Temporal changes in transnational activities among Mexican migrants throughout their migration careers

Monika Stodolska
Diversity Research Laboratory
Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Introduction

- The focus of many of the existing discussions of transnationalism has been primarily on:
  - The effect of transnational networks (including financial remittances) on the economic, social, and cultural development of migrants’ home communities (Bailey et al., 2002; Coway & Cohen, 1998; Durand, Parrado, & Massey, 1996; Remennick, 2002; Rubenstein, 1992).
  - Issues of citizenship, national identity, nation building and national stability (Kong, 1999; Smith, 1999; Houston & Wright, 2003; Spoonley, Bedford, & Macpherson, 2003; Leitner, 2004)
  - Migrant family dynamics (Waters, 2002)
Existing transnational studies have largely focused on the lives of migrants at the group level and arrived at generalizations applicable to different diasporas, communities, and/or migration cohorts (Al-Ali et al., 2001; Bailey et al., 2002; Bash, Glick Schiller & Szaton Blanc, 1994; Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003; Portes, 1984; Wells, 1996).

They largely failed, however, to consider transnational migrants as individuals and examine the type and the strength of transnational connections they maintain over time.
The goal of this study was to:

- Identify and analyze the degree to which Mexican transnational migrants engage in economic, social, and cultural transnational activities throughout their migration careers.

- Show a temporal progression of different aspects of transnationalism among people at different stages of their migration career.
Transnational activities

- **Types of transnational activities** according to Al-Ali, Black, & Koser (2001).
  - **Economic** (e.g. monetary remittances sent to relatives abroad, circular labor migration, small businesses created by returned migrants in their home countries).
  - **Social** (e.g. maintaining contacts with friends and family abroad, travel to the home country, socializing with people from the same ethnic group, membership in social clubs and community organizations).
  - **Cultural** (e.g. attending musical/artistic events that include visiting artists from the home country, participation in ethnic cultural organizations, watching home country movies, listening to home country music).
  - **Political** (e.g. immigrants taking part in their home-countries’ political activities).
Metro Chicago is home to 1.1 million people of Mexican origin, including 504,000 persons born in the U.S. and 563,500 immigrants (Paral & Ready, 2005).

During the last 10 years, the population of Mexican Americans in the Metro Chicago area has increased by 89.8%.

On average, Mexican immigrants have a low educational background, are low-skilled, and many come from semi-subsistence rural economies (Alba & Nee, 1997; Rothenberg, 1998; Roberts et al., 1999). As a result, they are overrepresented in low-wage, blue-collar and service jobs such as restaurant, factory, hotel, landscaping or construction.
Methods

- Individual, in-depth interviews with 23 Mexican temporary migrant workers residing in the Midwest (Chicago and Champaign-Urbana)

- **Timing:** April 2003 and September 2004
Methods

- **Gender:** 16 men and 7 women
- **Age:** 19 to 44 (average age: 34)
- **Legal status:** 5 documented and 16 undocumented.
- **Lengths of stay in the U.S.:** 2 months to 32 years (average length of stay 8.1 years).
- **Occupations:** cooks, gardeners, factory workers, construction workers, restaurant workers, cab drivers, cleaning staff at hotels.
Methods

Three groups of workers:

- Those who found jobs through their individual networks in the U.S. (employed in restaurants, hotels, factories, and landscaping businesses).

- Day laborers who found their jobs on their own (mostly related to construction - roofing, drywall, plumbing, electrical).

- Day laborers employed through local employment agencies (mostly factories, hotels, cleaning jobs).
Findings Economic Transnationalism

- Economic transnationalism – the majority of migrants worked so they could send financial remittances home and invest in land, business and home properties in Mexico, as well as to take care of the families.

Mano: All Mexicans think about what they’re going to do with the money. They all have the same goal. They want to make a little money to open a little business. Not big. Just a little business… I want to make a little factory to make pants or clothes. (male, 40ties, undocumented, construction worker)
Findings
Economic Transnationalism

- 18 out of 23 workers had wired money to their families in Mexico at least once in the past three months.

- Economic remittances seen as an obligation (Bailey et al., 2002; Mutersbaugh, 2001; Rothenberg, 1998).

  Jose: Most of these guys have kids; they have children down there... at home. And, no matter what, they have to send money every time, cause these guys have families that depend on them. (male, mid-40ties, day laborer, undocumented)
Findings
Economic Transnationalism

- The **degree of monetary transfers** was significantly lower among those who spent the longest amount of time in the host country.
  - All participants who had immediate families in Mexico maintained regular financial remittances.
  - Those who emigrated 20 or 30 years ago no longer had families they had to support in their home country; their “primary responsibility” was with their children and grandchildren residing in the U.S.
Findings
Economic Transnationalism

Isabela: When my parents were alive I would send them money. My mother died before I left to come here, but my father was alive. I used to help him as much as I could. Now he is gone, so I don’t have anybody to send the money to. I have an uncle, but it is not my responsibility. I don’t send him money, but when I go home I always bring him something nice.

(female, undocumented, migrated to the U.S. in 1973; factory worker)
Findings
Economic Transnationalism

- The “capacity” to maintain economic links with the home country was stronger among those migrants who resided in the U.S. for longer periods of time. However, the “desire” to maintain such links was weaker.

- As a result, the extent and the strength of the economic transnational ties were weaker among interviewees who resided in the U.S. for longer periods of time than among those who arrive to the host country several months or years ago.
Findings

Social Transnationalism

- Types of social transnational activities
  - contacts with family and friends in the home country
  - social remittances (transfer of ideas, values, artifacts)
  - social activities in the host country (e.g., socializing with other members of the diaspora, participating in social clubs and community organizations)

- Engagement in social transnational activities was fueled primarily by
  - separation from families
  - cultural preferences
  - the desire to seek familiarity in the host country
Findings
Social Transnationalism

- Maintaining contacts with families and friends in the home country
  - The majority of the interviewees (17 out of 23) migrated alone. Many left their spouses, siblings, parents, and children back in their home country.
  - Two main ways in which social networks with communities of origin were maintained
    - indirectly - through letters, phone calls, and other means of communication
    - directly - through travel to the home country
Findings
Social Transnationalism

- Indirect contact (phone calls, letters):
  
  Rosa: We always send photos and videos to our family... and they send us photos and that is how we see each other... by pictures or by videos.

  *Asked why he walks 6 miles every week to a phone booth in rural Illinois,*

  Guillermo-Jose: He's six years old and I want him to know that I'm his father, you know? I want to be a part of his life. *(male, 40ties, restaurant worker)*

- Direct contact (travel to the home country):
  
  Ricardo: Yes, I have traveled a few times during the years. Yes, a few times... not many, but I go to Mexico when I can. *(male, 40ties, construction worker)*
Findings Social Transnationalism

The “capacity” to maintain contacts with communities abroad increased with time (higher earnings with time, legalization of stay which allowed for safe travel), but migrants’ “desire” to maintain such networks decreased (passing away of older family members, weakening of ties with other relatives, bringing children to the U.S., marriage and starting families in the host country).

As a result, the degree and the strength of contacts with communities abroad seemed to be lower among those interviewees who resided in the U.S. for prolonged periods of time.
Findings Social Transnationalism

- Little evidence found of the transmission of “social remittances” (values, ideas, artifacts) between the Mexican migrant community and their home country.

- Confirmation of previous studies that showed that social networks of temporary migrants are composed primarily (if not, exclusively) of members of their own ethnic group (Al-Ali et al., 2001; Bailey et al., 2002). Little temporal variations observed.
Findings
Social Transnationalism

- Clear **temporal variations** with respect to migrants’ involvement in ethnic social clubs and organizations.
  - Interviewees who had arrived to the U.S. only recently had no time, money, or the desire to participate in social clubs.
  - Those who had resided in the U.S. for prolonged periods of time displayed some interest in the matters of their ethnic community (with time, they had acquired resources and had more time to volunteer at local social organizations, schools, or churches).
Findings
Social Transnationalism

- Asked if she participated in any ethnic social organizations:

Clara: At first – no, because I had no time. When I was working I could not do anything else, but then the work slowed down and I began to spend more time at home. So, I got involved to help the community with all the problems that the agencies give us. When I saw what was happening and how badly they treated everyone… some [people] will defend themselves, but many will not, and so I wanted to get involved. I approached the church and I found people [to help me]. I try to help people and get them to know what their rights are. I want to stop the horrible treatment they [the agencies] give to people (female, mid 50ties, undocumented, factory worker).
Findings
Cultural Transnationalism

- **Types of cultural transnational activities:**
  - **Cultural activities that were a natural extension of migrants’ lives from their home country** (watching Spanish-language TV, reading newspapers brought from the home country or Latino press published in Chicago, listening to Mexican music, and sporadic visits to local ethnic bars).

  - **Activities whose goal was preservation of Mexican culture abroad** (being a part of ethnic cultural clubs and organizations, organizing visits of artists from abroad, or instilling traditional culture among subsequent generations).
Findings
Cultural Transnationalism

- Cultural activities that were an extension of migrants’ lives from their home country
  - Individual, low-cost, and unstructured
  - Common among all interviewees, regardless of their length of stay, but particularly important for those who had arrived only recently and who were longing for their life back home.
  - Helped those who were preparing for the return migration to stay informed about the developments in the home country.

Rosa: I read [Mexican] newspapers. We see in the cable the news and we talk with our families. So, we know what happens there [in Mexico]. *(female, 23 years old, stay-at-home mother)*
Findings
Cultural Transnationalism

- Cultural activities whose goal was preservation of Mexican culture abroad
  - More complex in nature, required some planning and outlay of resources.
  - Very low participation rates among migrants who had arrived to the U.S. relatively recently. The most often mentioned constraints: lack of interest, money, time, being too tired after work, lack of transportation, inability to plan in advance.
  - More prevalent among interviewees who were better established in the U.S. (nostalgia, better financial situation caused by decreased monetary transfers, desire to instill traditional culture in subsequent generations).
Study allowed to extend Al-Ali’s et al. (2001) classification of transnational activities in two important dimensions:

1. It has showed that there are important variations within the categories of social and cultural transnationalism related to the level of organizational structure needed to maintain them and to the main goal of transnational activities.
Discussion/Conclusions

2. Allowed to highlight the temporal nature of migrants’ transnational networks.

- **Economic transnationalism** – decreased with time
- **Social transnationalism:**
  - Maintaining contacts with communities abroad – decreased with time
  - Endogeneity of social networks – unchanged with time
  - Participation in ethnic social organizations – increased with time
- **Cultural transnationalism:**
  - Activities being an extension of cultural activities from the home country – unchanged or slightly decreased with time
  - Activities whose goal was preservation of Mexican culture abroad – increased with time
It is important to take into account migrants’ capacity to maintain transnational networks, but also contextual circumstances, and their desire to maintain such networks (based on their preference structure and their level of obligations to the host and home communities).

- While at the beginning of stay in the U.S., migrants’ preference structure is clearly skewed toward benefiting their home community, it changes with the increased length of stay abroad and growing responsibilities in the host country.

Future research: More large-scale, quantitative study needed to verify these patterns. Also, cross-ethnic comparisons would be useful.
Thank you!