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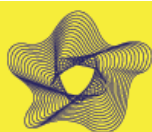
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IMTFI
INSTITUTE FOR MONEY, TECHNOLOGY
& FINANCIAL INCLUSION

Wednesday, May 20, 2015

Juggling Currencies in Transborder Contexts: Field Notes from Sabinilla and Calexico (Part 2)

By IMTFI Researchers *Magdalena Villarreal, Joshua Greene, and Lya Niño*

Part II

Turning the lens to Mexicali, on the contiguous Mexican border with the United States, one finds people also juggling currencies. Here, making currency transactions between pesos and dollars is an everyday matter, as illustrated in this example of a so-called 'dollar girl' exchanging currencies for people in their cars as they wait in line to cross the border.

In scenarios like this, we immediately come across everyday transactions that involve the use of differential normative, cultural, moral, and symbolic frameworks. Sandra, for example, went back to Mexicali - the city where she grew up and her parents live - after losing her house at the Imperial Valley. However, she commutes to Calexico twice a week to take care of her one-year-old granddaughter. In the same way, Sandra's minor son, who studies at El Centro, California, lives with her sister, who cares for him. Another similar case is that of Karla, who lives in Calexico. She organizes "garage sales" in El Centro, California, and her mother, who lives in Mexicali, arrives to her house very early to care for the grandchildren. When Karla and her family go on vacation, they leave the key to their mother so that she can drop in and check the house, but overall so that she can feed the dogs.

Another example concerns borrowing social security numbers. Undocumented workers can greatly benefit from a social security number, which is held by legal citizens or residents. Here, different calculations are brought into play. Those working in Mexico can lend out the social security number in exchange for unemployment benefits in times when there is no work and income tax returns. But many prefer not to use such benefits and instead profit from the work history provided by those who are using their number. In the longer term, this will be beneficial in their applications for United States citizenship. They are very careful, however, to cross the border only at times when the people using their numbers are not expected to be working.

On the other hand, Mexicans in need of cash might cross the border to sell their blood (as can be seen in the picture below taken in Calexico, United States: note that it is written in Spanish, i.e. for a Spanish-speaking audience).

It is also common for Mexicans to cross the border to labor in the agricultural fields, hire themselves as domestic helpers, gardeners, cleaners, assist nurses or care for the elderly, etc. as well as organize ROSCAS, buy groceries, and even cash pensions for friends for neighbors who are not able to cross to 'the other side', or simply as a favor.



Plasma center in Calexico, United States (Photo by the authors)

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informed about work sources, work conditions, contracts and benefits such as the unemployment compensation. Some farm workers learn how to use several social security numbers and receive “unemployment compensation” while they work in other areas, usually following “runs” or going to work “up North”.

And the search for a double nationality cannot be set aside of this point. In border cities of northern Mexico, it is very common that women give birth to their children in the United States. Here, the social networks play an important role, because information concerning medical services, lodging, etc. is required. Patricia, for example, lives with her two children in Mexicali. Both were born in Riverside, California, where her brother and sister in law helped with all the necessary logistics. Even though Riverside is located 170 miles from Mexicali, her relatives had made calculations and hospitalization in this city appeared cheaper than in Indio. A week before giving birth, he and her sister in law went to pick her up and hosted her during this period, until she considered it safe for the baby to travel back.

Living on the border, it is convenient to manage oneself in English as well as Spanish to be able to switch quickly between calculations in dollars and in pesos, but also to be *au fait* on legislation and normative frameworks on both sides of the border. The latter is a difficult task, since it not only entails reading and understanding the small print in contracts and legislations, but also being able to anticipate problems that can arise, and having the capacity to juggle with the different currencies entailed in their everyday transactions.

Read *Juggling Currencies in Transborder Contexts: Field Notes from Sabinilla and Calexico (Part 1)*

Link to film: "[Juggling Currencies](#)" (40min)

Posted by TSF at 8:15 AM



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