

THE
TRANSNATIONAL
VILLAGERS

PEGGY LEVITT

For my mother and father

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Chapter Two

Social Remittances

How Global Culture Is Created Locally

Most Mirafloresños agree that Esther Báez is one of their community's most prominent residents. It is not that she is wealthy. She and her husband live in a modest, though very comfortable, home. He works for the Baní city government and she supplements the family's income by making cakes and sweets that she sells from her living room. Rather, what has earned Esther the Mirafloresños' respect is her community leadership. She is a pillar of the church. She is a secretary of the Miraflores Development Committee. And her neighbors consider her someone who is wise and fair and who knows a great deal about who they are.

During the course of our many conversations, after mass on Saturday evening or sipping a cool drink in the shade of her back patio, Esther slowly pieced together the puzzle of Miraflores's past and present. "Our lives are totally different now," she would begin,

and so much has to do with what we have learned from the United States. It's both good and bad. When Javier told us that he wouldn't stand being tricked by politicians anymore or having to wait on long lines at city hall because they are so unorganized there, these were good things that he taught us about his life in the United States. But when people come back saying that they care more about themselves than about our community or that you can make a lot of money by selling drugs and that is okay, then we would rather not learn what the U.S. has to offer.

Esther is describing the positive and negative ways in which social remittances transform village life. Social remittances are the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from host- to sending-country communities (Levitt 1999). They are like the social and

cultural resources that migrants bring with them to the countries that receive them. The role these resources play in promoting immigrant entrepreneurship, community development, and political integration is widely acknowledged.¹ What is less understood is how these same ideas and practices are transformed in the host country and transmitted back to sending communities such that new cultural products emerge and challenge the lives of those who stay behind.

The process of global cultural diffusion is not very clear. Most sociological analyses focus on the ways in which social relations shape diffusion (Strang and Meyer 1994). Coleman, Katz, and Menzel (1973), for example, found that physicians with high levels of social contact were more likely to adopt new drugs than those with fewer relations. When the individual disseminator is a trusted, valued member of the community, others are more likely to respond favorably to the new ideas they introduce. Diffusion is also understood as a function of geographic distance. The farther away something is disseminated, the more diluted and changed it becomes in the process. The size and configuration of social networks also shape cultural diffusion. In relatively small groups, many weak ties can be more effective in "getting the word out" than a few strong ones (Granovetter 1973). Strang and Meyer (1994) argue that social elements flow better between units in a system when they are perceived to be similar to one another. Adoption is also more likely when the practices being diffused are seen as "modern" or "westernized."²

Much of the research on global cultural flows focuses on how macro-level institutions and regimes spread throughout the world's economic and political system. It emphasizes demand, as opposed to supply-side, factors that influence dissemination and adoption (Scott 1995). There is, however, a second way that global culture is diffused. Ordinary people, at the local level, are also cultural creators and carriers. Migrants send or bring back the values and practices they have been exposed to and add these social remittances to the repertoire, both expanding and transforming it. Later migrants bring this enhanced tool kit with them, thereby stimulating ongoing iterative rounds of local-level global culture creation.

From Social and Cultural Resources to Social Remittances

Studies of evolutionary institutional change suggest useful approaches for understanding social remittance production. Evolutionary change is shaped by the structure of existing institutional arrangements. How things are already done both enables and constrains subsequent choices about how things will change in the future (Campbell 1995). These types of change processes are often called path-dependent. They are events that arise through a branching process such that once a particular choice is made, other routes are no longer possible (Scott 1995).

A similar design process occurs in social remittance evolution. Migrants interact to varying degrees with the host society. They make sense of their experiences using the interpretive frames they bring with them. Just as institutional actors' choices are shaped by the routines and norms already in place, so the new behaviors and views migrants adopt are also a function of how they did things at home. A number of blending scenarios result. In some cases, existing ideas and practices go unchallenged. In others, new elements are grafted onto existing ones. In still others, *creolization* occurs, whereby new social relations and cultural patterns are created by combining sending- and receiving-country forms.

The degree to which migrants' interpretative frames are altered is a function of how much they interact with the host society (Portes and Zhou 1993). This, in turn, depends upon their socioeconomic profile and the opportunity structures available to them. *Miraflores* who have enough money, education, and social capital to start their own businesses have much more contact with the broader community than those who work alone cleaning offices. When migrants interact more intensively with the host society, they receive more exposure to its features. They are more likely to make comparisons with their established ways of doing things and become more open to incorporating new routines. Those who remain firmly embedded in their ethnic community face more limited challenges to their long-standing practices and beliefs.

For heuristic purposes, I identify three broad patterns of interaction with the host society. Clearly, *Miraflores* do not fit precisely within these categories. I offer them as conceptual tools for clarifying

ing how different levels of social contact influence social remittance emergence.

At one end of the spectrum are *recipient observers*. Most of these individuals do not work outside their homes or, when they do, they work in places where most of their co-workers are other Latinos. Recipient observers are more likely to be women than men. They generally shop and socialize with other Dominicans and report few social contacts with the Anglo community. They do not actively explore their new world because their lives are structured such that they do not come into close enough contact with it. Instead, they take in new ideas and practices by passively observing the world around them. They listen to how others describe it. Or they learn about it by reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, or watching TV.

Other *Miraflores* are more fully integrated into life in the United States. Their interactions at work, on public transportation, or with medical or educational professionals force them to shift their reference frames. They need new skills to be able to get along. These *instrumental adapters* alter and add to their routines for pragmatic reasons. They adjust the way they interpret the world to equip themselves better to meet the challenges and constraints of migrant life.

Finally, some *Miraflores* are *purposeful innovators*. In contrast to recipient observers, they are sponges who aggressively seek out, select, and absorb new things. Unlike instrumental adapters, they want to get ahead rather than just get by. They do not change because they have to, but because they want to learn and benefit from the new world around them. They creatively add and combine what they observe with their existing ideas and practices, thereby expanding and extending their cultural repertoire.

Several patterns of social remittance evolution result. Each of these is most common among, though not restricted to, one of the three types of social actors I have described.

In some cases, migrants abandon some of the social and cultural tools they arrive with. Either they are not relevant in their new homes or the organization of immigrant life makes them too difficult to use. For instance, when her father died, Doña Gabriela did not organize a *Hora Santa*, a popular religious ceremony to honor the deceased, because it was too difficult to do so in Boston. She could never be sure that enough people would come because they were always so busy or

because they did not want to go out at night when it was cold. Beliefs also weaken and behaviors become unfamiliar when they are not used regularly.

Another pattern of social remittance evolution leaves the social and cultural resources migrants bring unchanged. This occurs most frequently in the *recipient observer* group. Many of their norms and practices go unchallenged because they interact so infrequently with the host society. Their sending-country repertoire still works because their lives are very similar to those they led in Miraflores.

A third pattern of social remittance evolution occurs when migrants add new items to their tool kit that do not alter existing elements. They expand the range of practices they engage in without modifying their old habits or ideas. This occurs most often among *instrumental adapters*, such as Mirafloreña women newly entering the workplace. Since most of the women in the village did not work outside their homes before they came to the United States, they learned a new set of skills in the process of looking for a job alone.

When I got here, my sister tried to get me a job, but there was no work at the company she was working for. I had to go down and speak to the supervisors at the places people told me about. I wasn't used to talking to people I didn't know. We hardly ever met anyone new back home and when we did it was usually as a family. I had to use the telephone. In Miraflores, they had just gotten a phone at Carmen's house [her mother-in-law next door] and I wasn't used to talking to people that way. I had to find my way downtown on the subway. And I had hardly ever been to Santo Domingo by myself. (Gabriela, 38, migrant, Boston)

The new skills Gabriela learned during her job search do not challenge her old routines. She added to her repertoire of skills and understandings but did not transform it.

In a fourth scenario, which is most common among *purposeful innovators*, migrants' ideas and practices combine with host-country norms. In these instances, cross-pollination occurs, producing hybrid social forms.

Dress is a good example of this, though its impact is most apparent in Miraflores, where these remitted practices have taken hold. Mirafloreñas generally like to wear tight-fitting, brightly colored clothing. They continue to dress this way in Boston, albeit with some modifications, exchanging shorts for pants and sleeveless blouses for long-

sleeved shirts. They also wear boots in the cold weather. Nonmigrants observe these styles when migrants come to visit. They also receive clothing as gifts. Because young women, in particular, want to emulate U.S. fashion, they combine elements of their own wardrobes with items from the United States, creating a new hybrid style. Women wear boots with shorts. They wear long-sleeved clothing in eighty-degree weather. Patterns of dress no longer reflect climate. Rather, current styles meld fashion statements from the island with those from the United States.

Whether expanded upon or hybridized, these social and cultural resources become the substance of social remittances. The following section describes the actual content of social remittance transfers and differentiates them from other kinds of cultural transmissions.

What Is Exchanged?

There are at least three types of social remittances—normative structures, systems of practice, and social capital.

Normative Structures

Normative structures are ideas, values, and beliefs. They include norms for behavior, notions about family responsibility, principles of neighborliness and community participation, and aspirations for social mobility. Normative structures also include values about how organizations should work, incorporating ideas about good government and good churches and about how politicians and clergy should behave.

Several prior studies have described normative structure-type social remittances without defining them as such. The changing values and social ties that Polish immigrants to the United States wrote about to their nonmigrant family members in the early part of the twentieth century were said to foster greater individuality at home (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). The mutual aid societies formed by return migrants to the Italian *Mezzogiorno* eventually evolved into political organizations. According to Wyman (1993, 158), "Social progress of the people, extremely slow so far, begins to make headway, thanks to the *Americani*" (those who returned from America). Return migrants to the West Indies repatriated a vision of social reform they learned from the

Black Power movement in the United States (Patterson 1988). Miraflores also communicate the values and norms they observe to those at home.

When I go home, or speak to my family on the phone, I tell them everything about my life in the United States. What the rules and laws are like. What is prohibited here. I personally would like people in the Dominican Republic to behave the way people behave here. The first time I went back to the Dominican Republic after nine years away, I arrived at the airport. I saw the floor was filthy and that the smokers threw their cigarette butts everywhere. And I said wait a minute. I even said it to the police who were there. How can this be? The gateway to our country is the airport. It should be clean and neat and people should be polite. When people put out their cigarettes they should use an ashtray. Tourists will get a bad impression when they see this mess. So when I smoked, I used an ashtray. It's not just saying things but doing them to provide a good example. When I'm in Miraflores, when I see people throwing garbage on the ground, I don't go and pick it up, because that would be too much, but I get up and throw my own garbage away and everyone sees me do it. And those that have a little consciousness, without me saying anything, the next time they have to throw something out, they'll probably remember that they saw this, and it's the right thing to do, and they'll do it. These things and many more, the good habits I've acquired here, I want to show people at home. (Pepe, 35, migrant, Boston)

Host societies offer both positive and negative role models, and migrants are equally adept at emulating both. A common complaint among the adults in Miraflores is that the community's youth "don't want to work hard anymore." They are used to receiving without having to work for it, these adults say, and they have never known what it is like to have to do without.

Life in the U.S. teaches them many good things, but they also learn some bad things as well. People come back more individualistic, more materialistic. They think that "things" are everything rather than service, respect, or duty. They are more committed to themselves than they are to the community. They just don't want to be active in trying to make the community better anymore. Some learned to make it the easy way and they are destroying our traditional values of hard work and respect for the family. (Javier, 56, nonmigrant, Miraflores)

Migrants' sense of themselves also changes in the United States because they do things they have not done before. Their social standing improves, particularly with respect to nonmigrants. These trans-

formed identities expose nonmigrants to a more ample range of self-concepts from which to choose.

In Miraflores, there have been particularly strong challenges to gender identity. Migrant women's ideas about what women should do and how they should behave changed in response to their more active participation in the workforce and to their contacts with schools, health clinics, and social welfare agencies. They transmitted these new ideas about identity back to Miraflores, where nonmigrant women used these social remittances to construct new versions of womanhood. Some came to believe that women in Miraflores should also work outside their homes. Others became convinced that husbands and wives should make decisions together and that they should share household chores. While their ideas were often romanticized, they still represented a marked change in thinking about gender relations.

I don't want anything to do with the men from here anymore. They are too *macho*. They just want a woman to be waiting around to fulfill their every need. I see the way the couples act when they come back to visit. The men have changed. Couples do things together. The man doesn't just leave his wife at home and go out to enjoy himself with his friends or with his girlfriend. He takes her with him and shows her respect. They make decisions together. When I start my own family, I want it to be like that. (Adriana, 19, nonmigrant, Miraflores)

Systems of Practice

Systems of practice are the actions shaped by normative structures. These include how individuals delegate household tasks, the kinds of religious rituals they engage in, and the extent to which they participate in political and civic groups. They also include organizational practices such as recruiting and socializing new members, goal setting and strategizing, establishing leadership styles, and forming inter-agency ties.

In Miraflores, these types of social remittances have far-reaching effects. They challenge long-standing patterns of social interaction and political participation. For instance, Miraflores used to spend most of their days outdoors because of the heat. Families passed many afternoons watching village life unfold in front of them from their roadside seats on their front *galerías*, or porches. They socialized con-

stantly with their neighbors while at work and at leisure and conducted much of their private lives in public view.

Miraflores in Boston live much more isolated lives. Several respondents told how they lived in the same building for years without ever meeting their neighbors. While this made some quite lonely, it instilled in others a greater sense of independence, which they enjoyed. They liked living without everyone having something to say about their affairs. When they returned to Miraflores, they wanted to preserve their privacy, and this motivated them to build different style houses. Some eliminated the front *galería* and built a more private patio in the back, which redirected the focus of daily life away from public view. Others built homes surrounded by high walls that discouraged the spontaneous, frequent visiting that had been such an important part of a typical day.

Social Capital

Both the values and norms on which social capital is based, and social capital itself, are socially remitted.³ Basch (1992) found this among Vincentian and Grenadian immigrant leaders and activists who were able to use the prestige and status they acquired in the United States to further their political platforms on the islands they came from. This also occurred in Miraflores. Those who worked toward the betterment of the community in Boston could use their social capital in Miraflores. They could get things done on the island using the goodwill they generated and the favors they stored up working for the community in Boston. The social capital they acquired was transferable. Nonmigrant family members also benefited from the obligations incurred and respect earned by those in Boston. For instance, when the nonmigrant sister of the president of the Miraflores Development Committee (MDC) in Boston became ill, her family asked the doctors at the health clinic to make a home visit. When they refused to do so, her relatives reminded the physicians that she was related to the president and that it was the MDC that had just paid for the renovations to the clinic. When the doctors heard this, they suddenly became available. The president's family in Miraflores harnessed the social capital he had accumulated in Boston to help a family member who remained behind.

When social capital declines, this also registers in Miraflores. When someone is seen as not helping the community as much as they are perceived to be able to, their social capital diminishes. Their nonmigrant family members also feel their ostracization. It used to be, for example, that Enrique's family participated actively in organizing and supporting many of the sports activities around Miraflores. But when Enrique had a falling out with some of the important migrant leaders about not pulling his weight, his family in Miraflores was also marginalized. According to Javier, his brother: "Last year, when they had the meeting to organize the committee that supports the baseball team, no one came to invite my father. It was like what Enrique did over there really put us in a bad position over here."

Mechanisms of Transmission

Social remittance exchanges occur when migrants return to live in or visit their communities of origin; when nonmigrants visit those in the receiving country; or through exchanges of letters, videos, cassettes, e-mails, and telephone calls. The mechanisms of social remittance transmission differ from other types of global cultural dissemination in several ways.

First, while it is often difficult to distinguish how world-level institutions and global culture emerge and are disseminated, it is possible to specify how social remittances flow. Social remittances travel through identifiable pathways; their source and destination are clear. Migrants and nonmigrants can state how they learned of a particular idea or practice and why they decided to adopt it.

A second feature that distinguishes social remittances from other kinds of global cultural flows is that they are transmitted systematically and intentionally. A social remittance occurs when migrants speak directly to their family members about a different kind of politics and encourage them to pursue reforms. In cases such as these, ideas are communicated intentionally to a specific recipient or group. Villagers know when and why they changed their mind about something or began to act in a different way. Nonmigrants also change their behaviors in response to catalysts that are not social remittances. They may begin to think about holding their politicians more accountable when they hear on the radio that the president of the United States is being

investigated for his extramarital affairs. But the radio report is not a social remittance because it is not a specific message directed at a particular individual.

A third distinguishing aspect of social remittance transmission is that these remittances are usually transferred between individuals who know one another personally or who are connected to one another by mutual social ties. Social remittances are delivered by a familiar messenger who comes "with references." The personalized character of this kind of communication stands in contrast to the faceless, mass-produced nature of global cultural diffusion. Several studies have already highlighted the interpersonal nature of idea transmission among elites. In this work, idea carriers were able to convince others to adopt the technical expertise and skills they introduced because of their influential social positions.⁴ The Miraflores case underscores that ordinary individuals are also social-remittance carriers. The ideas and practices they introduce function as the local-level, change-from-below counterpart of elite idea carriers' influence on national affairs.

A fourth characteristic differentiating social remittances from global cultural flows is the timing with which they are communicated. In many cases, a staged process occurs, whereby macro-level global flows precede and ease the way for social remittance transmission. Since many nonmigrants were already eager to emulate the patterns of consumption they observed in the U.S. media, they were more receptive to the new political and religious styles migrants brought back to the village. Calls for greater political and economic participation by women met with greater acceptance because they came on the heels of an already familiar global discourse about women's rights. Social remittance flows do not arise out of the blue. They are part and parcel of an ongoing process of cultural diffusion. Gradual transmission sets the stage for future remittance transfers that then seem to make more sense.

Determinants of Impact

A variety of factors determine the nature and magnitude of social remittance impact.

The Nature of the Remittance Itself

Social remittance impact is in part a function of how easy it is to transmit a particular remittance. Some remittances are difficult to package. They do not translate easily into neat data packets. Instead, they are slippery, unstable, and unwieldy to send. They are sometimes so complex that it is difficult to "theorize" or communicate them (Strang and Meyer 1994); or, they have to be broken down into smaller parts to be transmissible, a process that increases the potential for misinformation and confusion. In contrast, other types of remittances are fairly straightforward. They are easy to articulate and travel cleanly through transmission channels, after which they are either adopted or ignored.

In the case of Miraflores, social remittances, such as membership recruitment techniques or vote-winning strategies, were easily communicated. They were either appropriated as is, modified and adopted, or disregarded. In contrast, values and norms about gender relations and racial identity fluctuated more easily. Migrants constantly redefined and renegotiated them. Their unstable nature made them more difficult to simplify and express and therefore diminished their force.

Remittance impact is also stronger if, by adopting these new ideas and behaviors, individuals signal to others that they are better off, more "modern," or more "American." Since some Mirafloresños covet all things from the United States, they are more open to the new styles and practices that migrants introduce.

The Nature of the Transnational System

The features of the transnational organizations and the social networks through which remittances are communicated also influence their impact. Remittances flow more efficiently through tightly connected, dense systems because they consist of similar parts and use similar technologies. Transfers within more open, informal systems are sloppier, less efficient, and more prone to interference by other cultural exchanges. As in the child's game of "telephone," each time a message is recommunicated, it becomes increasingly distorted in the translation.

Transnational religious ties between Boston and the Dominican Republic, for instance, arose primarily out of personal relations between priests, parishioners, and seminarians. Communication tended

to be unsystematic and leaky because these ties were based on personal, informal connections. In more structured settings, or in cases involving more tightly constructed social networks, remittances flow through more efficient transmission channels. The connections between the organizational parts or the members of the network are closer and more systematic, increasing remittance impact.

The open nature of the religious system also meant that social remittances were more vulnerable to interference by other global cultural flows. For example, Catholic religious messages competed with evangelical ones communicated outside the Church's purview. In contrast, since the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano established an organization in the United States that mirrored its Dominican structure, political social remittances traveled directly, and with some degree of protection, through these organized, secure channels. Since the technology used to transfer remittances and the organizational units that they flowed between were similar, remittances were more likely to have a stronger effect.

Finally, remittance impact also changes at different stages of organizational development. New organizations or organizations in flux are more malleable or amenable to change. After the PRD's 1986 electoral defeat, the party organization was overhauled. Return migrants who suggested new approaches felt that party leaders were more receptive to their ideas because so many aspects of party life were up for discussion during this period of organizational change.

The Characteristics of the Messenger

The strength of remittance impact is also influenced by the characteristics of their messenger. Individuals occupying higher status positions get listened to more. In Miraflores, these individuals are generally men, people with money, older community members, or established community leaders.

In some cases, these individuals can pressure others to listen to them because the person receiving the remittance relies upon them for economic support. Receptivity is higher because remittances are delivered with a golden glove. Doña Sara, for example, began saving to open a small business in her home because her brother in Boston thought it was a good idea for women to have some income of their

own. Since he sends her money almost every month, she felt she had to do his bidding.

In other cases, villagers adopt remittances because they want to emulate their peers. Since everyone else in a certain strata is "doing it," they feel they must also "keep up with the Joneses." Young men and women who were never particularly interested in fashion now feel that they too must have the latest jeans or backpack from Boston in order to hold their own. Others adopt remittances because they want to become more like remittance transmitters. If they accept a particular practice or point of view, it signals to others that they have ascended to a higher-status social or economic group.

The Target Audience

Remittance impact also depends on the gender, class, and life-cycle stage of the receiver. Individuals with more resources and power, and who therefore control more aspects of their lives, have more freedom with which to accept or reject remittances. Women with some income of their own can adopt remittances more easily than those who are completely dependent upon their husbands. Families with some savings can experiment with different business schemes, while those on the economic margins cannot.

Similarly, younger, unmarried women have many choices ahead of them, while married women with children have already made important decisions that constrain their ability to adopt new ideas. Unlike Doña Sara, Sandra could not start her own small business. All the extra money she saved had to go toward paying her son's private school tuition.

Differences between Sending and Receiving Countries

Social remittance impact also depends on relative differences between sending and receiving countries. If the value structures and cognitive models migrants import are similar to host-country norms, then social remittances are likely to be assimilated more quickly. If the new patterns of social relations have elements in common with those already in place, then social remittances are also more likely to be

adopted (DiMaggio 1988; Westney 1987). If the remittance is a completely new idea or behavior, then it will face greater barriers to acceptance. In this sense, remittance adoption, as well as evolution, is path-dependent, in that existing normative, cognitive, and structural constraints condition future choices.

Miraflores, for instance, adopted new religious practices from the United States more easily than they did political ones. Religious remittances were often stylistic variations of the Catholic practices that Dominican and Boston parishioners already shared. The modified version of a particular prayer or ritual looked enough like what villagers already did that it was easy to assimilate. In contrast, political remittances that promoted a more egalitarian leadership style went against the grain of "business as usual" and contradicted long-standing power hierarchies. These remittances represented a sharper departure from deeply entrenched political ideas and behaviors and were therefore a harder sell.

Features of the Transmission Process

Some remittances have a stronger effect because they travel with other remittances. When those that are introduced initially are accepted, receptivity is heightened to those that follow.

Remittances traveling through multiple pathways also have a more significant effect. Community leaders in Miraflores, for example, began managing contributions to community projects more carefully in response to demands from the Miraflores Development Committee (MDC) in Boston and from migrant community members in general. MDC members' calls for stronger financial controls coincided with social remittances introduced by migrant community members, who told nonmigrants about the management practices they observed while working in Boston.

Remittances reinforced by global cultural flows also heighten remittance impact. Nonmigrants begin demanding better social programs because they hear about the kinds of services their relatives receive in the United States and because they see such programs on the Cable News Network (CNN). The PRD decentralized decision-making, in part, because return migrants pressured them to do so and because an international pool of ideas that favored markets and democracy came into favor (Domínguez 1997). Young adults in Miraflores were open to

new ideas about gender because they related these to the movie and magazine images they were already so familiar with.

Finally, the force of transmission affects remittance impact. If many remittances are transmitted consistently during a short time, their impact is greater than when they are transferred periodically. If there are many, simultaneous calls for men to share the housework, and numerous examples of this, nonmigrants are more likely to change their behavior than if they are exposed to only infrequent, isolated examples of these new social forms.