

Collective Defense Mechanisms in the Polish Peasant Families

- *Extended Abstract* -

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At the turn of the twentieth century, large-scale migration from Eastern Europe to the United States reorganized family life across continents. Migration separated family members for years at a time, while communication depended almost entirely on letters that were slow and irregular, shaped by the costs and uncertainties of transatlantic exchange. In these circumstances, family members could not directly observe one another's labor or commitment to shared obligations. Distance therefore produced not only physical separation but also informational separation, generating persistent uncertainty about whether migrants and those who remained in Europe continued to cooperate in sustaining the kinship ties.

Classic sociological work recognized that migration transforms family organization by redistributing authority and accountability across space. In their foundational study of migrant correspondence, "*The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*" (1918–1920), William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki showed that letters served as a primary medium through which migrants and their families negotiated obligation and identity across distance. More broadly, scholarship on migration and transnational families has emphasized how communication technologies shape family coordination and emotional life (e.g., Levitt 2001; Schiller and Caglar 2011; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2021). Yet while this literature demonstrates that transnational families remain socially connected despite geographic separation, less attention has been paid to the interactional mechanisms through which trust and authority are stabilized when communication is delayed and effort cannot be directly observed.

The problem is fundamentally one of cooperation under informational uncertainty. In co-present families, obligation fulfillment is often visible through everyday participation in labor, caregiving, and household management. Historical migration disrupts this visibility. When migrants depart, their contributions to the family become temporally delayed and symbolically mediated. Letters must substitute for observation, and interpretation becomes central to sustaining cooperation. As a result, correspondence becomes a site where family members continually negotiate whether absence reflects constraint or defection. This dynamic resembles classic sociological problems of trust and cooperation under uncertainty (e.g., Gambetta 1988), but it unfolds through everyday communication rather than formal institutions or markets.

I argue that transnational family correspondence is organized through collective defense mechanisms (CDMs, Emirbayer 2025): patterned communicative practices through which family members signal cooperation and reaffirm obligation when direct verification is impossible. Defense moves include explanations of delayed communication, accounts of labor and sacrifice,

appeals to religious or moral authority, expressions of reassurance, and conditional promises regarding future support or return. These communicative forms appear not as isolated rhetorical choices but as recurring combinations that transform uncertainty into enforceable moral claims. Through these interactional sequences, family members reconstruct a shared moral world in which absence can be interpreted as constrained participation rather than abandonment.

The logic of these mechanisms becomes particularly visible in letters written by migrants in the United States, which frequently emphasize work conditions, earnings, hardship, and future prospects. Such economic narratives do more than describe life abroad. They function as signals of continued effort on behalf of the family. Because labor and sacrifice are not directly observable across distance, economic storytelling becomes a substitute for visible contribution. In turn, letters from Europe often reaffirm relational continuity, family reputation, and the moral significance of shared property and kinship ties. Together, these communicative practices sustain trust across prolonged separation by linking economic effort to moral obligation. In this way, correspondence operates as an interactional field in which trust is not simply maintained but actively produced through communication.

To examine these dynamics empirically, I draw on a newly coded epistolary dataset of 472 letters across 27 family correspondence series drawn from early twentieth-century Polish migrant families, recorded in *“The Polish Peasant.”* These letters provide unusually detailed evidence of how family members interpreted absence, justified delay, negotiated authority, and coordinated decisions across distance. I identify recurring combinations of accounting, piety, shaming, reassurance, and conditional promises that function collectively to stabilize trust and sustain family governance. Letters thus appear not merely as records of migrant experience but as interactional sites where moral regulation is enacted across distance.

Understanding these mechanisms contributes to sociological theory in three ways. First, it shows how cooperation can be maintained when direct observation of effort is impossible, extending theories of trust beyond face-to-face interaction. Second, it reconceptualizes transnational family life as an ongoing process of moral regulation through communication, rather than as a residual effect of migration. Third, it demonstrates that authority in transnational families is stabilized not despite distance, but through communicative practices that transform absence into accountable participation.