Affective ties and moral loyalty within care work: An example from Romanian domestic workers in Italy

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study of a Romanian female caregiver in Italy aims to shed light on the perception and performance of moral obligations towards her patients in the host context and her family members left behind in the home country.

Theme

Reproduction Migration

Keywords

Care work, transnational family arrangements, moral loyalty, affective ties, Romanian migration

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> **"I can't thank them enough … the Italians … for all they gave to me. They loved me like their daughter."**

I am sitting on a porch in front of a 2-story house in Sicily[2] with Veronica from Northern Romania. During our talk I can hear the sounds of the sea mixed with laughs and chatter that are whiffled over to us from tourists and locals relaxing at the beach. Veronica can witness this scenery every day from the big bright glass front of the 'salone', the living room inside the villa that appears like a beautiful rock in the sand. However, she is not living there on her own. Or with her family. Veronica lives there with an older house-bound lady in precarious health conditions, who completely relies on her.

She is one of approximately 1.083.000 Romanians[3] having chosen Italy as their second home and workplace and belongs thus to its largest immigrant community. The Romanian diaspora represents 21% of Italy's total foreign population, and has outnumbered other prominent immigrant groups (e.g. from Albania, Morocco) in the country for the last 15 years[4].

Romanian migration to Italy has a relatively short history, starting with single movements in the 1980s under the presidency of Nicolae Ceausescu. The revolution in 1989, the fall of the Socialist regime and a harsh deindustrialization of the country led to the emigration of almost one fifth of the Romanian population, striving for a better life for them and their family[5]. Geographical and linguistic proximity, shared cultural traditions and the increasing presence of Italians and Italian business in Romania are presumed to be decisive determinants that put Italy today at the top of European destinations for Romanian labour migration, ahead of Spain, Germany and UK[6].

Veronica came to Italy in 2011 when she lost her job at the Romanian state railway company, where she had been employed for more than 17 years. She received no financial support from the government and had to take care of her mother, whose poor health required urgent medical attention. Therefore, she decided to go abroad to earn some money that would pay her debts and help her family.

Silva defines family in the context of migration as a 'microcosm' held together by links and a story, denoted by assigned roles, resources, affective bonds and events[7]. Drawing on this concept, decisional intra-familial strategies towards mobility are highly complex processes, generated, triggered and guided by a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, especially where labour migration is concerned. Consequently, the familial impact within migratory trajectories acts on different levels. Family members often profit from migrations, but cause and condition them at the same time[8].

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[2] All local references and names have been changed by the author to guarantee the privacy of the respondents.

[3] ISTAT. 2022. http://dati.istat.it

[4] ISTAT. 2022. http://dati.istat.it

[5] Ricci, A. 2010. Romania: immigrazione e lavoro in Italia prima e dopo l'allargamento. In: Pittau, F., Ricci, A., & Timsa L. (eds.), *I Romeni in Italia tra rifiuto e accoglienza*, 14-27. Roma: IDOS/Sinnos.
S. Stan & R. Erne. 2014. Explaining Romanian labor migration: From development gaps to development trajectories. *Labor History* 55(1): 21-46.

[6] Cingolani, P. 2007. *The Romanians in Italy. Rapporto finale Transnational Communities in a Globalized World.* Torino: FIERI. Retrieved March 20, 2020 from: www.fieri.it.

[7] Silva, C. 2006. Famiglie immigrate e educazione dei figli. *Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare* 1(1): 30-36.

[8] Zontini, E. 2010. *Transnational Families, Migration and Gender: Moroccan and Filipino Women in Bologna and Barcelona.* New York: Berghahn Books.

Veronica's sister Maria had already been working in Italy for several years and provided her with her first workplace and some contacts in the destination context, once she had decided to leave Romania for the sake of supporting her mother and improving the familial economic conditions.

A rapidly developing migration infrastructure in the last decades, as well as enhanced possibilities for communication and travel, facilitated the link between sending and destination locations and thus the transmission of economic remittances[9] and their socio-cultural counterparts: ideas, norms, identities and practices[10]. However, this is not a one-way process but rather a continuous circulation, initiated by the migrant in the receiving context, destined to the country of origin, and elaborated and reproduced by those who stayed behind[11].

Veronica didn't speak a word of Italian when she arrived in Sicily to replace her sister as provider for the family left behind in Romania. She continued the work Maria had been performing for the previous decade: care work - one of the most common and emergent employment sectors for qualified and low-skilled migrant labour in Europe in general and in Southern European states in particular[12].

Indeed, several countries were late in implementing social security systems, and the systems they did establish were often insufficient for the actual needs of an aging European population, characterised by decreasing numbers of working age and a rising share of those potentially in need of care[13]. A vast body of research refers to "Mediterranean familialism" as leading concept in the Italian context that relies on particular forms of inter-generational solidarity, support and care work arrangements. These are informal and unpaid, and often prevent family members (predominantly female kin) from working and providing for their own households[14]. However, a rapidly aging society, the current crisis of traditional family models, life-style transformations and the urgent need for labour participation by local women to support their own children are challenging the Mediterranean welfare system and increasingly prompting private households to look for help from abroad[15].

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[9] Engbersen, G., Okólski, M., Black, R., & Panţîru, C. 2010. Introduction: Working out a way from East to West: EU enlargement and labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe. In: Engbersen G., Okólski M., Black R., & Panţîru C. (eds.), *A Continent Moving West?: EU Enlargement and Labour Migration from Central and Eastern Europe*: 7-22. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
Goschin, Z. 2014. Remittances as an economic development factor. empirical evidence from the CEE countries. *Procedia Economics and Finance* 10: 54-60.
[10] Levitt, P. 1998. Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion. *International Migration Review* 32(4): 926-948.
[11] Grabowska, I., & Garapich, M. P. 2016. Social remittances and intra-EU Mobility: NON-FINANCIAL transfers between U.K. and Poland. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(13): 2146-2162.
[12] Baldassar, L. 2007. Transnational families and AGED care: The mobility of care and the migrancy of ageing. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33(2): 275-297.
[13] Ambrosini, M. 2015. Parenting from a distance and processes of family reunification: A research on the Italian case. *Ethnicities* 15(3): 440-459.
Hoesch, K. 2018. *Migration und Integration: Eine Einführung*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
[14] Calzada, I., & Brooks, C. 2013. The myth of mediterranean familism. *European Societies*, 15(4): 514-534.
Saraceno, C. 2016. Varieties of Familialism: Comparing four southern European and East Asian Welfare regimes. *Journal of European Social Policy* 26(4): 314-326.
[15] Rugolotto, S., Larotonda, A., van der Geest, S. 2017. How migrants keep Italian families Italian: badanti and the private care of older people. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 13(2): 186-197.
Marchetti, S., Piazzalunga D., Venturini, A. 2014. Does Italy represent an opportunity for temporary migrants from the eastern partnership countries? *IZA Journal of European Labor Studies* 2014, 3(8): 1-20.

The care-giving sector has generated homogeneous gender features and today triggers female mobility on a global level. Treibel (2008) argues in this context that diversified female qualifications, their changing aspirations and an altered propensity and attitude towards conflicts and variations within the life course have contributed to an increased feminized migration and the changing (socio-culturally perceived) role of women[16]. Ambrosini (2015) further refers to an informal parallel welfare system that is developing in Italy and other Mediterranean countries, where care work by immigrants becomes an option that is "cheaper and more respectful of the habits and dignity of the elderly" than relying on institutions such as nursery homes.[17]

This was also the case for the older Italian lady, Signora Sarti, who received care and affection from Veronica for almost five years. When she passed away, Veronica left her temporary home that she had shared with her employer, who represented – like the others who would follow - far more than that to her. She returned to Romania, to look after her sick mother. Thanks to the money she had saved and sent from Italy, her mother could get the operation she needed, the familial home underwent some urgent reconstruction and her siblings received some support for maintenance of their homes that had been postponed for years. After one and a half years in Romania, in 2016 Veronica decided to return to Italy to work for another family in order to save up more money to support her family in Romania. Her concern was in particular to financially support her sister, one of her seven siblings, whose health situation was also very critical and needed continuous medical treatment in Romania.

A decisive push factor for migration from collectivistic societies is often the situation of kin-members in need of financial assistance due to health problems. Indeed, the idea of a global care chain[18] points to the phenomenon where women leave own family members with their care needs in the hands of third persons to depart and take care of other persons abroad in a "more profitable setting". The financial compensation for efforts and sacrifices represent then the currency to facilitate life conditions in the country of origin and are provided as remittances to those left behind. If the needs or the status of the family members change, ties in the host context may represent an outlet or substitute, as exemplified by Veronica's story:

"When my mother died, I only saw her dead, I had not seen her alive…because I was in Italy…this was a real sufferance. (…) Now, all those years that I could not take care of my mother and now all my love and all my efforts go to the 'Signora' I work with."

The stigmatisation of women who perform their kinship duty – be it one of motherhood or a similar degree of blood kin – from a distance and provide care for strangers, contributed to the development of the care drain concept. It describes the effect of migration on family members left behind, who often

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[16] Treibel, A. 2008. Migration. In: Baur, N., Korte, H., Löw ,M., Schroer, M. (eds.), *Handbuch Soziologie*, 295-317. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

[17] Ambrosini, M. 2015. Parenting from a distance and processes of family reunification: A research on the Italian case. *Ethnicities* 15(3): 440-459.

[18] Ambrosini, M. 2015. Parenting from a distance and processes of family reunification: A research on the Italian case. *Ethnicities* 15(3): 440-459.

Rugolotto, S., Larotonda, A., van der Geest, S. 2017. How migrants keep Italian families Italian: badanti and the private care of older people. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 13(2): 186-197.

suffer from emotional deprivation caused by transnational family arrangements and other caring schemes, that were chosen to negotiate the interplay between economic necessity and familial responsibility[19]. The paradox of care work lies indeed in the drain of affective sustainment for kin members to provide care assistance and emotional support to other families. The trading of emotional for economic resources provides for potential consequences for the relationship between migrants and family left behind, which often condition, benefit and suffer from the migration of their kin members – all at the same time[20].

Veronica says that she loves her job, the work with older people. She has maintained very close ties with the families she has worked with and calls them her 'Italian friends'. They represent her social network in the host context and support her with the daily challenges she has to deal with, such as bureaucratic and medical issues, that are often a result of the linguistic autonomy she is still lacking. They turned out also to be a reliable gate-opener system to potential new employers for Veronica.

Transnational in-house care givers work and live with the persons they look after. Consequently, they lose more than a job when their patients pass away. Their existence in the host context is thus consistently precarious, their living space, their leisure activities and their networks are interrelated and interdependent with their work. This issue is presumed to be decisive for the bonding, the affective ties and the moral loyalty that may develop between care-seeker and care-giver[21]. This was Veronica's case.

She has not been to Romania for more than three years now. The person she is currently taking care of has no closer relatives, who could take over temporary care work, which strengthens her sense of responsibility accordingly: "I cannot go home now, I have a responsibility. This is my life. (…) I could never leave her alone, the 'Signora'. Once she is not with us anymore, or if I may find somebody one day to look after her - somebody who is good with her - then I can go home. But now…how should I leave her here? I would be too worried to leave her."

Veronica has saved up enough money to return to her home country, a project that was always in her mind, since her intentions were directed towards a rather temporary migration. However, the emotional and affective ties that have been developed over the years with her protégé, keep her from abandoning the lady in Italy, which would be the only option for returning to Romania.

Veronica is single and has no children, which might also explain her even closer relationship with the 'Signora', who herself never had own children and has been widowed for several years. It seems indeed that biographical parallels, characterised by states of solitude and dependency as well as shared intimacy[22] through the co-living arrangement amplify the feelings of responsibility and duty for her employer:

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[19] Baldassar et al. 2017. 'More like a daughter than an employee': the kinning process between migrant care workers, elderly care receivers and their extended families. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 24 (5): 524–541.
Stalford, H. 2005. Parenting, care and mobility in the EU. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 18(3): 361-380.
[20] Ambrosini, M. 2015. Parenting from a distance and processes of family reunification: A research on the Italian case. Ethnicities 15(3): 440-459. 9
[21] Baldassar et al. 2017. 'More like a daughter than an employee': the kinning process between migrant care workers, elderly care receivers and their extended families. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 24(5): 524–541.
[22] Colombo, A. & Decimo, F. 2009. Spazi di confidenza: la regolazione della distanza sociale nella collaborazione domestica. In: Catanzaro, R. & Colombo, A. *Badanti & Co. Il lavoro domestico straniero in Italia*, 253-278. Il Mulino: Bologna.

"If the 'Signora' would have been in better health, I would have brought her to my home in Romania."

Nicolescu (2019) speaks about a mutual dependency between care-givers and care-seekers. The prolonging of the elderly person's life also automatically represents the improvement of life conditions of kin in the migrant's home. Positive personal work practices such as recognition, negotiation and collaboration, facilitate a positive relationship between both by a growing shared affection and a corresponding increase of their well-being[23].

How care work may trigger particular forms of solidarity within and outside the actual caring context is exemplified by Veronica's social network in the host context, built through former employers. Indeed, affective ties are affirmed by continuous respect of former patients on the one hand, and are symbolised through presents and little services to facilitate Veronica's current work on the other hand. Accordingly, care work may create a unique form of cohesion, shaped by mutual appreciation and solidarity, between care-giver and both, their patients on the one hand and between the relatives of the elderly, which often represent an enlarged family for the migrants.

"I have a very close bond with the families of the older people I have worked with. They bring presents for Christmas for me and for the 'Signora', I go to the cemetery for the anniversary [of former patients], when they need me I am here, when I need them, they are there for me. For example, one time I had to go to the hospital with the 'Signora', and they brought us there and took us home again. (…) Even when I moved back to Romania [in 2016], I came back to Italy for 10 days on vacation to stay with the people I had worked with."

According to research[24] there is an interrelation between the migratory intentions – that may be articulated in either long- or short-term migration stays – and emotional bonding within the host (care) context. From a transnational perspective, the created social field -built from experiences and institutions in both, the country of origin and settlement- generate transnational categories of identity that have a further agency on the (affective) relations and ties within the host society[25]. Accordingly, movers are mentally and physically wandering between at least two realities and create a pool of transnational habits, life style and personal attitudes. These transnational elements are further steered by the migrant's professional occupation that determines the life circumstances in the host context decisively. In the case of live-in care assistance, the co-residency exposes both, the care workers and their patients, to the utmost

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[23] Kitwood, T.M. 1997. *Dementia reconsidered: The person comes first.* Vol. 20. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Nicolescu, G. 2019. Keeping the Elderly Alive. Global Entanglements and Embodied Practices in Long-Term Care in Southeast Italy. *Anthropology & Aging* 40(1): 77-93.
[24] Baldassar et al. 2017. 'More like a daughter than an employee': the kinning process between migrant care workers, elderly care receivers and their extended families. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 24 (5): 524–541.
Nicolescu, G. 2019. Keeping the Elderly Alive. Global Entanglements and Embodied Practices in Long-Term Care in Southeast Italy. *Anthropology & Aging* 40(1): 77-93.
[25] Levitt, P., & Glick Schiller, N. 2004. Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society. *The International Migration Review* 38(3): 1002- 1039.
Pries, L. 2010. *Transnationalisierung: Theorie und Empirie grenzüberschreitender Vergesellschaftung.* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

level of intimacy that may attenuate different forms of hierarchy and (re)formulate values, norms and ideas as well as future developments of their own life courses.

This leads to a further consideration drawing on King's (2002) critics of labour migration research that acts predominantly on the assumption of indigent and deprived persons, mainly driven by the economic and political situation in their origin context, who move and stay in the host country to better their life situation[26]. Forsey (2015: 768f.) jumps on this bandwagon and indicts academic eschewing of serious studies and presenting instead "stylized and polarized images of international migration, that of high-flying corporate elites (…) and desperate, poverty-stricken labour migrants and asylum seekers (…) [that] misses much of what is actually happening in contemporary migration scenes"[27].

In fact, migration trajectories, and thus linked motivations, objectives and expectations towards them, are dynamic and constantly re-elaborated. They rely on personal life-course events, encounters and a norm and value system that is based on social interactions within the created social field. Thus, also loyalty, moral obligations and affective delegations are continuously re-defined and steer according decisions for the future migratory path. As exemplified by Veronica's story, especially in the care work sector, boundaries between work and private life are blurry and condition thus the complexity of migration patterns in general, and the development of interpersonal ties in particular. Those in turn affect the life of both, kinship and beloved ones left behind and the newly acquired 'family' in the host society.

Indeed, Veronica closes the interview highlighting her affection with the words:

"I am very close to the 'Signora', as I have been to all persons I have worked with. (…) This is my work and I will do it with all my heart up to the end."

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[26] King, R. 2002. Towards a new map of European migration. International Journal of Population Geography 8(2): 89-106.

[27] Forsey, M. 2015. Learning to stay? Mobile modernity and the sociology of choice. *Mobilities* 10(5): 764-783.