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Social Remittances

Michele Tuccio¹ and Jackline Wahba²

Abstract

This article reviews the economic literature on social remittances. Unlike financial remittances, which are flows of cash or goods sent by migrants to their origin countries, social remittances refer to economic, social, political attitudes, behaviours and norms that are transmitted through migration. Although economists are newcomers to this literature, they have contributed to advancing knowledge on the causal effects of migration on social remittances. The evidence reviewed in this article unanimously points at the important role played by international migration in the transfer of norms. However, host countries matter greatly in explaining the types of attitudes and knowledge that are transferred back to countries of origin. Overall, there are still clear gaps in our understanding of social remittances that future research would need to address to enable us to appreciate better the mechanisms through which norms are transferred.

Keywords: Remittances, international migration, norms, knowledge, selectivity, endogeneity.

JEL Classification: D72, F22, J10, O15.

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1. Introduction

International migration has attracted a lot of public interest over the last few years. Although migration is as old as humankind, and despite the increasing concerns about migration and its implications, only 3% of the world population are international migrants (The World Bank, 2018). People move in search of better jobs and lives, nicer weather, safer communities, greater amenities. The implications of human mobility go well beyond the individual improvements of the migrants: migration bears indeed substantial impacts also on left-behind families, countries of origin and destinations (Tuccio, 2016).

One of the earliest recognized consequences of international migration has been the associated financial flows, referred to as financial or monetary remittances, sent back to countries of origin. Statistics on monetary remittance flows show the substantial importance and significance of those transfers. In 2018, financial remittances flows amounted to \$683 billion, according to the World Bank (2019), which is much more than overseas assistance development, and almost equal in size to foreign direct investment (FDI).

Not surprisingly, a large strand of the literature has concentrated on understanding the drivers and consequences of financial remittances both at the micro and macro level, as summarized for example by Rapoport and Docquier (2006). For instance, the seminal paper by Adams and Page (2005) explores the effects of financial remittances on poverty levels, whereas Giuliano and Ruiz-Arranz (2009) demonstrate the pro-growth nature of remittances, especially in countries where financial systems are weak and remittances can be a substitute to overcome liquidity constraints. Similar results are established by Aggarwal et al. (2011), who study trends in 109 countries between 1975 and 2007, and also find a positive relationship between remittances and financial sector development.

Although the scholarly study of financial remittances has received a great deal of attention in recent years, an emerging strand of the economic literature is turning to analyse the potential externalities that international migration might have on social and political outcomes in sending areas. This has been referred to as “social remittances” where migrants living abroad and returnees transfer new ideas and norms to their household members and peers back home, thereby modifying the social institutions and norms of the origin communities and countries. In other words, while in the case of financial remittances migrants send back money, with social remittances they transmit new ideas and norms. In the words of Levitt (1998), social remittances are “the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending country communities”. Migrants transfer new ideas and knowledge to their communities of origin. Exchanges take place as migrants visit or return to live in their home countries, as non-migrants meet migrants overseas, or through simple communication (in this sense, the spread of ICT technologies in the recent years have greatly facilitated international communication). As such, migrants convey new behaviours, attitudes and perspectives which shift the social norms of their home communities.

The economic literature has turned its attention to social remittances only after the pioneering contribution of Spielberg (2009) on democracy and foreign education. Spilimbergo (2009) examines whether the number of students abroad improves democracy at home. Using dynamic panel regressions with data from 183 countries over the period 1960 to 2005, he finds robust results that the lagged total number of foreign-educated individuals has no effect on democracy at home, but conversely the quality of the democracy in destination countries has a strong and significant impact on domestic democracy, rising with the number of students abroad. After this seminal article, a novel and lively branch of the economics of migration thrived. The

underlying conceptual idea of these new studies is that migration can affect opinions and behaviour of individuals through two channels: the transmission of ideas by migrants and/or the contact with migrants who have changed. However it is not always possible to disentangle those two mechanisms.

The aim of this review is to focus on the economics literature related to social remittances and provide an economic perspective on this important topic. To facilitate the reader, the numerous contributions on this topic will be grouped under three main sections: economic, social and political norms. Each section will in turn be distinguished in macro and micro studies according to their country coverage. Avenues for future research conclude the article.

2. Measuring Social Remittances and Their Impact

Financial remittances represent a widely evident and tangible gain to countries of origin. Their estimates are produced both globally and bilaterally and are provided by the World Bank based on national balance of payment statistics collected by central banks and compiled by the IMF. In contrast, social remittances are more difficult to quantify. In fact, measuring social remittances is complex and involves capturing behavioural changes related to economic, social or political outcomes. Since they encompass behaviours and norms, data on social remittances are quite varied. Some studies rely on individual or household survey data while others involve field experiments. More importantly, unlike financial flows, there is not a single measure of political or social norms – i.e. each study uses its own measure. Hence, comparing the same outcome across studies is not feasible.

Although the interest in social remittances goes back to Levitt (1998)'s seminal work and there has been a sizeable literature by other social scientists on the subject, economists have only started to focus on this issue since Spilimbergo (2009)'s work. In particular, economists have been interested in studying the causal effects of migration on social remittances. Their efforts have been focused on dealing with several empirical challenges that were not the core of other social scientists' work. In order to test the causal impact of migration on social remittances, economists are interested in identifying the effects of migration on changing norms but ensuring that individuals did not migrate because of a desire to change norms in first place, that is reverse causality or endogeneity of migration and social remittances do not bias the estimated results. In essence, the economics literature is interested in disentangling the potential reverse causality between the observed outcome – such as adoption of a new norm – and the migration decision.

Indeed, the ideal thought experiment for economists is one where they observe individuals affected by migration (migrant, or the left behind) before and after migration, compare them to someone who has not been exposed to migration, and know that the migrants did not move because they wanted to change their norms but rather because of other unrelated factors (the selectivity problem). Thus, a number of economics studies attempt to deal with both those two empirical challenges: the endogeneity and selectivity problems. Of course, if studies are focusing on returnees, then they also need to address not only the selectivity of emigration but also that of return migration. Moreover, a third layer of selectivity is related to the choice of country of destination. In essence, who migrates, where they migrate and who returns are three potential selections that need to be addressed when disentangling the causal effect of migration on any outcome. Hence dealing with selectivity is a major empirical challenge in the economics literature, as identifying the causal effects of migration needs to control for the non-randomness

of who migrates, who returns and their choice of destination in order to attribute the adoption of new norms to the migration experience rather than to the unobserved characteristics of the migrant.

Furthermore, another important issue is that many studies attempt to measure a change in norms and might carefully attempt to deal with those two empirical challenges but still are not always able to capture the link between the new norms and the host country beyond speculative or suggestive evidence, in particular in micro studies. In an ideal situation, we would like to capture the migrant before and after migration and measure their norms in the origin and host countries as well as the norms of the origin and host countries at the same time.

Although the economics literature has advanced knowledge on the impact of social remittances, there are still notable gaps in terms of nailing down the exact channel through which norms are transferred as well as capturing all the various aspects of social remittances.

3. Economic knowledge & norms

3.1 Macro Studies

A few papers focus on the role of international migration in shaping economic knowledge. Exposure to different workplace practices and technologies while abroad affects migrants' perspective towards employment and productivity. Thanks to such exposure, migrants become vectors of economic knowledge, and transfer what they have learned abroad to their home communities, thereby becoming the basis of the diffusion of new innovations from technologically leading regions to poorer nations. Yet, although this idea of technology diffusion through cross-border migration has been extensively scrutinized by economists, relatively few are the studies that have directly examined the transfer of economic knowledge and norms from host to origin countries as "social remittances".

In a cross-country perspective, Andersen and Dalsgaard (2011) study whether countries more exposed to foreign influence, through temporary in- and outflows of travellers, can obtain useful technologies, ideas, and organisational strategies from abroad. The rationale behind this is that interactions between people from different countries facilitate the international diffusion of ideas. To show such link, a gravity equation for bilateral travel flows is estimated using data from the World Tourism Organization. Fitted aggregate travel shares, derived from the gravity equation, are used as an instrument for the aggregate travel. The resulting empirical analysis suggests that cross-border movement of people is an important vehicle for knowledge diffusion, although a direct causal relationship is not estimated.

A recent paper by Valette (2018) indirectly looks at whether international migrants contribute to increasing technological advances in developing countries by inducing a transfer of productive knowledge from developed countries back to migrants' home countries. Using economic complexity as a proxy for export sophistication and addressing endogeneity issues using the System GMM estimator, the paper finds that technological transfers are more likely to occur when the intensity of emigration is high and when technology levels in destination countries are high, thereby suggesting that productive knowledge is indeed transferred by migrants from receiving to sending countries.

In a similar vein, Bahar and Rapoport (2018) use international bilateral migration and trade data for over 100 countries for the period 1990-2010 to study whether international migration shapes the international diffusion of knowledge. Their methodology makes use of the changes

in countries' export baskets, and assumes that, after controlling for product-specific global demand, firms in a country will be able to export a good only after they have become productive enough to compete in global markets. Their results suggest that the likelihood for a country to experience such changes in its export basket is positively correlated with the number of emigrants going to countries that are experts in producing that specific type of goods. More specifically, a 10% increase in the stock of emigrants to a country exporter of a given product is, on average, associated with a 1.6% increase in the likelihood that the sending country will export that same product from scratch in the following ten years.

3.2 Micro Studies

While macro studies on the transfer of economic knowledge through international migration are relatively abundant, convincingly identifying causal relationships at micro level reveals much harder. The seminal paper by Kerr (2008) is among the first attempts to examine the ties between migrants' research and entrepreneurial communities and their home countries. In particular, the study looks at migrant researchers in the United States – identified through an ethnic-name database and individual patent records – and their role in technology transfers back home. Reverse causality issues arise, since human capital developments at origin could lead to both higher output growth and more researchers emigrating to the United States. To address these concerns, the authors rely on exogenous changes in the immigration quotas existing in the United States. The estimates suggest that the elasticity of manufacturing output in foreign countries with respect to scientific integration with the United States is positive and is around 0.1–0.3.

Using again patent citation data, associated this time with inventions from India, Agrawal et al. (2011) introduce the concept of Knowledge Flow Production Function (KFPPF). The KFPPF gives the probability of any domestic innovator receiving knowledge from any other innovator based on structural aspects of their relationship. Their interest is in the connections between innovators whether they are in the same domestic economy, share a diaspora connection (co-ethnic), or are unconnected by location or nationality. Their results point at a co-ethnic ties premium, easing knowledge flow among inventors of same origin back to the migrants' source country.

Finally, Bahar et al. (2019) is among the few studies exploiting a natural experiment to assess the migration-induced transfer of productive knowledge. In the early 1990s, over 600,000 Yugoslavians escaped to Germany to flee war, mostly under temporary protection status which was revoked after the Dayton peace agreements of 1995, pushing most of these Yugoslavians to return to their homes. The study looks at the massive return migration flows of thousands of individuals – with experience in the German labour market – into the former Yugoslavia, to study sector-specific productivity shifts (proxied by export performance). In order to address endogeneity issues and self-selection, the number of returning workers per industry is instrumented with their expected number given a spatial dispersal policy that exogenously allocated asylum seekers across Germany upon arrival. Their findings show that products with a one percent increase in return migration experienced an increase in exports to the rest of the world of 0.08 to 0.24 percent between the pre and post-war periods. The results are stronger in knowledge-intensive industries and for analytical and managerial occupations.

4. Social norms

4.1 Macro Studies

A growing economic literature has focused on investigating the causal impact of migration on various social norms. Beine et al. (2013) is among the first economic analysis of social remittances. Their study draws from previous sociological work showing that migrants' fertility tends to converge to the one of the destination country where they lived to hypothesize that migrants might also serve as channels for the transmissions of such fertility norms to their home communities. In particular, the authors argue that the transfer of fertility norms can operate through multiple channels: (1) direct communication between migrants and left-behind peers and families; (2) greater general interest of the left-behind on destination countries' practices; (3) media attention on the lifestyle of return migrants; (4) increased trade between origin and destination due to diaspora links, which in turn might foster norm transmission; (5) word-of-mouth.

In addition to fertility choices, economic studies have also looked at how international migration might act as a tool to encourage gender equality across the globe. For instance, Lodigiani and Salomone (2015) examine the influence of mobility on the parliamentary participation of women in the origin countries. The rationale is that migrants can be vehicles of foreign norms, reshaping opinions and practices, and generating new narratives about womanhood in sending communities. In particular, migrants foster the adoption of more equal practices when they become aware of the fact that women's political participation at home and its implications on governance are worse than those experienced at destination. The study tackles endogeneity and reflection biases with GMM estimations and address selection through a two-step Heckman estimation. Results suggest that migration to destinations with a greater share of women's parliamentary seats significantly increased female political voice in sending countries during the period 1960-2000.

Ferrant and Tuccio (2015) expand the analysis beyond female political participations, focusing on a wider proxy of discriminatory social norms in developing countries, the Social Institutions and Gender Index of the OECD Development Centre. Aiming at testing whether migration reinforces gender discrimination or reduces it depending on the type of social norms in place at destination, the study finds that – while larger shares of migrants towards less discriminatory countries are associated to greater gender equality back home – migration towards high discriminatory countries has the opposite effect. In addition, estimates suggest that both men and women are agent of change, but the impact of female migration is considerably larger.

4.2 Micro Studies

Micro studies on the migration-induced transfer of social norms are very sparse (Tuccio, 2016). Bertoli and Marchetta (2015) focus also on fertility decisions but with a micro perspective on Egypt. Their hypothesis is that couples with the husband being a returnee from a high-fertility destination tend to have more children than non-migrants. To address the non-random selection into migration, a two-stage residual inclusion strategy (2SRI) is adopted, where international migration is instrumented by historical real oil price. This variable, in fact, can have a substantial influence on the scale of migration towards oil-producing countries that adopt employer-driven immigration systems responding to fluctuations in local economic conditions. The results of the analysis confirm the initial hypothesis: while endowed with unobservable characteristics that would have led them to have fewer children had they not migrated, returnees tend to have a similar number of children to the number prevailing at destination.

Using household and census data from Mali in 2009, Diabate and Mésple-Somps (2019) test whether girls in villages with higher concentrations of return migrants are less vulnerable to female genital mutilation. Tackling the endogeneity bias of migration with an instrumental variable approach, the study finds that girls in communities with more returnees are less likely to be circumcised than their counterparts in villages with no return migrants. Results seem to be driven by return migrants from Cote d'Ivoire, whereas returnees from other destinations (including Western countries) do not have significant effect.

Tuccio and Wahba (2018) exploit a unique labour force survey in Jordan to show that women who have a return migrant in the household bear different gender norms and behaviors than non-migrant individuals, since migrants have been exposed to different practices and attitudes towards women while living abroad. Three distinctive features of the dataset at hand makes the analysis possible: (i) the survey contains retrospective questions on labour and residence mobility allowing the identification of returnees; (ii) it also provides information on current migrants, permitting to control for selection into emigration; (iii) rather remarkably for a labour market survey, it includes detailed subjective information on the role of women, freedom of mobility and decision-making power of women. To estimate the relationship between return migration and attitudes towards women causally, the authors notably control for both selection into emigration and selection into return migration when comparing returnee and non-migrant households, since migrants and return migrants are both self-selected based on unobservable characteristics. The analysis finds that return migrants transfer indeed different gender norms, but overall the effect is negative, with the transfer of discriminatory norms from destination countries with highly conservative gender roles that drives the main findings.

A very recent working paper by Rahman (2019) takes a different spin on the migration-induced transfer of social norms by investigating whether international migration affects religiosity and religious preferences in the home country. In particular, the study estimates the causal impact of a household from Bangladesh sending a migrant abroad on the migrant household's likelihood of sending a child to an Islamic school. Using a neighbourhood-level concentration of migrant households as an instrument, the author finds that the migration of a household member from Bangladesh to a Muslim-majority country increases the chances that a male child of that household is sent to a religious school. Importantly, financial remittances and learning channel effects are carefully ruled out as potential mechanisms, while the increase in religiosity through social remittances remains the most plausible mechanism of the increase in religious schooling.

5. Political norms

5.1 Macro Studies

Another focus of the economic literature on migration has been on establishing causal relationship between international migration and political behavior. Several studies use cross-country data to study migration-induced transfer of political norms. For example, Beine and Sekkat (2013) examine whether international migration affect the quality of institutions in the home country. They consider four measures of institutional quality: Voice and accountability, Government effectiveness, Regulatory quality and Control of corruption. They find that international migration, and in particular skilled migration, affects institutions, in particular in developing countries. Their results suggest that high skilled emigration leads to the transfer of norms related to the quality of institutions from the host to the home country.

Similarly, Docquier et al. (2016) study the effect of emigration on institutional quality and democracy. They use cross-sectional and panel estimation for a large set of developing countries and consider different international indicators of democracy (such as the Freedom House's indices) and address the endogeneity issue using different complementary IV strategies. The findings suggest that openness to emigration has a positive impact on democracy in origin countries.

On the other hand, Mercier (2016) adds to this literature by using original data on the political leaders of developing countries between the 1960–2004 and finds positive and robust correlation between leaders who studied abroad and the increase in the quality of political institutions, in particular the level of democracy in initially autocratic settings. Mercier (2016) argues that two mechanisms could be driving that correlation namely: a “preference shock” experienced by future leaders while studying abroad, which is in line with transfer of political norms triggered by migration, and the effect of the quality of foreign education. However, the paper doesn't attempt to disentangle those two potential channels.

5.2 Micro Studies

Several studies have used micro level data to investigate the transfer of political norms due to migration. One of the early works by Batista and Vicente (2011) relied on innovative voting experiment to capture the impact of international migration on the demand for better governance in Cape Verde. They were able to differentiate between the impact of current and return migrants from OECD and non-OECD countries as well as address the endogeneity problem. They find that international emigration positively affects demand for improved political accountability, with stronger effects for migrants' countries with better governance and for return migrants than for current migrants. In a more recent work, Batista, Seither and Vincente (2019) use detailed data from Mozambique to study the effects of migrant networks on political participation and electoral knowledge. They find that migrant networks have a positive and significant impact on political participation even after controlling for self-selection into migration as well as endogenous network formation.

A number of papers examined the impact of migration on actual political behaviour measured by electoral participation and election outcomes. For example, Pfütze (2012) used data from the Mexican electoral cycle 2000-2002 to provide evidence that municipalities with a greater proportion of migrant households are more likely to vote for the opposition political party. He argued that this relationship could be driven by migrant networks transfer of political knowledge from destination to origin country or by remittances raising voters' income and reducing the clientelistic links between the governments and its constituents. However, the paper does not disentangle which of these two channels is at play due to data limitation.

Looking at the case of Mali and studying electoral outcomes Chauvet and Mercier (2014) find a positive impact of returnees from non-African countries on participation in local elections. They also test the spill over impact of knowledge transfer beyond the returnee themselves and into their households and communities. They identify several localities that had no return migrants and show that their political participation rates are positively correlated with the share of return migration of neighbouring localities from non-African countries. They control for time-invariant heterogeneity across Malian localities using panel data covering the years 1998 and 2009, and address the potential endogeneity between return migration and political participation. Chauvet et al. (2016) use a multi-sited exit-poll survey conducted during the Malian 2013 presidential election in three countries: Mali, France, and Côte d'Ivoire. They examine whether Malian migrants have different political behavior compared to their non-

migrants in Mali. Then they distinguish between Malian migrants living in two countries: France and Côte d'Ivoire. The findings suggest that migrants have different political perceptions relative to non-migrants, but also that the institutional context of the destination country matters for migrants' adoption of political norms.

Focusing on a transitional economy, Barsbai et al. (2017) exploit electoral data from the former Soviet Republic of Moldova to explore the impact of international migration on political norms. Making use of a quasi-experiment as emigration was limited in Moldova until the Russian financial crisis of 1998, they control for before the crisis (and thus before migration) voting patterns to take into initial political norms. The results show that communities with a one percentage point increase in migration rate to Western countries are less likely to vote for the Communist party by around 0.6 percentage points. They provide evidence of the impact of migration on the transfer of political norms which is stronger in communities with general low level of education and with large share of individuals grown up during the Soviet era. Also, as another direct test for the transfer of norms, they use individual-level survey information from the Moldovan Political Barometer to show that migration does not impact only electoral preferences, but also political views in general such as on trust in the government and media.

Ivlevs and King (2017) examine a different measure of political norms, namely bribery and attitudes towards corruption. Based on data from the Gallup Balkan Monitor, they find that having relatives abroad reduces the likelihood of bribing public officials, makes bribe-taking behaviour by public officials less acceptable, and reduces the likelihood of being asked for bribes by public officials. The study deals with endogeneity using instrumental variable strategy where out-migration is predicted by economic conditions in the host countries interacted with historical local-level migrant networks there.

In a more recent article, Tuccio et al. (2019) examine the demand for political and social change in Morocco. They test the hypothesis that households with return and current migrants have different political preferences and behaviours than non-migrant families. Results show that having a return migrant in the household increases the demand for political and social change, driven by returnees mostly from Western European countries, who were exposed to more democratic norms in the destination. However, having a current migrant has a negative impact on the willingness of the left-behind households to change, particularly for left-behind household migrants in non-Western countries, where the quality of political and social institutions is lower. For the first time in the literature, this study controls for three layers of selectivity: out-migration, return and, more importantly, destination selectivity. Findings underscore the importance of destinations.

On the other hand, Karadja and Prawitz (2019) examine the impact of emigration on demand for, as well as actual, political change and find evidence for mass migration from Sweden to the US leading to higher membership in local labor organizations, greater strike participation, and mobilized voter turnout and support for left-wing parties in national elections. However, they argue that the mechanism behind their findings was emigration providing an outside option which improved the bargaining strength of citizens left behind rather than a transfer of attitudes.

6. Conclusion

This article reviewed numerous studies on so-called "social remittances" published in the economics field. This thorough review of the literature points at three stylized facts. On the one

hand, economists arrived relatively late in the analysis of the migration-induced transfer of norms and knowledge – at least a decade later than sociologists, political scientists and other social scientists. On the other hand, the economics literature on the topic is so far unanimous in its findings: there is a clear evidence of a migration-induced transfer of economic, political and social norms. Yet, the role of host countries is paramount in explaining the types of attitudes and knowledge that are transferred back home. As such, not all of the ideas and practices migrants send back to their origin communities are positive, but instead they depend on the norms existing at destination.

Lastly, in spite of a very recent spike in economic papers on social remittances, there are still important gaps in the literature. Now that the existence of social remittances has been confirmed through numerous studies and methodologies, the questions that economists and social scientists more broadly need to tackle are: how does the transfer of norms happen while migrants live in the host countries? Which migrants are more likely to absorb new ideas? Is exposure to different practices enough or is there a need for more intensive and direct integration? Moreover, in addition to trying to better understand what happens in the host country, another set of opened questions are how social remittances spread back in the home communities and who matters the most in the knowledge transfer. All in all, the study of social remittances is still in its infancy, and more is needed to fully understand the exact mechanisms behind the migration-induced transfer of knowledge, so that it can be exploited to harvest the gains of international migration.

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