

Article

# Student Mobility and Transnational Social Ties as Factors of Reflexivity

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**Abstract:** The article seeks to develop and apply new quantitative measurement instruments capable of significantly improving understanding of the relationship between the transnational mobility and transnational social ties of students, along with their reflexive capacities. With a focus on students building their personal networks, educational and professional activities that extend beyond the nation's borders and organising their day-to-day routines in transnational social spaces, we analyse the role of mobility in their reflexive capacities. Applying a tool that is line with Archer's theory and indicators to measure reflexivity, and transnational social ties as proposed by Molina et al., we analyse data collected via an on-line survey questionnaire administered to Slovenian students. In addition, students from the Middle East (Lebanon) and the USA (Hawai'i) are added for comparative purposes. The results of path analysis show the Slovenian students' mobility as such implies higher scores for meta reflexivity, combined with lower scores for communicative and fractured reflexivity. Further, social transactions reaching beyond one's physical localities in terms of transnational social ties implies they have higher levels of reflexivity in general.

**Keywords:** reflexivity; transnational personal ties; students; mobility

## 1. Introduction

The development of the technology underpinning today's transport and communication activity has dramatically impacted our social practices and imaginary landscapes. Only a few decades ago, no one could imagine a casual conversation with someone on the other side of the world, even looking at what they are doing, wearing, or simply chatting with friends, but from afar. Nowadays, we take all of this for granted. As described by David Harvey (Harvey 1989), the tremendous changes in our lifestyles have, by way of the compression of time and space, some time ago become part of a common repertoire of our perceptions and social constructions. The fact contemporary society has become ever more globalised and individualised makes mobility a key concept in understanding major transformations on different levels of society. Mobility permeates our everyday lives and is drastically altering our social reality, whether we are aware of it or not.

We have all become mobile to some extent, given that mobility means far more than just physical movement. It can also be communicative, imaginative, and virtual (Urry 2007), which correspond to a changing social order. We can imagine local orders of interconnections that extend far across physical localities and national imagined communities. We can observe and participate in distant events via virtual tools or at least absorb information through television or these days increasingly other media. There are different ways and different intensities of mobility that might contribute to different outcomes for individuals and social groups.

Although we are all somewhat mobile, what is crucial is the manner and intensively of our mobility. Recent studies (Salamońska and Recchi) on cross-border and transnational movements

in the EU context emphasise two different extremes among people, meeting [Lash and Urry \(1994\)](#) definition of winners and losers in modern society. The former group includes so-called transnationals who are actively mobile in all forms, while the other extreme typically consists of locals, firmly embedded in their local and national frameworks. Although one might consider that browsing the web, communicating by mobile phone, occasionally traveling and watching TV certainly have an impact on one's imagination ([Appadurai 1996](#)), what counts is being regularly and actively involved in the production of social spaces that exceed local and national boundaries.

The article tackles mobility practices that seem especially relevant when observing young people. For them, mobility implies making contacts and acquaintances outside of their local and national societies, encountering new cultural patterns and being part of a changing social environment. Young people are not just mobile in a "classic" way of backpacking and travelling across countries and continents ([Graburn 1983](#); [Matthews 2008](#)), but are also experiencing global changes, transnational connectivity, and technological development, referring to digital communication and mass mediation in their everyday practices. They are producing social relations and meanings within social spaces that reach beyond national contexts.

Our study deals with students' transnational mobility in higher education. This mobility can be seen as a special type of international migration typically motivated not by economic factors but by the desire to travel, gain experience, and for leisure ([King 2012](#); [Van Mol and Timmerman 2014](#)). Although mobility indicates a shorter time span, usually less than a one-year stay ([King and Raghuram 2013](#)), it is argued ([Van Mol and Michielsen 2015](#)) that mobile students still undergo certain migrant-specific processes. Their decisions to leave and their subsequent social dynamics of mobility depend significantly on pre-existing social networks and on those yet to emerge during the period of mobility ([Van Mol and Michielsen 2015](#)). In the host country, mobile students seek a home and, to participate in the social life, they must adapt to the new cultural environment and develop fresh social relations ([Murphy-Lejeune 2002](#)). They thereby acquire a variety of employability skills, interpersonal and intercultural competencies ([Waters and Brooks 2011](#)). On one hand, student mobility is an outcome of social stratification since mobile students more likely to come from higher social strata ([Waters and Brooks 2011](#); [Cairns 2014](#)). On the other hand, it can be tool to help overcome social constraints, while enhancing a person's reflexivity.

Student mobility implies involvement in all types of mobility. We argue that being actively mobile in in a variety of ways ensures that constructing a self occurs in a constant confrontation with ambivalent meanings that cause certain identity crises and clashes. In such circumstances, the referential frames substantiating one's self-perceptions and identifications become multiple, contested and ever-changing. Considering the latter, the underlying assumption made in the text is that there is a crucial difference between individuals who are chiefly wedded to their local and national environment and those who regularly participate in transnational social spheres that extend over national borders. In that regard, the article's central purpose is to develop and apply new quantitative measurement instruments so as to significantly contribute to understanding of the relationship between the transnational mobility and social ties of students, as well as their reflexive capacities.

## 2. Connecting Mobility, Transnational Contexts, and Reflexivity

Our discussion of the idea of reflexivity stems from interpretations of social changes and transformations linked to the expansive changes in communication technologies and structures. Reflexivity has become an important concept in the social theory mostly associated with Beck, Giddens, and Lash, and has offered an intellectual framework for interpreting modernity to a wider range of theorists, from Habermas to various postmodernists such as Lyotard, Bauman, Touraine, and Melucci (for more, see ([Delanty 2000](#))). Reflexivity is associated with individualism and individualisation and refers to the relationship between subjectivity (Oneself) and objectivity (Other). It is a means of mediation that links subjective and objective domains ([Delanty 2000](#)). Reflexivity as a category of mediation has been systematically explored by Giddens in his structuration theory ([Giddens 1984](#)),

which emphasises the dialectical interplay of agency and structure, and sees structural properties as both the medium and outcome of practices. People engage in practices and it is through those practices that both consciousness and structure are produced. Giddens (Giddens 1991) has also argued that in late modern societies reflexivity plays a major role in self-identity. Giddens attributes individuals with the ability to make a difference in the social world as their everyday activities seem to have a global impact. By monitoring the continuing flow of activities and structural settings, the individual lives a reflexively organised biography. Institutional positions determining individuals have started to present not just events and conditions influencing their lives, but at a minimum the consequences of the decisions they make on their own (Beck 1992). However, it has been argued that those perspectives view reflexivity more as the ability to self-monitor and neglect personal creativity and imagination (Mutch 2010). Attention should also be paid to ideas of the individual's uniqueness and the ability to identify oneself and others within the unique world of thoughts, feelings, and performances. Further, it has been argued that Giddens exaggerates the degree of reflexivity and overlooks the limited capacity of individuals to reflect and their willingness to act upon the consequences (Mutch 2010).

When conceptualising reflexivity, we lean considerably on Archer's perspectives as she argues for analytical dualism and rejects the conflation between structure and agency (Archer 2003). In that regard, reflexivity is not just a reflection referring to self-transcendence, merely implying that one is capable of observing oneself as an object, but it also leads to deliberate actions. Each person has their own private space and exercises reflexive deliberations, yet there are some conditions that influence whether one can evaluate the situation in which she or he is embedded, such as enablements or constraints acting as potential causal powers of social emergent properties (Archer 2003, 2012).

The conscious deliberations and unconscious reproductions of the external social contexts vary among individuals and depend on the individual's social embeddedness in the social environment and the specifically constructed social context in the moment of internal mental activity. Here Archer (Archer 2003) distinguishes: (a) communicative reflexivity: the context is stable and continuous; internal conversations need to be confirmed and completed by others before they lead to action; (b) autonomous reflexivity: the initial context itself lacks stability, internal conversations are self-contained, leading directly to action; (c) meta reflexivity: which acquires a driving ultimate concern, internal conversations that critically evaluate previous inner dialogues and are critical about effective action in society; and (d) fractured: internal conversations cannot lead to purposeful courses of action, they lead to personal disorientation in action. On the basis of reflexivity, individuals adopt certain 'stances' on society, which constitute the micro-macro link and produce the 'active agent'.

Therefore, reflexive deliberations take place through inner conversation, which enables different modes of reflexivity to emerge. Archer (2003), for instance, argues that different time periods induce particular modes of reflexivity. In traditional societies, the dominant mode of reflexivity is a communicative one, as it is collectivistic towards the social. Modernity enabled autonomous reflexivity, which is accommodative towards the social. In recent decades, new unpredictable and uncertain social areas have emerged that have influenced a number of transitions in everyday life. Structural uncertainties have increased the importance of meta-reflexivity, which is transcendental towards the social, and also allows a sub-category of fractured reflexivity to emerge.

The particular mode of reflexivity to emerge and become a subject's personal property refers to the nexus between a context contributed by the socio-cultural structure, and concerns contributed by active agents. Based on reflexivity, individuals adopt certain 'stances' on society which constitute the micro-macro link and produce the 'active agent' (Archer 2003, 2012). Having a personal identity, as defined by individuals having their own configurations of concerns, they are able to decide what they care about most and what they seek to realise in society (Archer 2003). In that light, reflexivity is a key mechanism of social change, taking shape through the relationship between individual and structure, but always in the individual domain (Archer 2003). Individuals reflexively influence their actions; by so doing, they simultaneously influence the social structure. Seen this way, reflexivity is a mediator between structure and agency.

So how is reflexivity linked to mobility? As Archer (2003) shows, internal conversations leading to reflexivity have been shown to be radically varied and shaped by the interplay of the social situation and the personal concerns of agents. As part of this formation, differential access to resources (cognitive and physical) is crucial (Mutch 2010; Archer 2003). Mobility can be seen as a source for enhancing reflexive capacities, which enable better adjustment to the social order while also offering a range of lifestyle varieties for someone to choose. Here it has been shown that mobility strategies can influence one's adaptation to European societies to a certain extent (Andreotti et al. 2013, p. 3). It has also been examined as a reflexive decision embracing ideas of lifestyle migration (Benson 2010), self-searching migration (Kato 2013) and liquid migration (Engbersen et al. 2010). One study, on student mobility (European Union 2014), revealed that students who engage in study mobility are half as likely to suffer long-term unemployment compared to others. It showed the unemployment rate of mobile students was 23% lower, even five years after graduation. They are also more likely to occupy managerial positions (on a low and medium level). Further, they are also better endowed with transversal skills such as language competencies, communication, problem-solving, and intercultural understanding due to spending study periods abroad. Besides finding jobs and transversal skills, mobility plays a protagonist role in material and symbolic practices marking the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Thomson and Taylor 2005). By traveling, young people obtain individual control over their lives as travel offers a scenario of the individualised construction of the self (Bagnoli 2009).

However, differences are likely to arise not just between mobile (being on a student exchange) and non-mobile (not on a student exchange) individuals, but also those who are actively mobile in the long run and the others. An important indicator is not simply the mobility experience per se, but the regularity of social practices and interactions in the transnational social sphere. Abilities to reflexively deliberate upon the social context and different modes of such reflexivity in individual cognition (Archer 2003) are influenced by the involuntary agential position of the individual that is given by birth and also by their access to the resources ensuing from it and from further life stances. Another considerable role is played by 'interactional' and 'figurational' inter-relations (Mouzeis 2007). The latter have a substantial impact on how individuals contextualise the social environment, i.e., their semantics of (self)-description resulting in reflexive deliberations.

We hypothesise that the more individuals actively participate in different social environments (local, national, and transnational), the more they are confronted with the multiple and ambivalent meanings of social orders (Golob 2016). The contested and overlapping semantics offered by the social environment should somehow force individuals to actively respond to a social context. We hypothesise that regular presence in trans-local or transnational social environments enables access to various resources (social, cultural, economic, etc.), which enhances the individual's reflexive and agential emergent properties. We understand this presence as the frequency of transnational social ties, implying the number of direct contacts with alters in the egocentric network who live in a country different to the ego.

Transnationalism generally refers to the processes, activities, people and their ties across national borders (Portes et al. 1999). Based on contacts with transnational alters, certain types of transnational practices emerge that connect people through social and symbolic ties. These people are thus encouraged to become involved in the production of particular transnational social spaces (Faist 2000). It has been argued (Basch et al. 1994, p. 1) they are engaged in networks, activities, and patterns of life which encompass both their host and home societies. Networks have turned out to be particularly significant for students' mobility (Van Mol and Michielsen 2015), especially within Europe. While it has been shown that social networks form right *after* arrival, empirical evidence also demonstrates that certain interaction and networks are formed *before* the actual period of mobility (Van Mol and Michielsen 2015). On one hand, these networks do not encourage transnationalism since students tend to socialise with their fellow nationals. On the other, the transnational component is paramount: first, because mobile students maintain transnational contacts with their local and national environments

(Gargano 2009) and, second, because new contacts in the host society are added to the existing social network.

When paying attention to student mobility and their transnational social networks, we must consider the development of their transnational personal ties, their social positioning in the national environment, specific national semantic contexts, and students' reflexive considerations, including the different types of reflexivity they employ.

We see individuals as experiencing the world indirectly, through their thoughts and perceptions, whereas observations of a wide variety of environments stimulate self-observations and consciousness (Luhmann 1999). Different national (and transnational) contexts stimulate individuals' mental activities in different ways. An important role is played by discursive influences presenting semantic variations of reality (Hasan 2009), which substantiate a person's perceptions. Through structural coupling, the way, in which individuals describe themselves, results in their contextualisation of the social semantics leading to their personal or collective identities.

While our study focuses on Slovenian students, it also provides some tentative insights regarding a comparison of individuals coming from different structural and semantic national contexts.

On that basis, we can identify three main questions that call for empirical testing:

1. Is mobility a significant factor in enhancing the reflexive capacities of the students?
2. Is there a relationship between the students' transnational social ties, their mobility, and their reflexive capacities?
3. Are there any other relevant impacts on reflexivity from the environments of the students, including both their national contexts and their family backgrounds?

### 3. Methodology

Our research questions are based on a broad range of studies dealing with the issues of mobility, transnationalism and/or reflexivity described above. What is clearly missing in the existing research, however, are proper measurement tools combined within a single study—to use quantitative research methods to examine what links students' mobility, their transnational social ties and their reflexive capacities. Our research thus entails three main steps.

First, we operationalised the key theoretical concepts to develop the instruments to measure reflexivity levels, reflexivity types, transnational social ties and mobility. Here, we were not only able to build on existing theory and research but to improve and adapt it to suit our research focus on the students. The development of the primary measurement instruments is described in the next two sections.

Second, we applied our measurement instruments in an on-line administered questionnaire. We obtained our samples from different sampling frames:

- The sampling frame targeted the sub-population of Slovenian students registered as participants in student exchanges by their universities' /faculties' /departments' international offices—all Slovenian higher education institutions were contacted and asked to distribute the survey. The entire sub-population was thus targeted but encountered a limited response—first, at the level of the international offices, then among individual students.
- In order to provide a control group, we targeted Slovenian students generally using direct contacts, e-mails, and social media. The majority of them reported not having engaged in transnational student mobility, while those who did were grouped together with the mobile students from the first sampling frame.

The final sample used to build our statistical explanatory model contains 146 respondents from Slovenian higher education institutions. Given the limited responses within the first sampling frame and the convenience sampling for the second one, we also cannot speak about representative probability sampling. This clearly hindered the potential for broader generalisation but is sufficient for initially testing the connection between reflexivity, transnational personal ties, and mobility.

In addition, using the same on-line survey questionnaire we targeted students from a high-ranking university in Hawai'i and a private American university in Lebanon to include some other world regions: USA-Pacific-Asia, and the Middle East. For these additional comparisons, 30 respondents from Hawai'i and 12 respondents from Lebanon are used, which might be relevant for future research, but not for our explanatory model: because both foreign samples are quite small and limited to a single (comparatively high-ranking) academic institution.

Finally, we conducted statistical analysis, first through some basic quantitative techniques and then through path analysis of the Slovenian sample. The intention was to test the hypothesised causal relationships among the key variables, especially between mobility, having transnational personal ties, levels and types of reflexivity, while controlling for certain other potentially relevant background variables.

#### 4. Measuring Reflexivity

To test the relationship between reflexivity and the presence of transnational social ties among higher education students, we first need to develop a tool to measure reflexivity. Moreover, we should operationalise the concept of transnational mobility for the students and quantify their transnational social ties.

The key steps in quantifying the issue of reflexivity as understood by Archer were initially provided in her own Internal Conversation Indicator—ICONI (Mutch 2010) clearly showing that this complex theoretical concept can be operationalised for use in questionnaires. The measurement instrument was further developed by Porpora and Shumar (2010) who used a battery of five statements to measure levels of reflexivity, selected from Archer's original instrument. Using five-level Likert scales, they asked respondents to determine the frequency of the following actions:

- plan your own future;
- rehearse what you would say in an important conversation;
- imagine the best and worst consequences of a major decision;
- review a conversation that ended badly; and
- clarify thoughts about some issue, person or problem (Porpora and Shumar 2010, p. 212).

They asked the respondents whether each of these actions had been done in their own minds (as a supposed measure of autonomous reflexivity) and/or in talk with family and friends (communicative reflexivity). They further combine meta reflexivity with the autonomous and communicative forms of it (Golob 2016, pp. 212–16).

However, while their instrument has a clear strength in providing the reflexivity levels and acknowledging that reflexivity types are not mutually exclusive, their operationalisation of reflexivity types is questionable. It is no surprise they find that purely communicative reflexivity (compared to autonomous or 'full' reflexivity is quite rare, i.e., one per cent of their sample). One can hardly imagine people talking about something with other people without also considering it in their own minds or, in other words, talking about something without thinking about it. In fact, Porpora and Shumar (2010) operationalisation of the two reflexivity 'styles' is problematic because communicative reflexivity should not simply be seen as 'talking' with other people but as looking for confirmation of one's own reflexive deliberation in one's social environment—something not needed by autonomously reflexive individuals.

While Porpora-Shumar's instrument can be used to determine the *levels* of reflexivity, it struggles to provide a valid measure for the reflexivity *types*. We therefore suggest further development of the instrument.

First, we apply the same set of five items, each with a five-level Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (all the time), to determine the level of reflexivity (ranging from 0 to 20 in total, since a respondent can gain up to four points for each of the five statements). Unfortunately, Porpora and Shumar do not report whether their reflexivity is based on a combination of the five questions, is truly a one-dimensional concept or, in other words, whether the five different items truly measure the same thing. Regarding our own adaptation of their set of five statements, we found that our instrument is one-dimensional, with an acceptable value for the Cronbach alpha reliability test (0.70).

Second, we developed an alternative measure of the reflexivity types where each statement listed in Table 1 indicates a certain reflexivity type.

**Table 1.** Statements indicating different reflexivity types.

Reflexivity Type	Type of reflexivity indicator: five-level Likert scale each transformed into scores from 0 (never) to 4 (all the time): <i>During the last year, how often did you . . .</i>
<b>Communicative</b>	Make important decisions with full agreement and support of the people close to you only.
<b>Autonomous</b>	Make important decisions based on your own best judgement regardless of what others think or say.
<b>Meta</b>	Carefully consider the key priorities of your life and why you are doing what you are doing.
<b>Fractured</b>	Feel lost and did not know at all what to do because of the things happening around you.

The statements in Table 1, however, should not, as such, be seen as indicators of reflexivity—without combining them with the reflexivity levels. For instance, individuals can make decisions with or without the full agreement of others but neither of these necessarily means such decisions are linked to reflexivity. Decisions may arise from sudden impulses or traditional habits—not reflexivity. Consequently, the frequencies of behaviours listed in Table 1 should only be seen as indicators of different reflexivity *types* when combined with the *levels* of reflexivity measured by the five statements presented above. We establish this combination by simply multiplying the scores for the reflexivity level (from 0 to 20) with each score for the reflexivity types (from 0 to 4). The final score for each reflexivity type combined with the reflexivity intensity is thus between 0 (minimal reflexivity of the given type) and 80 (maximal reflexivity for the given type). The calculations are presented systematically in Table 2.

Unlike the one by Porpora and Shumar (2010), our measurement instrument does not make an arbitrary binary opposition between reflexive and non-reflexive persons (they attempt to soften this arbitrariness by distinguishing between absolute and comparative perspectives). Such an opposition would be questionable since we are dealing with a Likert scale, not binary variables. We thus do not see people as divided between reflexive and non-reflexive but as being more and less reflexive.

**Table 2.** Calculation of the reflexivity scores explained.

Reflexivity Type (5-Level Likert Scale for Each Item)	Reflexivity Level (5-Level Likert Scale for Each Item)	Plan Your Own Future (L1)	Rehearse What You Would Say in an Important Conversation (L2)	Imagine the Best and Worst Consequences of a Major Decision (L3)	Review a Conversation That Ended Badly (L4)	Clarify Thoughts about Some Issue, Person or Problem (L5)	Total Score for Reflexivity Type (TS)
Communicative (T1)		$S1_c = L1 \times T1$	$S2_c = L2 \times T1$	$S3_c = L3 \times T1$	$S4_c = L4 \times T1$	$S5_c = L4 \times T1$	$TS_c = S1_c + S2_c + S3_c + S4_c + S5_c$
Autonomous (T2)		$S1_a = L1 \times T2$	$S2_a = L2 \times T2$	$S3_a = L3 \times T2$	$S4_a = L4 \times T2$	$S5_a = L4 \times T2$	$TS_a = S1_a + S2_a + S3_a + S4_a + S5_a$
Meta (T3)		$S1_m = L1 \times T3$	$S2_m = L2 \times T3$	$S3_m = L3 \times T3$	$S4_m = L4 \times T3$	$S5_m = L4 \times T3$	$TS_m = S1_m + S2_m + S3_m + S4_m + S5_m$
Fractured (T4)		$S1_f = L1 \times T4$	$S2_f = L2 \times T4$	$S3_f = L3 \times T4$	$S4_f = L4 \times T4$	$S5_f = L4 \times T4$	$TS_f = S1_f + S2_f + S3_f + S4_f + S5_f$
Thresholds		$0 \leq S1 \leq 16$	$0 \leq S2 \leq 16$	$0 \leq S3 \leq 16$	$0 \leq S4 \leq 16$	$0 \leq S5 \leq 16$	$0 \leq TS \leq 80$
Thresholds for the reflexivity level ( $R = L1 + L2 + L3 + L4 + L5$ )		$0 \leq L1 + L2 + L3 + L4 + L5 \leq 20$					



## 5. Measuring the Mobility and Personal Transnational Social Ties of the Students

Different types of student mobility could be viewed as relevant indicators. In studies on student mobility, one can differentiate spontaneous and organised student mobility, which is the most common type in Europe due to the institutionalised Erasmus programme (Waters and Brooks 2011). Student mobility can be either intra-European or inter-continental, either an exchange (within the Erasmus study exchange framework or outside it) or degree-seeking. However, the present study does not aim to detect differences in various types of student mobility but how such mobility, regardless of the different types, affects the students' reflexivity. Nevertheless, the duration of mobility must be taken into account since a longer period of mobility may generate a stronger impact. We asked the respondents whether they had ever spent at least one month or more (and, if so, how many months) in another country for study purposes. We included all levels of study (BA, MA, and PhD) and did not explicitly distinguish them due to the comparatively small overall sample size. However, we have controlled our model for students' age.

While it may be hypothesised that mobility is related to higher reflexivity scores, a crucial variable that is linked to them both is the presence of students' transnational social ties. The latter is the next element we have to operationalise. In this regard, we mostly drew on the work of Molina et al. (2014). Thus, we measured the students' transnational social ties through their "personal networks [as] an intermediate level of analysis, in which both agency and institutional constraints can be studied simultaneously" (Molina et al. 2014, p. 2). While considering transnational social ties it is not only important for the ties to be present, but also that they are dense and continuous. Another important element is whether the ties derive from the private sphere (such as family, friendship, romantic ties) or the sphere of business, career and study.

In our own research, each respondent was thus first asked to list 20 persons "important in your current life, including your family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, business contacts etc.". They were then asked to provide basic information about each of these persons (or alters in the egocentric network). This information includes:

- The frequency of contacts: "How often did you contact this person, including web and phone-based communication, in the last year?" (Never/Less than once a month/At least once a month but not every week/At least once a week but not every day/Almost every day);
- The number of years for which the alter has been known to the respondent ("For how long have you known this person?");
- The sphere of life related to the alter: "Is the person related to" . . . "your private life" or "your study, business, career etc.";
- The alter's country of origin ("What is this person's country of origin?") and country of current residence ("Where does the person live now?").

Based on the country in which the respondent has spent most of his/her life and each alter's current country of residence, we identified whether an alter can be considered transnational or not. The number of transnational alters identified by each ego (respondent) was then used as a measure of personal transnational social ties.

## 6. Descriptive Statistics

Based on our samples of students, we have no reason to believe that student mobility as such increases reflexivity levels. For the Slovenian students, the mean reflexivity level is 13.2, with no significant difference between mobile (13.1) and non-mobile ones (13.4). With a score of 14.8, the differences between Slovenia and Hawai'i are also nonsignificant. Yet the score for Lebanon (16.5) is somewhat higher. Due to the small sample sizes, we obviously cannot test the differences between mobile and non-mobile students in statistical terms for Lebanon and the USA/Hawai'i.

The differences clearly become significant when considering the mean scores for different types of reflexivity as shown in Table 3, where we present both the mean scores for each reflexivity type and the

share of students with a score above 40. There is no significant difference between the Slovenian and the US non-mobile students in terms of communicative reflexivity. In contrast, mobile Slovenian students are characterised by significantly lower communicative reflexivity and the Lebanese students generally are characterised by higher levels than the rest. The explanations for both are quite straightforward. Mobile students may find it more difficult to maintain very strong and close social bonds with other people and take their opinions and actions into account. On the other hand, such bonds may be more present in somewhat more traditional societies, like the Lebanese, which encourage communicative reflexivity. The situation of the Lebanese students included in our survey may be even more complex than the situation of other Lebanese students. While their society may be characterised by certain traditional elements usually linked to the pronounced role of religion and religion-/tradition-related social norms (Inglehart and Welzel 2014), they are studying at an elite and western-style educational institution. This may lead to interesting contradictions expressed in both high levels of reflexivity, high scores for meta-reflexivity and extremely high scores for fractured reflexivity—more than twice the level for the Slovenian and US students.

**Table 3.** Mean scores and percentages with scores exceeding 40 (out of 80) for the four reflexivity types.

		Communicative		Autonomous		Meta		Fractured	
		Mean Score	% with Score >40	Mean Score	% with Score >40	Mean Score	% with Score >40	Mean Score	% with Score >40
Slovenia	not mobile *	31.9	26.2	38.9	45.2	42.1	50.0	25.4	19.1
	Mobile **	25.3	17.3	35.4	37.5	41.4	50.0	22.0	13.5
USA—Hawai'i	not mobile *	32.5	20.0	43.0	60.0	42.3	50.0	26.3	20.0
	Mobile **	33.1	30.0	43.4	55.0	52.0	70.0	27.1	20.0
Lebanon	not mobile *	41.9	40.0	36.6	30.0	46.1	60.0	53.4	60.0
	Mobile **	56.0	50.0	48.0	50.0	72.0	100.0	40.0	50.0

\* Not experiencing mobility related to transnational study for at least one month; \*\* Experiencing mobility related to transnational study for at least one month.

While mobility is linked to lower communicative reflexivity, it is not connected to higher autonomous reflexivity (or is not caused by autonomous reflexivity). In this case, national differences seem to be more important. The students from Hawai'i stand out in terms of their higher autonomous reflexivity. These results may be linked to some individualist features of American culture (Inglehart and Welzel 2014) and specifics of the local environment, educational institutions, and the frequency of interactions with people from quite different cultural backgrounds.

Slovenian mobile students have no higher scores for meta reflexivity than non-mobile ones, whereas the differences seem to be greater for the Hawai'ian and Lebanese students. However, due to the small sample sizes, we are unable to draw any firm conclusions on this basis.

Fractured reflexivity, on the other hand, has—with the exception of the Lebanese students—comparatively the lowest scores. However, if fractured reflexivity is seen as a problem, its scores may still be seen as too high. Mobility as such does play its part here since it is linked with lower scores for fractured reflexivity. This calls for further research on both intercultural and institutional differences.

To summarise: in line with our expectations, students' mobility is linked to lower communicative and fractured reflexivity. The mobile students seem to have greater control over their lives and depend less on the opinions and support of others while making their reflexive deliberations. In contrast, mobility as such neither increases general levels of reflexivity nor autonomous reflexivity. Yet any comparisons between Slovenian, Hawai'ian, and Lebanese students can only be seen here as tentatively indicating that similar differences between the more and the less mobile students regarding their reflexivity levels may appear in quite different cultural and institutional settings. Due to the sampling limitations mentioned above, we can draw no firm conclusions regarding inter-cultural differences. Our further analysis is therefore limited to the Slovenian students.

## 7. Towards an Explanatory Model: The Case of Slovenia

Further, we hypothesise that mobility implies higher numbers of transnational alters. This relationship is presented in Table 4. It is worth noting that the mobile students—regardless of whether they are only mobile for at least one month or for at least three months—have three times more transnational alters than their non-mobile counterparts. They contact more than twice as many of their transnational alters at least monthly than the rest and have more than twice as many transnational alters in their private spheres. Moreover, the mean number of transnational alters not known prior to each student’s first (or only) mobility experience indicates that most transnational alters were not known by our respondents before their period of mobility (1.88 out of 2.52). Yet we cannot determine whether the *new* transnational alters not known before the period of mobility have replaced national alters or transnational ones on the list of the 20 key alters.

The key direction of causality thus cannot be determined in any obvious way: it is very likely that higher numbers of transnational alters encourage mobility, which then contributes to even higher numbers of transnational alters. As indicated by a study on Erasmus students, students’ networks abroad are typically formed before they leave home (Van Mol and Michielsen 2015). Our construction of possible explanatory models clearly requires testing of which direction of causality provides a superior goodness of fit.

The data in Table 4 also indicate the distinction between mobile and non-mobile students in terms of transnational alters already arises from at least one month of staying abroad for study purposes: there is no big difference between mobility periods of at least one month and longer durations. This is also indicated by the correlations of data on transnational alters and the length of mobility expressed in the reported number of months: here no correlation is significant at the level of at least 0.10.

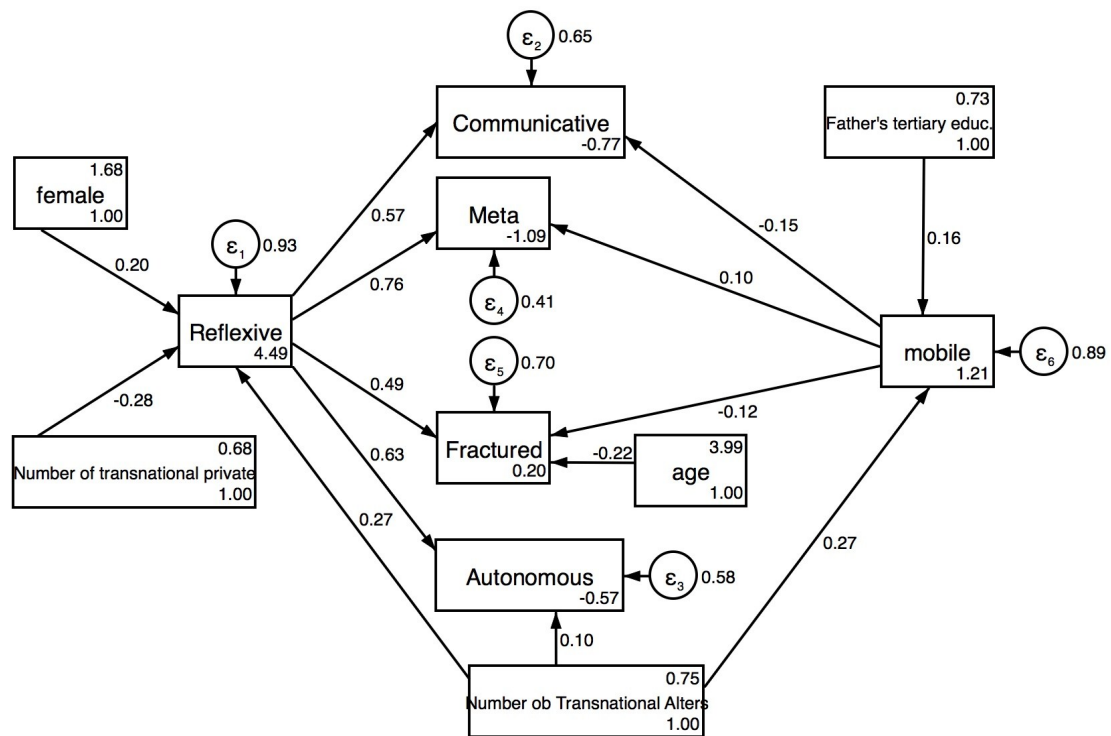
**Table 4.** Statements indicating different reflexivity types.

	No. of Transnational Alters	No. of Transnational Alters Contacted at Least Monthly	No. of Transnational Alters in Private Sphere	No. of Transnational Alters Not Known before the Mobility
experiencing transnational mobility for study purposes $\geq 3$ months	2.56	1.81	1.68	1.97
experiencing transnational mobility for study purposes $\geq 1$ month	2.52	1.77	1.64	1.88
others (no transnational study related mobility for at least 1 month)	0.83	0.86	0.62	
<i>t</i> -test: mobile for at least three months vs. the rest (significance)	4.08 (0.000) **	2.19 (0.030) *	3.17 (0.002) **	
<i>t</i> -test: mobile for at least one month vs. the rest (significance)	4.70 (0.000) **	2.30 (0.023) *	3.10 (0.002) **	
Correlation with the length (number of months) of transnational study related mobility (significance)	0.13 (0.123)	0.06 (0.481)	0.08 (0.317)	0.05 (0.671)

\* Equal variances assumed; \*\* Equal variances not assumed.

Based on the existing theoretical assumptions and what can be inferred from our empirical data regarding the Slovenian students, we can develop an explanatory model applying path analysis. It is a version of structural equation modelling that remains on the single level of analysis and includes no latent variables. Due to the limitations of our sample mentioned above, these models should not be seen as the final generalisation but more as providing tentative guidance for further research.

Our analysis, with the significant paths presented in Figure 1 and Table 5, has two parts. The first part is based on the hypotheses derived from our first two research questions, namely that: (1) mobility increases the scores for certain types of reflexivity; and (2) the number of transnational alters leads to a higher level of reflexivity in general.



**Figure 1.** Path analysis explaining the relationships between mobility, inclusion in the transnational sphere, levels, and types of reflexivity and background variables.

**Table 5.** Path analysis: variables, coefficients, and overall model fit.

Variables: Effect	Variables: Causal	Standardised Coefficients	Standard Errors	Significances	Variations Explained (R <sup>2</sup> )
Level of reflexivity (Reflexive)	No. of transnational alters	0.269	0.130	0.038	0.07
	Female	0.201	0.083	0.015	
	Number of transnational private alters	-0.278	0.130	0.032	
	Constant	4.487	0.359	0.000	
Communicative reflexivity score (Communicative)	Level of reflexivity (Reflexive)	0.572	0.059	0.000	0.35
	Mobile ≥1 month	-0.153	0.071	0.031	
	Constant	0.772	0.348	0.027	
Autonomous reflexivity score (Autonomous)	Level of reflexivity (Reflexive)	0.632	0.052	0.000	0.42
	Number of transnational alters	0.0980	0.067	0.142	
	Constant	-0.571	0.308	0.064	
Meta reflexivity score (Meta)	Level of reflexivity (Reflexive)	0.762	0.036	0.000	0.59
	Mobile ≥1 month	0.099	0.056	0.075	
	Constant	1.088	0.253	0.000	
Fractured reflexivity score (Fractured)	Level of reflexivity (Reflexive)	0.493	0.064	0.000	0.30
	Mobile ≥1 month	0.117	0.074	0.116	
	Age	0.221	0.072	0.002	
	Constant	0.200	0.486	0.680	
Mobile ≥1 month	Number of transnational alters	0.268	0.079	0.001	0.11
	Father's tertiary education	0.162	0.082	0.047	
	Constant	1.209	0.156	0.000	
Model's overall goodness of fit		CFI = 0.998 TLI = 0.997 RMSEA = 0.012			0.24

Mobility itself (the *mobile* variable in our model) is subject to the individual's position in the social structure where we can hardly speak about equal opportunities. Father's level of education affects the chances of one being mobile: students of parents with some form of tertiary education are more likely to be mobile than the rest. In line with other studies on youth ([Republic of Slovenia](#),

Ministry of Education and Sports Office for Youth 2011; Bevc and Ogorevc 2013), father's education significantly influences different areas of a young person's life in terms of their future orientation, active participation, and academic access.

To construct our explanatory model, we operationalised mobility in three different ways: (1) as a distinction between students mobile for at least one month and the rest; (2) as a distinction between students mobile for at least three months (i.e., the minimum length of an Erasmus exchange) and the rest; and (3) as the total number of months of the period of mobility. We note the relationships in the model remain the same regardless of the mobility indicator.

However, while considering the minor differences in the coefficients, their significances and the entire model's explanatory power, the distinction between students who were mobile for at least one month and the rest provides the greatest explanatory power.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, this does not mean that the significance of short-term student mobility (i.e., even for just one month) implies that transnational personal ties are irrelevant. Our path analysis confirms mobile students have a bigger number of transnational alters. The standardised coefficient between the number of transnational alters and mobility is 0.268. While mobility does not affect the general level of reflexivity as such, the latter is positively affected by the numbers of transnational alters (0.269), while negatively affected by the number of transnational private alters (−0.278) and by being a male (i.e., female students are more likely to indicate higher levels of reflexivity).

The model's overall explanatory power and its goodness of fit prove to be far better *when the number of transnational alters is seen as a cause for mobility and not vice versa*, which is consistent with previous research (Van Mol and Michielsen 2015). With the number of transnational alters as an independent variable affecting mobility, the overall model explains 24% of variance (compared to only 19% with reverse causality) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) fit statistic is 0.012, i.e., clearly within the acceptable threshold of 0.05. On the other hand, the hypothesised reversed causality of mobility affecting the number of transnational alters would raise the RMSEA value to 0.157, higher than the threshold usually considered acceptable for path analysis models.

Further, we attempt to identify the relationship between levels of reflexivity and scores for different reflexivity types, while controlling for the background variables provided within our sample. The relationship between reflexivity levels and reflexivity types is obvious since the scores for the reflexivity types were constructed by taking the reflexivity levels into account. A more interesting part of our model is the impact of mobility, participation in the transnational sphere (in terms of the number of transnational alters) and the control variables, defining our respondents' backgrounds, on the scores for different reflexivity types.

Our path analysis confirms the negative relationship between mobility and communicative reflexivity as already noted and explained above. Being mobile implies that students' reflexive deliberations depend less on receiving other people's confirmations.

Further, mobile students seem more likely to be able to take control over their situations and social contexts, to make decisions and perform actions based on their reflexive deliberations. Consequently, they are less likely to experience fractured reflexivity—as demonstrated by our path analysis model.

Mobility also implies higher scores for the meta reflexivity type. Mobile students are more likely to participate in heterogeneous socio-cultural contexts and enter social environments that differ significantly from their own. They are more likely to reject simplifications, stereotyping and to instead

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<sup>1</sup> Mobility for at least three months can be explained in a similar way as the at least one-month mobility by father's education (coefficient equals 0.170) and the number of transnational alters (0.255). It is also linked to communicative reflexivity in a similar way (−0.182). However, it is less persuasive in statistical terms when linked to meta (0.087) and fractured (−0.097) reflexivity. Taking the total number of months spent abroad due to study reasons as the mobility indicator, on the other hand, produces statistically significant—but weaker—links with the number of transnational alters (0.137) and meta reflexivity (0.128), while the links with father's education, communicative, and fractured reflexivity are clearly insignificant in statistical terms.

critically reflect on their social contexts and even their own reflections. These patterns of thinking and behaviour clearly make them more meta reflexive.

Yet we cannot confirm a direct effect of the students' mobility as such on their autonomous reflexivity. This may be explained by noting that autonomous reflexivity is typically linked to the western type of modern society characterised by high levels of individualisation (Beck 1992; Inglehart and Welzel 2014), not to mobility as such. However, autonomous reflexivity might be slightly affected by the number of transnational alters, although one can draw no firm conclusions here due to the lack of any clear statistical significance of the coefficient ( $p = 0.142$ ).

Finally, fractured reflexivity decreases with age. With higher age, students seem more likely to be able to organise and arrange their lives in such a way they do not feel lost and/or completely unable to control the things happening around them.

## 8. Interpretation and Concluding Thoughts

Reflexive deliberations and aspirations have come to be seen as an imperative of late modernity (Archer 2012) and as a means for successfully adapting to the rapid changes. The article addressed students who are generally expected to be more disconnected from their initial social context than older generations that are comparatively more embedded in their routines, expectations, customs, and beliefs. Young people represent a special social group as their attitudes and behaviour reflect the fast pace of social transformations and herald future social conditions (Ule 2008). They are a social category substantially affected by individualisation, technological development, and communication, considerably subjected to social risks and uncertainties (Threadgold and Nilan 2009). They are expected to be responsible for their actions in an unstable and unpredictable environment and to construct a sense of individual identity in relation to fluid social settings and undermined traditional social semantic anchors. In a world of lost ontological security (Giddens 1984), the construction of identity, building one's position in society, and aspiring for the future are all demanding tasks.

The increasing complexity of social structural and semiotic influences has distanced individuals from traditional structural constraints, but also created new uncertainties and risks (Beck 1992) that enable—but also demand that—individuals deliberate on their decisions and orient their actions relative to different social and cultural contexts. Reflexivity as an integral part of our consciousness is not new, but today's transformed social context induces different modes of such mental activity (Archer 2003) and emphasises its role in mediating individual agency and social forces.

Youth from different parts of the globe are experiencing certain shared challenges that reflect their accelerated risk circumstances and individualisation processes. Since the economic crisis in 2008, young peoples' demanding transitions from education to work, becoming financially independent, and acquiring personal autonomy have occurred in even more fluctuating economic, social, and personal conditions. However, despite some trends of concern, one can identify two factors substantially contributing to better living conditions (European Union 2014). One is education, as the unemployment rate is much lower for young graduates from tertiary education than those with the lowest education levels. Graduates are also more active in political and social spheres. Another is mobility, which may be seen as even more important than education as such.

Our study shows that transnational mobility does affect reflexivity but the relationship between them is not straightforward. It directly affects three reflexivity types, being positively linked to meta reflexivity, and negatively to communicative and fractured reflexivity. Its effects on the levels of reflexivity generally and autonomous reflexivity specifically, on the other hand, are more indirect—through participation in the transnational sphere.

We noted that students' transnational mobility is most clearly linked to a drop in the communicative type of reflexivity. We are aware that students' family members can play an important role in someone's decision on student mobility as parents can actively support the decision (Waters and Brooks 2011) or influence it through the so-called family habitus (Cairns 2014). However, a typical mobility engagement for study purposes is not a collective but an individual endeavour because students generally migrate for

study purposes as individuals—without their families and close friends. Therefore, it is not surprising that students' mobility implies certain levels of detachment from other people's opinions when planning one's actions. These processes are reflected in a decline in communicative reflexivity.

Regarding communicative reflexivity, we may draw some tentative thoughts regarding inter-cultural differences. Besides the contrast between mobile and non-mobile Slovenian students, we may also underline the difference between Slovenian and American non-mobile students on one side and the Lebanese students on the other. The latter reveal significantly higher levels of communicative reflexivity, which is in line with both Archer (2007) understanding of communicative reflexivity, linking it more to traditional societies, and Lebanon's positioning on the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map (i.e., with stronger survival values than American and stronger traditional values than Slovenian society) (Inglehart and Welzel 2014).

The variety of contested cultural information increases and triggers students' internal conversations to become more reflexive. They are thus encouraged to deliberately consider their personal concerns, future actions, and personal identity (Archer 2003). Students with higher numbers of transnational alters in their network, regardless of how frequently they actually contact them, have accordingly turned out to be more reflexive in terms of reflexivity levels than the remaining students. This level of reflexivity in general is the basis for the different types of reflexivity.

Yet, the impact of transnational alters in the network is reversed somewhat when we consider the private transnational alters, whose presence in fact lowers the level of reflexivity. This may be explained by viewing transnational social networks as constitutive elements of social fields (Beckert 2010), which can be seen as local orders in which "actors gather and frame their actions vis-à-vis one another" (Fligstein 2001, p. 108). Interactions and intersubjective meaning among individuals are localised within nodes of particular social networks that enable certain social fields to exist, including transnational ones. When those interactions occur among private alters, namely one's family and closest friends, they do not trigger our personal emergent properties in the same way as those from the business, study, or professional environment. The cultural and social meanings do not induce clashes and discomfort in our perception of everyday reality and thus do not trigger our inner dialogue to adapt to new circumstances in the social environment.

While observing the effects on the levels of reflexivity in general, we should also consider the significance of gender. Female students are more reflexive in terms of reflexivity levels, which is in line with the findings of Porpora and Shumar, who do not distinguish between reflexivity levels and reflexivity types (or 'styles' as they call them), but still find women to be more likely to be characterised by communicative and meta reflexivity (Porpora and Shumar 2010). The higher levels of reflexivity among the female students indicated by our data should be seen in today's context, characterised by individualised social reality. On one hand, the importance of the traditional and fixed social role has faded away, bringing a remarkable influence on women's positions in society. Being more empowered, they can pursue similar social goals as men do, they can reach similar social positions and be successful in politics, business, sport, etc., areas traditionally reserved for men. However, those possibilities must be combined with family and household obligations, which remain primarily in women's hands. As it is very hard to combine a successful career and family life, higher levels of reflexivity are required, referring to constant deliberation about which scenario to choose for one's future life strategies. It can be explained as a need caused by contradictory expectations in individualised late modern society where, on one hand, women are supposed to compete for all social positions, just like men but, on the other, they remain unable to escape from certain traditional gender-based limitations and expectations. When women are unable to resolve these issues, fractured reflexivity may also become more likely.

Autonomous reflexivity seems to be more related to cultural differences and participation in the transnational sphere than to mobility as such. Although the mobility of the Slovenian students suggests lower communicative reflexivity, it is linked to any increase in autonomous reflexivity. On the other hand, the most obvious difference can be seen between the American and Lebanese students—stressing

the contrast between a strongly individualised and a still quite collectivistic society, which is line with previous research on inter-cultural differences (Inglehart and Welzel 2014).

Finally, meta-reflexivity might be related to individuals confronted with contradictions that individuals need to resolve while entering different socio-cultural contexts facilitated by their mobility (Kleindeinst 2017; Valentinčič 2016). As mentioned, such contradictions might be entailed in not so much the mostly intra-European mobility of the Slovenian students but more by the greater inter-cultural contradictions students from Lebanon or from Hawai'i experience (Kovačič and Rek 2016). While fractured reflexivity may be linked to unsuccessful coping with such contradictions, meta reflexivity could be a more positive outcome. Yet, this does not mean they are mutually exclusive since the same individual may successfully resolve a certain contradiction through his/her internal dialogue and subsequent actions, but fail to resolve another.

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