



## INTRODUCTION

### Care across Distance

*Monika Palmberger and Azra Hromadžić*

MANY PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD are aging in places other than those in which they were born, for reasons that are multiple and range from forced migration to lifestyle relocation. In addition, some elderly people age in their countries of origin while their close kin, including children and grandchildren, migrate (by choice or by force) to other geographical locations. When faced with the challenges of aging in the context of migration, elderly people sometimes move back to the country from which they initially migrated, because they long to return to their old home or because they hope to access care offered by their families and/or the state (Ackers 2004). Others, however, decide to migrate in an effort to be close to and receive care from family and friends who have migrated (Deneva 2012; Díaz Gorfinkiel and Escrivá 2012). And there are those who move to faraway places where life and healthcare services are more affordable and where they hope to sustain the standard of living they had prior to retirement, although in a different sociocultural setting (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). These diverse but interrelated experiences of aging and migration generate novel convergences, expectations, and practices of eldercare—processes that are at the heart of this edited volume.

By asking questions such as “What does it mean to care at a distance?” and “What does it mean to age abroad?” the contributors to this volume investigate how migration, and the related spatialization and transnationalization of care, produce unprecedented convergences of people (such as relationships between “care receivers” and “care providers”), objects (such as institutions and regimes of care; discourses of morality, responsibility, and spirituality; kinship relations; and material sustenance), and spaces (home and exile; homeland and diaspora; and vacated, transitory, and hybrid spaces of care) that challenge our assumptions about *who* ought to care, and *how* and *where* care ought to happen.

## Thinking Care and Aging across Distance

Research on care, aging, and migration has received increased attention in the social sciences since the 1990s. The vast majority of literature originated from migration studies and social gerontology, two areas of study that for a long time had minimal overlap. Only in the early 2000s has a substantial dialogue between migration scholars and social gerontologists started to emerge (see Torres and Karl 2014). One significant research strand therein focuses on the challenging consequences of migration for older migrants, including feelings of isolation and abandonment (Amin and Ingman 2014; Gardner 2009), the high emotional toll, and continual longing for home (Baldassar 2008, 2014; Gardner 2004; Xie et al. 2010). Scholars have shown that this longing for home cannot be simply resolved by migrants returning to their original home after retirement. Rather, returning home at an advanced age, after several years or decades spent abroad, is far more complex than is usually anticipated, especially when social ties with friends and neighbors have weakened over the years (Ciobanu and Ramos 2016).

Complementing this focus on experiences of aging abroad and returning to the country of birth in order to age at home, another central research strand explores the experiences of the elderly who stay in place while their children migrate. This literature emphasizes the void that emerges when younger people migrate, and the lack of traditional kin-based care-related services that occur.<sup>1</sup> These studies also investigate the rise of novel social networks that are becoming available to the elderly who stay at home (Baldock 2000; Holmén and Furukawa 2002; Lamb 2009). They also address the children's experience of guilt for not providing care in proximity to their parents; this constant worrying about parents at home is a significant part of a contemporary migrant's experience (Amin and Ingman 2014).

In exploring new ways in which care unfolds across vast spaces of migration, scholars have also focused on the development of new "technologies of care," including internet-based intimacies (via Skype, for example) (Wilding 2006). New communication technologies generate new possibilities of caring across distance (for example, via webcam, see Miller and Sinanan 2014; see also Kaiser-Grolimund, this volume)—strategies that children employ from afar to preserve and at times deepen contact with their parents as well as with those in the home community who take part in eldercare, such as neighbors, friends, and relatives. These new technologies and communication strategies enable people to provide advice, share stories, and express emotions across physical distance (Mendez-Luck et al. 2009).

This scholarship on care, aging, and migration has been enriched by the recent anthropological interest in care. Here care has been approached not only as a subspecies of kinship, as has historically been the case, but also as a subject and set of relations significant enough to be investigated on their own terms. By closely linking care to kinship, anthropologists in the past tended to present care as natural, linked to generational roles and expectations, and closely connected to the pre-given and clearly defined stages in the life course. Feminist and postcolonial critiques within anthropology, and the emerging scholarship on disability, deconstructed such naturalized and flawed understandings of family care by highlighting social inequalities (for example, gendered care labor) and global discrepancies of care (for example, people, mostly women, from the global South providing care to elderly in the global North). These deconstructions, discourses and approaches allow scholars to examine and complicate another widely accepted perception of care: the dichotomy between public/cold care and private/warm care (see Thelen and Coe 2017).

While the contributors to this volume, all anthropologists, do not follow a single definition of care, they all understand care as a multifaceted phenomenon that incorporates not only medical but also emotional, social, moral, and economic aspects that may be provided and maintained at proximity or from a geographical distance. The authors acknowledge and investigate different aspects of care that go beyond the division of care as commodity/product and care as relation (see Drotbohm and Alber 2015; Tronto 1993). The authors also adopt a polysemic approach to care that understands it both as a resource and as a relational practice (Buch 2015). In the case of the latter, care practices and evolving care relations are the focus of investigation rather than presupposed relationships (Thelen 2015: 509). Moreover, the roles that institutions and national politics play in care practices and relations are taken into account (Buch 2015).

This volume points to the multiple and changing care relations in a migrating world. It analyzes numerous consequences migration may have for aging and eldercare. The chapters investigate how taken-for-granted roles are challenged, intergenerational relationships transformed, and spiritual relations pursued and desired. Furthermore, the care relations that this volume examines go beyond the nuclear and extended family in order to illuminate the roles that friends, neighbors, paid caregivers, fictive kin, state and nonstate institutions, and the wider community play in accommodating care at proximity or at a distance. In order to achieve this, the contributors to this edited volume explore different dimensions and expressions of care across distance, including relations of care and materiality, care and spirituality, and care and community, as well as failures of

care. In this way, the chapters in this book, individually and collectively, invite the reader to revisit and rethink the familial, spiritual, communal, political and economic relations, practices, and lived effects of care and aging across distance.

### **Ethnographic Explorations of Care, Aging, and Migration across Distance**

Various chapters in this edited volume tackle the themes outlined above as they ethnographically explore and untangle the transforming configurations of eldercare in the context of migration, both within and across national borders. The ethnographies that populate this edited volume are not only thick and intimate, but they are also ethnographies on the move and across distance. Several authors literally follow the people they study, as these individuals migrate within and across national boundaries. Consequently, the ethnographic spaces covered in this volume include more traditional anthropological niches, such as homes, community centers, and nursing homes, as well as “non-places” (Augé 2003), such as airports and airplanes, sidewalks, buses, and cyber conversations (see Desai, this volume; Kaiser-Grolimund, this volume).

With their fine-grained ethnographies, the contributors to this volume also question the division of “care providers” and “care receivers.” By exploring numerous aspects of eldercare ethnographically in diverse geographic and sociocultural settings, they reveal divergences between self-perceptions and attributions by others concerning the question of who cares for whom. For example, some ethnographic data show different generational perceptions of directions of care, where children perceive themselves as care providers to their elderly parents, while the latter frequently see themselves as caring for their children (see Palmberger, this volume). Other ethnographic contributions show how those elderly people who seek care from non-kin, such as in the case of retiring migrants, are likely to perceive themselves as care providers for the children of those who look after them in the host country (see Miles, this volume). Such ethnographic observations not only question any simple division between care providers and care receivers, but also underpin what anthropologists have for a long time been arguing: namely, that care is tightly interwoven with social understandings of reciprocity (see Rasmussen, this volume; Sokolovsky 2009). By using ethnographic evidence to question this dichotomy between care providers and care receivers, the authors in this book also critically interrogate the idea that those in need of care necessarily find themselves in a passive position (Thelen 2015: 502).

Using ethnographic fragments and thick description, the contributors show that transnational and migratory settings do not necessarily diminish but rather transform caregiving relationships and practices within and outside of family. In addition, new relations, responsibilities, and expectations of care and intimacy emerge between the family, market, and state. What is more, these novel technologies, arrangements, and modalities of eldercare are tied, in complex and intersecting ways, to gender, generation, migration, and displacement, and geographies of home and exile; their unique, contextual articulations are at the core of this edited volume.

The ethnographies that make up this volume span the globe, and they include and compare the following topographies and ethnographic settings: the United States, Tanzania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Austria, Ecuador, Mali and Niger, Suriname, the Netherlands, Turkey, India, and Nepal. This provides a unique opportunity to acknowledge sociocultural differences and specificities of different locations/politics/regimes of care as well as to recognize similarities of experiences related to aging and care across geographically distant places. For example, several chapters in this book reveal that while for many of the elderly it is important to be part of a community, this community does not necessarily have to be a long-standing, traditional, and rooted one. Rather, materialization of these new, exilic communities in unexpected places (such as in refugee camps or postindustrial cities) prompts us to rethink the imaginaries of care and belonging, and of life and death, that are being generated from novel relations and roles across borders and distances. Other chapters, however, point at the limitations of care across borders and distances—there are documented instances of suffering and “crises of care,” such as visa restrictions that prevent aging parents in need of care from joining their children who have migrated. There are also palpable consequences when migrating family, transforming community, and a shrinking welfare state are unwilling or unable to take care of the elderly in need (see, for example, Hromadžić, this volume, and Van der Pijl, this volume).

Thematically, different chapters explore various confluences of transnational regimes and relations of eldercare in the context of migration. Each chapter offers a detailed discussion of eldercare as it relates to intersectional identities, processes, and experiences—class, kinship, race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, language, religion/spirituality, violence and exile—and associated inequalities and discrimination, or advantage and privilege, that stem from these convergences. While the authors in this volume draw widely on transdisciplinary research and theory, they offer specific ethnographic approaches and anthropological insights, providing a new angle on, and engagement with, the themes outlined above. Their contributions not only address specific ethnographic cases but also speak to bigger issues

that go beyond their particular case studies. The themes they address are characterized by the interplay of globality and particularity, as well as by the tension between creative agency and structural constraints (Lamb 2009: 11).

This interest in care, aging (and increasingly “good aging”), and migration has received significant scholarly attention, as well as public visibility: these themes are frequently discussed publicly (see the epilogue). And yet, aging migrants have scarcely been included or even represented in these public debates. Scholarly works that illuminate experiences of migration and its transforming impact on care and aging (and vice versa) are vital for widening the public debate on aging in the contemporary moment. Ethnographically grounded studies, such as those presented here, lay the foundation for including the needs and desires of aging migrants and those elderly people whose lives are significantly affected by migration within these public debates.

### Care across Distance: An Outline

The book is divided into four parts and eight chapters. Part I, titled “Materialities and Technologies of Care across Distance,” examines novel encounters and unexpected directions of care. The two contributions to this part—by Retika Desai and Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund—focus on reconfigurations (mostly material and technological) of intimate family relations of affection and eldercare in the context of contemporary migration and flight. Focusing on the newly resettled Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in Syracuse, New York, Retika Desai explores how care is being discursively, materially, and affectively recalibrated by Syracuse-based refugees, most of whom have several family members in refugee camps in Nepal and who often express their inability to physically provide care to the relatives they have left behind. Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund’s piece explores transnational care practices among middle-class, elderly people in the city of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and their children in the United States. The author introduces the notion of the “triangle of care,” which encompasses adult Tanzanians residing in the United States, older people in Tanzania, and their siblings and relatives (“observing eyes”) in Tanzania. The chapter shows how new communication media, such as Skype and smart phones, are essential in creating intimacies at a distance and for upholding the “triangle of care.”

Part II, titled “Spirituality and Intergenerational Care across Distance,” explores the role of spirituality, religion, and ritual in the context of caring across distance, both spatial and generational. Susan Rasmussen examines

the impact of disrupted and transfigured, though not always ruptured, intimate and spiritual ties between elders and youths among the migrating Tuareg (Kel Tamajaq)—a traditionally rural, seminomadic, stratified, and Muslim group—located in northern Niger and Mali. Similarly, Namgyal Choedup investigates the emergence of “old people’s homes” and other forms of community care in one of the largest Tibetan settlements in India. Here he captures both the changes and continuities in practices of elder-care in the context of the settlement’s recent social, cultural, and demographic changes. The author focuses especially on how the elderly in the Tibetan settlements see these spaces of exile not only as proper places to age, but, very importantly, as places where one can die properly; in this settlement, the Buddhist rituals of death and dying are still respected and practiced.

Part III, titled “Communities of Care across Distance,” includes chapters by Monika Palmberger and Ann Miles that zoom in on the communal aspect of eldercare. Palmberger’s contribution explores the role of institutions and communities of care among Turkish labor migrants who came to Austria as “guest workers” in the 1960s and 1970s as young adults, and who are now entering retirement age. She discovers that Turkish cultural, political, and religious associations in Vienna provide unique spaces to experience “social embeddedness”—to feel cared about by being part of a diasporic community formed and coalesced around one of the many voluntary associations. Writing about related yet unique phenomena of community care in her contribution to this volume, Ann Miles shows how the US retirement “lifestyle” migrants, or “migrants of privilege,” who move to Ecuador to retain or even increase their standard of living, consume the “good life” and care services in their new locations, while at the same time aiming to create spaces of community and solidarity in their new home. This is achieved by entering and sustaining a community created by and for US lifestyle migrants, as well as by forming personal and family-like relationships with Ecuadorians in their new homes.

Finally, Part IV of this volume, titled “Failures of Care across Distance,” examines how the changing relations and configurations of care between individuals and families, the state, and the market sometimes produce failures of care that could have dire consequences. For example, Yvon van der Pijl’s contribution, which builds on her long-term, multisited ethnographic research in Suriname and the Surinamese diaspora in the Netherlands, shows how those who are deprived of their domestic and cultural homes suffer from social-emotional isolation and profound loneliness in old age. Similarly, in her chapter on eldercare in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina where post-socialist policies and postwar conditions powerfully converge, Azra Hromadžić introduces the concept of the “semi-absent” state and family: the state is

bureaucratically and politically ubiquitous but biopolitically shrinking, and the family is materially present but physically removed, or physically present and materially incapable of providing care. This study shows how elderly people in need of care and assistance sometimes “fall through the cracks” of these shifting topographies and understandings of care and responsibility, which can lead to neglect, abandonment, and, at times, death. The book’s epilogue, which brings together, explores, and further develops the main ideas presented in the individual chapters, is written by Sarah Lamb.

By exploring these emerging regimes, processes, and practices of eldercare, as they unfold in multiple contexts and at different junctures of unique migration journeys across societies, this volume also poses questions about ethics of belonging and relations of care in the contemporary world. The assumptions about *who* ought to care and *how* and *where* care ought to happen in the context of migration and changing connections between family, the state, and the market are loaded with sociopolitical dilemmas and ethical idea(l)s about what constitutes good aging and a life worth living (Lamb 2009). Furthermore, we chose not to organize our book around different types of movements, such as forced migration (that is, “ethnic cleansing” and war-flight) and migration “by choice” (that is, economic or lifestyle migration). While taking the different migrants’ trajectories and their specifics seriously, we decided to focus on what is shared and what is surprising and uncertain across these differences. Thus, this volume, with its unique organization and its many and overlapping themes, challenges multiple dichotomies (such as the above-discussed division between care providers and care receivers, and between care as commodity and care as relation) that sometimes saturate the literature as well as popular understandings of eldercare.

Finally, the chapters in this volume challenge the dichotomous notions of bifurcated care, which posit private (warm, good, traditional, familial) against public (cold, bad, modern, “institutional”) regimes of care (see Thelen 2015). While this division is not totally absent (see Van der Pijl, this volume), opposing examples and experiences are plentiful, and they invite us to think in a more complex and context-driven way about relations and novel practices of care that materialize from these encounters, assemblages, and convergences of different actors and institutions when *care is practiced across distance*.

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## Notes

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1. The phenomenon of female migration for paid care work and the resulting care void they leave behind has been discussed under the headings of “care chain” (Hochschild 2000) and “care drain” (Lutz 2012).

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## **PART I**

### **Materialities and Technologies of Care across Distance**