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OF COYOTES, CROSSINGS, AND COOPERATION: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND WOMEN'S MIGRATION AT THE MARGINS OF THE STATE

Anna Ochoa O'Leary

ABSTRACT

Purpose – Examined here are some of the tenets of social capital in the context of the migrants' crossing the U.S.–Mexico border without official authorization. Using this context helps identify how social capital development is weakened by the structural and gendered dimensions of migration, contributing to the rise in undocumented border crosser deaths since 1993.

Approach – A selection of published works provide an overview of social capital, and in particular, how the framework has been used to further our understanding of the process of migration and immigrant settlement in new destinations. The principles of social capital are then examined in light of women's border crossing experiences and used to argue that migrants from emerging migrant-sending states in southern and central Mexico have had less time to accumulate resource-enhancing migration-related social capital. The narratives of repatriated women collected

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during research on the border in 2006–2007 are used to illustrate how controlling environments undermine the acquisition of social capital at a critical time.

Findings – The selection of narratives of women who were repatriated after attempting to cross into the United States without authorization illustrate the perilous interplay of hardening border enforcement and multiplying illicit border smuggling organizations. The outcome is the downward leveling of social capital on the border that potentially poses greater life-threatening risks for migrants.

Originality/value – This study provides a theoretical understanding that can be used to explain rising levels of violence along the U.S.–Mexico border that increasingly engulf migrants fleeing poverty in Mexico.

Keywords: Social capital; migration; smuggling; border enforcement; violence

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine some of the properties of social capital through the particular conditions faced by migrant women as they cross into the United States from Mexico without official authorization. Fundamental in this exercise is an understanding of the tenets of social capital and to examine them in this specific context. Unlike the analysis of the process of immigrant settlement in destination communities where the positive workings of social capital have been highly venerated, social capital's utility for accessing critical resources needed for border crossing has been less explored. A rare exception comes by way of data collected by the Mexican Migration Project in the mid-1990s (Singer & Massey, 1998). Since then border enforcement has intensified and the percentage of women migrating has increased. Both of these developments increasingly challenge the much-celebrated problem-solving power of social capital.

After a brief review of how social capital frameworks have been applied to the study of immigration and migration, I proceed to summaries of the political and historical bases for the research, and then the research itself. Subsequently, I consider issues raised by social capital theorists as they apply to the migration of women, and in particular, to their border-crossing experiences. The narratives of repatriated women on the border in

2006–2007, are used to discuss social capital when it matters most: in the context of a high-stakes crossing into the United States without documentation. Using this context to push the limits of analysis, so to speak, I explore some of the main ideas outlined by several theorists of social capital. Specifically, I ground my arguments in the structural dimensions of migration that has great bearing on our understanding of how, as a “resource for action,” social capital is not equally available to all (Coleman, 1988, p. S95; Foley & Edwards, 1997); and, how with greater migration of women (Donato, 1994; already-vulnerable female migrant populations are disproportionately impacted, putting them at greater risk than men of harm, violence, and death. In this way, I follow Silvey and Elmhirst (2003, p. 876) who argue that

Questions about gender have the potential to transform conceptual tools, because gender norms are not only part of the context of social capital formation, but they are also a key part of that which structures the meanings of social capital for particular groups and individuals.

Secondly, I consider the impact that increased border enforcement has had on the transformation of social relationships from those premised on cooperation and reciprocity, to those premised on impersonal economic exchange. Undocumented migration has for many years been a divisive political issue in the United States but mounting political clamor has led to the development of the Southwest Border Strategy¹ in 1993. This resulted in tighter control of well-established urban crossing areas by U.S. border enforcement agencies and subsequent redirection of migrant traffic toward the remote Sonora desert areas of Arizona (Cornelius, 2001; Eschbach, Hagan, Rodriguez, Hernández-León, & Bailey, 1999; Nevins, 2007). However, until the work by Singer and Massey (1998), little empirical data existed about how migrants still make their way across well-guarded international borders despite the heavy-handed efforts to deter them.

With the escalation of border enforcement (especially since 9/11), I consider how increased border enforcement policies contribute to the transformation of the socioeconomic environment resulting in an increased reliance on the service of smugglers to cross into the United States without authorization. I rely on Coleman's (1988) discussion of open and closed social structures and their implication for accessing resources that are vital for migrants who come from outside the border region. Depicted in Fig. 1, closed social structures (b) enable members (A–C) – bound by their personal relationships (represented by the line that connect each upper case letter) – to exert pressure upon others to conform to norms. In societies where collective responsibility is the norm, the rights of individuals to demand

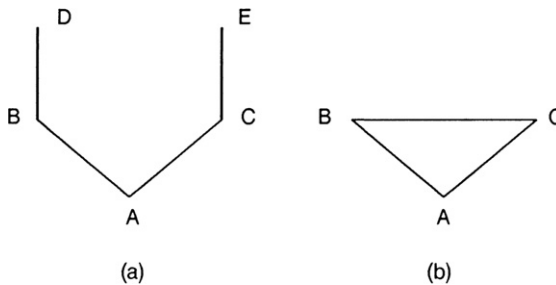


Fig. 1. Open (a) and Closed (b) Societies. Source: Coleman, (1988, p. S106).

redress for offenses is respected. However, when societies are allowed to exert too much control over its members, the development of external relationships may be discouraged, and lower levels of social capital develop (Gramajo, 2007).

On the border, closed social structures work in this way to benefit clandestine activities and the organization of smuggling rings. Conceptually, *mafia* provides a useful parallel to illustrate how closed social structures enhance the control needed to successfully operate illicit border smuggling organizations. Excessive control prevents social capital from developing (Gramajo, 2007). On the border, such closed structures disadvantage migrants who come from great distances as outsiders. In Fig. 1, outsider individuals (D and E), have fewer personal relationships, as shown by the lines between these and other individuals in the grouping. In this way, they are less able to exert pressure on those who they are increasingly reliant for services (e.g., for crossing the border). This process is consistent with a negative leveling of social capital (Coleman, 1993; Gramajo, 2007; Portes, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Silvey & Elmhirst, 2003). Ultimately, the acclaimed benefits of social capital may keep some segments of society from developing the extra-familial networks needed for human capital development. In this way, an examination of both, the potential good as well as the downside of social capital, expands our understanding of borders in ways that might advance reasoned problem-solving directions.

A social capital framework allows us to fathom how great economic disparities are meliorated through transnational linkages. Cyclical migration patterns fueled by labor shortages in core capitalist nations and the underdevelopment of peripheral nations have been reshaped by border security systems that increasingly control the flow of goods, services, raw materials, commerce, and consumption (Tseng, 2007). The growing reliance

on human smuggling and its rising cost are the result of this growing enforcement trend. Former commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Doris Meissner, predicted that “[t]he trend will worsen because countries are becoming more enforcement-minded ...[as] people who are trying to move will increasingly turn to the professionals who have made the illegal movement of people a thriving business” (*Foreign Policy*, 2002, p. 28): Thus, more integrative analyses – those that “address the underlying inequities and unmet needs that force people to take such desperate steps” (*ibid.*), remains unincorporated into solutions.

As I argue below, growing economic imbalances – between the United States and Mexico, coupled with the intensification of border policing, has subverted the value of human life,² and long-established cross-border cooperation between nations,³ municipalities,⁴ institutions,⁵ commercial interests,⁶ and border populations in general⁷ that might provide a more integrated approach to border issues. In this regard, my data offer evidence of the process by which social relationships are replaced by “professional” economic relationships for the purpose of crossing (people and contraband) in an endless game (*Donato, Wagner, & Patterson, 2008*) – a process that has become more costly and less vested in social relationships. I argue that those charged with smuggling, increasingly motivated by economic incentives, are stripped of reasons to identify with those migrating who increasingly tend to come from economically disadvantaged origins. Once detached from this social reality, *coyotes*⁸ – human smugglers – are increasingly influenced and controlled by the lucrative smuggling economy, and succumb to the trend of objectifying migrants that paves the way for their abuse. Smugglers’ allegiance to rings, in essence, works to devalue the commitment to human relations. Resource-poor migrants cannot compete with these attitudes that are antithetical to social capital formation. Thus, with their proximity to the border where heavy-handed enforcement measures are in place, the services of coyotes become increasingly important. Consequently, social capital is undermined resulting in its downward leveling. This trend works to foment social disconnections that ultimately imperil lives (*Fig. 2*).

SOCIAL CAPITAL

According to many scholars, the concept of social capital has suffered from its ambiguity and many interpretations (*Foley & Edwards, 1997; Portes, 1998*). However, most agree that at the core of the concept is the idea that,

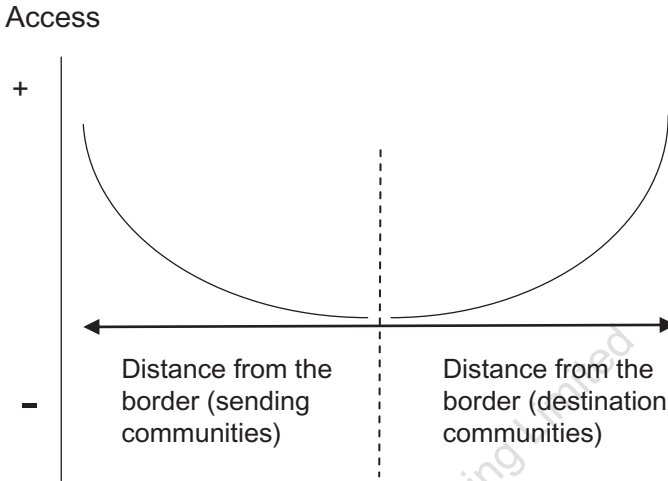


Fig. 2. Schematic Depiction of “Access” and the “Leveling” of Social Capital on the Border, Relative to Nonborder Contexts.

much like economic capital, its value is in some way associated with enhancing or enabling human action and productivity. Considered from a sociological viewpoint, social capital resides within human relationships and is thus defined by the social channels that enable actions through trust, cooperation, and mutual obligation, which benefit individuals or groups. In less advantaged communities that suffer from economic problems and/or the lack of social service infrastructure, the potential gains from cooperative behavior are compelling (Molinas, 1998). Indeed, social capital is regarded as essential in less developed communities who often lack access to the same resources of their more-developed, urban counterparts (Vermaak, 2009). As such, less advantaged communities may rely more heavily on social capital to compensate for lack of infrastructure or job stability. In such conditions, survival is rooted in a strong sense of trust among the society’s members (Gramajo, 2007), including that which is manifested symbolically through gift giving, and other expressions of compassion without apparent expectation of economic reward (Bourdieu, 1986). Social conventions of this nature might appear as wasteful or inefficient in economic terms, but for those societies that observe them, productive and economic development has better chances of flourishing (Vermaak, 2009).

However, while exalting social capital’s positive properties and potential for achieving greater productivity and social harmony, it is also important

to understand its potential for producing harm (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Thus, to better understand the concept of social capital, some of its properties and its uses need to be examined within specific contexts as it may not function for all people in the same way.⁹ Unsurprisingly, over the years, it has been applied to many fields and situations, making almost any type of review of the literature a daunting task. However, a synopsis of how the concept has been applied to migration helps illustrate some of its attributes so that these can be re-examined in the context of border crossing.

Social Capital and Immigration

Studies of immigrant communities have advanced our understanding of social capital by way of analyzing how social relations aid newcomers in overcoming obstacles once they arrive in destination communities. Thus, this body of research has been critical to mainstreaming an appreciation of the value of social capital in terms of its beneficial outcomes and its connection to the norms that express and manifest cooperative attitudes and behaviors that new immigrants rely upon for survival. Studies routinely point out that social networks grow out family financial needs (Tseng, 2007) and the search jobs (Rees, 2007). For example, Garcia (2005) finds that various social networks work simultaneously to provide new immigrants with crucial information about available jobs and other daily needs such as food, transportation, and housing. Moreover, once networks are established, they tend to become stronger and sustained over time (Rees, 2007). This assessment flows from Coleman's (1988) explanation of how social capital is generated by networks of relationships. In this way, the positive side of social capital as theorized by Coleman (p. 101) is fully appreciated by its beneficial attributes. Because of the potential of networks to transform social connections into increasingly tangible resources, newcomers may openly acknowledge their desires to belong to the donor group (Garcia, 2005). Coleman's outline of the process is made clear: Social capital is purposeful and rational, enabling individuals in their acquisition of human capital (skills, experience), which in turn, enables the acquisition of material capital (property, tools, wealth),¹⁰ as Table 1 illustrates.

The foregoing model holds in studies by Singer and Massey (1998), and Massey, Durand, and Riosmena (2006) where migrants are shown to follow its path to resources with repeat migration. In other words, migration-specific social capital leads to the accumulation of useful knowledge and skills (migration-specific human capital) that makes subsequent crossings

Table 1. Types of Resources Ranging from Less to More Tangible Forms.

Less Tangible	←————→	More Tangible
Social capital Norms premised on cooperation, social cohesion, and orientations that serve the collective good.	Human capital Skills, experience, information	Capital Property, tools, financial wealth

Source: Coleman (1988).

more efficient, less risky, and more productive. In this way, social capital has facilitated the transnational movement of labor (Tseng, 2007). Once in their destination communities, migrants are likely to acquire jobs, through which they acquire material assets that may allow them to acquire even more human capital and so on. In sum, the presence of a critical mass of tangible resources within the network will enable and accelerate the economic advancement and well-being of those who are less advantaged. In a concluding footnote to this section, it is important to point out that due to growing anti-immigrant fervor in migrant destinations—usually in more developed countries such as the United States (Rees, 2007; see also Tseng, 2007), migrants are increasingly encountering more difficult social conditions. Greater hostilities and discriminatory policies have increasingly weakened immigrants' labor rights, social welfare support (O'Leary & Sanchez, 2011; Rees, 2007; Tseng, 2007), community support (Tseng, 2007), impeded their attainment of high-quality human capital and material resources (Fernandez-Kelly, 1998, p. 88), and increased their dependency, isolation, and segregation (Rees, 2007).

THE “DOWNSIDE” OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

As previously noted, the acclaimed benefits of social capital have been viewed with critical circumspection by social theorists such as Coleman (1988, 1993), Portes (1998); and Portes and Landolt (1996). Depending on its context, social capital may also contribute to negative outcomes. These outcomes may be defined by the differential access to resources that undermines the agency of already-disadvantaged segments of society, and increase their dependency (see, e.g., González, 2009). Outcomes determined by “open” or “closed” social structures – while positive in some contexts – can also be harmful at times. In this regard, an examination

of “negative” social capital (Gramajo, 2007, p. 218) is no less powerful as an analytical tool and may illuminate the path toward reasoned problem-solving approaches (Vermaak, 2009).

Differential Access and Emergent Dependency

Portes’s (1998) and Portes and Landolt’s (1996) critical view of social capital begins with the premise that in much the same way that other forms of capital are differently available, social capital, too, is not equally available to all. It follows then that in the context of migration, social capital depends in part on geography and the socio-economic origin of migrants. For migrants from traditional sending states of west and central Mexico (Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Jalisco, and Michoacán) with migration patterns established since the 1950s, access to migration-related social capital has not only positively predicted movement from rural Mexican communities to the United States, but also the accumulation of social capital (Fussell, 2004). The accumulation of social capital over time in both sending and destination sites is an important positive outcome (Massey et al., 2006; Hernández Vega, 2006). It has facilitated both legal and undocumented immigration, transnational business enterprises (Fussell, 2004, Gramajo, 2007), remittances (Hernández Vega, 2006), and transnational political and civic organization (Cano & Délano, 2007; Goldring, 2002; Hernández Vega, 2006; Montero-Sieburth, 2007; Zabín & Escala, 2002). In contrast, for migrants coming from the more recent sending states since the 1990s (those from the south and central parts of Mexico when neoliberal policies disrupted economies where subsistence-based agriculture dominated),¹¹ social capital accumulation that over time reduces costs and risks has been undermined (Gramajo, 2007). Migrants from nontraditional states are thus more likely to migrate as “undocumented,” possess lower levels of human capital (Fussell, 2004), are less able to afford the costs associated with migration, are more likely to migrate less frequently, and are more likely to be novices (Massey et al., 2006). These mitigating factors undermine the accumulation of social capital and put migrants at greater risk when crossing the border. Singer and Massey (1998, pp. 565–566) describe this best when they write:

... [F]or first-time migrants, the border looms a threatening, dangerous, and hostile place. The histories, letters, testimonials, and paintings are replete with tales of suffering and victimization experienced while crossing the border: migrants get lost in the desert and nearly die of thirst; they almost drown while swimming the Rio Grande; they are robbed, beaten, or raped by criminals; they are hit by cars on highways; they are extorted

by Mexican police; they are defrauded by unscrupulous border smugglers; they are forced to crawl, run, or jump through hazardous terrain; they are mistreated by Border Patrol agents or beat up by vigilantes; they are arrested, jailed, and summarily deported.

The role of social capital, embodied by networks of support, is key for tapping into the knowledge held by social relations who help by providing information – and the basis for action (Coleman, 1988, p. 104). However, where networks are thin, dependency on human smugglers and the information they can provide becomes more prevalent. The critical need to forge alliances and dependencies with strangers is further compounded by the proportionately greater needs of those who are the most economically disadvantaged – for food, lodging, and information (O'Leary, 2009c). Needed information may prove to be costly, resulting in debt to those who provide information. Family members assume this debt, paid over the months and years after the successful crossing.

Greater dependency on human smugglers also stems from that fact that for resource-poor migrants, *legal* entry into the United States is nearly impossible. Typically, they are unable to provide authorities with proof of economic stability (e.g., paycheck stubs to prove employment status, copies of utility bills) and material wealth (e.g., tax statements for proof of property ownership and bank accounts) that are required for a work visa.¹² Although eventual remittances might contribute to a measure of economic stability in sending communities, in general, and when contrasted to those from urban and semi-urban areas, migrants from rural, agricultural-based economies in Mexico are less able to invest in their communities of origin (Basok, 2000), which would help facilitate an accumulation of social and human capital that would reduce dependency.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND WOMEN'S MIGRATION

Gendered analyses of social capital are less researched. Similar to Garcia (2005), Wilson (2009) examines how attitudes that reflect a value on cooperation and obligation result in behaviors and actions that institutionalize social networks that aid women in the process of migration and settlement. These social networks may extend over distance, across international borders and over prolonged periods of time. In Wilson's analysis, social networks are seen as enabling women's agency – allowing them to migrate, settle, and engage in productive activities through kin-mediated networks of support. It is through these networks that we come to understand the ways that social relations give shape to a gendered capacity to turn

social capital into other forms of capital, such as the accumulation of property in unregulated *colonias* – irregular residential settlements, usually lacking adequate essential infrastructure (Wilson, 2009). However, Granberry and Marcelli (2007) find that for women, accessing extra-familial networks is potentially reduced. Their quantitative analysis of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County suggests that men accumulate more social capital than women because they have additional opportunities to develop relationships *outside* the family and neighborhood. Moreover, because women’s networks are more likely to be kin-mediated, they may accumulate less social capital (Granberry & Marcelli, 2007). This is also an example of how closed social structures might differentially limit human and social capital development for some segments of a society (see also Gramajo, 2007). These conclusions are consistent with the findings of Hellermann (2006) and Silvey and Elmhirst (2003). In the context of migrant women from Eastern Europe in Portugal, Hellermann (2006) argues that through kin-mediated social capital and social networking women become more enmeshed in broader mechanisms of social control. Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) assert that as long as networks are seen as resources, gendered patterns of discrimination will insure that women will continue to remain excluded from accessing the more powerful forms of resources readily available to men. In Indonesia, for example, women’s continued embeddedness in their rural family networks often means that families and husbands can exert social pressure on wives and daughters. By imposing more gender-specific burdens, heightening parental control, and reinforcing gender-specific tensions around sexual morality, women’s mobility and self-promoting behaviors are constrained, resulting in their exclusion from resources. In this way, the “good” properties of social capital that emphasize responsibility, obligation, and social cohesion, may be “bad” for women by worsening inequalities that disadvantage them more (*ibid.*), resulting in potentially oppressive “downside” or a “downward leveling” effect of social capital (Portes, 1998).

Women Migrants and High Stakes Border Crossing

Issues of differentiated access and deepening dependency assume new importance with the increased participation of women in the global labor market and are best examined in the context of neoliberal restructuring that has fueled the feminization of poverty, and the feminization of migration (Marchand & Runyan, 2000; Monteverde García, 2004). To be sure, with the implementation of harsher border security measures since 1993, women

are also confronting the trends that make migration increasingly hazardous and even deadly (Cornelius, 2001, 2005; Hagan & Phillips, 2008; Hinkes, 2008; Meneses, 2003; Nevins, 2007; Goldsmith, McCormick, Martinez, & Duarte, 2006). Related to the surge in mobility and subsequent risk, are the increases in the cost of migrating safely (O'Leary, 2009c), and as I argue here, the marked importance of social capital for meliorating the hardships that result from high stakes border crossing.

For women, the adverse consequences of hardened border enforcement have been documented in a wide variety of ways. Based on human remains recovered in the desert dating from 1991, a study by Goldsmith and colleagues (Goldsmith, et al., 2006) shows that when controlling for age (up to 18 years of age), women were 2.67 times more likely to die of exposure than all other causes of death when compared to men. Subsequent research suggests an explanation of this finding: Perceived as liabilities, women assume the greater risk of abandonment in the desert by their guides, which dramatically increases the probability of death (O'Leary, 2008, 2009a). Other dangers inherent in the migration process were brought to the public's attention in March of 2007 with an outbreak of armed violence in Arizona, allegedly between rival bands of human smugglers. Five undocumented immigrants were killed in these incidents, two of who were women (Quinn & McCombs, 2007). Since 1993 there have also been several high-profile cases of sexual assault of migrant women by border patrol agents. (Cieslak, 2000; Falcon, 2001; Ruiz Marrujo, 2009; Steller, 2001; Urquijo-Ruiz, 2004). These highly publicized cases have been instrumental in raising concerns about the violence and other physical risks migrant women face (see, e.g., the volume by Staudt, Payan, & Kruszewski, 2009). In the spring of 2006, the present study began to systematically document migrant women's border crossing experiences. Interviews with migrant women provided greater understanding of their encounters with U.S. immigration enforcement agents as well as the broader economic and social environments in which migration takes place. The narratives of migrant women can be used to explore the manifestations of social capital and how enforcement policies contribute to its "downward leveling" that increases human suffering and violence on the border.

The Research

The research upon which this article is based was conducted in 2006–2007 at a migrant shelter, Albergue San Juan Bosco, in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico,

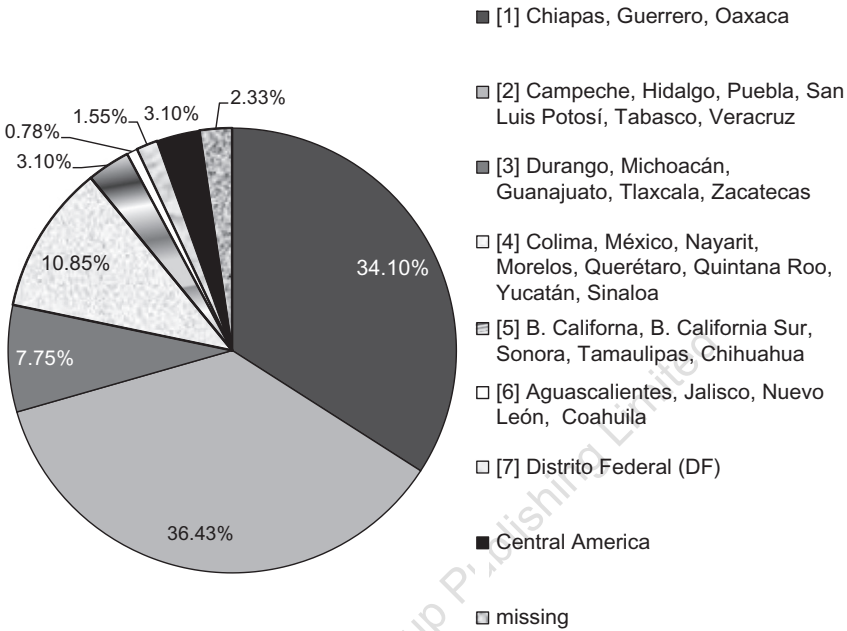


Fig. 3. Distribution of Sample ($N=129$) of Interviewees by State of Origin by Development Ranking, from Low (Disadvantaged) to High (Advantaged).

where I interviewed 129 women who had been repatriated by the U.S. Border Patrol. The interviews focused on their border crossing experiences. Like so many other migrant shelters that have sprouted up along the U.S.–Mexico border, Albergue San Juan Bosco is dedicated to the temporary relief of repatriated migrants who upon their release from the custody of U.S. immigration enforcement authorities find themselves without a support system in the area. Amidst growing instability and vulnerability, such shelters provides an important refuge for migrants in transit. An analysis of Mexican primary sending states in terms of the number of emigrants shows that most migrants come from Mexico’s central and southern states with relatively low levels of development based on indicators of “well being,” such as average education level, household infrastructure, and access to health services (INEGI, 2010). Consistent with idea that migration is largely driven by poverty, an overwhelming majority of the sample of women interviewed in my study also came from some of Mexico’s most “disadvantaged” states: 35.7% came from Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca,

ranked as the most disadvantaged according to INEGI (2010), and 37.2% came from Campeche, Hidalgo, Puebla, San Luis Potosí, Tabasco, Veracruz (ranked as the second most disadvantaged), for a cumulative percentage total of 72.9 for these two state groupings alone. The resultant distribution of women interviewed by Mexican sending state is presented in Fig. 3.

The state of flux in which migrants find themselves is momentarily relieved by the shelter which was inherently challenging for conducting the research. Guests at the shelter typically stay only one to two nights before they either attempt to re-enter the United States or return to their communities of origin. This prevented the establishment of long-term relationships with any interviewee or opportunities for follow up questions. However, conceptualizing the field site as a moment in time also follows Hannerz' (1998) suggestion for organizing transnational research, where migrants are viewed as somewhere in between two points of reference, rather than at the start or end of their migration journey. It is through this temporary suspension of movement that I now examine the parameters of social capital as one where the processes by which shared norms that promote cooperation are tested. It is here, outside the reaches of normative mechanisms for creating trust and social order that the means of sanctioning harmful behavior is challenged. Such sanctions might prevent a coyote from abandoning his group to a potentially catastrophic fate: hypothermia, hyperthermia, dehydration, or injury. Without a doubt, with the escalation of border militarization, border crossing becomes an increasingly isolated endeavor, where as outsiders, migrants are powerless to claim access to reserves of social capital that might mean the difference between life and death.

STRETCHING THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

For migrant women, reaching the border exacerbates a state dependency that began with incurring debt to finance the cost of migration. The downside of social capital is thus apparent with emerging debt (social and economic debt) and the level of dependency it institutionalizes for migrants and their families. For many, undertaking the journey north to the U.S.–Mexico border began with securing a high-interest loan. In many cases, this involved families putting up their meager properties as collateral. One repatriated migrant woman interviewed at the shelter, Agustina, was determined not to return due to this debt. She had borrowed \$1,500.00 pesos (a little less than \$150.00 dollars) against her parents' land so she planned to stay in Nogales, Sonora, long enough to send money home to pay the lender. Then she would

work to pay for her return. She explained that rich lenders have them sign a legal document that is used to take their land away if the terms of the agreement are unfulfilled. In this way, migrants are highly motivated to cross the border at all cost, make multiple attempts if necessary, find work, and pay off the loan.

Relying almost exclusively on their coyotes for crossing the border, some accounts suggest migrants are often delivered to bands of “*bajadores*” (bandits) who take advantage of the isolatedness of the migration route to rob them. The name, “*bajadores*” comes from “*bajar*,” the Spanish verb meaning “to pull down,” and refers to the tactic of forcing victims to pull down their pants at knifepoint or gunpoint – a strategy used to keep them prostrate while they are bodily searched for valuables. Like smuggling rings, the bands of assailants operate as closed social structures: benefiting from secrecy needed to carry out a calculated orchestration of robberies. As outsiders, migrants have no way to exert any kind of pressure – economic or moral – that might deliver them from harm. At the same time, they are dependent on these bands for their passage. A migrant woman interviewee, Dolores, recalled that their coyote explained to her group that it was preferable to allow the *bajadores* to rob them rather than to try to avoid them: submission to the band would save the group valuable time and almost certain punishment (beatings by the *bajadores*) if they were discovered eluding them. It essentially made more sense to pay the informal toll to the bandits to allow them to continue on their way. This extortion adds to the cost of migrating.

Migrating alone is too dangerous, and this places migrants at the mercy of their coyotes and other of actors who see them only as way to earn a living. One migrant woman noted: “*!Asi nos ven,... con un peso en la frente!*” [This is how they see us,... with a peso on our forehead!]. In this way women become enmeshed in mechanisms of social control evolving from broader relations of power between the United States and Mexico. For example, in recent years Arizona initiated investigative campaigns to choke off human smuggling operations that bring into the state an estimated \$1.7 billion a year (Holstege, 2008). Some of these clandestine operations merge legitimate businesses with illicit human smuggling activities¹³ and to become one of the fastest growing informal economies on the border. This development has succeeded in fusing migrant mobility with inter-gang rivalries resulting in violent competition over turf, influence, smuggling routes, operatives, armaments, and above all, a share of the high profits.

The Mexican government is often blamed for the border’s volatility and for its failure to provide opportunities for ordinary Mexicans to earn living

wages in their communities, resulting in greater reliance on informal economies for survival (Erfani, 2009). One report found migrants increasingly relying on human smugglers to cross into Arizona: 18% had hired a human smuggler in 2000, compared to 55% in 2005 (*ibid.*, p. 78). This development challenges the model put forward by Singer and Massey (1998, p. 574) who did not predict the effect of increased border enforcement and neoliberal trade on sources of migrant social and human capital:

In general, we expect people progressively to substitute migration-specific human capital for the use of paid guides. As experience grows and the number of trips rises, the odds of crossing with a guide (either relative/friend or coyote) should diminish, and as these indicators of migration-specific capital increase.

Consequently, the transformation of the nature of social relationships on the border has become hypermotivated by economic incentives (Portes, 1998, p. 15). With a smuggler's shift in loyalties from the social to the closed smuggling ring for accessing resources – knowledge, skills, networks, clients – his performance is not unlike that of other corporate actors who are driven by the need to control and manage supply chains and remain “closed” to outsiders. In this way, as Vermaak succinctly states (2009, p. 404), certain “instruments of force can destroy a society's social capital while building up its own.” I further contend that on the border, excess claims on resources by desperate migrants increasingly push the parameters of social capital to the limit. As instruments of force, illicit smuggling and extortion activities are on the verge of destroying society's capacity to rebuild trust, and invigorate social capital.

CASE STUDIES IN SOCIAL CAPITAL AND WOMEN'S MIGRATION ON THE BORDER

Case Study 1: Where Networks of Support Grow Thin

Migrant women's narratives can be used to illustrate the absence of behaviors consistent with social capital. For this first illustration, I turn to the case of Rosalva (age 18),¹⁴ who was from the farming village, Bajos de Coyula, in the *municipio* of Hautulco, Oaxaca. She had arrived with a cousin, who was one year younger, and two others, both men who were not relatives but friends of the family. Her cousin had been further detained by officials when they discovered that she was a minor. Policies dictated separate procedures for processing minors unaccompanied by a legal

guardian. The immigration officials on the Mexican side of the border did not allow Rosalva to see or talk to her cousin. Of the two others who accompanied Rosalva on her trip north, one was present at the shelter, but the other one – an older man and friend of the family – was being held by U.S. authorities for prosecution for a previous offense.

The group of about 27 in which Rosalva and her cousin were part of had been apprehended by the Border Patrol after walking a whole night in the desert north of El Sásabe, Arizona. They had been resting for about 20 minutes before they heard incoming helicopters. Rosalva's cousin had fallen asleep but Rosalva kept watch, fearing that the group might move on without them – illustrating here an absence of trust even though she was accompanied by two male friends of the family. She clearly sensed her outsider status. In response, Rosalva assumed the protective role, allowing her younger cousin to sleep while she kept watch. At the sound of the helicopters, they ran and hid in the bushes. They hoped to remain undetected, but had no such luck.

Elsewhere I have argued that women and children are differentially treated based on their perceived liability for the coyote (O'Leary, 2009c). One migrant woman recounted how her coyote was reluctant to guide her and her child through the desert because slower-moving children slow down the entire group. Without social capital, women have less agency, and this explains Rosalva's lack of trust and fear of being left behind with her cousin. The fear is not unfounded. Since the late 1990s, an unprecedented number of human remains (presumably of migrants) have been discovered in the desert along this stretch of the U.S.–Mexico border (Goldsmith et al., 2006), and those identified as female are nearly three times more than those identified as male. However, in terms of the differential treatment of women with children by their guides, it is also only fair to point out that there is little systematic research on this topic, and that there is also evidence to suggest that the cold and calculating commodification of migrants by coyotes is not always so, nor has it always been so. Garcia Castro's research (Garcia Castro, 2007) shows that trusting social relationships can exist between migrants and coyotes that they know, "*coyotes comunitarios*" (coyotes from the community). Based on the coyotes' relationship with clients (family members, former clients, friends or relatives of former clients), coyotes comunitarios may offer discounted rates and in this way they help reduce the cost of migration. Furthermore, for coyotes comunitarios, the crossing process is more than an economic contract but one forged from a social obligation to help and to remain in good standing with members of one's social network (see also O'Leary, 2009b). In other words, the social structure

was not entirely closed and the process operated along the principles that define social capital. As Singer and Massey have shown (1998, p. 566), a reliance on the human capital of family and friends assure lower costs of the coyote's services, provides guarantees for services rendered, and teaches novices how to behave if and when they are apprehended and what to expect upon arrest. In this way, familial smuggling networks help assure safety amidst the "many dangers of border crossing" (cf Vélez-Ibáñez & Sampaio, 2002, p. 32). In this way, human smuggling may conform to pressures to maintain cooperative, personal relationships that are mutually beneficial. Spener's (1999, p. 23) interview with "El Carpintero" a coyote on the Texas border illustrates this point:

... he [El Carpintero] sometimes lowered the price for friends and friends-of-friends. As his reputation as a competent and "honest" coyote spread, strangers also came to him and he eventually developed a Mexico City clientele in addition to his Monterrey circle.

When asked where she was going or what job awaited her, Rosalva said that she did not know where she was going. This was an atypical answer and gave me reason to suspect that she might not trust me with this information. By this time, I knew that migrants may be suspicious of sharing information about the location of family members who might be extorted by unscrupulous individuals. This speaks to the insecurity that permeates the entire environment. She was only 18, alone, feeling insecure, and reluctant to share information with a stranger, especially about her plans, her ultimate destination, and about relying on family members in the United States. She shared with me that she wanted to know something of the world outside of her community: *vine a conocer*" (I came to see.). Although plausible, it was uncommon – most women assume the risks of crossing in search of a better life for their families. When I asked her if she would try to cross again she said that she did not know, that this decision depended on finding out if her younger cousin would be sent back to Oaxaca. It was expected that Mexico's *Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (DIF)¹⁵ would make contact with its counterpart agency in Oaxaca, then make arrangements for the transfer of her cousin to the authorities there. This would leave Rosalva with a decision to either continue with her plans to cross into the United States or return home. She suspected that her mother might insist that she return. She made it clear that the friend who was there at the shelter with her was under no obligation to either take her back or to take her with him if he should decide to make another try – another sign that social capital was absent. I had hoped that she would be there when

I returned the next evening, but like so many other cases, knowing the final outcome would once again elude me.

Case Study 2: Reconstructing Social Capital “On the Fly”

Not all cases demonstrate the helplessness that appeared to be Rosalva’s. In an environment saturated by distrust and insecurity, a response may be to reconstruct social capital “on the fly”; that is, through the process of migration itself, one which may result in harm reduction. Twenty-four year old Gabriela left the state of Mexico (*Estado de Mexico*) in hopes of finding a better economic opportunity in the United States. At the bus station before boarding the bus that would take her north, she stopped for a blessing from an elder shaman woman. Others also boarded. At first strangers, through the course of the trip north, they became friends. Perhaps with apprehension growing as they approached the border, Gabriela and her companions resolved to make the crossing together and support each other no matter what happened. It is important to note that Gabriela’s story about the migrating group’s outspoken commitment to each other is extraordinary. Gabriela explained that there were a total of 18 people traveling together as they commenced their walk through the desert. One group of ten walked ahead, and the rest, those she considered her friends, walked behind the lead group. She felt lucky in that they encouraged and supported each other as they grew weary. She described to me how by the third day of walking, that they had developed into true friends:

It was fortunate that my group was very good, everyone became fast friends. At once, one would be pulling me, then another would push me from behind ... There were eight of us, six men and two women ... On the third day we became friends ... we proved it to each other. We made a pact that we would support each other, and we honored it.

Gabriela mentioned that the group was already in United States territory when they had to stop because the border patrol was performing a search using dogs. She says it was already night time so they laid low that night to avoid detection. For this reason, a day of travel had been “lost.”

After they stopped, she, like the other woman, became exhausted because the “*terreno*” (terrain) was difficult to tread. The last day was the most difficult, but this was when she came to realize she truly had friends. The other woman, Sara, reassured her that they would not leave her behind. Gabriela explained:

There came a moment in which I felt desperation because I saw our group lag further and further behind. We were at that moment inside the United States, and we had but to

go a bit further so that the *migra*¹⁶ would not toss us out. The *migra* passed by every five minutes and I thought, “No, in reality I am putting at risk the lives of the 18 others,” and I did not think that was right.

Because she could not walk any faster her group of eight was falling behind. So she decided to tell them that she could not go on, and that it was not fair to them that they should be held back on her account. She sat down on a rock and told them, “*Chicos, ya no pudeo ...*” [I cannot go on.] *Están a un paso ... Siganle!*”) [You are nearly there ... keep going!] She felt that they had made it this far and she would not risk the chance of the group not reaching their destination because she was no longer able to continue. However, her friends refused to leave her saying “*Si te quedas tu, nos quedamos todos.* (If you stay, we all stay!)” She sensed a mixture of both courage, and sadness. (“*sentí tanto valentía como tristeza*”).

After they talked about it for a while, the group asked her to try again: “*héchale ganas ya estamos cerca*” [Try harder!... we are so close!], but she could not walk anymore. She told them she just could not do it, and she told them that she would just walk down so the Border Patrol (*migra*) could see her and they would find her. Again, she expressed her mixed feelings: “*Me dio más sentimiento y pero también me dio más fuerza.*” [I was very touched, but also I felt strengthened.] Sara was the youngest and the strongest of the group: “*Ella estaba extremadamente fuerte, no se de dónde saco fuerza*”. [She was extremely strong, I don't know from where she mustered strength.] The young girl told all the men to go. She told them that she was more familiar with the area and with a forceful voice she told the men to move on and that she would stay with Gabriela until the *migra* came. Realizing their determination, the men had no choice but to let them go. In part due to the support given to her by her young friend, Sara, Gabriela had been able to return to the safety of the shelter. Returning to Coleman's model of closed and open social structures, Gabriella's case illustrates how a previously open social structure, embodied by a group of strangers who first come together in a bus journey to the north, congeal into a group united by trust and a mutual sense of duty and obligation to each other. This strategy countered the potential for harm that comes when a group of strangers, because they are unorganized and unconnected, are fully dependent upon the more organized smuggling rings.

CONCLUSION

Increased dependency of migrants on clandestine human smuggling is due in large part to increased border enforcement measures that have been

implemented since the 1993. Increasingly impoverished, migrant women are forced to rely on the services of human smugglers to cross into the United States without authorization. As outsiders and as women, they are particularly vulnerable to exclusion especially where gendered norms discourage self-promoting behaviors for women, and when the operation of clandestine activities depends on closed social structures to maintain control. Moreover, as outsiders, women are increasingly vulnerable to less-charitable treatment by those whose income depends on fast-paced crossing over difficult terrain and most often in the dark of night to avoid detection by authorities. The magnitude of this exposure to risk is comprehensible only by considering the exponential rise in the number of migrant apprehensions and migrant deaths due to exposure in this part of the region since the late 1990s. According to the Department of Homeland Security,¹⁷ in the Tucson Border Patrol sector alone, where this research was conducted, there were 439,090 apprehensions in 2005. That year, this sector led all other sectors when all field offices were considered. Arizona has also had the most voluntary departures, an administrative procedure in which migrants who are arrested are simply “removed” from the United States. The figures include repeat migrant crossings and repeat apprehensions. It has been estimated that nearly one-third of migrants reentered the United States without authorization after being removed (Marizco, 2005). The high recidivism attests to the economic imperatives that outweigh both the risk of crossing and the risk of serving longer prison terms if re-apprehended.

Research of repatriated migrant women’s border crossing experiences conducted on the border in 2006–2007, offered me the opportunity to examine the intersection of contradictory processes: transnational movement and border enforcement. The research also offers an opportunity to examine the limits of social capital in a context where norms that promote trust and cooperation are destabilized by overriding illicit economies. It is here, on the border, where the reaches of normative mechanisms for the establishment of trust and social sanction wane and the potential fatal consequences of abandonment are attributed to the much maligned coyote (O’Leary, 2008, 2009a). Without a doubt, with the escalation of border securitization and militarization, border crossing becomes an increasingly isolated endeavor where excess claims on resources by desperate migrants increasingly stretch the limits of social capital, and reveal its dark side.

A schematic portrayal of the leveling of social capital for migrants on the border is depicted in Fig. 2. Moving from the left to right, access to social capital in sending communities is illustrated as diminishing with proximity to the border. We know that family-based and migration-related social capital exists in sending communities as this has been extensively documented

by scholars such as Massey et al. (2006) and Fussell (2004). Although the accumulation of social capital may be lower in rural communities, social capital is nonetheless known to operate (González, 2009; Gramajo, 2007; Vermaak, 2009). This is consistent with norms of cooperative behavior that enhance the survival of underdeveloped rural communities in general (Vermaak, 2009). So in spite of geographic and demographic differences between traditional and new sending states in Mexico, social capital processes exist and work similarly. Differential outcomes become apparent over time, with notably more accumulation occurring in traditional Mexican sending states (Hernández Vega, 2006; Massey et al., 2006). This accumulation is in part facilitated by the social capital generated in destination communities – an accumulation that has yet to materialize for the states of central and southern Mexico with shorter histories as migrant-sending states (*ibid.*, p.118). Thus, continuing to move to the right in Fig. 2, in destination communities, immigration studies show that social capital continues to thrive, aiding newcomers in their settlement, networking, job-seeking, and other adaptive processes. Moreover, the development of social capital in destination communities, noted by the flourishing of strong social networks, well-developed community associations, and a high degree of civic engagement, improves the chance of social capital accumulation and human capital development in sending communities (Cano & Délano, 2007; Goldring, 2002; Hernández Vega, 2006; Montero-Sieburth, 2007; Zabín & Escala, 2002). The U-shape in the diagram depicts the relationship between social capital and the border. The base of the U depicts the drop in the level of trust and cooperation, and therefore, lower social capital. This is explained in part by the presence of migrants from impoverished nontraditional sending states, who as outsiders, may have had less time or less opportunity to access social capital.

With profits fueled by demands for specialized knowledge needed to circumnavigate intensified border securitization, and consequently more smuggling, a faster pace, and more secrecy, crossing is made more costly, which put migrants – especially those most recently made destitute by neoliberal policies – at a disproportionate disadvantage. Moreover, when providers of valuable knowledge (coyotes) are easily co-opted by economic incentives, in part again because their own economic opportunities have languished or eliminated, they are less incentivized to replicate norms of trust and cooperation with impoverished outsiders with whom they have little connection or loyalty (perhaps perceived as time wasted). With this, a dramatic downward leveling of social capital occurs.

NOTES

1. This strategy involved the intensification of border closures known as Operation Hold the Line (1993), Operation Gatekeeper (1994), Operation Safeguard (1995).

2. Readers are encouraged to consult the *New York Times* online interactive website, “Mexico under siege: The Drug War at our Doorstep” (<http://projects.latimes.com/mexico-drug-war/#/its-a-war>) to examine current statistics showing the dramatic rise of drug-related violent deaths since 2007 with the initiation of a binational militarized approach to drug trafficking and the disproportionate number of drug-related deaths that have accumulated in the U.S.–Mexico border region. In addition, already mentioned is the dramatic rise in migrant deaths documented by the United States Government Accountability Office (August 2006) (see <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06770.pdf>).

3. Before a joint session of U.S. Congress made tense by partisan controversy on May 20, 2010, Mexican President Felipe Calderon pointed out that drug enforcement policies have been made less effective by a flood of smuggled assault weapons into Mexico, in part because U.S. ban on assault weapon sales to civilians expired in 2004, which Calderon said coincided with the beginning of a rise in violence in Mexico.

4. Sister cities Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora that depend on the tourism industry have experienced a dramatic drop in trade since the escalation of drug-related violence. See, for example, “Drug ‘War Zone’ Rattles U.S.–Mexico Border” (<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/International/story?id=1477964>), which reports that Nuevo Laredo, across the border from Laredo, Texas, has experienced as much as an 80% drop in tourism, citing the growing power and economic means of drug cartels to corrupt officials with “offers that they dare not refuse.”

5. In May of 2010, reacting to Arizona Governor signing Senate Bill 1070 into law, commonly known as the “No Papers” law because it authorizes law enforcement officials to request proof of those “reasonably” suspected to be in the country unlawfully, two Mexican universities (Universidad Autónoma de México and the Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí) halted their student exchange program with the University of Arizona. For the same reason, the annual meeting of the Border Health Commission scheduled to take place in Arizona was cancelled.

6. A 2006 study by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and The California Department of Transportation entitled “Economic Impacts of Wait Times at the San Diego-Baja California Border,” clearly shows that delays at the border, due to increased surveillance activities on both sides, have significant negative economic impacts for both the regional and the national economies (http://www.sandag.org/uploads/publicationid/publicationid_1205_5394.pdf).

7. An unprecedented number of U.S. State Department travel advisories have been issued since the escalation of drug trafficking related violence including states along the Texas border (in 2007), and more recently (in 2009), along the Arizona border with Mexico.

8. A discussion with almost any border denizen will refer to the traits shared by human smugglers and their namesake. Like the four-footed desert creature, human smugglers disappear into the environment – usually when migrants are apprehended.

9. The literature on social capital is vast, so it is not the objective in this article to review this history or developments. For a useful overview, readers are encouraged to consult Portes (1998).

10. Missing from this theoretical rendering is “cultural capital,” a concept developed by Bourdieu (1986) that emphasizes how with the ultimate access to economic resources and wealth, individual increase their affiliation with institutions and influential individuals that confer other valued credentials such as social status, prestige, and societal respect and privilege.

11. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is largely blamed for the economic destabilization experienced in Mexican subsistence economies. The agreement was adopted by the governments of the United States, Canada, and Mexico in 1994. While in theory the idea of free trade is a good one, in practice only corporations have been freed of restrictions to engage in economic trade. For those who have been displaced and in search for work in larger urban centers, rising costs of living and depressed wages have only pushed them northward and to the United States where wages are higher (Basok, 2000; Crummett, 2001; Labrecque, 1998; Manning & Butera, 2000; Rees, 2007).

12. For women, such requirements are particularly problematic as receipts need to be in their name, and more often than not, important records are in the name of male heads of households.

13. See Robins (2007) for more on this.

14. This account is taken from research field notes taken on 4/5/2007. To protect the identity of respondents, their names have been changed.

15. Translated from the Spanish, this is Mexico's National System for Integral Family Development, a public health and social service institution that works toward family well-being.

16. This is a colloquial name for the U.S. Border Patrol.

17. Department of Homeland Security Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2005, Data on Enforcement Actions Table 36 (<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/>).

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