Refugees' Transnational Practices: Gay Iranian Men Navigating Refugee Status and Cross-border Ties in Canada

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Abstract

Despite the rise in displaced population numbers, refugees' transnational lives, and those of sexual-racial minority refugees in particular, have remained at the margins of transnational migration studies. In this article, I focus on the case of gay Iranian refugees in Canada and analyze their pre-migration transnational lives and understandings of the asylum process, their post-migration transnational ties, and their activism practices. I underline refugees' transnational agencies and argue against the rhetoric that represents refugees as passive migrants whose emigration means detachment from home countries. Based on my field work findings, I endorse analytical and methodological shifts to simultaneously explore refugees' pre-migration and en-route lives in addition to their post-migration lives to stress the power relations that, through social ties, affect refugees' transnational practices. I connect transnational, forced, and queer migration literature to the Bourdieusian social theory and, in conclusion, argue that it is necessary to deploy de-nationalized methods of inquiry to account for intra-group diversities as well as border-crossing social ties in addition to economic ties.

Keywords

transnational migration, refugee, queer migration, sexual minority, Canada

Introduction

During the past few years, Canadian media have, once again, resurrected the rhetoric of refugee crisis and the images of asylum seekers in Canada as welfare parasites, passive, risks to security, and free-rider migrants. Similarly, the resurgence in nationalism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and right-wing populism has fueled the Trump administration's tightening of border controls, the Italian government's rejection of migrant rescue boats, and the Hungarian Parliament's approval of detaining all asylum seekers. Such perspectives and policies on refugees, currently predominantly from North African and Middle Eastern countries

and of Muslim backgrounds, have roots in the late 1980s surge in the numbers of asylum seekers and the consequent spread of anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric (Kyriakides et al. 2018; Lucassen 2018). It is in this context that I analyze the case of gay Iranian refugees in Canada to underline refugees' agency in building and sustaining transnational ways of belonging which are informed by various forms of power relations,

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structures, and capitals. Transnational ways of belonging are those "practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group" (Levitt and Schiller 2004). In particular, I highlight the role of sexuality in informing such transnational practices (Klapeer and Laskar 2018).

To date, refugees' transnational lives, sexual-racial minority refugees in particular, have remained at the margins of transnational migration studies (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001a, 2001b; Lindley 2009). Forced migration studies have also lagged behind in incorporating contemporary transnational perspectives (Castles 2003; Wahlbeck 2002; for exceptions see Grace 2018; S. K. Lee 2018). This disconnect between transnational and refugee studies results because the social sciences understand refugees' movements as involuntary, reactive, and mostly devoid of agency (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Long 2013; Van Hear 2011). The image of the passive refugee is part of the "rescue and liberation" (Espiritu 2006) narrative that overlooks structural inequalities and assumes that once saved from the developing world, refugees' journeys end in assimilation into ethnic communities in host countries (Tang 2015). A similar narrative frames the internal migration of sexual minorities as a unidirectional move from rural patriarchy to urban freedom which, mainly, awaits the white middle-class lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgenders (LGBTs; Duggan [2003] 2012; Gorman-Murray 2007). Although some (and growing) attention is given to sexual-racial minority *immigrants'* ties with their home countries (Ayoub and Bauman 2018; Binnie and Klesse 2013; Carrillo 2018; Dhoest 2016; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010), the nascent body of literature on queer migration has neglected sexual-racial minority *refugees' transnational lives.*

In this article, I will rely on empirical data I collected from 35 interviews with gay Iranian refugees in Canada to demonstrate the complexities of sexual-racial minority refugees' transnational ways of belonging regarding their ties with families back in Iran, ties with the Iranian LGBT community awaiting the results of asylum claims in Turkey, and limited activism in Canada (Ayoub and Bauman 2018; Binnie and Klesse 2013; Eleftheriadis 2014). I will connect my findings and discussions with the wider body of social theory. This objective is a response to appeals by migration and refugee studies scholars who have emphasized the importance of conducting empirically and theoretically informed sociological research "that can help explain specific empirical findings by linking them to appropriate bodies of historical and contemporary research" (Castles 2003; see also Portes 1998). Building on Lacroix's (2014) comprehensive critique of social theories relevant to transnationalism, structure, and agency, I draw on Bourdieu's social theory (Bourdieu 1984, 2011; Bourdieu and Nice 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) because it outlines a balanced schema of structure-individual relations, enables foregrounding various aspects of refugees' transnational agency and identities (Erel 2010; Nowicka 2013), and allows for understanding the ways that refugees' transnational lives are disparately affected by several overlapping social fields, structures, and power relations (Levitt and Schiller 2004).

Based on my findings, I argue that transnational connections are not phenomena-initiated post-migration between immigrants and their social networks in home countries. In contrast to the traditional sociological approaches which defined immigrants' integration as a unidirectional path toward assimilation occurring after arrival in their host country (Gordon 1964; Portes 1969), I argue that, as a result of globalization, transnational ties inform both practices and multi-faceted transnational identities at home, transition, and host countries. At the methodological level, my findings support transnational migration scholars' emphasis on analytical and methodological shifts to simultaneously explore refugees' pre-migration and en-route lives in addition to their post-migration/resettlement lives to secure a comprehensive vision of transnational lives of refugees (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994; Dahinden 2017; Faist 1998).

In what follows, I will first briefly review the literature on transnational, forced, and queer migration studies. Second, I will discuss Bourdieusian social theory in relation to transnational and forced migration studies. Third, I will delineate my six months of field work with 19 gay Iranian refugees in Canada which resulted in 35 semi-structured interviews. I will then thematically outline and discuss my findings: (1) pre-migration transnational lives and understandings of the asylum process, (2) post-migration transnational ties, and (3) activism with transnational outreach. In the conclusion, I argue that to better understand transnational practices, it is important to examine transnational *social* ties in addition to *economic* ties; acknowledge diversities in practice at the intersections of migration status, sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity, among other social factors; and understand transnational practices within socio-historically shaped fields and structures.

Transnational, Forced, and Queer Migration

Basch et al. (1994) defined transnationalism as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement." Their goal was to go beyond the traditional economic and assimilationist understandings of immigrants' lives and highlight the importance of the "many different racial, ethnic, or national identities which shape people's actions and consciousness" across borders (Basch et al. 1994). Other scholars have demonstrated that transnationalism is indeed an "inherent part of the habitual lives" of non-state actors (Guarnizo, Sánchez, and Roach 1999). These approaches to transnational lives, implicitly or explicitly informed by Bourdieusian social theory (see, for example, Levitt and Glick-Schiller's [2004] use of Bourdieu's [1984] conception of social fields where they develop their understanding of transnational belonging and practices), underline individuals' ways of "belonging, through memory, nostalgia or imagination" located within transnational social fields containing "institutions, organizations, and experiences" (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004; see also Dahinden 2017). In my study of gay Iranian men, such transnational ways of belonging are reflected in their connections with their families in Iran, concerns for their friends awaiting asylum results in Turkey, and their identification with the wider Iranian LGBT community.

Transnational migration studies have correctly questioned the validity of taking ethnic groups located within one nation-state as a given starting point (Glick Schiller 2008; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), and have called for adopting and applying de-nationalized epistemologies and methodologies in analyzing transnational practices "embedded in multi-layered structures (political, economic, social) at simultaneously local, national and supranational scales" (Dahinden 2017). Disconnected from this line of research, and up until the mid-1990s, refugees were mostly depicted as a collective whose members suffer from trauma and await liberation by Western countries, while experiencing loss of identity and detachment from their home countries (Espiritu 2006; Faist 1998; Malkki 1995).

With the rise in asylum and refugee numbers, however, the ensuing research demonstrated that refugees are far from being detached from their communities in home and transition countries. These findings resulted in rethinking forced migration studies from a transnational perspective (Shami 1996; Wahlbeck 2002). Several studies (Al-Ali et al. 2001a, 2001b; Miller 2011) have shown that refugees are particularly involved in "transnationalism from below" (i.e., agency and practices of non-state actors), in their home and host countries' political, economic, and cultural activities. Other studies have underlined the similarity with which refugees and labor migrants transnationally deploy social networks (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; FitzGerald and Arar 2018), social remittances (Grace 2018), and information and communication technologies (Baldassar et al. 2016; Ghorashi and Boersma 2009; Van den Bos and Nell 2006; Vertovec 2004).

Overall, including the examination of refugee populations' daily lives in transnational

migration studies has made two major analytical contributions to the field: underscoring the role of pre- and post-migration structural and individual factors that critically shape refugees' migratory paths (Faist 1998; Karimi 2018b; Karimi and Bucerius 2017; Lacroix 2014; S. K. Lee 2018), and accounting for intra-group diversities that designate certain populations as *refugees* and, potentially, set such populations apart from their co-ethnic or co-national *immigrant* groups (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Glick Schiller 2008; Long 2013; Van Hear 2011). The latter theme—accounting for diversities—is particularly central to queer migration literature which highlights the interplay between sexuality, as an often overlooked factor, and migration and integration.

Initially, queer migration researchers were occupied with the emancipatory rural-to-urban migration of sexual minorities (Binnie 2004; Weston 1995) as well as the hegemonic exportation of Western sexual identities to the rest of the world as components of the globalization of human and minority rights (Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999). The more recent queer migration scholarship has explored the ways sexuality constitutes social relations, shapes collectivities, and structures sexual minority migrants' lives in host countries (Ayoub and Bauman 2018; Binnie and Klesse 2013; Cantú 2009; Carrillo 2018; Grundy and Smith 2005; Klapeer and Laskar 2018; Manalansan 2003; Mepschen et al. 2010). In other words, and in line with the critique of ethnic assimilation narratives put forward by transnational migration studies, queer migration research "underlines the intra-group diversities around sexual and gender identities and explores the ways that sexuality may also drive immigration, inform group membership" (Karimi 2018b), and shape cross-border ties. Indeed, building on queer migration literature allows for analyzing "the ways that (homo)sexuality as well as gender, race, and other relevant factors intersect in creating social hierarchies" and inform transnational belongings (Karimi 2018b; see also Lewis and Naples 2014).

However, despite queer migration scholars' interest in examining the daily lives of sexual minority refugees, in addition to the more commonplace research on LGBT immigrants, the former's transnational ties and experiences have remained within the bounds of theorization in the absence of empirical research. Such limitation is a result of methodological as well as analytical focus on, first, the ways that LGBT refugees navigate national asylum apparatus (Akin 2017; Kahn and Alessi 2017), and, second, the ways that these refugees seek to integrate in their host countries (E. O. J. Lee and Brotman 2011; Murray 2015; see Gorman-Murray 2007 on diversities of queer relocations). To address such limits of researching sexual-racial minority refugees' transnational lives, I will draw together the above discussions on transnational migration and an understanding of the Bourdieusian social theory which, more recently, has gained popularity in explicating refugees' and immigrants' transactional lives.

Bourdieu's Social Theory and Transnationalism

Bourdieu's social theory revolves around the concepts of habitus, practice, capital, and fields. Habitus, formed under the influence of objective structures, is the subconscious system of lasting dispositions and the "embodied history, internalized as a second nature," capable of reproducing and reshaping the objective structures (Bourdieu and Nice 1977). Habitus is reshaped—albeit not easily, due to its subconscious nature—as a result of encounters with new social fields and other actors' habitus. Habitus, which is shared by people of similar backgrounds, simultaneously generates and limits practice. Bourdieu (1984) understood practice as the outcome of the interaction between actors' dispositions embodied through their habitus, actors' diverse forms of capital, and power relations within each social field.

Bourdieu presents four convertible categories of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital defined, respectively, as financial profit, educational and intellectual qualities, a network of durable social relations, and the prestige and recognition of these forms of capital in each social field (Bourdieu 2011). Each social field is comprised of certain social structures

and individuals' and groups' multiple forms of capital, which condition actors' positions within the social fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Inevitably, individuals are unceasingly but disparately located in and interact with various structures of social fields. The rules of the field are implicit, and actors internalize these structures over time into their inter-subjective habitus.

Accordingly, any discord between the habitus and its respective social fields may provoke transformations in habitus and fields. For instance, the circulation of the Western discourses of sexuality around the world or the undertaking of migration to other locales challenges actors' habitus, inform the emergent multi-faceted transnational identities, and, in turn, affect social fields through actors' actions. Accordingly, individuals—refugees, in particular —will have to adapt their practices to their new environment and act according to the rules of new social fields to re-evaluate and accumulate capital (Bauder 2008; Thieme 2008).

Thus, if we are to understand the social meanings of actors' practices in society, we must acknowledge and examine the intersections of fields and their respective structures which encompass individuals and institutions in home, transition, and host countries (Levitt and Schiller 2004). Traditionally, the nation-state was the entity on which the boundaries of social fields were modeled. This meant that social scientists would contextualize, investigate, and analyze social phenomena within distinct national contexts as if actors and their practices were impervious to global and transnational trends. For instance, the nation-state container would not allow for exploring gay Iranian refugees' daily lives that reach beyond their host country's borders; neither would it allow for understanding how gay Iranian refugees' ties with their families in Iran regulate their choice of communication tool. To account for such border-traversing phenomena, it is important to develop and adopt a definition of "social field" that perceives individuals and institutions as linked across borders.

Go and Krause (2016) and Buchholz (2016) underlined that Bourdieu did not set fixed boundaries for habitus and social fields. This

fluid and relational nature of social fields, they argued, means that the analytical starting points are not predetermined and that units of analysis can span nation-state borders. Mirroring Dahinden's (2017) stance on de-nationalized migration research, Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2004) built on Bourdieu's understanding of fields and society to define transnational social fields as "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are exchanged, organized, and transformed . . . through direct and indirect relations across [national] borders." Actors within transnational fields bring together "social and symbolic ties, positions in networks and organizations . . . found in at least two geographically and internationally distinct places" (Faist 1998). This means that the newcomers, including sexual-racial minority refugees, can use cross-border sources of capital to build new social relations in the host country while sustaining cross-border ties with LGBT communities as well as friends and families in home and transition countries (Ayoub and Bauman 2018; Erel 2010; Klapeer and Laskar 2018; Miller 2011; Nowicka 2013). Consequently, it is possible to theorize that refugees are continually located in and interact with power structures of transnational social fields, and that they develop habitus and various forms of capital that enable successful navigation of the structures of transnational social fields (Bourdieu 1984).

Method

It is important to note here that the de-nationalization of the research process does not equate to de-territorialization of the researcher and research participants, as individuals and communities are located within national spaces, and their activities are informed by various national and international structures (Waldinger 2013a). A transnational approach to social fields requires an examination of the social and symbolic ties between refugees and their friends and families in home, transition, and host countries as well as the forms of capital exchanged through these ties. A multi-sited and longitudinal approach would be ideal, as it would enable us to examine transnational

relations and practices. I previously conducted two phases of field work with gay Iranian men in Iran and in Canada (with different participants). I documented the processes of pre-migration identity (re)construction (Karimi 2016, 2018a) as well as the deployment of collective memories for post-resettlement integration purposes (Karimi 2018b).

Building upon my previous research projects with gay Iranian men, my discussions in this article are based on six months of field work with 19 gay Iranian refugees in Canada. They left Iran for Turkey to seek asylum at the offices of the United Nations because, as these are neighboring countries, they have geographical access and the financial means to undertake this relatively short journey. The most important factor, however, is that Iranian citizens do not need a visa to enter Turkey for stays of up to 90 days.

I used snowball sampling for participant recruitment in Canada and found participants in Toronto, Vancouver, and Ottawa. I used snowball sampling because I was working with a social group that was multiply stigmatized at the intersections of sexuality and gender identities among Iranian diaspora, and at intersections of migration status, ethnicity, and nationality in Canada. In the absence of any publically available statistics on resettled sexual minority asylum seekers, snowball sampling enabled me to gain access to this population in three different localities (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007; see Murray [2015] for a similar study of inland LGBT asylum seekers in Canada). Nevertheless, I recognize the limits of my sampling method in terms of generalizability and replicability because I may not have been able to reach individuals who were not members of my network or who were excluded due to gatekeepers' bias. This limitation may have affected my understanding of intra-group diversities regarding the community members' disparate educational and financial status as well as access to participants who are less active and connected in the community (Karimi 2019).

I reached out to a community activist friend who had been resettled to the United States, asking him to forward my contact information and project description to potential participants. Upon receiving potential participants' expression of interest, I communicated with them through social media and by telephone. In 2016, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews in Vancouver. I interviewed 11 more participants in Toronto and Ottawa during the winter of 2017. Interviews lasted for about two hours each and were complemented by detailed field notes taken during and after interviews. Next, and following initial data analysis, I conducted 13 one-hour follow-up interviews via telephone or Skype. I also conducted 3 two-hour interviews in Vancouver during the fall of 2017 (total interviews $N = 35$; total audio recorded from interviews ≈ 60 hours).

All participants were born and raised in Iran and identified as gay. With one exception, they all had a university education, and they ranged in age from 22 to 37. All self-identified as middle class in Iran but working class in Canada. At the time of the field work, participants' length of stay in Canada ranged from two to seven years. None expressed strong religious beliefs. I conducted observations and interviews in participants' homes as well as public spaces such as cafes, parks, malls, and workplaces. The interviews were conducted in Persian (except for one conducted in English). In designing my interview guide, I focused on the participants' social trajectories, the social construction of relationships, and the meanings of these contacts for them (Erel 2010).

All interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the informant. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. I used an inductive approach to analyze my findings. I started with open coding and attached comments to quotes and excerpts from the data. Once the thematic categorization of data was established (as presented in the following sections), I undertook a more rigorous analysis to explain the emergence of these typologies by a deductively derived theoretical argument. A refined Bourdieusian approach to transnational social fields, as discussed above, proved most capable of making sense of this set of data.

Findings

Pre-migration Transnational Lives and Understandings of Asylum Process

We can account for individuals' capacity and motivation to deploy border-traversing relations and the knowledge made available through such relations (i.e., social and cultural capital) once we locate their habitus as well as strategies of capital accumulation within transnational social fields. My interviews with gay Iranian refugees revealed that when they were in Iran, consumption of the images and information dispersed through the media (read: Western media) had added to their cultural capital and knowledge of the West, and had altered their habitus by, symbolically, creating imageries based on freedom for sexual minorities in Western countries. For the most part, however, it was not the interplay between their habitus and volumes of capital, located within Iranian as well as global social fields, that resulted in their leaving Iran. One participant remembered,

> Yes, I have watched many movies made about gay people. Everyone has watched them because we used to exchange our DVDs or hard drives among [gay] friends. Closer to my departure from Iran we also had easier access to high-speed Internet at home which made it much easier to download movies or even follow the news or the gay models and celebrities on Facebook and Instagram.

In response to whether consuming these types of media and information was a motivating factor to leave and apply for asylum, one participant said, "personally, I remember when I was in Iran I did fantasize about the life that I would have in Europe or Canada, but I never seriously considered leaving so I could have such [a] life."

When I probed the factors behind emigration and seeking asylum, I discovered that sexuality played a central role along with several national and international social, political, and economic structural factors which had vastly contributed to my informants' decisions to act according to their dispositions of habitus, as well as their access to various forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). These structural factors consisted of the United Nations's inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds for asylum in 2007, which consolidated certain migratory routes; the recent visibility and force given to Iran's penal code on same-sex sexual acts; and the ongoing deterioration of the Iranian economy as a consequence of Western sanctions against the Iranian government (Karimi and Bayatrizi 2018). One participant mentioned,

> I left Iran for Turkey twice. The first time it was because my neighbor found out that there was something going on between their son and me and they threatened to go to the police. They told my parents, and for a while, I did not dare go home. . . . I went to Turkey and applied for asylum but after two weeks realized that I might still be able to return and make a living [in Iran]. I really tried to have a life there, but after two years I left again. . . . During those two years I changed my job and moved to my own place and asked my boyfriend to live with me. Again the neighbors [caused problems], but it was more difficult this time because neither of us had the support network or the money to guarantee our safety . . . and I realized that I would lose my boyfriend, my future, and my sanity if I would stay . . .

Another participant told me about his living conditions in Iran, similar to those expressed in the quotation above, and that he had contemplated suicide until he came across a few Web logs written by gay Iranians who had been resettled or were in Turkey awaiting their claim results.

> I had no other way and did not know what to do before I got to know that if I can prove my homosexuality and that my life and future was at risk in Iran, I would [be] eligible to apply for asylum and leave Iran. . . . when I left in 2009 there were weblogs about this, and they were writing about their experiences, so I contacted one of the bloggers. . . . I am not sure if I would still be alive if it were not for this asylum option. The [Iranian] government and the police have become very wary of gay and transsexuals recently . . .

The early waves of gay Iranian asylum seekers actively took part in writing blogs in Farsi, forming connections throughout the asylum process, and sharing online their experiences of living in Turkey and resettlement in Canada or the United States. During the past decade, such blogs have decreased in numbers and have given way to several Web sites and online magazines that cover a wider range of social issues, collaborate with activists, and publish news and scientific articles translated into Farsi. There is now a chain of connections built around sexual identities and belonging, or what in other cases sociologists of migration call an "ethnic network" (Portes and Böröcz 1989) between gay Iranian men who have sought asylum and have been resettled, those awaiting the results of their cases in Turkey, and those gay men who remain in Iran and are considering seeking asylum as an option should their situation there worsen. As parts of the globalized discourses of human rights, these blogs and the blog writers accelerate capital accumulation and embody social capital by sustaining cross-border social ties throughout the asylum process.

In sum, my participants' networks, formed around sexuality and ethnicity, stimulate changes in habitus by making available new forms of transnational knowledge that expand the nationally limited habitus and, consequently, facilitate the possibilities of chain migration (Castles and Loughna 2005). According to Bourdieu and Nice (1977), such changes in the habitus, which is shared by people of similar backgrounds, generate unprecedented practices including seeking asylum in the case of gay Iranian men. These habitus- and structural-level changes among gay Iranians are tied to national and international enterprises, and challenge the narratives that merely demonize marginalized states and depict refugees as escaping the cruelties of a single state in the Global South (Espiritu 2006).

Post-migration Transnational Ties

After resettlement in Canada, refugees find themselves linked with both the old (i.e., home and transition countries) and the new (i.e., host country) social fields and structures which constitute refugees' daily lives and experiences. In this section, I will examine the ways that gay Iranians manage their ties with family and friends back in Iran and Turkey as well as their interactions with their host society.

Defining social fields as transnational implies that the lives of individual actors are not merely bound to the host nation-state's rules and regulations but that they are simultaneously influenced by social and cultural norms as well as laws and politics of the home and transition countries (Dahinden 2017; Levitt and Schiller 2004). Throughout my field work, it was evident that my informants' dispositions and experiences that were shaped in Iran, and their endeavors to sustain and further accumulate social capital through their home-country ties, had informed their decision to conceal their sexual orientation from their social network even after resettlement in Canada. One participant said,

> Living in Canada means that I can be myself here, but it definitely does not mean that I can call my dad one day and tell him hey I am gay. I still have to follow the norms of my homeland because my family and friends live in that society which unfortunately does not accept my sexual orientation and even severely punishes it. A couple of my Canadian friends were surprised to know that I am still in closet with my family because they think that I am safe in Canada and that I should [not] fear anything . . . I have not told my parents about myself not because I am afraid of persecution or harassment, but because I know that they may not understand me or that they might ostracize me from family connections.

Rather than coming out and risking their social ties and capital, my participants preferred to keep a balance between family ties and life in Canada, and to keep their parent-child relationships intact. Except for three, my participants were not out to their parents or siblings. Interestingly, my informants, whose asylum-seeking decisions were primarily motivated by their sexual orientation and the risks of living in Iran as a gay man, had justified their emigration to their families through the more typical frames of emigration as a

search for jobs or education in Turkey and the West. One participant said,

> The truth is that I have moved here, but I am still part of my family so from time to time I have to hide who I am and say I immigrated because of work reasons. . . . One of my classmates from Iran got in touch with me asking about universities here in Canada, and now he lives here [Vancouver], and I have to deal with him and the risk of him knowing that I am gay because I do not want him find out and tell others back in Iran.

Looking at the quality and methods of managing their social relations across borders, I found that my participants stay connected with their kin through phone calls, social media, and (infrequent) travel. As a result of emigration and resettlement, my participants had learned about and could afford to make Internet calls on their cellphones, because this method required the least effort in terms of their sexual identity and lifestyle management. One participant said,

> My life is now in Iran, in Turkey, and here in Canada because I have my parents and my siblings in Iran and many friends in Turkey who are still waiting for their cases. . . . I have got friends in Iran too, but they have decided to stay there because they somehow manage their life. I am in touch with them mostly through Internet phone calls and texting on Skype, Telegram, and WhatsApp . . . it's cheap and my mom or others cannot know much about my life here.

The literature on transnational migrants' lives underlines the role of communication technologies and the accessibility of travel means (Ghorashi and Boersma 2009; Vertovec 2004) in managing and developing transnational ties. Several studies involving refugees have shown that families' access to communication technology in their home countries has become a means of burdening refugees with financial requests (Lindley 2009). Likewise, families' and friends' easy access to Internet phone calls and connections through social media have increased the risks of exposing gay refugees' sexual identities (Binnie and Klesse

2013; Dhoest 2016). This latter consequence testifies to the fact that social fields and their respective structures stretch beyond national borders to influence refugees' lives in their host country (see Portes [1998] and Zontini [2010] for their discussions of how social capital may restrict immigrants' opportunities in the host society).

In contrast to most refugee groups, none of my participants was involved in sending monetary remittances to their families in Iran, because (as was revealed in the interviews) the majority of my informants' families held middle-class status in Iran and had access to various forms of capital. Indeed, a series of combinations and conversions between informants' pre-migration social and financial capital as well as their access to the above-mentioned blogs and blog writers as transnational sources of cultural and social capital had strongly shaped their habitus and decisions to leave their home country. One participant said, "no, I do not send money to my parents or siblings. They do not need money from me or anyone because they are doing fine financially!" He continued,

> I did not leave because there was a war . . . my family is not at risk, I was actually the only one at risk because of my sexuality and because the government could easily pick on me as an individual target.

Another participant, expressing similar thoughts, said,

> I have never sent money to my family, they do not need it and, honestly, I am not making that much money here . . . but I was among the luck[y] ones in Iran, my family had enough money which meant I had enough money and had access to the Internet and some ways of affording emigration and asylum wait-times in Turkey, I know at least two friends from Iran who could not leave because they did not have the money and access to right people.

This participant and several others emphasized that they had, for the most part, sustained their transitional social ties with their gay friends in home, transition, and host countries

through social media and phone calls as a way of communicating their experiences of seeking asylum and life in Canada. In addition to contributing to cultural capital, two participants mentioned that they had on one occasion sent money to a friend or a former roommate in Turkey to support them through the asylum process. One participant said,

> We did not have access to legal jobs in Turkey and could not afford renting a proper place; I did not have access to hot water so many months! A couple of years ago, when I had found a job here [Toronto], I decided to send some dollars to my ex-roommate in Turkey because I knew he was not in a good place.

Besides their border-traversing ties and practices, gay Iranian refugees must navigate the challenges of adapting to the host society's economic, political, and education fields as well as the challenges of belonging to social groups, including the Iranian diaspora and the mainstream LGBT groups in Canada. The former group's patriarchal gender and sexual structures have served as barriers against the full inclusion of gay Iranian men (Shakhsari 2012), while the latter group's homonormativity (Duggan [2003] 2012)—the rights-based politics that consolidate around white middle-class gay men's values without challenging heteronormative institutions—marginalizes racialized gay Iranian men (Manalansan 2006; Mepschen et al. 2010; Steele, Collier, and Sumerau 2018). Regarding the marginalization of sexual minorities within the Iranian diaspora in Canada, one informant said,

> Yes, Iranians are well educated, and most of them are financially successful, well-off people. But when you talk to them about this stuff [gender and sexuality], they do not even want to hear it. It's like you question their whole identity! Just have a look at Iranians' Facebook page. There are a couple of psychologists who leave some random but educational posts about sexuality but no one comments on those posts, it's like they do not want to see it!

In sum, all social groups experience gradual changes in their habitus, volumes of capital, and modes of practice as a result of encounters with new social structures and other actors' habitus. These gradual changes and transnational processes are some of the social integration mechanisms that affect and are affected by immigrants and non-immigrants alike (Dahinden 2017; Wieviorka 2014). However, Bourdieu's (1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) social theory, which presents a relational understanding of individuals' agency and social structures (Castles 2003; Lacroix 2014), underlines the importance of power relations regarding the intertwined national and transnational structures and sources of capital (Levitt and Schiller 2004). This theoretical approach deftly interprets the ways that my participants' transnational lives, their decisions to manage their ties with families and friends for instance, are affected by transnational power relations and social ties.

Activism with Transnational Outreach

During my field work, I found that gay Iranian men, mainly those with higher sense of connection with Iranian LGBT communities as well as greater cultural capital (i.e., higher educational attainments and previous activism experiences; Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003), had become agents of social change by using the Iranian diasporas' networks and media channels to promote discussions around the acceptance of LGBTs among Iranian communities inside and outside Iran (Ayoub and Bauman 2018; Eleftheriadis 2014; Klapeer and Laskar 2018).

The Iranian diasporic communities have established themselves as ethnic communities in several cities in the United States and Western Europe. These communities have founded broadcasting companies and channels to produce entertainment programs and TV shows that Iranians in and outside Iran consume via satellite TV. Until recently, any discussion about sexualities and gender roles had been absent from diasporic communities and politics (see Binnie and Klesse 2013); however, during the past decade, some factions of the anti-Iranian-government diaspora, otherwise replete with patriarchy and homophobia,

have strategically started to include LGBT rights in their media channels as part of their campaign against the Iranian government (Shakhsari 2012). The visibility that was initially given to LGBT issues has laid the ground for more discussion about homosexuality and the inclusion of gay and lesbian activists in TV programs. One of my informants, who was a regular guest on various TV talk shows, said,

> There are some gays and lesbians working for the VOA Persian or the BBC Farsi, and in ManotoTV [a TV broadcasting channel], some of them are news spokespersons . . . but none of them is out to the public, and their audience does not necessarily know about their sexuality. If they come out, they will lose their jobs! Look at the whole controversy about the ManotoTV's song contest host who was accused of being gay and the way people from inside and outside Iran attacked him on social media.

He continued, "I am trying to establish myself but not depend on my income from the Persian TV companies so that I can, one day, be out and still be on TV." In total, three of my participants were working with Iranian diasporic media as guests in talk shows. One of them, who had cut ties with his family in Iran, had already used his fame and popularity to initiate conversations about LGBT issues on his Instagram page:

> After a few months that I was working with ManotoTV people started to follow me on Twitter and Instagram. Of course, none of them knew that I am gay until last year I posted one picture from Toronto's Pride. I was wearing a white dress with tonnes of make-up with this long beard . . . hundreds of people unfollowed me after that picture, but so many more stayed and kept insulting me and homosexuals [in general]. But I noticed that some of my followers started to defend me and my sexuality by replying to the offensive comments. The best thing was a mother who contacted me from Iran to ask why I was in a dress and what does it mean to be gay, because she had seen some similar behaviors in her teenage son and wanted to be supportive of him in case he was gay!

Previous research has shown that any discord between the habitus and its respective social fields may result in or provoke transformations in that habitus or those fields. For instance, the undertaking of migration to other locales challenges actors as they face new sets of rules and fields. Consequently, individuals—and refugees in particular—will have to adapt their practices to their new environment and act according to the rules of new social fields to re-evaluate and accumulate capital (Bourdieu 2011; Thieme 2008). The forms and amounts of capital and the sets of dispositions and expectations that migrants bring with them might be insufficient for or in discord with the new environment (Bauder 2008; Kelly and Lusis 2006; Killian and Manohar 2016). Notwithstanding this, and perhaps more importantly, various forms of social and cultural capital that are accumulated by refugees in both pre- and post-migration contexts become mediums of power that (Cameron and Cabaniss 2018; Erel 2010), as in the case of sexual-racial minority refugees, enable individual members to engage with other community members to challenge cultural constructs and, ultimately, reinterpret the rules of social structures (Ayoub and Bauman 2018; Binnie and Klesse 2013; Bourdieu 1984).

In addition to collaborating with diasporic media, four of my participants were working with members of Iranian LGBT groups, some of whom had left Iran over a decade ago, to build ties with Canadian activists and municipal and provincial politicians. Indeed, residence in Canada and access to the host country's institutions and structures have increased gay Iranian men's social and cultural capital and have reshaped their activism skills and the relevant aspects of their habitus (Eleftheriadis 2014; Van den Bos and Nell 2006). During my field work, for example, I was invited by my participants to be a forum member of an online Iranian LGBT group whose members were living in Canada, the United States, and Turkey. I observed that several of my participants, who were also members of this forum, were involved in discussing and formulating strategies as well as guiding lobbying meetings and community politics with Canadian and American activists. Most of these efforts were targeted at increasing awareness about gay Iranian asylum

seekers' situations in Turkey and the necessity of expediting their case processing. The participant who invited me to join the online group said,

> The primary goal is to increase awareness. . . . The Canadian government has put a halt on resettling LGBT refugees from Turkey, but most Canadian activists do know about this so we have been trying to arrange meetings with our MPs in different cities and with LGBT activist groups to talk about this issue and find ways to restart the program.

During my six months of field work, I discovered two characteristics of Iranian LGBT groups and their activities. First, throughout the years and as a result of gaining experience with Canadian methods of activism, Iranian LGBTs have experienced a change in their habitus regarding their politics and have accumulated new forms of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 2011). It was evident that they have built on the forms of the human rights discourses that they had been exposed to during their lifetime in Iran to further adopt Western activists' language of universal human rights and politics in making symbolic ties and navigating politics in Canada (see Osanloo [2009] on the interaction between the global human rights and social justice in Iran). As mentioned by one participant, "[Iranian] activists have managed to secure some funding from various sources and have succeeded in making progress by placing gay Iranian asylum seekers on the agenda for policymakers in Canada." Although I observed my activist participants' as well as other forum members' occasional attempts to avoid the vilification of Iran to underline Iranian queers' need for support, the majority of their discussions were framed in a language that vilifies the totality of Iranian society. Their rhetoric directly builds on post-9/11 transnational politics and discourses which, now more than before, denigrate the Middle Eastern nation-states and their cultures, and depict Middle Eastern LGBT refugees as passive victims of Oriental cultures and states (Kyriakides et al. 2018; Mepschen et al. 2010).

Second, building groups and engaging with activists and politicians are intensely pursued activities at times, but are more often short-lived and disorganized in bringing members together for online meetings or for establishing group consensus to plan for long-term goals. Similar to Colombian immigrants in Canada (Landolt and Goldring 2010), gay Iranian refugees' lack of organization and their inability to build and sustain non-personal networks with Canadian activists is rooted in their habitus that contains pre-migration mentalities. Elsewhere (Karimi and Bucerius 2017), I have argued that the absence of community organization and social commitment among Iranian diaspora is due to their distrust of the hostile (extra)territorial and transnational politics of the Iranian government. In addition to this diasporic mentality, gay Iranian refugees' families still live in Iran, and they fear that any involvement in human rights and sexual politics, both of which are interpreted as treacherous by the Iranian regime, might jeopardize the safety of their family members back home. According to Bourdieu's (1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) social theory, it is once again evident that my participants' practices are informed by national and transnational experiences and sources of capital (Levitt and Schiller 2004) which affect their interaction with Canadian activists, their involvement, or lack thereof, with Iranian LGBT communities, and their transnational activism.

Conclusion

My findings confirm refugees' engagement in various forms of transnational activities, and highlight the role of several micro- and macro-structures in regulating the forms and frequencies of transnational ways of belonging and practice (Castles 2003; Koser 2007). Here, I underline two major contributions of my research findings.

First, I argue that it is necessary to account for the social and symbolic ties, that is, power relations, that stretch beyond national borders because these ties are as important as economic or political activities in bringing social groups together (Al-Ali et al. 2001a; Levitt and

Jaworsky 2007). Gay Iranian refugees, in contrast to most migrant groups, are not directly involved in cross-border financial activities, nor are they involved in home-country politics through voting or political party formation (Horst 2008; Koser 2007). In the absence of extensive financial and cultural capital, gay Iranian refugees in Canada draw on their social ties and their transnational habitus (Kelly and Lusis 2006)—that is, their shared sexual identities, past experiences from home and transition countries, and their friendship ties in Iran, Turkey, and Canada—to evaluate their sources of capital and navigate transnational social fields. With regard to the importance of the social relations, Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) emphasized that "taken together and over time, their combined efforts add up and can alter the economies, values, and practices" of communities across borders.

Second, I argue that de-nationalized analyses of transnational practices must also account for diversities in practice at the intersections of migration status, sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and other relevant social factors (Anthias 1998; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). This analytical goal is attainable through a Bourdieusian theoretical approach that accounts for power inequalities (i.e., differences in capital and habitus in overlapping social fields), which inform migration decisions and transnational practices. My findings add to the literature that argues for the importance of Bourdieusian social theory for transnational migration studies in explaining migrants' and refugees' diverse cross-border ways of belonging as well as their practices which occur within overlapping social fields (Erel 2010; Nowicka 2013). This approach discards any predetermined categorization such as ethnic niche or a fixed LGBT community and prioritizes an understanding of social phenomena based on "the relation of specific kinds of capital and of the interplay of social fields and habitus" (Thieme 2008). For gay Iranian refugees, for instance, it is the combination of sexuality, nationality, race, class, migration regimes, gender structures, and previous experiences that regulates their transnational connections. Gay Iranians' transnational

activities underline the importance of pre-migration contexts and the fluidity of refugees' attachments to and movements between home, host, and transition countries.

In sum, it is crucial to understand transnational practices as existing within socio-historical fields and structures and as being affected by intersecting micro- and macro-level factors (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Nice 1977; Lacroix 2014). Transnationalism then becomes "one form of economic, political, and cultural adaptation that co-exists with other, more traditional forms" (Portes 2001). This conclusion not only questions the interpretation of refugees' flight from their home country as a unidirectional and final move, but also supports an understanding of individuals' transnational social practices as connected through the interplay of social fields and habitus (Waldinger 2013b). I invite future research to contextualize and empirically examine refugees' pre-migration, en-route, and post-migration transnational practices to bring to light the individual and structural factors that intersect in informing their daily lives.

Author's Note
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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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