





Community Ethnography for Understanding Social Dynamics in Migration

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47134/bai.v2i3.4370

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Received: 04-05-2025 Accepted: 14-06-2025 Published: 17-07-2025



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Abstract: This study aims to explore how migrant communities construct, sustain, and negotiate social structures in urban environments. Using a community ethnography approach, the research is grounded in Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of socio-cultural capital. The research was conducted in Tamalate District, Makassar, involving participatory observation and in-depth interviews with 15 key informants. Findings reveal that social structures within migrant communities emerge from routinized daily practices such as communal gatherings, religious study groups, and collective neighborhood maintenance. Socio-cultural capitalmanifested in networks, trust, and shared values-significantly influences individuals' positions and roles in the community. Moreover, the younger generation is actively involved in shaping new socio-cultural spaces through digital adaptation and small-scale entrepreneurship. Migrant communities also employ symbolic strategies to navigate external challenges without engaging in open conflict, which reflects a form of silent resistance and social negotiation. This study highlights the remarkable adaptability and resilience of migrant communities in urban settings. Rather than being passive subjects of displacement, these communities actively reproduce and transform their social world, contributing to a dynamic and empowered urban life. The findings offer valuable insights into the interplay between migration, identity formation, and urban inclusivity, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in urban development policies.

Keywords: Community Ethnography, Social Structure, Internal Migration, Socio-Cultural Capital

Introduction

Human mobility from one place to another is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout history, migration has been an integral part of human life, driven by various reasons such as economic necessity, conflict, education, or simply the pursuit of a better life (Campbell & Barone, 2012; Hoerder, 2022). In Indonesia, interregional population mobility has significantly increased in line with infrastructure development, urbanization, and easier access to information (Firman, 2004; Mardiansjah et al., 2021). Yet beyond mere statistical figures, migration carries complex social narratives about how people build new communities, negotiate identities, and reconstruct social order in unfamiliar settings (Gomes & Mejía, 2020; Lőrincz & Németh, 2022).

In the context of internal migration, migrant communities often face multilayered challenges: economic pressure, social stigma, cultural alienation, and limited access to public services (Choi & Fong, 2017; Dalal & Churchill, 2018). Nevertheless, these communities demonstrate extraordinary capacities to adapt, organize, and create their own distinctive social systems (Carpenter & Brock, 2008; Vallury et al., 2022). Migrant communities are not merely displaced populations; they are active social agents shaping space, meaning, and collective structures (Comola & Mendola, 2015; Ryan et al., 2008). To fully understand the social dynamics of migration, community ethnography becomes a vital methodological lens (Case et al., 2014; King, 2018).

Community ethnography provides a sharp and in-depth perspective on the everyday lives of migrant communities (Allwood, 2020; Hamish & Vupenyu, 2020). It does not merely view migration as an economic or demographic symptom, but instead interrogates how social interactions are formed, how power and solidarity operate, and how identities are contested in daily life (Blumenstock et al., 2025; Lőrincz & Németh, 2022). This approach stems from the belief that social reality is not something "out there," but is continually constructed and lived through everyday practices (Orleans, 2015; Rudanovskaya, 2019).

Previous studies have employed various approaches to examine migrant communities. Quantitative studies, for example, have explored the correlation between migration and poverty alleviation (Tjiptoherijanto, 2011), while structural approaches have analyzed how state policies shape migration flows (Hugo, 2000). However, such perspectives often portray migrants as passive objects influenced by macro structures, rather than as reflective and proactive subjects (Ehrenfeld, 2024; Wieviorka, 2018). Some ethnographic works—such as Lindquist's (2009) study on Indonesian-Malaysian migration—have started to reveal more sociological and cultural readings. Yet, few studies have specifically examined the dynamics of migrant social structures in urban Indonesia through the combined lenses of structuration theory and socio-cultural capital (Akhmad et al., 2024; Hamid, 2021).

This article fills that gap. Instead of merely depicting economic aspects or population movements, it presents a bottom-up social narrative—drawn from everyday conversations, routines, power relations, and cultural symbols that emerge in migrant communities (Bönisch-Brednich et al., 2023; De Fina, 2022). This study integrates community ethnography with Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration and Bourdieu's concept of socio-cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Giddens (1984) emphasizes that social structures are not only constraining but also shaped by social practices. Bourdieu (1986), on the other hand, invites us to examine how cultural, social, and symbolic capital determines positions and power relations within communities (Waters, 2009). By combining both frameworks, this article captures the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, between old habits and new adaptations, and between constraints and creative social strategies (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Stoecklin, 2020).

This study also responds to the need to view migrant communities not as homogeneous units tied by common origins (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Stoecklin, 2020), but as diverse groups with varied strategies in responding to change—how they preserve values,

reinterpret collective memory, and negotiate with urban pressures, discrimination, and local interactions (Sinha & Mishra, 2024). In practice, migrant communities create "shadow social spaces" such as informal savings groups, cooperatives, religious study forums, and other informal institutions that function as alternatives to formal state structures (Lubbers et al., 2020; Sandoval, 2013).

This article seeks to answer the following key questions: How do migrant communities construct and reproduce their social structures through daily practices? What rules and resources guide their interactions? How are power relations established based on the accumulation of economic, cultural, and social capital? How are collective identity and solidarity negotiated in the urban context? And to what extent do individuals within these communities have room to change or sustain existing structures?

The aim of this study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics within migrant communities in urban contexts by employing community ethnography alongside the theoretical frameworks of structuration and socio-cultural capital (Hardcastle et al., 2005; Lippuner & Werlen, 2009). This article aspires to contribute new insights into how migrant communities not only survive under constraints, but also actively build distinctive social worlds—worlds shaped through interactions, strategies, and evolving meanings (Vickstrom, 2019).

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using community ethnography to gain an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics within migrant communities. This method was chosen for its ability to capture social realities that are not always visible on the surface and to allow the researcher to be directly involved in the daily lives of the community being studied. The primary focus is on processes, meanings, and social interactions that are formed and inherited within migrant communities in an urban context.

The research was conducted in Tamalate District, Makassar City, South Sulawesi. This area was selected due to its high concentration of migrant communities, particularly those originating from Bone, Jeneponto, Tana Toraja, Buton, and Flores. Moreover, this district represents an intense convergence of migrant cultures and urban life, making it an ideal site to explore how identity, social structure, and solidarity are formed and negotiated.

Data collection was carried out over a period of approximately three months, from November 2024 to January 2025. During this time, the researcher engaged in participant observation across various community activities, including Friday night religious gatherings, neighborhood clean-up efforts, women's rotating savings groups (arisan), and extended migrant family meetings. These observations were conducted directly and involved detailed note-taking on social interactions, communication patterns, and cultural symbols expressed in daily practices.

In addition to observation, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the personal experiences of community members. A total of 15 informants were purposively selected, consisting of first- and second-generation migrants, community leaders, housewives, youth, and local entrepreneurs. Semi-structured interviews were employed to

maintain flexibility and responsiveness to the informants' narratives, while still covering key topics such as social structures, power relations, habitus, and survival strategies in urban settings.

For recording and documenting the interviews, the researcher used a high-sensitivity digital recorder and a field note application that facilitated data coding. Transcriptions were made verbatim and were accompanied by ethnographic notes capturing situational context, body language, and emotional tone during conversations. The identities of informants were anonymized using pseudonyms, in accordance with ethical standards in social research.

Data analysis followed a theory-driven thematic analysis approach, grounded in Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social, cultural, and symbolic capital. The analytical process was iterative, beginning with close readings of the transcripts, identifying key themes, developing thematic codes, and linking them to the theoretical framework. NVivo 12 Plus qualitative software was used to support the organization and visualization of data in the form of conceptual maps and analytical matrices.

To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and methods was applied by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and community documents (such as event invitations, meeting minutes, and WhatsApp group conversations). Interpretive validation was also conducted by consulting key informants to clarify selected quotes or preliminary interpretations. This step aimed to ensure that the meanings captured by the researcher remained faithful to the community's lived social context.

Supporting visuals—such as community location maps, social network diagrams, and community activity documentation—will be presented as figures with separate captions, placed beneath the images, not embedded within them.

Overall, this research method is designed to provide a rich and nuanced portrayal of migrant community life in urban contexts. Rather than merely depicting external conditions, the approach aims to delve into the social logic that drives everyday actions—from seemingly minor conversations at roadside coffee stalls to more symbolic acts such as the selection of community leaders. Through this lens, the analysis aspires not only to describe existing social structures but also to reveal how these structures are formed, negotiated, and occasionally contested by the actors themselves.

Results and Discussion

This study reveals several significant findings regarding how migrant communities construct, maintain, and negotiate their social structures in urban environments. These findings not only respond to the research questions posed but also offer broader insights into the hidden social dynamics that lie beneath the routines and daily interactions within migrant communities.

Social Structures Are Formed Through Repetitive Daily Practices

One of the central findings of this research is that social structures within migrant communities are not established through formal institutions, but rather through repetitive daily practices involving community actors themselves. This aligns with Giddens' (1984)

concept of the duality of structure, in which structure is not merely a constraining framework, but also the outcome of continuously reproduced social actions.

For instance, among the Bugis migrant community in Tamalate District, regular activities such as arisan (rotating savings groups), communal clean-up (gotong royong), and religious gatherings are not merely social routines. Instead, they serve as arenas where social hierarchies, collective norms, and the distribution of power are formed. Community figures who consistently participate and demonstrate loyalty gain symbolic recognition and significant influence. This demonstrates that social structures are shaped from the bottom up—through seemingly trivial actions that carry profound symbolic weight.

Social and Cultural Capital as the Most Enduring Sources of Power

Another striking finding is the role of social and cultural capital as enduring sources of power within the community. Individuals who possess extensive social networks, fluency in local languages, or active participation in cultural practices tend to hold high positions within the community, even if they lack substantial economic capital.

For example, one informant who was known for leading religious activities held a strong symbolic position despite modest economic status. This reflects Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital—recognition granted by the community for actions or attributes deemed valuable. The finding also shows that within migrant communities, power relations are not strictly determined by money or formal status, but by a complex combination of trust, moral authority, and contributions to the collective.

Agency and Negotiation: Migrants as Agents of Change

This study also demonstrates that migrants are not passive subjects merely adapting to their new environment. They are reflective actors with agency to alter social structures, particularly when existing frameworks are no longer relevant (Calo & Baglioni, 2023; Mkrtichyan, 2015). One notable finding is the emergence of new spaces initiated by the younger generation of migrants—such as discussion forums, digital communities, and online-based collaborative businesses—beyond traditional customary structures.

This phenomenon points to a shift in habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), where younger generations experience tensions between inherited values and modern-day demands. Instead of rejecting tradition, they combine cultural elements with contemporary strategies to navigate urban life. This transformation of habitus indicates that migrant communities are dynamic and not bound by a single, static social pattern.

Coping Strategies Against External Pressures: From Symbolic to Structural

Another important finding relates to how migrant communities respond to external pressures such as discrimination, exclusionary policies, and economic challenges. In many cases, rather than engaging in direct confrontation, they build internal support systems such as neighborhood cooperatives, informal savings groups, and cultural events that reinforce their collective identity.

These practices exemplify symbolic resistance, a concept referring to non-confrontational actions employed by marginalized groups to assert their existence and legitimacy (Dornschneider, 2023; Saikia, 2023). Practices such as wearing traditional clothing in public events, organizing communal Maulid celebrations, or speaking regional languages in public spaces are not merely cultural expressions, but also assertions of social space and reminders that these communities possess a history and dignity worthy of recognition.

Findings Supported and Contrasted by Previous Studies

The results of this study reinforce the findings of Norris and Inglehart (2012), who argue that migrants do not simply relocate their bodies to new places—they also bring with them social structures and cultural values that reshape urban spaces. However, unlike Lindquist's approach, which focuses more on transnational migration, this study shows that similar dynamics are present in internal, inter-regional migration within Indonesia.

Moreover, this study offers a fresh perspective in relation to Scheel's (2013) policyoriented view of migration. While the role of the state remains significant in shaping patterns of mobility, the present study highlights the autonomy of migrant communities in constructing social structures independent of formal state apparatuses.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the life of migrant communities in urban environments is neither static nor solely shaped by external pressures. On the contrary, through their everyday practices, these communities actively create and sustain their own social structures—often in ways that remain invisible to outsiders. Migration, therefore, is not merely about relocating physical residence, but about transporting values, social networks, and life logics that gradually shape new urban social spaces.

The key findings reveal that the strength of migrant communities lies in their ability to build solidarity, maintain trust, and manage the socio-cultural capital they possess. Whether through arisan (rotating savings groups), religious rituals, or informal mutual aid, these practices play a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging and security amid unfamiliar or even hostile urban conditions. The social structures that emerge are not imposed from above, but rather grow organically from the ongoing, reciprocal interactions among community members.

Furthermore, this research highlights that individuals within these communities do not lose their agency. They are capable of interpreting their surroundings, adapting to change, and even transforming outdated norms into life strategies more relevant to contemporary contexts. Young people, for instance, play a key role in reconfiguring community values while remaining anchored to their cultural roots.

Taken together, the findings suggest that migrant communities possess substantial social strength that should not be underestimated. They not only survive under constrained conditions, but also actively create social structures that are vibrant, adaptive, and continuously evolving. In the face of urban challenges, their presence serves as a vital

reminder that city spaces are not merely shaped by policy or infrastructure but are also deeply formed by organic social relations.

Looking ahead, this study opens avenues for further exploration of intergenerational dynamics within migrant communities, and how processes such as digitalization and shifting socio-political climates affect the social structures they have built. Future research may also delve deeper into the role of migrant women and their contributions to preserving symbolic capital and expanding networks of solidarity across communities.

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