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Franziska Bedorf

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Herausgeber:

Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 6208
E-Mail: lfE@uni-hamburg.de
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

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Transnationalism fading? Elderly Mexican migrants in Chicago and shifting notions of belonging

Franziska Bedorf

“In the end few of the Latin American newcomers to the United States end up as ‘transmigrants’. While symbolic ethnicity remains strong – as evidenced by the respondents’ persistent propensity to identify themselves in home country rather than host country terms – the newcomers are no less aware of the fact that the future is to be found in the United States. Of course, it is no surprise to discover that the immigrants are realists. The only question is why the professional students of immigration refuse to see it that way” (Waldinger 2008: 26).

The field of migration studies has been characterized by changing and contradictory paradigms guiding research perspectives and topics. In social and cultural anthropology and neighboring disciplines “transnationalism” has, since the beginning of the 1990s, constituted the central concept in studying the movement of people across national borders and its consequences for both individuals and societies involved. Much anthropological migration research has focused on the dynamics of how migrants forge and sustain so called “transnational social fields” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004);¹ links to the “home country” that were previously neglected in migration studies came into focus. This emphasis seems to suggest that every migrant becomes a “transmigrant” (Glick Schiller 2003: 105), equally involved in both societies and environments. However, as the sociologist Roger Waldinger provocatively concludes in his above-cited 2008 article, in the case of Latin American migrants living in the United States, “few [...] end up as transmigrants” (Waldinger 2008: 26). Waldinger, as well as other scholars of migration (e.g. Levitt 2001: 8; Mendoza 2006: 558), noted that concrete ties and involvements with the home country – such as remittances, visits, phone calls and political involvements – often fade over the course of time. Nevertheless, hardly any studies have explored these “de-transnationalizing” processes of migrants so far. On the contrary, anthropological research mostly examines communities whose members live in two or more countries. Fieldwork often starts in the migrants’ home country and consequently includes in the sample only those migrants who are still part of the transnational community. Migrants who have not maintained extensive cross border linkages and

1 Alternative concepts similarly highlighting sustained border-crossing ties include “transnational migrant circuits” (Rouse 1991: 14) or “transnational socio-cultural systems” (Olwig 2009).

hence “fall out of the transnational social field” (Soehl and Waldinger 2010: 1491) disappear from research.

In this article, I therefore want to question the emphasis on transnationalism and ask whether this lens, valuable and enlightening as it may be in many contexts, constitutes a sufficient perspective to comprehend migration movements and the social, cultural, political and economic dynamics related to them. I argue that it is important to take the possibility of what I will call “de-transnationalization” into account when studying migration. Drawing on fieldwork on elderly Mexican migrants living in Chicago and their plans of returning upon retirement, I will examine how sentiments of (transnational) belonging² and transnational practices transform over the migrants’ life courses. I will show how this has resulted in different degrees of cross border involvements today, including gradual exits from transnational communities. I will proceed as follows: First, I will shortly review transnationalism as a concept and the critique it elicited. Second, I present my methodological approach, the data I collected and the context of Mexican migration to Chicago before, third, introducing two individual cases of elderly Mexicans living in Chicago as related to more general tendencies and patterns regarding cross border involvements and dynamics of connectedness over the life course found in my research. I will conclude, fourth, by discussing these examples with regard to the concept of transnationalism.

Transnationalism: Highlighting cross-border ties

Whereas migration research before the 1990s primarily aimed at understanding migrants’ interaction with and integration into the country they migrated to,³ transnationalism as a new guiding perspective emphasized that migration was as much about sustained ties to the homeland as it was about

2 In recent years the term belonging has been increasingly discussed and applied in research on population movements, nationalism and globalization. In this context, belonging usually refers to notions of social, cultural and spatial connectedness (Albiez, et al. 2011: 13ff; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011: XII).

3 Until the 1970s, migration research was largely guided by theoretical frameworks highlighting the perspective of the receiving countries and assuming migration as a unidirectional process, implying assimilation and the severance of home ties (Anwar 1979: 7ff.; Gordon 1964; Olwig 2007: 8; Wimmer 2004: 1). A competing perspective evolving in the middle of the 1960s and superseding assimilation theory completely at the beginning of the 1980s was the multiculturalist framework, also called “cultural pluralism” (Newman 1973). Its proponents posited that after moving to a new environment migrants did not assimilate and discard their identities completely, but that ethnic organizational principles continued to matter (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Smith 1998: 199; Wimmer 2004: 1). Both assimilationist and pluralist concepts focused on life in the receiving society and did not take maintained cross border ties of migrants into account.

interaction with the new society. Since then, the idea of “transnationalism” has influenced most migration research in the social sciences.

Transnationalism discovered

Transnationalism as a concept emerged in line with globalization theories as developed by Ulf Hannerz, Arjun Appadurai and Robert Robertson (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1989; Robertson 1992) and postulated that migrants usually did not lose touch with their country of origin but perpetuated relationships with both societies, spanning national borders (e.g. Basch, et al. 1995; Kearney 1995; Levitt 2001; Portes 1997; Vertovec and Cohen 1999). Several anthropologists and sociologists “discovered” transnationalism in the early 1990s with regard to international migration.⁴ Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc advanced the term transnational in their 1994 book “nations unbound” where they investigated Haitian, Filipino and Grenadian migration to the U.S., defining transnationalism as “the process by which migrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch, et al. 1995: 7). In order to fully understand migrant experiences, they suggested the term transmigrant, denoting “immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political – that span borders” (Basch, et al. 1995: 7).

Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc as well as other scholars of migration viewed transnational connections as a genuinely new phenomenon of the late 20th century, contingent upon what Appadurai referred to as the “new global cultural economy” (Appadurai 1996: 32), characterized by new and amplified technologies and means of communication and travel (Portes 1999: 29; Portes, et al. 1999: 27; Smith 1998: 231). Skeptics hastened to demonstrate that migrants had always sustained ties to their homeland and that there was nothing new about transnationalism as a phenomenon (Foner 1997; Harper 2005; Wyman 1993). Others appreciate transnationalism as an analytical lens shedding light on aspects previously neglected in migration research, which had primarily focused on the receiving society, overlooked cross-border links and taken the nation state as the main unit of analysis (Olwig 2007: 7ff.; Smith 2006: 9; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 596). The transnational view, these scholars say, provides a remedy to counteract such shortcomings since it takes a global, deterritorialized perspective and focuses on migrants as active agents and their networks, seeking to understand migratory experiences more comprehensively.

4 The term transnational had been used much earlier in the context of migration studies (Bourne 1916), but it was in the early 1990s that scholars studying migration coined transnationalism to describe a supposedly new form of migration and as a concept to capture aspects previously neglected in the migration process.

The general assumption of maintained political, social, cultural and economic ties that transcend national borders, of deterritorialized and unbounded communities and emerging “transnational social fields” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) or “transnational migrant circuits” (Rouse 1991: 14) which the transnational perspective entails is inherent in most anthropological and sociological migration research today (Boehm 2009; Cohen 2001; Dürr 2011; Fitzgerald 2004; Mendoza 2006; Smith 2006; Striffler 2007).

Transnationalism challenged

At a first glance, the sheer volume of research assuming a transnational perspective seems to suggest that migration processes in general are characterized by the emergence of densely knitted transnational communities where national borders become meaningless, distinctions between “here” and “there” dissolve and migrants end up as transmigrants who are connected with both contexts alike, or rather inhabit a kind of merged “third space” (Bhabha 1994: 53ff.), devoid of boundaries. A closer look at the numerous refinements the concept has undergone since its conception, however, reveals that this generalized view has been partially revised. For Mexican migrants living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for example, the anthropologist Cristóbal Mendoza finds that “large number of immigrants decide to either sever their ties with Mexico (and somehow integrate into the American melting pot) or return to Mexico in the near future. Real transnational lives are scarce among interviewees” (Mendoza 2006: 558). Research in the “second phase” of transnationalism after 2000 stresses that only a rather small number of migrants are involved in regular border spanning activities and delimits “regular migrants” from “transmigrants” (e.g. Glick Schiller 2003: 105). Similarly, Waldinger holds that “migrant reality takes more diffuse forms” (Waldinger 2008: 5) and argues that cross-border ties, albeit constituting an integral part of every migration experience, tend to both vary in intensity and change, often withering over time (Waldinger 2008: 9; see also Soehl and Waldinger 2010: 1507).

Although much research today concedes that migration is not exclusively characterized by tight transnational connections (Levitt 2001: 8; Levitt, et al. 2003: 569; Smith 2006: 7ff.), most anthropological studies remain focused on such relations, investigating how cross-border practices and ideas originate and develop and how these transnational spaces impact both the people involved as well as their environments. By contrast, in what ways and why migrants vary in their scope and intensity of cross-border connections and how transnational involvements change over time as related to the migrant’s life course remains largely underexplored. Migrants who are not actively engaged in border spanning practices are thus by and large absent from the field of research. Akin to what the sociologist Ewa Morawska has found

for migrants who were not involved in ethnic organizations at the heyday of pluralist research (Morawska 1994: 83), these migrants “disappear”. Much of transnational research is still, like Wimmer and Glick Schiller rightly remarked, “conceptually blind for those cases where no transnational communities form among migrants or where existing ones cease to be meaningful for individuals” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 598).

Fieldwork in Mexican Chicago: Accidentally going beyond transnational communities

The ethnographic data I will refer to in the following paragraphs are based on 13 months of fieldwork in the village San Antonio Solís, Mexico, and Chicago, U.S., which I conducted from July 2010 to August 2011.⁵ Originally, I had myself intended to conduct research on a “transnational community”. I aimed to explore whether and why Mexicans who had migrated to and were living in the U.S. intended to return to Mexico upon retirement. Having designed the study as a multi-sited research project, I started the fieldwork in Central Mexico (San Antonio), before continuing research in Chicago, which represented the main migratory destination for the people of San Antonio. Upon arrival in Chicago, this design proved impractical, as not nearly enough of my contacts from San Antonio were approaching retirement age and seriously considering the question of return. It was therefore almost by accident that I gave up the transnational bias in my sampling and proceeded to focus not on one bounded Mexican community in Chicago, but on individuals from several neighborhoods and backgrounds. Although this was not a conscious methodological decision I came to realize the advantage: the new design allowed me to consider migrants who were not part of a “transnational community”. Thus my final sample – comprising 66 informants – covered a potentially more heterogeneous set of people. My interlocutors were, however, connected by the fact that all of them were born in Mexico and had migrated to Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s.

The ethnographic data I collected are based on participant observation, semi-structured and structured interviews on migration histories, dimensions of life and belonging in Mexico and Chicago as well as freelists and network data.

5 I conducted the fieldwork as part of a research project on ageing in transnational space at the University of Hamburg, which was funded by a DFG (German Research Foundation) grant.

Shifting notions of belonging? Elderly Mexicans in Chicago as (non)members of transnational communities

Chicago is the city with the second largest Mexican population in the United States after Los Angeles (De Genova 2005: 117).⁶ As of the most recent census in 2010, half a million Mexicans (578,000) live in the city.⁷ Mexicans account for almost 20 percent of the city's population of 2.7 million, and 10 percent of the population is Mexican-born.⁸ Today, many neighborhoods in Chicago, are visibly shaped by their Mexican population, particularly those areas in the city where Mexicans account for the majority, such as the neighborhoods Pilsen and Little Village (which is often called "La Villita") south of the city center and Logan Square in the west.

Most of the correspondents included in my research lived in one of these three areas – Pilsen, Little Village and Logan Square. They were first generation migrants and had come to Chicago between the 1960s and the 1980s. Usually they had migrated alone or with their spouse, largely leaving most of their immediate family like parents and siblings behind. Following the transnational perspective, one would assume that my interlocutors have kept in close touch with Mexico, through regular phone calls or travels to Mexico, economic support or investments in terms of remittances or property ownership, or manifested in activities such as becoming politically involved in a hometown organization. I will now introduce two cases of elderly Mexicans living in Chicago, Martha Rivera⁹ and Fernanda and Dionisio Pérez, and examine in how far their migratory histories, current ways of life and future plans fit the picture of people belonging to a transnational community.

"The city adopted us"

It is a hot July afternoon in 2011 when I maneuver my black Volvo through the Little Village neighborhood in Chicago, towards the house of Martha and David Rivera. I met Martha, a 74 year old lady, at a dance class at the Senior Center *Casa Maravilla*. Both she and her husband David spend time at the

6 The high numbers of Mexicans living in Chicago, which, considering the city's distance to the Mexican border, seem surprising stem from Chicago's industrial history, see e.g. (Arredondo 2008: 16; De Genova 2005: 113; Padilla 1985: 22).

7 This number is based on the U.S. 2010 census (U.S.-Census-Bureau 2010). The total number of Mexicans living in the United States was 33.7 million in 2012, constituting slightly more than ten percent of the country's population (Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez 2013: 5).

8 In this article, following the terminology applied by the Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project, I use 'Mexican' when referring to individuals living in the United States and identifying as Mexican and 'Mexican-born' when referring to Mexicans who were born in Mexico and live in the U.S. I use the term 'Mexican migrant' synonymously with Mexican-born.

9 I changed the names of all my correspondents.

center regularly, attending English, dance or computer classes or just mingling with acquaintances there. Apart from their children and grandchildren who all live in Chicago, the people they meet at *Casa Maravilla* represent their main social circle. On this July afternoon, however, Martha has invited me to their home. She guides me through the house, which the couple bought some years ago, proudly showing me her collection of plants and talking about her plans for the future. “*I think I won’t move from here, until I go to the other side,*”¹⁰ Martha says, laughing. She never wanted to return to Hidalgo in Mexico, which she left in 1969, at the age of 32, with her husband and their six children. They migrated to the U.S. in order to escape poverty – the jobs David had in Mexico hardly sufficed to cover the family’s needs. “*I’m thinking of how I struggled, how I suffered there, how I couldn’t feed my children,*” Martha recalls her life in Mexico. After the family had settled in Chicago, where David acquired work in a steel manufacturing company and Martha in a tortilla factory, life continued to be tough, both Martha and David working double shifts and taking turns in looking after the children. Nonetheless, Martha looks back upon this time as a period of hardships that were worth the strain because in the end it allowed them to “*accomplish our dream, [...] the American Dream.*” Their daily lives were very much focused on realizing “*el sueño americano*” and advancing in Chicago, Martha recalls, as we sip our coffee in her kitchen. There was hardly any time or money for travelling to Mexico. Since the majority of Martha’s and David’s families were still living in Hidalgo, they still managed to go back and visit every few years. “*Until 15 or 20 years ago we used to go [to Mexico] a little more often. Now not any more. We don’t have much family left there, you know?*” All but Martha’s mother and three of her siblings have migrated to the U.S. as well. She keeps in touch with the family members still based in Mexico by talking on the phone and supports her mother by occasionally sending her money, but does not feel the need to travel to Mexico any more, “*I haven’t been there for five years.*” Besides the transformed social situation in Mexico, her six children and fifteen grandchildren, Martha says, constitute a major reason for her changed focus: “*They started making their lives here [in Chicago] [...], they have their children here, their wives are from here, they have a different culture.*” Regarding Martha’s social circle her ties have thus clearly shifted to Chicago. This is also reflected in other dimensions of life, such as her political behavior, the couple’s material investments and in what she experienced in and thus associates with both places: Martha, who became a U.S. citizen in 1991, votes in the U.S., but not in Mexico. She and her husband own the house they inhabit in Chicago, but have never acquired property in Mexico. Twenty years ago, Martha recalls, David “*wanted to buy something there [in Mexico],*” but never put this idea into practice. Finally, while Mar-

10 Interview Martha Rivera, 07.07.2011. I translated the quotes from Spanish to English.

tha associates Mexico primarily with “*how I struggled, what I suffered,*” her view of Chicago is shaped by the opportunities she had there: “*I thank god and the city which gave me the opportunity to come with my children, to be here and achieve something positive [...]. I’m grateful for that [...] to the city which adopted us, and that we are here in this place where we could accomplish our dream.*”

“You don’t feel at ease any more”

The second example I would like to present are Fernanda and Dionisio Pérez. Dionisio (61 years) from Guanajuato and his wife Fernanda (55 years) from San Luis Potosí came to Chicago when they were teenagers, Dionisio at the age of 13, Fernanda at the age of 15. Despite his young age, Dionisio’s reason for migrating was to find a job in the U.S., while Fernanda followed her family, her father being a *Bracero* worker. The couple met at a candy factory where they were both working. After getting married they lived in South Chicago and became active members in one of the city’s first Spanish speaking parishes. In Logan Square, too, where they moved to some years ago, church involvement is central to both of them. Dionisio works as a deacon at the *Nuestra Señora de Gracia* church, Fernanda teaches catechism to the parish children. Through their parish activities the couple is tightly connected with Chicago’s Latino community. Their linkages to their Mexican homes, however, have dissolved over time.

After migrating, neither Fernanda nor Dionisio travelled to Mexico very frequently since their immediate families lived in Chicago. Therefore, going back to San Luis Potosí and Guanajuato was not necessary in terms of fostering social linkages important to them. Nevertheless, Fernanda used to visit Mexico with her husband and children, every now and then joining Dionisio’s parents when they went on vacation. When we are sitting together after a Sunday church service Fernanda describes one of these occasions to me:

“They [Dionisio’s parents] had gone there [to Mexico] for a few months, but actually we were not enthusiastic about going to Mexico. When we went our children, who were six, seven years old, got sick [...]. We got all sick, and we were there for two weeks. And all those days we were there: It was raining, always raining, and [we] sick, and they [the children] wanted to go home. That was in ’85 [...] and after that we didn’t go [to Mexico] any more.”¹¹

Even before experiencing those two weeks in San Luis Potosí, which Fernanda recounts as extremely unpleasant, Mexico had ceased to attract her,

¹¹ Interview Fernanda Pérez, 29.11.2013.

she recalls. But the time of sickness and rain in 1985 was so frustrating that it came to constitute the family's last visit to San Luis Potosí, and to Mexico in general, "*we didn't go any more.*" Fernanda's husband Dionisio adds financial reasons and estrangement from Mexico as additional factors leading to reduced visits to Mexico. He earned quite a lot in the factory where he was working during his first 20 years in Chicago, but "*our focus was our children's education. They went to a catholic school [...]; that costs a lot of money. I mean, already for the school and for paying the house the check was gone.*"¹² Apart from these financial limitations and the priority on their children's education, Dionisio emphasizes how Mexico had changed since he moved to Chicago in 1963, which in turn made him feel a stranger there. The city has grown immensely, and he hardly knows anybody in Guanajuato any more: "*Life [in Guanajuato] is very different to what it used to be, at least for me. [...]. You don't feel the same any more, at ease.*" For Dionisio and Fernanda several factors contributed to their dwindling contact with Mexico. At present they are not in touch with Guanajuato or San Luis Potosí any more.

Discussion of the two cases as related to the wider research: Shifting notions of belonging over the life course

Neither Martha's case nor the Pérez' example would be adequately captured by applying exclusively the transnational lens. Martha, on the one hand, still keeps in touch with her mother and siblings in Mexico. Apart from that, however, ties to Mexico on other levels hardly figure in her daily life. She very much identifies with her Chicago life since the city allowed her to accomplish the "American dream" and is the home of her children and grandchildren. Fernanda's and Dionisio's lives, on the other hand, are not connected to their Mexican homes any more at all. Their attachments and affiliations have shifted along with their families whose members all gradually migrated to the United States, as well as with the augmenting estrangements from altered settings in Mexico. To a certain extent, both Martha and Fernanda and Dionisio have "fall[en] out of the transnational social field" (Soehl and Waldinger 2010: 1491). They have de-transnationalized to different degrees. While the Pérez would disappear completely if this research was focused on a transnational community, Martha might still be part of it, but focusing on her cross-border connections only covers a small part of her story and would be likely to distort the insights drawn on dynamics related to migratory movements in general. In both cases, exploring the migrants' interaction with meso and macro level structures in Chicago and U.S. society is as important for comprehending the dynamics of migratory experiences unfolding between Mexico and Chicago as taking into account maintained cross border ties. How do these two individual cases of gradual de-transnationalization

12 Interview Dionisio Pérez, 29.11.2013.

relate to my wider research data on the lives of elderly Mexican migrants living in Chicago? In order to examine more general patterns of non-/transnationalism I will investigate whether, how and why cross border ideas and practices played a role in my correspondents' lives after migrating as well as whether and how this changed over time by addressing stays in Mexico, remittances and future residence plans.

My data confirm that most of my interlocutors did in fact stay in touch with Mexico after migrating to Chicago. They sustained this connection in different and often multiple ways, returning – legal documents and financial means permitting – for occasional or regular vacations, sometimes even for several years, talking on the phone, sending remittances and building houses. Table 1 shows that most of the migrants I conducted structured interviews with used to spend time in Mexico regularly, and the same is true for the rest of my sample.

Annual time spent in Mexico since migrating to the U.S.	Number of persons	Percentage
No time	1	2,7 %
Less than one month	28	75,5 %
1–3 months	8	21,6 %
Total	37	100 %

Table 1: Time annually spent in Mexico in the past (since migrating to Chicago), $n = 37$

Comparing this with the amount of time these same correspondents said they spend in Mexico today (see table 2), however, reveals that, while some of them have extended the frequency and/or length of their visits, there seems to be a greater tendency to pass less or even no time in Mexico today.

Annual time spent in Mexico now	Number of persons	Percentage
No time	7	19%
Less than before	16	43%
The same as before	3	8%
More than before	11	30%
	37	100%

Table 2: Time spent in Mexico now, $n = 37$

Sending remittances, or *remesas*,¹³ constituted another very concrete way of caring for family in Mexico, and by this means staying in touch. Half of the people I conducted structured interviews with keep sending remittances to relatives today (see table 3). Supporting family members in the home country by sending money is often motivated by other objectives as well, such as the desire to remain “present” at home. Yet, many of my correspondents made regular financial contributions to relatives in Mexico since they felt it was their natural duty to provide for their family. However, also remittances declined over the years, not least because older relatives, such as the migrants’ parents and their siblings, died.

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	17	46%
No	20	54%
Total	37	100%

Table 3: Sending remittances today, $n = 37$

Another indicator of non-/transnational engagements I will address are people’s future residence intentions. Most Mexicans who take the decision of heading north assume a later return to Mexico as self evident when migrating (Reyes 1997: 11). When my correspondents established themselves in Chicago they, too, said they pursued the goal of “volver” (engl.: return), of returning to Mexico after a few years. However, most of them never realized this idea of going back, the intention of return turning into a „myth“ (Anwar 1979).¹⁴ Even for the future, after retirement, only half of the migrants planned to completely return to Mexico or to engage in a back and forth movement, spending parts of the year in Chicago and parts of it in Mexico (see table 4), while the other half of the migrants planned to stay completely in Chicago. Overwhelmingly, I found, these decisions were not shaped by pragmatic necessities, such as legal or economic constraints, but tightly linked with sentiments of belonging socially, culturally and spatially, which had changed over time. As such, they, too, manifest that many people’s life worlds were not located in border spanning communities any more, but had shifted in Chicago.

13 A report by the Pew Research Center estimated the total of migrants’ remittances to Mexico from the U.S. at \$22 billion for 2013, a markedly lower sum than the estimated \$31 billion in 2006 (Cohn et al. 2013).

14 This phenomenon is documented for various migratory contexts, see e.g. (Brettell 1979; Şenyürekli and Menjívar 2012).

Intended residence	Frequency	Percentage
Mexico	8	12.1%
Chicago	29	43.9%
Chicago and Mexico	20	30.3%
Other	9	13.7%
Total	66	100%

Table 4: Intended future places of residence, $n = 66$

The three aspects discussed above indicate that Mexican migrants who came to Chicago between 1960 and 1980 sustained close contacts with their Mexican home regions after migrating. Gradually however, along the life course, those involvements dwindled for various reasons, diverse factors influencing people's possibilities and readiness to spend time in Mexico: Fewer meaningful social ties located in the home region implied less resources and obligations and the incentive or need to spend time there diminished, while on the other hand children and grandchildren in Chicago were born, establishing meaningful ties there. This confirms the assumption of the sociologist Rogers Waldinger who, examining migration from Central American countries to the U.S., observed that „ties to the home environment wither: the locus of significant social relationships shifts to the host environment as settlement occurs“ (Waldinger 2008: 9). Besides altered social circumstances legal constraints, restraining the migrants from traveling to Mexico as long as they lacked permanent residence status, mattered, as well as time, money and security issues. Finally, and importantly, personal experiences as well as the passing of time and people's aims led to changes in how they related to different places, people and cultures. As a result a substantial part of my sample has gradually de-transnationalized to various degrees: While some of my correspondents are still in touch with their Mexican homes, albeit less so than they used to, others have completely ceased to engage in border spanning connections.

Conclusion: Beyond the transnational lens

The transnational perspective has called attention to the fact that migrants perpetuate cross-border relationships. This presented an important revision to the assimilation paradigm previously dominating the field and substantially widened the research perspective since previous migration studies largely ignored sustained ties and loyalties to the home country. When anthropologists study migration today it almost goes without saying to assume that international migration engenders activities, ties and practices transcending borders.

Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated by presenting data on Mexican migrants living in Chicago, it would be misleading to start from the premise that all migration processes are characterized by lasting, static transnational relationships where boundaries between “here” and “there” become entirely blurred. The intensity, scope and duration of those ties is likely to vary – both between individuals and over time –, not least because international migration is embedded in both social and political processes. Focusing on cross-border connections alone does therefore not cover the whole range of migrant experiences. Research on transnational communities leaves out those migrants who do not form part of such communities (Soehl and Waldinger 2010: 1491; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 598). My research offers an alternative perspective. I did not focus on one transnational community but included people from a variety of backgrounds in Mexico. Although sustaining linkages to Mexico by spending the holidays there, attending important celebrations, sending remittances and making regular phone calls constituted an important element in my interlocutors’ migration histories, transnational linkages and practices by and large receded over time. The migrants have related and adapted to the U.S. context to varying degrees. Applying the transnational lens and assuming that people, once they have migrated, sustain and create linkages to their place of origin remains central in order to comprehend migrant experiences. At the same time, I argue extending the perspective and taking transformations of cross-border relationships into account when studying migration is essential if one wants to grasp not only a segment, but the full range of dynamics involved in migration processes.

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Franziska Bedorf is a PhD student at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Hamburg. For her dissertation on return migration and belonging she conducted fieldwork in Central Mexico and Chicago, IL, in 2010 and 2011.