



Domestic Migrant Workers in Israel: The Strength of Weak Ties

Jenny Bronstein^(✉)

Bar-Ilan University, 52900 Ramat-Gan, Israel
jenny.bronstein@biu.ac.il

Abstract. This paper presents an ongoing exploratory study examining the role that weak ties play in the information behaviour of domestic migrant workers living in Israel. Weak ties are social acquaintances that provide varied information and social support. The study used the narrative inquiry method that allows the researcher to study and understand information behaviours intrinsically related to the life stories of the population studied. The interviews looked for narratives that described their interactions with different information sources, and the role that weak ties play as sources of information and social support that help them make sense of their lives in Israel. Findings revealed that weak ties fulfilled four functions: extending access to information, fostering social interactions with dissimilar others, facilitating low-risk discussion of high-risk topics, and fostering a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Migrant workers · Weak ties · Information seeking
Information sources · Migration

1 Introduction

The growing pace of economic globalization, higher rates of unemployment, increasing poverty, as well as climate change and armed conflicts, have forced millions of people in developing countries to seek work elsewhere. At the same time, developed countries have increased their demand for labour, especially unskilled labour. At present, there are an estimated 150 million migrant workers, of which 11.5 million are domestic workers. These workers experience social exclusion characterized by discrimination and exploitative working and living conditions that are often exacerbated by the lack of access to information sources, to economic resources, and to the educational skills needed to adapt to life in a new country [1].

Access to information is crucial for migrants at all stages of the settlement process [2]. Past studies have revealed that migration disrupts the individual's information landscapes by disconnecting them from the information sources and the social networks they knew and rendering the information practices used in their country of origin irrelevant in their host country. That is, their information landscapes are fractured because of migration [3]. This disruption, hinders the migrants' decision-making, restricts their capacity to satisfy basic needs (i.e., employment, education, housing, health care), to learn a new language, and to adopt new social norms and understandings [4–7]. How do migrant workers manage to navigate new and complex

information landscapes and find the information they need? Preliminary findings of this study show that acquaintances or weak ties have a significant role in helping migrants rebuild their fractured information landscapes by functioning as an important source of information and social support and helping them learn new “ways of knowing” [3].

The strength of weak ties is a social network theory formulated by Granovetter. This theory defines the strength of a social tie as the combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, and level of reciprocity and intimacy that characterize the tie. Weak ties, then, are relationships formed with individuals outside our immediate social network. They are much more significant as information sources than strong ties because our friends or relatives tend to circulate in the same social circles as us and the information they have to share is to a large extent the same as we encounter [8]. Contrarily, weak ties provide access to information that is more varied. As Granovetter explained, “individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends” [8]. Furthermore, weak ties often provide support during times of crisis when strong ties are disrupted such as (e.g., death of a family member, divorce, long-term illness [9] or, as in the case of this study, migration). Prior studies on migration have emphasized the significance that social networks have for migrants since they bridge social distance, bringing together people from different social locations [10–12] and helping them become resilient and adapt to their new country [13]. Resilience refers to positive adaptation despite adversity [14]. Hence, the purpose of this study is to understand the role that weak ties play as sources of information and social support in the settlement process of domestic migrant workers in Israel, as shown through their life stories.

2 Research Approach and Methodology

The study uses narrative inquiry as a research method. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method based on the notion that we obtain understanding of and provide meaning to our lives through narrating our life stories. It investigates the stories people tell about themselves, their inner thoughts, states of mind, and how they perceive their own reality [15]. This method of inquiry was chosen because narratives or stories “represent the character or lifestyle of specific subgroups in society, defined by their gender, race, religion, and so on. From a social, cultural or ethnic point of view, these groups frequently are discriminated against, minorities whose narratives express their unheard voices” [16]. Because of its naturalistic character, narrative inquiry is a natural and intuitive methodology for eliciting and examining human behaviour [17]—in this case information behaviour. Narratives have been used in past studies dealing with migrant populations such as Polish migrants in Britain [11], Latinos in the US [18], Chilean immigrants in New Zealand, [19] and Andalusian migrants in Spain [20]. Although it is widely used in the social sciences, this has been scarcely applied to the study of information behaviour [21, 22].

Data was collected through 20 narrative interviews with Spanish-speaking domestic migrant workers living in Israel. During the interviews, participants were asked to talk about their emigration to Israel and their lives as migrant workers in the country. The

study looked for narratives that describe their interactions with information sources, and their views and perceptions of the social role of information.

The information behaviour of migrants has been investigated in studies that have focused on the use of information sources and the information literacy skills needed to fulfil their information needs during the different stages of the settlement process [2, 23–26]. The current study examined the role that weak ties play in the information behaviour of domestic migrant workers by applying Adelman, Parks and Albrecht’s theoretical framework to the analysis of the data. This framework proposes that the distinctive features of weak ties result in four different functions: (1) extending access to information, (2) fostering social interactions with dissimilar others, (3) facilitating low-risk discussion of high-risk topics, and (4) fostering a sense of belonging [9].

3 Preliminary Findings

First function: Extending access to information

Weak ties represent a diverse and unique set of informal information sources that can provide the individual with experiential information and social support not always provided by strong ties. While the number of strong ties is rather small, the number of weak ties can be large; therefore, they provide extended access to information [27]. These weak ties were sometimes strangers who helped them in time of need:

Well I think ... I do not know .. But God puts like angels in our way for us to find, look many times I've been lost in a train, on a bus, in a city and I always find someone who speaks Spanish and helps me.

Adelman, Park, and Albrecht refer to some of these weak ties as “community agents” [9], people like clergy or teachers that play a specific role as information sources. For participants, lawyers and volunteers at different NGOs functioned as community agents by helping them solve issues related to their visas, for example:

There is an NGO, called “Israel children”, and there are volunteers who also speak Spanish. There was this lady who spoke Spanish, she helped us a lot, translations, messages, she used to call me, let's do this, we want to collaborate, we want to help. This is how we arranged my daughter's visa.

Second function: Fostering social interactions with dissimilar others

Weak ties tend to be people from different backgrounds that provide distinctive perspectives and reference points; the low levels of intimacy and reciprocity in the relationship tend to ease the need for similarity [9]. Employers were revealed in the content analysis as important sources of information, oftentimes using their own social networks to help the workers:

[when I need to solve a problem] I'll sometimes ask my employers, and if they don't know they'll ask their friends or search the internet for me.

The employers also provided instrumental help that was perceived as social support:

I have excellent employers ... all of them ... they helped me set up my internet connection, my contract with the cable company ... they are not my bosses, I tell you, I do not know ... they are like my guardian angels in this country.

Third function: facilitating low-risk discussion on high risk subjects

Most weak ties are restricted to specific temporal and situational contexts, and the interactions are limited to a narrow range of subjects (i.e., doctors, clergy, and people on the bus). This temporality “provides a sense of freedom and anonymity that often allows individuals to disclose far more than they otherwise would” [9]. One participant relates how she confided in a stranger on a bus who gave her the information she needed:

When my son was born I had to take him to Jerusalem to see a doctor, I needed to find a way to see a doctor closer [to home]. One of those things in life happened; I met an Argentinian lady on the bus. We started talking and I told her about my problem. She worked in a ... what was this called? NGO. I did not know anything about rights but she told me how to get a better health insurance for my son.

Fourth Function: fostering a sense of belonging

Weak ties foster a sense of belonging because they connect people from different backgrounds that eventually become a support network, a group of people to turn to in time of need. Building relationships with people outside their social environment gave participants a sense of belonging and connection to Israel:

I want to stay here, I have a child who was born here and he loves Israel, he likes everything here, I also like all the Jewish holidays, I like going to the synagogue, I like everything about Israel.

This sense of belonging helped participants become resilient and adapt to their new country:

For me Israel is my place even if I was not born here. I respect the Jewish traditions, I try not to offend other people, and I always respect their traditions.

The settlement process can be a difficult experience for migrant workers who immigrate to a different country looking for a better quality of life; but it is this promise that helps them develop the resilience needed.

I came here twelve years ago with a tourist visa looking for a better life; I decided to stay here in the country, because the situation in Venezuela was very bad at the time. Nowadays the situation is even worse. It has not been easy, but I feel relieved ... I feel the peace of mind that I am giving my daughter a future a little different from what I could have [back home] and from what I know I can give her in Venezuela.

4 Conclusion

Migrant workers come to their host country to escape conflict and poverty, looking for a better life. During their settlement process, they encounter social, cultural and linguistic barriers that greatly hinder their process of social inclusion. Weak ties in the form of social acquaintances or community agents can provide them with invaluable

information and expose them to new information skills that their strong ties within the migrant community cannot always offer. Moreover, because the information provided comes from people with whom migrant workers do not have a reciprocal or intimate bond, this information is perceived as social support that fosters a sense of belonging and helps them develop the resilience needed to confront the challenges they face during the settlement process.

References

1. International Labour Organization: ILO global estimates of migrant workers and migrant domestic workers: results and methodology. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/dgreports/dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_436343.pdf
2. Shankar, S., O'Brien, H.L., How, E., Lu, Y.W., Mabi, M., Rose, C.: The role of information in the settlement experiences of refugee students. *Proc. Assoc. Inf. Sci. Technol.* **53**(1), 1–6 (2016)
3. Lloyd, A.: Researching fractured (information) landscapes: implications for library and information science researchers undertaking research with refugees and forced migration studies. *J. Doc.* **73**(1), 35–47 (2017)
4. Aspinall, P.J.: Language ability: a neglected dimension in the profiling of populations and health service users. *Health Educ. J.* **66**(1), 90–106 (2011)
5. Caidi, N., Allard, D.: Social inclusion of newcomers to Canada: an information problem? *Libr. Inf. Sci. Res.* **27**(3), 302–324 (2010)
6. Choir, S., Du, J.T., Koronios, A.: Everyday information behaviour of Asian immigrants in South Australia: a mixed-methods exploration (2015). <http://InformationR.net/ir/20-3/paper687.html>
7. Lloyd, A., Lipu, S., Kennan, M.A.: On becoming citizens: examining social inclusion from an information perspective. *Aust. Acad. Res. Libr.* **41**(1), 42–53 (2010)
8. Granovetter, M.: The strength of weak ties: a network theory revisited. *Sociol. Theory* **1**, 202–233 (1983)
9. Adelman, M.B., Parks, M.R., Albrecht, T.L.: Beyond close relationships: support in weak ties. In: Albrecht, T.L., Adelman, M.B. (eds.) *Communicating Social Support*, pp. 126–147. Sage, Newbury Park (1987)
10. Awumbila, M., Teye, J.K., Yaro, J.A.: Social networks, migration trajectories and livelihood strategies of migrant domestic and construction workers in Accra, Ghana. *J. Asian Afr. Stud.* (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1177/002190961663474313>
11. Ryan, L.: Migrants' social networks and weak ties: accessing resources and constructing relationships post-migration. *Sociol. Rev.* **59**(4), 707–724 (2011)
12. Ryan, L., Sales, R., Tilki, M., Siara, B.: Social networks, social support and social capital: the experiences of recent polish migrants in London. *Sociology* **42**(4), 672–690 (2008)
13. Rashid, R., Gregory, D.: 'Not giving up on life': a holistic exploration of resilience among a sample of immigrant Canadian women. *Can. Ethn. Stud.* **46**(1), 197–214 (2014)
14. Bandura, A.: Self-efficacy: the exercise of control. In: Vilanayur, R.S. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Human Behaviour*, pp. 71–81. Academic Press, New York (1997)
15. Riessman, C.K.: A short story about long stories. *J. Narrat. Life Hist.* **7**(1–4), 155–159 (1997)
16. Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., Zilber, T.: *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation*. Sage, Thousand Oaks (1998)

17. Spector-Mersel, G.: Narrative research: time for a paradigm. *Narrat. Inq.* **20**(1), 204–224 (2010)
18. Courtright, C.: Health information-seeking among Latino newcomers: an exploratory study. *Inf. Res.* **10**(2) (2005). <http://www.informationr.net/ir/10-2/paper224.html>
19. Smythe Contreras, K.C.: “Maybe because we are too Chilean”: stories of migration from Hispanic women living in New Zealand. Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand (2015)
20. Macías-Gómez-Estern, B.: Narrative as a sense-making tool in the construction of migrants’ identities. *Apprehending emotions. Procedia-Soc. Behav. Sci.* **173**, 168–175 (2015)
21. Bates, J.A.: Use of narrative interviewing in everyday information behavior research. *Libr. Inf. Sci. Res.* **26**(1), 15–28 (2004)
22. Eckerdal, J.R.: Empowering interviews: narrative interviews in the study of information literacy in everyday life settings. *Inf. Res.: Int. Electron. J.* **18**(3), 3 (2013)
23. Fisher, K.E., Durrance, J.C., Hinton, M.B.: Information grounds and the use of need-based services by immigrants in Queens, New York: a context-based, outcome evaluation approach. *J. Am. Soc. Inf. Sci. Technol.* **55**(8), 754–766 (2004)
24. Khoir, S., Du, J.T., Koronios, A.: Study of Asian immigrants’ information behaviour in South Australia: preliminary results. In: *iConference 2014 Proceedings*, pp. 682–689 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.9776/14316>. <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/47274>
25. Lingel, J.: Information tactics of immigrants in an urban environment (2011). <http://InformationR.net/ir/16-4/paper500.html>
26. Lloyd, A.: Stranger in a strange land; enabling information resilience in resettlement landscapes. *J. Doc.* **71**(5), 1029–1042 (2015)
27. Rubenstein, E.L.: “They are always there for me”: the convergence of social support and information in an online breast cancer community. *J. Assoc. Inf. Sci. Technol.* **66**(7), 1418–1430 (2015)