Global ageing and transnationalism: Reflections on research prospects

Themes: Ageing; Migration, ethnicity and multiculturalism

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Abstract: In recent decades significant attention has been paid to the transnational and global dimensions of work and family lives. In the process, greater awareness has been generated about the ways in which people maintain social connections across place, time and national borders. Yet there is a surprising omission from this story of mobile populations. The growing population of ‘old old’, themselves a relatively global phenomenon of demographic shifts, tend not to be characterised as mobile and global in orientation. Rather, they are usually discussed in terms of concepts such as ‘ageing in place’ and ‘community dwelling’. In this paper, I reflect on why the ‘old old’ might have been overlooked in the literature on transnationalism, and the potential research prospects that arise out of turning our attention to the global orientations and transnational practices of older people.

Keywords: ageing in place, migration, transnationalism

It is now commonly accepted that processes of transnationalism and globalisation have accelerated during the past 20 to 30 years, such that individuals and groups across the world are intimately interconnected in spite of the geographic distances that separate them (e.g. Appelbaum and Robinson 2005; Giddens 2002; Sassen 2007; Appadurai 1996). For example, Filipino women working in the USA send money and love to their children and parents in the Philippines (Parreñas 2005), Italian-Canadians vote in elections in Italy and thereby transform local political contexts (Harney 1998), and adult children in Australia adopt a range of strategies to care for dying parents living overseas (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007). One significant gap in existing research is a lack of attention to the ways in which transnationalism might be experienced and practiced by the growing population of older people, in particular the ‘old-old’ population of people aged 75 and over. While population ageing is often declared to be a global phenomenon (Kinsella 2000), the global experiences and interactions of those who are ageing remains relatively undocumented. Yet
an understanding of the impact of globalisation on ageing populations has been argued as necessary in order to develop a ‘deeper awareness of how the economy and society affect older people and create variations in their lifestyles and culture’ (Bevan 2001: 21).

In this paper I explore why the ‘old-old’ may not have been included in recent and ongoing attention to practices and experiences of transnationalism and globalisation, with a view to identifying whether any benefits might arise out of focusing attention on this specific cohort. I begin by examining some of the relevant literature on globalisation and transnationalism in order to establish the lack of attention to the elderly. I then demonstrate that global attention to ageing populations focuses not on transnationalism, but rather on what I suggest is its opposite – ‘ageing in place’, or localism. Then, by aiming to understand why this divergence in the two bodies of literature exists, I seek to develop an argument about how greater attention to the transnationalism of the elderly might generate innovative contributions in both our understanding of transnationalism and ongoing research into experiences of ageing. Finally, I identify some of the practical and ethical problems that such research would need to address in order to be successful.

Transnationalism: A youthful domain?

Transnationalism emerged in anthropology and sociology as a conceptual tool to enable recognition of the various ways in which migrants sustain connection across national borders – particularly but not exclusively between their home and host countries (e.g. Glick-Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992; Basch, Schiller & Szanton Blanc 1994). As Smith (2003) argues, its distinction from globalisation lies in the concept’s capacity to retain a sense of the impact of national borders even as it acknowledges the capacity for many to engage in activities and imaginings that transcend those borders. When connections between particular places become firmly established through time, institutions and regular social interactions, those places can themselves begin to become thought of
as ‘transnationalised’, such that even those who do not move are nevertheless influenced by the presence of non-local others, ideas, goods and institutions in their daily lives (Levitt 2001).

Analysis or comparisons of specific age cohorts is not a feature of the literature on transnationalism. However, there are some significant ways in which age is an underlying or implicit dimension of much of the research on transnationalism. For example, important contributions such as the Levitt and Waters (2002) volume clearly mark out transnationalism as a significant concept for understanding the lives of the children of immigrants, or the second generation – usually assumed to be young adults or children (see also Haller and Landolt 2005). The majority of studies of transnationalism focus on business and employment opportunities, or on family lives, and so they tend to presuppose a sample comprised primarily of people in the prime of their productive and reproductive lives. Indeed, some argue that it is people who are in their economic prime who are most likely to be able to meet the considerable expenses of sustaining meaningful ties across multiple nations (e.g. Wong 1997; but see Al-Ali et al 2001), or who are likely to be of most interest to those in the homeland who might foster transnational engagement for purposes of generating remittances (e.g. Itzigsohn 2000).

There are two important exceptions. The first is research into retirement decisions, which points to the ways in which people aged in their 50s and 60s consider carefully whether to relocate to another town, city or country in pursuit of better housing, lifestyle, family care or financial positions upon ceasing full time employment (e.g. King, Warnes & Williams 1998; Aguilera 2004; Becker, Beyene & Canalita 2000). These decisions, while not always framed in terms of transnational activities or processes, clearly have implications for the ways in which older people might find themselves tied to multiple national contexts in their later years. The second is recent research on transnational aged care (Baldassar et al 2007), which recognises that non-migrant parents have significant connections to the new homelands of their adult migrant children through visits, communications and ongoing
exchange of various forms of family support. This latter research reinforces an important aspect of transnationalism: that geographic mobility is not necessary in order to ‘be’ transnational. Rather, in an era of globalisation, experiences of transnationalism might become significant even for those who remain at home.

**Ageing: a condition of immobility?**

The research on transnationalism briefly outlined above gives a strong impression that, thanks to more affordable travel and communication technologies, everyone is now able to and in fact does live their lives across multiple national locales. The literature on ageing, and particularly that about the ‘old-old’, provides a dramatic contrast. The Sydney Older Persons Study provides a useful example, in that it is based on ‘a community dwelling sample aged 75 and over’ (Broe et al 2002). In identifying the sources of social support that older people receive, they measure such things as instrumental support, defined as ‘the tangible, material or physical resources needed for daily living’ and emotional support, referred to as ‘the presence of a confidant’ (Edelbrock et al 2001: 174). Social interactions are measured as ‘getting together with friends, neighbours, relatives’, in increments of weekly, monthly or less frequently (Edelbrock et al 2001: 175). What is clear in these measures is that regular – even daily – physical proximity of the social support network is assumed to be a requirement of adequate social support. It does not appear to occur to the researchers to consider the ways in which their ‘community dwelling’ participants might be participating in communities that are geographically dispersed, or sustained through the use of technologies such as the telephone or Internet. ‘Community dwelling’ has emerged as a form of shorthand term for identifying that participants are not resident in formal care facilities. However, the use of such shorthand generates a set of assumptions and implications about the lives of the elderly that are not supported by empirical research. In addition to distinguishing between elderly who live in independent and formal care contexts, the term simultaneously implies a bounded territory within which the participants dwell. Gone is the sense of freely mobile individuals who sustain
connections across the globe. In its place, the lives being described are actively defined by their immobility and their fixity in a specific location.

The notion of ‘ageing in place’, particularly common in policy documents, has the same effect of implying the relative ‘fixity’ of the older generation. The concept is used to refer to the preference of most elderly people to remain in their own homes as they age, rather than to move into assisted living environments (e.g. Horner & Boldy 2008). The ideal depiction is of the older person remaining fixed in place while the various service providers mobilise around him or her to provide for the various needs that might otherwise prevent the stable residence of the ageing individual. To some extent, ‘ageing in place’ is actually a clear description of the relative geographic mobility of older people – there is an apparent peak in mobility at around retirement age, after which the mobility of older people appears to decline (e.g. Tinker 1999). Yet this emphasis on geographic mobility as the key indicator of people’s orientations would appear to be somewhat limited. It is no longer necessary to ‘move house’ or even move your body in order to participate in a conversation, exchange of resources or even a public event that is located within, across or between other nations, regions or contexts. While some studies acknowledge that ‘place’ might refer to a particular locality rather than a particular house (e.g. Olsberg & Winter 2005), the dominant implication is nevertheless that older people live their lives within a more geographically limited context than is suggested in studies of the transnationalism associated with younger populations.

Understanding the immobility of old age

Concepts such as ‘community dwelling’ and ‘ageing in place’ play a useful role in demonstrating that not all older people are necessarily institutionalised, and so make an important contribution in efforts to overcome longstanding stereotypes of later life. Nevertheless, at the same time they tend to reinforce the assumption that older people are not particularly mobile or necessarily interested in
engaging in global or transnational social, cultural or economic networks. Rather, older people are assumed to have strong – even exclusive – ties to their geographically proximate family and local communities (see also Fry 2005).

In part, this assumption reproduces common misconceptions of the old-old – that, simply by virtue of their age, they are disabled and relatively incapable of participating in active lives of travel, exchange of family support and community engagement. The old-old might be somewhat more likely than the young-old to face the onset of such conditions as arthritis, the loss of sight and hearing, and the loss of mental faculties, which potentially contribute to a more localised, rather than transnational or globalised, participation in everyday life. However, such conditions are certainly not exclusive to the old-old, and can be features of individuals across the life cycle.

The lack of attention to the elderly in relation to the globalising and transnational effects of communications and travel may also result from the fact that, unlike the young-old, the current old-old are more likely to have retired from active employment prior to the telecommunications and travel revolutions of the mid-1980s (Vertovec 2004; Wilding 2006). This could be used to argue that the old-old are less likely to engage in transnational communications with their social networks as a result of lack of interest or knowledge about telecommunications technologies. Indeed, recent research suggests that there may be some truth to this notion – but it is not necessarily the result of a ‘resistance’ to technology, as the common stereotype of technophobic elderly might suggest. Rather, a study of attitudes towards and awareness of technologies amongst the elderly concludes that ‘older Australians… appreciate the benefits of technology and do want to know more and be able to access many of the services and facilities available with technology. The major obstacles to using technology are cost, lack of experience and lack of access’ (Cameron, Marquis & Webster 2001: 55). A further limitation on the global outlook of elderly people might be that they are inhibited in their capacity to travel to be with family who are living elsewhere around the globe, for
example, as a result of the more prohibitive insurance requirements and limited visa options for those aged 70 and above (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007).

Such speculations based on assumptions overlook the need to ask an important empirical question: are these accurate ways of describing the population aged 75+? Or are this category of people, like other younger members of the contemporary global system, engaged in processes and practices that have a transnational or global character? If so, then in what ways, to what extent, and with what implications for their social support and wellbeing? The research on retirement decisions and transnational caregiving identify clear evidence that the ‘young-old’ are often engaged in transnational thinking, communication and travel, whether it be to sustain relationships with their children and grandchildren, or with friends and global interest groups. However, the question of how the old-old respond to and interpret global processes such as migration remains unanswered.

Assumptions about the diminished capacity of the old-old to take part in transnational and globalised networks are just that – assumptions. Similar assumptions about the ‘burden’ represented by the elderly in local contexts have since been debunked (e.g. de Vaus, Dray & Stanton 2003), so that it is now accepted that ‘most old people are neither ill nor disabled and do not need looking after’ (Borowski, Encel & Ozanne 2007: 9). Yet such assumptions about the incapacity of the elderly apparently continue to underpin our limited understandings of the globalised and transnational lives of elderly people. There is, to date, no serious effort to document the extent to which the old-old extend their lives beyond their local geographic contexts into transnational and global networks. Furthermore, there is no study of the extent to which the old-old desire to participate in such networks, or the constraints they might face in doing so, or the benefits they might reap from engaging in such networks.

Suggestions for future research
New empirical evidence is necessary in order to better investigate the intersection of experiences of old age and processes of globalisation and transnationalism. While these latter processes are highly influential in many people’s lives, it is unclear to what extent they are significant in the lives of the old-old. Recent studies elsewhere around the world suggest that the relationship is a complex one, in which some older people use the opportunities of transnationalism and globalisation to support complex and fulfilling lives (e.g. Becker, Beyene & Canalita 2000). However, it is not clear which factors might contribute to such opportunities, and which might impede them. Furthermore, it is not clear how particular national contexts might provide differential environments of relative support or limitations for older populations.

What is needed is some reliable, indepth data on the extent to which the old-old engage in transnational practices and activities. An important part of this would include reflections on the ways in which transnationalism serves to either enhance or diminish the well-being of those old-old who do participate in such practices and processes. Given existing research on the different class, gender and ethnic dimensions of transnational experiences, it is likely that these factors will also play an important role in analysis of the transnationalism of the elderly. Thus, some points of comparison between both migrants and non-migrants, refugees and migrants, and people from different class backgrounds will provide essential foundations for such a study. Also of interest will be an examination of the extent to which specific cohorts of elderly are differentially impacted by their level of access to and interest in the new technologies that are now so taken for granted. Is age a significant factor in determining whether someone communicates across distance, for example, or is it simply going to influence the tools they prefer to use for such communications?

Such research is likely to have significant theoretical and policy implications, by providing a deeper understanding of how a rapidly growing proportion of the population relate to the world in which they live. It would potentially provide a useful comparison of culturally and linguistically diverse
older people, enabling a clearer picture of the extent to which age is a significant factor in the
degree of transnationalism and globalisation in the lives of Australia’s elderly, as opposed to other
factors such as language, social networks or previous experiences of migration. Furthermore, it
would renew the field of globalisation and transnationalism by reinterpreting existing accounts
through the lens of age, in addition to the more common analytical categories of class, culture or
gender. This is likely to present significant new knowledge on the intersections of individual,
localised social identities and global/transnational processes for sociologists.

As Barker (2001: 66) has argued, in the context of a rapidly ageing population, ‘government policy-
making efforts need to concentrate on making those extra years of life worth living for the
individual, for the family and for society’. In order to achieve this, we need to know more about
what makes life ‘worth living’ for older people (see also Myrra et al 2006). This knowledge needs
to move beyond survey instruments and psychological testing, to seriously question the cultural-
and context-specific experiences of older people. How do older men and women perceive
themselves, their local communities, their nation and their world? How do they spend their time?
Who do they interact with, how and about what? What are their goals and hopes for the future?
Answering such questions is essential in developing appropriate policies, services and industries
aimed at supporting and catering to the needs to this rapidly growing population.

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