

The Emotional Cost of Migration: An Examination of Video Information Content between Families in North Carolina and Guanajuato

Introduction

In the past two decades, North Carolina has been a new destination for Mexican migration. According to the 1999 U.S. Census, the South (particularly Georgia, Arkansas, and North Carolina) experienced one of the largest percentage growth of Latino immigrants. North Carolina has been a prime magnet for immigrants from Latin America largely because of a booming service and construction industry sector that has provided a path for social mobility (Hagan 2008; Chavez, Hagan, and Mouw 2008). Although some of North Carolina's Mexican immigrant population has experienced mobility, we often forget about the emotional costs of family separation. As increased border enforcement has raised the cost of crossing to the U.S. and returning to Mexico (Andreas 2000; Cornelius 2005; Eschbach et al. 1999), many families are settling permanently in the process rupturing ties with family abroad. This paper draws on video communication between migrants in North Carolina and their family members in Guanajuato, Mexico shot during the summer of 2008. The paper has a two-fold purpose. First, I outline the main themes that emerged from the family videos. Second, I then focus on how migrants and their family members make sense of the emotional costs of family separation. The findings suggest that the costs associated with the decision to migrate, while embedded in the household or family, is highly contested. Moreover, I argue that the costs of migrating is an ongoing contestation process among migrants in the U.S. and family members abandoned in Mexico.

Literature Review

International labor migration has been explained using a combination of economic and social network factors to explain why people move, the mechanisms through which migration occurs, and the persistence of flows. According to standard neoclassical economic explanations, individuals make a cost-benefit analysis between their places of origin and potential destinations, including an assessment of intervening factors, the psychological costs of leaving family and community, and the difficulty of the trip; they migrate, usually permanently, if the net benefit anticipated—usually higher wages—is greater at the destination (Lee 1966; Todaro 1969). The new economics of migration theory furthers the economic perspective but argues that migrants make decisions in a household context and move as a short-term strategy to manage risk and overcome market failures (Stark and Bloom 1985), and that constraint notwithstanding, most migrants will return home after a limited period of work abroad. While these explanations account for the exit from origin, they do not provide a clear understanding of how ongoing flows of information reshape attitudes about international migration.

The present study draws on insights from a Migration Systems Perspective (MSP) that approaches migration as a dynamic and ever-changing system between sending and receiving areas (Castels and Miller 2003; Kritz and Zlotnick 1992). I treat origin and

destination populations as members of migration streams that are linked by socio-cultural connections at the community, household, and individual level. I emphasize multiple links forged and transformed between sending and receiving communities, including flows of information, ideas, and people. Linkages can be classified into political, social, and cultural categories and examined at multiple levels of analysis, from macro structures such as state relations to meso structures such as community norms to micro structures such as personal networks. In this paper, I utilize family videos as one linkage which connects families in Mexico and the U.S. I see this virtual linkage as a mechanism to understand the emotional side of international migration. By focusing on the flow of information through the videos, I contribute to a growing literature on diffusion and social network theory. This scholarship argues that the diffusion of ideas and attitudes and behavior through social networks influences the attitudes and behaviors of group members (Granovetter 1973; Levitt 1998; Lindstrom and Munoz-Franco 2005). As such, I focus on the flow of content of information and then analyze how migrants and their family members make sense of the process of family separation.

Methods

The present study is based on binational research in the research triangle region of North Carolina with undocumented migrants and in Guanajuato, Mexico with their family members.¹ The data derives from video recordings, photographs, observations as families watched the videos, and in-depth interviews about the consequences of family separation. As part of on-going projects on immigrant incorporation in North Carolina over the past year, I have developed rapport with undocumented Mexican families. Unable to return to Mexico because of their legal status, immigrants who have not seen their family members in years asked that I record messages to deliver to their families in Mexico. In this project, I examine the visual images, emotions, and content of information that flows in these videos, between families in North Carolina and Guanajuato. I use these visual images as a central focus of data collection to explain how visual interaction shapes people's understanding of family separation. I use the visual images not only as a contextual information but rather as way to engage with theoretical issues relating to the economic costs of international migration. As part of the project, more than 30 migrants and their family members participated in the project. Finally, I also conducted observations as people watched the videos and interpreted the messages.

Preliminary Findings

The findings from video content suggests that the social process of international migration, both leaving and returning, do not only have a economic cost but also an emotional tag attached to them. The videos also show that the cost of migrating is constantly revisited and renegotiated as a way to make sense of the absence of family

¹ The study is based on a larger project that examines How does the diffusion of information and ideas through cross-border social networks shape migration processes conducted in collaboration with Jackie Hagan and Ted Mouw at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

members. Finally, the videos also show that while families abroad utilize emotion as a means for pleading for return and discouraging further international migration, improved lifestyles and personal transformations on behalf of migrants creates a contested situation among family of whether to return or not.

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