

SOCIAL REMITTANCES - CULTURE AS A DEVELOPMENT TOOL

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The suburb of expensive homes with neatly-trimmed lawns and SUVs seems like any other well-to-do American community. But the mailboxes reveal a twist: almost all are labeled “Patel” or “Bhagat.” Over the past twenty years, these Indian immigrants have moved from the villages and small towns of Gujarat State on the west coast of India, initially to rental apartment complexes in northeastern Massachusetts and then to their own homes in subdivisions outside Boston. Watching these suburban dwellers work, attend school, and build religious congregations here, casual observers might conclude that yet another wave of immigrants has successfully joined in the pursuit of the American dream. A closer look, however, reveals they are pursuing Gujarati dreams as well. They send money back to India to open businesses or improve family homes and farms. They work closely with religious leaders to establish Hindu communities in the United States and also to strengthen religious life in their homeland. Indian politicians at the state and national level now court these emigrants’ contributions to Indian political and economic life.

The Gujarati experience illustrates a growing trend among immigrants to the United States and Europe. In the 21st century, many people will belong to two societies at the same time. Researchers call those who maintain strong, regular ties to their homelands and who organize aspects of their lives across national borders transnational migrants. They assimilate into the countries that receive them while sustaining strong ties to their homelands. Assimilation and transnational relations are not mutually exclusive; they happen simultaneously and influence each other. More and more, people earn their livings, raise their families, participate in religious communities, and express their political views across national borders. The host-country experiences of some migrants remain strongly influenced by their continuing ties to their country of origin and the fate of sending communities is inextricably linked to its immigrant members.

Transnational Perspectives on Migration

What do we gain by using a transnational lens to understand the immigrant experience? For one thing, it reveals the many layers and sites that make up the social spaces that they occupy. The relationship between Salvadoran villagers and their migrant family members in urban Los Angeles is not just a product of these narrow, local connections. It is also strongly influenced by ties between the Salvadoran and the U.S. states and between the U.S. and Salvadoran national Catholic Churches. Ties to Salvadorans living in Europe and Mexico also affect these dynamics. Similarly, a complete account of the religious lives of Brazilian immigrants in Massachusetts must go beyond the connections between specific congregations in Boston and Brazil and locate these ties within the thick, multi-layered web of links between national denominations in the United States and Brazil. Transnational social fields, then,

encompass the many sites of migrant and non-migrant connection. They also include the many levels of cross border ties that emerge in response.

Furthermore, seeing migrants and non-migrants as occupying the same social space also drives home that becoming incorporated into the United States and sustaining strong ties to one's homeland are not at odds with each other. Rather, the migrant experience is more like a gauge that, although anchored, pivots back and forth between sending, receiving-country, or other orientations, at different stages of life. Migrants do not trade one membership for another. Instead, they change how they direct their energy and resources in response to election campaigns, wars, economic downturns, life-cycle events, and natural disasters. By doing so, they contradict the expectation that newcomers will either fully incorporate or remain entirely transnational and suggest that most people will craft some combination of the two.

Finally, a transnational perspective drives home the point that sometimes migration is as much about the people who stay behind as it is about those who move. In some cases, the ties between migrants and non-migrants are so strong and widespread that migration radically transforms the lives of individuals who remain at home. Actual movement is not required to participate across borders. People, money, and social remittances -- or the ideas, practices, identities and social capital that migrants remit home, permeate the daily lives of those who remain behind, altering their behavior, and transforming notions about gender relations, democracy, and what states should and should not do. Non-migrants hear enough stories, look at enough photographs, and watch enough videos of birthday parties and weddings to begin imagining their own lives elsewhere. They covet clothes and accessories that have become part of the dress code. They want to play by the rules they think are at work in the United States which they learn about each time they talk on the phone, receive e-mail, or someone comes to visit. In such cases, migrants and non-migrants, though separated by physical distance, still occupy the same social space. Although laws and political borders limit movement and formal citizenship within it, their lives are strongly connected by a range of economic, political, and religious activities that cross borders. What happens to those in the U.S. cannot be separated from what happens to those who remain in the homeland because their fates are inextricably linked.

In the last decade, migrant economic remittances have been hailed as a development panacea. These debates largely overlook the social remittances that are exchanged between migrants and non-migrants and their potential role in the development equation. The remainder of this paper discusses what social remittances are, how they are transmitted and what determines their impact, and how they change the lives of women.

Defining and Specifying Social Remittances

There are at least three types of social remittances -- normative structures, systems of practice, and social capital.

Normative structures, are ideas, values, and beliefs. They include norms for behavior, notions about family responsibility, principles of neighborliness and community participation, and aspirations for social mobility. They encompass ideas about gender, race, and class identity.

They also include values about how organizations should work, incorporating ideas about good government and good churches and about how politicians and clergy should behave.

Systems of practice are the actions shaped by normative structures. These include how individuals delegate household tasks, the kinds of religious rituals they engage in, and how much they participate in political and civic groups. They also include organizational practices such as recruiting and socializing new members, goal setting and strategizing, establishing leadership roles, and forming interagency ties.

Both the values and norms on which social capital is based, and social capital itself, also constitute social remittances. Social and political leaders can sometimes harness the status they acquire in the host country to advance their cause in the homeland. The non-migrant family members of the hometown association leader in California, for example, can access the social capital he or she has accrued back in Mexico. Decreases in migrant social capital also register. If someone was a respected community leader in Los Angeles, but has fallen out of favor, the family also feels this back in Mexico.

Social remittance exchanges occur when migrants return to live in or visit their communities of origin; when non-migrants visit those in the receiving country; or through exchanges of letters, videos, cassettes, e-mails, and telephone calls. The mechanisms of social remittance transmission differ from other types of global cultural dissemination in several ways.

First, while it is often difficult to distinguish how global culture is disseminated, it is possible to specify how social remittances flow. They travel through identifiable pathways; their source and destination are clear. Migrants and non-migrants can state how they learned of a particular idea or practice and why they decided to adopt it.

A second feature differentiating social remittances from global cultural flows is that they are transmitted systematically and intentionally. A social remittance occurs when migrants speak directly to a family member about a different kind of politics and encourage them to pursue reforms. In cases such as these, ideas are communicated intentionally to a specific recipient or group. People know when and why they changed their mind about something or began to act in a different way.

A third distinguishing feature is that remittances are usually transferred between individuals who know one another or who are connected by mutual social ties. A familiar person who comes "with references" delivers them. The personalized character of this kind of communication stands in contrast to the faceless, mass-produced nature of global cultural diffusion.

A fourth difference between social remittances and global culture is the timing with which they are communicated. In many cases, a staged process occurs whereby macro-level global flows precede and pave the way for social remittance transmission. Since many non-migrants are eager to emulate the consumption patterns they observe in the media, they are more receptive to the new political and religious styles migrants bring back. Social remittances do not arise out of the blue. They are part and parcel of an ongoing process of cultural diffusion.

Gradual transmission sets the stage for future remittance transfers that, as a result, make more sense.

A variety of factors determine the nature and magnitude of social remittance impact:

1. The nature of the remittance itself - Social remittance impact is, in part, a function of how easy it is to transmit a particular remittance. Some remittances are difficult to package. They do not translate easily into neat data packets because they are slippery, unstable, and unwieldy to send. They are sometimes so complex that they are difficult to communicate or theorize. They have to be broken down into smaller pieces to be exchanged.
2. The features of transnational organizations and the social networks through which remittances are communicated also influence their impact. Remittances flow more efficiently through tightly connected, dense systems because they consist of similar parts and use similar technologies. Transfers within more open, informal systems are sloppier, less efficient, and more prone to interference by other cultural exchanges. As in the child's game of "telephone," each time a message is re-communicated, it becomes increasingly distorted in the translation. Remittance impact also changes at different stages of organizational development. New organizations or organization in flux are more malleable or amenable to change and, thus, more open to remittance acceptance.
3. The character of the messenger also influences remittance impact. Individuals occupying higher status positions get listened to more. These tend to be men, people with money, older community members, or established community leaders. In some cases, these individuals get listened to because others depend on them for economic support. In others, people adopt remittances because they want to emulate their peers. Since everyone belonging to a certain class is doing it, they want to keep up with the Jones'.
4. Remittance impact also depends on the gender, class, and life-cycle stage of the receiver. Individuals with more resources and power, who have more control over their lives, have more freedom to accept or reject remittances.
5. Social remittance impact is influenced by relative differences between sending and receiving countries. If the value structures and cognitive models migrants import are similar to host-country norms, then social remittances are likely to be assimilated more quickly. If the new patterns of social relations have elements in common with those already in place, then social remittances are also more likely to be adopted. If the remittance is a completely new idea or behavior, then it will face greater barriers to acceptance. In this sense, remittance adoption, as well as evolution, is path dependent, in that existing normative, cognitive, and structural constraints condition future choices.
6. Some remittances have a stronger effect because they travel with other remittances. When those introduced first are accepted, receptivity to those that follow is heightened. Remittances traveling through multiple pathways, or those reinforced by global cultural flows, also have a more significant effect. Finally, the force of transmission affects remittance impact. If many remittances are transmitted consistently during a short time, their impact is greater than when

they are transferred periodically. If there are many, simultaneous calls for a particular change, and numerous examples of people who have adopted it, than non-migrants are more likely to change than if they were exposed to only infrequent, isolated examples of a particular behavior.

Social Remittances and Changing Gender Dynamics

There are numerous examples of how social remittances change the status of migrant and non-migrant women. Let me mention three brief examples:

- Many of the young women in the Dominican village of Miraflores from which, during the 1990s, more than 65 percent of the households sent migrants to Boston, completely changed their ideas about the kind of men they wanted to marry. They learned that since both men and women have to go out to work in Boston, the man helps out much more with the children and the housework when they return home at night. They observed that when married couples came back to visit, they seemed to make decisions together and that the husband seemed to treat his wife with more respect. In response to these social remittances, they demanded a different kind of partnership. They did not want to marry a man who had never migrated and who continued to treat women in the "old" way. They wanted to be with someone who would treat them as equals.
- Most of the people who belong to the Islamic Center of New England are Pakistanis. On the whole, they are well-educated professionals who belonged to the upper middle-class before they migrated and have maintained their status in the U.S. Because Pakistan is an Islamic country, they never had to think much about what it meant to be Muslim. But in the United States, they are forced to figure out what their faith means to them and how to pass it along to their children. This transforms the mosque from a center of prayer, with no formal leadership structure, to a social and cultural center with tax-deductible status and a board of directors. Enter women. In Pakistan, most women do not go to the mosque to pray. In Boston, they not only pray alongside men, they run the mosque alongside them as well. News of these changes travels back to Karachi where some women say, "This is all well and good but we still want to pray at home." Others, however, are galvanized by these changes and try to create new spaces where women can collectively pray and study together.
- Many of the Brazilian migrants who have settled in Boston come from the city of Governador Valadares. As more and more women start their own housecleaning and office cleaning companies, they have also assumed a prominent role in organizational life of this community. Women started one of the branches of the Brazilian Business Network as well as many of the community's social and cultural organizations. Some of the women in Valadares who have learned about this followed suit and became leaders of their churches or neighborhood groups. Others simply revisited their assumptions about political participation, acknowledging that women can play a much more central role than they ever thought possible and that it is important for them to participate, albeit only with their vote.

Social Remittances and Development

Not all migrants are transnational migrants nor do all those who participate in transnational activities do so all the time. But when a small group is regularly involved in their

sending country, and others participate periodically, their combined efforts add up. Taken together and over time, these activities constitute a social force with tremendous transformative significance that can modify the economy, values, and everyday lives of entire regions.

Social remittances play a key role in bringing about such changes. Not all social remittances are positive, however. What some consider a force for greater democratization and accountability, others hold responsible for rising materialism and individualism. Furthermore, culture does not flow only one way. Migrants introduce new ideas and practices to the countries that receive them which transforms the host culture, in both positive and negative ways as well.

Social remittances are an under-utilized development resource that have the potential to be purposefully harnessed to improve socioeconomic outcomes in both sending and receiving countries. This can happen in several ways:

1. To improve socioeconomic indicators - To the extent that migrants and non-migrants are embedded in transnational social fields, the forces shaping their health, education, and class status are also transnational. By systematically encouraging flows of information about health and education back to the source country and by stimulating a parallel flow of information to the host country, practitioners and policymakers will better understand the factors determining socioeconomic outcomes in a transnational field. By paying attention to social remittances, teachers and health care providers will understand the assumptions and expectations underlying health and educational behavior better. They will also have more powerful, effective tools with which to improve them.
2. Defining social categories like race, class, and gender. - Those who live in transnational social fields are managing two sets of, often conflicting, ideas about race, gender, and class. How people think about race in Latin America is, in many ways, the exact opposite of how it is conceived in the United States. One drop of black blood meant being black in the United States while the slightest link to whiteness made it possible to ascend the racial hierarchy in Latin America. Migrants and non-migrants use social remittances to square these conflicting social expectations. Dominicans who migrated to Boston, for example, thought of themselves as white before they moved to the United States. Soon after their arrival, they realized they were being slotted into a different racial category in the U.S. and they told those who remained behind about this. This exposure made non-migrants reconsider their relations with their Haitian neighbors. Some became more tolerant while others more firmly asserted their whiteness in the face of this new threat. In this example, racial identities were transnationally determined, largely in response to social remittance flows.

These dynamics do not confine themselves to class. Those who live across borders earn their living and measure their success in two different socioeconomic contexts. How should class be defined when migrants receive government assistance toward their housing costs in the United States at the same time that they are building homes in their sending communities? What about those who have trouble paying their rent because they continue to support family members in their homelands? In cases such as these, both remaining poor and getting ahead, and where one locates oneself in the class hierarchy, are influenced by home

and host-country factors. Therefore, shouldn't programs aimed at alleviating poverty take both contexts into account?

3. Culture as an asset - Culture is an under-explored, under-utilized development asset. Poverty alleviation and development require not only getting the structures right. They also require getting the heart and soul right. Culture is a valuable asset in creating communities, helping communities identify problems, and in coming up with solutions to them. It is a safe way for factions within communities, divided by gender or generation, to clarify their positions and achieve consensus. The more culture is harnessed to build strong, viable communities that know what they want and how to achieve it, the more such groups will be able to protect their interests and make claims vis a vis the policymakers, development professionals, and state officials they work with.

Additional Resources

Levitt, Peggy. 2001. *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette, ed. 2003. *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.