

Transnational Practices of Care. The Azorean Migration in Quebec (Canada)

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Abstract

The practices of caring at distance are more and more in the focus of the scholarly research on transnational migration. The existence of exchanges across frontiers shows that the intergenerational familial solidarity subsists in the context of transnational migration. How the intergenerational caring is reconfigured within the transnational families? How do the stages of the life course shape the transnational caregiving? These are the questions examined in our research on the Portuguese migration from the Azores archipelago to Canada, a yet under-documented phenomenon. Starting in the mid-1950s, the Portuguese migration flows directed to Canada reached a peak in the 1970s, continuing until nowadays at lower levels. Maintaining strong ties with their origin communities through multi-directional exchanges (visits, traditional feasts, etc.), as well as the return migration of the first generation registered in the last years, allow us to observe the transnational migration as a historical phenomenon that perpetuates over more than five decades. Organized mainly as a family-led migration, this phenomenon involves nowadays three generations of migrants who have multiple bonds and various relations to their origin country. Based on exploratory fieldwork conducted in 2009 in the Azores and Quebec (Canada), we examine the practices of caring at distance and the variations between generations and along the life course.

Key Words: Transnational families, caring, caregiving at distance, life course, Azores, Portuguese migration, Canada, intergenerational solidarity.

1. The context of the research: the Portuguese migration from the Azores to Quebec (Canada)

The practices of caring at distance, between migrants and their kin left behind in the origin country, are more and more in the focus of scholarly research lately¹. In this paper, we discuss how the intergenerational caring is organized in transnational families, based on a case study: the Portuguese migration from the Azores archipelago to Quebec (Canada)². The main questions we try to answer are: How do the stages of the life course shape the transnational caregiving? What is the impact of experiencing particular

family transitions on the exchanges taking place in transnational families? What changes are registered between generations?

In the Azores archipelago³, the migratory movements have been an important part of the region's culture and history and have been directed to Americas. The migratory route to Canada is the most recent and the migratory fluxes intensified since the mid-1950s, reaching a peak in the mid-1970, but continuing until nowadays. This massive emigration involved an important proportion of the Azorean population. Consequently, the majority of the Portuguese in Canada (60-70%) are of Azorean origin, as many sources point out⁴. The Portuguese are among the most numerous ethnic groups in Canada. For instance, in 2006, 151 740 immigrants of Portuguese origin (considering only the foreign born, permanent and non permanent residents) were registered, most of them in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. From the total, 21 590 Portuguese are established in the province of Quebec⁵.

In Canada, the immigration policies encouraged the recruitment of workforce for agriculture and railways construction during the 1950s. The Portuguese and the Canadian governments established agreements that facilitated the recruitment of unskilled workers from the Azores. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, changes of the immigration policy favoured the family reunion and the sponsorship of relatives. At the same time, in the Azores, the massive migration was motivated by the economic hardships and difficult living conditions in these islands – high density of population and unemployment rates⁶.

If the transoceanic migration is permanent for the majority of migrants, several authors highlighted that return as well as re-emigration occur and can be a project for some migrants⁷. For instance, Charbit, Hilly and Poinard describe the migratory system of the Portuguese in France as a back-and-forth movement between origin and immigration societies⁸. Therefore they stress that for the migrants of continental Portugal the return in their origin community is largely a part of the initial migratory project. On the contrary, for the Azoreans, migration seems to be permanent, characterized by the definitive settlement in the destination country⁹. Certainly, the geographic distance between the Azores and Canada and the access to transport explain this difference. In fact, return and re-emigration are also registered for Azorean migrants. The extent of this phenomenon is not yet elucidated, but a few researches analyzed its motivations and patterns. The return migration depends on the motivations to emigrate, the migratory paths, the success or the failure of the project¹⁰. The success to attain the objectives (mainly material) of emigration or the failure to do so can motivate the return¹¹. Melo collected life histories of returnees in the Azores that document three main patterns where return occurs: 1) in late life, after retirement and after accomplishing objectives (principally, material) set out

initially; 2) upon unexpected circumstances, contrary to the planned permanent migration to Canada, and 3) as reaction to negative experiences. Re-emigration can also be decided especially if the family has young children or children born in Canada¹². In his research on an Azorean village, Oliveira found that at the moment of emigration all immigrants planned to return when they would improve their economic situation. However, the majority never did so for various reasons: economic advantages in Canada, having children and family in Canada, disappointment and reject during their return visits in the Azores¹³. The return of first generation and sometimes second generation immigrants contributes to the geographic dispersion of families, as returnees preserve the ties with members of their families (children or kin) who live in Canada.

The immigrants also maintained important links with the communities left behind, returning on holidays, participating in traditional festivals of their native community, preserving their houses in their villages or building new ones. The existence and maintaining of such strong links between communities of origin and of immigration, noted in many studies¹⁴, indicate the presence of “transnational ties” that the Portuguese migrants developed over time, maintaining links with their homeland and nourishing the ideal to return.

The state of the art on the Portuguese migration in Canada points to a few observations: the importance of kinship networks in the migration process, the variety of exchanges (material, informational, social, cultural, etc.) taking place within these networks, the co-presence of three generations of immigrants, an important family and intergenerational solidarity, the transmission of cultural values and norms through the maintaining of strong family ties and the links with the origin community. However, the transnational perspective has never been used in the study of this community, although research conducted with life course approach or other theoretical approaches showed various practices involving migrants and non migrants, community of immigration and that of origin. The situation of the youth, second and third generations, in the Portuguese families in Canada, as well as their links with their non migrant counterparts are still undocumented. At the same time, little is known about the impact of return migration and re-emigration on the transnational ties and practices. Therefore, in our research, the analysis focuses both on the transnational links between migrants and non migrants and between the three generations, also considering their transformation along the life course.

2. The Caring in transnational families

The transnational perspective emphasizes the communities and networks across frontiers. Instead of considering migration as a unidirectional process and the migrants as uprooted, it conceives differently the relation

between origin and destination societies: mobility and insertion processes are not contradictory or exclusive, but complementary. The incorporation of migrants in the host society and the development of transnational practices can occur simultaneously, even reinforce mutually, and involve various life domains – economic, political, social, cultural, religious¹⁵. In the area of family, research showed the exchanges and support circulating within the kinship networks among members living in different countries. Analyzing the forms and gendered composition of transnational families demonstrated the role of women in maintaining familial ties at distance. Nevertheless, the perpetuation over time of transnational family networks and practices, as well as the factors influencing them are still under-researched¹⁶.

Although the exchanges in transnational families are multi-directional and the direction of help often reflects the stage of the migration process and of the life course, the current researches documented the transnational practices of caring on specific situations where the migrant is either the receiver or the giver. Some¹⁷ focus on the support offered by migrants to elderly kin left behind in the origin country, while others show the support received by the migrants from their families and relatives¹⁸. Another documented situation is that of the transnational parenthood, such as in the case of migrant women whose children and families remain in the origin country¹⁹.

Based on several case studies investigating the transnational caring, Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding developed a model that captures the complexity of factors influencing the exchanges and practices of caregiving in transnational families. The capacity to engage in caregiving at distance and to offer help (finance, access to technology, time, mobility), the cultural sense of obligation to care and provide for the needs of the others (perception of the need and duty), the negotiated family commitments and the characteristics of kinship relationships, underlie the transnational processes. If the support can circulate in multiple directions – from the migrant towards the family left behind and vice versa) or towards another location where family members live – the variations across life course stages and according to the gender have been rarely documented²⁰.

This body of research on the transnational caring often disregarded the current achievements in the study of family solidarities in contemporary societies in general. A vast literature elaborated in the last thirty years in North America and in Europe demonstrated the conservation and the transformation of family solidarity in contemporary societies²¹. In summary, the findings of these researches show that many forms of support and exchanges are present in the networks of kin: material goods and financial aid, services, such as caregiving, lodging, or domestic help, as well as emotional, informational and relational support²². The direction of the support, the positions of receiver and giver, can vary from one life stage to

another and are particularly mobilized during important life transitions, such as marriage, birth of a child, serious illness. Solidarities operate primarily on the principle of the need and are particularly activated when a family member experiences difficulties. Other norms also shape the supportive practices – affinity, selectivity, obligation and mutual help, respect of the autonomy and individual liberty.

Moreover, the geographic proximity influences the availability and intensity of different forms of support and exchange. Characteristics such as gratuity, reciprocity, polyvalence, personalization in regard to the needs and resources available, accessibility are specific for the practices of family solidarity. The demographic structure of the family, the social environment, the norms and values shared by its members, the circumstances experienced at a particular moment also influence the practices of support. For instance, the services exchanged within families are related to changes in the family cycle; the occurrence of family events activating or suppressing certain types of help²³. These are also key elements in understanding the transnational ties, where the geographic distance does not stop the practices of caring, but influence their availability and intensity. Some forms of help such as information and advice can be offered at distance, while others, like caregiving, cannot or require specific arrangements.

Although these factors have been partially documented in various contexts, their specific impact and their interplay need to be documented extensively furthermore. Therefore, we consider important to analyze the family processes undertaken in a transnational context within a perspective that account for multiple exchanges between migrants and non migrants, between generations and their transformation over the life course. In order to do so, in our research, the transnational perspective is conjugated with the life course approach which offers a comprehensive model of analyzing social and family behaviour and generational change in order to understand the individual development, in regard to multiple temporalities: the social time (generation, social roles), the historical time (period and social contexts) and the individual time (biography)²⁴. The analysis focuses on the family trajectory and transitions, and their interplay with the migration paths and processes associated with. A socio-anthropologic, qualitative methodology focused on the actors' point of view is employed. Participant observations and biographic interviews are conducted in order to document the multiple relations established between the actors involved in the migration processes.

3. The impact of family transitions on transnational caregiving. Results from an exploratory fieldwork

Multi-sited exploratory fieldwork was carried out in both sending (the Azores) and receiving countries (Quebec, Canada) in 2009, in order to test the methodology and explore the particular context at study. Participant

observations were conducted in the Azores, during the summer, in various social contexts that gather migrants and non migrants, such as local traditional festivals, religious rituals or social gatherings. Similar circumstances and observation sites were also identified in Quebec. At the same time, biographic interviews investigating real-life experiences were conducted with members of two or three generations of extended families living in the Azores and in Quebec. Respondents, aged over 18, were migrants, returnees and non migrants, women and men of the same generation. The interviews focus on the family transitions (birth, marriage, divorce, etc.), transitions related to health (illness) and migration-related processes, at various life stages. Preliminary results of this fieldwork are discussed further. Firstly, the various types of support and exchanges are identified. Secondly, the impact of family transitions and life course stages on the transnational practices is analyzed.

Many types of exchanges are observed; they are multi-directional and involve migrants and non migrant actors. We regrouped them in four categories.

Visits and hospitality. After settling in Canada, many migrants reported regular or occasional return visits in their origin country, especially during summer holidays. They are received by their relatives who offer them lodging, traditional meals, accompany them for visits around the island. Many also participate to local traditional festivals²⁵ that take place during all the summer, since May to September, in all the villages of the islands. Reciprocally, non migrant relatives benefit of the same kind of hospitality when visiting members of their families in Canada.

Material exchanges. During the visits, but also on various other occasions, migrants and non migrants exchange various goods, clothing, furniture, domestic equipment and money as gifts on their reuniting visits or at the moment of traditional holidays (like Christmas or the ritual feasts). If the direction of these material exchanges is mainly from migrants towards non migrants, the reverse can also be observed as relatives in the origin country can offer traditional products as gifts.

Information. Migrants transmit various information about the immigration country, living conditions, opportunities, lifestyle, immigration procedures, by different means: letters, phone calls or during the visits. This kind of exchanges played an important role for inciting the massive migration waves during the late 1960s and mid-1970s, helping migrants' relatives to complete immigration procedures, to settle in Canada, to find a job and a lodging, as other studies also underlined it. For instance, Anderson showed that the first established immigrants in Canada formed "networks of contacts" that helped extended families to immigrate through the sponsorship of relatives and facilitated their socio-professional insertion²⁶. Nowadays, these

exchanges are facilitated by the access to Internet and available air transport²⁷.

Emotional help and caregiving. At various life moments, members of conjugal or extended families are mobilized to offer other types of support, such as domestic help, baby-sitting, or care during illness of a relative. This kind of exchange can occur among migrant relatives in Canada, but non migrants can also be occasionally involved, especially women, for specific domestic help, like in case of families with young children.

The exploratory work conducted to date showed all these types of exchanges that involve all three generations of immigrants and their non migrant counterparts. These particular practices intensify during important life transitions. For instance, normative transitions²⁸ such as marriage or birth of a child are associated with specific familial rituals that gather members of the family network split between host and home societies. All non migrant respondents reported such an important family event as an occasion to visit their migrant relatives in Canada. For instance, Leonor²⁹, a 27 year old Azorean, planned to visit her cousin and a childhood friend, established in Quebec a few years ago, upon her first child's birth. Another young non migrant respondent, Mafalda (30 years), visited her relatives established in Quebec to be god-mother at the wedding of a cousin. Family's gatherings on these occasions represent an opportunity for non migrants to meet their migrant relatives and to visit Canada. For instance, Mafalda was accompanied by her brother and a cousin, during her visit in Canada. These planned visits can entail other arrangements, involving members of the family in Azores (especially women) who take over the familial responsibilities, like those related to child care. The regular contact between kin living in the two societies is maintained over time through various ways (internet, mail, phone calls), either directly or indirectly. The position in the family and the relationship with the migrant relatives prior to migration influence the way these contacts are established: direct with close kin, friends and members of the same generation in the family, and indirect, mediated through elder family members, with the extended family.

Migration and non normative transitions, such as a serious illness or a separation, bring about other exchanges between kin living in the two societies, as the story of Marie illustrates. In the 1950s, Marie's grand-father immigrated through the recruitment of workforce program and established in Quebec. He formed a network of relations that helped all his kin to emigrate in Canada. As he worked in a lucrative services sector, his economic situation improved rapidly and therefore could sponsor firstly his wife and three children and then successively all his relatives from the Azores. The couple settled in Quebec and offered for more than three decades various forms of help to their relatives who emigrated in Canada: hosting them on their arrival, helping them to find work and housing, offering advice about social and

professional insertion strategies. Their own house became the place of family gatherings on important occasions (marriages, baptisms, Christmas etc.). Meanwhile, they maintained regular links with their origin community, returning on summer holidays, and conserving their familial house and land properties in their origin village. Later in life, when Marie's grand-parents faced serious illness and consequently the loss of autonomy, the whole family mobilized to offer them caring, visiting them weekly, hosting them temporarily, taking over the housekeeping, preparing traditional meals, etc. The family solidarity practices are transformed over the life course according to the norms of reciprocity and need. As a young adult family, the grand-parents couple offered material and informational support to their family, while in late life they became receivers of the support and care offered by their kin. The caregiving, instrumental help and decision-making engage the second generation of migrants, at adult stage of their life course, while the third generation offers mostly emotional support to the older generation. Like Marie explained, the family dynamics incited by the illness of her grand-parents contributed to strengthen her relationship with her father and stimulated her interest in the Portuguese heritage, to learn the Portuguese language, to participate in social and cultural activities of the community, to visit the Azores during her summer holidays and planning on returning occasionally in the future. In Marie's narratives, it appears that the transmission of the Portuguese traditions, norms and values occurred through various loose ways occasioned by the interaction with her grand-parents and various practices and activities: a close relation to land and plants, celebration of traditional feasts, social gatherings with sharing of traditional meals, the catholic religious practice and a traditional conception regarding gender roles. These practices reinforced her familiarity with the Portuguese culture "that she has always knew since her childhood". For Marie, who is a third generation of immigrants in Canada, these intergenerational exchanges contributed to forge multiple identities and affiliations and strengthen the family solidarity, as she feels "firstly a Canadian and secondly a Portuguese".

At the same time, non migrant respondents also explained that the exchanges with the migrant relatives shaped their perceptions about life conditions, work, life styles and the opportunities in these two societies, somehow on opposite images, Azores as a society with limited opportunities and difficult living conditions, while Canada as an open society, where many opportunities regarding professional life and material success allow youth to achieve well being and autonomy rapidly and easily. Therefore, we stress that the transnational links involving migrant and non migrant actors juxtapose the intergenerational exchanges in order to create a complex familial dynamics that explains the transmission of practices and norms related to caring, without excluding their transformation over time.

4. Conclusive remarks

These preliminary observations resulting from our exploratory fieldwork suggest that the exchanges within extended families split between origin and host societies are perpetuated over time and from one generation to another. The impact of life stage and life transitions on the practices of solidarity appears to be important and the caregiving depends greatly on the needs experienced by members of the family, as researches on family solidarity in general showed³⁰. The different forms of support vary equally between generations and according to the position in the family. Caregiving and instrumental or material help are particularly noted for the first and second generations of migrants and their non migrant counterparts, while emotional help often involves the third generation.

Emotional and even material help offered by the families left behind to migrants have been noted in various studies, at important life moments like conjugal separation or birth of a child³¹. We stress, though, that these informal exchanges and practices offering mutual help registered in the case of Azorean migrants in Canada express a form of “transnationalism from below”, developed in the domestic sphere, that juxtapose other forms of transnational ties, through formal organizations³². These practices can contribute to the incorporation of migrants in the host society, offering resources to cope with the difficulties experienced. Such observations point to the pertinence to pursue further research with a transnational and cosmopolitan approach focused on migration processes and social relations (instead of culture, identity and integration) because incorporation both within a nation-state and transnationally can occur simultaneously³³.

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Notes

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2005.

² This is an ongoing project. Exploratory fieldwork was conducted in 2009 in the Azores and Quebec (Canada).

³ The Azores is a Portuguese archipelago, of nine islands, situated in the Atlantic Ocean. It is an autonomous region of Portugal, having its own local government and administrative structures. Farming and fishing are the main industries of the Azorean economy. The population is about 240 000 and the archipelago's surface totalises around 868 square miles

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⁵ Special compilation from the Census 2006, Statistics Canada.

⁶ Melo, *op.cit.*; Teixeira& daRosa, *op.cit.*; Chapin, *op.cit.*

⁷ E. A. Noivo, *Inside Ethnic Families: Three Generations of Portuguese-Canadians*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1997; Brettell, *op.cit.*; Chapin, *op.cit.*; O.H.R Medeiros, and A. B. Madeira, "Emigração E Regresso: Os Casos Dos Concelhos Do Nordeste E Da Povoação (S. Miguel Açores)." *Portuguese Studies Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2004, pp. 205-32.

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¹⁰ Medeiros and Madeira, *op. cit.*; Melo, *op.cit.*

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¹² Melo, *op.cit.*

¹³ M. A. Oliveira, "Immigrants Forever? The Migratory Saga of Azoreans in Canada." In *The Portuguese in Canada: From the Sea to the City*, edited by C. Teixeira and V. da Rosa, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2000.

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¹⁹ Parreñas, *op.cit.*

²⁰ Baldassar et al., *op.cit.*

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²⁴ G. H. Elder, M. K. Johnson, and R. Crosnoe, "The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory", in *Handbook of Life Course*, edited by J.T Mortimer and M. J. Shanahan, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Springer, New York, 2004, pp.3-22.

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²⁶ Anderson, *op.cit.*

²⁷ For instance, the local air company of the Azores, SATA International, has weekly direct flights to the Azores from the main American and Canadian cities where most Portuguese are settled (e.g. Boston, Toronto).

²⁸ Definition of normative / non normative transitions in P. A. Cowan and E. M. Hetherington, *Family Transitions*. Edited by Family Research Consortium. Summer Institut, Advances in Family Research Series, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, 1991.

²⁹ All names are fictive.

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