ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A relational analysis of migration in old age: How transnational ties affect migration decisions

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Abstract

Recently, the role of personal ties in migration decisions has received considerable attention. However, this aspect has seldom been studied in the context of retirement. This paper addresses this gap by shedding light on the composition of personal networks, types of mobility patterns and retirement locations for four groups of older adults. To this end, two methodological approaches are employed: (1) a qualitative Social Network Analysis to examine the composition of older adults' personal networks and (2) thematic coding to analyse the relational aspects of migration decisions. This paper draws on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted in Spain and Switzerland in 2020 and 2021. The findings demonstrate that pre-retirement migration trajectories shape personal network composition. Moreover, personal ties play a critical role in older adults' mobility patterns and choices of retirement location. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the impact of personal networks on migration decisions of older adults.

INTRODUCTION

Sophie: My children reacted quite a bit. They thought: "This mother who suddenly stops working and moves to Spain." It upsets them. […] My daughter is still angry and we don't have much contact, precisely because of that. And my son, well, he's adapted.

Laurent: My children, on the other hand, dream of coming to live in Spain. My daughter, who speaks Spanish perfectly, has already bought a flat in the area. [...] And my son, who will retire soon, also plans to move to Spain.

Interview with Sophie (74 years old, first-time migrant) and Laurent (85 years old, onwards migrant).[1]

The decision to migrate is socially anchored. On the one hand, it provokes reactions and has the potential to change the nature of social ties, as can be seen in the couple interview with Sophie and Laurent. On the other hand, such a decision is also determined by social and institutional actors and individuals' resources. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the field of international migration and social networks, the migration decision-making process has received substantial attention (Amit & Riss, 2007; Asad & Garip, 2019; Ghimire & Kapri, 2023; Haug, 2008; Manchin & Orazbayev, 2018; Ryan, 2009; Tucker et al., 2012). In this field, it has been demonstrated that social networks significantly affect individuals' desire or reluctance to relocate. While individuals with strong personal relationships in the current country of residence are more hesitant to migrate, people with established social ties in the destination country are more willing to make such a move (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Boyd & Nowak, 2012). The literature on social network effects on migration decisions is well established for certain populations, such as labour migrants, and mobile students (Beech, 2015; Boyd & Nowak, 2012). However, little is known about the role of personal connections in older adults' migration decision-making processes. This paper aims to fill this gap by shedding light on personal network compositions, decisions related to mobility patterns, and choices of retirement locations for four categories of older adults. In so doing, it advances research at the intersection of social networks, migration and ageing. Moreover, the paper addresses a relatively underexplored topic by applying a relational analysis to older adults' migration and mobility decisions (i.e. first-time, return, onwards migration and bi-locality).

This paper draws on 29 semi-structured interviews in which data were collected on older adults' ego-centric networks[2] and their migration decision-making process. The qualitative interviews were conducted between June 2020 and August 2021 in Spain and Switzerland with individuals of retirement age, who were engaged in some form of transnational mobility since leaving work. Older adults with diverse mobility profiles, who presented these same characteristics, took part in this study: (1) first-time migrants, (2) return migrants, (3) onwards migrants and (4) bi-local older adults. We comparatively analyse these four groups of older adults' network composition as well as their decision to migrate in later life. This paper, thus, asks the following research questions: How does personal network composition vary for these four categories of older adults? How do personal ties affect their mobility patterns and choice of retirement place?

The paper begins with a brief theoretical and empirical discussion on social networks in the context of old age. We then present collected data and an analytical framework, that is, the four categories of older adults. Finally, empirical evidence on the composition of older adults' personal networks, the influence of personal ties on mobility patterns, and the choice of place are discussed.

TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL NETWORKS IN OLD AGE

Qualitative social network analysis and transnationalism

The main contribution of Social Network Analysis (SNA) resides in the study of the role of *relationships* between network members to explain observed phenomena. It, thus, adopts a relational approach to view how network members interact and influence each other (Freeman, 2004). A qualitative approach is important when applied to yet little observed populations and to understand 'how networks matter' (Hollstein, 2011, p. 408). Both arguments apply to this study. On the one hand, we examine personal network compositions of yet little explored groups of older individuals as, for instance, return and onwards migrants. On the other hand, we are interested

in understanding 'how networks matter' in older adults' migration decision-making processes. A qualitative approach is, therefore, particularly relevant to answer our research questions.

Furthermore, scholars of transnational studies have highlighted the potential of SNA to overcome 'methodological nationalism' (Ryan & Dahinden, 2021; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Indeed, by focusing on individual attributes *and* relationships between network members, SNA enables scholars to analyse 'ethnicity' or 'migration background' as one of many attributes that influence network and social phenomena (Ryan & Dahinden, 2021). In so doing, the analysis goes beyond specific ethnic groups or migrant populations and their implied inherent differences (Dahinden, 2016). This paper, thereby, also adopts a transnational lens.

Transnational social networks and migration in old age

The available literature on social networks in the field of migration in old age is sparse. Broadly speaking, two relevant foci can be identified for our research questions: (1) keeping ties through transnational care practices and mobility and (2) building new personal connections in the destination country. The first focus discusses how older migrants sustain personal ties with geographically dispersed family members and significant others through information and communication technologies (ICT) and regular visits. Research points to the importance of ICT in maintaining links with family members and friends (Lardiés-Bosque et al., 2016; Nedelcu, 2017) and allowing them to participate virtually in important religious festivities (Karacan, 2020). Baldassar and Wilding (2020) go one step further by introducing the concept of 'digital kinning'. Practices that form part of this concept are, for example, the use of ICT to convey a sense of social connectedness or to access emotional support, that is, practices that enable individuals to 'be together' across distances (Baldassar et al., 2016). Such forms of togetherness are reinforced through personal visits. These involve on the one hand older migrants' regular return visits, and on the other hand, routine visits from family members and friends that have been left behind (Buffel, 2017; Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Lardiés-Bosque et al., 2016; Repetti & Calasanti, 2020; Savaş et al., 2023). However, there are also those older adults who choose not to relocate to another country, but to move back-and-forth between two countries. This bilocal strategy is primarily influenced by strong personal ties in the country of residence, which makes older adults more reluctant to migrate. These individuals decide to move back-and-forth between two countries in order to satisfy individual aspirations with regular and close contact with their significant others (Bolzman et al., 2017; Gustafson, 2008).

When people relocate to another country, existing social ties are maintained, but new connections are also created. This aspect has been predominantly analysed in the context of international retirement migration, that is, migration typically from North to South motivated by lifestyle-related and climatic considerations (Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Lardiés-Bosque et al., 2016; Pickering et al., 2019). Studies have shown that 'expatriate communities' and 'expatriate clubs and associations' are of particular importance for such older migrants to build new friendships (Gustafson, 2008; see also Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Lardiés-Bosque et al., 2016; Savaş et al., 2023). People with comparable social backgrounds are able to meet either by moving into expatriate communities or by becoming members of a club. Thus, these communities and clubs have 'language, nationality, class and interests' in common (Casado-Díaz et al., 2014, p. 128). Besides the opportunity to build new social connections, these neighbourhoods and associations are an important source of information, and practical help that facilitates life in the new location (Huber & O'Reilly, 2004). Thus, such '"readymade" social networks' can affect the decision to migrate in old age (Pickering et al., 2019, p. 387), as they provide newly arrived older adults access to local social capital. Simó Noguera et al. (2013) as well as Casado-Díaz et al. (2014) illustrate in their studies how such associations create 'bonding social capital' by strengthening reciprocity and solidarity among its' members (Woolcock, 1998).

In sum, two elements are of particular interest. First, studies have shown that strong social ties in the country of residence influence older adults' chosen mobility patterns. This is in line with migration research's broader knowledge of social networks, which indicates that individuals with strong, personal ties in their current country

of residence are more reluctant to relocate to another country (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Boyd & Nowak, 2012). Second, expatriate communities in the destination country offer practical advice and help to build new ties (Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Pickering et al., 2019). This last element is important within the broader context of social networks and migration. Indeed, similar motivational factors are at work in so-called 'migration corridors' (Carling & Jolivet, 2016). These corridors put new migrants in touch with existing migrants for information and advice about, for example, local bureaucracy (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Ghimire & Kapri, 2023; Hosnedlová et al., 2021). In this short discussion, two gaps appear in the existing literature: First, little is known about the role of personal ties in the migration decision-making process in old age. Second, studies mainly focus on specific ethnic groups or migrant populations. Thus, the suggestion of scholars of transnational studies to use SNA to overcome 'methodological nationalism' has not yet received much attention within this field. This paper addresses both these gaps by comparatively analysing personal network compositions, decisions related to mobility patterns, and choices of retirement places for four categories of older adults.

METHODS

Data collection and analysis

This article is based on qualitative data collected in Switzerland and Spain between June 2020 and August 2021 in the framework of a research project[3] focusing on older adults' transnational practices, mobilities and personal networks. The Swiss-Spanish case study was chosen due to its historical and contemporary relevance. There was an important migratory movement from Spain to Switzerland in the 1970s. Now that these labour migrants are approaching retirement age, the question of return arises (Bolzman et al., 2006). In addition, statistics on Swiss abroad indicate that many Swiss older adults are settling in Spain (FSO, 2022).

Participants in this study meet three criteria: First, they all have a connection with Switzerland, either by residing or by having once lived and worked in this country. Second, all participants have reached the Swiss statutory retirement age of 64 for women and 65 for men, and finally, all interviewees spend at least 3 months per year in Spain and thus have engaged in transnational mobility since ceasing work. In contrast to other studies analysing transnational practices and social networks of older adults (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Gustafson, 2008; Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Karacan, 2020; Lardiés-Bosque et al., 2016), the focus of this project is not on a specific 'ethnicity' or on 'migrant populations'. The diversity of participants' profiles is illustrated in detail in Tables A1–A3 and B1 in the supplementary materials.

In order to construct an inclusive sample, four recruitment strategies were put in place (Tomás & Ravazzini, 2022): (1) an announcement in the Swiss Review, (2) an invitation letter sent by the Central Compensation Office (CCO) of Switzerland, (3) snowball sampling and (4) personal contacts. However, the first two channels proved the most effective at recruiting participants. The Swiss Review – a magazine published six times a year for Swiss people abroad – was the main vector for contacting a large number of older adults living outside Switzerland. Only people registered with a Swiss legation receive this magazine. Thus, only Swiss nationals were reached by this announcement. Nevertheless, the second strategy involving the CCO proved successful in contacting a wide variety of older adults. The main task of the CCO is to pay the old-age and survivors' insurance (OASI) to any person who has worked in Switzerland. These benefits are paid regardless of nationality[4] and country of residence, that is, retirees who leave Switzerland to live abroad are entitled to a pension. This is particularly interesting because between 2001 and 2019 the number of pensions paid to older adults living abroad has doubled (OFAS, 2020). Spain alone accounts for approximately 145,000 pensions paid by the CCO to retirees of 63 different nationalities (CCO pensions register, December 2018). As a result of the collaboration between the research project and the CCO, 290 randomly selected individuals residing in Spain received a written invitation to participate in the study.[5]

This paper is based on 29 semi-structured interviews carried out with four couples and 25 individuals in Switzerland and Spain. The interviews were conducted by the first author and held in German, French and Spanish. They focused on the following topics: transnational mobilities before and after retirement, transnational practices and ego-centric networks.

For data analysis, interviews were fully transcribed in the three interview languages. To respond to our first research question, which touches upon personal network compositions of older adults, we analysed ego-centric data collected during the interview. In this thematic focus, participants were asked to name their most significant social ties and to provide information about the nature of the relationship, the age and the residence location of the individuals they had listed (see Section C in the supplementary materials for more details). For the second research question, we followed a relational approach by analysing the capacity of personal networks to influence retirement mobilities and their direction (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Emirbayer, 1997). This discussion, therefore, relies on the thematic coding of the interviews with the use of MAXQDA.

The 33 interviewees are between 64 and 89 years old. The sample consists of 22 Swiss nationals, 3 double nationals and 8 non-Swiss nationals (Argentinian, British, French, German, Italian-Argentinian, Spanish (3)). Of these 33 individuals, 18 have migrated at least once before their retirement, 13 have migrated for the first time when they ceased work and 2 have no experience of migration. In addition, 28 individuals relocated to Spain during retirement, while the remaining 5 older adults have kept their residency in Switzerland while spending between 2 and 6 months per year in Spain. These post-retirement mobility practices are mostly carried out in couples. Indeed, 25 participants migrated or moved back and forth between Switzerland and Spain in couples. On the other hand, seven participants relocated individually to Spain, whereas two of these participants migrated to join their new partner. The remaining participant engages in a bi-local residence strategy individually. These and other socio-demographic information are summarised in Tables A1–A3 in the supplementary materials.
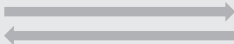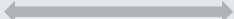
Analytical framework

As the sample includes on the one hand different mobility patterns (i.e. relocation and back-and-forth mobility), and on the other hand, individuals with various migration trajectories, a comparative approach appears to be the most pertinent option. We identified four categories of older adults by linking theoretical considerations with collected data. These categories include (1) first-time migrants, (2) return migrants, (3) onwards migrants and (4) bi-local older adults.

The decisive criterion for these categories is not a specific ethnicity or migration background, but *mobility* (Tomás, 2023). More precisely, these categories differ in their *pattern of mobility* (relocation or bi-locality), their *pre-retirement migration trajectory* and their *direction of mobility* ('new' country or already 'known' country). This is illustrated in a simplified form in Table 1 and in a detailed form in Table B1 in the supplementary materials. In identifying these categories, this paper addresses two important critiques with regard to the field of migration research: First, and as previously stated, the necessity to move beyond a specific 'ethnicity' and 'migration background' and to take, for example, mobility as a starting point for the analysis of transnational phenomena (Amelina & Faist, 2012). Second, to take into account less permanent forms of mobility to gain a thorough understanding of migration-related phenomena and other social processes (D'Amato et al., 2019; nccr-on the move, 2019; Nedelcu et al., 2023).

The category of *first-time migrants* includes 12 participants who spent their lives in Switzerland and migrated for the first time during retirement. In the literature, these migrants are known as international retirement migrants (IRM) or lifestyle migrants (Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Gustafson, 2008). The category of *return migrants* is made up of six individuals. Most of these individuals migrated from Spain to Switzerland as labour migrants in the 1970s and returned once they ceased work. Moreover, this category includes IRM who left Switzerland during retirement and subsequently decided to move back. While the return of IRM has only recently become of

TABLE 1 Four categories of older adults.

Group of older adults	Number	Mobility pattern
First-time migrants	$N = 12$	
Return migrants	$N = 6$	
Onwards migrants	$N = 10$	
Bi-local older adults	$N = 5$	

research interest (Giner-Monfort et al., 2016), the return of older migrants is an established subject in the literature (Bolzman et al., 2006; Klinthäll, 2006). Finally, this category also includes one individual who spent a few years in Spain in adulthood, moved back to Switzerland and returned to Spain to spend his retirement. The category of *onwards migrants* is composed of 10 participants who migrated at least once before they decided to move to Spain at retirement age. On the one hand, this involves individuals who moved to Switzerland from, for example, Germany, France, or Colombia for work-related purposes or to join their significant other. On the other hand, it also involves older adults who moved from Switzerland to another country, returned and relocated to Spain during retirement. The literature on transnational mobility in old age has not yet looked at this category. *Bi-locality* is the last category in the analytical framework. Five participants came under this category. These older adults reside in Switzerland and spend between 2 and 6 months per year in Spain. A diverse and affordable range of air and bus travel as well as the European Union's Freedom of Movement mechanism have led older migrants' back-and-forth travel to become a widely studied mobility pattern (Bolzman et al., 2006). However, such a pattern is also increasingly observed among older adults without pre-retirement migration trajectories (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). Equally diverse are the biographies of the individuals in this category: two participants have spent their whole lives in Switzerland; one participant was born in Spain and now spends part of the year in this country; the two remaining participants migrated several times, and at present live in Switzerland while spending part of the year in Spain. This category, therefore, unites older adults from the three other categories in the analytical framework.

PERSONAL NETWORK COMPOSITION OF OLDER ADULTS

This section discusses older adults' personal network composition. More precisely, we ask: How does personal network composition vary for the four categories of older adults? Do pre-retirement migration trajectories matter? For this purpose, we have used ego-centric data collected during the qualitative interviews. We display these data in the diagrams below (see Figures 1–4).

It becomes apparent in the analysis of ego networks that kinship ties play a crucial role. Indeed, participants in the interviews systematically mentioned their spouses or partners, descendants (if applicable), siblings and other family members such as in-laws and cousins as their most significant ties. This is in line with other results. Buffel (2017) as well as Walters and Bartlett (2009) find in their qualitative studies that personal networks of older adults are centred on family members, and more precisely on their descendants. Non-kin ties, for example, friends and neighbours, also form part of participants' personal networks but are mostly labelled as important, rather than as very important connections. This is true for all four categories of older adults. However, non-kin ties play a more central role in the network of the six childless participants.

While there are similarities in the four categories' personal network compositions, the geographical dispersion of significant others varies. In the case of first-time migrants, significant members of their personal network are mainly located in Switzerland. Nevertheless, in these networks, we find connections that have been maintained across borders over several years. These transnational ties are mostly connected to children and siblings'
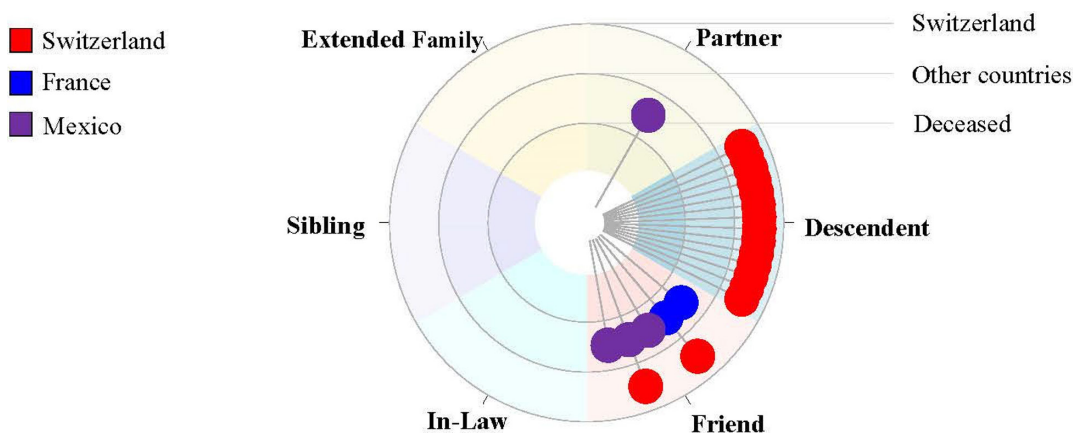
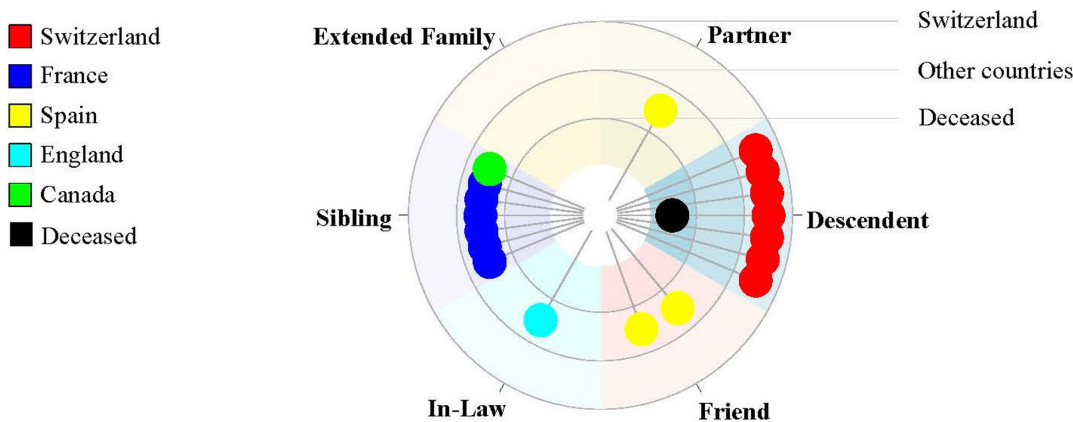**FIGURE 1** Ego-gram of a first-time migrant – Sophie.

FIGURE 2 Ego-gram of an onwards migrant – Liliane.

occupational mobility. Furthermore, first-time migrants established new connections in Spain. These involve occasional contact with neighbours, or people met during specific activities. Figure 1 illustrates Sophie's ego network. In her case, the most significant contacts she made and maintained over the past 10 years in Spain are a Swiss couple living nearby and her yoga teacher. In contrast to the results of Huber and O'Reilly (2004) who found that older adults developed several important contacts in their new place of residence, we are able to identify only a few new relationships in participants' personal networks. Indeed, some first-time migrants explicitly mention the difficulty of establishing new friendships in Spain:

David: It is very difficult to build new friendships, particularly with Spanish people. Maybe it is because we don't speak the language well, or because we don't go to places such as bars on a regular basis, where we can meet new people.

Interview with David (69 years old).

The difficulty in building new and meaningful relationships can, thus, be linked to a lack of Spanish language skills and few opportunities to 'anchor in the new environment' (Kindler, 2021, p. 518). The fact that poor language skills are an obstacle to forming new friendships has been discussed in-depth in studies analysing IRM
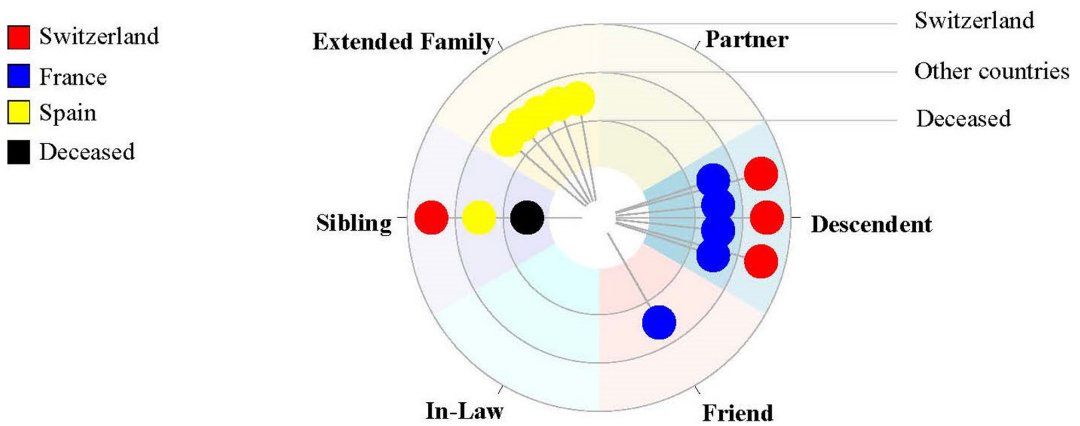
FIGURE 3 Ego-gram of a return migrant – Dolores.

and their integration into a new society (Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Gustafson, 2008; Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Savaş et al., 2023).

The geographical dispersion of the personal network of onwards migrants is more diverse. In the case of Liliane, whose ego network in Figure 2 illustrates a 'typical' social network of an onwards migrant, we can see that she has six siblings in France, one brother in Canada and one in-law in the UK. This geographical dispersion is linked to her and her husband's pre-retirement migration trajectory. Liliane migrated from France to the UK for educational purposes, where she met her husband. After he received a job offer in Switzerland, they decided to migrate and lived and raised their family in Switzerland for nearly 40 years. Thus, as with first-time migrants, descendants of onwards migrants mostly live in Switzerland. Equally, onwards and first-time migrants have few significant ties in Spain and mention the difficulty of establishing new relationships with locals. However, other family ties are geographically more spread out than in the case of first-time migrants.

The significant ties of return migrants are scattered geographically between two nation-states: Switzerland and Spain. Similarly to first-time and onwards migrants, the descendants of return migrants live in Switzerland. Other family members such as siblings, in-laws and cousins live in Spain. Through these kinship ties, participants have a strong connection to their place of origin. Over the years, they have been able to maintain transnational ties with, for example, regular visits during holidays (Bolzman et al., 2017). In Figure 3, the ego network of Dolores is presented as 'typical' for return migrants. Migrating to Switzerland while still a child, she spent her entire adult life in this country while regularly returning to Spain for summer holidays. This enabled her to maintain strong transnational ties with aunts, uncles and cousins over the years. These ties are apparent in the composition of her personal network. Moreover, in this example, some descendants live in France. Cross-border commuters are a Swiss particularity. Individuals work in Switzerland but live in France and cross the border on a weekly or daily basis.

We find the greatest geographical dispersion among bi-local older adults' personal networks. This is mainly the result of different pre-retirement migration trajectories in this category. If the five bi-locals had not kept their residence in Switzerland and only spent part of the year in Spain, they would be divided among the three other categories. Therefore, the geographical dispersion of bi-local older adults' personal networks exhibits the same characteristics as the ones described for the other three categories of older adults. This is visible in Figure 4, which displays Agnès' ego-gram as an example of a personal network composition of a bi-local older adult. Her ego-gram exhibits similarities to the network compositions of onwards migrants, as pre-retirement migration trajectories become evident in it. Indeed, Agnès lived in South America for over 10 years to accompany her husband. After the divorce, she returned to Switzerland with her children. In the meantime, both sons have moved back to South America, where they have started their own families. Thus, Agnès' pre-retirement migration trajectories are still visible in her network composition.
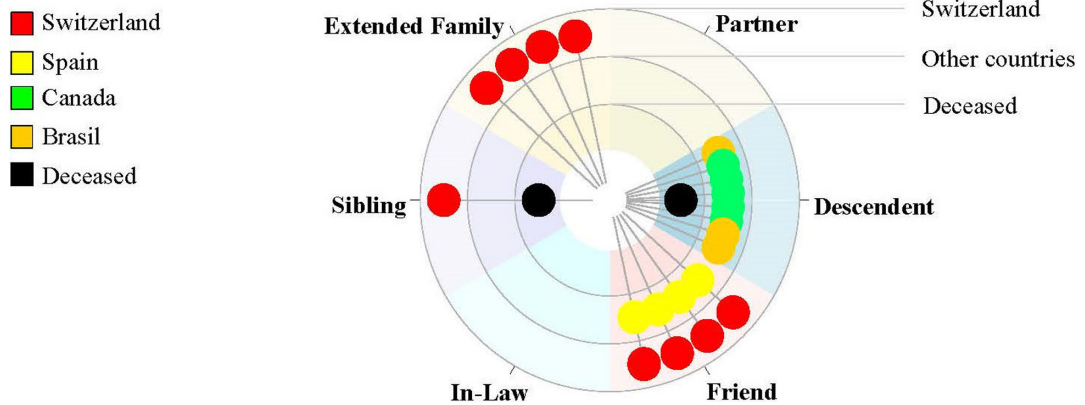
FIGURE 4   Ego-gram of a bi-local older adult – Agnès.

To conclude, this section highlights the relevance of kinship ties in personal networks of older adults (Buffel, 2017; Walters & Bartlett, 2009). Moreover, the results indicate that pre-retirement migration trajectories shape ego networks thereby making their geographical dispersion more diverse. However, mobility during retirement only marginally shapes personal networks. While most participants were able to make some new friendships in Spain, first-time and onwards migrants, in particular, have difficulty in forming meaningful ties in the new location.

PERSONAL TIES IN MIGRATION DECISIONS IN OLD AGE

In this empirical discussion, we look at how personal ties are involved in the migration decision-making process. We, thus, ask: How do personal ties affect older adults' mobility pattern? And how do these personal ties influence the choice of retirement place?

The choice of mobility pattern: Migration or mobility?

Literature suggests that bi-local older adults choose mobility over migration because of the importance of their personal network in Switzerland (Bolzman et al., 2017; Gustafson, 2008). We find similar results in our qualitative data. Juan, an 85-year-old bi-local individual who moved from Spain to Switzerland in the 1980s for occupational reasons, long believed that he and his wife would have to leave Switzerland upon retirement, as they would no longer be able to afford to live there. However, because of the fortunate circumstance to be able to buy a property in Switzerland thanks to inter alia an inheritance, they could stay in Switzerland and spend around 4 months per year in Spain. Juan expresses the importance of maintaining geographical proximity with his significant others in the following way:

> We will be travelling as much as we can, but our future is here [in Switzerland]. When we had to move to find work, we had to leave our parents. Now we would have to leave our children and grandchildren to return [to Spain]. This is what worried me the most when I still thought that we could not stay in Switzerland.
>
> Interview with Juan (85 years old).

Interestingly, personal networks not only influence the mobility pattern but also the rhythm of mobility. Bi-local older adults take holidays into account when deciding which periods they spend in Switzerland or Spain. Heinz elaborates:

> At Christmas we are in Switzerland because of our children and grandchildren. We always celebrate together. [...] And then, we spend July in Spain, so that our children and grandchildren can spend their holidays there.
>
> Interview with Heinz (73 years old).

These two quotes as well as Buffel (2017) demonstrate that descendants play a central role in the migration decision and in the specification of older adults' mobilities.

The analysis of the personal network composition of older adults indicates that as well as bi-local individuals, first-time, onwards, and return migrants also have their most significant others in Switzerland. On the one hand, there is little evidence that personal ties affect the migration decision of first-time and onwards migrants. For return migrants, on the other hand, there are indications that the decision to migrate is influenced by personal ties. These individuals can rely on an existing network in Spain conveying a feeling of safety and comfort. However, our qualitative data does not show that personal ties greatly influence older migrants' chosen mobility patterns. An explanation for this finding is that networks are not necessarily the most important reason for migration in old age. Indeed, economic considerations such as maintaining a standard of living or making ends meet on low pensions, the desire to live in a better climate as well as pivotal life events are cited as the main drivers for relocating to Spain (Tomás, 2023).

We conclude that personal networks are one of the many factors that are taken into account by older adults when choosing mobility patterns. However, ties can play an influential role, particularly for bi-local older adults. These individuals deliberately choose not to relocate to Spain in order to spend at least half the year near their children and grandchildren in Switzerland. The implementation of a bi-local residence strategy requires a privileged financial position and good health status (Bolzman et al., 2006; Fokkema et al., 2016; Repetti et al., 2018). Additionally, descendants influence mobility. Bi-local older adults stay in Switzerland for important holidays or birthdays (Repetti & Calasanti, 2020) and spend the summers in Spain so that descendants can spend their holidays with them. The literature on the transnational mobility of older adults has largely overlooked this second aspect.

Choice of retirement location

Alongside migration decisions, the choice of place is affected by personal ties. On the one hand, such ties can make relocation to a new country easier by providing guidance, support and information. In the case of older adults, studies show that expatriate communities play an important role by providing these resources and, in so doing, facilitating the arrival in the new country (Gustafson, 2008). Bilecen and Lubbers (2021), on the other hand, argue on the basis of Pohjola's study (Pohjola, 1991) that personal connections define and therefore restrict available place options. Limited options arise for individuals who already have important social ties in the country to which they are migrating. In this study, this is the case for return migrants. Indeed, their narratives present strong indications that personal connections influence their choice of retirement location. Andrés and Lucía, a couple in their late 70s, who returned to Spain 20 years ago, never thought of going elsewhere. For them, it was clear they would move back to the place, where they were born and in which they have a large personal network:

Andrés: That is why we are in an area, where we have many family members. When we need something, we can always call on our friends and family.

Interview with Andrés (78 years old) and Lucía (77 years old).

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Thus, in their case, limited options are not perceived as negative, but rather as positive, as they were able to move back to a place, in which they have significant others, on whom they can rely.

The existence of a personal network in another country does not necessarily trigger a return. This is apparent in the case of onwards migrants. These older adults decided not to return to a country they knew from previous migrations, but to move to a new country. Nevertheless, we find evidence in onwards migrants' narratives that personal ties decisively influenced the choice of place, as exemplified by René:

> For some time, I've been thinking about going somewhere else when I stop working. I have three underage children, and one adult son who is forty. This is why I would like to stay here in Spain for the next five, six years. As long as I am here, they can visit me easily. [...] I already knew this area a bit, because four or five years ago I visited a friend who has a house here. [...] So, in November 2019 I left Switzerland and moved to this area, where I was able to rent a house from my former employers for six months.
>
> Interview with René (68 years old).

Two interesting aspects emerge from this quote: First, not only is the personal network in the migrating country important in the choice of place, but the personal network left behind is equally decisive. While René wishes to migrate further away such as to South America, he decides to stay geographically close to Switzerland as long as his children are minors. Second, weak ties also affect the choice of place. René's migration was helped by his former employer who lent him his house to stay in for the first few weeks after his arrival. From there, he was able to get to know the area and find a flat that suited him.

As with onwards migrants, strong and weak social ties influence first-time migrants' choice of place. Acquaintances who knew Spain had spoken highly of it and invited individuals to come and visit. These visits made Spain the first choice in participants' retirement location. In some cases, trips to Spain to find a holiday home took place long before retirement. Indeed, current ties affect the choice of place, but past personal connections also have an influence. However, strong ties, such as in-laws and other family members, play the most significant role in first-time migrants' choices. In the case of Verena, it was her daughter who shaped her choice of retirement location. Her daughter had moved temporarily to Spain in the late 1990s, but she had stayed on and made her life there. Verena had intended to move to Morocco or India for her retirement, but decided to adjust her plans and relocated to Spain to be near her daughter. She explains:

> Apart from my mother, I have no other relatives in Switzerland. And with time I realised that my daughter will stay in Spain. So, I asked myself: 'What am I doing in Switzerland? My daughter is not coming back.' And as I still had the desire and motivation to move to another country, I went.
>
> Interview with Verena (75 years old).

Thus, we find strong evidence that first-time migrants' personal ties affect their choice of place. However, there is no indication in our qualitative data that upholds the argument presented in the literature that expatriate communities influence the choice of place (Gustafson, 2008). In general, Swiss clubs and associations are of minor relevance for these 12 participants.

Bi-local older adults' choice of place is also influenced by personal networks. On the one hand, bi-local older adults decided to keep their main residence in Switzerland in order to be geographically close to their significant others. On the other hand, we also find that the choice of location in Spain is shaped by personal ties. Here we observe similar processes as with return, onwards, and first-time migrants, depending on their pre-retirement mobilities.

To conclude, there is strong evidence that personal ties affect the choice of retirement location of all four categories of older adults: strong ties influence return migrants and bi-local older adults, while both strong and weak ties are of particular importance for onwards and first-time migrants. These findings highlight the importance of weak, non-kinship ties in the choice of retirement location for these two categories of older adults. However, our data cannot uphold the claim that expatriate communities play a role in the choice of place.

CONCLUSION

This paper has contributed to research conducted on social networks and migration processes by looking at a yet rarely studied population: older individuals on the move. While scholarship at the intersection of social networks, migration and ageing has been mainly interested in understanding how older adults keep in touch with their significant others across borders (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Nedelcu, 2017), and how new ties are built (Gustafson, 2008; Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Lardiés-Bosque et al., 2016), this paper contributes to this research field by exploring how the migration decision-making process of older adults is shaped by personal networks. We, thus, applied a relational analysis to migration decisions of four categories of older adults: first-time, return and onwards migrants and bi-locals. In so doing, we had an in-depth look at two relatively underexplored mobility patterns, namely return and onwards migration.

Our findings demonstrate that personal ties influence migration itself. In tandem with other studies examining network effects in *migration decisions* (Beech, 2015; Boyd & Nowak, 2012), we found that migration is anchored within a social context. This is particularly true for bi-local older adults who decided not to relocate to Spain but to live only part of the year in this country. While the small sample size complicates the formulation of definitive conclusions, our data shed light on the rationale behind bi-local residence strategies. Indeed, bi-locality enables these individuals to spend at least half the year in Switzerland near their significant others. However, we do not find strong evidence that 'the "migrant network" remains the critical explaining mechanism shaping the perpetuation of migration' for first-time, return and onwards migrants (van Meeteren & Pereira, 2018, p. 941). Rather, reasons such as economic and climatic considerations were mentioned as decisive in the decision to relocate. Thus, strong, personal ties in the country of residence make older people more reluctant to leave. However, financial resources are crucial in determining the choice of place for retirement and the possibility of a bi-local residence strategy (Bolzman et al., 2006; Repetti et al., 2018). In addition, the paper shows that the choice of *retirement location* is influenced by strong and weak ties. While strong ties are relevant for return migrants and bi-local older individuals, both strong and weak ties play an important role in the choice of place for the other two categories of older adults. In sum, the relational analysis of migration decisions in old age indicates that personal ties strongly influence older adults' pattern and direction of mobility.

By adopting a qualitative approach to SNA, we were able to shed light on the plural rationale behind mobility decisions in old age. For future research, it could be insightful to expand the research questions of this paper to non-mobile ageing populations to gain an in-depth understanding of how personal ties influence (non-)migration decisions in old age. Moreover, a study exploring the formation of non-kin ties and their importance in the migration decision-making process would be an important contribution to future research.

Finally, collected data support the argument that migration affects *personal network composition*. However, we find evidence for this claim only for pre-retirement migration trajectories. Post-retirement mobilities have, therefore, little influence on social network composition. Moreover, kinship ties play an important role in personal networks of older adults with the exception of childless couples. Accordingly, most of the results presented in this paper relate to the role of kinship ties in the migration decision-making process. For future research, it would be valuable to complement these findings with longitudinal research to analyse changes in personal networks and 'go beyond a "snapshot" of time' (Ryan & D'Angelo, 2018, p. 157). Questions guiding this longitudinal research could relate to the influence of age, marital status and the number of years since relocation on the ability to form new and meaningful relationships in old age.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] We use pseudonyms for the interview participants.

[2] 'Ego-centric network' refers here to the set of specific alters elicited by ego, whereas 'personal network' refers to the wider set of social connections.

[3] The full name of the research project is 'Transnational Ageing: Post-Retirement Mobilities, Transnational Lifestyles and Care Configurations'.

[4] Some countries do not have a social insurance agreement with Switzerland. Citizens of these countries are in this regard highly disadvantaged as they do not receive their OASI when leaving Switzerland. For more information go to https://www.bsv.admin.ch/bsv/en/home/social-insurance/int/points-of-reference-and-agreements.html.

[5] In this process, the anonymity of the 290 randomly selected individuals from the pension register was guaranteed at all times. The CCO generated the sample and sent out the invitation letters. Thus, the CCO did not share any personal data with the first author.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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