

## Migrants Support their Older Parents from a Distance

Migrantes que a distancia apoyan a sus padres mayores

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According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2012), there are now 214 million people living outside their countries. One out of every 33 persons in the world is a migrant. The current annual growth rate is approximately 3.1 percent (IOM, 2012). The migration movement is affecting large numbers of people all over the world, and is expected to increase in the coming years. Migration patterns have sparked increased interest in family studies in recent years because it is important to understand how family relationships are maintained over distance. At what level is the family affected? How do families maintain their links and overcome the geographical distance in their relations? What are the challenges? As life expectancy increases, migrants face the fact of their own parents getting older and therefore need to support them from a distance. How much help and support is really exchanged between adult offspring and their older parents from a distance? How strong are the bonds and expectations between them?

### *The Reasons for Migration*

The reasons for migration vary. They include political reasons (King, and Vullnetari, 2006), sociocultural reasons (Clark, Glick, and Bures, 2009), personal freedom and self-realization (King, and Vullnetari, 2006), insecurity and violence (King, and Vullnetari, 2006), and economic aspects (Baldassar, 2007b; Clark, Glick, and

Bures, 2009). However, the *economic factor* is the predominant explanation. Remittances often provide the incentive for migration (Mckenzie, and Menjívar, 2011; Van der Geest, Mul, and Vermeulen, 2004). Remittances improve migrants' families' economic situation, which is the primary motivator for children's migration (Mckenzie, and Menjívar, 2011). The family economy is therefore directly related to children's propensity to migrate (Clark, Glick, and Bures, 2009). Furthermore, remittances not only improve the economic well-being of family members at the origin, they also serve to reinforce and maintain transnational bonds (Clark, Glick, and Bures, 2009). For instance, mothers do not see children's migration exclusively in terms of financial support, but as an expression of love, commitment, and sacrifice (Mckenzie, and Menjívar, 2011). However, reasons for migration are not always related to children's family economic constraints in the country of origin. Migration is sometimes motivated by *career or lifestyle choices* (Baldassar, 2007b; Baldock, 2000).

#### *Provision of Support*

When adult children migrate, they need to know who provides support for whom, how much, when, and why (Baldassar, 2007b; Stuifbergen, Van Delden, and Dykstra, 2008; Sun, 2002). The first providers of support for older adults are their partners; when partners cannot provide support because they are absent or unable to provide help, children are next in line (Stuifbergen, Van Delden, and Dykstra, 2008). The provision of support for older parents is closely related to parents' age, marital status, and physical condition (Stuifbergen, Van Delden, and Dykstra, 2008; Sun, 2002). For instance, single parents, widowers or divorcees, are more likely to receive support than those that have re-married or re-partnered (Stuifbergen, Van Delden, and Dykstra, 2008). Moreover, migrants' age, marital status, and socio-demographic conditions determine the type of support provided for their older parents (King, and Vullnetari, 2006). For instance, single adult children tend to send more money than those who are married.

When adult children marry and have their own children, remittances to older parents decrease sharply (King, and Vullnetari, 2006). Furthermore, remittances are also highly gendered because in some cultural or ethnical groups, women become part of their husbands' parental family; as a result of which they send their remittances to their husbands' parents (King, and Vullnetari, 2006).

Furthermore, the diversity of *life course trajectories* of older parents shapes the types of support provided by adult children for their parents. For instance, affluent parents are most likely to provide opportunities to their children (such as a good education), and therefore, these parents receive more material and financial support from their adult children than those who did not provide opportunities for their children (Kreager, 2006). In addition, the type of support given is related to the *parent-child relationship* (Kreager, 2006; Stuifbergen, Van Delden, and Dykstra, 2008). Some adult children have negative childhood memories. They express hate or anger towards their parents, which may affect the support provided for their older parents (Leinonen, 2011). Yet despite adult children's emotional and personal circumstances, the general attitude towards their older parents is to offer help because they believe this is a moral responsibility (Lai, 2010; Leinonen, 2011; Sun, 2002). This moral responsibility, known as *filial piety* and refers to: "an attitude, values, and behavioral prescriptions for how children interact with their parents" (Lai, 2010:205). Overall, adult children believe in filial piety and continue with the social practice of assuming roles and responsibilities in caregiving (Lai, 2010; Leinonen, 2011; Sun, 2002).

### *Support Providers: Family and Social Networks*

Migration movements of adult children have changed family structure, the roles of interaction within the family, and the social support networks available (Miltiades, 2002). After adult children migrate, family members need to know who is now helping with the daily living needs of older adults, which used to be

responsibility of adult children. It seems that migrants rely first on their siblings' support (Baldassar, 2007a; Baldock, 2000; Leinonen, 2011). Migrants recognize the important role played by their siblings who live near or in the same city where their parents live (Baldassar, 2007a; Baldock, 2000). They interpret the role of their siblings as *informants* and *providers*. Siblings report on well-being, financial matters, and other issues regarding their older parents. This information helps migrants to become involved in the caregiving process.

Migrants with no siblings make arrangements with their neighbors or close relatives in order to be informed of any emergency issue related to their older parents. Baldock (2000) uses the term *Play Detective* to explain how adult children investigate to find out more about their parents by using secondary sources. Thus, the broader family and social networks (Kreager, 2006; Sun, 2002) play a crucial role in migrants' support for their parents from a distance. A sub-set of family members have to assume more responsibility when adult children migrate. This sub-set of family members is likely to change over time, depending on the availability of supporters, and what these supporters are prepared to do (Kreager, 2006). However, older adults should not be described exclusively as the receivers of support. They do have various resources, which they share with others (Sun, 2002). Financial support, practical support, and emotional support flow from adult children to parents and vice versa (Kreager, 2006; Sun, 2002). Support is therefore not unidirectional but *bidirectional*.

#### *Governmental Support*

The absence of adult children is more problematic and acute in societies where governments fail to provide support for older adults and their adult children, and care of the elderly is almost entirely family-based (Van der Geest, Mul, and Vermeulen, 2004). Developed countries offer several options for the care of dependent older parents in comparison with developing countries (Sun, 2002; Van der Geest, Mul, and Vermeulen, 2004). However, it

seems that the tendency of governments in developed countries is to promote family support for older adults, as well as the reduction of public welfare services and benefits for this population group (Leinonen, 2011). This tendency is known as *reverse substitution* and refers to the fact that: “the process whereby families have been forced to take over social-care tasks that were financed and organized by the state during the era of the expanding welfare” (Leinonen, 2011:310). Changes in public social-care services and the availability of formal help have clearly influenced adult children’s capabilities, willingness and ability to provide intensive care for their parents. On the other hand, the tendency of governments in certain developing countries, such as China, is to increase the role of the government in providing support for older adults by establishing a comprehensive social security system for senior citizens, particularly those living in rural areas due to the depopulation phenomenon caused by children’s migration (Sun, 2002).

#### *The Mechanisms Used for Providing Support and Care*

Due to geographical distance between migrants and older parents, they rely on *communication technologies* to stay in touch, such as phone calls and e-mails, as well as travel opportunities to visit each other (Baldassar, 2007b; Mckenzie, and Menjívar, 2011; Stuifbergen, Van Delden, and Dykstra, 2008). This is important because, “As long as family members work hard at staying in touch by making use of all technologies available to them, they can maintain mutually supportive relationships across time and space” (Baldassar, 2007b:406), and alleviate “the stress and anxiety revolving around the possibility of abandonment or family dissolution” (Mckenzie, and Menjívar, 2011:73).

The exchange of telephone calls, including the use of mobile phones, between migrants and older parents is the most important channel of communication that maintains close emotional bonds between family members (Baldassar, 2007a, 2007b; King, and Vullnetari, 2006). Phone calls are planned or scheduled, such

as a monthly call, or a call every Sunday morning. The frequency of calls increases when one or both parents are no longer in good physical or mental health, or one parent has been widowed (Baldassar, 2007b). Thus, patterns of communication among migrants and their parents may show some changes over time, but regularity and frequency of contact remain almost unchanged (Baldock, 2000).

Additionally, migrants' visits to their parents' homes show that children care for their parents (Baldock, 2000; King, and Vullnetari, 2006), and face-to-face contact is always appreciated during times of crisis (Baldassar, 2007b). For instance, grandmothers and mothers visit their adult children to offer support for newborn babies, or provide care for a sick adult child (Baldassar, 2007b). Patterns of visits tend to be planned and are reciprocal. Moreover, the frequency of visits varies, depending on migrants' working conditions. Migrants' visits to their parents are blocked or limited by migrants' illegal status in the host country (King, and Vullnetari, 2006).

Another mechanism used for providing support is based on *formal and paid helpers*. Paid helpers are essential when older parents are frail and have functional limitations on performing certain housework activities, such as cleaning, washing dishes and clothes and going shopping (Miltiades, 2002; Stuifbergen, Van Delden, and Dykstra, 2008). In developing countries such as India or Ghana, in-home help is inexpensive, and migrants with low or moderate incomes can afford to pay help for their older parents (Miltiades, 2002; Van der Geest, Mul, and Vermeulen, 2004). This help is essential because, for example, in India few houses have washing machines, meaning that clothes are washed by hand and hung out to dry. When parents have physical limitations, paid help is therefore essential for daily living activities, which enables older parents to live independently (Miltiades, 2002). Furthermore, full-time paid helpers provide more than physical assistance. Their presence create a sense of security for adult children because they know that their parents are not alone and could have instant help if needed. This also means that migrants and older

parents can rely on family mostly for emergency situations rather than for everyday living activities (Miltiades, 2002).

### *Emotional Consequences*

The relationship between adult children and their older relatives at a distance has several emotional outcomes. Migrants express considerable *guilt and regret* because they are unable to do more for their parents. They all describe feelings of guilt about the perceived inability to meet their family obligations, often described as the result of physical absence, and not being there for their parents, which is the most frequently expressed cause of anxiety for adult children (Baldassar, 2007a; Baldock, 2000; Mckenzie, and Menjívar, 2011). However, anxiety is also found in the narrative of migrants' mothers. Responsibilities previously handled by their sons, such as agricultural work in rural areas, are assumed by mothers and wives. This causes anxiety and stress and, in some cases, physical illness (Mckenzie, and Menjívar, 2011). Another emotional consequence is *the creation of myths*. Whereas some older parents have more or less resigned themselves to the fact that their children will not return, others have a more ambivalent view, which creates a *myth* of their adult children's return (King, and Vullnetari, 2006). Some older adults never accept the fact that their adult children will never return to live permanently in their country of origin. Elderly parents are frightened about what might happen to them if they become ill or die without seeing their children again. This particular issue, as expected, is found in research studies in which migrants do not have legal residence status in the destination country (King, and Vullnetari, 2006).

The concept of *imagined and ideal families* is also mentioned as an important emotional outcome in the parent-child relationship from a distance (Baldassar, 2007a, 2007b). This concept is used for exploring how adult children and their older parents construct their ideal of family in a transnational context. Both children and older parents conceal or change the information they share with each other. They scrutinize what they want to share with

each other, because they do not want to worry them unnecessarily (Baldassar, 2007b). For example, older parents may hide the fact that they are physically ill or depressed while adult children may conceal information about, marital or work problems, for example (Baldassar, 2007b). Hiding or altering information is a recurrent activity between migrants and older parents. By projecting an ideal personal or family story; they give others what they want to listen to. However, one important challenge faced by children and parents is that when information is manipulated, this may result in a lack of support and solidarity between parents and children (Baldassar, 2007a).

### *Closing Remarks*

Despite large-scale migration movements separating families across national borders, relatively little is known about migrants' availability for providing support for their older parents from a distance. Migration may help families to alleviate their poverty, yet at the same time it generates cultural changes, and negative emotional consequences in the relationship between migrants and their older parents. In the future, family researchers and scholars in related fields should advance and extend research on child-parent relationships across national borders in several directions. There is likely to be more discussion about migration patterns in rural areas. Labor migration seems to intensify the age-population imbalance in rural areas, particularly in the developing world. The older population is increasing in rural areas, while the younger population is decreasing. As a result, the oldest group in the population seems to be particularly vulnerable because support networks living close by and available to provide support to older people are likely to belong to the same cohort group (*i.e.* older people providing support for older people). It is important to know more about the challenges when support networks for older people belong to the same or a similar birth cohort.

More discussion is also to be expected, with a critical perspective, about governments increasingly encouraging self-help and



family responsibility in the care of older adults. Researchers should be more critical about the reasons for migration and link the governments' responsibility in the migration of adult children and the caregiving of older parents, particularly in developing countries. Other topics related to migration movements may be included in researchers' agendas, such as the increased involvement of formal and informal social networks, the effects of generation size (due to the decrease in the number of children), and community-based projects designed to involve society in new ways to support families with older adults. It would also be useful to understand how individuals, families, regions and countries adopt solutions for dealing with migration challenges based on their cultural particularities (*i.e.* idiosyncratic aspects).

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