



Transnational caregiving in turbulent times: Polish migrants in Iceland and their elderly parents in Poland

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Łukasz Krzyżowski and Janusz Mucha

AGH University of Science and Technology, Poland

Abstract

The culturally determined necessity of the personal fulfilment of children's obligations to care for older parents, including personal care and practical household help, is a long-lasting element of the Polish normative system, strengthened by the weakness of the institutional support system. In the situation of migration the obligations (and the methods by which they can be realized) are modified but do not disappear. What become necessary are new types of social practices. The aim of this article is to analyse intergenerational caregiving and family remittance flows in transnational social space. The authors use the case study of working-class migrants in Iceland and their elderly parents in Poland to explore how remittances function in the later life stage of the transnational family. The main thesis is that in transnational social space taking care of elderly parents (mostly by women) in person in Poland is transformed into remittances (mostly sent by migrating women). The authors also discuss the impact of the economic crisis on transnational families, which in the present case had strongly hit Iceland but has (for the time being) bypassed Poland. The authors use quantitative and qualitative data collected during field research in Iceland and Poland.

Keywords

Ageing, Iceland, intergenerational support, Poland, transnational caregiving, transnational family

Introduction

Numerous scholars and politicians are now focused on the processes of ageing of modern and postmodern societies and their socioeconomic and cultural ramifications. One of the widely discussed issues, in particular in societies with a poor infrastructure of formal

Corresponding author:

Łukasz Krzyżowski, Faculty of Humanities, AGH University of Science and Technology, ul. Gramatyka 8a, Krakow, 30-081, Poland.

Email: lukasz.krzyzowski@agh.edu.pl

care of dependent people, is the effect of the ageing process on the efficiency of informal care of the elderly by family members, friends, neighbours and local communities. The problem is often conceptualized in terms of a moral panic (see e.g. Cohen, 1972; Mucha and Krzyżowski, 2010; Rohloff and Wright, 2010) and then analysis focuses on dropping fertility rates and, as a consequence, family size. The smaller families are, the less available their members are where there is a need for emotional, financial and instrumental support. The complex situation of care of the elderly resulting from dropping fertility rates is further complicated when the emigration rate is high in a given country. This is the situation of contemporary Poland. Meanwhile, research on international migration, done from a transnational perspective (see Faist, 2000; Faist et al., 2013; Vertovec, 2009), shows how remittances and various sociocultural practices realized across national borders maintain social relations, including relations of social care as well as related tensions and inequalities. We use the broad concept of ‘transnational family’, taking into account both its migrating and non-migrating members. Transnational families, despite their geographic dispersion, ‘hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely “familyhood”, even across national borders’ (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 3). The functioning of transnational families is not, however, free of the tensions which obviously occur in non-migrant families as well. According to Carling, ‘There are intrinsic asymmetries in the transnational relations between migrants and their non-migrant counterparts in the area of origin’ (2008: 2). In our case study those tensions result from an interplay among various factors: geographical distance between Poland and Iceland; different care regimes (familialism in Poland and de-familialism in Iceland); gender; and the economic crisis in Iceland.

In this article we draw on quantitative and qualitative data collected during our own field research in Iceland and Poland (2010–2012) to examine the changing role and use of remittances in the care obligations of transnational families, as well as the consequences of the realization of these obligations during the economic crisis.

Remittances, intergenerational relations and caregiving

While the notion of ‘care’ is used in many contexts, its meaning is not clear-cut (Thomas, 1993). This also refers to attempts to define elderly care. Broadly defined, care means support (physical and emotional) for a person who cannot manage by her/himself (Daly, 2002). Researchers recognize at least five types of informal support provision towards elderly parents: economic (financial and material); housing and practical assistance in the household; personal care; emotional support; and cognitive support (Attias-Donfut, 2003; Hoff, 2007). These types of support are derived from those legal and moral obligations which may be called ‘filial responsibility’. On the other hand, they are not established once and for all but are developed and negotiated (Finch and Mason, 1993). As pointed out by Thomas (1993), care is usually carried out by women through the roles that they play in society (wife, mother, daughter, maid, nurse, etc.), and refers both to the emotional care for someone (*caring about someone*), and specific cultural practices such as *caring for someone*. Analysis of the intergenerational flows of support shows that generally in Europe and the United States older generations give far more support than they receive (Künemund et al., 2005). However, while economic (especially financial)

forms of support transfer from older generations (elderly parents) to younger (adult children), the other forms of support go both ways (Hoff, 2007). The above relates mainly to the functioning of the stationary family without taking into account the potential changes in the flows of various forms of intergenerational support due to economic migration. However, there are interesting new analyses (see Baldassar et al., 2007a) that undermine the assumption that caregiving requires proximity. Our article supplements the research on transnational caregiving (Baldassar et al., 2007b). We show how extensive patterns of mutual care among transnational family members are maintained (mainly through remittances) even in times of economic crisis. In the following, we summarize recent findings of migrant remittances.

Research on migrant remittances has hitherto focused on their economic dimension, on the phenomenon of migrants sending money to their close relatives in the country of emigration (Adams, 2009; Guarnizo, 2003). Scholars distinguish between two basic forms of 'economic remittance': (a) remittances in cash and (b) remittances in kind. The transfer of the first form takes place mostly within the family, known as family remittances, or within a local community, which are collective remittances. Since the early 1990s, economic theories of remittances have been supplemented by concepts based on research stressing their societal dimensions (Rahman and Fee, 2012). According to Levitt and her collaborators (Levitt, 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011), migrants not only send money and various kinds of products to their close relatives but also transfer ideas and patterns of behaviour. Levitt shows how these forms of social remittances operate according to norms, practices, identities and social capital (Levitt, 2001). The concept of 'degrees of transnationality' plays a very important role in the analysis of the dynamics of remittances and social security of members of social networks, which cover both relatively mobile and non-mobile actors (Amelina et al., 2012).

The above-mentioned studies present the functioning of remittances in universal categories. However, their dynamics change with the stage of the family life course. Some types of remittances are sent by migrating parents to their non-migrating children, others by spouses or adult partners, while still other forms of support and care are delivered by migrating children to their elderly parents. This differentiation is missing in most of the research. We should bear in mind the fact that the latter type of socioeconomic transfer is particularly significant in the context of the growing number of ageing societies. In view of the research perspectives mentioned above, our main questions are as follows:

1. How are patterns and types of intergenerational relations between elderly parents and their children and care provision strategies maintained, modified and generated in transnational social space?
2. What consequences for the migrants result from the realization in the host societies of culturally determined intergenerational obligations in the sending societies, in particular in times of economic crisis?

Polish immigrants in Iceland

From the point of view of Polish economic emigration, Iceland is not a major country of destination. From the perspective of Iceland, the situation looks different. Poles are the

largest foreign born population. In 2010, they constituted 44% of inhabitants with foreign citizenship (Napierała and Wojtyńska, 2011). Migration of Poles to Iceland is a good example of economic chain population movement based on migrant networks. Mobility is initially of a short-term character but eventually transforms into migration of the settling type. The main economic sectors where Poles are being employed are construction and fish processing. Until May 2006, migrant workers from Poland needed work permits, and migration was organized by Icelandic employment centres (different kinds of job agencies), mostly connected with the fishing industry. Most migrants living in Iceland in the pre-2006 period were female. Since 2006, when Iceland opened its job market to workers from the ‘new European Union countries’, the number of incoming Poles (mostly men then) increased rapidly.

Before the economic crisis, unemployment – both among the native population and among immigrants – practically did not exist in Iceland. In September 2008, the unemployment level was 1.8% (Statistics Iceland, 2012). The deterioration of the economic situation of the country resulted in a drastic increase in the unemployment rate, from 1.3% at the beginning of 2008 to 7.4% in 2010. In 2011, the unemployment level dropped to 6% (Statistics Iceland, 2012). Since the beginning of 2009, the share of jobless immigrants (mostly Poles) in the total number of unemployed has jumped. They have more problems returning to the job market. In May 2010, foreigners constituted 16.8% of all Icelandic unemployed, with about 90% coming from Europe, and 60% from Poland (Skaptadóttir and Ólafsdóttir, 2010). The level of joblessness among male Poles is 6% higher than among female Poles, reflecting the crisis in the real estate market, and therefore in construction.

As in all of Western Europe in the first years of postwar economic immigration, Icelandic state institutions, as well as public opinion, assumed that guest workers would come to the country only for a short period of time. It was expected that these workers would return home if they lost their jobs. However, exactly like citizens, they have the right to unemployment benefits in Iceland, in many cases higher than the wages in the countries of origin (Wojtyńska and Zielińska, 2010). In Poland, unemployment benefits for people who have worked at least one year slightly exceed 700 PLN (or €165) per month for a maximum of one year. In Iceland, equivalent benefits are about €810 a month and unemployed persons who have worked a minimum of one year are entitled to receive benefits for at least three years. If a person has worked for at least three months, he or she is entitled to 30% of the basic benefit, meaning €243. Moreover, there are additional benefits for people in need in Iceland, like housing allowance, food parcels, clothing and reskilling courses. The level of these benefits depends on the household income. During the economic crisis, some migrants who lost their jobs returned to Poland. A large proportion decided to remain in Iceland, where they are entitled to unemployment benefits and believe that the economic situation of the host country will improve (Napierała and Wojtyńska, 2011). As a consequence, it became very difficult for them to fulfil their family obligations within the culturally defined Polish system of intergenerational relations.

The field and methodology

Findings presented here are based on field research over a three-year period (2010–2012) conducted by Łukasz Krzyżowski and Janusz Mucha in Iceland and Poland. Participant

observation and 40 individual in-depth interviews were conducted. The informants were Polish labour migrants, people of a productive age who did not plan to return to the home country during the following five years. The interviewees were recruited by the snowball sampling process, but also via a migrant Internet forum. Our research followed the paradigm of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) and matched-sample methods (Mazzucato, 2009), so interviews with migrants' relatives (mostly parents) remaining permanently in Poland were also conducted. This methodology allowed us to investigate the organization of the intergenerational support system across borders.

An Internet questionnaire ($N = 401$) was used as a quantitative technique. It was very fruitful (although the sample was not representative in a statistical sense) because a very high proportion of Icelandic Poles are Internet users. According to Ólaf's representative study among local Poles, 96% of them have access to the Internet, and nearly half of the sample was actively using this medium. The Internet is for them a much more important medium to find information about the home country than about the host society (Ólaf's, 2011).

The average age of the parents of the respondents was 59 years. Although most of these parents had not exceeded the retirement age, the majority were already outside the job market. That refers to 62% of mothers of the migrants and 54% of their fathers. The average age of respondents to the Internet survey was 34 years. Among them, 65% were women. Most of the respondents (nearly 70%) had been living in Iceland for two to four years. Interestingly, as far as future housing and migration plans are concerned, the highest (32%) proportion of respondents were those who intended to stay long in Iceland, despite the job problems, but later, when retired, wanted to return to Poland. The second largest category (nearly 20%) wanted to stay in Iceland without the intention of returning to Poland even when old. Nearly 60% of respondents had children, and more than 85% of these children lived in Iceland (the remaining children lived in Poland). Nearly 55% of respondents, when describing their financial situation, said that they had enough money for everything necessary and could save for the future (and about 30% of all respondents were jobless). Despite the fact that our findings cannot be generalized in the statistical sense to the whole population of migrants and their parents, the comparative analysis of these results and findings of other studies on Poles living in Iceland (see Napierała and Górný, 2011) as well as official Icelandic statistical databases (see Iceland Statistics, 2012) allows us to observe similarities in the distribution of key variables (like age, gender and length of stay in Iceland).

Strategies of intergenerational support in transnational social space

Over the life course, various forms of support emerge. Research findings show that migrants negotiate both the scope and the forms of care of their parents. Quantitative research reveals that the majority (about 70%; $N = 401$) of respondents help their parents living in Poland. We can distinguish five dominant transnational types of declared care practices: (1) personal care (1%), (2) practical assistance in the household during vacations (4%), (3) assistance with paperwork (28%), (4) financial help (56%) and (5) emotional support (48%). Migrants, as well as relatively non-mobile people, employ similar sociocultural practices when they give support to their elderly parents. However, our

qualitative material shows that in situations when parents need support, the help provided can be divided into three types of support and social and financial remittances. These are based on the extent of modifications of the traditional Polish culture of care. They are: (1) 'usual' practices, realized in the same sense and extent, regardless of migration, by migrating and non-migrating members of the family network, like emotional support, advising, help in the search for information concerning legal regulations, health, etc; (2) practices which, in the situation of migration, have to be modified, like monitoring the everyday life of parents and helping them, now via Skype, in organizing medical help, Internet shopping, etc; hiring people who help the parents in cleaning the flat and cooking; and paying bills via the Internet; (3) completely new practices, resulting from the functioning of migrants in the transnational spaces, like financial (direct and/or indirect) help for the parents, which in the Polish indigenous culture of help rarely takes place (literature presented in the second section of this article supports this observation); technical help, like buying and installing new devices brought from host societies to make the life of parents easier; medical consultations in host societies and sending home opinions and medications; and teaching the parents how to use a computer and the Internet. In our own study the migrants often pointed out that they had introduced their parents to the Internet, in order to build a shared lifeworld. This is important in our opinion, since in Poland the proportion of Internet users hardly exceeds 50%, and only 5% of people over 65 years of age are active on the Internet (Kowalik, 2011). Therefore, the situation in which an adult child migrates could mean in Poland that parents left behind feel isolated and consider themselves deprived of support, assistance and care which, as we have already mentioned, should be delivered according to Polish cultural principles, first of all, personally, by children. Migration of children can mean social exclusion of parents. At the same time, new Internet skills and competences, obtained thanks to the help of migrating children and grandchildren, can reduce marginalization. Loretta Baldassar has shown the same is true not only for the first but also for the second generation of Italian migrants in Australia (Baldassar, 2011b).

While constant personal care is impossible, migrants (especially women) make use of return visits to Poland to take care of their parents. As in Baldassar's (2011b) case study, during these visits (lasting usually one month) migrants do shopping and cleaning and do repairs in the apartment and gardening. Migrants describe these activities as very hard, unpaid work that must be done instead of taking a holiday. At the same time they highlighted that these return visits are very important for two reasons. One is that home visits make it easier to fulfil intergenerational obligations in the eyes of non-migrating family members and the local community in Poland. Therefore, return visits supplement transnational forms of caregiving. The other reason is connected with ethnic identity transmission. Migrants often visit parents in Poland with their own children so that they can spend more time with their grandparents. From the grandparents' point of view it is very important that those grandchildren who live in Iceland do not lose their ethnic identity. Grandparents, even those who stay in touch with grandchildren via Skype, use the opportunity to directly teach them about their Polish cultural heritage.

The dominant form of transnational caregiving is financial support (economic remittances). In the family network, migrants are usually responsible for financially helping

their parents, in particular for paying medical and other bills. Respondents stress the fact that this assists in supplementing parents' retirement pensions. The average pension of this kind in Poland is around 1500 PLN (less than €400). It is one of the lowest pensions in the European Union. Moreover, according to Eurostat, the rate of activity of people between the ages of 55 and 64 on the job market in Poland is also one of the lowest in the Union. It does not mean, however, that Polish elderly are passive in retirement or that the direction of support in the networks of intergenerational relations is unilateral (from adult children to their old parents) (Krzyżowski, 2011a). Qualitative research findings show that the financial help on the part of migrants (economic remittances) is balanced by the support on the part of elderly parents who take care of their grandchildren, the children of migrants. This help (caregiving) is provided either prior to migration to Iceland or temporarily in Iceland during the stay.

Our qualitative findings show various kinds of cultural meanings of economic remittances. According to migrants' parents, it is not only 'quantity' that matters but also 'quality': remittances have very strong sentimental value for the parents, as they symbolize children's concern and care. For the migrants (in particular for women), remittances compensate for the lack of their direct, physical presence, of help in taking care of the health and hygiene of parents, and of practical help in the household in Poland. The financial value and the meaning of remittances are also negotiated, and migrants' financial support is regulated by cultural norms of reciprocity.

Those members of the familial network who do not migrate support their parents mainly by everyday assistance in the household, in transportation (to the doctor, to church, etc.), and in maintaining hygienic standards. Migrants sometimes financially support their siblings, and the siblings' directly take care of their common parents using the money sent by migrants. The migrants also find temporary (vacation) jobs in Iceland for nephews and nieces, whose parents (migrants' siblings) deliver the caring in Poland, and invite those family members to Iceland.

Although division of care practices between siblings in the transnational family seems to be rational and functional, they have to simultaneously deal with tensions, mostly characterized by gender, which are intrinsic to this division. When the only daughter migrates, it is rarely the case that the son takes up her culturally determined obligations. In this situation daughters-in-law provide their parents-in-law with personal care. This results in tensions and conflicts:

When my mother had an accident she could not wash herself and my brother had to help her. He accused me that it is the daughter's responsibility to help the older mother in taking baths – it is not his or his wife's obligation! But I had to work, I have no choice, I must work. I have no chance to get work in Poland to combine working and taking care of my mother. Working abroad when your mother is sick is very stressful. (Female, 41 years, high school degree)

Even though Polish female migrants financially support their parents more often than their male counterparts (although it should be noted male migrant support has been shown more in research focusing on migrants from other regions, mostly from Asia; see Singh et al., 2012), our qualitative data do not indicate that women gain more power within the transnational family. Instead, realization of family obligations in the context

of migration sometimes demands sacrifices on the part of migrants, particularly women. This is still more difficult when they have a double obligation because they have to take care of their own children. This latter situation results not only in the necessity of making difficult choices over whom to help first and how, but also in the search for additional sources of income.

Social support, ambivalences and inequalities: Consequences of migrants' support strategies

All these strategies of migrant support of their families result in maintaining or increasing their status in the sending society. Being able to realize these strategies means, first, that their geographic mobility was successful, as it has led to their economic upward mobility. Second, despite the geographic distance, the 'moral order' is maintained – the Polish cultural system, which demands care of the elderly, is strengthened. Among the 13 EU countries being covered by the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) research project, the proportion of people who are of the opinion that family is the only actor responsible for care of the elderly is highest in Poland (Krzyżowski, 2011b). The importance of close family in Poland is very often compared to Italy, where 'notions about close family ties have come to be associated with *italianità* (Italianness) at home and abroad, perhaps most particularly in the migrant imaginary' (Baldassar, 2011a: 173).

The opinions and expectations presented above belong to particular national cultures but the dynamic international relations are not taken into account in the SHARE study. These opinions will change in the situation of international migrations, and therefore so too the contacts and dynamic relations between carriers of various national cultures, and they may become markers of ethnic identities and boundaries. People who in their own country naturalize and universalize national values and norms which are for them obvious and absolute will, in the transcultural situation (Nowicka, 2010), take differences of attitudes into account, which leads to self-ethnicization of their own approach. Our informants, when talking about care of the elderly and constructing their own definitions of proper care, quite often realize that there is a specificity to the Polish approach and describe their own ethnic care culture in moral terms. They express the opinion that the Polish (family-centred) care strategies are good and the Icelandic institutional care system is wrong:

From my point of view, this Polish model is friendlier [than Icelandic]; it happens within family. Here [in Iceland], one is excluded, as if taken out of the family; yes, one lives within one's milieu, but in Poland it is more cordial. (Male, 42 years, unemployed, vocational school education)

Interestingly, while all male Polish migrants stressed that only the family (meaning, in fact, women) should take care of the elderly, the female informants presented much more balanced opinions:

It has its good and bad points, since in Poland, all the time, there is a feeling that to put one's parents in a nursing home is a horrible thing. ... Only disgraceful children do that. But I think

that nothing is wrong if one sends a person to a nursing home if the person cannot take care of him/herself. When one is unconscious, has Alzheimer's disease, or is so ill that they are not aware of what is going on around them. (Female, 29 years, a college student)

Help provided to parents who live in Poland is, in a sense, a realization of the norms of the Polish culture of care but at the same time it proves the success of the migration. As Stark has convincingly stated in his economic theory of migration (Stark, 1991), migration success should not refer only to the individuals but also to their whole households and kin networks. However, strategies of support which in the eyes of the sending society represent upward social mobility can have a different meaning and repercussions in the host society.

Impact of the economic crisis on transnational caregiving

The necessity to realize personal transnational intergenerational obligations is, for our informants, a justification of their practices when they present them to the members of the host society especially after the economic recession when 25% of the total population of Polish migrants in Iceland were unemployed (Wojtyńska and Zielińska, 2010). Although unemployed migrants were offered jobs and training they found it difficult to return to the labour market. Those jobless informants who took part in our research, as well as those in other studies (Wojtyńska et al., 2011), claim that remuneration in jobs offered by the Directorate of Labour was not much higher than their unemployment benefits. Monthly unemployment benefits for a person who has worked for at least one year is higher in Iceland than the average monthly wage in Poland. However, recipients of the benefit have to report all their departures from the country. If they leave for any period, the support will be frozen. It is socially rational to receive the benefit in Iceland but the cost is that one's opportunities to visit family back home in Poland are limited. The much higher cost of living in Iceland than in Poland makes it also *irrational* to bring the whole non-migrating part of transnational family to Iceland.

For the Icelanders, the work ethic (regardless of the sector of the economy and the kind of positions: skilled or unskilled, managerial or shopfloor) is a very important element of their collective identity (Lacy, 2000; Ólafsson, 2003), and the unemployed migrants' strategies are hardly understood and are negatively valued. Meanwhile, those migrants who have financial problems (usually unemployed) use additional sources of income (such as from charities) to save money for the family in Poland. Although the proportion of Polish migrants in need (not necessarily unemployed) who use charitable services is not statistically significant (Wojtyńska et al., 2011), one-third of participants in our qualitative study use services offered by these institutions relatively often. In this situation, unemployed immigrants whom we studied adopted a strategy described by them as a 'social game' with the Icelandic public institutions active in the field of financial and other care.

Migrants become involved in this 'game' to save money to send to their family in Poland. One of the examples of these 'games' is food parcel distribution. Theoretically speaking, a person in need can receive a parcel at one distribution point at a time. However, since there is a delay in the system of registration of people who have received

the parcels, the unemployed migrants can in fact receive the parcels at several points. The administrators who distribute the parcels are aware of this strategy and therefore they prepare smaller (according to our informants) parcels than the regulations allow. For a number of our migrating informants, this 'game' between themselves and the Icelandic institutions is a source of critical self-reflection regarding both their own practices and the practices of Icelandic administrators. The informants' attitudes are ambivalent. In our opinion, this ambivalence consists of three elements: (1) *pride* in their own ability to use (*cheat*) the generous Icelandic system of social security; (2) *shame* because they realise that they are abusing the system; and (3) *accusation* of Icelandic policies and society – that Iceland itself is responsible for the economic mistakes which led to the crisis and its consequences for the local job market, including the migrant job market and the practices mentioned above (which is a form of rationalization).

The situation of migrating women is particularly difficult, as Polish care culture defines women as the primary caregivers. Meanwhile, migration to Iceland means that women leave either children or ageing parents behind in Poland. Our respondents, both men and women, underlined that they were in Iceland only in order to make their families' lives better than their own, and to help their parents and other members of the family. Women who left their children or older parents in Poland in the good hands of close relatives saw themselves as giving priority to the children's or parents' welfare, but they were aware of the fact that despite their much more active social practices compared to men, the emigration of mothers and daughters was often regarded in the sending society as culturally unacceptable, the act of abandoning children and elderly parents, and therefore it was negatively valued. At the same time, emigration of sons and fathers without their children was considered by the same social milieu to be a good sign of entrepreneurship and taking care of the welfare of the family, and was therefore valued positively, even if in fact they were much less active. The migrating woman who leaves her children in the careful care of grandparents will not advance in the eyes of the sending society; rather, she will lose social prestige.

The economic situation of the host society suggests devoting more attention to the ways and reasons for the implementation of migrants' support strategies in transnational social space in the situation of economic crisis. How do these strategies influence the dynamics of individual social status in these spaces? Family obligations – as social mechanisms leading simultaneously to social exclusion and to social inclusion, both in the sending and receiving societies – are dynamic and variously constructed in different stages of family life.

Ambivalence and tension towards elderly parents in transnational caregiving

Social mechanisms related to the realization of family obligations are full of ambivalences and tensions which make the intergenerational relations in transnational social space more dynamic. Our interviews present the evaluation of care and help for the parents. We can analytically divide these evaluations into three categories. First, we find comments stressing the dedication of the informants to their families despite their difficult financial situation. If they do not often go back home, this is in their opinion due to

the Icelandic formal system of social security and not their lack of concern. They see the difficult choice between either visiting their family in Poland or earning (or getting) money:

My mum is aged and ill, she cannot get out of the bathtub on her own ... how does my mum live? Well, she lives somehow, we have an apartment in a housing block, two rooms, there is some space, but, you know, rent, etc. Let me tell you: when I am here [in Iceland] on this unemployment benefit, I can send these 500 PLN [equivalent to €120] once a month. Mum has a small retirement pension in Poland, and I can send money for this apartment; I manage somehow. But if I were there [in Poland], there would be an additional mouth to feed, you know, this is terrible. Not only would I have no benefit money, not only is her retirement at a starvation level but I would need to be fed as well. (Female, 51 years, vocational school education, unemployed)

Second, there are those who are embroiled in multifaceted obligations while having very limited resources, and they are doubly overburdened by care of dependants. They have to choose between meeting this or that obligation or to divide their limited resources:

On the 2 September this year I buried my father. My sister moved in with my mother who, by the way, has only weeks. She is artificially fed, she weighs 33 kilograms, and there is more of the cancer than herself. Unfortunately, and I am truly sorry, I cannot quit the emigration and return back home. I have a wife, two children and financial obligations connected to the house in Poland ... I simply cannot. (Male, 44 years, high school education, working in the fishing industry)

Third, there are those who, despite sufficient resources, are not in practice very involved in their parents' situation but feel obliged during the research to justify their inability to face the unrealized, socially constructed expectations and who point to the situation in which their care of their elderly parents could (and did) directly lead to their own serious exclusion in the sending society (like loss of a job):

I cannot imagine that my children will take care of me. I remember very well how it used to be, like a chained-up dog, even worse, because the dog can sometimes break off, and one cannot leave a person without food. It seems stupid, but [when the informant still lived in Poland] I could not go to a funeral of a close person [but not a member of immediate family]. I asked my brother to take care of our father if I went to this funeral but he said that it was MY duty [to take care of the father] ... eventually, our neighbour helped me [in caring for the father], but she can do that once, twice, and this is work and not a favour, so I could not ask her. Besides, it is true that I lost the job then because I was caring for my father. And what could I have done? I have a wife, children, I left [Poland] and that is it; my brother was to take care of him, but the truth is that it was my wife who cared for my father until the end, the death of her parents, so I exchanged my father's retirement pension into 'care money' [cashed by a public social assistance institution] and they take care of him. (Male, 52 years, high school education, a plumber)

All these interviews make clear that the personal support of dependent persons leads very often to situations of potential exclusion, understood not only as deep financial problems but also as a sense of helplessness, where taking advantage of the unemployment benefit or having a low-waged job (sometimes the wage is hardly higher than the

benefit) in Iceland are the only realistic means of enabling help for the dependants who live in Poland. If one chooses to stay in Iceland and takes advantage of the social security system for a longer period of time, it also potentially leads to exclusion, but exclusion from the larger, international network of economic immigrants to Iceland, who do not accept the *abuse* of the Icelandic social security system as a permanent life strategy serving to get ‘money for nothing’ and sending it to Poland, instead of treating the system as social assistance during a period of intensive job search.

Conclusions: Transnational family responses to economic crisis

Most research on remittances provides a general account of this phenomenon, neglecting the specificity of the groups of providers and recipients. Studies on transfers within transnational families concentrate on the analysis of the family of procreation or address the global transfers (Hochschild, 2003; Parreñas, 2001). The aim of our article was different. We were interested in intergenerational transfers between adult, migrating children and their elderly, relatively immobile parents. In addition, we intended to present the dynamics of these transfers under conditions of economic crisis.

In transnational social space, the intergenerational contract undergoes numerous modifications, but survives and regulates the functioning of the transnational system of social security in a new way. In our study, the care chain process (Hochschild, 2000; Yeates, 2012), as a response to changes in the intergenerational contract caused by migration, was not observed. Instead, some of the sociocultural practices of taking care of elderly parents remain unchanged in the process of migration. Other practices are modified (mainly due to technological development) but do not disappear. There are also new phenomena in the transnational social space which transform the typical order of the *de facto* intergenerational contract. We mean here, first of all, the change of direction for financial remittances. While in the Polish (and not only Polish) traditional culture of care, it is the parents (regardless of their age) who transfer money to their children, in the situation of migration it is the adult migrating children who take responsibility for the financial security of their parents. There are various forms of remittances. First, money is transferred directly to the parents. Second, the money goes to the migrants’ siblings who live in the country of origin and who directly take care of the parents. Third, migrants hire people who do not belong to the immediate family network to take care of their parents. From the point of view of the adult migrating children, the financial support is a substitute for physical intimacy. For the elderly parents who receive the help, remittances are a sign of care and the financial value of remittances is put into economic and symbolic contexts.

In the transnational system of intergenerational care, not only do sociocultural practices, important for the care of the elderly, become modified, nor only do the directions of financial transfers, but gender roles as well. Migrating women, in particular those whose parents (mainly mothers) demand help in maintaining hygienic standards, are in the society of origin under social scrutiny and moral (mostly negative) evaluation to a larger extent than are men in the same situation. Therefore, women are forced by the social and cultural systems to make additional efforts in order to guarantee the financial security of their parents. Direct assistance of daughters to their mothers (and sometimes fathers), which is characteristic of the Polish

traditional intergenerational contract, transforms into financial transfers. It does not change the fact that in both systems of care (in the home country and transnational), it is the women (daughters) who are mainly responsible for the social security of the elderly parents.

Similar to the analysis of Helma Lutz and Ewa Palenga-Möllnbeck (2012), in our research there is not a simple replacement of 'protective agents' as often claimed by the advocates of care chain approaches. Instead, in situations of elderly care, there is a transnational system of intergenerational care based on a circular exchange of support on different transnational family life stages. Therefore, our findings contribute to the literature on social protection in transnational social spaces (Amelina et al., 2012) and the functioning of transnational caregiving towards the aged parents of migrants (Baldassar et al., 2007a), even in situations of economic crisis in the country of immigration.

There are various reactions and consequences (as well as emotions), in the host society, of the fulfilment of obligations towards elderly parents which became more visible in times of economic crises. We cannot summarize all of them here. However, we would like to underline the stresses and the possibility of a marginalizing mechanism (see Faist, 2010) excluding migrants who send remittances from the receiving society. In times of returning waves of economic crisis but also with the perspective or hope that it will be overcome soon, a potential change of the situation in which a number of migrant workers have no jobs and receive generous unemployment benefits from the host society would be inefficient from the point of view of all the actors involved. Unemployed workers prefer to stay, hoping for improvement in the economy and, in the meantime, cashing in on their lawful benefits. These benefits become a significant part of the budget of migrant households in Poland, helping to support the relatives of migrants, mainly parents and children. To migrate is a decision made by the kinship and household networks in which the destination and timing of migration and the scope and forms of realization of intergenerational obligations are negotiated. That applies first of all to migrating women. On the other hand, continuation of the current universal, expensive legal system of social security (and even its expanded benefit period) is rational and profitable for the optimistic Icelandic society and state administration believing in the return of an economic boom. Assuming that economic growth resumes, it makes sense to have skilled workers in the country who are already familiar with the local sociocultural situation. It is rational to help in their transnational life, including financial transfers to the country of origin.

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Author biographies

Łukasz Krzyżowski is Assistant Professor at AGH University, Krakow, Poland and Postdoctoral Fellow at Humboldt-University, Berlin. Krzyżowski’s interests are in transmigration, old age and elderly care and intergenerational solidarity under Polish systemic culture-bound conditions.

Janusz Mucha teaches at AGH University in Krakow. He specializes in social theory, ethnicity and migration, in particular migration of highly skilled specialists.

Résumé

L'obligation pour les enfants de prendre personnellement en charge leurs parents âgés, notamment en matière de soins personnels ou d'aide ménagère, est une donnée culturelle particulièrement ancrée dans le système de valeurs polonais, qui est encore renforcée du fait de la faiblesse du système d'aides en provenance des institutions. Dans un contexte d'émigration, les obligations (et les moyens pour les remplir) se trouvent modifiées, sans pour autant disparaître. De nouveaux types de pratiques sociales s'imposent. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser les prises en charge intergénérationnelles et les flux de transferts de fonds des familles dans l'espace social transnational. En s'appuyant sur l'étude de cas d'ouvriers immigrés en Islande et de leurs parents âgés restés en Pologne, les auteurs de l'article étudient le fonctionnement des transferts de fonds vers les parents âgés dans les familles transnationales. Suivant leur thèse centrale, les soins apportés en personne (essentiellement par les femmes) aux parents âgés restés en Pologne sont, dans un espace social transnational, remplacés par des transferts de fonds (essentiellement envoyés par les femmes émigrées). Les auteurs examinent par ailleurs l'impact de la crise économique sur les familles transnationales, qui dans le cas présent, a durement frappé l'Islande mais a – jusqu'à présent – épargné la Pologne. Les auteurs s'appuient sur les données quantitatives et qualitatives qu'ils ont recueillies au cours de recherches sur le terrain en Islande et en Pologne.

Mots-clés

familles transnationales, Islande, Pologne, soins transnationaux, soutien intergénérationnel, vieillissement

Resumen

La necesidad culturalmente determinada del cumplimiento personal de las obligaciones filiales de cuidar de los padres mayores, incluyendo el cuidado personal y la ayuda práctica en el hogar, es un elemento de larga tradición en el sistema normativo polaco, fortalecido por la debilidad del sistema de apoyo institucional. En una situación de emigración, las obligaciones (y los métodos por los cuales se pueden realizar) se modifican pero no desaparecen. Lo que se hace necesario son nuevos tipos de prácticas sociales. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el cuidado intergeneracional y los flujos de remesas familiares en un espacio social transnacional. Los autores utilizan el estudio de caso de los inmigrantes de clase trabajadora en Islandia y sus padres ancianos en Polonia para explorar cómo funcionan las remesas en la última etapa de la vida en las familias transnacionales. La tesis principal es que, en el espacio social transnacional, el cuidado de los padres ancianos en persona (sobre todo por las mujeres) en Polonia se transforma en remesas (en su mayoría enviadas por mujeres emigradas). Los autores también analizan el impacto de la crisis económica en las familias transnacionales que, en este caso de estudio, ha golpeado fuertemente a Islandia, pero que (hasta el momento) no ha afectado a Polonia. Los autores utilizan datos cuantitativos y cualitativos recogidos durante el trabajo de campo en Islandia y Polonia.

Palabras clave

apoyo intergeneracional, cuidado transnacional, envejecimiento, familia transnacional, Islandia, Polonia