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[Review of: L. Baldassar, L. Merla (2014) Transnational families, migration, and the circulation of care: understanding mobility and absence in family life]

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Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Medicine Anthropology Theory

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ahlin, T. (2015). [Review of: L. Baldassar, L. Merla (2014) Transnational families, migration, and the circulation of care: understanding mobility and absence in family life]. *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, 2(1), 200-203.

<http://www.medanthrotheory.org/read/4785/transnational-families>

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Transnational families, migration, and the circulation of care

Understanding mobility and absence in family life

Reviewed by Tanja Ahlin

Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla, eds. *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Hardcover, 304 pp., \$140. ISBN 978-0-415-62673-6.

In their edited volume, Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla introduce a new concept – ‘care circulation’ – which they propose as a theoretical approach to studying care at the crossroads of family studies and migration. The aim is to bring the analysis of care in transnational families to the next level from the well-known theory of global care chains, introduced more than a decade ago by Arlie Hochschild (2000) and later expanded by Nicola Yeates (2012), among others.

The notion of ‘care circulation’ is presented by Baldassar and Merla as ‘the reciprocal, multidirectional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks subject to the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of both sending and receiving societies’ (p. 25). Rather than thinking of care as an activity that takes place in a dyadic relationship, Baldassar and Merla argue that family members are at the same time care givers and care receivers, participating in various ‘circuits of care’ involving a number of close family members and broader family networks that may be

activated simultaneously or left dormant. The term ‘circulation’, adopted from migration studies, implies the movement of care in uneven flows (to the point of lack of care and abandonment) among all people and institutions involved in caring relationships.

Baldassar and Merla also challenge the ideal of proximity, which rests on the assumption that distance between family members automatically prohibits the exchange of caregiving; this ideal leads to the stigmatization of transnational families as deficient, at risk, fragmented, or broken. The chapters in this volume show a number of ways in which transnational family members routinely live their lives across geographic distance, retain their sense of collectivity and kinship, and develop practices and processes of ‘doing family’. These practices include the construction of (the feeling of) co-presence by routinely using a mixed set of modes of communication such as email, social media, and telephone to keep in touch.

The authors of the book’s chapters illustrate how care circulation may be studied empirically. They generally base their arguments on data obtained through multisited, long-term, ethnographic fieldwork in a variety of cultural contexts around the world. Some also comparatively explore transnational families from two or more cultural backgrounds. This diversity is intentional as the editors of the volume aim to show that the notion of care circulation is ‘pertinent to all types of transnational families and migrations’ (p. 18).

In the cluster of four chapters discussing theoretical and empirical considerations of care circulation, time and institutional contexts of care are explored as two important aspects. For example, in their analysis of migrant groups living in Portugal and Switzerland, Karin Wall and Claudio Bolzman show that care circulation is a dynamic process, as care practices, associated meanings and affects, and the experiences of all those involved in caring greatly change over time. That is why, they argue, care circulation needs to be approached through a life-course or life-cycle perspective. Secondly, care involves not only individuals and families, but also social institutions that direct migration, welfare, care, and work regimes in home and host countries. Exploring the life course of Mexican and Dominican families in the United States and Spain, Marina Ariza shows how country-specific migratory and security policies, such as visa regulations, differently impact opportunities for family reunification and visiting. Institutional contexts thus make it easier or harder to practice care across national borders, but, according to Merla, because care travels in a number of forms and in multiple directions, the actors involved in it can also ‘work the system’ to a considerable extent.

Another cluster of chapters is dedicated to transnational parenting and labour migration flows, with an emphasis on local family structures and kinship systems. Looking at childrearing from this perspective, Karen Fog Olwig shows that the physical proximity of mothers and their children is not universally seen as necessary for successful upbringing. These chapters shift the focus from the mother–child relationship to the extended family networks that become activated in transnational childrearing. Miranda Poeze and Valentina

Mazzucato examine the involvement of grandparents, and Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot and Majella Kilkey (in separate chapters) examine fathers as primary or distant caregivers in transnational families.

A final group of chapters addresses care circulation in middle-class transnational families of skilled, professional, and student migrants. Here, care is analysed as a kind of resource, particularly in terms of social and cultural capital. According to Tracey Reynolds and Elisabetta Zontini, who describe their ethnographic material on Italian and Caribbean families living in the UK, care giving and receiving across borders can strengthen migrants' sense of belonging to both their local and transnational communities through the processes of bridging (between communities) and bonding (within communities). Remittances are explored as a form of transnational care that not only travels from host to home countries, but also in other directions. For example, a migrant's stay-behind family may provide the assets for education or setting up a business abroad, as Supriya Singh and Anuja Cabraal write of some Indian migrants in Australia.

The volume is comprehensive in illustrating how 'care circulation' can be used to deepen the analysis of care in transnational families. The concept and its applications are thoughtfully developed, indicating how care in this context is indeed multidirectional, dynamic, and asymmetric. It will be interesting to observe what other research topics in anthropology, sociology, family, migration, and science and technology studies will find the care circulation framework useful in their analyses.

From this new framework, various strands of research might develop. For example, in my own research of elderly care in the transnational families of Indian migrant nurses, care has all the major characteristics of Baldassar's and Merla's concept. I explore how everyday information and communication technologies (ICTs) influence care provision particularly when migrants' parents become ill. ICTs thus are important not only in routine, day-to-day care, but also in what Baldassar and Merla call 'crisis care' (p. 52). Childbirth, illness, or the death of a family member often provoke a rapid reorganization of activities, including immediate visits to provide hands-on care as well as moral and emotional support. But can ICTs truly transform care? My work suggests they are more than simple means of communication: they are actors that significantly influence care practices and meanings. Joining the notion of care circulation to this perspective on ICTs could prove fruitful: What do circuits of care look like and how do they work if the actors involved in them are not only people and institutions, but ICTs too?

About the author

Tanja Ahlin is a doctoral candidate at the University of Amsterdam and the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp. In her PhD project, she is working across medical anthropology, science and technology studies (STS), and family and migration studies. The central topic of her PhD is the influence of everyday information and communication technologies (ICTs) on elderly care in Indian transnational families. Besides care, transnationalism, and aging, her interests include online communication, telemedicine, and e-health/m-health.

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