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To cite this article: Elena Borisova (2023): Ambivalences of Care: Movement, Masculinity and Presence in Tajikistan, Ethnos, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2023.2198677

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2023.2198677
Ambivalences of Care: Movement, Masculinity and Presence in Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT
Based on ethnographic fieldwork in rural Tajikistan – the region where migration to Russia has become almost the only stable source of livelihood – this article contributes to a growing body of anthropological literature concerned with tensions, ambivalences and contradictions of care. Drawing on the ethnography of my interlocutor’s attempts to arrange care for his elderly parents, I show how migration is entwined with the relations of indebtedness and care that are constitutive of moral personhood. Attending to the complex entanglements of care, personhood, movement, and presence, I expose the key paradox of care in migration contexts: migration creates distance and separation which results in the disjuncture between care as a material provision and care as an affective performance of respect. Men’s attempts to bridge this disjuncture can keep them ‘stuck’ in a loop of movement between Russia and Tajikistan and put a strain on their relationships, bodies, and sense of self.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 17 October 2022; Accepted 30 March 2023
KEYWORDS Care; masculinity; migration; morality; Tajikistan

Introduction
Temperatures in the Tajik lowlands plummeted to unexpected lows at the end of January 2018, sometimes reaching –13°C. The real feel was –20°C, though, when you accounted for the notoriously icy winds blowing down from the mountains. The cold crept up shoulders and ran down arms, it froze limbs and cheeks and battered window panes. Even the birds would not sing. A small trip outside, even to use the toilet, required a total concentration of will. Albina1 and I were sitting cross-legged on traditional colourful cotton mattresses encircling the dining table in a square 3 m² room, sipping green tea. This was one of the heated rooms in the big household,
and the stove greedily swallowing smelly coal substantially added to women’s domestic workload. During my month-long stay in their household, I spent the majority of time in this room with Albina (a 31-year-old divorced woman), her 10-year-old daughter, her mother – Manizha (a woman in her late 50s) – and her father – Maksud (a 60-year-old man) – all of them recently returned from Russia to care for his elderly parents (aged 91 and 82). Here we peeled carrots for palov, ate our meals, studied, brushed our teeth, washed our faces, did homework, wrote fieldnotes, and reviewed student papers, all while TV played an unending loop of Turkish and Uzbek soaps on the background.

That evening, both of us felt exhausted and we were about to start preparations for sleep. Suddenly the door opened, the icy wind from the outside brought in the strong reek of alcohol, and Maksud appeared on the doorstep. Unsteady, with his fur hat tilted, he measured the room with his gaze, plopped down on a cotton mattress, leaned against the wall, and lit a cigarette. He spent his evening drinking vodka with local men at the village teahouse (choikhona). It is the space where, warmed up by spirits, men compete in bragging about how much money they made in Russia, what improvements they made to their households back in Tajikistan, and what sexual adventures they had in the meantime. Looking at me, Maksud burst out, his voice wabbling:

Can I be considered a real man? Look, Lena, how we’re living! Look at our kitchen, at our toilet! Apparently, I lived just for myself. I was just remitting money and thought everything was fine. I failed to create good conditions for my elders for their old age. I was living for myself while they were suffering! And now I will have made everything in two months, but will they see it? What if they die tomorrow? … Sometimes Albina speaks to me rudely and I scold her. She tells me, “Dad, you’re only promising”. And actually, she’s right, I haven’t done anything! That’s why I humiliate myself sometimes – I drink. Can I be called a real man now? (Rus. Razve ia mogu teper’ nazyvat’ia nastoiashchim muzhchinoi?)

The room filled with thick smoke and as I picked out his face, I could see him trying hard to hold his tears. Maksud spent twenty years being torn between Russia and Tajikistan, driven by the desire to be odami khub (a good man): a good son, a good husband, and a good father. The head of extended family, the father of three adult daughters, and the well-known figure in the transnational network of migrant workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, how could he allow himself to appear so vulnerable now talking to a young woman of his daughter’s age?

Riddled by the feeling of guilt and determined to restore his moral standing by fulfilling the caring obligations as a good son, Maksud planned to stay in Tajikistan with his parents. Yet, his return turned out to be less permanent than he had planned: he quickly ran out of savings, could not get access to his Russian pension due to bureaucratic problems, and found it impossible to find an alternative income in Tajikistan. His multiple projects to improve his household came to a standstill. Unable to reconcile the demands of being present and of providing materially, the tension was building both in his relationship with his family and in his body. Eventually, worn out, he fell ill and had to have his gall bladder removed. Now his wife and daughter had to care both for him and his parents while receiving double the
amount of guests and showing them respect and hospitality. Every time someone showed up on their doorstep, Albina dropped everything she was doing and rushed to the kitchen, an annoyed grimace on her face, while her mother sighed and set up the table. The same ritual was repeated many times a day.

In March 2018, Maksud first started thinking of going back to Russia. He had not fully recovered from the surgery, and he spent his days in bed making plans for the nearest future:

I told my father, “Father, I cannot just sit here without money anymore”. He answered he doesn’t mind if I go to Russia and work there until January, save some money and come back. But I am still weak, I have to recover first.

He left in April. In May, his energetic voice on the phone reported to me that the ‘work was going well and money was accumulating’.

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Tracing Maksud’s family’s attempts to perform care for his elderly parents at a critical time of their increased frailty and illness in the north of post-industrial Tajikistan – the region where migration to Russia has become almost the only stable source of livelihood – this article contributes to a growing body of anthropological literature concerned with tensions, ambivalences and contradictions of care. Care is inextricably linked to one’s personhood and morality as it ‘confirms or creates the presence of something or someone in a moral world’, but it is also ‘a practice which involves the risk of being undone by others in relations of care’ (Louw and Mortensen 2021: 128). With this article, I turn to the existential risk of ‘being undone’ in care. This sheds light on how foregrounding inherent ambivalences, tensions and contradictions in the study of care in the context of migration can inform how we understand the dynamic of departure and return. I explore this dynamic by attending to the complex entanglements of care, personhood, movement, and presence.

Although research on care is fragmented, there have been calls to place care at the centre of analysis as social organisation (Thelen 2015a) and as ontological condition of interconnection and interdependency (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) crucial for and constitutive of both people’s everyday physical survival and their moral worlds (Kleinman 2012; Mattingly 2014). Recent ethnographies of care highlight its ambivalences, tensions and contradictions and its complex entanglements with inequalities, control, and oppression (Garcia 2010; Bruckermann 2017; Buch 2018; Johnson and Lindquist 2020). They also point to its inherently relational, processual and contingent qualities that make care a fundamentally ‘difficult, imperfect, and messy’ empirical phenomenon resisting our attempts to fit it into evaluative frameworks (Seaman et al. 2019: 8).

Earlier research on transnational care emphasises the continuity, agency, and creativity of transnational caring arrangements rather than contradictions, ruptures and failures. Specifically, it focuses on the constitutive role of kinship-based transnational care practices and the transnational circulation of care between different actors (Baldassar and Merla 2014) that drive migration projects and hold transnational families together in absentia. These practices come into being through regular remittances (Åkesson 2011; Zharkevich 2019), temporary home visits (Marschall 2017), mediated
forms of communication (Sinanan 2019), by proxy (Dalakoglou 2010), and through various manifestations of emotion (Svašek 2018). They create the effect of co-presence and allow families to cultivate ‘a feeling of collective welfare and unity’ across borders (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 3). Recent research recognises that care comes into being through complicated family negotiations of conflicting interests and roles, and can be disruptive, oppressive and have ambivalent outcomes for the wellbeing of differently positioned family members (Yarris 2017; Haagsman and Mazzucato 2020). For instance, Ester Serra Mingot (2020) shows that women in transnational families can experience care as suffocating due to gendered power inequalities and mismatched perceptions of need. This literature started to generate important insights about contradictions of transnational care.

In order to further nuance our understanding of ambivalences of care, instead of asking how care circulates or whether it succeeds or fails, I find it generative to first analyse what counts as care in a specific ethnographic context (Aulino 2016) and how this is consequential for what Maruška Svašek calls ‘the experiential dialectics of proximity and distance’ in migratory contexts (Svašek 2008). Research on care in transnational families often distinguishes between material and affective components. The former references ‘caring for’ such as daily hands-on care, while the latter refers to ‘caring about’ – intimate emotional support, providing information, and making decisions. Such a distinction allows researchers to claim that care does not necessarily require physical presence as ‘caring about’ can be exercised across borders through dense transnational practices while ‘caring for’ is achieved by ‘proxy’ (Baldassar and Merla 2014).²

Bringing together the literature on care with my ethnographic material and the debates about culturally contingent ideals and practices of respect and authority in Central Asia, I make a set of interrelated arguments. Firstly, care emerges as a triangular relationship between care-giver, care receiver and the social context from which caring derives its meaning. I show that care materialises through affective performances of respect that render care practices visible for the community. These performances are inherently bodily and are premised on one’s physical presence in the neighbourhood’s space. Secondly, migration as a necessary means of making a living in the region creates distance and separation. This results in the disjuncture between care as a material provision and care as an affective performance of respect. Consequently, men face contradictory demands to be simultaneously present and absent. While migration facilitates men’s capacity to provide financial support to their families, it means they cannot deliver affective performances of care that demand physical presence and that are tied to the recognition of their gendered personhood. Finally, migrants’ attempts to bridge this disjuncture can keep men ‘stuck’ in a loop of constant movement between Russia and Tajikistan. This form of mobility is associated with constrained agency and puts a strain on migrants’ bodies, relationships, and their sense of self.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the post-industrial north of Tajikistan in 2017–2018. I draw on participant observation in Maksud’s household where I was a regular visitor for almost a year and shared a room with
Albina and her daughter for a month in the winter of 2018, and on a series of interviews with Maksud and Albina. These interviews revolved around the family’s history of migration, the current challenges of being unable to leave because of caring duties toward Maksud’s parents, and their imaginaries of the future. Before 2017, Maksud’s parents lived alone with their extended kin present in Tajikistan checking on them every day. By autumn 2017, Maksud and his wife, his daughter, and his granddaughter had returned to Tajikistan from Russia. At the time of my fieldwork, the household consisted of his elderly parents and nuclear family.

My positionality as a young Russian woman, a migrant myself with family residing in two different countries and dreading the future of struggling with caring transnational responsibilities against increasingly restrictive border regimes, facilitated my conversations with Maksud and Albina. My experiences of migration and embodied knowledge of life in Russia (albeit from very different positions) allowed the degree of openness and sincerity in informal settings. Recorded interviews highlighted the role of care as a cultural and moral boundary, contributing to my understanding of its performative aspect. For Maksud, narrating how he cared for his father during our interview served as a retrospective performance of care, which confirmed his status as a moral individual to me, the researcher.

Research on migration from Central Asian countries has shown that migration is inherently a ‘family affair’. The members of extended families pour their collective effort into accumulating money and distribute responsibilities pertaining to different aspects of a family’s livelihood. The collective decision of who goes and who stays entails the negotiation of household moral economies as well as gender and generational hierarchies (Reeves 2017). Households with many children, especially those with sons, usually benefit from such an arrangement as they can successfully share financial and affective dimensions of caring responsibilities among migrants and stayers (Abashin 2015). Yet, ethnographers have not explored how families manage to sustain such arrangements in the context of growing absences and what it means for individual family members and their mobile trajectories. Close to nothing is known about how families that do not fit in such a household model hold together their migration projects and caring duties. In this respect, Maksud’s struggle to care for his elderly parents presents a unique case (due to Maksud’s structural position as the only son in the family and who does not have a son himself) and reflects wider dynamics of caring arrangements in the context of accelerating migration.

Migration in Post-Soviet Tajikistan

Explaining his decision to migrate, Maksud, like other men of his generation, referred to familial obligations against the backdrop of mass unemployment and a lack of resources in Tajikistan: ‘All of us had to leave to provide for our families. Because there’s nothing here! No factories, no plants – you couldn’t earn a penny here (Rus. ni kopeiki ne zarabotaesh)!’ As the family’s only son, he struggled to support his then-unmarried four sisters and retired parents. He went to Russia for the first time in 2000 when he was in his 40s, and after several years managed to find a good job
as a bus driver. He regularly remitted relatively large sums of money (up to £650–750 per month) to his parents and visited home annually, rebuilding and renovating their house during month-long visits. Meanwhile, his immediate and extended family members gradually joined him in Russia: he managed to bring his brothers-in-law, wife, daughters, and their husbands to St. Petersburg, finding jobs and acquiring residency documents for all of them. In 2009 he received a Russian passport, which facilitated the logistics of his departures and arrivals – when planning his visits home, he no longer had to account for the vicissitudes of the Russian migration regime, which was putting increasing pressure on migrant workers (Borisova 2020).

Maksud’s life story falls into the ‘typical’ biographical narrative of a male migrant trying to fill the gaping hole in the family budget in the aftermath of Tajikistan’s transition to the market economy and the deterioration of the Soviet welfare system. Beginning as early as the mid-1990s, labour migration from Tajikistan to Russia was to a large extent prompted by the degradation of the local economy, the sharp drop in living standards and the civil war (1992–1997). Over the past three decades, migration to Russia has turned into the main livelihood strategy for many families, with the economy of Tajikistan becoming heavily reliant on migrant remittances. Tajikistan is consistently placed in the top five most remittance dependent countries in the world. With a population of 9.5 million people, around 700–800,000 Tajikistani nationals reside and work in Russia (Zotova and Cohen 2020).

However, these numbers do not express the experiential scope and significance of migration. In the post-industrial rural region where I conducted my fieldwork, migration is experienced as a hard fact of life: ‘Migration is our reality, everyone has someone in Russia, otherwise it’s impossible to survive here’, one of my interlocutors from the local administration said. Throughout my fieldwork I did not meet a single family that had not experienced migration. Movement has become intricately woven into the fabric of the everyday life for both migrants who have developed a transnational way of living, and the so-called ‘left behind’, who are collectively striving to reproduce their communities of value (Ibañez-Tirado 2019; Abashin and Brednikova 2021). To borrow from Shah and Lerche’s work (2020), it would not be an exaggeration to claim that the whole region is involved in migration through participating in ‘invisible economies of care’ – the unpaid work to maintain life, social relations, and material forms such as migrant houses.

Materialised in large-scale building projects and flourishing ritual economies, migrant remittances made migration a highly desired option for the younger generations (Borisova 2021a). It has become a part of male social becoming, opening a path to marriage and family life, and reshaping domestic moral economies, gender roles, ideas about social propriety and respectability, and people’s experiences of time and place (Reeves 2017; Ibañez-Tirado 2019). Male and female mobilities are moralised differently: while men’s long-term migration is celebrated as a fulfilment of filial and conjugal duty, the increase of women’s mobility raises suspicion and casts a shadow on a family’s reputation. This is especially pressing for young unmarried women, who migrate only in rare cases. However, even women joining their husbands abroad are at risk of tarnishing their reputation (Reeves 2011). This is part of the
reason why migration in Tajikistan is still largely a ‘male affair’: almost 90% of migrants are men (Chudinovskikh and Denisenko 2020).

The transnational mobility of migrant workers from Tajikistan is structured by the Russian migration regime. Although in the past decade it has grown more restrictive with deportation and deportability used as a means of immigration control (Bahovadinova 2016), citizens of Tajikistan still enter the country visa-free. Upon arrival, migrant workers must obtain a temporary residence registration (propiska) and labour license (trudovoi patent) which have a monthly cost. These documents allow them to legally reside and be employed in Russia. The process of documenting oneself is complex and riddled with uncertainties, yet being partially documented does not preclude migrants from renting, finding jobs and sending remittances (although making it more expensive).5

The majority move between Tajikistan and Russia like Maksud, even if they have acquired Russian citizenship. Long periods of work are usually followed by short home visits, allowing people to accomplish life projects: starting a family, building a house, and maintaining social presence in their communities through participation in community events and life-cycle celebrations. Migration is also structured by obligations and responsibilities within family hierarchies that facilitate the circulation of family members (Reeves 2017). Imagining migration as a short-term project for ‘finding money’ (pul īftan) for a ritual event such as a wedding or a large purchase, many migrants find themselves caught up in a perpetual cycle of family needs, and demands for more money to be earned in Russia. As a result, although they perceive their presence in Russia as temporary, many of them spend their whole working lives there, hoping to eventually return to Tajikistan after their retirement. Sometimes generations of men from one family replace each other in Russia, collectively working towards the completion of family projects (Abashin 2015). Care for the elderly is highly important for Central Asian societies and is heavily moralised, yet it has not been analysed as part of family projects that structure migration. In this context, I turn to Maksud’s struggle to care for his elderly parents at a critical time of illness.

Morality of Care and Personhood in Central Asia

In Tajikistan, successful ageing is defined through relations with one’s extended family and community. Ideas about care are rooted in the so-called ‘generational contract’, implying the circulation of care between younger and older generations to ensure reproduction. Intergenerational reciprocity is perceived in terms of moral debt (qarz), mutual obligation (vazifa) and responsibility (javobgarī): parental obligations to care for children are inverted into children’s obligations to care for their elderly parents. Normative ideas about care emerge at the intersection of state law, customary law, and Islamic ethics. According to the state law, adult able-bodied children must provide material support and care for their elderly parents who are legally recognised as incapable of work or in need of material support. Caring for one’s elders is seen as a sacred obligation and an important part of living Islam. Despite variation in Islamic practice rooted within historically and locally embedded ideas about what it means
to be a Muslim (Louw 2007; Abashin 2014), cultivating respect and deference towards one’s parents from a very young age is considered a crucial part of proper upbringing (*tarbiia*) (Stephan 2010). Concern for one’s upbringing is embedded within formal education – some school textbooks contain references to the Quran and hadiths that place children’s responsibility to care for one’s elder parents and to treat them with patience, respect and kindness right after obedience to God (Jūraeva and Jūraeva 2016: 35). Customarily, caring obligations are linked to gender and generational hierarchies as well as family roles. Within the domestic division of labour among kin, care for the elderly is the youngest son’s responsibility, whose nuclear family never separates into an independent household, but takes care of the elderly and inherits the parental house after their death (Roche 2014). The obligation to care is joined by public expectations to conduct a proper funeral ritual (*janoza*) according to Islamic rules, which lasts for days and demands displaying hospitality to everyone coming to commemorate the deceased.

Delivering care is imagined strictly within the domestic domain, and institutional care is considered highly inappropriate. The reliance on informal kinship networks in care arrangements has increased with the decline of the Soviet welfare state: the average pension in contemporary Tajikistan (around $35 per month) makes it impossible to survive without kin support. Failure to care for one’s parents carries the risk of public commentary and social exclusion. As one of my female informants who had lived in Russia for more than ten years explained, ‘If you abandon your parents, the entire mahalla (neighbourhood) will condemn you! No one will help you, no one will invite you to tui (ritual celebrations of life-cycle events)!’ Care also functions as an ethnic and religious marker and a boundary: my presence in the field was sometimes interpreted as neglect of my own parents, which, according to my interlocutors, is highly immoral and unacceptable for Tajiks but somewhat ‘typical’ for Russians and ‘Europeans’. Although it is important to recognise that the normative ideas about care outlined above are often contested, negotiated and moulded according to specific practical circumstances, in this section I wanted to emphasise that people are guided by these ideas in their attempts to construct their moral worlds. As I will show below, the resulting physical and moral burden they bear is very real (see also Torno Forthcoming).

Giving and receiving care is inextricably linked with notions of respect (Alber and Drotbohm 2015). Showing respect (*hurmat*) to one’s elders and receiving it from one’s juniors is one of the main principles ordering social relations in Central Asia. The youth is socialised into respecting their elders by embodying specific interactional practices, and in return expect to enjoy the same respect when they approach old age. However, as Judith Beyer (2010: 84) argues in the context of Kyrgyzstan, the acknowledgment of elders’ increased authority should not be considered simply as a function of reaching a certain age. Authority and respect are rather ‘the result of co-emergent interactional practices’ and should be considered as an accomplishment. As one ages, one has to ‘work towards becoming an elder’, which implies delivering certain embodied performances: ‘performing eldersness’ in socially recognised ways. To present themselves as worthy of respect, elders draw on various sources of
knowledge they have accumulated over time (religious, traditional, and professional), demonstrating that they have led a morally committed life by providing care and moral guidance to their children and the community (Beyer 2010: 83–84; see also Ismailbekova 2016).

Such performances, however, demand an audience who willingly submit to the elders’ moral authority, as the mutual recognition of each other’s positions is at the core of respect and care. Exploring ageing in Kyrgyzstan in the absence of family, Maria Louw shows that to have their moral integrity and authority recognised, lonely Kyrgyz elders establish relations of care with ancestor spirits. Care in this sense is understood more broadly as ‘a way of presencing forth something or someone (through affection—emotional stances or attitudes—or more concrete actions); of confirming or creating the presence of something or someone in a moral world’ (Louw 2022: 69). Acts of care allow elders to ‘patch up’ their moral worlds that became damaged due to the absence of extended family. Thus, it requires some hard work of imagination to ‘do “being elders”’ in the absence of those who care.

Being abandoned by one’s children is a widespread fear among Tajik elders. Many try to use their authority family decision-making to bind their children to the home. While some prefer struggling financially to sending their sons to Russia (especially if they only have one son), others try to ensure that working in Russia is a temporary condition. They do not allow their sons to obtain Russian citizenship, get involved with the local women, or buy property in Russia. At one point, Maksud accumulated enough money to buy a piece of land with a small house in Russia but his father was against the idea and Maksud had to respect his decision.

My father didn’t give me his permission. Maybe he was afraid that I would abandon him in his old age. I am the youngest son after all – I must [care for the elderly parents]. I told him that we could sell it at any point. But what can I do if he forbade it? He said no and that’s it.

Men like Maksud who are the only sons and cannot share the burden of delivering various aspects of care with their male siblings are placed into a difficult position. On the one hand, they are pushed to migrate by the necessity to provide for their families materially – an important aspect of the gendered labour of care. On the other hand, they are expected to be present at home to be available to their elderly parents (Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012). This necessity to be simultaneously present and absent breeds personal ethical dilemmas around reconciling various aspects of care and meeting public expectations.

**Being Seen ‘Doing Care’: Validating Care Through Affective Performances**

Going to Russia allows Tajik men to meet the expectations of care as material provision and achieve masculinity and maturity in the eyes of the community (Reeves 2013b; Roche 2014). In this sense, absence is an achievement and aspiration (Elliot 2021: 76). However, their absence means they cannot perform a crucial aspect of care – giving respect, depriving their elders of the ‘audience’ who witness and validate their
embodied performances of authority. Migration poses a threat to both migrants and their elders: not necessarily in terms of practical care arrangements, which have been widely discussed in the literature on the transnational extension of kinship and relations of care through digital technologies, but in relation to the risk of ‘being undone’ as a person in relations of care through absence.

The inherent bodily character of care is encoded linguistically: to care (nigoh kardan) literally means to ‘look after’ someone. This metaphoric connection between care and the sense of vision points to the relationship that acknowledges bodily co-presence as its basis. It implies that care is not possible without vigilant attention to another person’s needs achieved through actively ‘seeing’ the other. It also highlights the practice-oriented aspect of care: one has to ‘do’ it (kardan), just like one has to ‘do respect’ (hurmat kardan). Recent work on distant care points to the importance of seeing as an embodied aspect of care (Marchetti-Mercer et al. 2021). Even if migrants cannot physically deliver practical aspects of care, they rely on kin in their places of origin who function as their ‘observing eyes’. Splitting the practical and affective aspects of care in between the physically present kin and migrants who demonstrate their concern and affection through their virtual presence forms the ‘triangle of care’ (Kaiser-Grolimund 2018). In what follows, I will show that the relationship of care can be imagined as triangular in a different sense if we account for the cultural context in which the caring action acquires its meaning. While it has been argued that care needs to be recognised as care by both caregiver and care receiver in order to be efficacious (Tronto 1993), I suggest that ‘doing care’ needs to be performed and presented to the ‘observing eyes’ of the social audience to be fully recognised as care. As such, care is rooted in specific forms of bodily presence – ones that the literature on transnational care does not capture.

I take inspiration from the literature on the importance of various audiences in making social action efficacious: for instance, Danilyn Rutherford (2012), and Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2020) point to the role of international audiences as a crucial element in asserting political sovereignty. More specifically to Central Asian context, Johan Rasanyagam, Judith Beyer and Madeleine Reeves (2014) highlight how the performance approach rooted in Austin’s theory of performative utterances and Goffman’s sociology of everyday life can help understand how politics is performed in the region. Success of such performances rests upon the ability to be ‘seen’ and have one’s claims to visibility validated by the audience. Performativity has also been discussed in the context of everyday life in Central Asian neighbourhoods. Morgan Liu (2012: 117) noted that in Uzbek neighbourhoods in the city of Osh one becomes recognised as a pious person through everyday performances of religiosity: ‘it is not just that one needs to pray, study, or fast but that one generally has to be seen [my emphasis] doing so and be known in this way’. Being seen is also important on other occasions, e.g. life-cycle rituals where performing wealth and hospitality testifies to one’s obru (reputation) (Cleuziou 2019; Borisova 2021b). My analysis extends this logic to the realm of care: I show that the audience involved in seeing someone ‘doing care’ is a crucial component of meaningful care practice.
My interview with Maksud fell on a rare afternoon when he was not rushing around frenetically trying to find what else he could improve in his house. As we talked, he smoked one cigarette after another.

When my father turned ninety last year, I came back urgently. He had hernia and we had him operated. Two months after I had left to Russia again, my father completely lost his vision. He could see absolutely nothing, he turned blind. They [the parents] waited on purpose [to tell me] until I would retire and they hoped that then, maybe, I would return and help them. When I heard this, I applied for a pension and left. I came back urgently. When I saw my father that night, I could not fall asleep. I left my parents in such a state and went to work in Russia! I was crying. It was very hard for me to even look at them.

Upon returning, Maksud firmly promised himself that he would find a way to restore his father’s vision. After three unsuccessful attempts to find a proper doctor and being rejected by all major clinics in the area, he finally found a young surgeon who agreed to perform an eye operation. Throughout the tiring process of looking for a doctor, doing tests and preparing for the surgery, his father remained very humble, demonstrating his moral integrity, which only heightened Maksud’s desire to help him recover:

you know, tears came out of my eyes! I looked at him – he was sitting and holding onto his walking stick and telling me, “Son, it’s ok if nothing can be done, don’t torture yourself, I will somehow manage to live to the end of my days”.

Maksud’s voice trembled and he lit another cigarette. ‘I told him, “No father, this is part of my obligations [Rus. obiazannost’]. I will find a way to make you see again’”.

Fortunately, the surgery went well. The very moment his father opened his eyes, Maksud’s tears were triggered again, but this time they were tears of happiness.

He said “Thank you, my dear son”. He could not see anything for the whole year! [At home] He sat in his place and produced such a prayer according to our custom. He said the words of gratitude for Allah, “I am pleased with him [my son], give him health, may he and his entire family be happy and never see any need after we are gone!” I told him it’s my obligation, but he said, “no! I know many people, who kicked their parents away, they don’t even feed them, don’t look after them, don’t visit.”

When they returned to the village, Maksud proudly took his father to the local mosque so that the local men could see and hear from his father that Maksud was taking good care of him. Since that day until his next departure to Russia, Maksud always brought his father to the mosque by car. The distance between their house and the mosque was only about 500 m and the old man could still walk without any assistance. He even refused to go there by car because physical activity was good for him, but Maksud insisted that he should not walk.

Maksud’s efforts to orchestrate care at a distance when his entire nuclear family was living in Russia read like a classic account of transnational care: he regularly called his parents and his kin to check on his parents’ health, remitted money, sent gifts and goods for everyday consumption, and managed hands-on care through someone else’s presence in their household. These efforts were enough for him to ensure that his parents were taken care of before their health started to deteriorate. Loretta Baldassar (2014) argues that the moments of acute crisis (illness, dying or death) make distant...
forms of care inadequate because certain embodied aspects of care require proximity. However, she reduces the necessity of co-presence to the delivery of ‘hands-on’ care and ‘intimate emotional support’. Approaching care as embodied performance witnessed and validated by the audience, as I argued above, opens a slightly different perspective on the necessity of ‘being there’.

In order to be recognised as a caring person, Maksud needed to be seen ‘doing care’. The moment of his father’s health crisis added to the urgency of care performance in the context of his prolonged absence. With distant care, ‘caring for’ stands for ‘caring about’: migrants’ remittances, gifts and phone calls serve as manifestation of their care and affection. Affective performances of care premised upon physical presence blur the boundaries between the ethic and practice of care in the opposite way. ‘Caring about’ performed under the audience’s gaze represents ‘caring for’ and testifies to Maksud’s willingness and ability to fulfil his filial duties. These performances involve managing one’s emotional displays, affective reactions and bodily responses. In her study of subjectivities in southern Tajikistan, Diana Ibañez-Tirado (2013: 175) points to the importance of emotional acts performed for the social audience in the (re)making of gendered subjects and local notions of personhood: ‘the local evaluations of for how long, and in what contexts, to display emotions are closely intermingled with local ideas of what constitutes a person and a human being’. One of her male interlocutors engaged in ‘crying and suffering’ during the process of his divorce, which would normally be considered a ‘female thing’, but in the context of divorce his tears – rather than signifying weakness – rendered him an ‘affective and moral person, and also a fully and truthful human being’ (Ibañez-Tirado (2013: 191). Similarly, Maksud’s affective response to his father’s illness indicates his willingness to perform care and positions him as a dutiful son. Someone else could have done the practical care work such as looking for doctors, taking Maksud’s father to the hospital, and providing him with daily hands-on care, but it was only Maksud who could experience and display certain bodily reactions (e.g. uncontrollable tears, insomnia) when guiding his father through medical procedures.

However, Maksud’s long absence at home made his care invisible, and as the only son, he was afraid of being labelled as an immoral person who abandoned his parents at a critical moment of illness. Thus, he felt the urgency of making his care count to, borrowing from Maria Louw, ‘repair the moral world’ of his own and his father through acts of care. Both the ‘doing’ – looking for doctors, buying medicines, accompanying his father, driving him around, taking him to the mosque, receiving guests at home upon his recovery – and displaying certain bodily responses needed to be seen by others in order to be recognised as care and to reaffirm his personhood, which had been put into question by his long absence.

**Holding it Together: Masculinity and the Labour of Care**

The links between migration, masculinity, and maturity both in the region and elsewhere have long been recognised in migration literature (Osella and Osella 2000; Reeves 2013a; Roche 2014, Gaibazzi 2015). Yet, the pressure to care in specific
gendered ways that might go beyond material provision has rarely been part of these accounts. In scholarship on Central Asia, care is still exclusively associated with reproductive work done by women in the domestic domain. At the same time, Muslim manhood is portrayed as rigid and defined by ‘unchanging codes of honor and systems of “patriarchy”’ (Marsden 2007: 475). Countering this, in the previous section I showed that affectivity is an important aspect of men’s performances of care that are required to be recognised as good sons. The affective labour of care is entangled with perceptions of care as material provision which forms an important part of expectations of manhood in Central Asia and in the wider Muslim world.6 Farha Ghannam argues men are expected to ‘materialise the notions of care’ in specific gendered and classed ways. For working class Egyptian men, this means that work outside the house and material provision is part of an ethics of care and is premised on ideas about connectivity and interdependence rather than personal fulfilment and self-realisation. Men are socialised to be not just responsible, respectful, and competent but also to actively seek opportunities to meet their families’ needs (Ghannam 2018).

Similarly, in Tajikistan the gendered expectations of care include the labour of coordinating and synchronising of a family’s caring effort and being in charge of its outcome. In the literature on care in transnational families such activities would not necessarily be conceptualised as part of gendered practice of care and are left out of the analysis. This implies a whole array of tangible activities a caring man should perform: solving bureaucratic issues, negotiating medical procedures, finding cheaper and more effective ways to do household-related things, maintaining social relations with a wide circle of friends and classmates to exchange favours, driving family members around, and spending time with his elders (Begim 2018). All of this is done in an attempt to improve the family’s material and social living conditions (sharoit). A large part of this effort is manifested in building, rebuilding and adorning houses and cultivating harmony and peace (tinjī) in the household by keeping everyone’s needs satisfied. Care is a collective effort and, as mentioned above, in Tajikistan various aspects of care for the elderly are usually split in between the families of adult sons. In this respect, Maksud’s position as the only son in his family and not having a son himself illuminates how the burdens of gendered labours of care play out in creating tensions and ambivalences in the context of migration.

The fresh smell of warm bread entered our room and made my mouth water. I was impatiently waiting for Albina and Manizha to finish baking and set up the table for dinner. Suddenly, I heard loud voices from outside and Maksud rushed inside, slamming the door, his face red from yelling. Seeing my perplexed look, he tried to explain: ‘The elders already asked me to tell them [Manizha and Albina] to bake softer bread. But they make the dough too thick on purpose, so that the elders could not eat it!’ Thick silence filled the room as we were having dinner. Maksud was smoking one cigarette after another, Albina was staring mindlessly at the TV screen, while Manizha was sitting in the corner quietly, looking offended and ashamed of the fight I just witnessed. When we were left alone, Albina burst out:
These elders drive me crazy! They are so capricious; they are like children – they don’t know themselves what they want! … When I first came back [from Russia], I was offended by their behaviour because – no matter what I did, I did everything wrong for them! They constantly complained to my father that I didn’t do anything here, and he yelled at me. I even cried … Dad cares only about himself. He’s always only with his elders, he doesn’t care about us at all. But we are his family! It hurts me so much, Lena. We have become strangers to each other. He doesn’t think who will take care of him in his old age. He drove me to the point where I don’t even care anymore if I have a dad or not. I’m not going to care for him, I will only care for my mother. … You know I just want to take my daughter and leave this house and this damned village. But I cannot leave my mother with them. They will drive her to death.

From the very start of his return to Tajikistan, Maksud was consumed with frantic activities to improve his household – he wanted to build a new outdoor kitchen, refashion their basic sauna and toilet, install a greenhouse, plant vegetables, and rebuild one of the house’s compounds. However, since he was rapidly running out of money, his plans were constantly deferred. No matter how hard he tried to perform care in all its aspects, he could not get rid of the intense feelings of guilt, shame, and the unattainability of his plans to stay in Tajikistan, which caused tension in his family relationships.

In Tajikistan, a successful period of work in Russia can transform a young man into a responsible adult who enjoys his increased authority in family decisions and respect in the community (Roche 2014: 147–57), and gives one an opportunity to fulfil the roles of a good son, father, and husband, thus confirming one’s status as a man (Reeves 2013a). However, as Alice Elliot (2021) reminds us in her ethnography of migration in Morocco, gender is a precarious achievement which must be constantly reiterated and reinstated in certain socially approved ways. Observing the activities of returnees during their visits home, she found that men were pressured to move in certain ways – they had to constantly ‘do’ something: houses, weddings, babies. Those who failed ‘to do’ were considered feminised and relegated to the shameful activity of ‘sitting’ – an activity that ultimately belongs to the domestic domain. In such cases, the only thing that could reassert their ability to ‘move like a man’ was another departure.

In a similar vein, while upon his return, Maksud was actively involved in ‘doing care’ for his father, he could not do what he would usually do as a migrant anymore – remit money and renovate his house to improve their living conditions. His attempts to perform care at all costs constantly fell short. Caught up in the contradictory demands of being simultaneously present and absent to care in socially recognised ways came at a high personal cost and put a profound strain on Maksud’s body, his sense of self, and his relationship with his family. As a result, he could not craft a socially recognised form of sedentary manhood, which pushed him to leave for Russia again. My impression is that the sense of relief he felt in Russia after his departure was rooted in the fact that he could temporarily escape the burden of contradictory care demands placed on him by his presence in Tajikistan. After all, his absence enabled him to earn money as a proper man – the task that he mastered best in his twenty years’ of living between Russia and Tajikistan. However, this temporary solution was not sustainable and after I had left the field Maksud kept moving back
and forth. He has not found a way out of the gendered care trap that required him to be simultaneously present in two places.

**Conclusion**

Recent anthropological scholarship on care has called to ‘rescue’ the concept of care from idealisation and its association with altruistic feelings (Thelen 2015a; Louw 2022). As Maria Louw shows persuasively, ‘We exist (socially) through acts of care—but we may also be destroyed through acts of care, and sometimes the distinction between what makes us exist and what destroys us is not very clear’ (Louw 2022: 69). In this article, I illustrated this fragile distinction in Maksud’s attempts to care for his elderly parents at a critical time of frailty and illness after his protracted absence. While studies of care as gendered labour privilege a focus on women, men also face contradictory demands and gendered burdens of care. Theirs is the labour of coordination, synchronisation, and holding together the collective transnational effort to care in the first place, which demands a certain moral orientation but also resources, networks and the cultivation of certain skills. Maksud’s care is fraught with tensions, contradictions and ambivalences, as he is pressured to meet the normative obligation to care. Being in a structurally disadvantaged position as the only son in his family, Maksud found himself needing to be simultaneously present and absent in his native village. This put a strain on his relationships, his body, and his sense of self: although he managed to affirm his moral standing as a caring son, he stopped being a caring father in the eyes of his daughter who now envisages a future where there is no place for him. Efforts to find a way out of this trap keep Maksud stuck in a loop of departures and returns which wear down his body and question his gendered personhood. It is in this sense that he faces the risk of ‘being undone’ in relations of care. Although Maksud’s case has important specificities that contributed to his unique struggles – the composition of his household where he is the only son and the only adult able-bodied man, and his father’s health crisis – it is illustrative of broader dynamics in the region. During my fieldwork, almost every middle-aged migrant man expressed anxieties over reconciling absence with caring for their ageing parents. The current economic structure of opportunities in rural Tajikistan, where it is impossible to sustain livelihoods without working abroad, means that it is becoming increasingly difficult for men to meet social and cultural expectations to deliver care as a material provision and as an affective performance of respect. The former demands absence while the latter is tightly bound up with bodily presence in the community.

To understand the relationship between care and presence in the context of migration we must problematise care as a triangular relationship accounting for the caregiver, care receiver and the cultural context in which a caring action acquires its meaning. Emphasising the importance of care being validated by the observing audience, I pointed to the practice of ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen’ as a constitutive element of affective performances that render care visible. These performances are inherently bodily and are premised upon physical presence in the neighbourhood space, which
sits uneasily with the project of migration as a means to meet the material aspects of care. By making this argument, I aimed to complicate how we think about care, absence and presence and contribute to literature on care in the context of transnational migration in three distinct ways. Firstly, following Felicity Aulino (2016), I started my analysis from the question of context, asking whether we can understand the experience of the caregiver as universal. The question has received little analytical attention in research on distant care so far. This opened a new perspective on the relationship between care and presence. I showed that in some contexts the importance of presence for care to be efficacious goes beyond care understood as hands-on tasks or emotional support.

Care emerges through affective bodily performances that need to be ‘seen’ by the audience to be recognised as care. This task is very difficult (although, perhaps, not impossible) to achieve via communication technologies. The very act of migrating can be perceived as an affective performance of care in a context where more and more people build their lives through migration projects. Yet, the distance and separation that migration breeds is potentially damaging to elders’ moral worlds. Successful ageing in Tajikistan demands an audience and creating such audiences through virtual presence implies elders’ knowledge and active use of modern communication technologies, which is not the case at present.8

Secondly, foregrounding the centrality of care for people’s moral worlds and their personhood, I paid attention to its gendered aspect, particularly its role in shaping migrant masculinities. I went beyond the narrative of the labour of care as an exclusively women’s burden and showed how men struggle to reconcile multiple modalities and demands of care. Addressing the gendered role of women and building a more nuanced account of gendered dynamics in migrant families in relation to care in Central Asia needs further exploration. Finally, I offered an account on care and migration from the post-Soviet space that has not received the same level of attention as research on migration from the Global South to Europe, UK and the USA.

Migration projects are intimately entwined with the relations of indebtedness and care that hinge on the entanglement of moral and economic concerns. Yet, these relations should not be taken for granted as a function of kinship networks. More ethnographically nuanced accounts are needed that place the contradictions, tensions, and ambivalences of care at the centre of analysis to understand how the dialectics of presence and absence play out in various migratory contexts.

Notes
1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The theoretical contribution of the literature on transnational care is set against the backdrop of earlier feminist research on care and global inequalities (Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2004; Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck 2012). Its theoretical and political project challenges the idea of the embodied physicality of care, and aims to destigmatise distant care as inadequate, and transnational families as deficient (Baldassar and Merla 2014).
3. During my fieldwork I encountered the perception of migration as constantly accelerating: I was often told that if before having one member of family working in Russia was enough to sustain the household materially, now it takes at least two to meet growing financial demands.
4. These estimates are based on trends in the pre-pandemic time and before Russia’s war in Ukraine.
5. On the workings of Russian migration regime and how it is experienced by migrant workers see Reeves (2013a).
6. This also mirrors the argument of feminist scholars that money and affection are intimately entangled (Zelizer 2005).
7. Similarly, in Tajikistan men are expected to be шустрый. It is a slang word borrowed from Russian and its meaning is bound up with the sense of movement, speed, and hustling. The direct translation is ‘mobile’, ‘fast’ and ‘street-smart’.
8. I will be interested to observe how this develops in the future. Research in other contexts shows that social expectations around successful ageing and care tend to change as migration becomes established (Thelen 2015b). Mass migration in Tajikistan began only three decades ago and it is only now that many families start to encounter dilemmas around arranging care for the elderly.

Acknowledgements
I express my sincere gratitude to Maksud’s family. I also want to thank my colleagues who discussed my ideas and generously provided feedback on my writing: Sébastien Bachelet, Madeleine Reeves, Malika Bahovadinova, Alexandra D’Onofrio, Lauren Woodard, Marthe Achtnich, Jolynn Sinanan, Michelle Obeid, Sara Pozzi, Swetlana Torno, and Noah Crawford-Walker. Finally, I thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding
This work was supported by the University of Manchester under President’s Doctoral Award and by ESRC under grant ES/W005336/1.

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