I am including the following short essay on globalization and transnationalism as a resource because I believe that these are important concepts to delineate and understand in conversations about the integration of a global health care work force. The piece below is an abridged part of a longer paper that is forthcoming as an AARP publication on Diversity and Aging.

**Globalization and Transnationalism**

by

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**Introduction**

As we look toward the mid twenty-first century, demographers forecast dramatic increases in cultural diversity in the general population of the United States. Globalization, transnationalism and immigration have had an impact on both the diversity of our patient populations and on those who provide care for them. Countries of the Global North increasingly rely on the Global South for health care workers to supplement their workforce shortages. Health care workers, including nurses, aides, and domestic caregivers and physicians have immigrated in large numbers to meet the labor shortage in the United States. The forces of globalization, immigration, and transnationalism will contribute to and shape this diversity. In this short piece, I will speak to what I mean by globalization and transnationalism. But before I do so, I want to share something about myself which informs my writing.

My thinking about globalization, transnationalism, and immigration are informed by my research as well as personal experiences. I am a sociologist who studies immigration, gender, globalization, and more recently, health care. My research is best reflected in two of my publications: 1) *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* - a book I co-wrote about studying globalization using ethnographic methods (Burawoy et al, 2000) and 2) *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration* - about the impact of transnational ties on the reproduction and transformation of gender and class
relations among Indian immigrant nurses, their families, and communities in the United States (George, 2005).

I am particularly pleased to write about this topic because I am an immigrant. I came from India to the United States at the age of 12 and I am what they call a “1.5er” in the immigration literature: born in India, but immigrated to the United States at a relatively early age, technically neither part of the first or second generation. My family’s and my first hand experiences of immigration and the formation of transnational ties have profoundly shaped my perspectives.

**Globalization and Transnationalism**

Globalization is a complex phenomenon which includes increased human interconnectedness facilitated by new information technologies and huge volumes of trade, capital, people, and cultures flowing across national borders and an increasingly integrated global economy. Globalization can be experienced as structural forces impinging on our daily lives, such as the creation of new spaces and connectivity between locales, and also as ideological resources (Burawoy et al, 2000).

Transnationalism is a term used in different ways, but I will limit it to the way that it is used in immigration studies as a specific form of globalization. Transnationalism refers to “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al, 1994). Many immigrants are living in what are called “transnational social fields” through which they keep constant contact with their countries of origin (Levitt, 2001).

What does transnationalism mean for health care workers in immigrant communities? Whereas the dominant paradigm for the settlement process of immigrants includes an expectation of assimilation – immigrants uprooting themselves from their homeland and blending into the American melting pot -- what we see with transnational practices is that people are increasingly part of both countries of origin and settlement. While immigrants adopt some American values, they reject others and do so at different rates (Gans, 1979). They are integrated to varying degrees and in varying segments of society in the United States and they find different ways to stay connected to their countries of origin (Alba, 1997).

It is valid to ask if this is really different from what immigrant communities experienced before the “invention of the Internet.” It is clear that immigrants from a previous era kept in
touch not only through letters, but also by involvement in the political struggles of their countries of origin. However, the frequency, the intensity, and the velocity of communications and connections have changed dramatically (Vertovec, 2004). Thus immigrants today are able to maintain more regular and sustained ties relative to the archetypal European immigrant of the early 1900s.

These ties facilitate attractive opportunities for economic investments, political and civic participation, as well as opportunities to gain status, give back to their communities, and provide mutual functional support to family and kin. I will address each of these examples of transnational connections in turn.

Many migrants send large sums of money to their families, churches, towns, and other institutions in their countries of origin. These remittances are the most visible evidence and measuring stick of the ties that connect migrants with their societies of origin (Guranizo, 2003). The International Monetary Fund reports an increase in global remittances up to $105 billion in 1999 compared to $2 billion in 1970 (Van Doorn, 2001). Sixty percent of the $105 billion is sent to developing countries and such remittances have become a larger source of income than international development assistance in most countries (Gammeltoft, 2002).

As a result, the governments of these states are reaching out to expatriates with different forms of tax incentives or investment opportunities and political rights-based incentives to participate in their countries of origin. For example, dual citizenship, legislative representation, and other flexible forms of political participatory opportunities that do not require residence are being extended even to the second generation (Levitt, 2001). The extension of electoral participation to the non-resident citizen is reflected in the 2000 campaign statement of Mexican presidential candidate Vicente Fox while canvassing votes in California. Fox said that he would be the first president “to govern for 118 million Mexicans,” including 100 million in Mexico and 18 million living outside the country (Rogers, 2000).

In addition to participation in the electoral system, migrants are also active in hometown associations, religious organizations, and other regional organizations that provide support in areas such as charitable work, improvement of educational institutions, and health-care facilities in the migrants’ villages, churches, and schools. My research shows that their involvement in the transnational church was particularly important to the minority immigrant Indian men I studied (George, 2005). This was not only because they had few opportunities for civic participation in
the wider American society, but also because their contributions were highly valued in their communities of origin.

Finally, the family arena may be the most important factor related to transnational ties. Because the immigrant is often the embodiment of an entire family’s dreams of getting someone “to the other side,” the family left behind may have expectations for financial support and immigration sponsorship (George, 2005). Consequently, many immigrants form transnational households with portions of their families in the sending countries. The immigrant may depend on family members in their country of origin for the care and socialization of children, finding them appropriate marriage partners, or in the care of older parents as they send financial remittances to support such efforts.

The quantity and strength of transnational ties depend on factors such as the context of immigration, the geographic proximity of the country of origin, legislative frameworks regarding movement and status, and the infrastructure established in the respective immigrant communities to facilitate these ties, such as the media, travel, and other transnational services that allow even the less affluent members to engage in transnational practices (Lessinger 1992, 1995). Transnational practices are often formed and facilitated at the communal level and become much more than individuals maintaining ties. Rather, transnational practices link immigrants to a “community of meaning,” a community based on shared histories and values that spans both populations. In the face of dynamic changes brought about by immigration and settlement, the transnational community of meaning becomes the point of reference for most immigrants where they gauge the extent of their progress and make status claims that can be understood by peers (George, 2005; Goldring, 1998).

It is important to note that not all immigrants develop transnational practices and when they do, it may be only in certain spheres, depending on circumstances. These transnational links affect people differently if they are actually traveling between sites, if they stay in one site but engage people and resources in their countries of origin, or if they never moved. Regardless, research shows that their lives are affected by the transnational practices of others in their communities (Mahler, 1998; Levitt, 2001).

Are transnational ties so powerful that they are a whole new way of reproducing communities and cultures? In other words, will such transnational ties be maintained by the second and future generations? While it is difficult to give definitive answers to these questions,
my research on Indian immigrants suggests important possibilities for the future of transnationalism, both in the near and distant futures. In the short term, access to resources may be what keeps the immigrant and second generations tied to the home country. In the long term, an expanded mix of elements may determine the level of dependence that future generations will place on transnational ties for a source of identity and support. These elements include the level of racism and anti-immigrant tendencies in the host society coupled with the level of support from the sending state, and the strength of immigrant institutions and practices such as transnational arranged marriage (George, 2005).

Please read my book “When Women Come First” to learn more about these and other topics related to Gender, immigration, globalization and transnationalism.

References


Rogers, A. “Mexico’s historic elections spill over into the USA.” *Traces*, 10. 2000. Available from: [www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/traces/issues10.htm](http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/traces/issues10.htm)
