

Population Review

Volume 44, Number 2, 2005

Type: Book Review pp. 81-85

The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico

Author: Jeffrey Cohen

Publisher: University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, USA (2004)

Pages: 195

ISBN: 0 -292-70592-1

Reviewer: Enrico Marcelli, Ph.D.

Affiliation: Robert Wood Johnson Visiting Scholar, Department of Society, Human Development and Health, Harvard University; Assistant Professor of Economics and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Corresponding author/address: (emarcell@hsph.harvard.edu)

This book is a serious effort to fill a gap in the Mexico-U.S. migration literature concerning how various local contextual factors (e.g., family expectations and structure, community obligations and development) and several migration outcomes (e.g., whether and where to migrate, remittance behavior and impacts) affect one another. Drawing on data collected from 590 households in twelve ethnically diverse and indigenous migrant-sending communities located in Oaxaca's central valleys from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, the author and his collaborators amass an impressive amount of detailed information from random household surveys, interviews with community leaders, and oral histories with key informants. In short, this study skillfully integrates anthropological and demographic methods in a way which offers a deeper understanding of how migration effects and is affected by familial and community context than is typically found in the immigration literature. It should be read especially by those scholars whose work concentrates mainly on Mexican immigrants residing in the United States.

The conceptual foundation of the book is a three-pronged cultural model of migration that is contrasted with migration as individual psychological addiction (or dependency) and with migration as aggregate economic growth (or development) at the regional or national level. Specifically, and as outlined in the book's introduction, the decision to migrate is rooted in the household and it is the household rather than the individual migrant that is the center of analytical attention. It is also the household rather than the individual that has broader communal obligations and expectations, thus both the household and community directly influence and are influenced by whether an individual migrates, a migrant's geographic destination, and a migrant's remitting behavior. Such a household-based approach conforms nicely to developments in the demographic and sociological literatures on immigration to the United States since Massey and colleagues' pioneering theoretical and empirical studies (Massey et al. 1993, 1994).

However, neither the act of migrating nor of remitting is the main variable under investigation here. Or is it? The reader, or at least this one, is unsure. The author spends a considerable amount of space stressing the point that to focus on the individual as decision-maker "misrepresents the ways in which households and communities inform how migrants define their social world" (p.23). Thus, it is reported that fewer than 10% of migrant households indicated having had a missing or uninvolved migrant when interviewed (p. 32), and "rather than focusing on why a

migrant leaves . . . [the] focus here [is] on the organization of the migrant household” (p. 34). Infact, the focus is on why a migrant leaves (as is eventually stated on page 100) and it is on how differences between migrant (chapter 4) and non-migrant (chapter 5) households may influence this. In any event, the uncertainty of what is really being investigated is compounded by conflicting statements such as “decisions to migrate and to use remittances are made by households, but outcomes are still determined by the actions of individuals” (p. 34); “households are able to migrate, seek wage labor in Oaxaca City, and use their earnings to pursue their own and their household’s desires” (p. 48); and “nevertheless, a migrant – that is, an individual – makes the final decision” to stay or leave (p. 48). In short, it is unclear whether the author ultimately seeks to understand what explains migrant and remitting behavior or how these impact households (or families) of local central valley communities in Oaxaca.

Despite this analytical distraction and several citation (Marcelli and Cornelius 2001) and referencing errors (Massey et al. 1987) in the first two chapters (Introduction and Chapter 1), there is much to recommend their reading. First, the ceremonial claim that traditional push-pull models are insufficient for understanding migration outcomes is explained rather than simply asserted. Both geography and tradition are necessary non-essentialist components of any model attempting to explain variation in where migrants choose to go and in how much they remit. Second, situating past and potential migrants within families or households and their communities offers a richer analytical perspective likely to provide a more accurate explanation of variance in migration and remitting outcomes. In some of our work on Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County, for instance, we estimate that having migrated from an urban area in Mexico reduced the probability (and among remitters the amount) that a migrant remitted, even after controlling for neighborhood effects in the U.S.A. and the usual individual-level characteristics (Marcelli and Lowell 2005). Cohen carefully details various community-level institutions that are very likely to influence migration and remitting decisions but to date have received scant attention in immigration research. For instance, many infrastructural improvements are paid for through *cooperación* (household communal fees) or what the state terms *usos y costumbres* (“use and customs” or “traditional practices”), and there are several non-pecuniary reciprocal activities in which local residents are obligated (*tequio* or communal labor) or expected (*cargo* or committee service) to participate. Should they not be able to do so, residents may pay to have someone else take their place – an option that remittances make more likely.

Chapter two (the third chapter) provides a broad historical account of migration from Oaxaca to destinations within Mexico and to the United States, but it does more than this. In addition to placing the beginning of contemporary Oaxaca-U.S. migration in the 1930s, it also distinguishes internal from international migration, and discusses local commuting or circuit moves for employment purposes and non-movers. It is not until 1975, for instance, that Cohen’s data show international overtaking internal migration, and not until the 1990s that the former rises rapidly. Thus, it may be argued, relatively large-scale migration from Oaxaca to the United States is a fairly recent development. Cohen also argues that earlier migrants (say from before World War II) generally held a positive view of their migration experience, whereas the opposite is the case with more recent migrants. Both of these conclusions (regarding internal versus international migration trends and migrants’ relative satisfaction with their migration experiences) cannot, of course, be more than suggestive given that cross-sectional data are being used to draw implications about trends and cohort-specific perceptions. They are nonetheless interesting and provocative. Are more recent migrants really less satisfied with their migration experiences or is it the case that older migrants tend to recall relatively positive past experiences more often? What would trends in internal and international migration reported in Figure 2.1 (p. 56) look like were we to age-standardize the data?

In light of these questions and despite a brief but misleading history of Mexico-U.S. migration, this third chapter also offers important information often overlooked in the immigration literature.

Concerning the brief immigration history provided, it is not the case that Mexican migration to the United States began when Mexicans sought refuge from fighting in the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1921 (p. 45). Rather, the earliest known migration flow is from Sonora to northern California following Mexico's defeat by the United States and the discovery of gold in 1848 (Standart 1996). Commencement (1942) and termination (1964 not 1966) of the second bracero program (García y Griego 1996) seem reasonable years for demarcating the second and third phases of Mexico-U.S. migration, but it should be noted that there are contending or at least more nuanced views (Heer 1996).

More importantly, these three migration phases anchor Cohen's discussion of Oaxacan migration historically and bring us chronologically to a thoughtful consideration of factors influencing the post-1970s rise of Oaxacan central valley migration. Specifically, transportation technology improvements, increasing family size and population density, and social networks and ethnicity/language help explain inter-community variation in whether local residents are more likely to commute, migrate within Mexico, or immigrate to the United States.

The fourth chapter (numbered three) presents a picture of the typical central valley Oaxacan migrant, and discusses how migrants pay for their trips, what kinds of jobs they do, where they migrate, and offers a provocative hypothesis which I do not think has been formally tested. The untested hypothesis is this – holding all else constant, a Mexican from rural Oaxaca with an indigenous identity is more likely to be discriminated against by other Oaxacans and therefore has a higher probability of migrating to the United States. Future work should thus estimate whether local prejudice in Mexico stimulates U.S.-bound migration. Finally, a logistic regression model of migration is presented and it is reported that household size, having friends or relatives with migration experience, and household wealth augment the probability of migration. However, because household size is not statistically significant and the coefficient on the migrant network variable is negative in Table 3.6 (p. 97) it is uncertain what these results actually reveal.

The fifth chapter (Four) focuses on remittances and community differences, and how household use remitted funds. Cohen sets the stage for this chapter by appealing to the migration as dependency/divisive versus development/growth debate, and reports that remittance use reflects reported intentions fairly well. That is, both stated reasons for migration as well as actual use of remittances suggest that covering daily cost-of-living expenses, housing repair or improvement, and education are important. Two other interesting findings are worth noting. First, although average income among migrant and nonmigrant households was quite similar, household expenses were very different. Second, neither migration nor remittances appear to reduce participation in community development activities by Oaxacan residents significantly. Together these findings are used to draw the conclusion that migration from Oaxaca is more consistent with a dependency rather than a development model. Again, it is difficult to judge how accurate this conclusion is from data obtained from one point in time, and any discussion of how remittances spent on daily needs may increase local demand for goods and services and thus serve to stimulate economic development (Massey and Parrado 1994) is conspicuously missing.

The sixth chapter (Five) switches gears and considers “nonmigrant” households. Here we learn that about 40 percent of sampled households did not include a migrant – international or domestic – and that social networks, household socioeconomic status, and community resources influence the decision not to migrate. Unlike earlier chapters, this one provides more detailed stories of individual Oaxacan residents and their families, and the impact of household and community constraint. One finding deserving of comment is that little evidence of transnationalism is found (p. 127). This, it may reasonably be argued, is a byproduct of the sampling methodology. Focusing attention solely on Oaxacan households will necessarily exclude a large proportion of those Oaxacan migrants who reside in the United States, and who are more likely to engage in transnational behaviors. Research on the U.S. side of the border has the opposite bias, however, and statements regarding transnationalism ought to be tempered by such information.

The basic message of the final chapter (Conclusion) is threefold. First, it is repeated that migration from Oaxaca is influenced by household and community concerns and values, and future work should focus at the community level. In fact, if the topic is remittances (one of Cohen's variables of interest), most research has studied factors influencing how much is sent and the impact in receiving communities and has ignored factors influencing what mechanisms are used to send remittances and the effects of remitting in remitting-sending communities where immigrants reside. In any event, data from both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving communities would be optimal if one wishes to understand how the demographic profile of migrants is changing (p. 147). Second, it is argued that migration is cultural, that is, rooted in everyday experience rather than prompted by some exogenous force. And it is argued that migration is a choice made by households – a conclusion resting somewhat uneasily with the notion of migration as dependency. Lastly, the author contends that to understand migration we must begin by observing sending communities, a task inherently appropriate to anthropology.

The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico is both fun to read and challenges several assumptions permeating the immigration literature. The view of immigrants as Norteños – individualist automatons seeking economic advancement – may distort our perception of actual migrant behavior from certain areas of Mexico. Households and communities may have a stronger influence on migration decisions than often admitted or recognized. Transnationalism may be in vogue yet rare – at least for Oaxacans from the central valleys. Migration may not reduce household commitment to community concerns. All of these questions emerge from a careful consideration of data collected in one sending area of Mexico. Future work investigating these questions should seek answers from other sending communities, and when possible, include data from migrant destinations both within Mexico and the United States.

References

García y Griego, M. 1996. "The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964." Pp. 45-85 in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, edited by D.G. Gutiérrez. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc.

Heer, D.M. 1996. *Immigration in America's Future: Social Science Findings and the Policy Debate*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Marcelli, E.A. and W.A. Cornelius. 2001. "The Changing Profile of Mexican Migrants to the United States: New Evidence from Southern California." *Latin America Research Review* 36(3):105-131.

Marcelli, E.A. and B.L. Lowell. 2005. "Transnational Twist: Pecuniary Remittances and Socioeconomic Integration among Authorized and Unauthorized Mexican Immigrants in Los Angeles County." *International Migration Review* 39(1):69-102.

Massey, D.S., R. Alarcón, J. Durand, and H. González. 1987. *Return to Aztlan: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Massey, D.S., J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino, and J.E. Taylor. 1993. "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal." *Population and Development Review* 19(3):431-466.

—. 1994. "An Evaluation of International Migration Theory: The North American Case." *Population and Development Review* 20(4):699-751. Massey, D.S. and E. Parrado. 1994.

"Migradollars: The Remittances and Savings of Mexican Migrants to the USA." *Population Research and Policy Review* 13:3-30.

Standart, S.M.C. 1996. "The Sonoran Migration to California, 1848-1856: A Study of Prejudice." Pp. 3-21 in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, edited by D.G. Gutiérrez. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc.