

# Instead of Preface: Reflexive Interview with Professor Peggy Levitt

## Social Remittances and More: Reflections on 25 Years of Migration Studies

**Izabela Grabowska:** This special issue on social remittances in Central and Eastern Europe is a follow-up to our conference which took place in January 2015 in Warsaw. We would like to interview you, which would be a kind of new way of expressing some reflections on social remittances instead of a conventional preface to this special issue. The first question is very general; you have probably been asked this many times, but perhaps you've developed new reflections on the subject with the passage of time. How do you interpret social remittances today, 18 years after you first coined this concept?

**Peggy Levitt:** First of all, I am delighted that this concept seems to have become part of many conversations in the migration studies community and that people have taken what was a very general idea and helped to polish it, hone it, clarify it. Certainly, the original formulation which was too much about things travelling from a receiving country back to a sending country, and which seemed to overemphasise the positive, has been corrected. Now we understand that these are circulating ideas, values and practices. What people are exposed to is very much influenced by what people bring with them when they move which, in turn, influences what they actually send back home. This gives rise to a constant iterative circulation. What is also very exciting is how people have taken this idea and looked at it in very specific places and at specific types of remittances, so religious remittances, political remittances, and have really analysed the costs and benefits of these kinds of exchanges: who they reach, who they privilege, who they don't, who are some of the new losers and winners as a result.

**But do you see it as a kind of umbrella concept that also covers political, religious and other remittances? At a seminar I attended at Nuffield College, Oxford in September 2016, there was a project looking at the combination of political and social remittances, mainly in connection with Ukraine and other post-communist countries, and we were wondering how you see these. Should we separate them into political remittances, religious remittances and cultural remittances with specific dividing lines? Should social remittances be a kind of umbrella term? What do you think of that?**

Well, I think that is actually happening now in the field. People are looking at social remittances in specific sectors. So my only hesitation about saying yes, social remittances is the mega category is: what then happens to the actual ‘social’? Political is kind of clear, and religious is kind of clear, but what do you do with the socio-cultural category? There is a lot of overlap between these different categories and these different kinds of remittances and I would not want to get into unproductive definitional battles. So, for example, where would work fall that looks at the social work being done and the social meanings being expressed by economic remittance exchanges? The act of sending remittances is often about demonstrating power or success. So every economic act has a social function and the same is true with politics and religion and I would not want that to get lost.

**How did the principle of social remittances occur to you? Was there a specific moment of inspiration in any of your fieldwork, a specific sentence that an interviewee came up with? Sometimes the momentum for a discovery in the social world comes from a particular situation.**

Peggy Levitt: You know, I was doing that fieldwork in the early 1990s, over 20 years ago, and at that point economic remittances were the name of the game and everybody was paying attention to monetary flows and their potential role in bringing about development. In fact a dear colleague of mine at MIT was behind that, she started doing that work in the Gulf and looking at what became known as the migration–development nexus. I thought: this is just about money. When I was doing my fieldwork for *The Transnational Villagers* it was so clear to me that people in the Dominican Republic were behaving and thinking in ways that were influenced by migration. Just consider the creation and exchange of social capital. What a family member did in Boston would increase the status of his family members in the Dominican Republic. It was just so clear to me that there was a whole other piece of the discussion that needed to be brought to the fore. Another thing that struck me. The Dominican Republic is very hot. In the summer, it’s 110 degrees Fahrenheit and in wintertime 80, which is still hot. But as soon as it went below 90, all the young women were putting on long sleeves, sweaters, and wearing boots, winter boots like you and I wear in winter. This was because their sisters had brought the stuff home and this was the latest fashion in Boston. There was social meaning attached to putting on these kinds of things. This is really interesting. And many of these young women changed their minds about whom they wanted to marry: they didn’t want to marry someone who hadn’t migrated because the men who had migrated had supposedly become more progressive about gender. And they changed their ideas about race. Many of the people in this village thought of themselves as white before they migrated. It had been settled by people from the Canary Islands who did not marry out. But when they got to the US, they were automatically people of colour, so this changed racial categories as well. So, I realised that gender was being produced across borders, as well as race and class, and it wasn’t just a question of economic, it was a question of these socio-cultural flows.

**There is no one single way of remitting social remittances. Everyone behaves differently. How do you explain this?**

That’s a hard question to answer because it is a very general and it is about purposeful action *versus* what just happens because of a conversation you have or things that you say. When Leonel Fernández was president of the Dominican Republic and he had campaign ads where he was shown playing basketball in some basketball court in Washington Heights in New York City and he was saying I spent part of my childhood in New York, which was true, he wasn’t directly saying ‘I’m telling people that American politics is good and we should emulate some of the things about American democracy’. But through his message, actions, he was sending social remittances and sort of modelling a different way of doing politics as he campaigned. So you have very

powerful people sending social remittances. I guess I would say that. Social remittances exchanges are between people who can say where they acquired a new value or practice. But there is the cultural and discursive backdrop that makes those exchanges possible by making people more open to these new ideas and behaviours. So Leonel Fernández is not talking to me or you or his mother for example. But he is setting the backdrop, setting the stage for when somebody who lives in New York says ‘look, we have a new Congressman and he is from the Dominican Republic, and he is doing x, y and z and why couldn’t we do those kinds of things in the Dominican Republic’. Then somebody is receptive to these changes. The question is not so much who is saying that, but who is listening and why they’re listening. That’s power dynamics, that’s about influential people, that’s about what makes somebody a change agent and what makes somebody an adaptor, both people who are from the sending country and from the receiving country and vice versa.

**You’ve looked at social remittances as part of the migration–development nexus, which assumes that social remittances travel from developed to non-developed or less developed countries. In the European Union social remittances have also been shown to travel between old and new member states – between developed countries, equal migration system, in terms of classical human development indices. But we know that the post-communist past is part of this. How would you explain it?**

I think that that is one of the important theoretical advances that other scholars are making with their work, including yours. So, absolutely. Social remittances circulate within the global south, they circulate between developed countries. The circulation does not arise from developed to under-developed. It arises from migrants. Any place where migrants go and they are exposed to new things, they are probably going to tell non-migrants about it. And then we can talk about the relative differences between countries. Certainly when we talk about Poland and England there is a certain kind of difference. When we are talking about France and Algeria, there is a certain kind of relationship. That is another field of inquiry. Do social remittances travel differently depending on the relative status of relations between the two countries that constitute the field where this circulation is taking place?

**Then there’s the migration–development nexus. Does it aid or distort understanding when social remittances are debated within this framework? How valid does the development mantra remain for discussing social remittances in other contexts – as you said, not necessarily in relation to development?**

Well, we know development is a really heated word, with lots of baggage which means different things to different people. Do we want to talk about what happens to Polish politics when people go to England as development, or do we want to talk about it as political change, which can be both positive and negative? We can’t assume that everything that people get exposed to in England is positive. They could also be seeing very difficult race and ethnic relations in England, they could be experiencing lots of discrimination. Then they come back to Poland and they may act this out by finding an underdog group they want to feel superior to. I don’t think about discussions about social remittance circulation in the global north as part of that migration–development nexus. I think it is another category of discussion, again due to the relative political and economic position of each nation. In other words, how does social remittance circulation change when you are moving from a country with X GDP to X GDP, or from a democratic country to a formerly non-democratic country? All those things are important questions to ask. So, for example, after I wrote about Dominicans, in my next book, I wrote about Brazilians. I assumed that they would be as involved in homeland politics as Dominicans had been but they were not. Part of it was because many people had left when Brazil was still an authoritarian government and they had not had a tradition of democratic participation. They did not have a strong sense of

supporting a political party so there were few political party chapters that formed in the US. That is the kind of thing where you say: what is the transnational social field I'm talking about? What are the implications of this field for social remittance transfers?

**But if we think about this idea of development in a wider sense, not relating directly to GDP, but involving social change connected to various segments or sectors of society. We could say that development is also not uniform, so in a sense, there is segmented development in the post-communist space. What do you think of that idea? In a black-and-white sense we have wonderful infrastructure here thanks to European funds. In every local community there is an aqua park, wonderful roads, outdoor gyms – anything you care to imagine. But if you go to local communities in Romania, Poland and the Baltic states you see that something is missing as a result of this – whatever you call it – development, social change, modernisation. In different disciplines they have different names for these processes, but the meaning is the same. What do you think of this idea, this kind of segmented development, where these social remittances come into particular segments of society?**

Are you saying: What is missing in those places for you?

**Changes in mentality, in norms, practices, in human capital, all that sort of thing. Migrants might come back with a more open mind, right? Or if they close their minds it is based on experience, not imagination or whatever. It's about these soft things – segments relating to specific categories of social remittances: norms, values, skills, whatever.**

I think I understand what you are asking me. First of all I would want to be really careful about not using words like evolution, or thinking that everything that people bring back with them is going to be a good thing. It is not a surprise to me that countries change unevenly, which I think is what you are talking about, or that certain sectors and certain people are affected differently than others. And so, again, I think that's actually a research question. If your question is about political change and you believe in a democratic form of government, then the research question is: is there a sequence of change that makes additional change more possible, that almost fertilises the ground for additional inputs? In other words: is it easier to receive some ideas first and then it predisposes you to other ideas? That is a research question. Is it easier when elites adapt first so then others follow? That is also a research question.

**But what we see here in this part of the world is that these macro changes ordered by political elites have gone quite well, but it's the grass-roots level that's been forgotten. So we've seen these grassroots processes maybe on a micro or meso scale but what's been forgotten, in a sense, is that this system transformation is not about top-down but bottom-up processes.**

But doesn't Poland as a nation have to undergo this process? Forget about immigrants. Yes, maybe migrants help this and maybe they do not. Maybe people come back and say 'this is what was happening in London' and people say 'forget that, do not look at that country. They have race riots, their economy is faltering because their welfare state is being eviscerated'. Social remittances are not going to bring about national political transformation on their own. That is like putting the responsibility for development on the backs of migrants. That is a dangerous and unfair strategy.

**And to wrap up this preface, what do social remittances mean for you in a theoretical sense? Are they theory, concept, ontology? What would you call them after twenty years of reflecting on them?**

Definitely, the idea of social remittances is not a theory. It is a concept that helps us understand the relationship between migrating people and migrating culture in a densely textured world. We see these things when we use a transnational optic or gaze. I strongly believe that you can't understand what happens to someone in a country of settlement if you don't consider their enduring ties to their country of origin. I also believe you can't understand the impact of economic remittances without looking at their social consequences and vice versa.

**Thank you.**

Thank you.