Caregiving in Polish–German Transnational Social Space: Circulating Narratives and Intersecting Heterogeneities

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ABSTRACT

Transnational caregiving has recently provoked a number of studies on the impact of migration on the reorganisation of care arrangements, family dynamics, and gender roles. Yet, the literature on transnational caregiving rarely discusses the ambivalences which migrants encounter in the provision of care. Twenty interviews with migrants from Poland in Germany and ten interviews with their relatives in Poland reveal that transnational childcare is mitigated between a wish for the integration of their children into the German education system and the need to maintain ties to relatives and friends in Poland. These mediations synchronise socialisation within and outside the (transnational) family, yet also connect families with each other (across borders) through reciprocity such as intergenerational contracts. The implications of caregiving are the differences in life chances – shaped by transnationality, class, gender, and age – through participation in relevant social fields such as the labour market and the education system. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Migrants’ strategies for obtaining social protection, here conceptualised as financial protection, care, and information exchange, are a crucial topic in the study of social inequalities and life chances (see Bilecen & Barglowski, 2015). Social protection encompasses the means and strategies of dealing with and overcoming social risks such as the lack of material, physical, or financial sources for social existence and is thereby inherently related to life chances.

Care, as an activity that promotes the physical and emotional well-being of people ‘who cannot or who are not inclined to perform these activities themselves’ (Yeates, 2004: 371, cited in Kofman, 2012: 143), is a crucial dimension of social protection, and often considered a ‘key category’ (Kofman & Raghuram, 2009: 3) of welfare regimes. As migration may pose distinct challenges to care, such as the loss of a caregiver or restricted access to formal care, transnational care has provoked a great deal of literature in the last decade (Zontini, 2006; Ryan et al., 2009; Trevena et al., 2013; Baldassar & Merla, 2014). In this article we shed light on intergenerational care, i.e. care for children and the elderly, as a vital dimension of social protection in the Polish–German transnational social space, with diverse forms of care provided and received in Germany and Poland and, sometimes, in other countries (see Bilecen & Sienkiewicz, 2015).

Certainly one of the most prominent topics when discussing migrants’ intergenerational care is the topic of ‘left-behind-children’ – studies investigating the impact of the migration of parents on the psychological well-being (Graham & Jordan, 2011) or health of their offspring (Graham...
& Yeoh, 2013). Yet, as well as these ‘left-behind children’, particularly because children raised without one or both parents contradicts ‘Western’ parenting norms – migration and transnational positioning also pose challenges in childcare even when parents and children are not separated from each other geographically. This is because, first, the parents’ cultural capital, as non-financial social assets which promote life chances, may be devalued by migration (Weiß, 2005), limiting the children’s future prospects, and second, processes of settlement often are unstable, engendering transnational positioning (Orellana et al., 2001).

When cultural capital, such as degrees, forms of knowledge and skills is devalued by migration, for example through the non-recognition of degrees or through language deficiencies (Weiß, 2005), the quest for an increase in life chances after migration is often challenged. Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is mostly constituted and transmitted within families, and is a major driving force behind the reproduction of inequalities within a social structure in that it is transferred between generations. From a transnational perspective the transmission of cultural capital within families may differ from accounts on the reproduction of national social structures, as transnational positioning may be ambivalent.¹ One example of this is when a lower socio-economic situation in the immigration country is experienced as more rewarding than a higher socio-economic positioning in the emigration country, due to higher earnings.

While a better future for their children is a common trigger for the parents’ migration and the children’s adjustment in the education system of the immigration country is an important driver of parents’ care strategies, sometimes better life chances for the children mean fewer opportunities for the parents, whose cultural capital is devalued after migration.² The literature speaks of the gendered implications of this devaluation of cultural capital through migration – women are often more affected by this reduced or limited access to employment after migration (Cooke, 2008). This highlights that families can be considered as sites of reproduction of social inequalities, not only between but also within families.

Poland and Germany are connected by a centuries-long history of migration and, while mobility from Poland to Germany was restricted for much of this time, when Poland entered the European Union in 2004, and when Germany relaxed its law on the free movement of workers in 2011, there have been no legal barriers to migrants’ mobility, settlement and employment. This has caused the emergence and perpetuation of dense transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000) and people located within who are tied to each other across borders. The salience of transnational social spaces requires a ‘non-sedentary’ lens on migration, taking into account the multi-local positioning and ambivalences which migrants often encounter (see Amelina & Vasilache, 2014).

The empirical results on which this article is based derive from a joint research project on social protection in transnational social spaces. We argue that transnational involvement requires certain practices, which we trace here in the realm of childcare among Polish migrants in Germany and their relatives in Poland. First, we will provide a brief overview of the migration history between Poland and Germany as well as of recent studies on transnational families and caregiving. Second, as transnational caregiving is embedded in formal protection structures, we will portray the main characteristics of the German and the Polish welfare regimes. Third, we will discuss the empirical data and methods used. Fourth, we will illustrate our analysis of Polish migrants’ in Germany and their significant others in Poland caregiving practices, focusing on how children are involved in migration processes. Last, we will discuss our results indicating how transnational caregiving is associated with inequalities alongside gender, age and class.

POLISH MIGRANTS IN GERMANY

During the long history of migration between Poland and Germany, Poland was partitioned and de-territorialised several times, engendering frequent and extensive migration streams. This mobility for individuals from Poland is assumed ‘to evoke and re-enact deep cultural traits and symbolic meanings’ (Garapich, 2011: 6). Germany, at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century, has been the most frequent country of destination for immigrants from Poland (Zubrzycki, 1953).³ Migration between Poland and Germany is characterised by diverse waves accompanied by changing legal regulations, and was and continues to be used as a livelihood strategy: ‘Migration has
always been a strategy of risk avoidance for both individuals and households. In the post-communist countries, many persons react with migration as a response to the rapid social and economic change, trying to escape marginalization in the newly transformed societies’ (Morokvašić, 2004: 10).

Nowadays migrants – or those whose ancestors migrated from Poland and reside in Germany – are very heterogeneous, with different legal statuses: refugees (until 1989), shuttle migrants (since the 1990s), undocumented persons (until 2004), (former) students, migrants within the European Union (since 2004 and then 2011), and also a group of so-called ethnic Germans (especially during the 1970s and 1980s). Because of their German roots, the latter had either held German citizenship before migration or had received it on arrival in Germany and were therefore entitled to formal social protection. Due to changes in legal regulations – in 2004 Poland entered the EU and, in 2011, Germany allowed the free movement of workers from the new accession countries – forms of mobility between Germany and Poland changed. Short-term work contracts in Germany, with migrants maintaining their centre of life in Poland – which used to be a common migration pattern (termed ‘incomplete migration’ by Okólski, 2001), tended to turn into longer stays or permanent settlement (White, 2011) and undocumented residence was legalised. The long history of migration and still-prevalent patterns of circular or seasonal migration as a way to earn an income while still considering their place of residence as Poland, brought about the formation of transnational families who, either permanently or for short periods, ‘live apart together’.

DOING FAMILY AND TRANSNATIONAL CAREGIVING

Scholars’ awareness of increased international mobility has made the study of transnational families a prominent topic in family and migration studies. As the co-residence of, at the very least, the members of a nuclear family was supposed to be the main constituent of a family or household, transnational families appear to be dysfunctional in that the children are rarely brought up by both parents but usually just by one (the category ‘left-behind child’ often refers to children whose mother migrated, even though some of them are cared for by their fathers or grandparents). For a while now, studies have indicated that families are not ‘given’, but that they require constant practice at tying together and constructing a sense of belonging, at ‘doing family’ (Finch & Mason, 1993). Recent studies show that these practices of constructing belongingness are not spatially bound and can be pursued across borders: transnational families ‘hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely “familyhood”, even across national borders’ (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002: 3).

Within the literature on transnational families, care, mainly for children and the elderly, has become a prominent topic. Debates about the ‘care gaps’, ‘care chains’ and ‘care drains’ associated with migration have placed care – as a classic field of feminist descriptions of unequal power relations within families – back on the public and scientific agenda. Yet, the literature also acknowledges that care-related practices are a medium tying people together, within and across borders: ‘Transnational caregiving, just like caregiving in all families (whether separated by migration or not) binds members together in intergenerational networks of reciprocity and obligation, love and trust, that are simultaneously fraught with tension, contest and relations of unequal power’ (Baldassar & Merla, 2014: 7). Families are thus tied together by mutual obligations and expectations of caregiving which often do not lose their value across borders. Studies about transnational caregiving have tended to focus on American immigrant groups, such as Filipinos (Parreñas, 2001), or Italian migrants to the UK (Zontini, 2006) or Australia (Ballock, 2000; Baldassar, 2007) together with more-recent studies on Polish migrants in the UK (Ryan et al., 2009; McGhee et al., 2013; Trevena et al., 2013). Yet, the Polish–German social space differs, in certain areas, to the transnational social spaces predominantly studied thus far. Since mobility restrictions between Poland and Germany vanished due to the spatial proximity of the two countries, scholars such as Kofman, (2012) argue that this facilitates the maintenance of family ties across borders. Moreover the historical prevalence of migration between Poland and Germany gave rise to networks and an infrastructure engendering communication and travel across borders. Although previous studies have shown the significance of care (from abroad) for transnational
family cohesion (and family conflict), most studies focus on women who are separated transnationally from their children; fewer studies examine the implications of transnational involvement for a co-residential parent–child dyad and (family) caregiver and receiver abroad.

FORMAL CHILDCARE, WELFARE AND GENDER REGIMES

Gender and welfare regimes are of key importance in understanding transnational caregiving and the development of patterns of social inequality. Gender regimes are ‘the key policy logics of welfare states in relation to gender’ (Pascall & Lewis, 2004: 373) and welfare regimes refer to the ‘organization and the corresponding cultural codes of social policy and social practice in which the relationship between social actors (...) is articulated’ (Lutz, 2008: 2). The social actors involved refer to the ‘classic’ triad of state, (labour) market and the family.

Generally the relationship between the family, the (labour) market and the (welfare) state is differentiated by the degree to which women’s labour-market performance is supported by institutions; Sainsbury (1996) distinguishes between the ‘dual-earner’ and the ‘male breadwinner’ models, both being understood here as ideal-types providing a heuristic tool for the comprehension of the core elements of welfare and gender regimes in Germany and Poland. Based on this rough – though not exhaustive – distinction, gender regimes in Germany and Poland typically diverge: in Germany, the dominant gender regime is modelled on either the male-breadwinner or the one-and-a-half-breadwinner, in which the income earned by the main breadwinner may be supplemented by income from the woman’s part-time employment. In contrast, the Polish welfare regime is based on a household’s two-person income, harking back to the former socialist state’s ideology of integrating women into the labour market. Yet, despite differences in their history and, nowadays, the constitution of welfare and gender regimes in Germany and Poland, both countries share some similarities. For instance, in comparison with the rest of Europe, the two countries have the lowest coverage in terms of public funding for childcare for children from birth to two years (Saraceno & Keck, 2010), and tend to have part-time schooling and kindergarten. Consequently both regimes are grounded mainly on familial and thus informal care being complemented by formal care (Saraceno & Keck, 2010).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SAMPLE

Our focus on transnational caregiving in the Polish–German social space is one strand of a larger mixed-method research project (see Barglowski et al., 2015). The results of the study presented here are exclusively qualitative and based on a multi-sited research design. The data stem from twenty semi-structured interviews conducted in 2012 in medium-sized cities in Germany and ten in Poland, in places where interviewees in Germany had provided their relatives’ contact details.

The sample in Germany has an equal gender distribution with an age range from 22 to 78. Of these, eight had Polish citizenship, eight had German/Polish dual citizenship and four were naturalised German citizens; eleven were married, four were single, three were divorced and only two were in an on-going relationship. Thirteen had at least one child; ten had a university degree, seven had completed vocational training, two were students at the time of the interview and one had graduated from secondary school. Respondents with degrees had received them in both countries. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted in Polish and the other seven in German. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed according to social-science hermeneutics (see Barglowski et al., 2015).

According to matched-sampling procedures, respondents were asked for contacts to their significant others, resulting in ten interviews being conducted in Poland (with three female friends, two mothers, two sisters, one female cousin, one daughter and one uncle). In addition, eight expert interviews were conducted: four in Poland (with a social welfare worker on the city council, two coordinators of the social security system and the director of the centre for social security) and four in Germany (a representative from a Polish-speaking NGO for social counselling in Germany, a representative from the Workers’ Welfare Organisation [Arbeiterwohlfahrt], a representative from the German Institute for Studies on Poland and a priest from a Polish church).
MEANS AND REPERTOIRES OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection across borders requires keeping in touch, which is mainly practised via ‘cheap [telephone] calls’, Skype and Internet forums as well as by visits. The regularity of communication and visits (and the kind of media used) vary within the sample from several times a day to irregular. For instance, while Janek calls his mother and sister in Poland several times a day, in this way integrating them into his daily family life in Germany, Joanna is not in regular contact with anyone in Poland, as all the relatives and friends with whom she is in touch live in Germany. However, this is not to say that she does not do any ‘Polish things in Germany’: each month she buys the same Polish magazine and talks with her parents in Polish.

By maintaining the Polish language in everyday life in Germany and using the new communication media people can stay in touch either with specific persons in Poland, as Janek does, or with ‘Poland’ as a kind of ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983), as does Joanna. In this way they exchange various kinds of information – particularly health-care options (mostly about medical products) and employment opportunities – depending on the life situation.

Keeping in touch involves most respondents travelling to Poland at least once a year. Important occasions for maintaining ‘family-hood’ (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002) at a distance are birthdays, first communions, Christmas and the summer holidays (for the significance of ‘the visit’ see Mason, 2004). However, whose birthdays are ‘worth’ travelling to Poland for is contingent upon the interpretation of the closeness of the relationship and those of the 1.5 generation, or whose most significant others are living in Germany, are not greatly geographically mobile, but who tend to keep in touch with Polish affairs in one way or another through Polish television, magazines, newspapers or Internet forums.

A very important issue for those who have ‘close’ relatives in Poland is care for their (elderly) relatives. Sabina and Bożena, for example, own flats in Poland; their family members there are involved in maintaining the properties by forwarding the rent and taking care of administrative and practical issues. These flats are also used as a form of financial protection from a distance: in Sabina’s case the rent of the flat is transferred to a bank account to which her grandmother has access. This is a common way of providing financial protection, and a means through which those who are far away can contribute to the care of their elderly relatives ‘on site’ (see also Baldassar, 2007). Accordingly, task divisions between those who stayed and those who are mobile mainly proceed alongside what can be done at a distance (e.g. transferring money) and what not – e.g. taking someone to the doctor (see also Vullinerati & King, 2008).

Informal and formal protection are interrelated (Bilecen & Barglowski, 2015). Polish migrants in Germany in some areas turn to formal protection; in other realms, however, they evaluate informal protection as the more attractive option. When without work, some make use of unemployment benefits and some families report that, immediately after their migration, welfare benefits in Germany helped them to gain some stability in life, limiting their struggle to cover daily expenses.

Those who have children in Germany receive child-care benefits which, in Poland, are means-tested. Kindergartens in both countries are mainly part-time; thus parents often need to find afternoon care for their children. In Poland, this role is predominantly undertaken by grandparents (grandmothers) whereas, in Germany, it is mostly the parents (mothers) or, less usually, a Polish-origin nanny. In the realm of childcare, both formal and informal care have different logics and meet different childcare needs – for instance, kindergartens providing a German-speaking environment, yet endorsing the loss of the children’s Polish-speaking abilities.

NARRATIVES OF LIFE IN GERMANY, FAMILY AND INTERGENERATIONAL CARE ARRANGEMENTS

For many years (although convergence has recently occurred), Germany and Poland were characterised by asymmetries in their socio-economic conditions. Although Poland is a comparatively wealthy country, emigration is still a common livelihood strategy. It is facilitated by transnational networks which provide both the social and, sometimes, economic capital which enables people to evaluate migration as a less risky way of ensuring a livelihood than other strategies such as internal migration (White,
2011). Narratives yield expectations which often barely reflect with ‘real life’, as a representative from a Polish-speaking NGO for social counselling in Germany reported: ‘There are rumours, visions and a lot of nonsense distributed on these online platforms or by histories of relatives and friends’. The narratives of our interviewees centre on the socio-economic conditions in the ‘West’, which are evaluated as being better than in Poland: ‘The West was perceived as a place where jobs were available and sufficiently well paid to ensure a “normal” standard of living’ (White, 2011: 82). In the same vein, our interviews revealed migrants’ expectations, which are shared transnationally with the expectations of a successful migration project – meaning an improvement in one’s life chances. We argue that these expectations structure migrants’ obligations within families and engender care practices as migration of parents is often framed by the goal of assuring their children a ‘better’ life as adults (e.g. Orellana et al., 2001), in either the emigration or the immigration country. Often the education system is the main means through which parents expect to achieve this goal. When parents migrate with their children, depending on the age of the children, they often express their worries that international migration might endanger their offsprings’ future prospects. Emilia recently migrated to Germany to settle down with her husband, who had been commuting for many years between Poland and Germany. Her main preparation before migrating to Germany was to search for a ‘good school’ for her 12-year-old daughter. The age-wise dimension of international migration for children becomes obvious, as Emilia did not worry about the education of her four-year-old son; for her, he is of an age when children are expected to adjust quickly into a new educational environment:

I was occupied with finding my daughter a school. Which school to choose was really a problem, because I really wanted her to have a better future, that she finishes a good school and has good grades.

Interpretations of their children’s education successes reveal a class-related dimension. Emilia, who, in Poland, obtained a university degree and had a middle-management position in a retail store, is concerned more about her daughter having ‘good grades’ and attending a ‘good school’ than about her general adjustment into the German education system, as was reflected in other interviews with migrants with lower education levels.

Migration is thought to occasionally have a negative influence on the future of children, especially if they are already of school age. Thus parents try to circumnavigate ‘migration-specific’ social risks such as discrimination, bad education and limited opportunities for upwards social mobility, often experienced as contradicting their expectation of migration, and a better future for their children. These navigations are mirrored in childcare strategies which are often reconfigured after migration.

In neither country is institutional childcare for children under three common and kindergartens for those older than three are predominantly only part-time. In Germany, care for the children in the afternoons is mainly assured by the parents – mostly the mothers – whereas, in Poland, this role is assumed mainly by the grandparents (again, usually the grandmothers). This common pattern is echoed in the elaboration of Jagoda, who lives in Poland, and who is the mother of Janek (who lives in Germany) and another daughter who lives in Poland:

I don’t help my son. He doesn’t need help. I help my daughter. I sit with my granddaughter. Now the baby has been born. Should we hire a nanny? No, I’d rather be the one at home with my grandchild. I suppose me being here is a big help for her.

For economic reasons, mothers in Poland often need to start work straight after giving birth and, as crèches (for children under three) and full-time kindergartens (the over-threes) are neither extensively available nor seen as attractive (in both Poland and in Germany), it is mainly the grandmothers who take on the role of part-time caregiver while, in Germany, it is mainly the mother, complemented by formal institutions or (co-ethnic) nannies. The reorganisation of childcare arrangements after migration may mean that mothers need to leave their jobs or limit their labour-market performance due to a lack of informal protection and different institutional infrastructures in Germany. While, in Poland, a dual-earner model...
is common, with grandparents assuring care in the afternoons for their grandchildren, in Germany the institutional infrastructures typically endorse a main-breadwinner model, with one parent taking care of their children. Thereby a family constellation in which one person earns the income and the other takes care of the household is often perceived as a ‘migration success’ and a strength of the German (welfare) system. For instance, Jagoda evaluates the living conditions of Janek and his family in Germany as being much better than those in Poland, where she lives:

I am very happy about how they live there. It’s very good. There is only one person working in the family and they can afford vacation. On the weekends they could get into their car and rent a hotel. Maybe some others here live better, but when I take a look across the border, I think they have better chances for everything. Here it is like that: if you don’t have money, you sit at home. Well that’s the truth, right?

Although the German welfare state is often interpreted as all-encompassing and superior to that in Poland, in the realm of childcare, state institutions only partly respond to migrant parents’ care needs. Although they facilitate the integration of migrant children into the immigration society, this may also contradict the parents’ wish for the transmission of knowledge of the language and culture of the emigration country. Our interviews reveal that migrant parents try to reach a compromise between these two orientations in childcare – the ‘successful’ integration of their children into the immigration country, while not losing their linguistic and cultural attachment to the emigration country. In the following section we expand on how these navigations materialise through childcare strategies and highlight their gender, class, and age-related implications.

NAVIGATING CHILDCARE BETWEEN NATIONAL ADJUSTMENT AND TRANSNATIONAL ATTACHMENT

The provision of childcare is framed by the available forms of formal and informal protection as well as by interpretations of ‘good care’. As institutions and discourses are mainly national, migration and subsequent transnational attachments may change a person’s perceptions of ‘good care’. In the present example, we found that migrants from Poland develop childcare strategies by compromising on two needs: their successful integration in Germany and the maintenance of some ties to relatives and friends in Poland. We demonstrate the mitigations in childcare and their implications through two constellations of labour market–family relationships. In the first scenario, the mothers leave paid employment after migration and, in the other, they combine paid work with household tasks.

Full-Time Care by ‘Polish’ Mothers in Germany: ‘Living a Polish Life in Germany’

Janek and Aneta are a married couple who migrated from Poland to Germany in the 1990s. Now they are about 40 years of age. After their first child was born, Aneta resigned from her job and started looking after the child(ren) and the household.

In our study, we found that what essentially influenced the decision by women with children to leave their job after migration is shaped by two ramifications: institutional arrangements in Germany which, to some extent, support the ‘housewife model’, and the fact that the migration project initially aimed to provide better life chances for the family. This included the possibility for mothers to stay at home and give their children ‘good’ care – interpreted as enabling the children to spend valuable time with their mothers and benefit from ‘Polish’ socialisation at home. Being able to spend more time with the children is often a major expectation of the migration project (see also White, 2011).

However, with their withdrawal from the labour market, mothers become dependent on the household’s income or formal protection, which may have conceivable negative implications under a welfare system which relies mostly on contributions accrued through wage deductions, such as the German welfare state. Women’s withdrawal from the labour market is thus often associated with social deprivation, especially when the breadwinner disappears (because of death, divorce, or other circumstances) or because of a reduction in their retirement pensions. Here, however, Aneta and Janek experience Aneta being a housewife not as a burden but as a privilege:
Aneta: Well this is the way we chose. Having three children, I can afford to stay at home, and take care of the household. Because also in the afternoons you have to take care of the children, look after their homework. And I am really not sure if I could have such a life in Poland. Not actually in Poland – I couldn’t afford it. Maybe we wouldn’t even have three children?

Janek: Right, this is doubtful. Well, take a look at my sister, she is a teacher, and she has to work in many schools and give after-school tutorials, only to exist! Not even to have a great life!

Aneta: Yes this is a big comfort that I stay at home.

In Janek’s and Aneta’s perception, their migration project is successful, as they have been able to fulfil their life plans of having three children, with Aneta being a full-time stay-at-home mother and housewife. Both doubt that they could lead such a life in Poland, a doubt also shared by relatives in Poland, as in Jagoda’s quote above. ‘Successful’ migration projects do not imply a lack of strong and regular attachments to the country of emigration. Yet, staying in touch is tied to some preconditions, among which the transmittance and maintenance of the Polish language is the most important one. Language acquisition by the children is dependent on their life-stage and age at migration. Therefore the orientation of having a main breadwinner model as a migration success story also enables migrants to fulfil their desire to transmit forms of ‘ethnic’ socialisation to their children.

As their children were all born in Germany, the effort for Aneta and Janek lies more in teaching their offspring to speak Polish than in helping them to learn German. While the German language is supposed to be acquired automatically in the institutions and environment outside the family, migrants find over time that their children’s Polish-speaking abilities require no little effort.

Janek: With my youngest daughter, you can see how fast they forget the Polish language. Because we don’t teach our children German, that’s what they learn at school.

Aneta: Yes they learned it right away when they went to the kindergarten.

Janek: But you really have to take care, because the Polish language vanishes (ucieka) very fast when you don’t use it.

As migrants often find that their children ‘forget the Polish language fast’, the need for children to learn both German in German institutions and Polish at home can be met when one parent stays at home.

The division of tasks within migrant households has transnational implications, for instance on the role-making of relatives abroad. A constellation with only one parent working and the other taking care of the children is considered as meeting all demands for ‘good care’. Thus the grandparents are often not involved in much childcare. While Jagoda helps her daughter in Poland with practical everyday childcare to enable her to hold down a job, her role towards her grandchildren in Germany is more ‘symbolic’:

Well, how [do] we help them [the son’s family in Germany]? (…) Sometimes we send books or newspapers if they have asked about something that’s not available in Germany. […] Something Polish, perhaps. For example, [it] was our granddaughter’s Communion and they wanted to organise it in the Polish way, so we prepared some traditional Polish dishes. Generally they like [Polish] things. The boys want to come to visit their grandparents to buy some Polish clothes. They recently called and asked about ‘Euro 2012’ T-shirts, so we will buy [those] and send them to them.

This extract indicates that having goods sent by the grandmother in Poland is a way of maintaining family ties, and one in which the grandmother can fulfil the expectations of care for her grandchildren at a distance. Thereby, role-making at a distance often diverges from role-making in spatial proximity. The way Jagoda is involved in practical care for her granddaughter in Poland reveals how intergenerational care is embedded in mutual obligations over the life-course:

We wanted to live close to my daughter and her family. You know, you can’t do it, when
you get older. What would we do, when we need help? Some say retirement home [...] But, I’d rather give my money to my children, than to the state.

Formal protection, although apparently available in the form of ‘retirement homes’, is often considered to be less attractive than the informal care provided by ‘the daughter and the family’. Intergenerational contracts, being a prime example for reciprocity, thus often ‘start’ when the next generation is born; thus, by caring for her grandchildren now, Jagoda is ensuring that her daughter will take care of her in the future – a quite common care arrangement in Poland (see also Krzyżowski & Mucha, 2013).

Care Work and Labour Market Activities: ‘What I Miss the Most is Having the Grandmother Here’

Another constellation of childcare is practised in dual-earner households. Unlike Aneta, Marta (aged 33) works as a teacher and has two young daughters – one year and three years old. Although both parents are in full-time employment, the main responsibility for household chores and care work rests with Marta. She generally agrees to the division of labour within her household, mainly because she does not perceive herself to be the main breadwinner – she sees her job as a teacher as a matter of self-fulfilment. In this case, the narratives of Janek and Aneta about successful migration projects are echoed, as Marta has the option to work for self-fulfilment and not the financial necessity which parents in Poland often face. This enables her to undertake her work for ‘symbolic’ reasons and less for material ones, which hints at class-related perceptions of work as a means for self-fulfilment.

With Marta bearing the main responsibility for childcare despite her full-time employment, the division of labour within Marta’s household does not differ that much from the male breadwinner model discussed previously. Marta reconcile her being employed while meeting her childcare responsibilities by taking on diverse forms of childcare. Her daughters spend half the day at a kindergarten, being afterwards picked up by ‘co-ethnic’ nannies. Although she mentions that her husband could be more active in childcare, what she really misses is the help of her mother:

It is difficult to organise childcare. [...] What I miss the most here is having the grandmother here, a family member you can leave your child with. Without my family to help out, I have to pay for each hour of childcare or I have to enlist friends, which then makes me feel as though I owe them a favour. [...] [It] is different with having grandmother here, because she loves the child and she loves doing it. I miss this a lot.

Some forms of family care cannot easily be provided at a distance and migration may create a lack of social capital – understood as people [outside the household] who can easily be asked for favours (see also White, 2011: 3). In Marta’s case, she refers to ‘missing the grandmother’ or family care in general, where she can spontaneously and without feelings of obligations of reciprocity draw on childcare. Anthropologists term this mode of exchange as ‘generalised reciprocity’, characterised by the weak obligation to reciprocate and ambiguity in terms of the time, quality or extent of the return (Sahlins, 1972). Childcare within families and by friends is characterised by different modes of exchange. The underlying logic for the different types of reciprocity within families are intergenerational contracts which imply that, if the grandmother cares for the grandchild now, she will be cared for in the future. For Marta, however, this type of reciprocity is explained by the emotional relationship her mother has with the grandchildren, because ‘She loves the child and loves doing it’. Without the ‘love’ and expectations of intergenerational contracts, this kind of help from a grandmother’s could be regarded by those involved as exploitative, the more so in that, up to now, it remains unresolved how Marta will meet her obligations in the intergenerational contract. Therefore, emotional attachments here serve as a substitute for future care expectations, as discussed in the previous section.

The literature discusses the phenomenon of ‘ethnic’ nannies, often referring to them as a ‘cheap’ form of help or easy to acquire within ethnic networks. Yet, ethnic nannies are also a means by which parents can establish forms of ‘Polish’ socialisation in the immigration country. As in Marta’s case, it is often an important reason why migrants hire other migrants from the same emigration country to look after their children – they can teach the children the Polish language and cultural practices.
Marta is not much worried about her children learning German, as the parents speak German at home with each other, and the children speak German in kindergarten. Marta is more worried about her children (not) learning Polish. Due to the distinct type of exchange mode, which makes an otherwise exploitation-like relationship acceptable, the grandmother is preferred over an ethnic nanny. Embedded in familial expectations about the embodiment of family roles, the attractiveness of the grandmother as a caregiver evokes the phenomenon of ‘mobile grandmothers’, who commute between countries, spending several months a year away from home. In the Polish–German transnational space, due to the open borders and a well-established infrastructure connecting both countries, mobile grandmothers are a quite common phenomenon. Janina (55), Marta’s mother, who lives in Poland, elaborates on her experiences as a ‘mobile grandmother’:

I’m not going there for a ‘holiday’. Sure, I help by taking care of the two children and I generally do the shopping and cook. […] But I like to do these things, so I don’t mind it at all.

Accordingly, grandmothers who travel in order to assist with childcare are involved in many tasks such as shopping and cooking, as well as caring for the children: when she is visiting, she takes over the ‘role’ of household manager usually fulfilled by the mother. It makes the grandmother’s assistance very valuable from the perspective of both the care receiver and the caregiver.

She would probably want me to be there [in Germany] all the time. We have a very good relationship and we have no conflicts, unlike other families. […] When I’m babysitting Kaśka’s [Marta’s friend who lives near her mother in Poland] child, she says, ‘Oh, Kaśka is so lucky’.

Grandmothers themselves evaluate their help as very important, and feel needed when their daughters both work in the house and in a job. In this case they tend to get more involved in practical care work than grandmothers in the country of emigration, where mothers tend to be the care-giver.

CONCLUSIONS

Expectations of migration projects shape childcare strategies in transnational families and have implications for the life chances of migrants and their families. Our intent was to show how children are involved in migration projects, despite the problematisation of ‘left-behind children’, and to indicate the challenges which migrants face when they raise their children outside their country of origin. As migration is often driven by the parents’ desire to improve their children’s opportunities for the future, their care strategies are orientated towards a national adjustment of their children, yet display gender, age and class-related implications. Although gender roles are changing, it is predominantly women who are responsible for their children’s socialisation. Class-related aspects are visible in the parents’ aspirations for the successful adjustment of their children, with highly educated parents wishing their children to ‘have good grades and attend a good school’, while parents with lesser education often lack the social or cultural capital to place their children in more academic schools. The age of the children determines whether the parents tend to invest more in their offspring’s adjustment to the immigration country or in the maintenance of their ‘transnational agency’, for instance, through the acquisition of their origin-country language.

Transnationality is an important concept, as it first sheds light on the ‘portability of national identity in the modern world’ (White, 2011: 7) and second is highly associated with life chances, ‘in that transnational transactions themselves have become a criterion of differentiation’ (Faist, 2014: 207). Therefore, our aim was to bring together migrants’ perspectives on transnational positioning, while not underestimating their quest for better life chances, which often involves their children’s integration into the immigration society. Not often well reflected in the literature is the fact that migrants are well aware of the risks their children may face after migration, such as a ‘migrant stigma’ (Lopez Rodriguez, 2010), diverging from their strong orientation towards their future prospects.

Taking migrants’ aspirations and their strategies to achieve them seriously allows us to consider the ambivalences in national and transnational positioning as, while migration is often patterned by the desire to increase one’s life chances, for some,
transnational care in the immigration country, this poses difficulties in the German labour market, and highlights the gendered implications of transnational care. The age-related dimensions become obvious – children may be exposed to migration-related risks such as bad schooling and discrimination, depending on their age at migration.

One dynamic not often reflected in the literature is that parents are not just orientated towards the adjustment of their children into the immigration country, or the maintenance of transnational attachments – they also aim at finding a compromise between the two aspirations. The prevalence of the orientation reveals a time-wise and age-related aspect and is patterned by the age of children by migration and length of stay. When parents recently arrive in Germany, they are mainly worried about their children learning German, while after some time they usually experience, that maintaining the Polish language does not happen automatically for their children. Both orientations require different types of national as well as transnational childcare strategies and affect the household–labour market relationship.

Drawing on two different types of a household–labour market relationship, we have shown how parents find a compromise in both childcare situations, as well as how they are embedded in prevalent narratives in the Polish–German social space. Our analysis also reveals that migrants’ division of labour impacts on the role-making strategies of transnational families, such as grandmothers who interpret their roles as caregivers, between co-present and physical care and more symbolic forms of care, shaped by the division of labour arrangement prevalent in the immigration country.

Finding a balance between national adjustment and transnational attachment synchronises socialisation within and outside the (transnational) family. Hardships in balancing both orientations in childcare arise for instance because institutional infrastructures in the immigration country often do not meet the demand of teaching the language of the emigration country. Yet, caregiving able to transmit forms of ‘ethnic’ competencies often is tied to mothers’ (full-time) care, making them dependent on the main breadwinner’s income and lower retirement pensions. We highlighted the differences in life chances which migration may mean for different family members, shaped by age and gender (and to some extent also class) in transnational positioning. Therefore, we argue for more thorough investigations of the ambivalences in maintaining ‘familyhood’ across borders that often go together with (unstable) processes of settlement.

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NOTES

(1) An early sociological account on ambivalence was introduced by Robert K. Merton, who stated that ‘people who lived in two or more societies and so have become oriented to differing sets of cultural values’ (Merton, 1976: 11). Following this insight, the concept of ambivalence is recently taken up by migration scholars to describe the ambivalences in identities, norms and attachments, migrants may be exposed to (cf. Kivisto & La Vecchia-Mikkola, 2013).

(2) There are of course also opposite processes of revaluation of cultural capital, or intergenerational upward mobility after migration, for example by higher income which can be invested in children’s education.

(3) Listed emigration from the former Polish territories began when Poland was partitioned and annexed by Russia, Austria and Prussia. People started migrating to the Prussian regions to find employment and settle down with their families.

(4) For more details on those who migrated to Germany as ethnic Germans or who received German citizenship (shortly) after immigration, see Sienkiewicz et al. (2015).

REFERENCES


