The Neglect of Network Theory in Practice with Immigrants in the Southwest

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This paper reviews selected theories of international migration including social network and human capital. It discusses the nature of social networks among immigrants and the costs and benefits for the sending and receiving countries. The history of social network theory in social work practice is revisited. Given the current importance of immigration in the Southwest, the strength and limitations of applying networking principles in practice with immigrants in the border areas are included. This article does not focus on the complexity of networks among refugees or asylum seekers, where government population dispersion or resettlement policies might change their circumstances.

Key words: *immigration; social networks; human capital; southwestern U.S.; social work practice with immigrants*

Two Contrasting Theories of International Migration

The multi-ethnic nature of U.S. society, the recent concern about the growth of immigrant populations, particularly Mexicans up to 2007, and the grouping of those migrants in specific regions or cities has become a matter of study and concern in the immigration literature in the U.S. Yet, as Massey et al. (1993) suggested, "there is no single, coherent theory of international migration, only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries" (p. 432). It is apparent that there is insufficient evidence to develop any single "scientific theory of migration" that would

provide a comprehensive understanding of the forces that propel or control the movement of people across the globe.

A variety of partial theories contribute to explaining the reasons individuals and groups migrate from one place to another. All of these contributions are helpful, but are far from definitive. Explanatory theories are offered not only by classical economics but also by what sociologists call the "new economics of migration." Classical economic theories hypothesized that immigration was the result of the work of global markets that create push and pull forces that pivot on the call of higher earning jobs. For classical economists, aggregate migration flows between countries are the result of individuals making migration decisions based on cost–benefit calculations. An alternative perspective suggests that "decisions about migration are not made by isolated individual actors, but by larger units of related people in which people act collectively, not only to maximize expected income, but also to minimize risks…" (Massey et al., 1993. p. 436). Theories based on the "new economics" suggest that "families, households, or other culturally defined units of production and consumption are the appropriate units of analysis for migration research, not the autonomous individual" (p. 439).

In the U.S., a study by the Pew Research Hispanic Center on the current decline of immigration from Mexico validates the notion that individuals migrate because of group rather than individual pressures (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012, p. 5). These authors show how cultural forces and trends related to fertility affect decisions to migrate: the lesser the number of children in a family, the lesser the pressure to migrate. The Pew Report states that,

> In Mexico, among the wide array of trends with potential impact on the decision to emigrate, the most significant demographic change is falling fertility: as of 2009, a typical Mexican woman was projected to have an average 2.4 children in her life time, compared with 7.3 for her 1960 counterpart. (Passel et al., 2012, p. 5)

This relatively new insight invites the use of network theory in analyzing how immigrants make their decisions and how they survive. This type of insight further helps explain

the centrality of family reunification measures in the debate about immigration policy.

While network theories might offer structural explanations and predictions about migratory behavior, such predictions are mitigated by the realities of entry policies of the receiving country. Entry policies often work at cross purposes with theoretical predictions of who will leave and who will stay. For example, difficult entry policies in a given country might deter family members from seeking to immigrate to that country, even if the head of the network had preceded them. Greene-Sterling (2010) suggests that,

> After the United States opened up the trade with Mexico, its immigration quotas remained antiquated and inflexible. … The American government did not readily grant visas for family unification. If you're a Mexican, you might not live long enough to get to the U.S. if you stand in line and wait your turn. For example, in 2008, if unmarried children of Mexicans with green cards wished to obtain a visa to join their parents in the U.S., the average wait time was estimated at 192 years. (pp. xi-xii)

Naturally, such realities are an important limiting factor that weakens the merit of the theories.

Migrant Networking: Cost and Benefits for the Sending and Receiving Countries

Migrant networks depict the connections that immigrants have with their communities of origin not only in terms of what propels them to emigrate but also in terms of their destination. Networks highlight relationships with residents in the receiving communities, residents who might be kin and friends or simply former immigrants. These networks serve as buffers for the many transitions of the immigrant and increase the likelihood of success. Immigrants congregate around these networks, which enhance the possibilities of employment, the availability of housing, and in general, offer a mediated interpretation of the new culture. As Massey et al. (1993) say, "… they lower the costs and risks of movement and increase the

expected net returns of migration. Network connections constitute a form of social capital …" (p. 448).

Social capital has received much attention from politicians and policy-makers. Those who discuss social capital generally include a consideration of the positive effects of migrants on community life, neighborhoods, culture and social diversity as well as the negative effects on welfare payments, schools, crime, physical and mental health (Carrington, MacIntosh, & Walmsley, 2007). Carrington et al. suggested in an Australian study in 2007 that "the social benefits of migration far outweigh the costs, especially in the longer term" (p. xi). The evidence presented by these authors indicates that migrants have made extraordinary contributions to Australian human and social capital.

In the U.S., a number of studies have suggested similar outcomes related to the contributions of immigrants to social and cultural capital. Weintraub and Cardenas (1984), for example, provided reliable evidence that tax revenues, even from the undocumented, clearly exceeded the cost of providing public benefits to them. Portes and Rumbout (2010) observed: "When a community of Mexican expatriates, regardless of size, settles, one of its first organizational efforts is to create '*comites de pueblo*' or '*club de oriundo*s' that gather people of the same locality of origin in an effort to maintain contact and support its development" (p. 109). As these committees raise funds, they generate businesses in their community of residence; they buy products and equipment to send back, use technology, organize fund raising activities, etc., all of which generate revenue and serve to integrate the immigrants into the larger receiving community. Social and cultural capital are enhanced.

When circumstances cause the erosion of the ties that bind communities of origin and communities of residence there is an increase in costs at the point of origin and at the point of arrival of the immigrant. Examples are found among Latin American migrants, both documented and undocumented. Heads of families, whether male or female, who leave behind spouses and children, can be more readily employable in the U.S., but they are also more isolated and less stable as a social force in the host communities. Social capital is further eroded because when network connections fail, the new resident

immigrants live in poorer conditions. A large amount of their income is sent back in the form of remittances to help those members of the network who cannot "cross." Furthermore, if they are men alone in new communities, they might be more prone to substance abuse, and if they are women, they can be easy targets for exploitation by unscrupulous people. Because of the difficulties of movement back and forth to their home countries—a matter of policy—unattached immigrants often engage in risky and costly practices to try to maintain their networks, for example, payments to *coyotes* who promise to reinstate the network.

In the country of origin, children left behind give rise to the very difficult and often intractable problem of unaccompanied minors in border towns, which are of concern to the courts and social service providers both in Mexico and the U.S. The cost of determining responsibility for these children is felt by the court systems, the child protection system and the schools, to name but a few. Oftentimes, they are left with a single parent who may decide to cross the border to join the other parent, only to discover that the husband or wife, after many years of separation, has found a new partner. The new arrival is then caught in diplomatic transactions between the sending and receiving countries (Cardoso, Gomez, & Padilla, 2009), or is again abandoned with no networks, becoming a charge to social services. Unfortunately, the public is most likely to be familiar with the latter.

The costs of losing migrants in a receiving country have been documented recently, particularly in the Southwest. Greene-Sterling (2010), reporting on the costs of losing immigrants in Arizona, documented through case examples how housing vacancies began to sprout in neighborhoods that had been flourishing before, either because the immigrants left when the recession hit or when law enforcement targeted them for deportation. Other negative effects of voluntary and involuntary returns are cited by Passel, Cohn and Gonzalez-Barrera (2012). They suggest that the economic and population gains experienced by the border areas between 1995 and 2000 have probably been eroded by the 1.4 million Mexicans and their children who returned to Mexico between 2005 and 2010. Such trends point in the direction of economic and social loses in years to come.

Social Work and Network Theory

Tracy and Brown (2011) have suggested that "almost by definition, social work has recognized the importance of social networks in clients' lives" (p. 448). Social work grew out of an interest in the individual in relation to his/her environment. Historically, social work attempted to focus on the interrelated patterns of people vis-à-vis their communities. The settlement houses included a large number of incipient social scientists who "mapped" the neighborhoods not only to understand them better but also to inventory where immigrants lived and worked (Kelley, 1895; Hunter, 1901, 1904). They were pioneers in using mapping and statistics as incipient techniques to locate clusters of immigrants of particular nationalities.

The Charity Organization Society's form of "scientific" social work also relied on identifying clusters of people in poor communities so that help would be given in systematic rather than random ways. According to Richmond (1908), it was important for social workers to seek the most natural sources of relief and that included the networks of kin and neighbors. The findings of the first caseworkers identified the strengths of many social networks, particularly natural and familial networks, but also their problems, such as alcoholism, mental deficiency, etc. While such identification was often used for very helpful purposes, it also included assumptions about malingering, entrenched dependency, imbecility or other problems deemed at the time to be ingrained in the "moral fiber" of many immigrants.

By the mid-1930s, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists were investigating informal relations and structures within large and small systems. Sociograms became an instrument of research. Moreno (1937) depicted the complexity of social relationships and connections among individuals. Studies in various communities in Europe indicated that network connections among people helped with job-seeking and securing, helped with aid in times of stress, and served as coping mechanisms for individuals (Barnes, 1954; Granovetter, 1973; Mitchell, 1969). Social workers became familiar with the terminology of social network theory. The links among individuals depicting interconnections began to be studied for their merit as social support systems.

Differential diagnosis, popular until the 1980s, encouraged social workers to look at the broader picture of the client in relation to his/her networks. In the 1970s, the advent of the ecological approach to social work practice continued focusing on social support networks, both natural networks within families and small groups, and larger networks in communities. But by the 1980s, as Fabricant (1985) has suggested, bureaucracy based on functional job analysis applied a form of Taylorism in social work, which eroded not only the craft but the possibility that workers would be creative outside the scope of the bureaucratic arrangements of agencies.

In the 1980s, however, the incorporation of social support networks in social work became very salient in Britain. Movements such as "going local" (Hadley & Mc Grath, 1980; Martinez-Brawley, 1990) stressed the positive aspects of resorting to community networks in social service delivery, not only for effectiveness but also as a cost saving device, particularly for the elderly. Social services were more willing to capitalize on networks, a matter that at one time would have worried those concerned about quasi-nepotistic practices. In 1981, Jimmy Carter's White House Conference on Families stressed the use of networks. Carter was a "ruralite" and his belief in the strength of families and small communities showed in the established purpose of the conference. Also, recognition was given to the diversity of family networks and a section dealt with how government could support networks (Tracy & Brown, 2011). The Conference announcement stated:

> The main purpose of this White House Conference will be to examine the strengths of American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which family life is affected by public policies. …This Conference will clearly recognize the pluralism of family life in America. The widely differing regional, religious, cultural, and ethnic heritages of our country affect family life and contribute to its diversity and strength…. There are families in which several generations live together, families with two parents or one, and families with or without children. The Conference will respect this diversity. (White House Conference on Families, 1978, paras. 4-5)

The social work literature of the 1980 reflected a strong emphasis on social and helping networks (Maguire, 1991; Whittaker & Garbarino, 1983). However, what can perhaps be viewed as the classic social support networks textbook of the times—Whittaker and Garbarino's (1983), mentions work with immigrant communities only in passing. Fleeting recognition was given to the need to understand particular helping network patterns among specific groups such as Blacks, Lithuanians, Latvians, Hungarian and Poles, recognizing that they were primarily "settled" communities. It is apparent that the theme of recent immigrants was not as salient in the professional discussion of the 1980s as it is today. The involvement of social workers with new immigrant populations was not as significant in the theory or practice of that time.

By the late 1990s, migration theorists in sociology were focusing their explanations for the immigration phenomena on social network theory. However, social work had become more bureaucratized and concerned with costs. The whole notion of social work practitioners focusing on immigrant networks to offer help to new arrivals was viewed as costly and perhaps problematic and inefficient.

The Scarcity of Social Network Theory in Practice with Latino Immigrants Today

Healy (2005) suggested that social work practitioners are reluctant to acknowledge the place of theory in practice. This applies to all types of theory, from simple explanatory statements of the reality at hand to what is referred to as "evidence-based" principles. Given Healy's assessment, it is not surprising that there is no systematic attempt to incorporate the explanatory principles of social networks in reaching out to immigrant communities. When one discusses with practitioners the frameworks used in working with immigrants, most will refer to elements of network theory but also suggest that their daily practice is not necessarily embedded in those concepts. For example, most practitioners realize the importance of family connections in adjusting to new settings, yet, they comment on how little time they have to try to understand them. Very extended and unusually large families with blood and non-blood "relatives" are a case in point.

Immigration policies, whether we believe they are generous or not, rely on an understanding of what brings immigrants into a country, who will follow them, where they will locate, etc. At the policy level, family reunification measures, very important to Latino immigrants, rely heavily on an understanding of networks. The question to be addressed then is why network principles are not more extensively used in social work with Latino immigrants in the Southwest. What are the elements blocking the full use of networks in helping immigrants in their transitions to the new land? The blockages can be clustered in two categories, though they may not be totally discrete.

Cultural Elements and Paradigms in the Receiving Culture
American culture is embedded in an early sense of freedom, independence, accomplishment, mastery of one's environment and personal accountability. In essence, the cultural ethos is, as Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) have suggested, one of individualism: "Individualism was so embedded in the civic and religious structures of colonial life that it had not yet found a name, even though John Locke's ideas of individual autonomy were well known by colonial times" (p. 147). De Tocqueville (1969) used the word "individualism" to describe the American condition. This intrinsic individualism permeated social work thinking and practice, even before social work developed cogent theories of its own. Americans "pull themselves up by their boot-straps," they aid others, but the object is self-reliance and independence. The social work paradigm of settlement houses of the late 19th century relied more on existing networks, but the psychological influences of the 20th century focused practice on psychological theories that were highly individualistic. In *Mental Health in America* (1981), Veroff, Koulka, and Douvan stated:

> The present day hero searches for the self by reliving experience in a contractual relationship which is, by definition, removed from 'real-life' and artificial in the sense that the feelings and emotions it contains are not indigenous to it but belong to other primary relationships in the real world… Psychoanalysis and psychiatry is the only form of psychic healing that

attempts to cure people by detaching them from society and relationships. (p. 6)

While our interest here is not related primarily to the psychological theories that are embedded in social work practice, the fact is that many bureaucratic practices, central to social work with immigrants, are derived from those psychological paradigms. So when agencies do not invest workers' time and energies and other resources searching for and relating to the immigrants' networks, it is because these steps have not been deemed essential among the myriad of discrete tasks workers are supposed to do. Social work in the U.S. in general is a very pragmatic, task-oriented enterprise, and social work with immigrants is particularly so. Some studies that looked at child welfare workloads have concluded that "child welfare cases that involve immigration issues present additional complexities that need to be considered in workload assignments." They specifically highlight the resource implications of applying "culturally appropriate practices" (Dettlaff, Vidal de Haymes, Velazquez, Mindell, & Bruce, 2009, p. 60).

Legal Issues and the Limitations of Bureaucracy

It must be recognized that social workers practice in the context of an increasingly litigious society. Agencies, whether dealing with immigrants or not, are keenly conscious of the potential for litigation and tend to practice defensively rather than imaginatively. Risk taking is neither encouraged nor sanctioned, and expanding the practice to potential networks brings forth ambiguity and reduces the span of control. There is also the fundamental element of privacy and confidentiality as defined by the legal framework or the practices of a highly individualistic culture. For example, in practicing with unaccompanied immigrant children, workers cannot always search for relatives, even when the children suggest the existence of those networks in the surrounding communities. Parental (or legal) permission is likely to be required, but naturally the parents are either not in the country or are in hiding. While some jurisdictions might be more open than others to workers' creativity in this respect, "when practitioners or supervisors stray beyond agency policy, they incur a greater risk of being held liable for malpractice" (Barsky, 2009, p. 76).

There are also risks associated with identifying the networks of undocumented immigrants who fear discovery or are otherwise problematic (Dettlaff et al., 2009). Those networks are hidden, and identifying them might not be welcomed by its members. Furthermore, if those networks are outside the U.S., the difficulties increase. Cardoso, Gomez, and Padilla (2009) reported that "caseworkers and judges are often reluctant to use kinship placements across international boundaries" (p. 71). They add that experts in the field explain this reluctance because of concerns about the quality of the networks and of the services that might be available across the Mexican border. If children were placed with family members who could not respond to the needs of the child, questions about the standards of care would be raised, and practitioners could be vulnerable for breaches of those standards. It is acknowledged that clients often refer to networks, which are not there or are extremely fragile, and that raises questions about standards of care (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990). Individuals who require social work help often come from fractured environments. The networks in those environments, while potentially helpful, can also be harmful.

Finally, efficiency has become the order of the day in social work practice. Workers must justify every step they take in terms of stated goals and achievable outcomes. Bureaucracies rely on specialization. Those who work in them have a specificity of function that defines and constrains their actions. Resources are provided only for those specific functions. Standardization of procedures is the raison d'etre of the bureaucratic enterprise. In "Emerging Issues at the Intersection of Immigration and Child Welfare," Dettlaff et al. (2009) highlight the difficulties of collaboration between bureaucratic agencies in the U.S., Mexico and other Latin American countries regarding the many issues where their jurisdictions intersect. Working with networks of immigrants, while in the long run potentially beneficial and enriching, is in the short run complicated, time consuming and difficult to standardize. Decisions are always complex and challenge the bureaucracy and the workers, for often opposing alternatives can be justified.

Summary and Conclusions

We have addressed the merits of network theory to provide explanations related to the phenomenon of international migrations. We have shown how social work, which encouraged the use of networks in the early decades of the practice, has become less prone to use network theory today. In practice with immigrants, there have emerged new structural, legal and professional challenges. Recognizing the difficulties of decision-making in this arena, we must nevertheless end by encouraging the re-exploration of networks in dealing with immigrants, whether children or families. Networks can constitute an extremely powerful resource in the process of acculturation and support of new immigrants. As is the case with all relatively untested interventions, any expansion of network practice with immigrants today must be accompanied by careful study of the legal and structural implications of each situation in the sending and receiving countries, including cross-system coordination, and by a realistic analysis of resource allocations within the agencies that work with immigrants, including workloads.

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