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**TANGO IMMIGRANTS  
IN NEW YORK CITY**  
The Value of Social Reciprocities

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*The recent global renaissance of tango dancing has been accompanied by the emergence of a thriving tango economy in New York City (NYC) that has encouraged the arrival of Argentine tango dancers and amateurs artists (tango immigrants) in recent years. This article builds on social capital theory to examine the importance of the Manhattan tango world as a reservoir for social resources (e.g., health information, contact for jobs, referrals) to satisfy their members' social and health needs. Tango immigrants seek informal access to health care through the assistance of health practitioners belonging to their tango networks (tango brokers), a relevant issue given the fact that many artists are uninsured and depend on their physical labor to perform. This article's ultimate goal is aimed at providing a theoretical contribution to our understanding of contemporary entertainment forms as ethnic social niches for immigrants' informal access to valued resources via interpersonal relationships.*

**Keywords:** *social capital; social niches; immigrants; access to health care; Argentina; tango*

**T**he tango's centennial existence, as both a dancing and a musical form, has been marked by periods of uprising and decline in the Río de la Plata region, including Buenos Aires and Uruguay, as well as abroad. Created as the bastard child of a blend of African and European rhythms, the tango's international prominence in the early twentieth century was soon followed by its rising as the symbol of the emergent Argentine urban middle classes of European descent (see Archetti 1997; Corradi 1997; Castro 1991; Guy 1991). In following decades, the tango's fate suffered from uneven periods of stardom and progressive decline, encouraged by periods of military censorship and the rise of folklore music and foreign rhythms, which relegated the tango to secluded social enclaves (Vila 1991; Viladrich 2004; Viladrich, forthcoming a). Since the mid-1980s, however, tango dancing has become the epitome of a lofty dancing trend supported by an eclectic commu-

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nity of tango fans around the globe, which has led its grasp to geographical, commercial, and symbolic areas where it had never been seen before. Despite the fact that the tango has become a global artistic form that resists local adscription to a particular social group or geography, the promotion of Argentine tango has encouraged the demand for professional and amateur tango artists of Argentine origin. In addition, the tango renaissance has helped reactivate a thriving domestic tango industry in Argentina while encouraging the migratory paths abroad of both reputed and amateur Argentine tango artists.

In the midst of its global renaissance, the tango has become the object of growing interest by both the academic and the popular literature, spanning from its conceptualization as an exotic merchandise within the globalized economy of feelings (Savigliano 1995, 2003) to the analysis of its hybridization as an evolving artistic form (see Pelinski 2000; Steingress 2002). Scholars have also explored the tango's social history vis-à-vis the sociopolitical changes that have occurred in Argentina for the past one hundred years (see Viladrich 2003, 2004; Guy 1991; Vila 1991; Castro 1991). Rather than exploring the transnational character of the tango as an artistic form, which has been so well done by colleagues in the field, this article follows an alternative theoretical standpoint. Researchers interested in the novel formation of immigrant communities have somehow overlooked the importance of social entertainment forms as ethnic spaces for social reproduction. In particular, a paucity of research exists regarding the contributions of the tango, as well as other artistic forms, in the creation of social niches that allow the circulation of resources among its members. This article will address this issue by building on the theory of social capital (defined as access to resources via social relationships) to conceptualize the tango's social reproduction as a social field that provides access to precious social assets to its practitioners. It will be argued that the Manhattan tango world, instituted on tango *milongas* (dancing halls), constitutes a point of intersection of Argentines from different social origins who exchange favors and services on the basis of sharing a common tango passion.

The article begins with the presentation of social capital categories and is followed by a detailed description of my participatory role in Manhattan milongas, which allowed me to grasp the subtle nuances of tango immigrants' social exchanges. The article's narrative will continue by revealing the role of the Manhattan tango world as an ethnic

hub and a social field of power that facilitates the exchange of social capital among its members in the form of contacts, jobs, and free access to health care. The latter topic will be further explored by describing tango immigrants' hardships and their access to informal assistance and health resources on the hands of their tango brokers, represented by doctors that provide health resources on the basis of belonging to the same ethnic field. Finally, the article will underscore the contributions of this ethnographic enterprise to our understanding of the importance, as well as the caveats, of social capital categories to our understanding of the role of artistic fields for immigrants' access to informal resources to address their unmet needs.

### **SOCIAL CAPITAL: ACCESS TO RESOURCES VIA SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

The literature on social capital has been prolific in recent years, particularly regarding social inequalities on health (e.g., poverty and social exclusion) and the relationship between morbidity and mortality indicators and socioeconomic status (see Hawe and Shiell 2000; Kawachi et al. 1997; Rose 2000). Bourdieu (1985) emphasizes the notion of social capital as the access to scarce goods via social relationships embedded in specific fields of power, which complements other forms of capital such as economic or symbolic. Within this notion, social capital is unevenly distributed across social classes and can be converted into other types (e.g., economic, human, and symbolic). Contrary to other forms, social capital depends on social webs to be created, circulated, and accumulated (Portes 1998; Fernández Kelly 1995).

Nevertheless its heuristic power, some authors suggest caution with the enthusiastic use of social capital (Cattell 2001; Wall, Ferrazi, and Schryer 1998) because of its dissimilar definitions and operationalizations. Still, some value more its metaphoric power than its practical use (Hawe and Shiell 2000). Furthermore, social capital is often mingled with other forms, such as human or cultural, particularly because of the close relationship among all these types. For example, social capital influences the extent to which individuals expand (or diminish) their human capital (e.g., skills, education, job training; see Coleman 1988), while investments in human and cultural assets also provide opportunities to expand social capital, as in the case of credentials that

entitle membership to exclusive professional clubs (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1979).

In spite of its different conceptualizations, social capital generally refers to the nontangible values exchanged through social relationships that require some kind of reciprocity and trust. As Portes (1998) argues, there is an increasing agreement on the notion of social capital as the ability to obtain valuable resources on the basis of belonging to particular social networks. Contrary to the positive effects commonly associated with the accumulation of social capital, this author also points out some of its negative consequences, such as the exclusion of outsiders and the excessive control and social pressure exerted on networks' members.

In addition, social capital's indicators stem from an array of concepts and vocabulary, including those from the social network and social support literature. Nevertheless, while studies on social networks tend to focus on the quantitative structure of social relationships and those on social support on the qualitative impact of social webs, the notion of social capital emphasizes the access and availability of resources (material and symbolic) by way of social relationships. Furthermore, social capital is invested neither in the individuals themselves nor in the goods provided and received, but in people's social relationships. As other authors have noted (Berkman et al. 2000), although social networks are the source of social capital, the effect of their use is a specific gain (e.g., material or symbolic power).

With regard to social capital's reach and impact, it is not only important to estimate the number of relationships (and their frequency) but also the specific *kind* of social ties able to provide essential resources in time of need. As Fernández Kelly (1995) observes, social networks are not just characterized by the quantity or type of contacts or their strength but by the resources they entitle to their members. Granovetter's (1974) notion of "the strength of weak ties," which emphasizes the importance of indirect relationships in the access to status and power, suggests that strong ties and homogeneous networks are not necessarily considered more convenient for the circulation of social capital than weak and loose webs. The latter may allow access to a wider and richer array of resources via a greater number of contacts. For example, individuals with strong social network resources living in impoverished neighborhoods tend to have less social capital than those with weaker social networks residing in better areas (Cattell 2001;

Fernández Kelly 1994). In addition, while social capital is produced and distributed through social relationships, the number or density of relationships does not guarantee, *per se*, capital accumulation.

For the purpose of this article, *social capital* will be defined as relationships of reciprocity in the provision and reception of social resources (e.g., health advice, referrals, and prescriptions drugs) among immigrants sharing the tango floor. In the following pages, this essay will examine some relevant categories of social capital that will contribute to our understanding of the tango world as a social field, including their members' reliance on *trust* as the basic currency for their interpersonal exchanges, the preeminence of rules of inclusion and exclusion, and bounded solidarity, defined as expectations of interpersonal assistance among those belonging to the same community of interest. *Multiplexity* is probably one of the most relevant concepts related to the accumulation and circulation of social capital, as it suggests its uneven appropriation within and across social webs joined by members belonging to different social strata. As Fernández Kelly (1995, 220) observes, multiplexity refers to the degree to which networks "may be composed of persons with differing social status linked in a variety of ways, who play multiple roles in several fields of activity." Multiplexity expands the possibilities for the circulation of valuable resources (such as housing, jobs, and skills) among those belonging to the same social networks.

In this article, I will argue that Manhattan tango halls constitute a unique multiplexial social field as they gather individuals belonging to different social and cultural worlds on the basis of dancing and listening to tango. This article will also examine the disadvantages of obtaining resources via social webs such as unspecified obligations among parties, which may lead to misunderstandings and disappointments, uncertain time horizons in reciprocity terms, and the potential violation of exchange norms (Portes 1998; Bourdieu 1985).

## ENTERING THE TANGO WORLD

As an Argentine immigrant myself, my incursions into the tango field began a few years ago when as a newcomer in New York City (NYC), I felt compelled to find traces of my own Argentine identity within the façade of an idiosyncratic Argentine milieu. At the time, I

had occasionally attended tango events for the purpose of chatting with friends, while listening to the same old tango tunes that my relatives used to hum and sing when I was growing up in Buenos Aires. With the guidance of Argentine comrades, I discovered early on the nomadic milongas that began mushrooming in the mid-1990s, along with the underground social world that was attracting both Argentine and international regulars alike. Although in the following years I continued being in touch with some of the tango acquaintances I had met during those early outings, I neither joined the troupe of tango practitioners nor included tango lessons as part of my cosmopolitan social routine (Viladrich, forthcoming b, forthcoming c).

The tango world was again brought up to my attention some years later when as a PhD candidate at Columbia University, I began conducting research on Argentine immigrants' social networks and was attempting to understand the importance of entertainment forms as social reservoirs for social webs to be activated and reproduced. At that time, tango dancing in Manhattan had already become a unique entertainment field attracting an eclectic cluster of Argentine artists and entrepreneurs, along with a multinational crowd. This also took place at a time when ballroom dancing (e.g., salsa, swing, rumba) was becoming popular not only on the East Coast but also on the West Coast (Finnegan 1992), following a renewed global interest in eclectic ethnic trends and world music. The latter led a growing number of aficionados into taking dancing lessons in Latin American and Caribbean tunes, attracted by their exotic hints, the physicality of coupling dancing, and its dramatic composition (Dunning 1997; Hood 1994).

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the former timid presence of tango in NYC dancing academies had been replaced by burgeoning tango venues where teaching and dancing tango (and tango only) had become a cornerstone of the Manhattan entertainment world. Suddenly, the tango world revealed itself as the visible façade of the Argentine minority that until recently had remained as a hidden immigrant group in NYC. On this realization, I decided to focus on the tango world as a specific case study where Argentines, along with an international crowd of *milongueros* (tango dancers), congregate to dance and exchange valuable resources, from visa information to free prescription of drugs.

For two years (1999–2001), I conducted formal fieldwork for this study, which in practice continued after the data collection was com-

pleted. The ethnographic methods implemented mostly relied on participant observation and informal interviews held with tango artists and patrons. In addition, I conducted fifteen interviews with Argentine tango artists and entrepreneurs, following a semistructured guideline that addressed their sociodemographic characteristics and migratory story, their health status, and the resources (both informal and formal) through which they attempted to solve their health problems in NYC. I also inquired about their perceived obstacles in obtaining affordable care in the United States and the strategies they implemented to overcome them. Systematic field notes were written throughout the research process. During fieldwork, I also jotted down quotes and accounts of conversations with immigrants in the field (field cases) whose remarks were illuminating on some of the main aspects described in this article. Although the project included tango venues in other NYC boroughs, I mostly focused on Manhattan milongas, given their relevance as unique social resorts for Argentine immigrants as well as an international audience of practitioners.

For months, I followed my tango informants through their social and artistic troupes, often waiting for them at dancing academies and milongas doorsteps during cold winter evenings. I visited nightclubs and restaurants where my tango comrades worked (as hostesses, waiters and occasionally as dancers or singers), and I listened to their life stories over *mate* (an herbal drink) and Argentine pastries at the coffee shops of Little Argentina in Queens. I also chaperoned them to different institutions and job venues, which provided me with an acute sense of the resources they had (and did not have), along with witnessing the display of their diverse social personas.

As a female Argentine immigrant myself, most of my interviewees felt that "I was one of them" even though I am not a tango artist and do not publicly practice tango. In fact, my nondancing participatory role ended up becoming the most conspicuous unanticipated decision I made during fieldwork, as it provided me with a unique opportunity to talk with all sorts of tango artists and enthusiasts who would join me at the side of the dancing floor in between tango tunes to rest, drink, and eat (Viladrich, forthcoming c). In between sets, tango musicians, dancers, and their friends would gather around a table to chat, sharing stories and complaints. During my incursions to milongas salons, it was common to witness milongueros' exchange information and resources regarding housing facilities, visa applications, and cheap access to



health care. As many of us would see each other on a regular basis, our encounters on the tango floor would seem like an expected rendezvous that lengthened the thematic thread of previous exchanges. Much of my understanding of the informal transactions taking place at the milongas arose from my participation in these informal gatherings that often preceded and followed my formal interviews with tango immigrants. On those occasions, my informants would spontaneously engage in discussing their everyday tribulations and other issues on which I would eventually provide my expertise. Sharing information often involved seeking help for physical complaints such as sore muscles, a common issue given tango immigrants' reliance on their physical strength to both teach and perform.<sup>1</sup>

As I was studying social capital, I did not immediately realize that my encounters in the field would be tainted with the same limitations that characterize social capital exchanges (Viladrich, forthcoming b). Social reciprocity in the tango field, although not limited to those sharing the same nationality, translates into subtle rights and obligations in which the terms of the transactions are not always clearly delimited, and my case was no exception. As I did not pay my interviewees for their participation in this study, we typically subscribed to informal agreements of reciprocity. As part of a discreet code of interpersonal trade, most of my tango friends would generously share their stories with me in exchange for my services as translator, shopping guide, and unconditional listener to their everyday tribulations. Our regular conversations included accounts of their disenchantments with compatriots who had unreliably promised some help to solve a myriad of problems, from filling forms for health insurance applications to getting new visas after their previous ones had expired. Although for the most part, I was able to satisfy my informants' open (and often understated) requests for assistance in exchange for their volunteering information, I also experienced a few frustrated social encounters tainted by our often blurred and unspoken contractual terms.

### **THE MANHATTAN TANGO WORLD: A SOCIAL NICHE FOR ARGENTINE ARTISTS**

Argentines dance with a natural passion, while Americans dance with a borrowed one. (American tango fan)

For the purpose of this article, the most significant aspect characterizing the NYC's tango world relates to the emergence of a Manhattan tango niche fed by an international community of well-off customers, tango amateurs, and struggling artists from different nationalities. In only a few years, Manhattan milongas and other tango settings have become glamorous events readily available to an international clientele with enough economic capital, time to spare, and loneliness to share. Manhattan tango venues are unique multiplexial social fields (rich in social capital) that attract a variety of customers from diverse social origins and professions. They provide a wide range of tango products: ballroom lessons catering to the international middle and upper-middle class, milongas with restaurant and bar services, seminars and workshops to explore diverse sexual possibilities, and tango lessons for the gay community. In Manhattan alone, on any day of the week, there are at least three tango milongas to choose from. During the spring and the summer, tango is also being danced outdoors in Central Park, the Sea Port, and at the Lincoln Center under the sponsorship of the Lincoln Center Outdoor Festival, which usually includes two outdoor tango nights.

Manhattan milongas typically follow a complex routine that usually begins with a class (for apprentices and those who want to enhance their skills for a moderate fee), followed by ballroom dancing that usually extends until late hours at night. For a given fee (usually between ten and fifteen dollars) some milongas offer some food and soft drinks, while others have a full bar and restaurant available on the premises. Dancing sets are organized according to different pieces interpreted by either an ensemble of tango musicians or recorded tunes from old-time Argentine tango orchestras. On regular intervals, dancers usually stop to switch partners, rest, converse, and eat or drink, particularly in between musical sets.

In spite of the participation of amateurs from all nationalities in the tango's social reproduction, the predominance of the Argentine style in the ballroom floor (with all its variances) has contributed to placing Argentine artists in the spotlight. Internationally, the promotion and practice of "Argentine tango" has captured a loyal audience of customers and fans who, particularly in NYC, are eager to learn from those who embody the know-how of the tango's technical and emotional reservoir. Therefore, tango performance has become a vehicle for Argentines to become ambassadors of the genre and a passport to leave their

country in search for better opportunities abroad. As a result, growing numbers of Argentine artists have arrived in NYC in recent years eager to satisfy the demand arising from the offerings of new tango products, including the opening of new milongas and the presence of new and recycled tango shows. According to Windhausen (2001), the search for tango professors in the early 1990s stimulated the “importation” of both tango instructors and dancers from Argentina. Many Argentines, descendants of those European immigrants who held tango as their personal rubric a century ago, are currently the ones in charge of bringing it abroad.

As with other immigrant groups (see Waldinger 1999, 2001) network recruitment has become the main strategy to bring compatriots into the tango field, which has reassured the Argentine presence in both the local and the international market. Argentine tango artists, both in New York and other global cities, have taken advantage of the international demand for the tango’s sublimated passion that implies the circulation of emotional capital (see Savigliano 1995) by stressing their reputation as the *authentic* interpreters of the genre and the *legitimate holders* of the tango spirit. Therefore, being Argentine and being able to teach/dance tango has become a precious combination, a social warranty to reassure that passionate tango will emanate from its original reservoirs. In the words of one tango artist,

Being Argentine and teaching tango is a plus; we are expected to know about it, and it gives us an advantage over other tango teachers since tango is our national product.

Although from a technical point of view, it would be difficult to distinguish among tango instructors and dancers from different nationalities, Argentine tango dancers rely on the status ascribed to their national origin, as well as to their extensive experience in tango practice, to consider themselves as the natural translators of the tango’s emotional philosophy over their non-Argentine competitors. For many, the tango can be taught, interpreted, and danced by an international crowd around the world, but it is mostly through its Argentine carriers that it develops its “true character.” Milongas run by Argentines not only draw the presence of the Argentine community at large but also sponsor the itinerant visits of reputed Argentine artists who come to NYC on regular basis to perform and teach tango workshops. In NYC, not all milongas are run

by Argentines, but those hosted by them hold a touch of legitimacy as unique social resorts where dancing and listening to tango tunes goes along with socializing, drinking, and eating, as will be discussed next.

### UNCOVERING THE SOCIAL WORLD OF MANHATTAN MILONGAS

Although the main stated purpose of tango practitioners and artists is to practice complicated steps with others, there is much more at stake among those who regularly meet at the Manhattan milongas. Participant observation allowed me to grasp the relevance of the tango field as a community of interest among worldwide tango artists and patrons, supported by relational dynamics often marked by spontaneous social negotiations instituted by subtle power hierarchies. Following Bourdieu's conceptualization (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1979), tango milongas can be considered as unique social fields in which relationships of power are dynamic and relational and supported by actors' shared rules of the game.

As stated earlier, multiplexial social networks are characterized by their members' diversity in terms of social statuses, skills (human capital), and fields of activity. Although Manhattan milongas mostly recruit a middle-class clientele (e.g., professionals, entrepreneurs, and business people), they also welcome a heterogeneous crowd of Argentines from diverse social origins, including impoverished tango newcomers and representatives of the old tango guard. In spite of the fact that Manhattan milongas are for-profit enterprises, they constitute splendid social venues for Argentines to interact and exchange favors and services.

Paradoxically, accumulation of social capital among tango practitioners also requires other sources of capital (Bourdieu 1985; Howe and Shiell 2000), particularly as its investment is money-spending, energy-costing, and time-consuming endeavor. For example, in order to diversify their pool of potential students, as well as to be in tune with the latest dancing venues, tango immigrants must spend more resources (e.g., expensive dresses, commuting time, money to pay for transportation and meals) than they would if remaining isolated and indoors or as members of narrower social niches. For reputed and aspiring tango artists (even if dancing part-time), attending different milongas on regular

basis is a condition *sin equanon* and an investment that must be taken seriously to make their careers flourish. As noted earlier, capital accumulation relies on the importance of relying on social connections to achieve goals and resources (see Lin 2001; Willer 1999). The urge for tango immigrants to be “on the spot” also relates to social capital’s *reverse depreciation* through which the more it is used, the larger it becomes. In the words of an informant: “you have to be seen, you have to get there and practice with your students, talk to your peers and show that you are serious about it, even if you are exhausted by the end of the day.”

Indeed, the time and energy spent at the milonga also means social investment (in the form of contacts, relationships, and referrals) that can potentially turn into meaningful leads during the daytime. By sharing the tango floor, tango immigrants get embedded in subtle power games in which they try to impress each other and gain access to scarce resources, such as invitations to participate in upscale dancing shows and contacts to get entry into prestigious dancing auditions. Dancing couples will display their skills in front of others not just to enhance their reputation but also to woo potential students, and tango amateurs will attempt to enchant respected tango artists, secretly hoping to become tango performers themselves. In almost all cases, tango habitués interact with each other over and over by attending different tango venues every week, even before or after the milongas have closed their doors. Tango immigrants and their customers get involved in more than one “game” at the same time (in Bourdieu’s [1984] terms), as they perform as professors-students during tango classes, as partners during the tango practice, and even as friends who may go out for a bite late at night once dancing is over.

Within its diversity, the tango field operates within a particular hierarchy of professional authority and prestige that does not necessarily follow mainstream status markers. Those who are more experienced and have built their careers as well-known milongueros may not be the most successful in mainstream society, and vice versa. As a chain of alternate hierarchies, the superiority of the expert dancer and musician on the tango floor becomes the ground for leveraged power with those belonging to higher status positions in the outer world. The same well-off tango devotee, who will celebrate the opportunity to dance and take lessons from one of the many expert female dancers in an evening milonga, will be the one who will hire her as a part-time secretary or as a

waitress during the daytime. And vice versa, the young Argentine male tango practitioner who arrives late in the milonga, just after having finished his chores as a busboy at a nearby restaurant, will benefit from the contacts, treats, and generous friendship offered by the affluent professional women to whom he has become a steady tango companion.

As informed by social exchange theorists (see Zafirovski 2001), the interpersonal transactions taking place in the tango world provide revenues to those located at strategic sites, closer to those well connected with both the job and the artistic market. Above all, if milongas welcome a variety of tango immigrants, adherents, and entrepreneurs, then those who get closer to the decision-making nodes benefit from their tango connections the most. In sum, what happens at the dancing floor is transferred to the wider world, particularly among those for whom the tango field constitutes a nurturing social hub that provides specific responses to their everyday needs.

Even when the trade of resources would not appear to be based on reciprocal obligations, some kind of return will be expected in the medium and long run. Quite often, I heard my informants say “te hago la gauchada,” which literally means “I’ll be a good gaucho,” a slang phrase that refers to helping others without expecting specific goods in exchange. Nevertheless, intangible returns in the form of moral obligation and personal gratitude will be expected, or will be sanctioned with open or subtle criticism otherwise. As Portes notes (1998), what characterizes the provision and reception of social capital is that reciprocity terms are neither univocal nor scheduled in advance. Although in some cases, it may seem that no payment is involved, exchanges may be delayed in time and specification of mutual benefits may not be explicit, aspects that will be explored next.

## **SOCIAL RECIPROCITY AND TANGO BROKERS**

You can find all the resources you need in the tango world. (Cristal, thirty-year-old tango dancer)

In spite of the glamour that characterizes the internationalization of tango dancing, the lives of most tango artists are not as flamboyant as their external personas might suggest. Quite often, the tango’s apparent lavishness has led observers to overlook the hardships experienced by many artists, who become prey of the job market’s uncertainties. Sev-

eral of the tango artists I met in the field were forced to perform a dual life by combining their roles as “glamorous artists” with low-skilled occupations to make ends meet (see Viladrich 2005).

Indeed, many tango immigrants endure everyday lives that are far from the fairy tales imagined by many of their compatriots back home. To a certain extent, tango artists have problems similar to the ones experienced by other immigrants, including holding undocumented statuses and facing obstacles to obtaining affordable health care. In some cases, they are forced to work as part-time contractors or as freelancers by being “on call” at different tango venues that may need them on last-minute notice. Tango artists are especially vulnerable to the high costs of living in NYC, expenses that are much more predictable than their changing, and often erratic, job opportunities. Surely, the expensive prices of basic goods (such as food, transportation, and housing) are problems affecting tango immigrants the most, as they must invest considerable time and money in the production of their tango personas.<sup>2</sup> Many of the tango artists I met during fieldwork were forced to perform a dual life by combining their roles as “alluring artists” with low-skilled occupations (Viladrich 2005). In the young female dancer Carmin’s words,

People in Argentina think that this is a glamorous life and that it is easy to make money here, but they don’t realize how tough it is. New York is a very competitive place, which in part is good because it forces you to continue learning, but it is also difficult and expensive to live here. There are so many out there trying to make it in the city.

Most tango immigrants do not count on health insurance in the United States, despite having to rely on their physical ability to make ends meet. Curiously, health issues among artists in general, and among tango artists in particular, have been mostly unstudied, although performers (musicians and dancers) depend on their bodies to excel on their artistic skills, which also demand continuous investments (e.g., time, practice, rehearsals, and rest), to keep their careers ongoing. Physical injuries on arms and legs were among the most frequent problems reported by the participants in this study, problems that if not properly attended to could impair their ability to teach, play, sing, and dance. Unquestionably, good physical health is a prerequisite in a tight job market where professors and artists compete for students and sponsors. Roman (a tango newcomer in his sixties who plays the *ban-*

*doneón*) summarized the fears he shared with his colleagues regarding health issues in the following way:

Here, one becomes a doctor for oneself. You have to be okay since there is no insurance and everything is expensive. I would like to insure my hands just in case something happens and I can't play anymore. The problem of [a lack of] coverage is one of the big issues for immigrants like us.

It is precisely because of tango immigrants' exposure to unexpected changes of luck and fate (e.g., not having a visa, loosing their tango patrons) that the tango field has become such a resourceful hub where they get exposure and have access to different resources to satisfy their diverse needs. Contrary to the emphasis placed on social networks' size and density, social capital theory highlights the quality of social webs in terms of allowing their members to access valued resources rather than of their frequency or number of their social contacts. Argentine artists rely on their ingenious talents to make ends meet other than the practice of tango, and milongas are ideal hubs to advertise their services. For example, a young apprentice of oriental therapies may provide her services for free to her tango clients eager to play as guinea pigs for their in-residence therapist. On the basis of "bartering" services, some tango artists are eager to teach lessons for free in exchange for help finding cheap housing or affordable health care.

As noted before, the amount of social capital is relatively independent of the size and density of social networks. For example, my informants' opportunities to obtain useful assistance regarding health issues were not a matter of how many individuals they were connected with but rather who they were related to and what sort of relationships they developed with each other (e.g., through mutual obligations). As summarized by one of my interviewees who paraphrased a popular saying, "Dime con quien andas y te dire quien eres" ("Tell me who you are with and I will tell you who you are"). This issue became even more conspicuous when examining tango immigrants' resolution of their health problems and their need to find accessible and affordable medical care in NYC.

Many tango artists solved their more immediate health problems through the direct help of medical doctors and alternative health practitioners (often from Argentina or of Latino origin) who either belonged to their tango networks or were directly referred by them. Particularly



in the case of newcomers, the obstacles to obtaining health services through formal channels were a main reason for them to seek the assistance of their tango comrades to solve their health needs. I have coined the term *tango brokers* to refer to physicians who facilitate immigrants' access to and use of the U.S. health system by virtue of their sharing ethnic and social interests with their clients that transcend the clinical setting. The social capital exchanges involved in this kind of brokerage are at the core of understanding its meaning.

Tango brokers' performance can clearly be witnessed at Manhattan milongas, where health professionals and their clients exchange social resources of different natures (e.g., prescription drugs for social company and tango practice) as members of the same social domain. Tango brokers often become trustful health consultants for their tango pals while charging them lower fees or no fees at all in exchange for opportunities to dance and interact with talented artists and amateur tango fans. While tango artists obtain medical services for low fees or for free, doctors are rewarded, both inside and outside the tango field, in the form of status recognition and potential clientele. Doctors, lawyers, undocumented tango artists, and business entrepreneurs who might not be able to socialize in other social fields will get together in the tango salon to exchange transpiration, embraces, and informal social transactions. In this way, health brokers and tango immigrants subscribe to a paralleled power hierarchy that somehow challenges their status differences in the real world. For most Argentine tango immigrants and tango fans, both uninsured and insured, health brokers constitute the best antidote against the barriers they face to access the U.S. health system, as they speak Spanish, are easily reachable, and treat them as members of the same group. Nevertheless, to find trustful and inexpensive biomedical practitioners is not an easy task, particularly for those who are undocumented and count on few (if any) social connections. Even so, relying on a tango broker does not imply exclusivity or loyalty on their clients' part, as many tango practitioners negotiate different sorts of assistance over time, depending on their specific life circumstances.

In addition, health problems are an additive to the many issues tango immigrants have to deal with in NYC. By following some of my informants through time, I was able to witness the flexibility and vulnerability of tango immigrants' legal careers (changes in their legal status), which in some cases forced them to obtain jobs in less attractive fields. Some tango artists ended up undocumented in the United States mostly

because of the increasing restrictions to obtain visa-sponsored jobs, as well as their difficulties to renew nonpermanent U.S. visas. Even if legally in the United States, tango artists are exposed to the flexibility (and variability) of show business, which often makes them vulnerable to unfair contractual obligations on the part of their employers.

Carmin had begun working as a tango instructor in one of the many dancing studios in Manhattan in exchange for a working visa. Nonetheless, her dream of coming to America seemed crushed. Not only was she forced to teach for uncountable hours in exchange for a minimal wage, but she also had to learn the “American way” to tango as a requirement for her to be able to teach.

I was hired by this academy to teach tango full-time, but they did all sorts of illegal things. For example, I was supposed to sign blank receipts, and they exploited me since they only paid me for a few hours of teaching, although I was there all day. But because they gave me the visa [a working visa], I could not go anywhere. I was trapped and they did not keep their promises.

Nonetheless, thanks to her regular attendance at different Manhattan milongas, Carmin was finally able to meet many other Argentines who ultimately helped her find alternative solutions to both her legal and working tribulations. One of her social connections was Dr. L., an Argentine tango fan who offered her a visa sponsorship in exchange for participating in common professional projects. Through time, this doctor turned out to be Carmin’s legal sponsor and dancing friend, as well as her main medical counselor during critical health episodes, since she was suffering from stress, bodily fatigue, and stomach problems. The following excerpts illustrate Carmin’s combination of diverse healing practices recruited via her tango connections:

I have called my sponsor [Dr. L.] in all cases to ask for his opinion, and then I have self-referred myself to alternative medicine. If I have a problem, he is the first person I will call because he is a physician; he helps me with most of my medical needs. If I cannot find him because he is traveling, I will go to the hospital or to an alternative doctor.

Although Carmin considered herself lucky, she did not regard Dr. L.’s help as an exemption but as a token of the solidarity exchange taking place among compatriots, which implies that those in better positions

should help those in more susceptible ones. Following Carmin's reasoning (also shared by other study participants), these kinds of interactions are not supported by an altruistic nature but by a shared code of reciprocal favors in which the circulation of social capital is nurtured by the exchange of people's singular skills (human capital) within specific social fields. Without knowing it, Carmin was referring to what has been called "bounded solidarity" (Portes 1998; Coleman 1990), which implies actors' provision of valuable resources, without expecting direct retribution, based on their belonging to the same community of interests.

Teo, a tango entrepreneur in his fifties, was an enthusiastic dancer who had limited health coverage that he paid for out-of-pocket. Through his tango activities, Teo had met not only professionals of various disciplines but also a female doctor (Doctor M.) who had become his informal primary care practitioner and with whom he routinely danced tango at weekly milongas. In exchange, Teo would help his friend improve her expertise with tango steps by rehearsing together choreographed tango routines. Teo called this doctor any time he had a health problem, and she would either briefly check his condition at the tango practice or recommend him prescriptions over the phone. Just before our first interview, Teo had experienced continuous coughing and fever and decided to visit the emergency room where he got X rays, after which he remained in bed for several days. Nevertheless, instead of continuing his care through the hospital's doctors (who were not covered by his insurance), Teo asked another tango dancer who was staying in his place at that time to bring the X rays to his doctor friend. After examining the X rays, Doctor M. concluded that he had caught pneumonia (a similar diagnosis to what he got in the hospital) and prescribed him medicines over the phone.

In return for their services, Doctor L. and Doctor M., as many professional tango enthusiasts I met during fieldwork, found in the tango world an ethnic niche where they could dance and practice with skillful artists, as well as develop social relationships with other Argentines. As noted earlier, the tango field constitutes a fertile area for professionals' recruitment of clients, who contribute to building up (and maintaining) their good reputation as well as to increasing their clientele. As Portes (1998) observes, social capital's returns come back not necessarily from recipients but from the community at large in terms of prestige, approval, and potential referrals. While immigrants obtain medical

services for either low fees or for free, doctors benefit from social company and approval in the form of social recognition both inside and outside the tango field. In fact, since the reputation of healers is greatly supported by public acknowledgment and recommendations, their participation in ethnic social fields constitutes an ideal marketing arena from where to collect social capital's returns.

Reciprocity is one of the most conspicuous characteristics of social capital which, contrary to economic or financial returns, requires agents to be involved in interpersonal exchanges of products that are not easily measured in economic terms. By belonging to the same community (in this case the tango field, with its sanctions and rules), donors and recipients of social capital guarantee that favors will be returned in one way or another. In Carmin's words, "Una mano lava la otra" ("One hand washes the other hand"), which means that the exchange of favors is embedded in shared codes of retribution. Nonetheless, as noted by Portes (1998), the absence of a priori rules regarding the principles commanding social capital's transactions often provides fertile ground for misunderstanding, disappointment, and loss of trust. During fieldwork, I had the opportunity to witness the breakage of such sanctioned codes through gossip, hidden or overt attacks to the parties' reputation, and even the exclusion from the tango field, as will be described next.

### **THE LOSS OF TRUST: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND UNMET EXPECTATIONS**

Many of the tango practitioners I met during fieldwork had built unique reputations as tango masters, which often mismatched the often low-skill occupations they would hold otherwise. In fact, among tango habitués, those belonging to a lower socioeconomic status were often the ones enjoying the highest prestige in the tango ballroom, particularly by holding a distinctive tango expertise that they displayed and shared with others. Social differences that would be irreconcilable at the light of day vanish under the lure of tango dancing, where power hierarchies are measured under the cannons of artistic cachet and skillful performance. By sharing the same social fields (tango milongas in this case), some of my informants held the illusion that the tango's social hierarchy would be extended beyond, and above, the tango salon's doors.

Violeta's case illustrates this point. She was one of the tango's grandmothers, as she was older, more trained, and held a reputation as a long-term *milonguera* (*milonguera vieja*). Although she belonged to a working-class family and had been a housewife most of her life, she had built up a tango career for herself and for some members of her fictitious tango family, as she and her husband were considered mentors for younger generations of Argentine tango fans. Violeta knew more about tango than many of the tango amateurs she had met, including an Argentine practitioner, Dr. F., who for a while had become her main medical practitioner. On one occasion, Violeta was complaining about Dr. F., saying,

You see, I used to see this doctor, Mr. F., whom I met in the milongas. I actually taught him how to dance his first steps, and I believed we were friends, always teasing and talking to each other in the milongas. I was having problems [emotional], so he told me that he could help me; so I began to see him on regular basis . . . for a year. . . . But he did not like the fact that I was not taking the medicines he gave me because these were bad for me, and even when I took them, I always did it in lower doses. Also, he canceled my appointments many times. And the thing that hurt me the most was that one day, I had to cancel the appointment because I was going to get the American citizenship. So I called him up and he told me that I had to pay half of the consultation. After that day, I stopped seeing him because it hurt me so much what he did.

If he had not told me that [to pay for that day's consultation], I would have probably offered to pay, but now I've been hurt. . . . My husband tells me to go back, and he [the doctor] also tells me that since I continue seeing him in the milongas. . . . I thought we were friends, you see *tango friends*, since we danced together, made jokes, gave each other kisses and hugs. But now I have lost *trust* in him, because there was a kind of friendship between us. . . . He knew all the problems of my life.

Immigrants' social webs are not quiescent and may suffer from exaggerated expectations, misunderstandings, and overwhelming demands (see Menjivar 2000). As illustrated in the excerpts above, unmet reciprocal expectations may lead to misunderstandings and the eventual rupture of trust when individual expectations are not met. Exchanges based on social capital transactions, although holding the promise of being supported by unselfish motivations, provide fertile ground for disappointments and misunderstandings, particularly when individual expectations are not met. Violeta felt betrayed by her doctor's behavior, as she

had expected to be able to extend to the medical field the same codes of semiequality she shared with him in the tango field. For Violeta, the message she had received from Dr. F. could be decodified as, “We can be almost equals in the tango milonga, but in my office I am the doctor and you become my patient.” As such, Violeta was expected to follow the doctor’s prescriptions “palabra por palabra” (“word for word”), even if this implied taking the prescription drugs as provided and waiting a long time in the office to be seen.

As unique social fields supported by social capital exchanges, Manhattan milongas have the property of “camouflaging” social differences by bringing together individuals belonging to different social strata, occupations, and ages. Violeta’s disappointments emerged from an illusion of social equality that was broken by her doctor’s reminder of their actual status differences. Immigrants who would have probably never met otherwise (e.g., doctors, psychologists, veteran housewives, and mechanics) are brought together at particular points in time on the basis of sharing similar interests. Social hierarchies that would be irreducible in other scenarios temporarily vanish in the tango world under the umbrella of belonging to the same entertainment community. To a certain extent, the wonders of the tango world’s social diversity also become its Achilles’ heel because of the informal nature of the social exchanges it nurtures, which also leave room for unmet expectations, and the eventual rupture of trust among artists and clients belonging to different social worlds.

### EPILOGUE: BEYOND SOCIAL CAPITAL

This article has revealed some of the characteristics of NYC’s tango world in the context of the tango’s broader circulation, in which customers and Argentine tango artists are shareholders of the same entertainment market. For years, I have been at the milongas to examine how tango (or even better, its *tangoified* relationships) has become a socialized metaphor for something else: for relationships to be created, for social and economic transactions to take place, and for interpersonal reciprocity to be instituted.<sup>3</sup> In the end, I found the ritualized performance from where the metalanguage of Argentines’ social solidarities and conflicts are exposed, dramatized, shared, and occasionally solved.

This study has provided a window of opportunity to examine the contribution of social capital categories to our understanding of the Manhattan tango field as a unique reservoir for social resources to be circulated on the basis of individuals belonging to the same community of interest. The tango world has revealed itself as an ideal place from which to understand how entertainment fields provide alternative venues for their members' provision and reception of material and symbolic and emotional assistance on the bases of social capital exchanges. As we have seen, by sharing the same entertainment niche, Argentine tango artists and some doctors are linked (through favors and sublet obligations) to a double form of bounded solidarity in which they share membership in the same "artistic community" (tango milongas) and a common ethnic allegiance as Argentine or Latino practitioners.

In spite of the barriers to health care experienced by tango artists, this study has shown that the tango world, as a community of interest for Argentine immigrants, provides unique resources for the resolution of their health problems. The analytical approach developed here could be useful for the study of other cosmopolitan dancing fields also sponsored by ethnic minorities' social webs, as in the case of the salsa world also supported by nationals from Caribbean countries in the United States.

Some caveats regarding the buoyant possibilities of social capital categories deserve further consideration. In recent years, the literature has addressed (and questioned) the importance of social capital as a resource for social integration and community empowerment, as well as an enhancement of health and social indicators (Cattell 2001; Kawachi et al. 1997). Those interested in fomenting social capital at the local level have raised concerns about the disruption of community bonds and the pervasive loss of America's social fabric represented in the image of the individual "bowling alone" (Putnam 1995). Although this study has concluded that Argentine tango artists do not bowl alone, their richest sources of social capital are mostly drawn from informal links of trust and reciprocity emerging from their participation in itinerant social fields—in this case, the tango world.

In addition, returns from social capital are not the panacea for immigrants' needs. If at the individual level, access to its benefits depends on social networks' diversity (multiplexity), there exist specific limits at the macro level (based on class, ethnic differences, and physical loca-

tion) to immigrants' participation in rich social fields, particularly among disenfranchised individuals who need them the most. As we have seen in this article, social capital is dependent on norms of exclusion and inclusion that follow belonging criteria, such as national origin, ethnicity, and shared interests. Most ethnic fields are not as diverse as Manhattan milongas where only a selected pool, including struggling immigrants, is recruited from among its members. Among newcomers in particular, counting on tango brokers is not an easy task unless they rely on diversified social networks where people with different skills, professions, and interests interact on the basis of sharing common goals and activities. To a certain extent, access to the U.S. health system via health brokers is a symptom of the hidden demand for health care among immigrants, which would probably remain otherwise unattended. As we have seen, reciprocity exchanges between providers and recipients of social capital are not always clear, leaving room for exaggerated demands that may jeopardize the expectations of trust between parties. In addition, since the health broker model is based on informal codes of reciprocity, immigrants may lose their health brokers if their social exchanges are modified or if they stop sharing common social fields. Finally, in many cases, the private (and informal) nature of the medical encounter exceeds the supervision of health institutions over medical practice.

Furthermore, not all the benefits deriving from immigrants' participation in social fields are reproduced beyond its reach. As previously noted, ethnic solidarity (mostly in the form of bounded solidarity) will coexist in the tango domain as long as participants' exchanges do not challenge their unequal locations in mainstream society. Rich ethnic fields, such as the tango world, are not enduring substitutions for formal channels (e.g., job insurance's comprehensive health benefits or government programs) that should provide access to basic resources, disregarding immigrants' involvement with informal social webs. The fact that informal networks are doing (even if partially) what other formal channels are not, tells us something important about immigrants' unmet needs. More studies are needed to expand the theory subjacent to the access of scarce social resources via social relationships within specific fields of power. Finally, we need more information on which networks facilitate the circulation, access to, and provision of social capital, including information concerning who is accounted for and excluded from the networks' benefits on the basis of social participation.



## NOTES

1. My nondancing role as a tango aficionado also protected me from the subtle competition for male dancing partners and from playing within the tango's unspoken hierarchical structure where performers measure their talents vis-à-vis others (Viladrich, forthcoming c).

2. Tango performers in New York City (NYC) are not exempt from the lure of sophisticated representations that characterize the tango's public imagery and are quite aware of the need to create specific characters, which require not only the mastering of tango techniques but also the personification of elaborate "tango selves." The latter implies assuming particular attitudes (e.g., the male seductive, the femme fatale, the gracious performer) both on the stage and the ballroom floor.

3. My search for the ways through which Argentines have access to social resources became the catalyst that sent me back to the original social relationships that had welcomed me in NYC at the beginning of my own, and still inconclusive, migratory journey.

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