics, but also allows for flexibility in follow-up or expansion questions, helping the researcher to explore specific details during the interview process to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon [24]. For example, after the participant indicated that he or she had received support from others in the community, the researcher could further follow up by asking about the role of this -person, how they know each other, how often they are in contact, etc.

In terms of sampling method, this study used purposive sampling, in which researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon. In this study, 11 women living in a street in Shanghai were selected for offline interviews. Five of them were employed as janitorial staff, three as domestic workers, and three as caregivers, with ages ranging from 35 to 55 years old, who were born outside of Shanghai and do not have Shanghai household registration. The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis in an empty private room in a restaurant on the street. The interview outline included basic demographic information about the individuals, their experiences of working and living in Shanghai, their social networks, and their integration and challenges in community life.

4. Characteristics and causes of social network of Shanghai's migrant women

The social network of Shanghai's migrant women in this study is dominated by strong ties, with more frequent emotional and economic ties with family members and friends from their hometowns. Participants interacted less frequently with colleagues and neighbors in Shanghai, and were less emotionally invested, but this weak tie was important in providing information and resources. The

systematic support received by the Shanghai migrant women in this study needs to be strengthened compared to the various support at the individual level in the social network.

Shanghai migrant women's social networks are mainly composed of strong ties with family members and friends from their hometowns, which typically involve higher emotional commitment, frequent interactions, and stronger trust. In the interviews, every participant mentioned their family or friends back home when answering questions about the people who helped them when they came to Shanghai and encountered difficulties. All 11 participants said that they had contacted their family and friends back home at least three times a week through WeChat/video calls/phone calls, and eight participants said that they had talked to their family/friends back home for more than 30 minutes a day, almost every day. Eight participants said they have had phone/video calls with family members/friends in their hometowns for more than 30 minutes a day, and three of them said the calls lasted for an hour or more. Migrant women in Shanghai have more frequent interactions and higher emotional engagement with family and friends back home. Some participants said that contact with family and friends is the happiest time of the day for them. In addition, help in terms of financial resources also reflects the high trust in the interaction process, such as when a child is sick, these migrant women's family members or friends will transfer money in order to provide financial assistance.

Compared to the participants' close ties with family members and friends in their hometowns, the participants' relationships with neighbors and colleagues in their inflow areas are looser, reflecting the characteristics of weak ties. Weak ties are characterized by a low frequency of interaction, usually in times of need, and a relatively low level of emotional commitment. One participant said, "My social life is still with my old schoolmates, and new friends are only familiar to me or I just say hello, but not much in the way of friendships. Shanghai is not a very humane city, unlike in my hometown, where everyone is very attentive and helpful to one another." However, five women also mentioned the help they received from their landlords or neighbors in the community when they first arrived, expressing strong gratitude for the support.

Weak ties play an important role in providing an individual new information, resources, and opportunities, as opposed to the direct emotional and financial support provided by strong ties. In everyday life, some participants expressed the importance of information transfer between neighbors. For example, neighbors help them to make appointments for vaccinations, landlords help them find schools for their two children, neighbors help them to introduce new properties, and so on. Regarding work, two of the 11 respondents indicated that they had also received help from colleagues they met at work in Shanghai. The help was mainly in the form of information about job opportunities, which helped the participants to change jobs successfully. For example, they switched from working as janitorial staff in hospitals to hourly domestic workers. Some of the remaining participants also mentioned that neighbors/landlords would help to introduce jobs. Participants obtained important information resources about life and work through weak ties, which is important for integrating into life in Shanghai.

The social networks of Shanghai's migrant women is characterized by strong ties and a lack of outward socialization, which is affected by the group's dual financial and time poverty. Most of the middle-aged female migrant workers in the study are engaged in labor-intensive industries and have to work longer paid hours to keep their jobs and incomes stable, and some even have to work two jobs to cover household expenses, lacking the time and money for outward socialization. At the same time, under the influence of the traditional concept of gender division of labor, migrant female workers actively or passively take on more responsibilities within the family, and are more likely to spend their non-working time on reproduction work. Due to limited education and traditional values, low-income migrant female workers lack the sense of personal subjectivity and are accustomed to hiding and avoiding their own needs, making it difficult for them to recognize their time poverty [24].

Financial and time poverty are important factors affecting the characteristics of the social networks of migrant women in Shanghai, and the gendered division of labor and lack of subjective awareness reinforces and consolidates the current situation.

Exclusion from the social network is also an important factor, with half of the participants saying that they felt more or less non-included in their communities, and that aspects such as household registration, language, and welfare policies for migrant women have an impact on their sense of belonging. The household registration system divides residents into “locals” and “outsiders,” and some activities and information are only disseminated to locals due to the channels of communication, resulting in the exclusion of migrant women. “Usually some internal activities such as medical check-ups are usually communicated to locals.” Some participants also said, “I also hope that the community can not only look for Shanghai locals in some activities, but also give some opportunities to us, the outsiders”. Besides, language, as a tool of direct communication between people, plays an important role in the project of helping people to form a sense of community, which can also make people feel excluded. For example, “I didn't know how to speak Mandarin when I first came to Shanghai, and it was very difficult for me to communicate at that times.”. Another added, “In this group, if you only speak Mandarin, others won't be particularly willing to accept you. They don't exclude you on purpose, but it's customary for them to speak their language, and you're naturally excluded.” In terms of welfare policies, almost every participant expressed concerns about the high price of rent in Shanghai and hopes for the introduction of relevant welfare policies. “If anything, I still hope that we can be given some benefits in terms of rent, it's really too expensive to rent an apartment in Shanghai.” In terms of education, most of the children who moved to Shanghai with their parents are unable to attend public schools due to the household registration issue, and the tuition fees of private schools are relatively high, which is also one of their concerns.

Formal support from the community and government for migrant women still needs strengthening. Some of the migrant women in the study lacked the knowledge to actively seek systematic support. For example, one participant said, “I don't expect any help from the community, I prefer to rely on myself”. Another added, “I don't think we have done anything special, so why would others want to help us?”. At the same time, the community and local government should also strengthen their support for migrant women. When it comes to formal help provided by the community, most of the participants said that they seldom or never received it: “The community really doesn't give us any help, and I'm too old to think of asking for any help”. Most of them indicated that they had not received any help or care from the community, except for the supplies and food they received during COVID-19. Systematic support is more stable than that provided by personal relationships and is more likely to provide institutionalized solutions in terms of healthcare, education and employment. Formal support should therefore be strengthened to facilitate the community integration of migrant women.

5. Conclusion

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore the characteristics and influencing factors of the social networks of 11 migrant women in Shanghai. The study found that the social networks of Shanghai's migrant women are dominated by strong ties, and they face difficulties in expanding their social networks to develop weak ties due to financial constraints, time poverty, household registration issues, language barriers, and restrictive policies. Community integration allows migrant women to build wider social networks and receive emotional support, information, and practical help (e.g., childcare, material assistance) from neighbors, friends, and community organizations. The various kinds of support obtained through social networks are of great significance to the physical and mental health of migrant women and their community integration. At present, research on the social networks

and resources, both strong and weak ties, of migrant women requires further attention, and this direction should be considered in future research.

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