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Networked Migrants and De-Networked Policies—Examining the Nexus of Migration Regimes and Experiences Through a Relational Lens

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on theory and practice of social network research, this article examines the nexus between networked migration experiences and de-networked migration policies in countries of arrival. Building upon classical network scholarship and our own contributions to qualitative network research, we show how migration policies in Europe tend to ignore or actively oppose the relational, meso-level of migrants' experience. This includes, for example, kinship networks, involving narrow definitions of family and 'worthiness'. Such approaches, increasingly enforced by governments across the whole policy spectrum, hinder migrants' social trajectories but also push them to find (networked) ways to resist and circumvent policy regimes, as demonstrated through our case studies of Sub-Saharan forced migrants in Italy and Afghans in London. By taking a network lens—and working at the intersection of Relational Sociology and Policy Analysis—our argument goes beyond the agency-versus-structure binary, exploring the mediating meso-level of relationality.

1 | Introduction

Drawing on theory and practice of social network research this article examines the nexus between networked migration experiences and de-networked migration policies in countries of arrival. Our starting point is an examination of how migration policies in Europe tend to ignore or actively oppose the relational, meso-level of migration. This includes—but it is not limited to—family networks, often affected by very narrow definitions of kinship and worthiness (Oliver 2013; Phillimore et al. 2023). More generally, the idea of 'migrant' seemingly underpinning policy thinking often resembles a highly atomised 'homo economicus', bereft of any social sphere. Such 'de-networked' (D'Angelo 2026) approaches, enforced by governments across the whole political spectrum, hinder migrants' agency and their social trajectories

but also push them to find (networked) ways to resist and react to policy regimes (Ryan et al. 2024). This is increasingly the case for all types of migrants, though the most extreme policy approaches tend to coalesce—at least at first—around forced migration and irregularised migration, two categories frequently conflated in political discourses. Building on this analysis, we then consider how forced migrants operate precisely at the meso-level to exert agency and access social support, striving to circumvent immigration regimes and policy restrictions. After an overall analysis and critical engagement with the wider literature, we exemplify our argument by turning to our own empirical research, with two case studies on, first, the networked experiences of African forced migrants in Italy, living at the margin of the national reception system, and, second, on how resettled Afghans in the United Kingdom engage with their globally scattered kinship ties.

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With this article, taking a network lens—and working at the intersection of Relational Sociology and Policy Analysis—we contribute new, highly contextual insights into diverse notions of social ties and their role in underpinning migrants' agency within increasingly hostile policy structures. Hence, our argument goes beyond the agency-versus-structure binary, exploring the mediating meso-level of relationality. Here, we are especially inspired by the work of E. Bott (1957). She observed how networks of inter-personal relationships to family and friends operate at the meso-level, between individual actors and wider social structures, in ways that influence and support particular forms of action. Bott's analysis has proven influential and underlines a key appeal of a social network perspective: overcoming 'methodological individualism' (Wellman 1979), whilst at the same time, avoiding structural determinism (Knox et al. 2006, 124). By definition, the fundamental concept of social networks analysis (SNA) is relationality (Borgatti and Ofem 2010, 19). This is not simply about studying relationships per se, but also—as we illustrate later—about understanding the impact and consequences of these social ties (Ryan et al. 2015). By revisiting classical network scholarship and migration literature (Bott 1957; Wellman 1979; Boyd 1989; Massey 1990), as well as our own previous work, in this article, we now consider how adopting qualitative SNA and exploring network stories (Ryan 2021) can offer new insights into how migrants and refugees draw on relationality, at the meso-level, to navigate and resist macro structural contexts, including immigration regimes.

2 | The Boomerang Effect of 'De-Networked' Policies

As M. Boyd (1989) noted in her seminal paper—echoing Bott's earlier observation—social networks 'mediate between individual actors and larger structural forces' (p. 661). In practice, applying a network lens to migration provides us with an alternative, linking perspective to two dichotomous, simplistic approaches often used to explain migration processes. On the one hand, we find 'over-socialised' deterministic theories, that is, those that see migrants as passive actors at the receiving end of global geo-political and economic forces. On the other, there are 'under-socialised' theories, whereby migrants' trajectories, decision-making and processes of settlement seem to respond only to individual plans and carefully calculated interests (for a critique of this, see, e.g.: Boyd 1989; Ryan and D'Angelo 2018). Indeed, many policy decisions recorded across Europe over the past decades seem to sit at one of these two extremes, being framed either as barriers against faceless migration 'flows' or as detached mechanisms of reward and deterrence targeting individual migrants deemed as deserving or undeserving. Here, we can think of the increasingly militarised approach to border controls (so-called Fortress Europe), tightly coupled with an externalisation of migration management; of the many 'point-based systems' implemented by most governments to filter migrants based on background and skills; of the 'Blue Card' scheme introduced at EU level to entice (not very successfully) skilled workers; or, most recently, the post-Brexit British policies such as those that prevent international students from bringing their dependents into the country.

The fact that migration policies in Europe—and beyond—tend to ignore or actively oppose the relational, meso-level of migration and of migrants' experience (D'Angelo 2026) is precisely why migration policies end up 'failing' or producing unexpected results (Castles 2004; Massey 1990). In turn, this adds to public discontent (however instrumental) around migration and, in a vicious circle, often ends up producing even more extreme policy stances. This was noted by Massey (1990) regarding migration across the Mexican border already in the 1990s and by Castles (2004) reflecting on the historical experiences of migration across Europe. The most classic example is Germany's 'guest worker' policy which treated overseas, mainly Turkish, migrants as atomised temporary workers, whilst ignoring their familial ties and wider networks. As highlighted by Rogers (2019), these 'guests' are people with social and emotional needs, whose processes of relationship-building can result in shifts from temporary to long-term, even permanent, migration. More recently, De Haas (2024, 328) highlighted how—in relation to Brexit—'the idea that higher costs and risks will reduce immigration may seem logical at first, but it is not how migration works in reality.' In fact, immigration restrictions are not just ineffective but often trigger migrants' responses in ways that end up producing more immigration and of a more long-term or settled nature, as migrants try to circumvent policies 'finding loopholes, adjusting the timing of their migration or deploying new ways of crossing borders' (De Haas 2024).

Throughout this article, we argue that it is precisely the development of barriers, stratification of rights and policies of network hostility—both at the border and within countries (Oliver 2013; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019)—that push migrants to rely even more on personal ties, in a sort of boomerang effect.

At a practical level, migrants can use networks to enable border crossing, both regularly and irregularly (D'Angelo 2021), and to 'play the game' of migration rules', for example, pragmatically shifting from temporary to permanent settlement (Massey et al. 1993). Within the country of arrival, networks help navigate systems of internal bordering, enable access to statutory and informal sources of support and facilitate regular and 'irregular' employment (Elrick and Ciobanu 2009; D'Avino 2025). As we discuss in the next section, in contexts of so-called welfare chauvinism (Guentner et al. 2016), migrants turn to their networks to access information, to unlock social support and to navigate and resist policy restrictions and the negative impacts of these policies at the personal, relational and societal level. At the same time, migrant networks often involve the maintenance of kinship ties transnationally, across numerous immigration regimes (Ryan et al. 2024).

Overall, migration policies can be seen as the often hostile 'structure' within which migrants exercise their agency and strive to fulfil their capabilities (De Haas 2021) and aspirations. As shown in our case studies below, this exercise of agency does not happen so much at the individual level but rather through relational structures and processes, with the activation, development and redevelopment of social ties across time and space. Hence, we argue that networks allow elastic responses to policy changes; although, as we will discuss later in the article, the way and extent to which policy regulations are taken into account as part of migration strategies varies contextually.

A review of different academic contributions—including both SNA in the strict sense, as well as wider literature on migrants' networks (Bilecen and Lubbers 2026)—reveals how social networks are not on their own sufficient to explain migration processes nor to fully overcome policy restrictions. Indeed, recent scholarship has highlighted that a holistic analysis of migration systems and processes must reconcile issues of structure and agency (De Haas 2010, 2021), encompassing both state interventions aimed at regulating human mobility (Sørensen 2012) and the personal networks of migrants: locally, transnationally and across time (Ryan and D'Angelo 2018). These two dimensions interact with complex mechanisms of influence (Collyer 2005), adaptation (Elrick and Ciobanu 2009) and elasticity (Beine 2016). Although this has been acknowledged conceptually, there is a lack of implementation at the level of specific, grounded case studies. Crucially, whilst issues of 'relations' and meso-level analysis are often mentioned, academic research at the intersection of policy and migration tends not to engage with the conceptual and methodological toolkit of social network research.

3 | Social Networks of Support: Beyond Structure and Agency

Strict immigration regimes are usually compounded by welfare policy, employment policy and access to public services. Major examples of this include the stringent formal requirements for the recognition of the status of 'resident', often linked to the ability to obtain and maintain working visas or to access local welfare (see, e.g., the extensive work of Gargiulo (2021, 2024) on Italian municipalities). Also in this respect, policy approaches across most of Europe tend to be eminently 'de-networked'. Again, the model is one where migrants are seen as individuals in isolation, with personal ties disregarded or actively discouraged.

As discussed elsewhere (D'Angelo 2023), the concrete effect of strict welfare conditionality is not necessarily a reduction in arrivals, but rather the development of a system of stratified rights (Morris 2003) and formalised inequalities. Furthermore, as highlighted by MacAuslan and Sabates-Wheeler (2011, 61) 'being entitled or having a right to social provision does not guarantee that it is actually received.' Rather, accessing social and public services relates to the capacity of individuals to leverage opportunities using knowledge, connections and an ability to navigate the formal state system. Thus, low-income or socially excluded migrants can end up having poorer access to formal social provision, further exacerbating inequalities at the intersection of ethnicity, nationality, gender, age and class (Bygnes 2021). This is particularly the case for forced migrants, who in many migration regimes face significant restrictions regarding their welfare entitlements[1] and their ability to access public services and employment.

Because of unequal access, migrants are compelled to seek social support from a range of alternative sources, including charities, formal and informal migrant organisations and, more generally, their personal and social connections, both locally and transnationally. More generally, migrants' social networks are mechanisms to activate alternative resources as well as means of resistance to structures of 'welfare chauvinism' (Balch and Balabanova 2016) and internal bordering (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

In this respect, migration studies have often juxtaposed the concept of social networks with that of 'social capital', that is, the ability to access and utilise social and practical resources through social ties. Migrants' social capital can emerge from family and friendship networks, co-ethnic/co-national networks but also strong and weak ties with people of other backgrounds (Ryan et al. 2015). These networks can be underpinned by processes of trust, belonging, solidarity and mutuality—facilitating the flow of different kinds of resources.

The classic work of Barry Wellman provides a useful framework for understanding how particular social ties may generate specific resources. Based upon his pioneering, longitudinal study of East Yorkers, in a suburb of Toronto, Wellman found that, far from being atomised, most people had numerous, differentiated ties of varying strengths that performed different roles offering a range of support, advice and information. Thus, it is useful to think of the different ties in someone's network as 'boutiques not general stores' (Wellman 1979). In other words, particular relationships may offer specialist sorts of support such as, on the one hand, the enduring emotional support provided by one's mother or sister versus, on the other hand, information about job opportunities provided by a casual or fleeting acquaintance. This is why, beyond any generalised notion of 'a network', it is necessary to examine the specific resources circulating among particular social ties (Ryan 2011, 2023). Applying a social networks framework is about discerning what roles particular relationships fulfil, what resources 'flow' through them and how these social ties influence each other. In the case studies below, we use rich qualitative social network research to generate insights into the variety, complexity and dynamism of social ties and the resources available therein.

In this sense agency—including migrants' agency—is inherently relational: it is made possible by social ties and enacted through the social support constituted by these ties. At the same time, to understand migrants' agency, we need to explore the meso-level of relationality that sits between micro-level individuals and macro social structures. As Crossley notes, we cannot separate networks from discussions of relationality and vice versa: 'Actors are always in-relation to one another… their actions are always interactions' (2015, 68).

In the most positive instances, social networks allow people to cope with personal challenges, for example, by accessing informal services such as unpaid childcare, by dealing with short-term poverty through material resources, by acquiring information about work opportunities and by identifying support organisations (Lubbers 2022). Social networks are also a source of emotional support which can sustain mental well-being and enhance people's reactive capacity in the face of adverse socioeconomic and personal circumstances (D'Avino 2025). Nonetheless, social networks cannot be simply equated with social capital, and it cannot be assumed that resources inhering in networks will be shared with others. Indeed, migrants may experience difficulties in trying to access vertical social connections to resource-rich networks (Ryan 2011). Especially for those in precarious circumstances, such as forced migrants, the networks they rely upon and can most easily access may be defined by horizontal ties to those in equally challenging situations. Forging weak ties or vertical ties to those with more resources can take considerable time and effort

(Ryan 2023). Moreover, there are risks associated with networks such as perceived moral obligation and, in some cases, 'burdens of reciprocity' (Offer 2012) as well as the potential for exploitation (Del Real 2019).

Social networks are also crucial in the creation and maintenance of 'transnational social fields' (Lubbers et al. 2018). As noted in the classic work of Glick Schiller et al. (1992), it is important to avoid methodological nationalism and adopt a transnational lens in order to understand how migrants are connected to social networks beyond national borders. Transnational lives—as shown by Scheibelhofer (2022, 161)—can lead to 'the emergence of various forms of cross-border social membership,' with migrants' 'simultaneous use of social security arrangements in their sending and receiving countries.' However, also in this case, national policies tend to ignore—or to openly oppose—transnational ties (Ryan et al. 2024), for example, restricting family reunion, travel and visits—often on grounds of racialisation and class (Dickson et al. 2023; Phillimore et al. 2023)—and hence limiting the ability to live family lives across border. Of course, some migrants enjoy privileged mobility. They can travel internationally for work and to engage in economic and social activities on a regular basis, to maintain family and friendship networks and to exchange money or other resources across countries—all processes which, in recent decades, have been facilitated by technological developments (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). Still, we need to pay attention to the impact of 'immobility regimes' (Brandhorst et al. 2020) and on how the rights of movement are circumscribed and curtailed for increasingly large numbers of people around the world.

3.1 | Exploring the Migration-Policy Nexus Through Network Stories

Having discussed the relevant literature on migrants' networks and migration policies in some detail, in the next sections we further examine their nexus by presenting our empirical data from two highly significant migration processes into Europe, both of which have attracted significant controversy in relation to policy approaches and their inadequacies.

The first case study is informed by D'Angelo and colleagues' research on Mediterranean migration. This example synthesises the experience of some Sub-Saharan African migrants in Italy, showing how these mostly very young people operate at the meso-level of relationality to navigate and often actively avoid Italy's system of refugee reception and the hostility of formal policy frameworks. These insights are drawn from the [project name and details removed for anonymisation], which included 20 narrative interviews with migrants across Italy.[2] The methodological approach—including issues of access and ethics—was developed in partnership with local NGOs and stakeholders, taking into consideration the level of vulnerability and liminality experienced by participants, the challenges of building trust in such circumstances (D'Angelo 2019) and the influence of the policy context in shaping narratives about refugee journeys. The interview guides covered the various stages of the refugee experience, from the decision to leave 'home' all the way through the African continent to Italy, and included a focus on expectations and plans for the future. At all stages, as discussed in the next

sections, issues of relationality and network activations emerged quite consistently as a key thread in these migrant stories.

The second case study is informed by Ryan's work (along with colleagues) on resettled Afghans in the United Kingdom. As part of that body of work, 59 Afghans were interviewed in London, including follow-up interviews, during 2022–2024, resulting in a dataset of over 100 rich qualitative encounters (for more details, see Ryan et al. 2024). Social networks formed a key focus of the interviews, as participants were asked about their interpersonal relationships both transnationally and locally. Beyond simply asking about who they know, inspired by Wellman's work, the interviews explored the meaning of relationships and what resources were flowing between social ties. In particular, the research analysed how the support available within networks impacted upon how immigration regimes and regulations were experienced and resisted.

These case studies look in some detail at the experience of particular individuals, allowing us to consider, more generally, how migrants navigate policy restrictions on movement, settlement, social integration and family reunion, as they attempt to sustain their personal relationships both locally and transnationally. Of course, we are not attempting to generalise from such specific examples, and indeed we acknowledge the major role played by contextual factors. Nonetheless, these case studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of migrants at the receiving ends of policy interventions that, in theory, are meant to give them sanctuary but that in practice—by their very 'de-networked' nature—create hostile macro- and micro-level structures, compelling migrants to resort to relationality as a way out.

In both cases, we drew on rich qualitative data to explore migrants' social network stories (Ryan 2021). Irrespective of the data collection techniques, it is important that qualitative network research consciously and actively focuses on the element of relationality in the interpretation of migrants' stories. By reflectively examining how migrants talk about their social ties, we can better understand the rich array of enduring and fleeting ties that make up their networks as well as the resources embedded into these ties and that can actually be mobilised to navigate particular structures and institutions. In so doing, we seek to debunk some of the deterministic—and highly unreflective—assumptions which have characterised mainstream political narratives and policy decisions of the past few years (Ryan 2021). In other words, we argue that taking this qualitative relational approach and focusing upon the meso-level of relationality has the potential to move forward scholarly debates and inform new policy agendas.

4 | Case Study 1—Migration and Reception Policies in the Mediterranean: Fighting Alienation by Seeking Relationality

The so-called Mediterranean 'Refugee Crisis' has represented a turning point in recent European history and in the policy and academic debates about migration. The increase in sea crossings following the Arab Spring and the collapse of the regimes in Syria and Libya reached its peak in 2015, when over 1 million

arrivals were recorded in Southern Europe (D'Angelo 2019). Over the following decades, the largest proportion of disembarkations took place in Italy and particularly in the island region of Sicily, though quite often people then proceeded to move towards other regions and countries. Over this period of time, the focus of EU-level discussions and policy interventions has been very much on border controls and externalisation, alongside empty announcements of large-scale relocation and repatriation schemes. Again, migration is seen—and managed—as a faceless stream, driven by geopolitical forces and to be physically contained, redirected and micro-managed.

Using a social network lens to examine the experiences of individual migrants, however, can help us reveal each of these journeys across the Mediterranean as a unique and fluid process, driven by the continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of meso-level relations through space and time. In this sense—as shown elsewhere (D'Angelo 2021)—migration routes can be understood as 'networks on the move', with every step informed by social encounters and interactions. These rich and complex networks often include the activation of family ties—both locally and transnationally—in order to mobilise social as well as economic capital. At the same time, as journeys from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe can take several years, decision-making along the way is significantly affected by ties established in very serendipitous and fleeting manners. These include fellow migrants, local residents and public officials as well as smugglers and traffickers (i.e., the formal, informal and illegal components of the migration industry). In all of this, the role of national boundaries—both as barriers to movement and as a frame for policy—emerges as much less prominent and meaningful than public and political discourses would suggest.

Within the wider context of the 'Refugee Crisis', the 'crucial issue of reception, accommodation and integration' was at the centre of EU policy debates only in the very initial stages and steadily moved into the background (D'Angelo 2019) as EU institutions shifted towards ever more restrictionist stances. This may appear quite paradoxical considering that the rates of refugee status recognition across Europe have been consistently high (despite media narratives focusing on 'bogus asylum seekers'). Still, the reception of newly arrived migrants and asylum seekers is largely considered, at best, a local issue. Likewise, academic research looking at experiences of reception and settlement has been more limited than that looking at migrants' journeys per se and, also in this case, with a focus on the macro level of policy regulations or the very micro-level of individual migrants, often depicted as highly vulnerable and depleted of agency and relationality. The insights presented in this section draw from empirical research[3] with migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa who eventually reached Sicily (mostly after being intercepted by 'search and rescue' operations at sea) and provide some counterbalance to these narratives, with an emphasis on the meso-level, relational dimension of these experiences.

As far as Italy is concerned, the national system of reception and support for new arrivals has been characterised by high levels of complexity, multi-agency interactions, internal inconsistencies, regional variations and, at all these levels, countless changes and restructuring over time.[4] This 'can be baffling to an external observer and is indeed quite confusing even for many of those working on the ground' (D'Angelo 2019); for migrants with very limited local knowledge and contacts, it can be utterly alienating. In practice, the wider picture of migrants' reception in Italy is permeated by processes of 'containment, confinement and dispersal' (Campesi 2018) in various types of reception and accommodation centres (including poorly adapted run-down hotels). Many of these structures are characterised by inadequate living conditions and inadequate service provision (D'Angelo et al. 2017) and are often located in remote rural areas with limited or no connection to the nearest town or village. The location and highly regulated organisation of these centres end up 'entrapping' migrants, generating—as Kersch and Mishtal (2016) observed—'a need for ever-growing involvement of non-governmental organisations' for the provision of the most basic provisions (from healthcare to legal support). In this context, as observed by Palillo (2022), 'day-to-day interactions between refugees and Sicilians in the locale' become very limited, intersecting with racist and patriarchal social dynamics and 'resulting in the placement of refugee men at the bottom of any hierarchy of deservingness.'

In several of the [project name] interviews, it is precisely the remoteness and isolation of official reception centres—more than the poor living conditions—that was highlighted by young migrants as a main reason of concern. As pointed out by many, this made it near impossible to establish social networks independently, to the extent that some young migrants preferred to sleep rough or squat in urban areas, living quite uncomfortably and disengaging from the formal process of refugee support, but at least being able to interact with other people and with a glimpse of opportunities of more empowering socialisation and informal information networks.

Malik (Senegal, male, 22), for example, was interviewed in a formal reception centre but recalled with some nostalgia the initial months after his arrival, when he used to sleep in a derelict occupied building in the suburbs of Palermo (Sicily's main city) together with some other migrants he met locally.

> It wasn't very nice in there; but it was good because we could go around the city all day, we could meet people; and some people, like in the shops, they would know us and say 'hi!'. And then after a few days they see you are always there and maybe they give you some work to do. And then you meet other people like that you know. You become somebody in the city.

By slowly embedding themselves in serendipitous social encounters—often at the margin of society and legality—these migrants could forge weak ties and slowly access economic opportunities (albeit irregular). Many interviews—and wider evidence from the field—reveal how even highly precarious and exploitative jobs and economic transactions could become the basis to access more regular employment and so, in the long run, increased the chances of securing some sort of legal status. Thus, paradoxically, it is by disengaging from formal processes of reception—as defined by national policy and its local implementation—that many migrants managed to shift their status from irregular to regular. Again, failure of policies (Castles 2004) leading to their circumvention and to status shifts.

The networked stories of these young people often focus on leisurely social interactions with local youth. Considerations about these dimensions are completely absent not just from policy but, in most cases, from the practice of official reception mechanisms. Still, these spaces of socialisation were highlighted as absolutely crucial to cope with mental health issues as well as to re-develop one's sense of social identity and individual agency. In this regard, Malik highlighted how by keeping outside of the state-run reception centres, he had the opportunity to go to the beach and hang out with some Italian girls. Similarly, Thomas (Guinea, male, 18) talked quite fondly about some Italian friends he managed to make whilst wandering around the city.

> Most of them are females, but it is not a big deal, this is just friendship. […] They help me to improve my language skills, with them I can speak Italian […] Sometimes we chat on Facebook or on Whatsapp, sometimes we organise meetings to see each other; we sit on a bench and we discuss. […] Most of the time they are curious about our life and ask us questions; in return we ask them questions and they tell us more about the Italian culture.

Very much unlike the paternalistic and infantilising interactions which characterise the reception centres (De Leo et al. 2022), these relationships with local young people are presented as interactions between equals, characterised by mutual exchange of information and emotional support, rather than hierarchical and disempowering dependency.

The ability of developing and operating within social networks based on trust and some sense of individual recognition is a key factor in achieving a sense of agency and is often presented as a driving factor in making long-term decisions about settlement or further movement—to paraphrase Crossley (2015), 'action as interaction'. Such decisions often happen at the intersection of multi-sited networks, including conversation with local peers as well as friends or family members based in other parts of Italy or abroad.

Several participants saw informal relations as more effective than the formal mechanisms of employment, and some migrants decided to make Sicily their home (at least in the short term) precisely because of the high level of informality of the labour market and of 'a local culture perceived as giving a primary role to personal networks, both among locals and new arrivals, in order to get by' (D'Angelo 2021). Indeed, in some stories, it appears that local, informal and recently developed networks were given the precedence even over family networks, which were not necessarily characterised by mutual trust. Amira (female, Somalia, 19), for example, recalled the difficult telephone interactions with her uncle, who lived in Sweden and with whom she had previously fallen out because of some economic issues.

> He is my father's cousin. He called me from Sweden and said: 'Are you still in Italy?' – 'Yes, what can I do?' – 'Come to visit me; what are you doing all alone there?' […] But I told him he was never a good uncle to me and never helped me before when I needed it.

Instead, Amira preferred to remain in Sicily, where she had developed some good friendship networks with fellow migrants—ties with people 'like herself', not necessarily in terms of ethnicity, but because of strong shared experiences.

Overall, the dynamic and resourced experiences of these young people—at the periphery or in opposition to 'de-networked' policy frameworks—provide a powerful counternarrative about the needs and expectations of forced migrants, the causes of their vulnerability, and the potential they have to exercise agency through relationality. The policy system of reception, nominally established to support but informed by ideas of 'sanctuary' which assume lack of agency, self-sufficiency and ability to independently find one's place in the local community (see, e.g., Zetter 1999; Lamba and Krahn 2003), can sometimes be experienced as an additional barrier to genuine relationality and personal development. Thus, personal ties, including those developed locally and serendipitously with local residents and fellow migrants, become the preferred source of social support and a meso-level space to circumvent the restrictions of welfare and labour market structures and better fulfil one's aspirations (Massey et al. 1993; De Haas 2021).

5 | Case Study 2—Afghans in United Kingdom: Navigating Social Ties Across Multiple International Borders

In recent years, especially since the return of the Taliban, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of Afghans seeking refuge in many countries around the world, including the United Kingdom. According to the UNHCR,[5] there are approximately 6.4 million Afghan refugees around the world, accounting for one of the largest protracted refugee situations. The majority of these, over 4 million, are currently located in Iran. Between 2021, when the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, and 2025, over 37,000[6] Afghans were relocated and resettled in the United Kingdom through two government programmes. The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) aimed to provide relocation and assistance to people who worked with or for the UK government and/or UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan. The Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) sought to relocate Afghan people most at risk of human rights abuse, such as women and girls, members of ethnic and religious minority groups, as well as LGBT+ individuals. Those evacuated under the ARAP and ACRS usually came only as 'nuclear' families—husband, wife and dependent children. Thus, several families had to leave behind adult children (over 18), elderly parents and other relatives (Ryan et al. 2024). As well as those arriving through these 'safe and legal routes', Afghans also made up 19% (5872) of all 'irregularised' arrivals in the 12 months to April 2024, making Afghans the top nationality among small boat arrivals in 2023 (Migration Observatory, Oct. 2024). For Afghans who arrive in the UK alone and are eventually given asylum, bringing relatives to join them, via family reunification, is slow, difficult and expensive.

In their on-going longitudinal research with recently resettled Afghans in London, Ryan et al. (2024) found that many participants were worried about the well-being of these relatives, but UK authorities were reluctant to support applications to reunite with

extended families. Participants were concerned about the safety of siblings, especially brothers who had worked for the military and were now hiding from the Taliban. Others had fled to Pakistan and Iran and were waiting there for news on reunification to the United Kingdom. Moreover, in 2025, all refugee family reunions were paused by the UK Labour Government[7] leaving thousands of Afghans and other refugees in limbo.

Forced migration can result in network rupture. Different asylum pathways may mean that networks are 'spatially fragmented' (Heidinger 2024), scattered over many countries and indeed continents, resulting in what has been described as 'torn nets' (Perino and Eve 2017). However, that is not to suggest that refugees are passive in the face of such immobility regimes. Rather than a fixed, static state, network rupture can be understood as dynamic over time. Research has shown examples of how people actively attempt to circumvent forced separation in order to maintain geographically dispersed networks (Ryan et al. 2024). For example, they do so through digital technology (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016; Alencar 2020) and, when resources permit, by arranging in-person visits to third countries for family reunions (Ryan et al. 2024). In so doing, they have to navigate multiple immigration regimes within Global North and Global South countries (Czaika et al. 2017). Hence, whilst recognising how Afghan networks have been denied by immigration authorities across many countries, it is important to understand how they assert agency to reclaim these ties, including transnationally, and rebuild 'torn nets'. We now focus on one detailed case study, Liloma, a young Afghan woman. She is selected because of opportunities to repeatedly interview and keep in regular contact over 3 years. Hence, Ryan and colleagues have generated rich qualitative data on Liloma's dynamic personal networks.

Liloma, who worked as a women's rights activist in Afghanistan, was evacuated alone to the United Kingdom in 2021. Years earlier, she had separated from her husband, but under Afghan law, he could prevent Liloma from taking their young son out of the country. So, when she was evacuated, she had to leave her son behind. For some time, the ex-husband refused to allow the child to join his mother, but, as the situation inside the country deteriorated, he finally agreed that their son would have better opportunities in the United Kingdom. Liloma then started the protracted process of trying to bring her child to the United Kingdom, but all her applications to the Home Office to obtain a visa were refused: 'they told me, we can't do anything for now. And you have to wait. I don't know how long more.' Class factors are also relevant as Liloma had only a temporary job and so could not afford suitable accommodation to live with a young child. Hence, she was unable to demonstrate her ability to financially support a dependent. Analysing her story through a network lens reveals intersecting power dynamics. Even at a distance, her husband exerted gendered power by refusing permission for their child to leave Afghanistan. Furthermore, at the macro level, in the United Kingdom, immobility regimes prevented Liloma from being reunited with her closest relative, her young child. Thus, her experiences were circumscribed by her gender, age, class, nationality and status, as a young Afghan female refugee.

As noted earlier, forced migration can result in scattered and fragmented ties as people flee to various countries. Liloma's sister and brother-in-law fled to Iran due to death threats from the Taliban. However, the situation for refugees in Iran is far from ideal (Crawley and Kaytaz 2022). Her sister was desperate to leave Iran, but Liloma was unable to help her: 'They can't live in Iran because of the Iran situation. I don't know. And they always ask if you can help to just come to other countries to be safe. But... I can't do anything for them.' People may feel 'helpless' when they cannot meet requests for support from transnational relatives in difficult situations (Brandhorst. et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, one of Liloma's other sisters and her husband have been offered asylum in a South American country:

> when I talked with them, they said yeah, it's better than Iran and Afghanistan, of course… they are safe and no one tells them to go out from our country or torture them (Liloma).

As the sisters have fled the country, their elderly mother is left in Afghanistan, with other relatives, and Liloma worries about her well-being but lacks the economic resources to provide any assistance. She misses the emotional care and support she would receive from her mother and sisters. But lack of reliable internet connectivity means she cannot talk to them when she is feeling sad and lonely: 'I always miss that because I can't talk with them every time that I want or they can't talk with me every time that they want… they don't have any Internet connection.'

In addition to her far-flung relatives, Liloma's partner is an Afghan refugee in another European country. Despite living there for several years and being employed, he still cannot travel outside the country. Liloma has not seen him since they both left Afghanistan, but, despite their relative geographical proximity within Europe, their ability to meet is again circumscribed by immobility regimes. Liloma has the right to travel, as a resettled refugee in the United Kingdom; however, she needs a visa to enter that other European country. Her application was initially refused. She persisted, appealed and was eventually given a 10-day visa. The strict time limit on her visa made her anxious in case the flight was cancelled or delayed, and she accidentally overstayed her allocated days.

Although Liloma arrived in the United Kingdom alone, her network story illustrates close connections to a far-flung transnational network in Afghanistan, Iran, Europe and South America. This was not unusual amongst the Afghan research participants (Ryan et al. 2024). Her network is formed of close kinship ties—child, partner, mother, siblings. These relationships are a central aspect of her life as she actively engages in regular communication and care work. They provide her with emotional support and solace but also are a source of worry and pressure as she struggles to meet needs and expectations. Thus, her network has positive but also some negative aspects. Moreover, policymakers and immigration authorities, by treating Liloma as a single, individual migrant and refusing to recognise her intimate network, place severe barriers on reunification. The UK authorities refuse a visa to her son. The authorities in another European country limit her ability to visit her partner. Meanwhile, within the Middle East, her sister experiences discrimination as an Afghan refugee in Iran but cannot return to her homeland because of the very real threat

from the Taliban regime. Liloma cannot visit Afghanistan to see her mother because of fear of arrest.

Applying Wellman's network conceptualisation, it is clear that Liloma's social ties form 'boutiques' rather than a general store. Analysing her rich network stories, related over several interview encounters, provides insights into the complexity and dynamism of relationality and the varied types of support that flow through specific ties. Thus, far from being an atomised, individual refugee in the United Kingdom, who is trying to re-build her life in a new context, Liloma is a mother, ex-wife, partner, sister and daughter, who is emotionally embroiled in many relationships across various jurisdictions. Her partner is a source of emotional support. Liloma worries about her mother in Afghanistan and her sister in Iran but does not have the resources to provide practical assistance. Her ex-husband could be perceived as a negative tie who exerted gendered power and control, despite geographical distance. Adopting Bott's analysis of relationality and its consequences, we can see how these social ties operate at a meso-level shaping and being shaped by Liloma's interactions with various structures and institutional frameworks. The examples presented here show how her strong emotional bonds give her the strength, motivation and encouragement to carry on resisting and challenging immigration regimes in her continued efforts to be reunited with particular loved ones.

6 | Conclusion: Networked Insights on De-Networked Policies

In this article—by adopting a networks lens and working at the intersection between Relational Sociology and Policy Analysis—we have provided an overall assessment of the 'de-networked' stance of European migration policies. Moreover, we have contributed to conceptualising policy frameworks not simply as barriers but as part of the complex 'structures' that migrants actively seek to navigate by mobilising relationality and the resources therein within specific contexts. In particular, drawing on rich qualitative data to explore network stories of migrants, we have offered new insights into the mediating meso-level of relationality and its fundamental role both in processes of migration and resettlement and in on-going interactions within local, national and transnational contexts.

Therefore, our article—building on seminal network scholarship (Bott, Wellman, Boyd, Massey) as well as on our own body of research—has made three key contributions. First, drawing on the theory and practice of social network research, we have shed new light on the meso-level of contemporary migration trends, particularly at the intersection of personal experiences and policy interventions. Second, we have illustrated how migrants navigate hostile policy environments and argued that the fact immigration policies tend to be 'de-networked' and hostile to relationality ends up generating a 'boomerang effect' whereby migrants are pushed to increase their reliance on networks, both locally and transnationally. Third, and precisely by understanding these nexus and dynamics, we provide insights that allow us to go beyond the agency-versus-structure binary.

Through network stories, we can advance understandings of how migrants—and forced migrants in particular—draw on their meso-level social ties to navigate between a micro, individual level and the wider macro, institutional and policy level of society. Rich, in-depth qualitative research also allows us to pay more attention to the heterogeneity of contexts and processes across different geographical locations and diverse migrant populations.

For example, as shown in the case of undocumented migrants in Italy, it is often by disengaging with formal processes of reception—as defined by national policy and its local implementation—and forging new local ties that many migrants manage to shift their status from irregular to regular. Meanwhile, in the case of resettled migrants, we see that although personal networks have been constrained by immigration authorities in the United Kingdom, and indeed across many countries, migrants assert agency precisely by reclaiming these ties and rebuilding 'torn nets', including transnationally. In both cases, we gained more nuanced, non-dichotomous articulations of vulnerability and opportunity as part of migrants' networked experiences. Furthermore, we have shown how networks are 'boutiques' rather than 'general stores' (Wellman 1979), and so inter-personal relationships play different roles, which can change over time. Rather than simple dichotomies, a migrant's network may include dynamic blends of positive and negative relationships that offer support and pressure, opportunities and constraints. Overall, adopting this approach, we argue, helps to challenge traditional—and Eurocentric—policy views of migration (Lubbers et al. 2018; Dahinden 2016), including deterministic mobility theories, informed by rigid legal categories that emphasise national boundaries, disregarding the transnational field. A network lens also allows us to challenge simplistic notions of solidarity, exploitation and agency in the lives of migrants.

Some important policy considerations should emerge from all this. The very 'unreflective' stance of contemporary immigration policy, which continues to be underpinned by flawed (and 'de-networked') ideas of migration and individual migrants, not only has negative impacts at personal and social/relational level but also continues to lead to policy 'failures'. Thus, rethinking policy intervention must start not just from a consideration of such failures, but also—crucially—from an understanding of the central role of the meso-level of relationality in driving macro-level migration processes and micro-level migrants' experiences.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] See, for instance, the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) rule in the United Kingdom or the shopping vouchers and pre-paid cards (restricted to specific shops) that several countries provide to forced migrants instead of actual cash allowances.

[2] The wider project also included interviews with migrants in Greece and Malta, a survey about migrant journeys administered across reception centres, and interviews with local policymakers, practitioners and

NGOs, with the triangulation of data offering further insights into the decision-making, experiences and plans and expectations of forced migrants and asylum seekers.

[3] Details of the research project anonymised for review.

[4] At the time of the interviews, the key framework regulating refugees' reception and support was the so-called SPRAR system (System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees), stemming from the wider immigration law of the second Berlusconi government. On article, the system was based on a network of reception centres managed by local authorities and offering accommodation, social assistance and legal support. In practice, the limited funding allocations led to the development of a parallel system of 'extraordinary reception centres' (CAS)—often run by private contractors with little experience and limited public sector oversight—characterised by much lower standards and attracting serious concerns from NGOs and human rights lawyers (see Melchionda 2016; D'Angelo 2018).

[5] UNHCR (2024) Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained. URL: https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/.

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data.

[7] Home Office (2025).

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