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Transnational Family Support and the Transformation of Local Networks:

Old-age Support among a German Minority in Romania

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Abstract

In our progressively mobile and ageing world, researchers and policy makers are increasingly interested in the implications of migration for the support and care of older people ‘left behind’. An important strand within this work examines transnational family support by older people’s migrant children. The main tenor is one of viewing migration as leading to older people’s greater social, material and emotional vulnerability, unless offset by remittance flows and/or ‘caring from a distance’. Very little research has considered transnational family links within the context of the wider networks within which older people are embedded, nor has the impact of migration on these networks been scrutinised. The Transylvanian Saxons, a German-speaking minority in Romania, present an ideal case study to examine the interplay of local and transnational dynamics in old-age support provision, because emigration to Germany post-1990 among this minority group was dramatic, and the Saxon population remaining in Romania is now notably aged. This paper draws on interviews from 2008 and 2015 with stakeholders and older Saxons in and around Sibiu. It argues that transnational family support is surprisingly limited, consisting chiefly of visits and occasional gifts, but rarely extending to monetary support or hands-on care. Instead local networks comprising local kin, Romanian neighbours and German institutions (esp. the Lutheran church) play a more significant role for older people’s wellbeing. However, the importance of local networks is not incidental to mass emigration, but instead has arisen out of the transformation of local kinship and community networks through emigration and wider societal changes.

Introduction: Research Questions

Population ageing and large-scale migration are two phenomena that intersect in interesting ways. As an anthropologist and gerontologist I am interested in these kinds of questions:

- How does large-scale emigration of working age adults affect the support, care and wellbeing of older people?
- How are migrant children able to provide assistance to their elderly parents from a distance?
- What role do the networks that are local to the older person play in the provision of care and support, and does their role change as a result of emigration?

Literature

Some of the research on the relationship between ageing and migration is very pessimistic. For example, the work by King and Vullnetari attests to devastation and insecurity of older people in the wake of the mass exodus in Albania since the 1990s. Other studies emphasise the importance of remittances that may offset the loss of hands-on support following migration. The literature on transnational family support is also more positive and stresses the different ways in which migrant children continue to ‘care about’ and ‘care for’ their elderly parents from a distance.

However, there are important gaps in the literature to date. For example, there is a narrow focus on parent-child dyads; this neglects that migration decisions are made with family members, and the impact of migration is felt by wider networks, comprising family, friends, neighbours and the wider community. As a result of this neglect very little attention has been paid to *how networks adjust to migration*. Who steps in to fill the gaps? How do relationships at the local level change?

In this paper I wish to argue that in order to understand the impact of migration on the wellbeing of older people you need to consider both transnational ties and the networks in the sending countries. These networks do not remain static but are transformed by emigration. They can be weakened or even destroyed – yesterday's talk on Estonia? Or they can reconfigure to give rise to new or strengthened ties. Either way, the transformations to local networks can affect not just those with family members abroad, but also those without any children or whose children have not migrated.

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This talk draws on a study of the impact of migration on the support networks of older Transylvanian Saxons. The Transylvanian Saxons are a German-speaking minority in this part of Romania. They are an ideal case study to examine the interplay of local and transnational dynamics in old-age support provision, because emigration to Germany post-1990 among this minority group was dramatic, and the Saxon population remaining in Romania is now notably aged.

Transylvanian Saxons in Romania

TS have been in Transylvania since C12th. They have kept a strong German identity and distinct Lutheran religion. Until the end of the 2nd WW intermarriage was rare. Population numbers started to decline after the war and then when the borders opened in 1990 about ¾ of the remaining Saxon population emigrated to Germany, where they were given German citizenship.

Methodology

My colleague and I conducted semi-structured interviews in Sibiu, Medias and surrounding villages in 2008 and 2015. This included expert interviews [with vicars, politicians, care home staff, journalists, academics,] and older Saxons, both those living in the community and in Saxon old-age homes.

Who are the older Saxons who have remained behind?

The Saxons who have remained behind are not representative of the original Saxon population. They consist of those who have important roles within the Saxon (and wider Romanian) community (note → Romanian President is a Saxon); those who are childless and thus would have had to emigration alone; those who have married a Romanian or Hungarian, and those who had significant caring responsibilities for an elderly relative at the time of the mass exodus.

Intergenerational relations and old-age support in the past

In order to appreciate the impact of migration on old-age support arrangements, we need to understand how such support was configured in the past. In the past support in later life was a family responsibility which was ideally achieved through coresidence of the generations, often with the elderly couple moving into an annexe and one of the children taking over the house and farm. Support flowed both ways, with grandparents often making important contributions to childcare and domestic tasks. Childless elderly relatives or neighbours were also cared for by the younger generation, not least because there were no real alternatives to informal care provision. The main carer often inherited the house of the person cared for. In short, old-age care was an essential characteristic of families, but also one which was rewarded.

How significant is transnational family support and care?

Given the centrality of family for old-age support and care in the past, we were interested in assessing how absent family members succeed (or not) in perpetuating this support. [NB: We are examining this from the perspective of older people who have remained in Romania.]

The vast majority of older people we interviewed maintain strong and meaningful ties with children, grandchildren and siblings abroad; they do this via letters, photographs, occasional phone calls and visits.

Visits to and from Germany are the key means of ‘doing family’ across borders. As older people have become less able to travel, they rely on visits by their family members. We found that those families that still own a home in Romania are more likely feel rooted here and to visit regularly. There was some evidence of declining frequencies of visits (grandchildren wanting to go somewhere else for holidays) and some cases where children had not been to visit for several years.

Even under communism family members in Germany sent parcels with food and luxury items, and this continued into the 1990s. Nowadays such material support is given on the occasion of visits, when family members bring gifts from Germany. Even this is declining in importance because nowadays you can buy anything in Romania.

What surprised us, given the huge and persistent differentials in income between Germany and Romania, is that monetary support (or remittances) from relatives in Germany to older people in Romania was extremely rare. Where it occurred it involved small sums of money.

This quote captures this well. The elderly widow had just told us that she receives a few Euros worth of support from the church to supplement her meagre pension, and that she finds it difficult to get by.

I: “Do you think your son would help you, if you couldn’t manage anymore?”

R: “Hmm, I don’t know. I don’t know, but I hope so.” [...]

I: “Have you ever had to ask him for help?”

R: “Well, that’s the thing ... I have always struggled through. I am very frugal, I don’t buy myself anything. So I have received a pair of shoes from him and... well so.”

I: “But the gas bill and electricity and telephone, that is paid...?”

R: “That is all paid by myself. And whatever is used at the back (in his part of the house), we settle up for that.”

Caring from a distance

When it comes to the broader domain of caring we found that not only adult children, but also siblings, nephews, nieces and grandchildren were actively involved. However, only in exceptional cases did this take the form of hands-on care by a relative who returned to Romania for this purpose (e.g. Froehlich: granddaughter who was a nurse taking unpaid leave for a year to care for her grandparents before they got a place in the old-age home). Equally, we encountered hardly any cases of an older person going to join their children in Germany for the purpose of being cared for, although this might have been more common in the early 1990s.

Instead, we found frequent instances of what Tronto has termed ‘caring about’ (as opposed to ‘caring for’). Migrants show that they ‘care about’ their elderly relatives in Romania, for example through regular visits. During such visits repairs to the house are made, visits to the doctor are arranged, or the older person is taken out of the care home to be within the bosom of the family for a couple of weeks per year. Migrant family members also show that they care by arranging domiciliary care from a neighbour or in the form of meals-on-wheels, and by assisting in the transition to a care home in Romania.

These forms of ‘caring from a distance’ crucially depend on the existence of care providers locally, in Romania. This means that local networks need to be brought into focus when trying to understand

the impact of emigration on old-age support. In a few cases, absent family members liaise with local kin to provide hands-on care and support. Here I am going to focus on the more common arrangements which involve support and care by local neighbours and by the church.

The transformation of local networks: Interethnic relations

Close-knit Saxon communities and neighbourly support were key to the Saxon way of life until 1990. There were entire villages which were predominantly Saxon, and in the cities, streets or neighbourhoods which were Saxons. These communities were hollowed-out by mass exodus. As a result, interethnic neighbourly relations have become more significant.

“In the past the relations [with Romanians] were also good (well, not immediately after the war), but until ‘the change’ [i.e. 1990] the main contacts were always with other Germans. Now they are missing, and therefore there is greater orientation towards Romanian neighbours. Look at my parents, they live in the same house as a Romanian family and they help each other. It means I don’t have to stop by so often.”

(expert interview, vicar)

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Romanian neighbours are taking on the previous roles of Saxon neighbours (e.g. keeping an eye on the older person, doing shopping, providing cooked food, practical help around house, cutting firewood). A degree of reciprocity is essential to these relationships – but that was also the case among Saxon neighbours.

I: “Do you still have ‘Kränzchen’ [traditional Saxon get-togethers involving cake, coffee and gossip]?”

R: “Yes, but not Kränzchen... With my neighbour, I go to her and she comes to me, she asks me for things if she needs, and I ask her. Because she is very decent. She is Romanian but very decent. If I go to her on the first floor, she comes out and calls [in Romanian]: ‘I know you haven’t prepared yourself any food!’”

I: “And did she bring you food?”

R: “No, I went and ate at hers.”

Care by neighbours

Surprisingly these interethnic ties now also extend to care-giving. In other words, Romanian neighbours not only take on the role previously played by Saxon neighbours, but also by Saxon family members. We encountered several cases where an older person was being cared for by a Romanian neighbour, in terms of keeping house, preparing food, accompanying to the doctor, providing physical care in illness. These arrangements typically involve a (formal or informal) contract so that the neighbour inherits the elderly Saxon’s house after his or her death.

“Opposite us lived an older Saxon widower, he came to an arrangement with a Romanian family living outside Hermannstadt in a village. He invited the young Romanian family into his home. They took on the duty of caring for him until he died, and afterwards they inherited the house.”

(Expert interview, academic)

“Without this woman, I would long be in the cemetery!”

(Elderly widower, living alone, both children in Germany)

In short, our interview data show that Romanian neighbours now play a key role in old-age support and care provision for older Saxons. There is continuity with the past in that having responsibility for old-age care entails legitimate expectations of inheritance. Absent family members are sometimes involved in setting up these arrangements with neighbours. However, a more common form of caring from a distance is for migrant children to assist with their elderly parents’ transition into a care home; these care homes, in turn, are part of the new role that the church has taken on.

The transformation of local networks: The role of the church

Like Romanian neighbours, the Lutheran church has also taken on roles previously played by family members and Saxon neighbourhoods. The church was always an important institution in the life of the Saxon community. Under communism church services were the only legitimate means of Saxons having gatherings. However, since the mass exodus the church is also central to old-age support provision.

Keeping records of members and their circumstances;

Providing emotional support through visits;

Providing practical support via 'Diakonie' (=Christian social welfare services) in form of meals-on-wheels, domiciliary care visits, free medication, winter fuel assistance;

[quote slide]

This quote captures very well the transformation of the role of the church as a result of emigration:

"We never needed a 'Diakonie' until 1990, then communities were well structured into neighbourhoods, sisterhoods, brotherhoods, one used to help each other. ... But after 1990, when all this collapsed, when these structures were no longer sustainable, i.e. one no longer had the people with whom one could do that, then the church took over."

Photo slide

The church was closely involved in the setting up of Saxon care homes, and nowadays it assists older people with the transition into care homes when this becomes necessary. The existence of good quality care homes targeted at the German-speaking community in Transylvania means that absent family members are able to 'care about' their elderly relatives from a distance without having to provide hands-on care, which would be difficult to provide transnationally.

Conclusions

It is undeniable that significant outmigration creates gaps in the supportive networks of older people 'left behind'. The absence of close family members is only partly compensated for by visits, phone calls and other ways of keeping in touch.

We found that transnational family support in the form of monetary or material assistance is not significant among the Saxon community.

However, absent family members continue to care for their elderly relatives from a distance. An important way that they do this is by making sure that local sources of support are tapped into.

Local networks have been affected through the mass emigration, so that not only family networks, but also Saxon community networks are diminished significantly.

However, we have also seen that local networks adjust to outmigration by bringing in new actors that were previously not involved in support provision; in this case, Romanian neighbours. In addition, existing ties such as those to the Lutheran church are intensified and extended. Where in the past the church primarily provided spiritual care, it is now central to the provision of practical assistance and even physical care.

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