Recent Australian immigrant Families and Transnational Caregiving: Italian professional migrants and Afghan refugees compared

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Abstract:
In this paper I apply the model of transnational caregiving developed by Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding (2006) to two sets of recent immigrant families in Australia: Italian professional migrants and Afghan refugees. I begin with a brief representative case study from each sample before comparing the practices of transnational caregiving of each group by focusing on the five types of care identified by Finch (1989). While they arrived in Australia during the same time-period, these two sets of recent immigrant families differ significantly in their capacity, obligation and commitment to exchange care across distance. Somewhat ironically, although the relationships between these migrants and their homeland-based kin are clearly transnational, in that they take place across significant distances as well as nation state borders, it is the ‘localised’ and ‘localising’ aspects of these relationships that impact most on transnational caregiving processes. In other words, despite the transnational character of their relationships, migrants and their homeland-based family members are located in particular places at particular times and their caregiving practices are variously affected by this ‘territorialisation’.

Introduction
The ideas presented in this paper are primarily drawn from a larger collaborative study by Baldassar, Balock & Wilding (2006) for which data collection comprised approximately 200 life-history interviews and participant observation with migrants and refugees in Perth, Western Australia, and their parents and other kin in Italy, The Netherlands, Ireland, Singapore, New Zealand and in the transit country of Iran (see also Wilding 2006; Baldock 2000). This research examines the dynamics of long-distance family relations and, in particular, the way migrants manage to care for (and about) their ageing parents from a distance, highlighting transnational caregiving as an important phenomenon of the migration process. Data for this paper are also drawn from my previous ethnographic research, including approximately 50 interviews with
families in Italy and Australia (Baldassar 2001; Baldassar & Pesman 2005). As well as research conducted by Lange, Kamalkhani & Baldassar (forthcoming, 2007) on Afghan refugees in Western Australia.

Towards a model of transnational family caregiving

Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding’s (2006) research represents a critique of the preoccupation and assumption in the gerontology studies literature that caregiving requires proximity and provides overwhelming evidence of families exchanging caregiving across considerable expanses of time and distance. The practices of transnational caregiving take place over time and are played out within individual, family and migration life cycles or life courses. Despite the transnational character of their relationships, migrants and their homeland-based family members are located in particular places at particular times and their caregiving practices are variously affected by this ‘territorialisation’. Further, these care exchanges are mediated by a dialectic encompassing the capacity of individual members to engage in caregiving and their culturally informed sense of obligation to provide care, as well as the particularistic kin relationships and negotiated family commitments that people with specific family networks share (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding, 2006). This model illustrates the complex mix of motivations that inform the exchange of transnational caregiving practices that flow in both directions – from migrant to ‘homeland’ kin and vice versa. In this paper I compare the transnational caregiving practices of recent Italian professional migrants and Afghan refugees. My discussion is organised around the five types of care identified by Finch (1989) including moral and emotional support, financial assistance, and practical support, all of which can all be exchanged transnationally through the use of various communication technologies including phone, fax, email, text messages, as well as personal care and accommodation which require co-presence and can only be exchanged during visits.

The case of Enrico: 'But why on earth go to Australia?'

Like several recent Italian migrants, Enrico is keen to stress that he is not the “stereotypical Italian immigrant” and, when first approached, comments that for this reason he may not be a suitable subject for interview. Enrico describes his motivation for migrating as being “existential” rather than economic. He is at pains to emphasise how different he is to the postwar Italian migrants who he argues were “forced to
migrate”. Despite migrating by choice, Enrico is very conscious of having to resolve a tension between what he describes as the “traditional” southern Italian values of his family and his own more “modern” and “cosmopolitan” values. Like most recent Italian arrivals, Enrico migrated to marry an Australian.

Although Enrico was attracted by the Australian climate and lifestyle his family were not at all happy about his decision to migrate. He described their response as “Very bad... a disaster. There were some really terrible moments. I think my sister still hasn't forgiven me”. Enrico believes his family felt he had reneged on his obligations to them, particularly since he is the only son; “Especially in the south of Italy where the family is very united, very strong... My situation as a migrant didn't just have an effect on my [immediate] family, but actually affected my cousins and aunts and uncles”.

Enrico believes that the many visits he and his family members exchange have helped them to accept his decision to settle here; “But the fact is I go to Italy every year and if there is ever any emergency or problem... The fact that I go often I think reassures them”. Aside from Enrico’s ability to afford to visit often, he describes his greatest good fortune as his occupation, which requires him to stay in contact with developments in Italy. He describes his visits as being “50% for personal reasons and …50% for work reasons. I keep in touch constantly”.

Like most recent Italian migrants, both Enrico and his kin in Italy are relatively affluent and have not needed to exchange any financial support. Enrico and his Italy-based sister are in a similar line of work and they constantly exchange practical support. His siblings look after his financial affairs in Italy on his behalf and generally watch out for him. Despite his significant business success in Australia, his family would still like him to repatriate; “Always; they want me to go back and live there... They constantly give me a hard time because I left”. To assuage their sense of loss and his sense of guilt he maintains regular phone contact and both he and his mother feel they provide each other with emotional support; “I'm terrible at writing, I hardly ever write. But I ring every week. If I don't call every week, they ring me here”. In general, Enrico says he is happy with the amount of contact and visits he has with his family in Italy, although as his mother ages he feels he would like to spend more time with her. Enrico takes great solace in the fact that his siblings live close to his mother and will be able to care for her in her old age; “because in Italy, it's the children who
have to look after their parents. She did everything for us when we were little and she still does this”.

Afghan refugee case study – ‘We had no idea about what Australia is like’

Omar and Flora are an Afghan refugee couple who have been living in Australia since 2001. They left Afghanistan due to political unrest and fled to India where they lived for ten years. When the situation for refugees deteriorated in India, the couple applied for Australian refugee status and after eight failed attempts were finally accepted.

Omar is a university graduate but his degree is not recognised in Australia and so, like many recent Afghan migrants, he works as a taxi driver; “I need money not only for myself but for [my relatives]… in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. They expect my support…”. Despite their frugal existence, the couple were able to save enough money for Flora to visit her mother in Afghanistan; “It was very scary. I put myself in danger but I could not wait any more… We passed the borders and went to Kabul by car… They did not know about our visit before hand… They were shocked when they saw me at the door”. Omar and Flora have very limited contact with their families abroad; “We have no telephone contact. The telephone contact costs us a lot and we told them that we are not going to call. I told them that the money that we spend on phone calls we can save and send it to them instead”.

Omar and Flora avoided the fate of all ‘unauthorised’ arrivals who are currently sent to detention camps where they are kept for between three and six months while their applications for refugee status are assessed. Those who are granted refugee status are released from detention on three year temporary protection visas. As ‘legitimate’ refugees, Omar and Flora benefited from access to Australian residency that enables them to travel (temporary protection visa holders who travel back to their homelands risk forfeiting their visas and refugee status and, if discovered, are not permitted to return). In addition, Omar and Flora enjoy some public health cover (Medicare) and access to unemployment benefits and English language tuition, which temporary protection visa holders are often denied.

Transnational caregiving practices

Financial support

Like Enrico, recent Italian migrants are more likely to be the recipients of distant care from their parents in Italy rather than the providers of care. The relative wealth of their
families means that financial assistance is more likely to flow from parents to migrants instead of in the other direction. Hence, remittances sent home, one of the key characteristics of economic migrants, do not figure at all in this group’s caregiving exchanges. Instead, given their early stage in the family life cycle (most are just married) and given the early stage in their migration process (just settled), recent Italian migrants commonly receive financial assistance from their parents to purchase expensive investments like homes and cars or to fund their visits home. In addition, the majority of recent migrants from Italy are professionals working in jobs commensurate with their employment back home. These resources ensure they have the financial capacity to fund regular transnational communication with their kin abroad as well as visits home. While Enrico relied primarily on telephone calls to stay in touch, most recent migrants make regular use of email, sms text messages and even video-cam. Another form of financial exchange occurs in the form of (often expensive) gifts, particularly from Italy-based kin to Australia-based grandchildren.

In stark contrast, most recent Afghan refugees are struggling to make ends meet. Like the more numerous working-class Afghan arrivals, the few Afghans who have professional backgrounds find it difficult to get any work, let alone occupations of similar standing to those they had back home. Some, like Omar and Flora, arrive as humanitarian entrants (often from transit countries where they have lived in difficult circumstances for years) and obtain basic assistance from the Australian government. Many more arrive as unauthorised refugees (usually after hazardous journeys by boat) are processed through detention centres and rely on NGO support. Like Omar and Flora, these migrants have an enormous sense of obligation to provide financial support to their kin back home so that any money they do earn is shared between their local and transnational families. Gift giving is also an important part of the financial exchange of refugees and is one way that homeland kin can reciprocate, through the sending of small gifts commonly of jewellery and textiles.

**Practical support**

Largely as a result of the ease, regularity and frequency of communication which characterises their transnational family relations, recent Italian migrants can exchange many forms of practical support with their kin back home. Many, like Enrico, relied on their siblings to maintain their business concerns in Italy in their absence. Other examples of practical support for this group include exchanging advice on any number
of matters from cooking to childcare, real-estate and investments. Because this group regularly visit each other, many of the usual forms of practical support (common to local care exchanges) take place during visits. For example, parents provide unpaid babysitting and migrants assist their parents with home maintenance. The combined use of various types of communication technologies means that recent Italian migrants and their kin can keep well abreast of each others affairs. Phone calls are often exchanged weekly for a general catch up and email and sms texting are often used daily to share the minutiae of everyday lives. This constant level of contact ensures family members can participate in the practical every-day matters of each others lives.

In contrast, and largely resulting from their relative lack of capacity to conduct transnational communication, the Afghan refugees and their families abroad have limited ability to exchange practical support. Impediments to communication are not limited to the lack of finance but also to the lack of available and reliable telecommunication services. Even if refugees can afford computers and email access, few of their families back home can. Much like the post-war Italian migrants, many resort to letter writing to stay in touch. However, as postal services in transit countries and Afghanistan are often unreliable, most refugees (again like the post-war Italian migrants) prefer to send gifts, including cash, through the trusted hands of family and friends travelling on visits. Notwithstanding these difficulties, one form of support exchanged which could be defined as practical involves refugees in Australia sponsoring their kin to migrate. In addition, there were several examples of marriage negotiations which take place transnationally.

*Emotional and moral support*

The bedrock of all caregiving, whether local or transnational, is the exchange of emotional and moral support. Even in the most extreme circumstances, like that of many of the refugees, people do not stop caring about their distant loved ones even if they can not communicate this concern. The very fact that the opportunity for care exchange remains, albeit in a latent state, is arguably a kind of emotional support. For family members (both migrant and refugee) to simply have the knowledge that they can call on kin in an emergency is often an enormous source of moral support. Indeed, the distinctions between types of support discussed in this paper are somewhat arbitrary because all of them (financial, practical, personal and accommodation) can be expressions of emotional and moral support. Refugees and their transnational kin
express their emotional support through the exchange of hard-earned remittances and gifts, while the families of recent Italian migrants express their emotional support through regular communication and visits. There is a clear link between the active participation in emotional and moral support and access to, and competence in, communication technologies.

**Personal care**

A number of studies have noted that parents provide their adult children with extensive support across the life course, and adult children usually begin to reciprocate as their parents get older (e.g. Finch & Mason, 1993; Bengtson, Rosenthal & Burton, 1995). The parents of most recent Italian migrants are still relatively healthy and independent. Yet many migrants and refugees expressed concern about the implications of their parents ageing so far away in another country. Like Enrico and Flora, many engage in extended visits in order to simply ‘be with’ their parents as they age.

The need for migrant involvement in transnational aged care is exacerbated by the limited aged support infrastructure available in Italy where the care of the elderly is only considered a problem for those who do not have available relatives (Trifiletti 1998:182). Further, cultural constructions of caregiving obligations, where ‘good’ children are expected to look after their parents, contribute to a sense of guilt on the part of migrants for not ‘being there’. Italian migrants with ailing parents commonly make extended visits to provide personal hands on care and to give some form of respite to their siblings who were responsible for the long-term care of their parents (Baldassar 2007). Given the family life cycle stage of the recent Italian migrants, a more common form of personal care exchange involves parents visiting their migrant children to assist with the care of children, particularly newborns.

The obligation to care for parents is even more pronounced for refugee families due to a combination of the relative absence of care provisions in Afghanistan and transit countries and the sense of ‘survivor guilt’ on the part of refugees for leaving their loved ones behind. Yet, unlike the Italian parents, refugee parents are often extremely pleased and relieved that their children have managed to settle in Australia because they hope this will afford them a safe and better life than the one they had back home. In addition, living in Australia increases the possibility for remittances and migration.
sponsorship, both of which could significantly improve the life experience of ageing parents.

**Accommodation**

In her classic study, Finch (1989) used accommodation as the type of caregiving that involved providing a place to stay for family members. In transnational contexts, the caregiving afforded by accommodation takes the form of visits and these are often particularly enjoyable and longed for occasions. In the vast majority of cases, migrants and refugees are accommodated in the homes of their parents and vice versa. Urry (2002) has raised the question about the importance of periods of co-presence in maintaining transnational relationships. The importance of visits in transnational practices of care is undeniable. Refugees like Flora are often willing to put themselves at significant risk in order to be able to ‘see’ their loved ones. Visits can be therapeutic in helping family members come to terms with migration, especially when the migrant has not been afforded ‘license to leave’ by their kin back home (Baldassar 2007). As Enrico found, after his mother and sister had visited they were more accepting of his decision because they were reassured that he was well and happy. Similarly, Flora felt an enormous sense of fulfilment at having been able to visit her mother in Kabul.

**Conclusions**

Stage in the migration process is a significant variable in the family life of migrants, refugees and their families back home. The first few years after arriving in a new country can be a particularly difficult time for all families. In the case of recent Italian migrants in Australia, this stage in their life course often results in increased practices of all forms of caregiving from their parents and kin in Italy. These migrants often receive financial support to assist their settlement, including help buying a house. Practical support with the concerns of everyday life often flow both ways to and from migrants. Similarly, emotional and moral support is constantly exchanged through regular and frequent communication, including in those (common) cases where parents and homeland kin disapprove of the migration. Personal care tends to be delivered primarily by parents in the form of assistance with newborns although migrants are often cognisant of their future obligations to provide this type of care to parents as they age. Visits are regularly exchanged and are defined as of central importance to maintaining close family relations.
In contrast, recent Afghan refugee families are not characterised by a particular life cycle stage as their migration histories often involve fleeing a homeland without prior planning and extended periods of time in transit countries. These families generally put enormous efforts into providing remittances to their kin abroad, often at great personal cost. Their generosity is often reciprocated through gift giving and gifts are key expressions of emotional and moral support. Their diminished access to, and limited ability to afford, telecommunication technologies means they use the telephone infrequently and often only for emergencies and email contact is at best sporadic. They are more likely than the Italians to write letters and they tend to rely on friends and family to deliver messages and gifts. Despite the limited contact, refugees continue to exchange practical support through assistance with sponsorship and marriage arrangements. Their lives are oriented in many respects if not by actual visits then by the myth of return as they long to be reunited with kin, particularly ageing parents.

Despite their differences, for both the recent Italian migrants and the Afghan refugees and their families abroad, transnational caregiving is influenced by the capacity to care (defined by access to finances, technologies and resources, including time and physical ability to use the available technologies). Like all cares, whether local or transnational, the sense of obligation to care for ageing parents is influenced by a number of factors including available services, the number of siblings or other kin who can be called upon to provide care as well as cultural constructions of obligation influenced by notions about gender role, birth order and duty. Deciding on who cares, when and how is partly the outcome of the negotiation of commitments between family members. These negotiations, like capacity and obligation, can change over the life course as does the need to give and receive care.

The negotiations, capacity and sense of obligation to exchange transnational care is clearly tied to available resources and services in the specific places the migrants and their kin reside. The manner in which transnational caregiving practices are influenced by family members’ access to services and technologies reveals that despite their transnational nature, these processes are also local and localising, tied to particular places in specific times.
References


