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The Interplay between Informal Social Networks and Formal Organizations in Connecting Newcomers to Canada

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Introduction

Navigating through life's challenges and taking advantage of opportunities that arise require an individual to draw on a range of resources. These resources may include components of financial, human, physical and social capital. While much evidence has pointed to the importance of financial and human capital in helping to improve outcomes of individuals, the last few years have witnessed an increased awareness and realization in the significance of social capital to economic and social well being.

Although there is no universal agreement on the definition of social capital, it is evident that relationships and networks are at the heart of the concept. Robert Putnam defines social capital as connections among individuals through networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust they engender (2000: 19). A similar network-oriented definition was adopted by the Policy Research Initiative, emphasizing the role played by social networks in providing individuals and groups access to a range of resources and supports (PRI, 2005). Social networks encompass both bonding and bridging capital. *Bonding* reinforces exclusive identities and homogeneous groups, while *bridging* refers to inclusive networks that consist of a diverse range of people from different backgrounds (Putnam, 2000: 22). Furthermore, social capital includes both informal and formal elements, consisting of relationships within and between social networks of family and friends and organizational structures such as community organizations, businesses, and different levels of government. Together these structures form an ecology of social support that an individual can draw upon in times of need.

Networks of personal relationships may be developed through interaction within and between families, neighbourhoods, workplaces and a variety of informal and formal places and settings (Harper 2002). Together with shared norms, values and understandings, networks facilitate co-operation within or among groups (Côté and Healy, 2001). Evidence suggests that social networks are linked to increased economic prosperity, decreased crime, higher educational attainment, and enhanced health and quality of life outcomes. However, networks can also have negative consequences. For example, while exclusively bonding networks (e.g., ethnic enclaves², fundamentalist religious groups, gangs, etc.) provide support to their members, they can also be disruptive to society, lead to isolation, and/or foster antagonism within and between communities.

This paper seeks to understand the elements that exist within informal social networks and the interplay between these networks and formal structures in helping individuals manage the challenges and opportunities associated with life-course transitions. In order to contextualize

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² Ethnic enclaves are defined as the dominance of an ethnic group in a neighbourhood. It includes the concentration of individuals within a particular cultural group distinct from its surrounding area (Qadeer and Kumar, 2005).

this framework, informal social networks will be analyzed in terms of their significance to immigrant populations (specifically newcomers), followed by an exploration of potential areas for further policy research.

What is an informal social network?

While exact definitions of informal social networks can be quite opaque, it is well understood that an individual's family (including their extended family), friends, neighbours and wider communities of interest (including the informal connections developed in work, education and neighbourhood settings as well as those increasingly formed on-line) are at the centre of these constructs. The changing nature and increasing diversity of families, the emergence of on-line networks of support and the increasingly broad interpretation of "community", all contribute to the evolving form and role of informal networks in helping individuals address social needs.

Informal social networks can generally be defined as a set of relationships or linkages among individuals, each of which has a varying degree of significance to the wider network. Each individual is linked to a set of other individuals, and a number of individuals within one set may be linked to networks of people in other sets, and so on. In this sense, the breadth of a network can be quite expansive. These types of linked networks can be characterized along three dimensions (Eng and Young, 1992; Israel, 1985; Rice et al, 2001):

1. *Structural* – the size and density of connections. The *size* indicates the number of people in a network and the *density* indicates the extent to which individuals within the network know each other (i.e., all members that know each other within a particular network would constitute a high density, whereas only a few who know each member would constitute a low density).
2. *Interactional* – the nature of relationships, which indicates whether members in a network have strong or weak ties. Elements of this dimension include i) durability - length of time individuals have known each other, ii) intensity - frequency of interaction, iii) dispersion - ease in which individuals in the network are able to contact each other, and iv) reciprocity - extent to which individuals provide and receive support.
3. *Functional* – the type of support. This could include i) instrumental support (time, money, labour and other transfers in kind), ii) emotional support (concern, understanding, companionship), iii) informational support (advice, information, suggestions), and iv) appraisal support (esteem, affirmation, feedback), or combinations thereof.

While these are the three dimensions on which informal networks are typically characterized, other elements also exist, such as their increasingly virtual and non-organized nature. With the rapid increase in information technology tools over the past few years, social media are becoming a powerful force in re-shaping social networks. The social networks of today include features of both face-to-face and virtual contact, as they transition from traditionally settled and location-specific to increasingly global and interconnected relationships (Crow, 2004).

Informal social networks are also non-organized in nature – as opposed to unorganized (Alcock, 1996). They provide informal structures of opportunity (or in some cases, barriers) that may facilitate (or hinder) access to a variety of resources. For example, strong networks can act as a form of support in old age, accessing jobs and reducing crime, or restrict an individual's ability to

change and adopt new ways of doing things. The implied reciprocity and mutual interdependence in interpersonal relationships need not be equitable (in terms of benefit or pay-back) and may (or may not) involve a “favour” now for an unforeseen or unguaranteed “favour” in the future (Phillipson et al, 2004). These characteristics make it difficult to define, track or evaluate informal social networks, but provide more flexibility in the way they deliver support to individuals.

While informal social networks are key in providing support to individuals, they do not operate in a vacuum. They occupy the interdependent, mutually reinforcing and reciprocal space between individuals, formal organizations and the communities (either local, global or virtual) in which people live. All these facets are inextricably linked with the way we routinely understand our lives (Phillipson et al, 2004).

Informal networks in a formal space

Informal networks develop in diverse spaces. We develop connections not only through informal situations, but also through our interactions at work, within communities, and within a variety of formal structures, including community organizations, businesses, and governments. These organizations and the informal connections individuals develop through involvement in them provide various forms of instrumental and informational support that assist during life transition stages, including employment, access to information and a range of support programs and services.

Formal structures usually involve a chain of authority and communication in an organizational setting (Marshall, 1998). They are traditionally based on some form of hierarchy, with a set of rules and procedures that guide the objectives and outcomes of the organizations. Nevertheless, informal systems of human relations are used within formal structures in order to advance their objectives. In comparing informal structures that exist within formal organizations, certain characteristics of each emerge (Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of Informal and Formal Structures³	
Informal structures	Formal organizations
Grassroots orientation	Top-down orientation
Spontaneously created	Deliberately created
Constantly evolving	Enduring (unless deliberately altered)
Dynamic and responsive	Static and prescriptive
Fairly flat and fluid structure – flexible and loose	Hierarchical structure – based on division of labour and specialization
People as individuals	People as bearers of roles and responsibilities
Relationships may be undefined	Relationship structures well-defined
Bound by trust and reciprocity	Bound by rules, process and order
Complex and hard to define	Simple and easy to explain
Useful for rapidly changing circumstances that are not well understood – adaptability	Useful for constant and well-known situations – consistency

Adapted from: Wikipedia, 2009; Answers, 2010

There exists a continuum between these characteristics depending on the type of organization. For example, small-scale community sector organizations are often grass-roots oriented as opposed to top-down and, as a result, have a dynamism and responsiveness that may not exist in other formal structures. Further, some organizations may start out as informal networks of individuals addressing issues specific to their community, only later to adopt a more formal organizational structure in order to be able to access resources (both financial and non-financial) and grow.⁴ As a result, Table 1 is more an illustration of the extremes that exist within and between informal and formal structures, rather than the many shades of grey that exist on the ground.

While informal structures operating within an organizational sphere are different from the informal social networks of friends, families and neighbours, some similarities do exist. Both feature the structural, interactional and functional dimensions of informal networks described above. As well, the characteristics of informal structures in an organizational context listed in Table 1 are equally applicable to informal social networks.

In fact, the sense of informality based on the characteristics described in Table 1 is becoming more salient in today's increasingly complex and constantly changing environment. Social media technologies are progressively making it possible to move from static, hierarchical and process-driven institutions to more informal forms of collaboration in addressing a wide range of issues (Shirky, 2005). Further, formal organizations are recognizing the limits of siloed and hierarchical

³ The characteristics in Table 1 are based on informal *organizations* composed of a social structure that determines how people work together in practice. That structure encompasses the norms, behaviours and personal and professional connections and interactions shared by individuals within an organization or cluster of organizations. It comprises social networks and personal relationships that are dynamic in nature and evolve with the changing dynamics between and within a variety of organizations. As a result, informal organizations are more responsive than the structure formal organizations allow, and have the capacity to foster innovation, bring people together to collaboratively solve problems and create opportunities for change within formal structures (Wikipedia, 2009).

⁴ Governments have provided incentives that have allowed initially informal structures and networks to transform into formal organizations, including facilitating incorporation into a non-profit organization, granting charitable status, and providing direct funding.

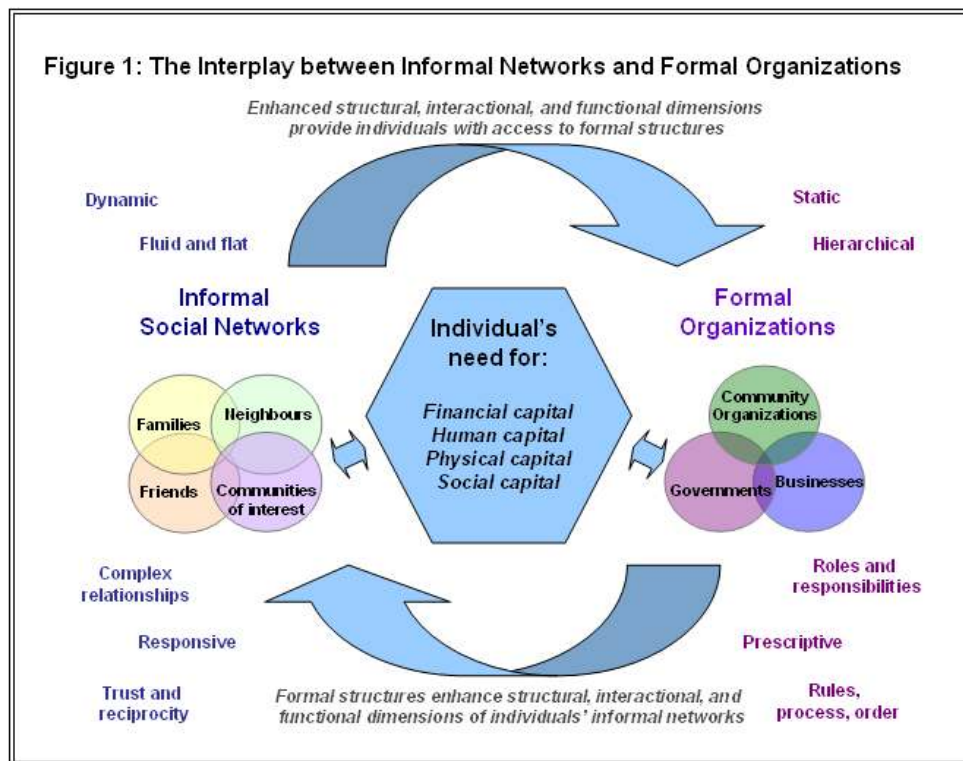
approaches to addressing complex challenges, and are moving towards more horizontal and collaborative mechanisms. These trends blur boundaries between and within formal and informal entities.

The interplay between informal networks and formal structures in managing life-course transitions

Life-course transitions bring opportunities and challenges. Both informal social networks and formal organizations can be a source of support during these times by helping individuals address needs through the provision of emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal support. Formal organizations mainly provide instrumental and informational support, although some grassroots community organizations have the potential to provide emotional and appraisal support as well.

Regardless of who provides support or the form it takes, informal social networks and formal organizations engage in a mutually reinforcing dynamic. While businesses, governments and community organizations provide a range of financial, program and service support to individuals, these formal organizations also create spaces for individuals to connect and develop networks. So in this sense, they aid in enhancing existing social networks and forming new ones.

At the same time, informal social networks provide an opportunity for individuals to share information and resources. They help connect people within their network to employers, gain access to government and community programs and services, and navigate through organizational spaces to obtain the required information and resources. Figure 1 illustrates the mutually reinforcing nature of informal networks and formal organizations in enhancing the financial, human, physical, and social capital required to help individuals address their needs.



Recent evidence suggests a strong link between robust social networks, immigrant outcomes and perceptions of their life in Canada (Houle and Schellenberg, 2010). Existing case studies also point to the importance of informal social networks in providing newcomers information on programs and services concerning immigration and settlement, as well as formal structures acting as a space in which social networks are enhanced or formed. This mutually reinforcing dynamic has important implications for public policy. The following sections will test the interplay framework described above on newcomers' transition to life in Canada.

Informal networks: Connecting newcomers to Canada

Migration is an experience that impacts the life-trajectory of an individual and brings with it a range of challenges and opportunities. It has differing effects depending on the newcomers' stage of life, category of admission and initial place of settlement upon entry. The process is fraught with both adverse and positive perceptions and realizations of risks: leaving behind one's career, family, friends and social support network, going to a new country in search of better employment and/or educational opportunities, adapting to new cultural norms that in some cases conflict with one's own, and so on. Integration outcomes depend on the actions of newcomers themselves as well as the receiving society, and decisions that have potentially positive and negative implications are taken at various stages of the immigration process: pre-migration, settlement, adaptation and integration (Kunz, 2005a). Throughout this process, the way in which immigrants individually deal with the challenges they face, as well as the support structures they access to help them address their needs, determine the success of their migration efforts (Kunz, 2005b: 54).

Newcomers to Canada are primarily drawn to its three largest metropolitan areas –Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal – due to the opportunities, infrastructure and connections that enable them to build their financial, human, physical and social capital. While the attraction to these cities may be due to increased chances for access to employment, housing, education and skills development, a recent Statistics Canada report indicates that the most cited reason immigrants settle in these areas is the opportunity to join social support networks of family and friends. Job prospects, climate and language were the second-most cited reason for settlement in Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2008).

When newcomers come to Canada, the structural, interactional and functional dimensions of their networks may be quite different compared to those of the Canadian-born population or those in their home countries. If their social networks are small and initially include weaker ties, the durability, frequency, dispersion and reciprocity attributes of their networks may be underdeveloped. With time, the networks of newcomers may grow in size, and the nature of their relationships may deepen, enabling them to take advantage of functional supports from richer and more diversified networks. Moving to a place that already has some established and familiar networks or greater opportunities to develop them can presumably facilitate quicker access to a range of possibilities (i.e., meaningful employment, improved language skills, etc). Hence the attraction of newcomers to Canada's three largest cities.

Another important element of networks in connecting newcomers to Canada is the bridging-bonding dynamic. All three dimensions of informal social networks are inherent in both bridging and bonding forms of social capital. Already established bonding networks formed within and between communities can be fairly large, include strong ties and well developed relationships, and provide an array of support to newcomers of a similar culture.⁵ In comparison, bridging networks can take longer to establish: typically, they are initially smaller, and involve weaker ties and underdeveloped relationships.⁶ Although bonding networks have their benefits, they can also be a barrier to integration into mainstream society, whereas bridging networks can facilitate integration. In short, bridging capital is good for getting ahead, while bonding capital is good for getting by (Briggs, 1998). These two concepts are not mutually exclusive or necessarily substitutes but together form a social capital portfolio whose diversity (or lack of diversity) can be expected to translate into different patterns and dynamics of social support and other interactions.

Formal newcomer supports

Prior to and on entering the country, newcomers can access support from a range of formal organizations that facilitate their settlement, adaptation and integration into Canadian society. Immigration serving organizations assist newcomers in searching for employment and housing, acquiring information regarding government and community services, obtaining language training, and a variety of other essentials, such as finding a doctor, enrolling children in school, obtaining important documents and so on (CIC, 2010). Businesses employ newcomers and provide a range of training and career advancement opportunities that impact the social and

⁵ For example, ethno-centric networks are a form of bonding capital that provide the social and psychological support necessary among a group of individuals transitioning to a new culture. In particular, more established immigrants from the same culture can share their experiences with newcomers on life in Canada from their unique cultural perspective.

⁶ Bridging capital introduces newcomers to the mainstream culture and society, provides an avenue for increased employment possibilities and facilitates access to settlement and integration services.

economic outcomes of immigrants. Governments also provide a host of settlement and integration programs that ease the transition process for newcomers. Some programs at the federal level include: Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada ([LINC](#)), which provides free language classes to adult newcomers; the Host program, which matches newcomers with a Canadian family who can help in the adaptation process; and the Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program ([ISAP](#)), which works with immigrant-serving organizations to help newcomers gain access to services that meet their needs (e.g., referrals, counselling, interpretation, tips on day-to-day tasks).

There also exist a number of growing initiatives that enhance collaboration between various social actors in order to assist newcomers. For example, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council ([TRIEC](#)) brings community groups, businesses, governments and immigrants together to develop local solutions to address immigrant issues in the Toronto region. Examples include creating opportunities that connect skilled immigrants to the local labour market and working with governments to enhance policy and programs for skilled immigrant employment (TRIEC, 2010).

The informal-formal interplay in meeting newcomers' needs

Some of the main challenges newcomers face upon migration to Canada include employment, housing, language, and cultural integration. Over time, as immigrants improve their language skills, find better jobs, increase their knowledge of the culture and gain a better sense of identity and their place in Canadian life, they move towards increased participation in the societal and economic life of the country. The access to and interplay between informal networks and formal organizations are crucial in helping newcomers in enhancing the financial, human, physical and social capital required to help them address their needs as they navigate through the immigration process.

Informal social networks provide an avenue for newcomers to access the programs and services of formal organizations, while the latter provide a venue for the formation of social networks. For example, the Host program, funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), and run by settlement agencies, helps develop social connections between Canadians and newcomers to facilitate immigrant settlement and integration. Native-born Canadians and longer-established immigrants point newcomers to resources that help with their integration process, while fostering cross-cultural understanding between newcomers and their Canadian hosts. Websites such as [LoonLounge](#) (developed by a Canadian immigration lawyer) and [Settlement.org](#) (developed by a council of immigrant serving agencies and funded by governments) provide immigrants with one-stop, on-line information about settlement services and allow participants to communicate with each other on issues of mutual interest, thus furthering informal connections through social media (LoonLounge, 2010; OCASI, 2010b).

Since 1999, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants ([OCASI](#))⁷ has developed and maintained [Settlement.org](#), a web-based tool that helps Ontario newcomers find answers to settlement-related questions. The website provides a host of location-specific information regarding housing, health, employment, education, community services, recreation services, legal services and day-to day tasks (OCASI, 2010b). It links newcomers to settlement agencies

⁷ The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) is a membership-based organization formed in 1978 that acts as a collective voice for over 170 immigrant-serving agencies in Ontario (OCASI, 2010a).

and moderates a discussion forum that acts as a virtual space where newcomers can get answers to their questions and exchange knowledge on their settlement experiences (OCASI, 2010c).

While Settlement.org is a service provided by a formal community organization, it also operates in the informal space by connecting newcomers with others in their virtual and physical communities. This tool helps newcomers address some of the main challenges they face upon arrival by providing a range of information on housing, language and employment, with further links to related websites. For example, those having challenges accessing affordable housing or information on how to rent or purchase a home can find valuable information on the site, as well as exchange their own housing experiences with others through the discussion forum. The same is true for issues related to acquiring English as a second language, finding employment, planning a career or starting a business. The discussion forum, while moderated to ensure that everyone receives answers to their questions, allows newcomers and others to share observations, experiences and insights among each other on the settlement, adaptation and integration process.

In this sense, Settlement.org acts as a space for the development of an informal network and shares some of the elements of networks described above. The network's structural strength includes its potentially large size, though the ties it facilitates may be relatively weak and episodic, rather than strong and ongoing. The interactional properties of the network reflect the virtual nature of the platform, which allows individuals to contact one another with relative ease (low dispersion) in a way that allows them to provide and receive support from each other (reciprocity). Regarding the types of support provided by the network itself, informational support in terms of advice and suggestions appears to be dominant, though the provision of emotional, appraisal and some semblance of instrumental support (mainly in terms of taking the time to help others get the information they need) are also in evidence. So in this sense Settlement.org is an example of a formal service, managed by a formal community sector organization (OCASI), and funded by both federal and provincial governments (CIC and Government of Ontario), which creates a space for an informal network of newcomers who can support each other as they navigate through their new life in Canada.

While Settlement.org provides a wealth of information on the settlement process, links to community services, and a forum for newcomers to connect on-line, one cannot discount the importance of face-to-face connections in physical communities.⁸ The role of formal community sector organizations such as immigrant settlement agencies is crucial in helping foster informal ties through volunteerism and community building initiatives. For example, neighbourhood houses have traditionally been the connecting points that bridge newcomers to community residents. As noted in Yan and Lauer's explorative study (2008), neighbourhood houses have been quite successful in helping newcomers integrate into communities and build cross-cultural social ties by connecting people within specific geographical areas. These neighbourhood houses offer a range of programs and services, including information referral, settlement counselling, language and skills training, and cultural and social activities that helps in the bridging process between newcomers and their new Canadian life. These formal programs are accompanied by attempts to foster informal networks. In fact, one of the main objectives of today's

⁸ It should be noted that the benefits of Settlement.org are only available to those with access to computers, the Internet, and some form of computer and language (English or French) proficiency.

neighbourhood houses is to act as a space for the formation of both formal and informal relationships that foster a sense of belonging and community building.

Exploring potential areas for further policy research

The dynamics of drawing on a range of social support structures, both formal and informal, at various stages of the life-course are significant from a policy perspective. While the role of public policy in supporting formal structures is relatively clear, the challenge lies in identifying its position with regard to informal social networks. For example, informal networks provide much support to individuals that is not accounted for in the formal system, while the latter is where public policy is largely targeted (PRI, 2010). Further exploration is required on the impact of public policies on informal social networks and whether such policies enhance or reduce the capacities of individuals to work within their networks in addressing needs throughout the life-course.

Linking measurement to outcomes

Often the measurement of social networks is tied to structural features, such as the size of the network, physical distance and density of connections, as well as certain interactional features such as frequency of contact (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). Although these features may be important when analyzing the structure of informal networks, they may not necessarily be as useful when gauging the social benefits and outcomes of these networks. For example, a person may have a large network of friends, be in touch with them often and be in close proximity to them, but how often and whether they can be relied upon in times of need can be another story. Conversely, one may have a small network of neighbours that may not interact often, but due to the reciprocity imperative (i.e., “you watch my back, and I’ll watch yours”) will more readily make themselves available for various forms of support when required. Compounding the various sources of social support (family, friends, neighbours, on-line communities, and wider community interest groups) with the various stages of life of the individual also adds to the complexity of gauging the effectiveness of social networks (Lubben and Gironde, 2004). These measurement and outcome challenges raise a number of research questions.

Research questions:

- What are the links between commonly used metrics of informal networks (size, density, relationships) and their specific outcomes (types of support provided)?
 - Does the size of a network really matter?
 - How can the quality of connections be gauged?
 - To what extent does the quality of support depend on the various elements within the structural and interactional dimensions of informal networks?
- What are the links between various forms of informal networks and specific outcomes?
- How do different types of informal social networks help support individuals during different stages of the life course?

The informal-formal continuum

The characteristics of informal and formal structures outlined in Table 1 also shed some light on potential policy research questions. Recently, much emphasis has been placed on the importance of collaboration between organizations in order to address some of today’s complex problems. However, the characteristics of informal structures – including their dynamism,

spontaneity, grassroots-orientation, flat and fluid structure and adaptability – appear to be better suited to addressing these problems compared to formal organizations, regardless of size, that tend to be more siloed, top-down and hierarchical. As a result, organizations across sectors are joining-up in order to access the dynamism, fluidity and adaptability required in coming up with solutions that address the root causes of these problems. At the same time, public perceptions of traditional Canadian institutions, especially governments, is on the decline. With the emergence of social networking sites, Canadians are increasingly taking advantage of new informal forums for expression and action. Up to a point, on-line tools may be breaking down (or at least adding to) traditional notions of networks based solely on proximity, with new technology being used to further enhance face-to-face networks of interest and support – for example, the social benefits that can result from meet-up.com's "Random Acts of Kindness" and other social support groups (Meetup, 2010).

Research questions:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of informal networks compared to formal organizations (and how are these shifting)?
 - What can siloed organizational structures learn from boundary-less informal networks?
- What do increasingly collaborative structures (including those that blur boundaries between organizations) mean for our public institutions?
- What are emerging forms of informal social networks (especially taking into account advances in social media)?
 - How can the quality and outcomes of support provided by virtual networks effectively be measured, especially given their non-organized nature?
- How do informal networks evolve into formal structures?
 - What are the reasons?
 - What is gained and lost when this happens?
 - How will new forms of on-line social networks evolve (if they do at all) into formal organizations?

Informal-formal interplay

While this paper has provided limited examples of interplay between informal networks and formal structures, research on this dynamic remains sparse. More questions than answers emerge.

Research questions:

- How do informal networks help support the work and objectives of formal organizations?
- How do formal organizations foster informal networks (in terms of structural, interactional and functional dimensions)?
 - What are the benefits and incentives to formal organizations in supporting the development of the informal networks?
- What is the role, if any, of various social actors in fostering informal networks? In particular, what role can be played by public policies in fostering informal networks?

- Which specific policy levers help such networks emerge or make existing networks more effective?
- To what extent do public policies in other areas inadvertently enhance or reduce the capacity of individuals to work within informal networks in addressing their life-course needs?
- Which interventions (of community sector organizations, businesses or governments) are the most likely to help vulnerable populations develop informal structures of support alongside formal ones?
 - Are particular populations or places (e.g., rural areas vs. urban centres) more (or less) amenable to successful interventions?
- How does the durability of networks formed with the support of formal entities compare to those formed spontaneously or organically based on need and interest?
- How do formal organizations together with informal networks help individuals develop their financial, human, physical and social capital?
- What is the potential to enhance the mutually reinforcing dynamic between informal networks and formal organizations?

Newcomer networks

The analysis of informal networks among newcomers also raises certain questions. Evidence suggests that both bonding and bridging networks are important for newcomers, as they get accustomed to their new life in Canada. Informal networks may provide emotional support through bonding capital in terms of companionship, familiarity and a sense of stability between members from similar cultures, as well as through bridging capital that can foster understanding between cultures. The main question is to what extent do different forms of informal social networks perpetuate – or help people get out of – difficult situations.

Research questions:

- To what extent do ethno-cultural networks and organizations have bonding and bridging elements?
 - Do informal networks formed within ethno-linguistic groups or interactions with strictly ethno-cultural organizations (strictly bonding capital) inhibit the pace of language acquisition, career advancement or the social integration of newcomers? To what extent?
- To what comparative extent do bonding and bridging networks reinforce or inhibit language skills, career advancement and cultural integration?
 - How do they provide support in terms of experiential advice, suggestions and information on employment and government and community programs?
 - How are the values and norms different between informal bonding and bridging social networks?
- What is the policy space in the development of bonding and bridging capital?

The category of admission to Canada may also have an impact on the types of social support networks they can draw upon. For example, those admitted under the “family” category either at the early or later stages of life are likely to have more family supports than those admitted under the “economic” category, though the latter have comparatively more friends upon entry (Xue, 2007). In this sense, the policy based on category of admission seems to have an impact on

the pattern of social support networks among immigrants, and the resulting “portfolios” of bonding and bridging social capital. Further research into this area may be useful to determine the intended and unintended impacts of immigration policies in building various forms of informal social networks. Moreover, the social class of newcomers (i.e., wealth vs. poverty) may also shed some light on the various types of informal support they can access.

Research questions:

- Do the types of social networks newcomers develop vary by categories of admission (i.e., family, economic, refugee, etc.), and how?
- Would a wealthy newcomer have better access to strong informal networks compared to a poor newcomer?
 - What are the similarities and differences?

When newcomers come to Canada, the structural, interactional and functional dimensions of their networks may be quite different when compared to those of the Canadian-born population or those in their home countries.

Research questions:

- What are the potential impacts of a newcomer’s country-of-origin network in attracting further immigrants to Canada and developing business ties between Canada and their home country (i.e., “split network” benefits)?
- In an era of circular migration, how do networks within both an individual’s country of origin and residence contribute to their social and economic well-being?
 - What impacts do country-of-origin networks have on potential contributions of returning emigrants at later stages of life?
- What are the interactions between an individual’s country-of-origin and country-of-residence networks?
- What are the differences between various types of ethno-cultural networks?
 - Do newcomers from a certain country access networks differently compared to newcomers from other countries?
 - What are the links between different types of networks, place and the economic and/or social outcomes of integration?

Conclusion

In describing his Theory on Relativity, Albert Einstein stated that particles interact differently according to time and space. The same could be said for the interaction between people. Informal networks vary in size, nature, dynamics and purpose and develop differently according to the members involved, their life stage and the place in which they live. Although difficult to identify and evaluate, informal networks are central to defining who we are and how we interact with our world – much like invisible particles are vital to the material world. How we understand social networks, the support they provide, and their interaction with more measurable structures in society is important to better help individuals manage the challenges and opportunities associated with life-course transitions.

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