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Mobilising social network support for childcare: The case of Polish migrant mothers in Dublin

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the utilisation of support networks for the organisation of informal childcare by working Polish migrant mothers in Dublin. Grounded in a support network perspective the study employs a mixed method approach to elucidate how the mothers use local and transnational relations in their child-minding strategies, but also highlights the obstacles posed by the distant character of the latter ties. In line with previous research on support networks, we find a strong reliance on strong ties in providing instrumental and emotional support (e.g., Wellman and Wortley, 1990) but also that ‘distance’ matters (e.g., Mok et al., 2010) and shapes the network mobilisation strategies of the working mothers. Locally based weak ties, based on various forms of reciprocity, are supplemental in providing ad-hoc crisis support when transnational ties cannot be mobilized. Nonetheless, transnational ties are shown to be crucial in the childcare provision, in particular for longer spells of regular childcare.

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Introduction

As international mobility has increased over the last decades, research on transnational families and transnational care has also gained more prominent place in family and migration research (Barglowski et al., 2015). In case of incomplete migration, that is, when only a part of the household moves, it has been studied how care is arranged for children left behind in the country of origin (e.g., Parrenas, 2001), among others (see for example the concept of distant mothering; Boccagni, 2012). But even if the household migrates as a unit or is reunited in the host country after an initial separation, it may prove difficult for the adult members of the household to combine employment and child care when their closest ties live far away.

Rearing a child in the country that is different from the parents’ country of origin implies various limitations in structuring childcare (Ryan, 2011a,b), such as initial lack of established support networks after migration and time and effort it takes to establish the new ones. Research with Polish migrants in London (Ryan, 2008) and Germany (Barglowski et al., 2015; Bilecen and Sienkiewicz, 2015) has focused on the roles that family members play in providing support and care. This research underlined the importance of local and transnational family relations, in particular

grandmothers (Barglowski et al., 2015; Ryan, 2011a; cf. Da, 2003; Bonizzoni, 2014 in research with non-Polish migrants) and younger siblings and cousins (Ryan, 2011a,b). These family relations combine positive and negative aspects. As Baldassar et al. (2014) stated, “transnational caregiving, just like caregiving with any other families 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” (p. 7). Furthermore, scholars have also stressed the importance of recognizing the interconnection between informal care arrangements and formal care provided by the state or organizations (Barglowski et al., 2015; Bilecen and Sienkiewicz, 2015), suggesting that mothers negotiate child care arrangements taking into account both formal and informal options.

The present paper extends these previous findings by exploring the roles of not only family relations but also of local or non-local non-kin ties in the organisation of informal childcare provision by Polish migrant mothers in Ireland. These include both strong ties (such as close friends) and weak ties (such as neighbours). In particular, we study how working mothers mobilise their social support network to combine childcare and employment. Second, we contextualize child care support within the larger social support networks that women have, providing not only instrumental support but also emotional support and companionship. Last, while previous studies on informal childcare provision analyzed only arrangements for ‘regular’ childcare (e.g., Roeder et al., 2014), we put particular emphasis on childcare in ‘crisis’ situations, when the

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need for childcare arises in an unpredictable fashion (e.g., due to illness of the caregiver), as crisis childcare poses particular obstacles for the involvement of transnational support.

Our research is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of social support mobilisation strategies, every day practices and the experience of being a migrant mother in Ireland, based on in-depth interviews with 23 Polish working mothers living in Dublin. In the first stage of analysis, we qualitatively explored the type of support obtained from different types of relation and how mothers complemented different sources of support. In a second stage, following a two-step strategy known as the 'generalization model' (for details, see Mayring, 2001; Auer-Srnka and Koeszegi, 2007), we converted the qualitative data into structured, numerical data (Domínguez and Hollstein, 2014), with the aim to test whether strategies reported by some mothers were more generally sustained within our sample.

After briefly reviewing the literature on social support networks, we provide some context information that is relevant for the particular case of Polish mothers in Dublin. We then present the data and the results of the mixed-method analysis based on a generalization model. Finally, we discuss our findings and the main contributions of this paper.

Social support

Community ties with friends and family are the principal means by which people receive supportive resources from others. The term 'social support' refers to a broad array of resources provided by community networks of friends, neighbours, relatives and workmates. Social support can range from emotional support to large-scale material aid (Wellman, 2007). As argued by Wellman and Wortley (1990) the kinds of support provided vary with the characteristics of the relationship and with the nature of the support provided. Support that involves substantial costs in terms of time and effort from the provider is mainly received from 'strong ties'. The strength of the tie depends on the 'combination of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy and the reciprocal services' that are being exchanged with the tie (Granovetter, 1973:1361). Family, intimate partners and close friends are typical examples of strong ties, while connections with neighbours, acquaintances and colleagues are typically weak ties. Strong ties have been shown to be important for the provision of emotional support, small services and company. Another salient dimension beside tie strength is the local positioning of the ties, which is of particular importance for the study of transnational support networks. Geographical proximity facilitates regular face-to-face encounters and is of particular importance for forms of support that the physical presence of the provider (e.g., Mok et al., 2010). For example, local relations (neighbours) are more likely to provide small services, such as ad-hoc childcare and emotional aid (Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

Research has shown that mothers rely to a large degree on their informal social support networks in managing childcare, in particular employed mothers. In line with the social support perspective, previous studies have further highlighted that strong ties, for example grandparents or partners, are particularly important for the provision of informal childcare services (e.g., Stoloff et al., 1999). For migrant mothers, those strong ties frequently reside in the country of origin. The lack of geographical proximity appears to pose obstacles for the mobilisation of 'transnational care' (Ryan, 2011a, Bargłowski et al., 2015).

Context

Within a few years Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, Polish immigrants have established themselves as the largest immigrant group in Ireland. While only a few thousand Poles resided in Ireland

before the accession, it is estimated that the number of Polish residents peaked in 2008 with 200,000 (Kaczmarczyk and Okólski, 2008: 603) and declined since somewhat thereafter. The Irish census of 2011 enumerated more than 120,000 Poles (CSO, 2012). The Polish community is very dispersed in Ireland but Dublin as the economic and cultural centre of Ireland is residence for about 36,000 Poles (CSO, 2012). While male migration dominated the first years after Polish accession, since the 2008 recession in Ireland, female migration, often in the form of family unification, has taken the lead. The Polish community in Dublin is quite young (the majority falls within the age group of 20–34) and well educated (CSO, 2012). However, despite the relatively high educational attainment, Polish migrants work mainly in low paid jobs, below their qualifications. For couples, this implies that both tend to work to make ends meet (Mührlau, 2012).

International comparisons show that in Ireland, formal childcare is the most expensive in Europe with limited supply and often of poor quality (OECD, 2011). Consequently, informal care arrangements are crucial for many working mothers in Ireland in facilitating their labour market participation. For native families, care provided by local kin is the prevailing form of regular informal childcare (Roeder et al., 2014). This option is often not available for most migrant mothers who lack local family support while the high price for childcare and low wages rule out the formal childcare road (Roeder et al., 2014; Frese et al., 2015). However, the relatively short distance between Poland and Ireland, cheap flight costs and the free movement law for EU citizens provide opportunities to mobilise transnational support for childcare.

Data collection

Sample

The data were obtained through interviews with 23 Polish mothers in Dublin. The interviews were conducted in Polish. Network maps as a visualisation tool and name generators were used as their simple and intuitive handling makes them easily adaptable in the context of foreign cultures and with people from various levels of education background.

The data are part of the doctoral research project and were collected between November 2014 and November 2015. The study employed purposive sampling strategy. In order to participate, women had to meet the following criteria:

- Employed (regardless of hours and type of employment)
- Polish
- Have at least one child in primary school age or younger (under 12) in Ireland
- Live in Dublin or Dublin commuting belt area.

Interviewees were recruited through various access points, such as evening activities in Polish culture centers; Saturday schools; social media; Church; non-governmental organizations (including those that target the general migrant population and specifically the Polish community). About half of the sample was referrals of these seeds. Those women were typically referring to other friends and acquaintances as well as other working mothers who they know from schools and crèches.

The 23 respondents are between 26 and 42 years of age (median: 33) and most of them migrated between 2004 and 2008 to Ireland. 17 of the respondents have only one child; 6 have 2–3 children. The youngest children are between 1 and 10 years of age. All but two had a partner at the time of the interview. Two thirds of them have completed at least a BA while the others have at least upper secondary education. All women are (full-time) employed or self-employed

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