Sharing in Diaspora

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Despite the global effort to design public incentives for diasporas to engage with sending countries, there is still room for marketing researchers to empower those public initiatives, by deepening the understanding of migrants’ motivations for home engagement.

This article puts forward a theoretical perspective to approach this opportunity: the autobiographical perspective. Some of migrants’ motivations can indeed be rooted in the need to maintain connections with past selves.

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Keywords: Diaspora engagement; macromarketing; autobiographical perspective; narrative identity; sharing in; sympathy.
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Introduction

“And why, years later, do you still,
Off and on, cast your eyes to the ground
As you hurry to some appointment
Where you are now certain to arrive late?”

Charles Simic (2009)
From That Little Something

According to the United Nations, there are currently 214 million people living outside of their birth countries (UNDP 2009, 21). Of these, 60% are said to originate from less developed countries (Keeley 2009, 31). Contrary to common belief, brain drain is not only a source of loss for poor or developing countries; it has also been proven, under certain circumstances, that it can be a source of significant wealth. Important compensation schemes have been implemented by diasporas to offset their absence.

At the same time, national authorities from all around the world are increasingly dedicating attention to their nationals abroad, aiming at reaching them out and motivate them to engage with further development of their home countries. In the framework of this worldwide initiative, marketing researchers have an attractive potential to successfully contribute to further empowerment of these public initiatives. They count indeed with significant experience in working with migrant populations and in understanding motivations for consumption. They are also knowledgeable in motivations facilitating helping behaviors. This experience is extremely useful in deepening the investigation of migrants’ core motivations for engaging with their home countries.

In this context, the objective of this paper is to suggest, because life has a storied structure, the use of autobiographical perspective as a theoretical tool for marketing research to apply in the understanding of migrants and their motivations for home engagement. The autobiographical perspective draws on the process of perpetual identity (re)construction in which we develop different versions of our life stories. For these stories to be recognized by relevant others as authentic, they have to appear as coherent wholes. Therefore we should be able to justify the transformations we undergo in our life story in such a way that its major episodes make sense when put together as a whole.

The autobiographical perspective considers that some of the most important, highly emotional, experiences require constant reconstruction in order for us to be able to create a link with our current life context. A migration experience is usually lived as a highly emotional
experience in life. Previous experiences before migration, in home nations, often require constant reflection and revisit. As a result, for the purpose of validating personal background and reassembling past stories, migrants participate in experiences that connect them with their home countries. For some migrants, their involvement takes the form of transferring wealth to their home nation. However, these experiences go beyond economic flows to the extended family – remittances. Some belong to the experience of sharing (Belk 2010) and draw on sympathy (Hume 2006).

The paper is set out in three parts. Firstly, it argues that Macromarketing has the potential for successfully contributing to current worldwide initiatives aiming at promoting diasporas’ engagement. In the second part, it introduces the idea of autobiographical perspective, with a brief description of the philosophical concept of narrative identity from which it is inspired. In the final section, it introduces and utilizes the ideas of sharing in (Belk 2010) and sympathy (Hume 2006) with the purpose of anticipating the types of motivation to be identified by applying the autobiographical approach. Suggestions for future research will end this article.

Towards Diaspora Engagement

It seems self-evident that the world has been rapidly transformed in such a way that the traditional perception of global space and physical distances has been challenged. Henri Heine, a Romantic German Poet from the nineteenth century, anticipated the reduction of distances experienced today. In his Parisian residence, while describing the rapid technological advances of railways and future connections between France, Belgium and Germany, he wrote: “I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now, I can smell the German linden trees; the North Sea's breakers are rolling against my door.”¹ (Heine 2008, 327).

Human beings in contemporary societies are less and less experiencing the feeling of living far away from exotic contexts. It takes just a day, or in extreme cases, a few days, for authorized migrants to move between continents. Facilitating personal career progression, building a better future for own children, following a personal curiosity for exotic experiences, fulfilling a long-lasting education journey, joining loved ones and even fighting for survival; there are numerous reasons for which people feel inspired or compelled to move out of their home countries. For whichever reason approximately 214 million people live outside their country of birth (UNDP 2009, 21).

Human mobility has become one of the key areas of discussion within public debates. It has been positioned as one of the major driving forces in contemporary societies, leading to social, cultural and technological exchanges. The economist Oded Stark (2005) has for instance highlighted the fact that just the possibility of enjoying international career opportunities has increased students’ motivation in pursuing studies in their home country for longer than mandatory. This phenomenon has, in some cases, increased the skills of local populations significantly even if not all students eventually move abroad.

While nationals’ strategies to attract the best talent from outside their territories intensifies and becomes routine, the “real” magnitude of the negative impact produced by brain drain in sending countries is far from clear. The OECD (Keeley 2009, 31) estimates that 60% of world’s migrant population’s moves to more developed countries. Brain drain is considered to be one of the reasons why poor and developing countries lose important skills, ideas, innovation, benefits from national investments in education, tax revenues and critical services providers in the education and health sectors (OECD 2007, 65). The OECD recognizes the existence of some critical regions where the brain drain phenomenon has been categorically unconstructive: Central America, some Caribbean Islands, Southwest and Southeast Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans (OECD 2007, 67).

A large portion of research on migrants’ contributions to their home countries, as a form of compensation for their absence, has been focused on remittances and the belief that they are a direct economic contribution to the extended family left behind (Gentry and Mittelstaedt 2009). Remittances are without doubt one of the fundamental pillars of the process of contributing back to one’s home country during migration. It represents a considerable part of the total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that reaches some developing and poor countries. United Nations state that in 2007 remittances represented 60% of the all combined volume of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and aid in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNDP 2009, 79). Even in an economic downturn, the amount of money that flows in remittances remains significant. For 2009, it was estimated to reach USD 304 billion, a decrease from the value reached in 2008, USD 328 Billion (Ratha, Mohapatra and Silwal 2009, 1).

Whereas in the past research has mainly focused on remittances, international organizations and individual countries have recently started to broaden their investigations to include the variety diasporas’ contributions to home countries. The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) has included in its 2005 report a series of perspectives in which migrants can contribute to the development of sending countries:

“Migrants make a valuable economic, political, social and cultural contribution to the societies they have left behind. The remittances that migrants send home play an important part in alleviating poverty in countries of origin, and can also support the development process if the governments of those countries provide a conducive environment for economic growth. Migration helps to limit the level of unemployment and underemployment in countries that have an excess supply of labour. Individual migrants and diaspora associations make financial and other investments in their homeland, strengthening the economy, serving as conduits for new ideas and enriching understanding between countries of origin and destination. When migrants go back to their own country, whether on a temporary or long-term basis, they take new skills, experiences and contacts with them, vital assets in a global economy that is increasingly knowledge-based” (GCIM 2005, 23).

From this report and the other international outlooks mentioned in this section, we can see that international organizations now see migration as having an enormous potential to contribute to sending countries. Beyond remittances, there are other forms of contribution that deserves to be highlighted: the role of diasporas’ networks in facilitating economic, political,
social and cultural interactions between host and sending countries; the contribution done by temporary or definitive returns to home countries of first or following generations of migrants; the entrepreneurial activities of migrants in cooperation with home countries; or the many workers from NGOs who after having been trained in developed countries decide to build a career supporting poor and developing countries (…).

In this context, a further understanding of diasporas and their connections with their home countries, even after years of migration, has been fundamental in improving the positive impact migration can have in sending countries. Sometimes those nexus remain even after the entire family moves to a receiving country and are even transmitted to second and third generations of migrants (OECD 2007, 56).

This broader perspective is an opportunity for scholars and politicians to promote better understanding and to preserve and push forward the multiple contributions that exist among migrants and their places of birth. Although marketing researchers have built important intellectual assets that could be successfully activated in this debate, most of this work still remains to be done.

Very little marketing research has intended to understand and improve compensation for brain drain (e.g. Coles and Timothy 2004; Gentry and Mittelstaedt 2009) even though the marketing community counts with significant theoretical and empirical experience in migration research. Within the purpose of introducing the theoretical point of view that suggests this text, only a selection of this knowledge will be mentioned.

A vast majority of marketing research on migration has focused on acculturation and on related consumer learning experiences (e.g. Peñaloza 1994; Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005; Üstüner and Holt 2007; Du, Sen and Bhattacharya 2008). Consumer research have also embedded cosmopolitanism as an ideological system that synthesizes the tensions between what is familiar and what is coming from new exotic cultures (Thompson and Tambyah 1999).

These research have been largely concerned with the new lives consumers develop when immersed in different environments. They have been focused mainly on migration from the perspective of receiving countries and this choice has drawn them away from sending countries’ point of view. Consequently, little research has investigated migrants’ engagement with home countries. Migrants’ backgrounds have usually been studied while analyzing, for instance, possessions from the past that are preserved after the immigration experience (e.g. Mehta and Belk 1991; Belk 1992). Nostalgic consumption activities, like ethnic shopping, which preserve a personal background and secure the transformation experience (e.g. Belk 1990) have also been taken into account. However, these studies still consider the past of a migrant as something that concerns only the foreigner, without taking into account his or her home country.

The active relationships that a migrant continues to build with his or her sending country deserves closer investigation. In following sections, the paper will focus on developing the idea of the autobiographical perspective in migration. The author believes that this perspective would put marketing researchers on a productive track for contributing to the debate on diasporas’ engagement.
Towards an Autobiographical Perspective of Migration

The narrative approach to identity assumes that life has a narrative structure (MacIntayre, 1984), which aims at organizing the multiplicity of life experiences and events to which we are confronted in coherent personal stories. Human beings’ self-reflective way of “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger 1962) leads us to connect the episodes of our lives in such a way that they have to make sense when put together. Personal stories then serve, as guarantors of coherence and continuity of a personal self, which is naturally exposed to multiplicity, change and contradiction (MacIntyre 1984; Ricœur 1990; Linde 1993; Atkins 2004).

Accordingly, there is a continuity of narrative that contrasts with frequent disruptions in life, implying a perpetual interpretation and re-interpretation of our lives. Each personal experience integrates into a series of experiences and is organized into a dynamic temporal structure; we write and re-write our own life as it is experienced.

In the process of developing our life stories, socio-cultural forces often authorize or motivate what is and what is not acceptable in terms of personal projects of identity. In this sense, a personal life-narrative is facilitated by socio-cultural forces, as well as by personal cumulative experiences - where an individual has been, what he or she has or has not done, where he or she is going, how he or she is evolving, what kind of personal future he or she is designing and so on.

These two main forces, socio-cultural and cumulated experiences in life, at the same time facilitate and constrain our personal narratives. Furthermore, there are a limited number of stories that we are able to tell. Our intention of building a specific personal story may fail. The risk of failure lies mainly in a lack of validation of our personal stories, implying that we and/or relevant others do not recognize our life stories as being authentic (e.g. Fine 2003; Beverland and Farrelly 2010).

The freedom at our disposal is, in this sense, not unlimited. All those episodes that are our own personal experiences already push us towards certain tendencies that we may or may not want to develop in our lifetime. In some cases some of our strongest life tendencies follow us and force us to behave in accordance to them.

Paul Ricœur, probably one of the most influential philosophers in narrative identity, describes the origin of our current personal stories as being highly linked to the people we used to be. Our current life stories emerge from our background and from the stories we have started in previous contexts (Ricœur 1991). Little by little, as our life flows, we limit the number of stories we can tell.

During turning points in life, such as migration, our life stories receive not only attractive innovative material to build on, but also an opportunity for transformation. Questions about the continuity of a specific project within one’s identity then appear: “Do I want to continue being the kind of person I have become, with the kind of behavior it requires?” Transitions in life offer
us an exciting opportunity for positioning ourselves differently as the subject of a particular life, the life that is ours.

By leveraging on the synthetic powers of the narrative, we transform the multiplicity, the instability and the diversity of our personal experiences, before and after a disruption event, to form a whole that has the appearance of being coherent. Turning points in life confront us with a personal concern, the autobiographical-concern (Rojas and Bluemelhuber 2010).

**Autobiographical Concern on Migration**

“My professional journey is probably not very different from many who, for one reason or another, decided to make the United States their home. (...) I remain a blessed and lucky Dogra boy from the hills of Jammu whose parents set no limits on learning. However, I do sometimes wonder what would have happened if I joined my father’s textile business in Jammu.”

Vijay Mahajan (2005)
From *The Incomplete Autobiography of an Immigrant Marketing Professor*

The location of our birth or childhood or even that of our parents or grandparents often occupies a special place in our personal stories. It is not uncommon that our height, the color of our skin, eyes or hair is used as an indication of the places we come from. Some of us can be identified as coming from a specific place, even before we speak. Where we come from is probably one of the most influential features we count on to start our life story and this even before we realize how important it is to shape our narrative identity.

In the same way, some of the most important experiences in our lives, emotionally charged and built upon the community we belong to, will probably always have an impact on the kind of stories we can tell about ourselves. Years later, after turning points in life have occurred – such as expatriation, divorce, loss of a family member – we still find ourselves repetitively questioning our past experiences. Our constant efforts put into past modifications give us an idea of how important our personal background is in satisfying the storied character of our human lives.

Some of our life stories’ transformations, that we would like to develop, would demand from us time and energy in order to adjust our experiences of the past in such a way that they happen to be compatible with the kind of beings we want to become. This re-assemblage of our past experiences that allows us to develop a coherent life story has important consequences for our life choices regarding the kind of experiences in which we would like to engage.

While during migration experiences we probably develop a taste for discovery and self-discovery through the exploration of other countries and through encounters with other societies,
we still continue to nourish our desire to return to the places of our origin where we have experienced some of the most important events in our life.

“Time heals all wounds” is a popular expression, however some of our most intensive emotional experiences stay with us forever and constantly command our attention. In the process of building a personal story that looks coherent, within a life that is constantly challenged by disruptive events, some of the activities in which we participate seem to be supportive. The renowned Dutch Psychologist Nico Frijda asserts that commemoration and joint ceremonies, among members of a specific community act, for instance, as personal strategies for preserving continuity in life after migration:

“One feels a member of a nation, clan or ethnic group and at the same or other times a member of one’s family, as part of one’s identity: I am the daughter or son of such and such, and I carry the imprint of that belongingness. Loss of actual coherence with one’s group, its habits and language, therefore is deeply disturbing, since it robs one’s sense of self as much of its supporting facts in the environment. The loneliness and threat to conception of self are evident in the suffering caused by being a refugee or displaced person. Coherence is strengthened by participation in joint ceremonies.” (Frijda 2007, 287).

As it has been presented in this section, important turning points in life, such as migration, require individuals to make a constant effort to re-assemble the past in such a way that there is a link between the person we are to become and the person we used to be. It is the author’s belief that the existential preoccupation for storied coherence development, the autobiographical-concern, is one of the main motivations for diasporas to be continuously searching for linking experiences with home countries. The author also believes that the kind of experiences that seem to be the most appropriate for developing that link is that of sharing, the topic of the next section.

Sharing in Diaspora

While it can be thought that the proximity migrants nourish towards home countries is a symptom of their lack of integration in receiving countries, the autobiographical perspective puts forward another explanation for that orientation. Even after successfully integrating into his or her host country, a migrant will still probably feel the need to come back to his or her personal background.

Hein de Haas, research officer at the International Migration Institute, empirically supports the idea that a successful migration experience does not exclude the migrant from engaging with his or her home country:

“This study indicates that it is not only unnecessarily harsh, but also factually incorrect to automatically interpret migrants’ commitment towards their countries of origin as a consequence of their inability or unwillingness to integrate. The reverse has turned out to be more likely: it is in particular the relatively successful and ‘integrated’ migrants who have the time, know-how and resources to remit money, to
become active in diaspora organisations and to remain involved in the social and economic development of countries of origin.” (Haas de 2006, 91)

A clear example of migrants that have reached an important level of integration in receiving countries can be found among writers living in exile. Most of them have managed to be inspiring writers in the language of their host countries. However, this fact does not prevent them from spending an important part of their intellectual career analyzing and reflecting about their own experiences of being far from their places of birth (see the cases of Thomas Mann, Milán Kundera, Bertolt Brecht or Charles Simic).

Our autobiographical concern – the existential preoccupation of making a personal life-narrative coherent by simultaneously interpreting one’s own personal past and future –, reminds us that imagining a future self that cannot be coherently related to past experiences corresponds to imagining a totally different person from oneself (Mackenzie 2008).

The process of connecting the self with experiences of the past necessarily occurs in a relation with relevant others, those that have the power of validating such connections. This process of identity construction is fundamentally a collective process; it is about the one we become with others. The shared character of identity and the need for life coherence in disruptive times, such as migration, would challenge the continuity of the connections established with those with whom previous life stories were built.

Emotional connectedness with significant others is a source of power. It shows that one’s personal actions have the capacity to impact others. In this same context, the feeling of sympathy towards those who suffer in home countries may motivate migrants to invest in helping them. This behavior may serve as an empowerment of their past identity, to continue to be the kind of person they wanted to be. The feeling of sympathy allows them to put themselves in others’ shoes and maintain the sensation of being a citizen of their country of birth. Feelings of sympathy are probably at the base of the similarities that exist among nationals:

“No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than the propensity we have to sympathize with others and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own. This is not only conspicuous in children, who implicitly embrace every opinion propos’d to them; but also in men of the greatest judgment and understanding, who find it very difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition of that of their friends and daily companions. (...)To this principle we ought to ascribe the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation; and ‘tis much more probable, that this resemblance arises from sympathy, than from any influence of the soil and climate (...)” (Hume 2006, 29).

The sympathy experienced when connecting with other community’s members usually facilitates the process of communicating sentiments. This privileged communication inspires migrants to share with others, whom they sympathize with, the experiences lived during their
journeys. Sympathy, the capacity to communicate intimate feelings and intentions in a contagious way among human beings, has been proved to be an important motivation for pro-social behavior (Small and Simonsohn 2008).

Some of our specific characteristics, such as our nationality, make us experience a readiness to connect with those whom we consider to be similar to us and makes us sympathize with them. An experience that seems to be a natural expression of sympathy is sharing. Following Belk’s ideas about sharing in (Belk 2010), we can expect that some of the activities that take place between a specific diaspora and its home country enter into the range of sharing in experiences. According to Belk, sharing in experiences allow us to reproduce social links with those that we consider to be part of our extended-self (Belk 1989).

There are various possibilities for migrants to engage with their home countries, all of them can be seen as returns back home. While some returns are physical, there are also virtual returns: adopting a career in cooperation, volunteering in supporting other migrants, spending holidays in home countries, actively participating in diasporas’ networks, sending children back home for the purpose of participating in social and economic life, (...).

Most of these activities can be considered to be attached to migrants’ profound desire to be connected with their background. This desire corresponds perfectly with Belk’s idea: “sharing tends to be a communal act that links us to other people.” (Belk 2010). Even the classical monetary compensation phenomenon in migration, remittances, goes beyond the simple activity of exchanging money to constitute a social exchange among families (Gentry and Mittelstaedt 2009).

Sharing in diaspora is, in this sense, a fruitful potential point of departure for consumer researchers interested in joining the worldwide initiative of maximizing positive effects of migration. These sharing in experiences help migrants commemorate their links to their countries of birth without necessarily having to return. At the same time, they allow home countries to enjoy valuable contributions from those far from home who have increased their professional and personal experiences.

This seems to be, for instance, the case for China and its strategy of managing and attracting back its scientific diaspora in North America and Europe through implementing flexible scientific careers. China offers mid-career Chinese Scientists the possibility to spend part of the year in Western countries and the other part in China, while doing their scientific work (Cookson 2010). China’s strategy has been adequate because answering to a simple human concern, the autobiographical-concern applied in a sharing in process. Constructing a completely new life story from scratch could be seen as infeasible. Therefore, having the opportunity to be in both places could help bridging the gap; we remain historical-beings.

Issues for Future Research

This theoretical perspective will be concluded by mentioning some of the multiple ways in which marketing researchers can contribute to worldwide initiatives towards diasporas’ engagement with their home countries.
Likelihood to share in diaspora

One of the first questions we would need to address is the understanding of why some foreigners are more likely to share their learning experiences or welfare with their home countries than others? What are the main factors needed for this sharing to occur?

Typology of sharing in behaviors

In addition to identifying motivations behind diasporas’ engagement in sharing experiences, it also seems pertinent to study the different forms those engagements take and the specific meanings behind each of them.

“You too” and “as myself” phenomenology

As migration is often undertaken in order to improve personal or family well-being, diasporas’ engagement can be understood through the lens of the phenomenology of “you too” or “as myself” (Ricœur 1990). Diasporas’ engaging experiences may shed some light on the way migration experiences are mythologized as a way of reaching well-being and how those myths may challenge local dominant cultures (Thompson 2004).

Diaspora Networks

A potential path for immediate future research is the study of diasporas’ networks or public-private partnerships (e.g. ChileGlobal, www.chileglobal.org, or Colombia Nos Une, www.colombianosune.com) and their sharing experiences. There is probably a lot of work still to be done in order to develop these diasporas’ networks or partnerships in order to favor sharing behaviors. In this framework, the knowledge built-up in studies of brand communities could form an interesting source of insights (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

Emotions in diasporas’ engagement

Behind sharing experiences, it would probably be very insightful to also inquire about the emotions that motivate diasporas’ engagement, such as remorse or guilt. Are engaging initiatives with home countries mechanisms for compensating for personal absence? Do migrants feel guilty for not physically being with their co-citizens in bad times? As migrants sometimes enjoy better quality of life in developed countries this would be an interesting possibility for pursuing insightful consumer research on diasporas’ engagement.

Conclusion

The philosophical approach to narrative identity shows us that there is a open link between current life stories and past experiences. The process of identity construction is deeply rooted in the kind of person we have been so far. Autobiographical memories represent important sources for designing alternatives of oneself. The behavioral question we ask, when selecting the experiences we will make part of, is not only “what should I do” – alternatives for oneself – but also, “who do I want to become” – alternatives of oneself (Bransen 2008).
In this framework, migration is an important disruption in life where our narratives can be seriously modified. Each modification, by definition, implies that there is already something that has been built. Human beings’ transformations are always reconstructions. In this context, home countries constitute one of the most important pieces of raw material at the disposal of human beings in migration. Most migrants are familiar with the day-to-day routine of being asked about their places of birth shortly after meeting someone for the first time. They also, spontaneously, very often think and talk about the places they come from and are therefore considered to be accountable for their personal roots. Migrants constantly revisit the experiences they lived in mother countries, this still happens sometimes years after migrating. Even second and third generations of migrants’ descendants develop similar schemes.

While migrants have to cope with important losses in terms of life context, sending countries will equally have to manage the losses generated by migrants – innovative ideas, skilled workers, tax revenues, and important service providers such as educators or health professionals. Experiences such as sharing in seem, in this context, to be an important key in the process of compensation for these kind of losses.

Identifying and analyzing which experiences are put in place as facilitators for sharing in behaviors would provide a support for policy-makers to set incentives for brain drain’s compensation. Because sharing in behaviors during diasporas may initiate from the autobiographical need of reaffirming connections to home countries, they can be expected to constitute creative, long-lasting and disinterested contributions.

The intent of this article is therefore to invite other researchers to also explore the multiple mechanisms of diasporas’ engagements. This exercise would provide important insights about the way diasporas conserve and preserve personal dynamic past.

References


