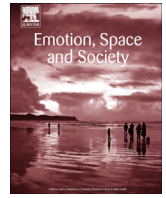




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The irony of kinship migration and the control of emotions among Malayalis

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses migrants' uses of irony in relation to normative conceptions of intergenerational affection, in Kerala (South India) and in the diaspora. It draws from current understanding of irony not only as a figure of speech but also as an emotionally-charged attitude of scorn and dissatisfaction towards a dominant view of society. The ethnography shows how irony emerges in context where present forms of mobility are set against a past of painful kinship ruptures, and aims at creating a distance between the subject and the emotional charge of the stories recalled. It suggests how the sociological understanding of emotions within processes of contemporary migration should go beyond the 'here and now' of research contexts, to interrogate the relevance of longer family histories. It also argues for the need to look beyond the dominant trope of nostalgia to look at how migrants' emotions towards kin might be moulded by recurrent – and often unresolved – ambivalence. Irony emerges as an important affective frame through which migrants express – and importantly try to control – conflicting emotions as displaced subjects. It constitutes an emotional work through which migrants make sense of events over which they do not feel they have total control, and yet with the intention of asserting their own truth about the parodies and paradoxes of family lives.

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Sanjay, the 'hero' of the story I wish to begin with, left his native village in central Kerala when he was in his twenties. This was in 1966, a time when his once prestigious Brahmin community was facing a longstanding decline in wealth and status. Yet very few at that time had the courage to break with the conservativeness of kinship networks and to relocate to North India or abroad as Sanjay did. He was *de facto* a 'hero' for many who stayed behind. His infrequent trips 'home' were fringed by the visits of people who wished to pay him homage and, often, to ask for favours. When I met him in Kerala, Sanjay was a retired doctor who enjoyed the benefits of a long career in the United States. As an anthropologist interested in migration and family history among Hindu middle classes, I was particularly lucky to meet him during one of his rare visits. 'He has experienced a lot', people told me with a hint of mystery. One day he approached the courtyard of my family's village-house and called to me in an apparently resigned mood:

'Get ready ... since you are here you should not miss the rare opportunity to visit my beautiful ancestral house'. I noticed an ill-concealed irony in his invitation, but decided to leave my 'interrogation' for later on. During our journey, Sanjay pretended to be relaxed but his bodily jerks betrayed some emotional distress. At times Sanjay sighed and, when he perceived his own mood, tried to control himself by casting out ironic sentences like: *'Isn't lovely to have so many relatives to visit?'* In fact our visit to his *mana* (ancestral home) could hardly have been described as a 'warm' encounter. Formal reception on the house veranda was accompanied by the usual *chai* (spiced tea), but a certain embarrassment and the silent scrutiny of Sanjay's relatives let the difficulty of relations shine through. On our way back, when I finally asked Sanjay for explanations, he initially dismissed the question by saying that his success in life had been achieved thanks to a break with his family. According to him, family relations had never fully recovered even after *'all these years spent away and all I did to help some of them'*.

These ethnographic insights introduce us to the broader sociological question of the relation between migration, social mobility and emotions. In this contribution I draw from my fieldwork with Nambudiri Brahmin migrants in Kerala, North India and the UK to explore how people cope with intergenerational conflicts. My

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argument is twofold. Firstly, I suggest how the sociological understanding of emotions within processes of contemporary migration should go beyond the 'here and now' of research contexts, to interrogate the relevance of longer family histories. Secondly, I argue for the need to look beyond the dominant trope of *nostalgia* to address how migrants' emotions towards kin might be moulded by often unresolved ambivalence. I argue that irony is an important affective frame through which migrants express – and importantly try to control – conflicting emotions as displaced subjects. Irony is intended here as a rhetorical device aimed at emphasizing the absurdities of social life, and the presence of competing versions of the world (Fernandez and Huber, 2001). Specifically, I conceive irony as an emotional work through which migrants make sense of events over which they do not feel they have total control, and yet with the intention of asserting their own truth about these events.

1. Mobility, emotions and critical distance

Scholars have recently recognized the importance of emotions in the study of migrant families. This literature has interrogated the multi-faceted ways in which diasporic lives produce and reflect changing cultures of affection (Christou, 2011; Ewing, 2005; Parrenas, 2005; Svasek, 2008). The ways in which emotions are involved in migration are determinant in processes of identity formation. People can have different emotional responses to mobility, and these are heavily influenced by the socio-economic, political and cultural conditions of migration. The study of emotions offers important insights into how power relations come to be experienced, articulated and, when possible, challenged among mobile subjects (Svasek, 2010). Transnational lives also question the cultural codes through which emotions are expressed in different contexts (Brown, 2011). As Escandell and Tapias (2010: 418) argue: '...emotions not only have 'local' meanings, manifestations and effects to each country, but also recombined 'local' meanings which make sense when embedded within the transnational cultural trajectory of the migrant life'. It is possible to extend this argument by stressing the importance of the *temporal dimension* of this 'cultural trajectory'. Emotional geographies not only reformulate different cultural codes of affection across geographical distance. They often locate the subject within longer histories of collective mobility which, as I hope to show below, may transform social expectations towards migrants' emotional lives. In the sociological study of emotions, the self should be considered as a 'relational being-in-the world that is captured by his or her surroundings and engaging with *past*, *present* and *futuresituations*' (Svasek, 2010: 868).

Emotions represent what Skrbis (2008: 234) calls a 'glue of an existing co-dependency' between the social domains of the *family*, of *transnational migration* and of *belonging* both at conceptual and experiential levels. As has been noted, socially constructed notions of nostalgia play a pivotal role in designing geographies of 'longing and belonging' among displaced subjects, and in orienting migrants' transnational commitments towards the homeland (Blunt, 2005; Boym, 2001; Brown, 2011; Rubenstein, 2001). In current accounts, nostalgia emerges as an affective exercise through which mobile subjects express the sense of loss *of* and desire *for* idealized kinship intimacy and territorial belonging. I believe that the 'politics of nostalgia' also voices migrants' claim to an *exclusive* status, in so far as it emphasizes the sacrifices of migration, as well as the rewards and costs of gaining exposure to the 'outer' world. Nostalgic attitudes may also be interpreted as a legitimized code through which migrants continue to express loyalty towards the homeland or other diasporic places (Vertovec, 1997). In doing so, while conveying the contradictions of migrants' lives, nostalgic attitudes also apparently 'resolve' underpinning ambivalences by

accepting a certain degree of continuity with the homeland and with its past.

Yet recent ethnographies also point out persistent tensions in the way emotional life is experienced by migrant families. In her study of Japanese migrant women, Maehara (2010: 958) notes how 'appropriate feelings' are in principle ascribed to migrant women by Japanese society, and how the inability to meet normative expectations produces conflicting emotional loyalties between 'here' and 'there'. Drawing from Svasek and Skrbis (2007), Maehara (2010: 964) defines 'emotional dissonance' as a situation of inconsistency between different emotional cultures which is experienced by migrants in different stages of migration. Similarly, Baldassar (2008) links the sociological analysis of emotions within transnational families to the study of how notions of obligations and commitments among kin vary cross-culturally. Through her ethnography of migrant Italian families in Australia, Baldassar (2008: 248) unpacks how 'the emotional experience of the absence of loved ones' in intergenerational relations is informed by ideas of old age and dependency. Baldassar's analysis of the normative side of kin work 'at a distance' (cf. di Leonardo, 1987) also addresses the crucial issue of 'emotional disappointment', as a situation in which expectations fail to meet reality. Simple events like migrants' visits home can reveal the existence of ambivalent kinship relations rather than emotional closeness and family solidarity. Both studies are significant for the present purpose insofar as they raise the important question of the relation between kinship norms, emotional codes and the 'unpredictability' of changes occurring through migration. The traversing of changing emotional codes and the difficulty of meeting social expectations creates ambivalence in the way migrants experience and articulate their emotional lives, particularly during crucial changes in their life-cycles (cf. Gardner, 2002).

The inclusion of irony within the sociological analysis of migrants' emotions, I suggest, is particularly valuable in grasping how migrants elaborate and cope with the 'emotional dissonance' arising from conducting lives across (sometimes) conflicting affective codes. Irony has increasingly emerged under conditions of uncertainty driven by (post-) modernity and globalization to voice unequal distributions of power (Fernandez and Huber, 2001; Taylor, 2001). Through irony, people highlight the 'incongruities between illusions and reality' and between 'ideas and practices' and they search for a 'critical distance' from situations that can potentially overwhelm their position within society (Steele, 2010: 95, 96). Irony can be considered as an 'emotionally-charged value judgment' that touches upon thorny 'issues of inclusion and exclusion, intervention and evasion' and can involve different degrees of emotional involvement (Hutcheon, 1994: 2–4) both from the point of view of the ironist and of the interpreter (recipient) of irony. In capturing the ambivalences of contemporary lives, irony constitutes an important lens through which to analyse how mobile subjects cope with the tension arising from conflicting emotional involvements. Following Wilson and Sperber (2012: 134), I consider irony not only a figure of speech – intended to communicate the opposite of a literal meaning – but also as a performative 'attitude of scorn towards general expectations'. In this reading, the ironic subject is *echoing* a thought (a belief, a norm, a value) which is usually shared by a collective and assumes a provocative or mocking attitude towards the same thought. In doing so the ironist puts into question a specific way of interpreting reality, and proposes his/her doubts or dissatisfactions with accepted truths. We can therefore interpret Sanjay's irony towards his family in a double sense. By casting doubts about the 'goodness' of a visit to his ancestral house, he challenges the dominant expectations of migrants' devotion towards elder relatives. At the same time, by questioning family relations in his migrant biography, Sanjay's

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