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Relational ageing: on intra-gender and generational dynamism amongst ageing Latvian women

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In this paper I conceptualise relational ageing in spatial and comparative terms by comparing the life stories and practices of Latvian women who migrated with those who did not. By counterposing the literatures on global care and gender contracts, I make a plea for a time-space attentive geographical approach to ageing migrants, their pre-migration experiences and ongoing relations between migrants and non-migrants. Firstly, I present some lesser-known dynamics of women-to-women (intra-gender) relations in these two groups. Secondly, I nuance relational effects in contexts when women are ageing but the man is absent from care responsibilities. And thirdly, I focus on cross-generational relations narrated and practised by ageing women abroad and those who stayed in Latvia throughout their lives.

Keywords: relational ageing, migration, global care chains, gender contracts, Latvia

Introduction

When researching labour migrants from Latvia in the UK, I became aware of the diverse meanings and temporary spatial practices which ageing female migrants related to ‘care.’ Some of my participants engaged in paid care work abroad, while others worked in hotels, cafes, shops and cleaning. Some forms of care arrangement ‘at home’ were partly in line with the strand of literature on global care chains (see Hochschild 2000; Parreñas 2001). Children, if still in need of hands-on care, were looked after by siblings, friends, and grandparents. Although the specific framework of the ‘chain’ is too narrow in studies of ‘bottom-up’ care, its key contribution is to place care on a global scale and to highlight the increasing transnationality of care (Yeates 2009; Williams 2010; Kofman and Raghuram 2015) One overlooked dimension, however, is the evolution of care across the life course. Rearrangements of care of my participants were dynamic and changing over the life course.

Importantly, women cared for their own future in older age too. So, what does care across borders mean to women themselves? This question cannot be addressed without sensitivity to life courses and pre-migration experiences. My participants engaged in labour migration while being in their middle age of life and beyond. Significant networks of relations, time- and place- specific experiences, and ideas of gender, care and ageing underpinned their lives.

This unevenly rich ‘endowment’ of meaning-making experiences can be partly addressed by the concept of ‘gender contract’, setting the working woman and her negotiations of care at the centre of inquiry (Rantalaiho and Heiskanen 1997). Gender contracts weave rules, roles and responsibilities into society, defining and constantly renegotiating relations between genders and generations (Forsberg 1998; 2001). Geographers have developed this concept spatially by uncovering relationships between economy, politics, culture and social practices in specific places (Forsberg 2001: 161). But here comes a caution: unlike the global care literature, this concept overlooks a crucial feature of the contemporary world – lives on the move. What about fast-changing societies with large-scale emigration, as in the case of my migrant participants?

In order to amplify the theoretical strengths which these literatures hold, I argue that one of the best responses lies in a relational approach. The ‘global’ scale results through relations between places (Raghuram 2012; cf Massey 2004) and the consequently enabled mobility possibilities for migrant participants. Experiences in the places where women lived, cared and worked before migration, mattered crucially to them. But what I did not know was which understandings of gender, care and ageing were migration-specific and which were place-of-origin-specific. Accordingly, I wanted to challenge my own approach of as migration scholar, and move beyond ‘methodological migrantism’, so to speak¹. In order to address this gap, I pursue a specific methodological approach: I compare the life stories of women who migrated to those who stayed in Latvia. This approach enables me not only to probe deeper into the question of how issues of care are reconfigured over the life course, but also to understand how the spatial positionings of being a migrant or staying put play a role in shaping care meanings and practices while ageing.

Conceptualisation ageing relationally

¹ ‘Migrantism’ is an awkward term but I use it here intentionally to draw a parallel to the influential critique by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) towards methodological nationalism

Hopkins and Pain (2007: 288-290) have identified three ways of furthering relational approaches to age and ageing. Firstly, through an intergenerational focus we situate people in contexts of families, generations and interactions between generational groups. Secondly, by an intersectional approach we pay special attention to social markers of difference that intersect and interact, shaping the geographies of young and old. And thirdly, we need to understand much more the spatialities of life courses. When it comes to gender, Massey (2005: 4-7) has urged us to challenge 'violent either/or distinctions between polarised genders' and the accompanying dichotomised thinking of an 'enveloped' place, contrasted to a 'space of flows'. Through an explicit space-time approach and comparisons of migrants and non-migrants, I challenge the dichotomisations of gender-contracted and ageing lives 'here' against 'there', or of lives which are 'static' versus those 'on the move'. Instead, I place the 'particular mix of social relations' (Massey 2005: 4) and the dynamically changing 'place-based knowledge about care' (Raghuram 2012: 162) at the centre of inquiry.

Inspired by the empirical puzzles mentioned in the introduction, I want to outline three 'dynamisms' to better grasp ageing, gender and care relationships in fast-changing societies like Latvia. The first is about the very *phenomenon of ageing*. As Hopkins and Pain (2007) point out, we need to overcome a chronological over-emphasis on geographies of 'old age' as the end-margin of the life-course. Interpretations of who is an ageing person are malleable in different spatial contexts, especially due to place-specific histories and meanings of gendered ageism. The second dynamism relates to the *renegotiation of gender and care roles*, broadly addressed by both the global care literature and the concept of gender contract. But negotiations and rearrangements of care do not happen in a bounded space and not only between sexes or generations. Thus, the third proposition is *generational dynamism*. Emotional and practical care support flow not only from parents towards children; flows change over the life-course, due to culturally shaped generational ideas.

So far, the emphasis has been on global care arrangements (or, indeed, lack of these) for children and elderly who stayed 'at home' (e.g. King and Vullnetari 2006), and less on care that is directed towards a migrant woman herself (but see Bastia 2011). The most promising conceptual achievements come from Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding (2007) on transnational caregiving across generations and Baldassar and Merla (2014) who have conceptualised transnational care as a range of multidirectional activities. These shift,

circulate and change directions unevenly across generations, and go beyond the usual focus of mother-child care across borders.

After a section on methods, I will illustrate these three dynamisms through key themes that emerged in both migrant and non-migrant interviews: female solidarity in the context of (lack of) negotiations between men and women, and cross-generational support. In the conclusion I will return to the conceptual implications of this relational approach to ageing and migration.

Methods, data and migration context

Like many Eastern European countries, emigration has become a defining feature of Latvian society, especially after the country joined the EU. According to the 2011 Census, more than 10% of the population left the country in the decade 2001-11. Although most emigrants were young, economist Hazans (2013: 84) assessed that around 10% of departing labour emigrants were aged 55+.

I first came across this trend in the field: while carrying out my doctoral fieldwork on the island of Guernsey in 2010-12, it was apparent that many workers were middle-aged or already-retired women from Latvia. Their migration motivations were a mix of economic, social and cultural factors: many had experienced long periods of unemployment and underemployment in post-socialist Latvia, were unable to improve their economic situation due to their age (referring to age-discrimination against women aged 40+ in the labour market), and wanted to escape from a culturally imposed feeling that they are already too old to hope for better lives. The first set of migrant interviews were gathered in Guernsey (27 women), and then supplemented by ten additional interviews in London and Boston (UK) in 2012. Furthermore, since participants regularly referred to their own experiences in other destinations, or those of their similar-age friends, I snowballed life stories of women in other European destinations to understand the place specificities in more detail. Thirteen more interviews, mainly through skype (but three in person) were gathered from Ireland, Norway and Austria in 2014-2015 (Lulle and King 2016). Besides, I regularly keep in touch with some participants up to now.

In in order to illustrate how a comparative take on a relational approach can equip us better to study gender, ageing and migration, in this paper I match migrant and non-migrant interviews. A comparative approach requires investigating shared or specific characteristics

within or across groups, and the need to account not only for what is different but also why (Dunn 2008; Dunn and Kamp 2015: 33-35). Furthermore, comparisons are crucial in order to reveal the cultural co-production of ageing and femininity across transnational social fields (Pessar and Mahler 2013: 834-835). I reviewed the 50 life-story interviews with Latvian migrant women aged in their 40s-60s, and chose a sub-sample of 10 case-histories, creating socio-economic and working-life profiles of their pre-migration experiences. Then in 2016 I interviewed 10 women with similar profiles but who never left Latvia for migration purposes. These 10 plus 10 exhibited similar care roles and working lives; two had four or five children, four were married, four single, twelve were divorced or separated. Education trajectories during the Soviet Union, and later professional and work experiences were also matched, as these could tell me about potential old-age pensions income, up to the point where the working lives of women those who stayed and who migrated diverted. Stayers usually did not change their professions or remained in alternating care and paid-work periods of time. While abroad, participants usually worked in lower-skilled jobs in the care and service sectors. I further compared two themes: gender and inter-generational relations and negotiations. I will now turn to these themes, placing them into their respective and dynamic space-time contexts and teasing out what these can tell us about care, gender, ageing and migration.

Intra-gender solidarities: women-to-women

In the migrant interviews, women-to-women solidarities were shown to develop dynamically throughout the whole migration cycle: in decision-making to migrate, during migration, upon return (if it occurred), and in future imaginations of life in old age.

Most of the migrant women whom I interviewed went abroad either directly or indirectly encouraged by their female friends – through the knowledge that friends, former classmates or workmates had already left for work abroad. Rasa (50s), mother of four, was also a grandmother and in addition had care responsibilities for her own elderly mother – she was therefore engaged in care across four generations. I interviewed Rasa first in Guernsey; she left Latvia because an acquaintance of hers was already working there. Like most of my research participants, she had internalised the discourse that she was over the ‘normal’ age for such a risky step as migration; yet, it was precisely the encouragement of another woman

which tipped her decision to leave Latvia for work abroad. She reorganised her care responsibilities: the two adult children looked after the two high-schoolers, and together they cared for Rasa's frail mother. Furthermore, during migration, encouraged by the example of another migrant, she not only paid off the mortgage for the family apartment back in Latvia but also saved enough to buy a small flat for herself. She re-married in Guernsey, but after her new partner's death, returned to Latvia.

Alida (early 60s), mother of five, grandmother, who never migrated, had similar work experience in local municipal institutions and agriculture as Rasa, and relatively similar care responsibilities. Alida, too, saw her similar-age friends leave for short or longer terms abroad. She admired their courage to leave, but never considered leaving herself. The key motive to stay was that she had hands-on care responsibility for her frail parents and felt she could not leave her husband either. Unlike Rasa, she did not seek to reconfigure care responsibilities and cared for her parents until their death, after which she became the full-time carer for her husband, who had retired early on a small pension. She did not see any possibility to improve her old-age income, and nor did she worry about the looming possibility of her own old-age poverty. Unlike Rasa, Alida never spoke about any renewed sense of youthfulness; she framed her story as a sequential path towards old age. Care responsibilities for others defined her adult life. In older age her care direction focused more away from children and more towards her partner, renegotiating her feminine role once again from a mother and daughter to a caring wife.

The figure of an 'absent' partner

However, there is one crucial difference between Rasa's and Alida's stories: it is the figure of a husband/partner. Although both women have similar care responsibilities otherwise, the quality of couple relationships differed. Rasa was still married when she left Latvia but the father of her children did not share care duties with her; in her words, he 'was and was not here'. Such phrases were often used by my participants, talking about a partner who is absent from care duties and does not support family either materially, emotionally or both². It was precisely the interlinkage of multiple care responsibilities *and* the real or functional absence of a male partner that pushed most of my participants to renegotiate care roles with their

² See also Näre 2014 on Ukrainian women against a background of lack support from male partners.

children, while they themselves worked abroad as the main breadwinner. This linkage was recurrent in most of the stories and formed a strong basis for solidarities: women who stayed sometimes pitied, sometimes admired and encouraged, but generally supported and justified other women's decision to leave:

My very best friend left and I helped [to look after] her children. Her salary was lower than the monthly payments for the flat. She had three kids; she was working in a bar and she openly told me that she has no hesitation to cheat a drunkard because she had no other choice. At night she was baking garlic loaves and sold them in the bar, under the table, to earn a bit more. But she still could not make ends meet. She went to England and left three children in Latvia. People condemned her. And then she gradually took the children to England too, one by one, placed them in schools... I know that she did not have a choice. I am so sorry for these strong women who have to fight for their lives. Where have all the 'strong' men gone? Why they [women] have to fight alone? (Sarmite, 40s, never migrated)

Care flowed among female friends in preparation for one of them to leave. I found several cases of women who stayed caring for a migrant women's children, at least for a while. Moreover, women, in their 40s, who did not have childcare duties of their own, cared for a migrant women's children initially to allow time for a migrant to settle in a new country. For instance, childless Gundega (40s) told of her wish to migrate too during the economic crisis. She and her friend, a separated mother, went to a recruitment agency, but only one vacancy was available. Gundega gave up her wish in favour of her friend because 'she had a child.' It implied that a mother in her 40s was seen as having more pressing needs to earn a higher income. Gundega stayed and cared for her friend's child until the friend secured a stable place to work and live abroad and could take her teenage daughter with her.

The figure of an 'absent man', as in the earlier quote by Sarmite, makes us reconsider the very basis of assumptions in gender contract research. If, formally, we can talk about gender negotiations between men and women, either in changing family policies (Zollinger Giele 2006), in the father's role under normative childcare reforms (Leira 2002), or even in socio-economic exploitation of female labour through care responsibilities (Rantalaiho and Julkunen 1994), in reality we need a much more nuanced relational understanding that takes

into account 'absent' others (Massey 2005: 5) and how these realities impact mobility trajectories. Formally, a father should provide the means to support his children in contemporary Latvia (Law on Alimonies 2016), yet so many escape this duty, sometimes by (falsely) declaring insolvency. A separated or divorced ageing woman can therefore end up in a particularly vulnerable situation. Not only due to (failed) legal provisions, but also due to cultural-historical gender care roles, it is primarily the woman who must provide support for her children, no matter what her position in the labour market is.

Duncan and Smith (2002) emphasise the importance of local and regional scales in formulating better policies, as parenting forms vary not only between national systems but also between localities and communities. Since these are lacking in Latvia, privileging the imagined normative ideal of a married couple who cares for their children (see e.g. The Constitution 1922), the absent node in the care circuits locally – the husband/partner and father – necessitates other solutions in migration and social reproduction which are found in women-to-women solidarities across borders (Kofman and Raghuram 2015: 14-15). Here I find useful Sa'Ar's (2009) research on reformulations of local gender contracts among single mothers in Israel. Gender contracts are simultaneously both resistant to change and dynamic. Despite patriarchal beliefs in Israel which privilege coupledness, especially in the boundaries of rules and roles in marriage and care for children, for lone mothers being loved and respected was more important than receiving material support.

In sum, women-to-women solidarities were not only more clearly pronounced in migrant women's stories; they were also evident and caused care rearrangements *in relation* to migrant women. Moreover, place-specific understandings of care 'absences' – of a partner and of the state (in terms of 'thin' childcare and unemployment support), as well as the minimal chances of ageing women to access the labour market – all point towards serious flaws in gender-contract ideas. A key plea of my research, therefore is the need to retheorise gender-contract ideas beyond the conventional, rigid norms related to parenting. We need to bring in female intra-gender solidarities amongst kin, friends, migrants and non-migrants, all of whom are ageing.

Intergenerational encouragements: children to mother

Migrant women emphasised more their extended family, and tended to envisage a somewhat idealised future, which many imagined as a meaningful return to Latvia or bringing their

children to join them abroad. I interviewed Rigonda, a migrant woman, currently in her early 60s, several times in Guernsey and in Latvia. She is a mother of two, and ‘grandchildren are being born more year by year’, she said during the last interview in Riga. When she first migrated to the UK, she did not have hands-on care needs anymore: her mother died early, her father was still strong, and her children were adults already, though in a poor economic situation and she helped them through remittances. Rigonda pulled both her children to the UK and helped them to find employment but her son soon returned back to Latvia. Like many migrant women who have been abroad already for a decade or so, she too has managed to buy not only a flat for herself but also an additional flat which she is currently renting out in Latvia.

My son goes to my own flat every week or, airs it, waters my flowers, collects the rent from the other flat which is currently rented out. The second flat is my security for my return. I will live on the income from the rent... and I will have my pension from here [UK]. Another five years and then I will be back [to Latvia]. I so much look forward to live in my own flat with my people around me.

In the non-migrant interviews, grown-up children usually did not feature as encouragers to their mothers to enjoy life and look more hopefully towards the future. Non-migrants’ old age was generally left unprepared for materially, and, for those who were separated or widowed, did not include an intimate partner in the future picture. ‘This is not for me anymore’, said Marita (60s). She has a similar work history in the service sector, is a mother of two and a grandmother, like Rigonda, but never migrated. However, Marita’s daughter currently lives abroad and helps with ad hoc health expenses or repairs to her apartment. Her narrative complies with the generational gender contract (Forsberg 2001) and the findings of research on ‘parents left behind’ (King and Vullnetari 2006) where care, in terms of remittances, flows to those who aged at home but whose lives are lonelier and less future-oriented. Here I want to draw on McKay’s (2016) findings in her study of Filipino care givers in London. She emphasised that migrant women did not ‘subscribe the neoliberal belief that every individual could become what he or she wanted to be, regardless of circumstance or starting point. Instead (...) their culture produced persons whose sense of self was distributed across social networks’ (McKay 2016: 166). My migrant participants longed

for care-full lives within families in their old age, which is counter-intuitive to individualistic ideas of migrants but consistent with McKay's findings. On the other hand, those who stayed put in the fast-individualising Latvian society, where support structures for an ageing person to live up to such neoliberal expectations are lacking, longed for more independent lives in older age.

Conclusion

My findings on different dynamics between migrant and non-migrant women are an empirical step towards filling the gap in both inter- and intra-generational relations and gender in the lives of Latvian women and their care arrangements while ageing. Although I do not claim any strict representativeness, such an approach can tease out a richer diversity of gender and care relations.

Firstly, the comparison enabled an appreciation of the place-specific rules and roles related to ageing. These crucially unite stayers and movers. Both groups studied, formed relationships and worked in Latvia, and pre-migration experiences and belief shaped migrants' understandings of care. In sum, place influences by no means are 'enveloped' in time and space but continue to shape women's lives also abroad.

Secondly, comparisons revealed how experiences of ageing also diverge and why. Economic asymmetry in terms of better wages, as well as exposure to culturally differentiated beliefs, were important here. In decision-making on migration, migrant women stressed that they had few chances to stay in Latvia and earn money compared to stayers who did not emphasise this or accepted it as a non-negotiable reality of ageing in a post-soviet society. More traditional care relations throughout the life course – the woman who cares for all at the expense of her own future – were more dominant among stayers. Future imaginations also diverted, somewhat controversially to their actual experiences: stayers were longing for a more individual old-age life, while migrants were longing for their old age amongst extended family. However, those were the migrant women who had taken more practical steps towards such life: women continuously learned from each other how to reorganise care responsibilities and care for their own future, including pensions and purchase of real estate. Furthermore, at some point children too begin caring for their migrant mothers. The younger generation may encourage women's autonomy, and this, in turn, paves the way for more independent futures in older age.

Thirdly, and crucially, the comparative method enriches empirical understanding of ‘relational space’. Migrant and non-migrant women learn, negotiate and construct care responsibilities interrelatedly. Movers and stayers are interconnected and influence each other in care arrangements. Friendly bonding (McKay 2016) in terms of intra-gender and cohort solidarity stretches across the space of flows. Women share understandings of what it means to be a woman with care responsibilities in neoliberal, yet simultaneously ageist environments. This was the best seen in the intersecting roles of a 40+ woman who is a mother, often without a male partner’s support but receiving substantial ad hoc care support from a female friend. Place-specific understandings and negotiations of who urgently needs support both intersected and interacted (cf. Hopkins and Pain 2007), and resulted in migration for some women while others provided hands-on care for migrant women’s children.

However, my aim was also to provide a productive critique of existing theoretical approaches of global care and gender contracts. I argued that, in order to achieve fuller understanding of global care and gender contracts, we need to place the woman, the main carer, who is currently ageing, at the centre of inquiry. We need to understand shifts in her own views and practices to care for her own future too. I demonstrated that studies of global care can gain new insights if we can comprehend the dynamic renegotiations of roles by working women who age. In terms of gender contract, there is much going on also at the intra-gender level, beyond negotiations between sexes. Generational contracts are dynamic; they change direction, but more prominently in case of migrant women than stayers. Children provide encouragement and sometimes hands-on care with property for migrant women who intend to return in their older age.

Furthermore, both global care and gender contract literatures need to be geographically sensitive to ‘absences’ in care arrangements (Raghuram 2012) – either in terms of state, private providers, community, or partner support. The ‘absent’ partner in cases discussed in this paper is a reminder that care relations are forged not only as ‘chains’ or some forms of ‘contracts’ but they are dynamically stretched over and knitted through networks that are full of holes and disconnections. Furthermore, while Forsberg (2001), Sa’Ar (2009) and others rightly claim that gender contracts operate at various scales and co-exist, territorially rigid forms of ‘contract’ cannot exist in spatial isolation. Fundamentally, existing gender contract ideas that are implicitly influential underpinnings for policy ideas, need to be re-thought through bringing an understanding of relational space into the care literature. And finally, future older-age imaginations and material possibilities can differ

between migrant and non-migrant women, but soon, upon the migrants' return, they will inevitably rub against each other and pose further questions of relations among ageing stayers and returnees, among genders and generations.

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