EDITORIAL

Mapping social remittances

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Abstract

The notion of social remittances has gained a central position, discursively at least, in the literature on the effects of emigration on home societies. In this editorial we briefly review the strengths and limitations that this concept has displayed, since its early coinage in transnational migration studies. More often than not, social remittances have been treated in the literature in a peripheral vein, ancillary to different foci of research. This *Migration Letters* special issue aims to move the debate on the theme beyond this unsatisfactory state of things. More specifically, we argue for four lines of research on social remittances to be further developed: the tensions between individualization and home-society based obligations and pressures, which shape the development and circulation of social remittances; the need to explore the embeddedness of economic remittances within a broader range of socio-cultural remittances (rather than vice versa); the interfaces between the categories of social remittances and social capital; the complex ways in which physical and social distance between senders and recipients affects the circulation of social remittances, as well as their impact on migrants' communities of origin.

Keywords: Social remittances, individualization, economic remittances, social capital, transnationalism, case studies.

Introduction

Social remittances are nowadays on everybody's mind, as an epitome of the myriad ways in which migrants affect their home societies – through the money they transfer, and well beyond. First coined in the late nineties, the notion of social remittances broadly stands for "the ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities" (Levitt, 1998: 926). It is typically assumed, in other words, as a catchphrase for the grassroots "forms of cultural diffusion" (id.) enabled by transnational migration processes. Despite its increasing salience, though, this notion has rarely been object of further theoretical refinements[1] – which, in a way, militates in favour of a special issue to "map" it as a research tool and a distinctive set of social phenomena.

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[1] Exceptions include Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011), as well as the papers of the same authors and of Mata-Codesal (and hopefully, our editorial) in this special issue.

Not surprisingly, in the light of the success story of social remittances, criticisms have also multiplied. At issue is, first of all, the analytical clarity of a concept that covers an extremely diverse set of phenomena. The lack of an explicitly economic or political dimension is arguably the sole commonality. This makes any attempt at operationalization problematic.[2] In question is also the novelty and distinctiveness of the phenomena themselves, as a precondition for adopting a specific label. Moreover, distinguishing migrants' specific influence, within the wealth of material and symbolic resources that circulate between and within nation-states, may be quite a hazardous task. Last, a risk exists that the literature on social remittances provides, once again, a one-sided account of cultural diffusion – as if emigration countries were only net recipients of remittances of any sort (a point which the new literature on reverse remittances has compellingly questioned [Mazzucato, 2010]).

These criticisms notwithstanding, what migrants "remit" to the everyday life values, attitudes and practices in home societies provides a terrain where the implications of a transnational lens can be fully addressed, and a much richer picture of the remittance debate can be traced. The evolving relationships between migrants and non-migrants – i.e. the transnational negotiation of their mutual expectations, obligations and life projects – can be approached, likewise, as a process with no pre-determined outcome. To be sure, this process needs to be read in the light of migrants' individual and collective characteristics, and the structure of opportunities accessible in immigration countries should be equally taken into account.

Whether migrants' "homeland spillovers" (Waldinger, 2011) deserve a distinctive coinage or not, it is hardly deniable that they do matter in many ways – and that the attendant research agenda (the 'how', 'when/where', 'who/whom' of their social relevance) is relatively undeveloped. This simple observation has inspired the project of our SI, as an attempt to move social remittances beyond the status of a slippery byword. Most authors, detractors included, would probably agree on the paucity of systematic and comparative empirical work on social remittances as an issue *per se* – rather than one ancillary to different research foci, to be mentioned in often principled or ritualistic ways. While the SI as a whole contributes to address this research gap, we will outline here some lines for further elaboration and research, which could be recapped as follows: the tensions between individualization pressures and family- (or community-) based obligations, which are mirrored in the prevalent forms of social remittances and in their impingements on local development processes; the need to further explore the inextricable links between

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[2] A risk does exist that any kind of migrant-driven influence falls into the rubric of social remittance, thus making the concept of little use. Some anecdotal evidence may be of interest here. The call for papers on which this SI builds – named, indeed, *Mapping social remittances* – received several manuscript submissions that called *social* what basically amounted to *collective* remittances: an equally evocative (and overused) category, but a substantively different one (cf. Goldring, 2004; see also de Haas, 2007, for an overview of the literature on remittances in migration and development studies).

economic and social remittances; the conceptual commonalities, as well as the discontinuities, between the notions of social remittances and social capital; the implications of physical presence or absence between "senders" and "recipients", as a background to the circulation of social remittances.[3]

All of these issues can be found, to different degrees, in the papers that follow our editorial introduction. This *Migration Letters* issue consists of eight qualitative case studies, which revisit the significance of social remittances in as many local contexts of emigration. While empirical-based reflection on social remittances is common to all the papers, many complementary topics are also dealt with – including the migration/development nexus, return migration, the social and cultural stratification of home communities, gender and generational relationships, and the processes of transnational family living. The emigration backgrounds covered in this SI are, more specifically, the following: Dominican Republic (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves), Ecuador (Mata-Codesal), India (Gallo), Senegal (Blanchard), Ghana (Sabar), Egypt (Gruntz and Pagès-El Karoui), Romania (Vlase) and Ukraine (Vianello).

Social remittances and the mixed prospects for individualization

Central to the study of social remittances is, to begin with, the faceted and changing relationship between migrants and their communities of origin. The emerging debate on social remittances should then be embedded in the literature on migrant transnationalism – more specifically, on transnational families (e.g. Golbourne et al., 2010; Dreby & Adkins, 2010; Baldassar & Merla, 2012). Research on the latter, while sensitive to the factors of stress and deprivation that undermine family emotional life across the borders, has generally celebrated the maintenance over time and space of significant ties between migrants and non-migrants, as members of the same households. Much empirical work has shown how vulnerable and difficult are cross-border relationships between partners, parents and children, siblings or other relatives (e.g. Parreñas, 2005; Dreby, 2010; Boccagni, 2012a). Less attention has been paid, though, to the conflicts generated by migration, the asymmetries of power between "leavers" and "stayers", and the related social changes in homeland communities (see Sayad [1977], as a remarkable exception).

In this vein, many of the contributions to this SI reveal how migrants' prospects of greater personal autonomy, or of individualization,[4] are a terrain of social conflict between migrants themselves, their families and the broader communities left behind. Both Blanchard and Sabar, by analysing the dynam-

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[3] Admittedly, such lines of research, while relevant in themselves, have also been privileged for their centrality to the research field of the guest editors of this SI. This primarily involves the interfaces between social remittances, individualization and social capital, for Decimo; the specificity of social remittances as a transnational process, and the influence of physical and social distance upon it, for Boccagni.

[4] See, in particular, Augé (1994) for a reflection on the controversial character of individualization processes in post-colonial societies.

ics of control on money remittances, call for a reflection on the rights claimed by a variety of kin on emigrants' transfers, as well as on the strategies developed by migrants in order to contain, or contrast, their family members' expectations. Non-migrants, in turn, more or less effectively appeal to the deep obligations that stem from migrants' home belonging – including the obligation to send money. At issue is, more specifically, the idea that emigration and its revenues would make someone free or independent (Decimo, 2007). Through the money they claim, and the relative freedom to spend it, non-migrants may try to inhibit or hinder potentially emancipatory trajectories, thus reaffirming the power of original bonds and constraints. By virtue of these social control dynamics, which may include belittling or denigrating any migration-related change, a migrant is ritually reintegrated, in a way, in his/her home community.

Of relevance, here, are also the discursive representations of migrant life which, through a cross-border flow of comments, narratives and gossips, make collectively sense of individual mobility. Vianello's paper, along these lines, approaches the very mixed account of Ukrainian migrant women which is cultivated in their home society. While their self-sacrifice is commended, their life-style is invariably stigmatized as soon as it mirrors some search for autonomy and self-realization. As Gruntz and Pagès-El Karoui remark in turn, in their analysis of gender and generation change in Egyptian migrant families, one's option to leave – no matter how supported by non-migrant kin – can also be understood as a kind of social violation of traditional relational arrangements.

Overall, then, the "suitcase" of immaterial goods brought back by migrants to home societies has diverse, even contrasting contents. This is intimately related to the meaning(s) attributed to migration, in terms both of individual trajectories and of expansion of family and community circuits. This ambivalence reflects itself in the highly variable meaning assumed by social remittances, depending on the prospect of analysis one adopts – whether an individual-, a family- or a community-centred one. A variety of trade-offs may emerge between the interests and needs of these different actors, as exemplified by the disputes on the value of migrants' savings, or on the freedom to spend them, highlighted in several papers within this volume. This calls for an analytical distinction between an individual (or a private) and a collective level, as well as for reflection on the aggregate effects of individual behaviours. In either respect, the notion of social remittances requires further elaboration, including a clear methodological stance about the unit of analysis underlying any evaluation of their positive or negative characteristics.

Delving into the link between social and economic remittances

As one analyses the circuits of production and diffusion of social remittances, their strong connections with monetary remittances invariably stand out. As all the papers in this SI suggest, every interaction between money senders and

recipients involves much more than a merely economic transaction. No less significant are the symbolic value, the expected destination, the roles and the power relationships that are attached to, and negotiated through, migrant monies. Apart from being a potential expenditure, then, economic remittances hold a distinctive social value which is particularly manifest in home societies, where migrant remittances are more likely to affect the traditional relations of production, distribution and control of the relevant resources. As they send money, migrants simultaneously send immaterial goods that distinctively impact on social and cultural discourses, meanings and practices – in ways that span beyond any strictly economic effect. Since the value of money is also connoted by the social meanings diffused through it, the concept of social remittances could be expanded up to subsume the economic remittance one – rather than being simply interwoven with it.

Along these lines, besides studying how migrant money is accumulated, invested or spent (and how it impacts on economic growth), a case is made for studying the attendant relational and cultural dynamics – hence, the broader social change(s) economic remittances trigger off. This research perspective, which is consistent with the gift economy approach, elaborates on the processes of social regulation of economic exchanges. More specifically, it considers how norms, values, relational networks and organizations embody and hierarchize the processes of accumulation, circulation and consumption of both the monetary and non-monetary goods which accrue from migration.[5]

Migrants' family life, as the primary arena for the transfer and consumption of their money, is particularly exposed to a variety of social tensions. In this respect, the papers of Vlase and Vianello, both of them on highly feminized migration systems from Eastern Europe, effectively discuss how the increasing economic responsibilities of migrant women affect gender and generational roles and relationships – even more so, as they turn into the main breadwinners.

Whether in a family realm or beyond, money remittances create circuits of resources which differentially reach out to left-behind households, depending on individual and family involvement in the migration process. To that extent, remittances affect the patterns of social stratification, as well as the criteria underlying the attribution of prestige, group labelling and class distinctions. Gallo's case study provides a compelling account of the different connotations of migrants' monies, depending on remitters' social status (i.e. skilled vs. unskilled workers). As the author shows, collective discourses and narratives

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[5] Several major authors have contributed, over time, to this line of reflection – among others, Mauss, Polanyi and, more recently, Portes and Zelizer. A quote from the latter's "Social meaning of money" is specifically worth making: "Extraeconomic factors systematically constrain and shape *a)* the *uses* of money, earmarking, for instance, certain monies for special uses; *b)* the *users* of money, designating different people to handle specified monies; *c)* the *allocation* system of each particular money; *d)* the *control* of different monies; and *e)* the *sources* of money, linking different sources to specified uses" (Zelizer, 1989: 351).

tend to assert principles and values instrumental to clear status distinctions, despite the "blurring" effect emigration has on long-standing class hierarchies.

Altogether, social remittances have a major influence on the outcomes of the economic ones. While a significant inflow of money from abroad is a clear and distinctive fact, its impact on local development depends on the relational circuits into which it is embedded, and on the social value with which it is credited. Factors such as weak or conflictive family ties, pervasive dynamics of social control, as well as ostentatious forms of consumption, do constrain and undermine the developmental potential of economic remittances. Several assumptions on the "new economics of migration" are then put into question: under what circumstances does a household really utilize remittances according to economic rationality criteria? Are there typical trajectories of convergence or differentiation, as far as money remitting is concerned? How is it that a "communal definition of the [economic] situation", and of the needs to be addressed, emerges through the negotiation between individual migrants, their families and the broader communities left behind? How is it that a shared "emigration culture" may develop, when it comes to negotiating the entity, distribution and destination of monetary remittances?

Looking at social remittances through the lens of social capital

As the above discussion suggests, a significant connection can be made between the notions of social remittances and social capital. Expanding on the relational resources available to migrants and their home communities is a promising way ahead, both in the light of the critical interface between individuals, families and communities all over the migration process, and of the social value and impact of monetary remittances. While the earlier account of Levitt (1998) assumed social capital as a form (or a subset) of social remittance, the focus could also shift to the reverse – that is, how different social capital arrangements affect, in differential ways, the development of social remittances.

A helpful starting point is provided by Portes' (1998) conceptualization of social capital. Building on the classical definitions of Bourdieu, Loury and Coleman, Portes thoroughly analyzes the process of construction of social capital, be it – importantly – a "positive" or a "negative" one. While social capital is defined as a set of interpersonal relationships that facilitate individuals and groups in reaching their objectives, an emphasis on the negative side emphasizes its less desirable consequences, such as "exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward leveling norms" (Portes, 1998: 15).

Generally speaking, interpersonal social networks between home and host societies, and the cultural changes they mediate, have been extensively ad-

dressed in the transnational migration debate.[6] Likewise, the thick relational bases of transnational social spaces or fields have been widely recognized. They tend to be depicted, though, only as a resource for the individuals and communities involved – in a way, an opportunity for "grassroots cosmopolitanism". Put differently, they are typically assumed as synonymous with positive social capital. Yet, as much empirical research shows (including several papers in this SI), migrant transnational networks can equally assume – just like all social networks – a restrictive, weak or even disruptive character.

The same ambivalence is inherent in social remittances, as Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) recognize through their distinction between the positive and the negative ones; quite unclear, though, are the factors and processes that account for one configuration or another. Against this background, social capital theorizations can offer a promising way ahead. Cross-border relationships between migrants and non-migrants, in particular, can both trigger and inhibit processes of growth and social change in home societies. On the one hand, they can facilitate multi-situated interconnections between different social actors and settings, promoting the development and circulation of positive social remittances; on the other, while protecting network members, they may reproduce conservative, even coercive social niches, which inhibit or censure individual initiatives.

In the latter perspective, which builds also on the "bounded solidarity" notion of Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993: 1324), further research hypotheses can be sketched out. The most obvious of them would probably go as follows: the more insecure immigrants' socio-economic and legal status, the more likely they draw on transnational ties as mainly a source of social protection, and the less likely they exert an innovative influence on home societies. A case in point is provided, in this SI, by part of the research material of Mata-Codesal, Sabar, and Gruntz and Pagès-El Karoui.

At an aggregate level, then, transnational social spaces need to be appreciated in the light of the hierarchization dynamics that pervade them – related to the differential effect of barriers to human mobility, of social-economic and legal status, of ethnicity, gender and so forth. Within this framework, transnational networks are themselves a trigger of social changes – as a result of economic and social remittances – which interacts with the axes of structural differentiation and segmentation highlighted above. It is a matter of empirical analysis, in conclusion, to see when and under which circumstances cross-border ties become stronger, or weaker, and what differential impact they produce.

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[6] A huge literature exists on the relevance of social networks in contemporary migration processes. Massey, Faist, Tilly are just a few of the many authors who could be mentioned in this regard.

How distance impacts on social remittances

Last, in our contention, research on social remittances should address the influence of distance, over time and space, on the relationships between migrant "senders" and non-migrant "recipients". How is it that migrants' physical distance from home affects the kind of non-economic resources they remit, the ways how they do so, and the consequences of social remittances on the pre-existing social arrangements? The dialectic between physical absence and social presence – at the very core of migrant transnationalism (Carling et al., 2012; Boccagni, 2012b) – needs also to be factored into the social remittances debate.

In principle, migrants' home visits, and especially their return on a more or less permanent basis, provide a privileged setting where the "baggage" they bring back can be appreciated. Sabar's contribution to this special issue is exemplary in this sense. Return migration is the most obvious venue to study the intersections between migrants' ideas, values, life-styles – to various degrees affected by their permanence abroad – and the stances of home societies towards them. Having said this, the bulk of migration-related cultural diffusion need not be mediated by physical co-presence. The transational perspective has made a compelling case for the importance, in this respect, of day-to-day interpersonal communication over a distance, whatever the "mediating" technology (i.e. phone, internet, couriers of gifts and packages, etc.). This is arguably the most pervasive channel through which migrants' life experience abroad can spill over the imagineries and expectations, as well as – in the long run – on the prevailing values and the cognitive schema of their significant others (and, indirectly, of home societies overall).

To be sure, analytically distinguishing (let alone operationalizing) social remittances, which is an elusive effort in itself, gets even harder when it comes to their non-physical ways of circulation. While social remittances in co-presence can be reasonably attributed to a distinctive effect of emigration – at least once they are approached through in-depth case studies over time –, social remittances in-absence can hardly be isolated within the huge variety of communication and information flows that circulate between immigrant sending and receiving societies.

As importantly, the influence of distance should be appreciated in terms of *time,* as Levitt and Lamba-Nieves point out. Social remittances, as any cross-border transaction, are basically processes that vary, in their contents and relevance, with the extension of migrant detachment from home. The focus should then go on their contribution to the evolving "dissonance" between the life horizons of movers and stayers; a process which stems both from migrants' exposure to different life-standards and styles (what one may call their acculturation), and from the "ossification" of their home-related views and expectations. In a nutshell, while migrants may diffuse distinctive mind-frames and ways of doing, for instance in the realm of work or of civic participation, what they perceive as the central needs, interests and values of their home communities tend to diverge, over time, from the mainstream

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constructions of non-migrants. Interestingly, conclude Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, the changing ways of conceiving, managing and valuing time are themselves a form of social remittances, with no predetermined outcome on the everyday life styles in home societies.

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There is also a regular article included in this issue. This last paper by Martel, Carson and Taylor draws our attention to the concept of 'escalator regions' first coined by Fielding. They examine and discuss recent migration trends to Australia's Northern Territory with a focus on new or emerging 'escalator migrants'.

Acknowledgements

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