

# Social Networks, Friends and Recreational Activities

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*"No matter how rich you are, you do not want to live alone. I need my friends, a circle where I feel well"*

(Germany, focus group)



## Introduction

Social networks, made of individuals and organisations, are a key resource to groups such as young migrants and are often seen as key determinants of immigrant integration. There are differing opinions however as to the building of different type of social networks and in particular how to minimize trade-off between bonding and bridging social capital, both of which are important. Literature suggests that rather than directly fostering inter-ethnic contacts, policies have to provide places of encounters between different groups. Within that, recreational and general social activities have clear roles to play as they help migrants in the cultural adaptation process and building network of trust and reciprocal engagement. This is not always the case, however.

## Results

The European research highlights that the existence and nature of social networks clearly impacts on young migrant men's well-being. When forming new friendships young men are cut off their old social ties and have to establish new friendships; those friends may even replace missing family members. As a result of forming those friendships, young men's **sense of belonging** becomes stronger and they feel they can progress further: *"(...) if you try alone, you face barriers. If you have lots of people you can move forward."* (Finland, age 18)

**Mutual trust and sharing** also emerges a key point that also positively influences their well-being: *"There are no real problems, as long as you have someone you can go to for help or work out your problem with."* (Germany; age 18)

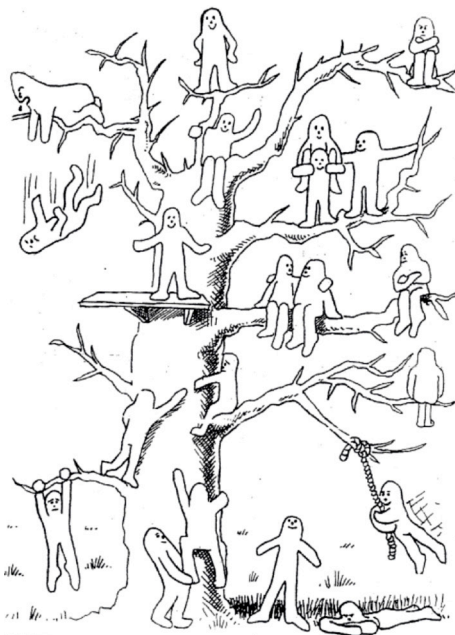
*"They are proud of me, that I'm taking my A levels. (...) My friends are proud [of me]."* (Germany, focus group)

At an early stage, local or established migrant friends assisted in migrants' process of acculturation

including acquiring the language while later young men themselves became a mentor to newcomers either informally or through an ethnic or religious organisation. However, some young men may suffer bad experiences in their diaspora as a result of being taken advantage of or due to bad influence:

*"I quit the school because of my friends. I was with them every day, drinking every day. I couldn't go to school because I stayed up every night."* (Finland, age 20).

Recreational activities play a pivotal role in socialisation: *"In school you learn the grammar but you need to have places in which to have informal discussions."* (Finland, focus group). Importantly, through those activities young migrant men made friends and also achieved recognition. Furthermore, they **developed vital skills**; not only language and cultural awareness but general interpersonal and leadership skills. Leisure activities also provided an opportunity for migrants to de-stress, receive stimulation and use their creativity. In contrast, those few who experienced negative treatment felt de-motivated and bitter.



*The Blobtree was used in some interviews to ask questions about well-being.*

Sport emerged a crucial area and in particular team sports such as soccer was pursued and valued by many young migrant men. Some also took part in art activities, youth clubs, joined churches or volunteered for a community organisation. Some

**differences emerged in terms of preferences** by them and their local counterparts. The most prominent examples were seeking social activities that do not involve alcohol or stronger interest in religious activities. Sometimes young male migrants had difficulty in realising those options or just simply felt unhappy about the limited choice in their locality or the lack of flexibility.

Related to that is the difference between the **type of socialisations**: a number of them emphasised a more informal and direct way of socialising with people in their place of birth and the more formal, more organised structured adopted by European countries. *"In Egypt everybody helps each other even though they may not know each other that well; but that does not seem to exist here, I don't even know the English word for it. In England it's like everybody for themselves, everybody minds their own business. In Egypt we don't mind just our own business"* (UK, age 18)." On the whole, although having native friends were not uncommon, it seemed that that young migrant men had more difficulties in building friendship with local young people than making friends from their own ethnic or other migrant groups. As suggested, the availability of safe spaces for meeting between native youth and other migrants therefore is important but how to create such space is a point of further debate.



## References

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