

VIEWPOINT:

On transnational migration, deepening vulnerabilities, and the challenge of membership

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Abstract

This letter concerns itself with how transnational scholarship might orient itself to unfinished business: specifically, the theorisation of deepening vulnerabilities and persisting inequalities faced by inter-temporary transnational migrants. I begin by identifying five interlocking dimensions of vulnerability: norms about remitting and returning; cumulative causation and context of arrival; social relations; civic participation; new racialisations. The paper argues that these vulnerabilities signal a crisis of membership, and goes on to identify how hybridity and what we understand by national community must remain central to strategies that ameliorate vulnerability.

Keywords: gender; racism; nation; family; immigration

Transnationalism refers to the multiple connections and ties that link people to two or more countries. These ties are often revealed as flows of migration, money and gift remittances, affection, information, religious practises and political influence (Jackson et al 2003). Transnational migration is an important – not a few say defining – marker of global society and its democratic institutions because it transmits business, familial, religious, and political networks and spheres of influence and seeds new global interdependencies (Castles 1998). Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars from all academic tribes have been “turning transnational” in their accounts of global transformations under the ever engulfing, but lately securitised project of capitalist accumulation (Bailey 2001).

Yet, as theories of globalisation and neo-liberalism become “transnationalised”, a lingering doubt remains about the efficacy of transnationalism to explain how and why many of today’s international migrants are poorer than a generation ago, stay poorer longer, and show widening inequalities (for example, Lindsay and Almey 2005). In short, what does transnationalism have to say about the processes that sustain this current empirical reality? Is

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transnationalism a conceptual red herring, a sideshow, masking and cloaking other villains of the piece, including globalisation or neo-liberalism? My view – and it is one seared from field experience in North America, Central America, Europe, and southern Africa – is that transnationalism systematically circulates vulnerabilities, and these deepen inequality. Indeed, to the above list of “ties that bind”, I append vulnerability. Within the overall aim of understanding how this might this work, and what it would mean for the democratic institutions of society, this letter has two more specific objectives: to introduce processes that might together systematically deepen inequality and tie these to an underlying crisis of membership; to consider the challenges in re-imagining membership.

It is widely observed that transnational migrants are expected to both support themselves in their (metropolitan) destinations at the same time as they must meet obligations to individuals and institutions in the offshore majority world (Parreñas 2004). Working double and triple shifts and duties is not unusual. Working in unsafe and abusive conditions is regarded as a necessary evil by migrants and members of their social networks. For example, anxious to remit to his young family, a Zimbabwean trained as a lawyer now living in the UK recently told me he had had to put up with abusive conditions on the night shift at a private care home for nine months (he had just quit this job). Deskilling is another consequence of transnational pressure to remit. In addition, many transnational migrants intend to return home once they have met their own or social networked-defined “targets” of accumulation and accomplishment. Such targets act to “discipline” workers and exert stress on daily life. This leaves immigrants tired and demoralised, translating into poorer physical and mental health outcomes.

The expectations of returning and remitting develop over time and gradually become part of place-based and network transmitted norms of behaviour. However, mismatches arise between such norms and the ability of migrants to live up to such expectations. Two sources of such mismatch are especially relevant for contemporary transnational migrants. First, the context of metropolitan reception (which includes labour and housing markets and patterns of prejudice) is often highly unfavourable for contemporary first generation immigrants. Under such conditions, it can take new immigrants longer to remit or reach their goals than expected by social norms that reference past periods of immigration. Indeed,

some research suggests such “stalled progress” is also experienced by the second generation, at least in Los Angeles (Fix et al 2008). Second, processes of cumulative causation in migration networks, combined with entrenched poverty in origins, means those now leaving the majority world are often less skilled and relatively less-well prepared for metropolitan life and work than former migrants. Not only are there fewer opportunities but those arriving are less able to compete for scarce openings. Reduced remittances exasperates the problem, prompting further outmigration of those least equipped to face metropolitan challenges.

Failure to meet increasingly difficult norms, postponed accomplishments, and continuing uncertainty over “the future” all piles pressure on people’s social relations. This includes (among others) the relations between adults, across generations, over extended families, between those left behind and their communities, and between those who have moved and their communities. Scholarship has shown how these social relations are re-cast in gendered and aged ways that perpetuate unequal power relations. For example, transnational women migrants face a triple burden of local care, entrance into the labor market, and care-at-distance; meeting this burden involves long hours, which reduces the opportunities for more general social activities (meeting new people, developing non-work interests, serving a faith community and so on) and entrenches inequality in gender systems (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Among men living transnationally, reduced access to and visibility in the public spaces and spheres of metropolitan destinations can undermine a traditional sense of masculinity, with some researchers linking the high rates of domestic violence and abuse in immigrant households to pressures on traditional gender roles (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). Children too must re-negotiate childhood in the dual contexts of interactions with peers they encounter in everyday life and whatever transnational aspirations they (or their parents and carers some of whom will be absent) idealise (Parreñas 2004). Some research suggests links between the rise in transnational gang membership among immigrant youth and the eroding legitimacy of the family as a legitimate locus of social relations (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Family relations are also stretched in “mixed status” families where family members with different legal status and differential access to social support and citizenship must internalise and re-negotiate these new, externally imposed hierarchies.

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The conditions in which transnational migrants find themselves negotiating daily life has been shown to dissuade some from not availing themselves of supports and resources that are still available under an admittedly retrenching welfare state. In short, aspects of civic participation are becoming limited. Negative stereotypes of “illegal” workers, “bogus asylum seekers”, and “welfare tourists” (amongst others) are applied in undifferentiated and increasingly taken-for-granted ways to all immigrants. Ethnographic evidence shows how immigrants internalise these social constructions, with workers seeing themselves as part of a fleet-footed, flexible, docile, and under-the-wire labor force (a new neoliberal subject; Wilson et al 2008) and the sick avoiding state-provided medical facilities, for fear of being perceived as un-American (Kerner et al 1999). In the cases above, workers “accepted” informal sector jobs for which a negotiated day labor rate was below minimum wage if paid at all, while the unwell sought out for-profit store-front drop-in clinics where medicines are dispatched at higher costs. Such disciplining of workers and residents exposes them to economic and health vulnerabilities. Other protections and resources seen to be out of reach include police forces and children’s classrooms and teachers (Metropolis 2007).

Transnational family practises (often undertaken in response to the above vulnerabilities) also appear to be referenced by new tropes of racialisation, opening up a further dimension of exclusion. Indeed, recent data suggests transnational residents were 66% more likely to face ethnic or racial discrimination than other residents (Metropolis 2007:8). While structural racism permeates parts of labour and housing markets, scholarship is exploring how family practises may become racialised, and block opportunity for transnational migrants. For example, recent work with Moslem parents and their families from Turkey (Erel 2002) and the Sahelian region of North Africa (Timera 2002) discusses how ethnicised constructions of family practises (parenting, mothering, childhood) mark these family members out as different from the native-born population (in Germany and France, respectively). Behaviors associated with language, dress, food, family rituals, and rights given to boys and girls all come under local and media scrutiny, and commentary. Crucially, many such family practises respond to a transnational impulse to offset vulnerability by keeping options open through maintaining dual home bases and investing in multiple and differently scaled loyalties. Driven by a set of values that imply the transcendence of national borders and disruption of

dominant sedentarist norms, transnational family practises are coded as hostile to, and deviant from national values. This trope of racialisation gains purchase when national values are most virulently associated with maintaining order and using borders to keep external (terrorist) threats at bay; our over-securitised times provide the necessary, but not sufficient condition for such racialisations to circulate (Rattansi 2007: 170). Thus, in certain situations (including, recently, the thugocracies of French suburbs, and the children overboard scandal in Australia) a poisoned cocktail of modifiers are attached to transnational families and their practises, including mobile, shifting, shifty, here-today-and-gone-tomorrow, restless, lacking commitment, rudderless. As a consequence, and as above, family members feel, and internalise, their racialised subject positions in metropolitan society. This is an under-explored area of concern, although Jiwani's recent work (2005) suggests that it is a combination of such "external" racism with the need to conform to within-group norms that increased the vulnerability of young immigrant women.

While such vulnerabilities are often presented – as above – as arising in the seemingly bounded economic, demographic, social, political, and cultural spheres of global society, taken together they signal a deeper and cross-cutting crisis of membership. For example, remittance vulnerabilities are powered by norms of transnational membership, while racialisation uses sedentarising ideas about membership to discipline and exclude transnational migrants. Yet, transnational scholarship has been slow to develop theories which can both recognise how membership might circulate structural vulnerabilities and, as sketched below, what challenges are encountered in refashioning membership to address the ties of vulnerability.

There is wide recognition that the cultural pluralism of global society opens up possibilities of multiple identities (eg Jackson et al 2003). This means that time-honored bases of identity, belonging, and membership, including nationalism, are re-worked by transnational migrants. Transnational migrants use the possibilities of dual home bases, both "here and there" and "us and them" affiliations, and dual citizenship to help keep economic, cultural, and political options open (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). However, the summative ontology that underlies this kind of hybridity raises challenges for those variants of multiculturalism that seek to celebrate "either/or" differences between groups, and those assumptions of assimilationist models of membership that seek to remove

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differences between groups over a period of time. Indeed, when asked about what could and should change, migrants often want barriers to social development removed (for all), rather than specialised help (for some). Either/or tropes such as taller fences, sharper wires, fake-proof id cards, and better armed vigilante groups are seen as pandering to an us/them divide, and antithetical to sustained social progress.

A second challenge in refashioning membership stems from the observation that many transnational migrants see themselves as leading “permanently temporary” lives. Faist has argued that (2004: 332): “it is by no means certain that for the vast majority of migrants and their offspring such transnational networks ... only constitute a temporary phenomenon, eventually to be overcome through assimilation, as is often claimed of the migration processes of the 19th and first half of the 20th century”. Listening to the accounts of daily life from undocumented and naturalised Salvadorans in New Jersey a team of us were struck by how taken-for-granted ideas about progress and generational succession were being reshaped in response to legal uncertainties, welfare drawbacks, and hostility to immigrants (Bailey et al 2002). The sense of permanent temporariness in such transnational networks exposes some key tenets of national membership including, for example, political community (which assumes inter-generational succession) and Marshallian citizenship (which assumes belonging from successive layers of rights). Institutions of membership, including the family and the nation, are reworked through expanded ideas about time, succession, and progress. Examples include the rise of roots tourism, spending gap years and working holidays in locations with family or ancestral significance, and the national (as opposed to exilic) promotion of diasporic membership based on newly constructed myths. In short, while multiple memberships are emerging over the spaces of global society, they are also appearing over the re-imagined times of global society.

A third challenge to membership arises in contemporary daily life when transnational migrants juggle multiple membership possibilities in a culturally pluralistic context which can seem to lack clear rules. This has been deepened when (central) government influence has been rolled back in the name of neoliberal economy, with much of the action shifted to local institutions, including education districts, the voluntary sector, police forces, congregations, employers, unions, community groups and so forth (Fix et al 2008). While the “think globally act locally” banner may seem particu-

larly apposite in these kinds of neoliberal, and transnational situations, where global transnational networks must negotiate local neoliberal realities, critical scholars like Bauman (2007) argue that the creativity, confidence, capacity, and thus power of the local to adjudicate membership and address vulnerability has been lost, to the abstract global. However, while the development of universal personhood rights frameworks and the new EC Constitution may signal the early emergence of increasingly credible membership options at a global scale, the present reality leads me to believe that an appropriately porous national community offers the most immediate locale for membership projects designed to tackle inequality.

In conclusion, scholarship on transnational migration has contributed important insights into how vulnerability is circulated through shifting patterns and norms of membership. It has also begun to shed light on how membership might be re-fashioned in ways that acknowledge the changing nature of the spaces, times, and institutions of global society. Further debate is needed that moves beyond the stalemate of political economy versus cultural studies, or global versus local, and which draws attention to how a changing national community might transcend its historically and narrowly ceded role in actualising membership. With an emphasis on transcendence, we return to the essence of transnationalism, and a confirmation of its continued salience in our spaces and times of inequality.

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