

Endurance of Transnationalism in Bolivia's Valle Alto

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Abstract

The increasing difficulty of return migration and the demands for assimilation into host societies suggest a long-term cutting of ties to origin areas—likely accentuated in the Bolivian case by the recent shift in destinations from Argentina to the US and Spain. Making use of a stratified random sample of 417 families as well as ethnographic interviews in the provinces of Punata, Esteban Arze, and Jordán in the Valle Alto region the authors investigate these issues. Results suggest that for families with greater than ten years cumulated foreign work experience, there are significantly more absences and lower levels of remittances as a percentage of household income. Although cultural ties remain strong after ten years, intentions to return to Bolivia decline markedly. The question of whether the diminution of economic ties results in long-term village decline in the Valle Alto remains an unanswered.

Keywords: transnationalism; emigration; remittances; Bolivia

In rural Bolivia, comprehensive transnationalism—in which social, economic, and cultural ties bind migrants to their homeland—is supported by evidence for extensive contacts across international borders (Hinojosa, 2006:11; Levitt, 2001:6; Levitt and Waters, 2002; Portes et al., 1999). But how long will this transnationalism endure? Compared to earlier migration streams to Argentina or Chile, travel to more recent destinations such as Spain and the U.S. is costly and may involve legal hurdles, so return trips may be less frequent, and, arguably, home ties may weaken over time.

This study approaches this question by employing two methodologies: (1) a survey of 417 households living in three *municipios* of the Valle Alto, an agricultural area near Cochabamba, Bolivia, in late 2007; and (2) interviews with migrants, their families, and key informants in the same region over a longer period of time.

Transnationalism and transnational migration

Transnational (international) migration is sustained by economic as well as social remittances (the ideas, behaviors, and social

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capital that flow from receiving to sending communities: Levitt, 2001; Price, 2006). The concept of transnational migration is clearly useful, but it is still an open question how long these connections last. Pressures in the host country to assimilate may promote “cultural retrenchment” within migrant families abroad (Levitt, 2001:19; Jones, 2008). On the other hand, these pressures may also induce migrants to modify the cultural traits (morals, customs, values, behaviors) that prevent their social and economic *integration* into the host society. As they integrate—obtain higher-paying jobs, bring family, purchase a home, arrange legal papers—their ties to the origin may atrophy (Smith, 2001; Cornelius, 2007; Marcelli and Lowell, 2005; Massey, 2006; Lozano, 1993:13-18; Riosmena, 2004; Reyes, 2004; Roberts et al., 1999; Binford, 2003; DiSipio, 2002; Mooney, 2004; Mahler, 1998; Jergens, 2001; Escobar et al., 2006).

Bolivian transnational migration

Bolivia, as Mexico, is a country with a difficult physical environment and an unfavorable political history that saw it lose half its national territory (Fifer, 1972). Even more than Mexico, Bolivia depends on wage labor migration to improve its trade balance and channel money directly into poorer regions. Remittances account for almost 10% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (compared to 3% in Mexico) (IFAD, 2006). Today, half of all Bolivians have a family member living abroad (de la Torre, 2006:32-33).

Bolivia's migration hearth is the Valle Alto region in the greater Cochabamba area of central Bolivia. Land fragmentation traced to the *allyu* (Inca communal landholding system), and the *mita* and *piquero* (colonial systems imposed on the inhabitants by the Spanish) are important migration push factors in this region (Cortes, 2001, 2004; Dandler and Medeiros, 1988; Zoomers, 1999; de la Torre and Alfaro, 2007:60-62). Labor migration from the region traces to the early 20th century when it was directed to the Chilean saltpeter mines (González, 1996). This was followed, successively, by migration to seasonal agricultural jobs in the northwest Argentina in the 1950s, followed by construction jobs in Buenos Aires (Hinojosa et al., 2000; Hinojosa, 2002:28-30; de la Torre and Alfaro, 2007:59-86). The Argentine economic crisis of the mid-1990s re-directed these flows to the United States, where, after 2000, economic and political difficulties again shifted the flows, in this case to Spain and to a lesser degree other destinations in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The shift in Bolivian migrant destinations to farther away

countries plays a major role in longer stays abroad (see below). Today, about one-half of Valle Alto migrants go to Argentina, and a fifth each to the U.S. and Spain.

Valle Alto families display several dimensions of transnationalism (de la Torre, 2006). Local and external family members are attached to each other by means of monetary remittances, demonstrations of family solidarity, and involvement in the community. Remittances serve multiple purposes—family sustenance, investment in agriculture and family businesses, education of children, medical care, community projects, and “ostentation” by which the family’s social status is improved (de la Torre 2006:146-169). The bonding agents of this transnationalism include *social communication*, by which traditional values are transmitted to the destination, and *social remittances* (Levitt, 2001) by which host society values are transmitted to the village (de la Torre and Alfaro, 2007:62-63).

Nevertheless, transnational migration in Bolivia is susceptible to forces that make migration permanent. Earlier research on Bolivian migration to Argentina points out that as experience in Argentina increases, the likelihood of getting married there and having more of one’s family there also increases. Also, political and economic barriers may promote migration permanence (Dandler and Medeiros, 1988; Bastia, 2005; Grimson, 2005). Legal residence eventually imparts a higher social status to migrants; for example, Valle Alto residents with migration papers enabling them to work in the U.S. prefer to call themselves “residentes” instead of “migrantes” (de la Torre and Alfaro, 2007:24-29); many of these “residentes” are not, in fact, returning to Bolivia. There are no studies addressing whether these more permanent Valle Alto migrants are cutting their transnational ties, and in what ways.

Study design

Three municipios in the Valle Alto “core” were selected for the household survey: Punata and San Benito (in Punata province), and Tarata (in Esteban Arze province). They have been little studied in the past, are typical of the region, and include both urban and rural centers. A random sample of households in the urban places of Punata (14,742), San Benito (2,029), and Tarata (3,323)—the county seats of their respective municipios—were surveyed, along with those in a sample of rural places. Both migrant and non-migrant households were surveyed. The final sample was 53% rural (compared to 58% for these three municipios in the 2001 Bolivian Census) and 49% male (compared to 47% in the Census). For

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reasons having to do with interviewing logistics and the predominance of Quechua in isolated rural areas, our sample came parts of the municipios that were more accessible to the country seat and to Cochabamba, and for that reason our households were less agriculturally engaged and "cosmopolitan" in terms of their household possessions, than the overall populations of the municipios. This should be taken into account in the generalizations that follow. The interview schedule asked 150 questions on household possessions and expenses, and on vital statistics and migration experience of all adult household members. In two-thirds of the interviews, the man or woman (father or mother) of the house provided the information; in their absence, the informant was a son or daughter above 15 years old. Therefore, attitudes on family values and community institutions noted below are predominantly those of household heads. The surveys were carried out between September 5th and November 7th, 2007, by sociology students working on their bachelors theses at the San Simón University, Cochabamba. In addition to the 417 surveys, interviews with numerous families and opinion leaders in the region have been carried out (by the second author) over a five year period.

Results

A transnational household is one in which at least one member was working or seeking work overseas at the time of the interview (de la Torre, 2006). Almost half (46%) of our households were transnational on this criterion; two-fifths were non-emigrant (no member having worked abroad); and the remainder (14%) were dormant (i.e., someone had worked abroad in the past). Dormant households are not analyzed below.

For comparative purposes, we examine transnational households alongside non-emigrant households, which in a sense represent what the community would be like "without" international migration. First, transnational households are larger by more than two members, with an average of 6.5 members (including adults abroad) vs. 4.5 in non-emigrant households, suggesting that large family size may be a stimulus to migration. This is not likely due to any fertility differences---as a crude indicator, the average number of children per household is identical between migrant and non-migrant households. Instead, it may be due to the fact that adult migrant children abroad remain members of the Bolivian household, whereas adult children who move away but remain in Bolivia usually do not. Second, migrant as opposed to non-migrant

households tend to hold cultural values that are slightly *more* traditional (e.g., belief that marriage is forever and more children is better), but at the same time they hold attitudes that are much *less* supportive of community institutions such as local government and the Catholic Church. Finally, transnational households have family incomes that are more than 20% higher (US \$ 3778 vs. \$3106) than non-migrant households. Transnational households depend on monetary remittances for nearly half (47%) of their income. Household members abroad participate in Bolivian celebrations at the destination (in over half of the cases), and keep in close telephone contact, thus maintaining strong ties with their Bolivian origins.

Lacking *panel* data that would show how transnational connections of families and individuals changed over time, we employ *cohort* data for different cumulated-time-abroad groupings of families at one point in time (2007), offering a surrogate for changes that affect a given family as its migration experience increases. Regarding *social gravitation*, there is accelerated demographic anchorage to the foreign destination over time. Between the short term (less than 2 years abroad) and the long-term (more than 10 years abroad), the mean number of adults working abroad increases by approximately two persons (from 1.1 to 2.8), while the mean number of adults and children living at home decreases by about one person (from 5.0 to 3.9) (Table 1). This anchorage is underlined by reduced intentions to return to Bolivia: specifically, from over 8/10 in the short term, to 9/10 in the medium term (2-10 years), to 2/3 in the long term.

Regarding *communication* and *cultural participation*, however, there is no indication that family members abroad are severing their ties. The frequency of telephoning home increases steadily, and the number of visits home increases markedly after 10 years (Table 1). We surmise that increasing legal status has enabled migrants to vault over the obstacles to re-entry mentioned earlier. Even after ten years, however, visits home are still only once in 2.7 years (10 / 3.66), because many long-term households (some 2/5) have not yet achieved legality for any member. Cultural participation shows even more fidelity to home over the migration experience. Celebration of Bolivian holidays and saints' days while abroad rises from around 1/4 to approaching 3/4 of transmigrant households—a dramatic and unexpected change that is apparently related to the larger number of family members abroad. We suggest that adherence to Bolivian culture serves two distinct pur-

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poses for transmigrants abroad: (1) early on, it serves to give migrants an oasis of refuge in a strange and difficult land; and (2) later, it serves to champion and display their culture to the host so-

Table 1: Social and economic transnationalism and cumulative experience abroad: Valle Alto, 2007

Indicator	Total cumulated working time abroad, transnational ^a households		
	short-term (<2 yrs):	medium-term (2 - 10 yrs):	long-term (> 10 yrs):
<i>Social Gravitation: (n=)</i>	(53)	(72)	(66)
Mean number of years working abroad, per migrant	1.1	3.7	11.7
Mean number of adults working abroad	1.1	1.6	2.8
Mean number of adults and children living at home	5.0	4.9	3.9
Migrants ^b intend to return to live in Bolivia (%)	84.4	92.4	67.2
<i>Communication: (n=)</i>	(53)	(72)	(66)
Migrants ^b phone home at least once monthly (%)	84.3	91.0	93.3
Number of visits home per 10 years, per migrant	1.33	1.10	3.66
<i>Cultural Participation: (n=)</i>	(53)	(72)	(66)
At least one migrant participated in Bolivian celebrations at destination (%)	26.7	44.4	72.4
At least one migrant joined a Bolivian social organization at destination (%)	7.1	17.2	39.1
<i>Economic Remittances: (n=)</i>	(53)	(72)	(66)
Monetary remittances received in the past year, US \$	1551	2065	1660
Estimated family income in the past year, US \$	3682	3871	3755
Remittances as a % of family income	42.1	53.3	44.2
"Our family's economic situation is better than 5 years ago" (% who agree)	66.7	73.2	61.1
<i>^aDefined as households in which at least one member was working or seeking work abroad the time of the interview.</i>			
<i>^bBased on the majority of migrants in the family.</i>			

ciety when they have the time and money to invest in it. Finally, membership in a Bolivian social organization at the destination also increases noticeably over time, from 7% in the short-term to 39% in the long-term. In the Valle Alto case, this especially represents migrant associations that support village projects including sports stadiums, cobbled paving, plazas, and church improvements (de la Torre and Alfaro, 2007:74-117).

Monetary remittances present a different story. They increase from US \$1551 per year (42% of income) to \$2065 (53% of income) from the short to the medium term, but then decrease to \$1660 (44% of income) in the long term. The literature attributes the low amounts at first to the costs of migration and settling into life in a new country, leaving less to send home. This situation improves in the medium term, a salutary period during which families are still strongly attached to the origin and earning good incomes abroad. Between the medium and long term, however, remittances decline owing to forces that are related to integration at the destination.

What are these forces that intervene between length of time abroad and the amount of remittances sent home to support the migrant household? The migration literature, most notably that on Mexico, identifies three factors that are particularly relevant. (1) *The obtaining of legal papers* enables migrants to leave and re-enter the foreign country without trouble, making more visits home possible, but also (ultimately) bringing about migration permanence and fewer remittances (DiSipio, 2002; Roberts et al., 1999; Massey et al., 1987:274; Cornelius, 1990:66). (2) *Bringing family members across* reduces the size of the household at the origin, and the monetary commitment necessary to support it (Cantu et al. 2007; Roberts et al., 1999; Llanque 2006). (3) *The purchase of a home abroad* tends to have a profound inhibiting effect on the migrants' intention to return home (Jones and de la Torre 2008).

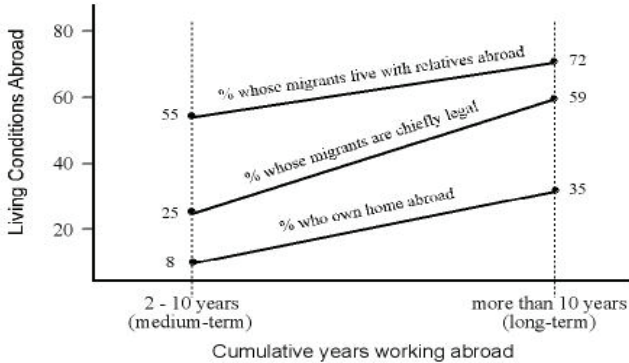
Figure 1 indicates the key mediating role played by each of these forces. Between the medium and long term, the proportion of households whose migrants live with immediate relatives abroad increases from 55% to 72% (Fig. 1a); this practice reduces the sending of remittances home by ten percentage points (from 55% to 45%), suggesting that indeed, the household has shifted its demographic center of gravity towards the destination (Fig. 1b). There is an even more dramatic shift in legality, from 25% of households whose migrants are chiefly legal prior to ten years, to 59% afterwards (Fig. 1a); legality has a clearly deleterious effect on remittances (they drop from 53% to 41% of income), despite its connec-

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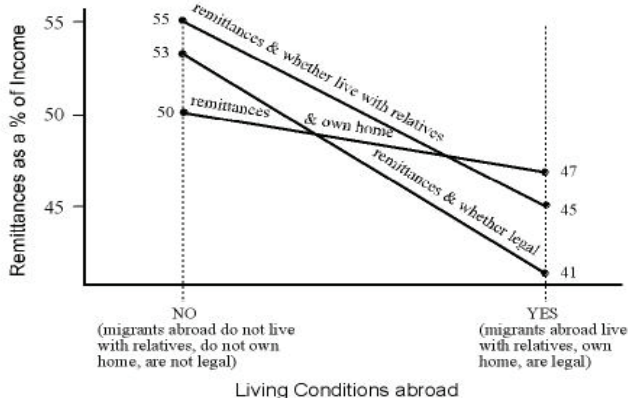
tion to higher paying jobs and more visits home (Fig. 1b). Finally, home ownership abroad is strongly positively related to increased time abroad (going from 8% to 35% of our households between the medium and the long-term) (Fig. 1a); and in turn, to the reduction in remittances (from 50% to 47% of income over time) (Fig. 1b).

Figure 1: Forces intervening between a household's foreign work experience and remittance receipt: Valle Alto, 2007

a. Living Conditions Abroad as a Function of Years Abroad



b. Remittances as a Function of Living Conditions Abroad



These intervening forces are not the full picture, however. Exogenous forces beyond households provide a background to accelerated and more permanent Bolivian emigration. Global tin prices have declined since 1980, and economic downturns overseas (coupled with political changes in Bolivia) have threatened foreign aid as well as exports. Since 2006, when Evo Morales assumed the Bolivian presidency, a series of government actions (the nationaliza-

tion of Brazilian-managed hydrocarbon deposits and refining; termination of U.S. AID programs and a dismissal of the U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia) have potentially hurt Bolivian exports and foreign investment in Bolivia. However, Morales' is a true grassroots, indigenous movement that targets development in many of the communities that are sending migrants abroad. It is still too early to tell what effects these policies will have on emigration and on the role of emigrants in the future economic and cultural life of Bolivia.

Conclusions and discussion

Transnationalism runs deep in the Valle Alto, but political and economic events that are re-directing migration to more distant destinations and restricting return migration are apparently having an effect on long-term linkages between Bolivian households and their families abroad (see also Fundación Pasos, 2008). The shift in the household's demographic center of gravity towards the destination has a particularly strong effect on monetary remittances. After ten years of cumulated migration experience, remittances decrease from 53% to 44% of Bolivian household income. We tie this trend to the intervening forces of migrants' legal status, the presence of family members abroad, and home ownership abroad. Cultural ties and communication between origin and destination, in contrast, remain strong and in fact increase, after ten years.

The decline in remittances and household income after ten years of migration experience does not necessarily imply community economic decline. Improved productive capacity due to prior migration may create "new migrant economic subsystems" – for example, peaches, dairying, and family retail businesses (Michel Vaillant, 2006; Goldring, 2004; Roncken and Forsberg, 2007). In fact, in our sample, dormant households (those exhibiting migration in the past) have higher incomes than either transnational or non-migrant households. In addition, remittances generate multiplier effects in the local and regional economy that include jobs filled by non-migrants and by internal migrants from the adjacent Chaparé and Potosí areas.

Definitive conclusions on the indirect impacts of international migration in the Valle Alto await further research of both a quantitative and ethnographic nature.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable and efficient work of our survey interviewers Ernesto Albarado, Gabriela Gutierrez, and Evi Sulcata, and of our field research associates, Silvia Jaldín and Carla Ascarrunz, all associated with the University of San Simon, Cochabamba. Dr. Fernando Mayorga and Dr. Carlos Crespo, both with the Center of Higher University Studies at that university, were supportive in every phase of this research. The research was made possible by a Fulbright Research Grant to the first author.

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