

Evaluation report for the Doctoral Dissertation: ‘Social Remittances into Family life: The case of Polish migrant families over time’ by Marta Buler, SPWS Uniwersytet Humanistycznospołeczny

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Introduction

This dissertation tackles an ever-present and salient question in migration studies and sociological enquiry into migration, namely: ‘how does the impact of migration on families change over time?’ (p. 3). It does so through a three-pronged empirical approach, comprising secondary analysis first of material pertaining to early 20th century Polish (e)migration, second of interviews with migrants from three localities in Poland living in the UK and their relatives and non-relatives back in Poland (Culture diffusion project, Grabowska and team), and third original empirical data mainly adding a third wave to data from the Culture diffusion project, thus strengthening the longitudinal aspect of the research.

The dissertation is an ambitious endeavour, which seeks to add to our understanding of the fundamental relationship between migration and processes of social change, albeit narrowing the scope to focus on ‘doing family’ specifically. The dissertation is very-well anchored in existing migration scholarship, notably in relation to time and temporality (though see also Baas & Yeoh 2019; Edensor 2012; Griffiths et al 2013; Mavroudi, Page & Christou 2017; Robertson 2015), transnationalism, transnational social fields, transnational social families and social remittances, as well as in relation to family studies, in particular matters of life course research, the roles of time therein, and on social control and family life.

The dissertation addresses five research questions, of which one is overarching: 1) ‘what is the long-term impact of migration on non-material aspects of family life?’. The four sub-questions which consider more specific aspects of the overarching question, are as follows: 2) ‘what is the role of the migrating family in the forming practices and norms among the kinship network?’; 3) how do social remittances impact the process of ‘doing family?’; 4) what intervening factors are there in the process of acquiring/resisting social remittances?’; 5) what impact does migration have on family life, relative to the family life cycle?’

The dissertation is further framed around the question of speed – acceleration and deceleration. It offers the concept ‘social deceleration’ inspired among other by Rosa (2003), but also other work on time, temporalities and experienced time in particular. The matter of deceleration is sought coupled with the question of migration and social change, and the dissertation concludes that in many cases social remittances-related processes of change, whether in terms of practices or norms, are in fact resisted, if not rejected, or they fizzle out over time, due not only to what previously has been discussed in terms of ‘conservatism’ (e.g. Cerase 1974 return of conservatism), but also through broader localized desires for slower-paced modes of life, and no desire for change.

The dissertation also finds that social control – internal and external – in the context of migration impacts on family life (here discussed in relation to social remitting) – matter hugely. How, when, and for whom social control in its different iterations matters, meanwhile, is not necessarily an easy question to conclude on. This notwithstanding, the dissertation offers important insights on the crucial difference between migration – when seasonal migration, circular migration, permanent settlement

migration, and not least when change is seen in relation to return migrants vs. to migrants who remain abroad. Further, time is of the essence. Not only length of time spent abroad – and how and where such time was spent (e.g. short-term work with Polish colleagues only, vs. living more as part of local communities abroad) – but crucially the length of time since the migration experience, and thus since a return to Poland, and a specific community of residence there, in the case of this research mostly communities of origin it would seem.

In particular the question of how circular migrants, such as a case mentioned in the dissertation of a migrant who spends 2-3 months working in the UK, but the rest of the year living in his community in Poland, is illustrative. To which extent does migration then offer opportunities for the production of social remittances, and thus feeding into social change in a migration-linked way in this locality, beyond the obvious financial aspect which drives migration?

I will elaborate on the conclusion below, but as is evident from the above, I find there is no doubt this Doctoral Dissertation meets the requirements more than adequately. The report is structured around some main strengths I wish to highlight, before I proceed to discuss some of the challenges and weaknesses which I observed, as well as some future research opportunities which I see from the Doctoral Dissertation and would like to briefly discuss. I then have some specific questions relating to particular places in the dissertation, which I am curious about, but these are not problems – simply points of inquiry. Finally, I return to the conclusion and justify my evaluation.

Main strengths

This Doctoral Dissertation comprising 316 pages is very thorough in its methodological as well as conceptual approach. I will mention some of its main strengths, viewed through the prism of the ways in which the dissertation on the one hand addresses its research questions, and on the other hand, provides valuable contributions to the field of migration studies, through this case-study on Polish migration and migration-related change in Polish localities.

- **The longitudinal view:** As the candidate notes, the field of Polish migration studies is one which is not easy to grasp, as Polish history, especially since the great emigration to the New World at turn of the 20th century, but even before this with movements of both people and borders time and time again. Nevertheless, this dissertation not only notes this backdrop, but instead tackles challenges of ‘presentism’ in contemporary migration research through secondary analysis of existing sources – as well as via published analyses – of these historic migrations in the early 20th century. Both the grasp and overview of existing studies – from back then, and to the present, where especially the past decade has seen an exponential growth in published work in English, but not least in Polish, on Polish migration from different angles – and this first-hand engagement and re-analysis of original data, are valuable contributions to migration studies, not limited to the Polish case.
- **Temporalities:** The theoretical discussion, as well as empirical and analytical applications of perspectives on time as both chronological and experienced, are extremely valuable, and very well done in this dissertation. Especially focus on time, family and life-course as these intersect with migration trajectories. Meanwhile, more could perhaps be done to connect these ideas somewhat historically also with perspectives on migration transition, and the demographic transition, which clearly also matter here. A key asset of this dissertation is how it shows that

‘the impact of migration gets constructed in the light of the current situation’ (p. 231). Thus, it really integrates time and temporal perspectives, as a matter of research substance as well as methodology, with salience for analysis and conclusions.

- **Methodological rigour:** As the methodological section also accounts for, this dissertation is built on methodological rigour in each of its three components (as mentioned above). The rigour stretches from descriptions of and approaches to the different data sets, analytically and conceptually, and in the case of the third, original data set, in the way the data collection of this was conceived of and executed. The appendices reveal fine-tuned data collection instruments as well as protocols for informed consent. Some further reflections on research ethical dimensions could have been included, however key issues on positionality, consent, and reflections on these are well addressed.
- **Figures:** The figures in this dissertation are extremely helpful analytically, both the ones portraying information flow lines within families, and the Genograms in a simple and clear way offer a lot of important information at-a-glance. Some of the tables are also very succinct and efficient ways of summarizing key details, but some tables are also perhaps not really so efficient (such as when many cells contain the same information for the entire row).
- **Application of social remittances on questions of family life:** The dissertation’s ambition to apply the lens of social remittances to migration-related changes in family life – is worthwhile, and it is also an area where it makes a contribution which is important. Often social remittances have been analysed in relation to work life or workspaces, or in relation to broader societal change e.g. in relation to corruption. Within-family change appears a fertile focus, given what we know about migrant’s communication patterns with non-migrant family members, as well as circulation, visits, and return, as part of this landscape.
- **Migration processes, migration dynamics and facets of change:** This dissertation is in essence not ‘about’ migration decisions, yet you offer a lot of analysis which speaks directly to migration-decisions and decisions about return migration. On the one hand, this is a strength of the dissertation, which you link with social remittances and change-processes. On the other hand, in its own right, the theme of migration-decisions might also be further explored in the context of your data and analysis (e.g. see p. 72).

Challenges, weaknesses and future opportunities

No Doctoral Dissertation evaluation report would be complete, without pointing out the observed challenges, weaknesses, and what usually then are also future research opportunities to push existing work even further. These comments should therefore be seen in the context of the conclusion of this evaluation, and the above-mentioned strengths, and as an encouragement for the candidate’s future work as well as issues for discussion during the doctoral defense.

- While the dissertation overall defines key terms well, and anchors these in relevant literature and conceptual debates (as the 37-page long Bibliography testifies to!) – a challenge, or perhaps a weakness even which I observe is the somewhat incomplete or unresolved discussion of the exact relationship between key terms in the dissertation. The key terms I am thinking of are – migrating families or migration families (e.g. p. 77), how are these delineated? Do they comprise all individuals in a family where one person migrates at a point? In other scholarship one might have assumed that this was then linked to families where parents and children migrate

together, but this appears to not necessarily be the case here? Other key terms where the links between them remain a bit elusive are, how return migrants are or are not to be seen more as migrants or as stayers? Yes, they have had migration exposure directly, but yes, also, they are living now in places of origin. Thus, they now have more in present, perhaps, with non-migrants there, than with migrants abroad? This remains unclear, which assumptions about these similarities or differences drive the analysis? As the conclusion importantly states – the role of circular migration is perhaps overall quite different, this merits further attention in future research certainly, and it is perhaps a weakness that the distinction between e.g. permanent settlement migrants living abroad for a very long time, and circular migrants is not made more systematically clear in the analysis throughout. E.g. in relation to matters such as gender equality norms, the expectation, I suppose, would be different in terms of first what kind of exposure these different groups have abroad to potentially new ways of doing things, and second, also to the types of incentives they would have to live in ways where new norms might become engrained in their own practices (e.g. such as parental leaves for father's etc.). Finally, the use of terms like kin and kinship in this context would require perhaps more clearly discussing who this involves in the context of rural or small-town Poland (which arguably is not only changing, but probably was never uniform).

- Social remittances in family life, while interesting and important, to an extent remain a little elusive or slippery. The dissertation focuses on concrete issues, such as practices in relation to celebrating weddings and rituals at Christmas, as well as entering into the themes of gender roles and gender orders, and not least marriage. It is however still an area where more systematic work appears necessary in order to tease out what causes and effects might be, though of course, this may never be concluded-upon. Still, could there be ways to move this research agenda forward, e.g. by studying particular facets of child raising, or particular and tangible gender-related aspects?
- The focus of this dissertation are the non-material aspects of social remittances where practices, norms and social capital are central. Nevertheless, financial remittances are mentioned time and time again, as well as the links that exist between money sent and the relationships within which this money is sent – and where these resources often are constitutive of maintaining such relationships. As an avenue for further research – flipping this upside down – and actually examining processes of change in families via remittances (financial and material) might be considered. In many instances, such as the letters from early 20th century migrants, but also in the more recent material – familial ties, money and social relationships are in fact often inseparable, also when it comes to weddings, hence this seems like a theme that might be worth pursuing with your data and interests (see e.g. Carling 2014; Erdal 2014; Mahmud 2020; Miah 2021; Rahman & Fee 2012; Sana 2005).
- There is perhaps also scope to look more carefully at the localities where research was conducted (the two present-day investigations). Yes, the micro, meso, macro, was included, but understanding the embeddedness locally is perhaps necessary to explain how migration affects social change, or interplays with ongoing change, or also stagnation, or even resistance to change in particular places. The analysis now is temporally rich, but spatially, perhaps there is more that could be considered in terms of how local context specifically matters, from the community to the formal sides.

- Migration, chain-migration, and return-migration are all themes which are heavily investigated, yet not the primary focus. There is no doubt more from this data and analysis which could be developed toward contributions specifically about chain-migration, but also return migration, and probably circular and seasonal migration too?
- Social remittances and the black box of how these turn into social change potentially here is focused around– observation & acquisition – among both migrants and stayers. But, there are some further questions to consider, perhaps. So, first, in Levitt’s original (1998) paper the emphasis is put on: Content-creation, transmission, impact. So, there is a step for transmission, and another one for observation, and a third for impact. Here we are somehow making content-creation equal observation and somewhat acquisition, whereas transmission is sort of not discussed, and then impact is also part of the acquisition on the stayer’s side. While on the one hand this model has some benefits (migrants/stayers, both two steps) – it also creates an artificial binary here between migrants and stayers, especially when most cases discussed are perhaps circular or return migrants, and many stayers will have visited or even migrated for periods themselves at some point. So, here it seems there might be scope to develop these models further in future work.
- The focus of the dissertation was both well-defined, but also in the end also quite expansive. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the dissertation’s proposed term ‘social deceleration’ was one that was not discussed that much, overall, and thus appears to leave scope for further refinement as well as empirical investigation, explicitly. When, and under which circumstances, can we find evidence of ‘social deceleration’ as explicitly tied to rejecting/non-acquisition of social remittances?

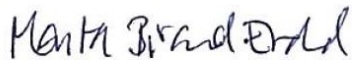
Specific questions

- You state very clearly on p.69 that ‘I focus mainly on seasonal and return migrants at different stages of the family life cycle’ – how does this (or does it not quite) square with the focus also on migrants with longer migration durations (both the early 20th century cases, and some of the Culture diffusion project participants)?
- To what extent would you say that you can say something about social remittances in these migration processes and related environments, and to what extent is it limited by what the original authors chose to include (or not include?) (p. 117)
- ‘the process of social remitting had already started...’ (p. 118): In what sense? So, social remitting as the process by which migrants undergo change, which may or may not lead to anything more? And which after all is not the same as communities of origin undergoing any change, necessarily, depending on i) whether migrants internalize anything; ii) whether migrants chose to try to share this; iii) if they chose to share anything – how they do so; iv) how this is then received by non-migrants; v) and plays into ongoing processes of social change or stagnation locally. Or, how would you see this?
- You clearly define transnational social field as your preferred term, yet you also refer to transnational social space on numerous occasions (e.g., p. 84); is there a reason why?
- The challenge of isolating migration effects from other effects, when studying migration and change has been highlighted, not least in the context of the migration-development nexus, e.g. Hein de Haas (2010) on the endogeneity-problem, whereby of course migration is part of social change, so how do we account for when the migration-effect is part of the input and/or the

output of social change? I was curious as to whether you've considered engaging more with work on migration and development, which whilst primarily not focusing on CEE countries, still may have insights worthy of consideration, especially as regards long term views (e.g. p. 252).

Conclusion

This Doctoral Dissertation more than meets with requirements for a PhD Dissertation, conceptually and analytically, empirically and methodologically. It is an impressive piece of work, comprising individual effort, but also building on existing data, offering fresh secondary analysis of such sources. Its insights offer opportunities for conceptual and methodological advances both in relation to the study of migration in Poland and the broader field of migration studies, and especially in the fields connecting temporal and family foci in transnational social fields, grappling with how migration intertwines with social change.



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