Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies

Edited by Anna Triandafyllidou

Dedication

For the Cultural Pluralism team of the Global Governance Programme at the European University Institute in Florence, for our exciting and thought-provoking academic and non-academic conversations!

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Social remittances

How migrating people drive migrating culture

Peggy Levitt

The term 'social remittances' was coined in response to an over emphasis in the literature on the economic aspects of migration at the expense of its social and the cultural aspects (Levitt 2001). Too much had been written about the money that circulated between migrants and non-migrants and not enough about the ideas, practices, social capital or identities that also circulate between them. A focus on social remittances, therefore, draws attention to the relationship between migrating people and migrating culture or how culture creates the conditions under which migration, social inclusion and unbounded understandings of the nation take shape. How does culture change as it travels? What travels easily and what is blocked? In addition, how do politics, religion and family life change in response? Focusing on social remittances both gave rise to and is an integral piece of a transnational approach to migration studies.

It is not surprising that economic remittances have been the focus of so much attention. According to World Bank projections, international migrants were expected to remit more than $550 billion in earnings in 2013, of which $414 billion would flow to developing countries. In 24 countries, remittances were equal to more than 10 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011; in nine countries, they were equal to more than 20 per cent of GDP (World Bank 2014). However, if we only focus on money at the expense of the people, objects, technologies and social remittances that circulate within transnational social fields, our analysis of the relationship between migration and development or processes of social inclusion and stratification will be incomplete.

This chapter begins, therefore, with a short summary of transnational approaches to migration studies before turning to the role of social remittances within them.

A transnational perspective

At its core, a transnational optic or gaze challenges long-standing ways of talking about, studying and evaluating the organisation of social life. It does not take as given the boundaries or relevant scales of experience of the individuals, groups, spaces or places of analysis. It does not assume they are static, contained or rooted but always at least considers the

possibility of fluidity, connection and movement, no matter how inequalities, power and securitisation make mobility more difficult for some than for others. A transnational perspective begins by asking what the appropriate spatial unit of analysis is for the question at hand. Part of its project is to determine, for each case, what are the relevant sites and levels of social interaction and how they fit together. Another is to invent new methods that generate new data or reread existing data in ways that reveal social processes and relations that are obscured when we take the nation-state as our logical, automatic starting point. It is to rethink social institutions, processes and statuses such as 'citizenship', 'inequality', 'race' or 'power' by understanding them as potentially produced across space, scale and time.

The term 'transnational' is an adjective rather than a noun. In contrast to traditional perspectives, which treat the transnational as belonging somewhere between the national and the global, this view is different. Rather than assuming they are bounded or bordered, social units or identities are understood as transnationally constituted, embedded and influenced social arenas that interact with one another. The world consists of multiple sets of dynamically overlapping and interacting transnational social fields that create and shape seemingly bordered and bounded structures, actors and processes (Khagram and Levitt 2007).

What does a transnational optic reveal about migration? First, that movement is not a prerequisite for belonging to, or being affected by, what goes on within transnational social fields. Because the circulation of money, goods, people and social remittances is so frequent and strong, even non-migrants feel their impact. Someone who has never travelled can be influenced by values, ideas, skills and practices from far away. Organisations are also affected. Political parties, religious organisations or community development groups assimilate values and practices from afar in response to the transnational lives of their constituents. Second, the transnational social field is a multi-sited and multi-layered field, encompassing many other salient sites where co-nationals or co-religionists live. Third, migrants engage in different ways of being and ways of belonging in transnational social fields and they are not always in sync. Ways of being are the actual practical ways that people continue to participate in their homelands, such as buying a home, investing in a business or voting in an election. This is distinct from ways of belonging or identifying with a transnational lifestyle or group. A person may not engage in a transnational way of being but embrace a transnational way of belonging through memory, nostalgia or history (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004).

Once we rethink the boundaries of social life, it becomes clear that the incorporation of individuals into nation-states and enduring homeland ties are not contradictory social processes. Simultaneity, or participating in daily activities, routines and institutions located in a destination country, a country of origin and other salient sites, is both possible and increasingly common, although increasingly difficult in the current geopolitical moment. Migrant incorporation into a new land and enduring connections to a homeland or to dispersed networks of family, compatriots or persons who share a religious or ethnic identity can occur at the same time and reinforce each other.

Therefore, incorporation in a new state and enduring transnational attachments are not binary opposites. Instead, we should think of the migrant experience as a gauge that, while anchored, pivots back and forth between them. Movement and attachment is not linear or sequential but capable of rotating and changing direction over time. The median point on this gauge is not full incorporation but rather simultaneity of connection. People swing one way or the other in response to life cycle events, economic downturns and climactic disasters. Many migrants will not be fully assimilated or solely involved in their homelands but some combination of both.

Social remittances and sites of encounter

A growing body of work focuses on social remittances that circulate within transnational social fields. In response to early criticisms that social remittances are more than just 'social', that they are negative as well as positive, and that they circulate in multiple directions, researchers have revisited the concept with several provisos (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2013; Mazzucato 2011; Boccagni and Decimo 2013). What migrants are exposed to and adopt in their countries of settlement is very much influenced by the ideas and practices they bring from their countries of origin, which, in turn, influences what they send back. These iterative circulatory exchanges occur when migrants return to live in or visit their communities of origin, when non-migrants visit migrants in receiving countries or through exchanges of letters, videos, cassettes, e-mails, blog posts and telephone calls. Individual social remittances occur through interpersonal exchanges between individual family members and friends, while collective social remittances are exchanges between individuals in their roles as organisational actors. Individual and collective social remittance circulation functions separately from, but reinforces and is reinforced by, other forms of global cultural circulation, such as the ideas and practices to which people are exposed through the mass media or when they come into contact with institutions of global governance. They have the potential to scale up to other levels of social experience (such as regional or national-level organisations) and to scale out to other domains of practice (such as a skill first used in a religious organisation that then is applied to politics).

In response, a second generation of scholarship on social remittances is emerging that expands upon these ongoing debates. Some of this work tries to clarify what is or is not a social remittance. Some research distinguishes between social, cultural, religious, 'immaterial' and political 'goods', highlighting how political practices, institutional and organisational forms, gender values and professional skills travel. What separates social remittances from other forms of global cultural circulation is that individuals, in their roles in families, communities and organisations learn of, adapt and appropriate ideas and practices as the result of interpersonal communication. Just as money is exchanged between two parties, so social remittances are exchanged between individuals, although they can be reinforced or disrupted by other forms of cultural circulation. Therefore, discussions of social remittances should inform and be informed by research on policy learning and international knowledge transfers because it is often migrants doing the learning and transferring of knowledge when they move to work and study abroad (Kapur 2010; Holdaway and Levitt, forthcoming). Other researchers focus on the direction of travel, using the term 'reverse' remittances to highlight flows from sending to receiving countries (Mazzucato 2011). Still others highlight the different phases of circulation – that the launch or introduction of a new idea or practice, is distinct from its journey, which differs from processes of appropriation and vernacularisation.

Related, but clearly different, is research on the social relations underlying economic remittance exchanges and the social meaning of these exchanges. This work explores the relationship between social and economic remittances and the impact of social networks of different types and scope on the circulation and adaption of ideas and practices. Does money precede the circulation and adaptation of ideas or do social remittances lay the groundwork for different kinds of money transfers and their new uses?

Meaningful answers require a better understanding of the determinants of circulation and adoption – the characteristics of the carriers, the geographies through which remittances circulate, the pathways that constitute them and what happens at the site of encounter, where what is travelling comes into contact with what is already in place (Levitt 2013).

Individuals are the primary carriers of social remittances, although they also inhere in objects or, in the case of religion, deities and spirits. However, individuals with different backgrounds and experiences move for different amounts of time across varying distances, producing different levels and types of contact with the places where they travel. Not everyone moves with the intention of permanent settlement, nor are they allowed to. Therefore, migrants encounter destinations with different degrees of openness and closedness, with skills that open up opportunities and close them down, and with varying degrees of intensity and frequency that, in turn, affect social remittance adoption and use.

These carriers move through different kinds of geographies, the intersecting planes and networks that constitute transnational social fields and their boundaries. Some terrains are more stable than others. The social fields connecting Mexico and the United States, the UK and South Asia and Germany and Turkey have relatively long and consistent histories. In contrast, less developed and more uncertain social fields, such as those plagued by civil unrest or climactic disaster, are more difficult to navigate. Not only can communication be hampered but also what travels is more likely to encounter blockages along the way. These geographies are deeply rutted by history, politics and demography and new cultural infusions must accommodate themselves to the existing terrains. Social remittances have to make their way through these pockmarked terrains, which enable some things to travel easily while blocking others. Geographies also change over time, not only with respect to migrant characteristics but also with respect to governance and institutions, facilitating circulation more for some migrant cohorts than others.

The characteristics of the pathways that constitute these geographies, through which remittances must travel, also influence their circulation and adaptation. Some pathways are formal, protected, and hierarchically organised, providing sheltered channels that are less vulnerable to interference. Other pathways are more informal and exposed. What travels through them is, therefore, much more likely to be diverted or changed as it moves.

But what explains how and why what is circulating and what is already in place come together as they do? What happens at these sites of encounter?

One broad set of factors is the social status of the carriers and the receivers; be they individuals or organisations. First, the qualities of remittance senders – gender, education, citizenship and length of stay in a host country – greatly affect the ideas and practices they bring when they migrate and what they are ultimately exposed to, appropriate and export back. Higher status senders, whether they are individuals or organisations, can more easily influence less well-positioned receivers. Socially marginal individuals and organisations can more easily take risks. When organisations see themselves as peers, they are more likely to mimic each other's behaviour.

A second broad set of influences affecting what happens at sites of encounter is the difference between the ideas and practices in motion and those that are already in place – not only how easy something is to package, communicate and transmit, but also how different it is from what is currently being done. Some ideas and practices are more portable and transposable than others. Behaviours such as fasting, praying, singing, voting or campaign strategies can happen anywhere with certain adjustments while values, such as human rights or gender equity, are more difficult to adjust to local conditions.

Portability and adoption also depend, in part, on boundaries or the discrepancy between what is already in place and what is being introduced. Boundaries can be high when adoption requires a major change or they can be low when what is travelling has a lot in common with what is already being done. Boundaries can be thick, creating tight data packets that travel easily and efficiently, or they can be thin, creating leaky packages that move with greater

difficulty because they are more likely to spill. Written traditions travel in packages that are literally bounded, while stories transmitted orally are more likely to change when they are translated and retold over time. Finally, boundaries tend to be selectively permeable, only permitting things with particular shapes and textures to infiltrate them. Ideas and practices that are too 'round' to fit within metaphorically square-shaped gates simply cannot pass through.

The frequency and strength of contact between circulating and rooted elements also influences the nature of the encounter. This often depends upon how new ideas and practices are introduced into the social field. If something is injected directly, intensely, and frequently (for instance, various examples and arguments in favour of gender equity), it is likely to have a greater impact than if it is talked about every so often and only indirectly.

Finally, the nature of the circulatory encounter depends on the presence of exogenous elements that stimulate, enhance or cancel out its effect. Some social remittances travel together in a kind of partnership, producing an interaction effect. Sometimes their relationship is parasitic; what is introduced piggybacks onto a host that it decimates as it travels. Other flows cancel each other out. Finally, other ideas and practices depend on each other symbiotically for survival (Levitt 2007, 2013).

Vernacularisation

Vernacularisation entails redefining and adapting ideas to facilitate their understanding and appropriation in local contexts. It is what happens after the 'encounter' takes place – the process of translating social remittances so they are useable in new contexts, of creating meaning by connecting global discourses with local ideologies within the context of a particular organisational style and ethos. An idea or practice circulates, comes into contact with ideas and practices already in place and some kind of transformative mixing occurs. People have heard, for example, that there are workplaces that are managed less hierarchically and that it might be a good idea to challenge the boss. However, how and when does the availability of that knowledge lead to some form of vernacularisation or adaption and use?

There are at least three types of vernacularisation: the act of building on the imaginative space, momentum and power of particular global frames without using them directly; the act of translating global ideas so they are locally appropriate and applicable to new issues; and the act of taking core concepts, articulating them in locally appropriate ways, and modelling new ways to put them into practice (Levitt and Merry 2009). To build on the workplace example, knowing that in some workplaces there is less social distance between workers and supervisors might cause people to become more comfortable with their superiors. While not directly challenging authority, they take advantage of the social space created by that frame, thereby easing the social hierarchy and making the workplace more productive. Other workers actually embrace ideas about more egalitarian workplace relations in ways that make sense for their particular context while others actually put these ideas into practice.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, we live in a world on the move, in which mobility and connection, although not equally or across the board are the words of the day. What, then, are the next steps? One is to learn more about how social remittances are shaped by and how they shape other kinds of cultural circulation. How do the media, assemblages and other types and levels of cultural circulation interact with, enable and thwart social remittance travel and vice versa? How can

migration scholars speak more effectively to other fields? For example, how might social remittances concerning more egalitarian gender roles eventually contribute to demographic shifts and greater female participation in the labour market? What does thinking about remittances as a communicative act say to linguistics and communication studies? What difference does it make when it is health, political preferences or religious beliefs that are circulating? Do these different types of remittances travel in the same way, through comparable types of institutional architectures and geographies? Must we talk about circuit-specific patterns or do we see regional similarities? Finally, under what conditions do social remittances scale up and scale out? When might ideas about greater gender equality lead to more large-scale economic and demographic change?

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Migration and diasporas

What role for development?

Piyasiri Wickramasekara

Introduction

International migration and diaspora issues have come to the forefront of the global agenda in the past two decades. The initial focus of diaspora studies has been on their identities and historical evolution based on anthropological, political and sociological approaches (Sheffer 1986; Cohen 1997, 2008; Nyberg-Sørensen 2007). Population movements and migration have generally been studied by economists and demographers (Skeldon 1985; Stark and Bloom 1985; Papademetriou and Martin 1991; de Haas 2012). International migration was viewed from a negative perspective in the 1960s and 1970s as a reflection of development failures with resulting loss of human resources (brain drain) from developing countries (Bhagwati 1976; de Haas 2012). Another trend has been the increasing attention on transnationalism and transnational communities, which study social ties and networks linking contemporary migrants or refugees to their origin states or communities (Nyberg-Sørensen 2007; Faist 2010). While diaspora is a very old concept, transnationalism is relatively new, and Faist called the diaspora and transnational communities as two 'awkward dance partners' (Faist 2010: 9).

The growing interest in the migration-development nexus triggered by the phenomenal rise in global remittances has led to an optimistic view of migration since the mid-1990s (World Bank 2003; de Haas 2012). Clemens *et al.* (2015) also note that the focus of migration studies has shifted in recent years from rural urban migration and remittances to wider issues of human capital investment, global diaspora networks, and the transfer of technology and cultural norms.

Definitions and concepts

The term 'diaspora' has historically been linked with the notion of forced displacement, victimisation or alienation. Cohen (1997) characterised diasporas in terms of several attributes: dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically; alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions and a collective memory and myth about a homeland and an idealisation of the supposed ancestral home. He categorised diasporas using a five-fold classification with specific examples: *victim*