



## Transnational connections of later-life migrants



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### ABSTRACT

In this paper a transnational perspective is used to explain whether and how older migrants construct and sustain their social networks. The paper uses a transnational viewpoint on older migrants' lives by analysing their engagement with their former homeland, and the intensity and habitualness of those engagements in old age. The aim of this article is to study the transnational connections of later-life migrants'. Attention is especially paid to the features of old age while maintaining these connections. These considerations are based on analyses of transnational networks in the everyday lives of later-life migrants from the former Soviet Union residing in Finland. The data were collected from 11 later-life migrants.

It is found that transnational relationships are a vital part of the everyday lives of older migrants, and that they are sustained in varied ways. These connections mean a concrete source of help, family affiliations, the sharing of emotions, and a larger social network. Economic limitations affect the frequency and type of communication, and various physical limitations may also cause inability to maintain contacts across borders. In these circumstances, family members or other close relatives or friends are needed to deliver messages on the older person's behalf. Old age and immigration status affect the amount and direction of communication across borders, thereby shaping these networks.

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### Introduction

Old age can also be the time of change and not all older people are able to stay in their familiar environment and grow old there. Some must leave their homes, and at the same time they also have to leave their familiar social and societal settings. Their physical environment and the wholeness of their everyday lives are changed significantly. Such relocation can happen because of the choices of other family members, as in the case of transnational caregiving (see e.g. Zhou, 2012), but it can also be the choice of the older people themselves. Whatever the reasons behind relocation to a new country in old age are, the move requires a lot of resources. Many studies have found that relocation to a new culture is more difficult for older migrants than for younger ones. They need to deal with the losses and limitations they face through their own ageing process (Angel &

Angel, 1992; Gelfand, 1989, 1994; McConatha, Stoller, & Oboudiat, 2001; Torres, 2002; Warnes, Friedrich, Kellaheer, & Torres, 2004; Weeks & Cuellar, 1983). Growing old means often the need for additional instrumental support (hands-on assistance, housekeeping, meals) and severe illness or loss may change or increase the role of emotional support (Kauh, 1997; Van Groenou & Van Tilburg, 1997). Migration later in life means time in a new environment without work or education, which are the best ways for migrants to establish contacts in a new home country. The lack of work or education diminishes the number of social contacts older migrants can create. Studies have shown that later-life migrants can live very isolated lives, even if their children are nearby (see Moon & Pearl, 1991; Weeks & Cuellar, 1983).

Social networks are an important part of well-being, but they can be threatened in cases of migration. In migration studies, social networks are a form of social capital offering support in the process of integration into the host country (Yoo & Zippay, 2012). Litwin (1997) analysed pre- and post-immigration network shifts. According to his study, social

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networks constitute a significant personal milieu, and are a mediating factor in migrants' transitions to a new society. He found that most of the elderly migrants studied experienced a change from kin-based networks to family-based networks (Litwin, 1997). However, the role of transnational connections was not considered in his study.

Transnationalism is the main concept used when talking about connections sustained across borders. Transnational connections can be an important source of sense of community, especially for older migrants. In this study we are interested in the transnational networks of people who have migrated in old age. Transnationalism has been interpreted in different ways in different times. In a broad sense it can refer to "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" (Vertovec, 1999: 447). Transnationalism focuses on the institutions and identities that migrants create when they are simultaneously connected to two or more countries. Transnationalism can be used in familial and cultural settings, as well as in economic and political ones. The concept was defined in 1994 by Basch et al. as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994: 6–7). This perspective enables a recognition of the various ways in which migrants sustain connections across national borders (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Vertovec, 2004).

Transnationalism involves not only flows of global capital or mass media, but also activities in people's daily lives. Transnational connections occur between people living in migrant-sending and migrant-receiving contexts, and are experienced through everyday life practises. People combine elements of the two cultures in their lives in order to form a homelike environment in a new setting. These elements are varied, and include exchanges with kin, memories of the home country, forms of politics, modes of death and dying, ties of affection, and practises and conceptions of how things are or should be (see Lamb, 2002; Vuorela, 2002). These elements are both feelings and practises of daily life. They are real plans to visit and see kin and family; they are cakes, biscuits and medicines carried from the former homeland; and they are arrangements made between people here and there. In a transnational perspective, people maintain cultural, political, economic, familial and other ties across borders, making the home and the host society an arena of social action. But transnationalism does not include just any kinds of relation, such as occasional connections across borders (see Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999). Although very differently understood in different times and scientific perspectives, transnationalism is a concept which contains the idea of connections in both directions, here and there, and the need for connections for everyday life in a host country for institutional, economic and social reasons.

In this study we understand transnationalism as connections between older migrants and their social networks in their former homeland. We see that for older and especially later-life migrants, it is vital to have connections to the place where they lived most of their lives and the people they have known for decades, especially their family, but also their kin and friendship networks. However, social ties can be difficult to maintain across borders, as old age can bring changes, for example in hearing and seeing, that can affect the feasibility and character of communication across borders.

Most studies of transnational modes of living have been undertaken in the fields of anthropology and sociology. These studies tend to concentrate primarily on people in the prime of their productive and reproductive lives (Al-Ali, 2002; Al-Ali, Black, & Koser, 2001), such as labour migrants and global professional elites, who usually move by choice (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Hannerz, 1990). Older people and transnationalism are dealt with in studies about retirement migration (see e.g. Gustafson, 2001), grandparents taking care of the children of immigrant women in the countries of origin (Hondagenou-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Schmalzbauer, 2004; Warnes et al., 2004), and grandparents brought to the host country to take care of children while parents are working (see e.g. Zhou, 2012). Recently, transnational caregiving and ageing have become an important research area. Several studies have focused on grown-up children taking care of their older parents transnationally (Baldassar, 2007a; Baldock, 2000, 2003; Treas, 2008; Treas & Mazumdar, 2002; Wilding, 2006; Zehner, 2008). In these studies, women meet the physical and emotional needs of their older parents or kin in more than one household in more than one country, involving connections to the various social service agencies and resources (see Zehner, 2008). According to Baldassar (2007a), distance and the passage of time do not diminish the exchange of care, even though they may disrupt, fracture and transform it. Her study revealed that the frequency of exchange and transnational connections actually increased, thanks to cheaper travel, communication technologies and improved infrastructures (Baldassar, 2007a; see also Treas, 2008; Treas & Mazumdar, 2002). Lamb's (2002) ethnographic study of Indian-Americans touches on the ageing processes and the meaning of living in a transnational era in old age. The study examines ageing as a key dimension of transnationalism for Indians living in the United States. Through the predicaments and stories of Indian-Americans, the study examines how transnationality is an "intimate" matter that is lived and produced locally (Lamb, 2002). Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, and Ogg (2001) found that among elderly Indians and Bangladeshis in Britain, the tendency to maintain strong connections to the former homeland is important for sustaining family affiliations.

In this study we have investigated with whom our older informants have transnational relationships (i.e., children, parents, relatives, friends, and neighbours), the kind of role these networks play, and the ways transnational relationships are kept on.

## Background

In many western countries, large immigrant groups have arrived since the Second World War to fulfil the need for a workforce. These immigrants have also grown old in their host countries (Nazaroo, 2006). During the past two decades Finland has changed its position, from being a point of departure to becoming a point of destination. This sparsely populated Nordic country, with about 5.3 million inhabitants, has a few traditional minorities, such as Swedish speakers (about 5.7% of the population), Sami (about 6000), Romany (about 9000), Jews (fewer than 2000) and Tatars (fewer than 1000). During the 1990s the number of foreigners increased very rapidly. At that time asylum-seekers, refugees and repatriates began arriving in Finland more actively than ever before. The biggest refugee group are the Somalis, who number

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