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Burden, blessing or both? On the mixed role of transnational ties in migrant informal social support

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Abstract
This article revisits migrants' informal social support by exploring their exchanges of material and immaterial resources with the family members left behind. The latter are typically constructed as net beneficiaries of migrants' struggles for a livelihood abroad, and even as a potential constraint on their self-realization. Building on a qualitative study of Ecuadorian domestic workers in Italy, the author explores – instead – whether left-behind kin are also, potentially, a source of social support for them. In fact, transnational family relationships can facilitate the circulation of welfare relevant resources from both sides. While migrants are expected to transnationally share the benefits of better life conditions abroad, 'what' they left behind contributes to their personal wellbeing in three respects: reverse remittances, emotional support and the provision of a locus for cultivating nostalgia, attachment and social status. The mixed influence of home-related family ties and obligations is assessed against the backdrop of migrants' life course and patterns of integration. Overall, their interdependence with left-behinds is a source of benefits, and costs, which should not go unnoticed.

Keywords
Care, domestic work, Ecuadorian migrants, Italy, reverse remittances, social support, transnational families

Introduction

Migrants' relationships with their family members left behind have been increasingly investigated in the light of the 'financial, emotional, moral and practical' care that substantiates and reproduces them (Baldassar et al., 2007: 6). Their transnational exchange of care resources is generally understood as a two-way, negotiated and implicitly asymmetrical process – one embedded in family regimes of solidarity and mutuality, themselves open to change over time. Yet, the consequences for those left behind have been discussed in far more depth than the other side of the coin: the ways in which migrants' life experience is affected by what non-migrant kin demand and expect, but also (potentially) provide and guarantee. Relatively neglected is the interaction between migrants' home-bound commitments and obligations, and their own life conditions, opportunities and needs. How does migrants' transnational engagement affect, for better or worse, their everyday lives abroad? And what if left-behinds are also framed as a potential source of social support for migrants themselves? In which respects, and under what circumstances, is this the case?

Building on an archive of life histories of domestic workers in Italy, this article explores the forms of instrumental, emotional and symbolic support that migrants may *receive* from, as well as provide to, their family members left behind: the set of nonmigrant social actors, delimited by intergenerational, kin and couple ties, who constitute migrants' 'transnational domestic sphere' (Gardner and Grillo, 2002). Non-migrant family members tend to occupy a comparatively disadvantaged position, and to be framed as potential beneficiaries of migrants' search for better life conditions abroad. However, as an emerging perspective suggests, the relationship between migrants and left-behinds is more complex than a one-sided transfer of resources – or indeed, a gradual detachment and a loss of mutual commitment. Over the last few years, the notion of reverse remittances has gained some currency as a byword for the influence exercised from the leftbehind side (Mazzucato, 2011). While using this category, I argue that it deserves further elaboration. The emerging debates on transnational social support (Chambon et al., 2011), as well as on transnational families and care circulation (Baldassar and Merla, 2013) can be helpfully revisited through this lens.

Not surprisingly, my analysis of migrants' narratives shows that the cross-border circulation of social resources from home- to host-lands is far more intermittent and fragmented than in the opposite direction. It affects migrants' emotional and social wellbeing rather than the material bases of their livelihood. In strict terms of welfare provision, 'what' migrants receive from home societies matters less than the structure of opportunities available abroad, or the gendered support they provide to stay-behinds (in the short term at least). Migrants' livelihood overseas is primarily dependent on labour market participation; likewise, their overexposure to vulnerability is critically associated to an often limited access to the welfare provision of *receiving* societies. Therefore, a focus on the transnational dimension of migrants' social support does *not* deny the centrality – for better or worse – of their entitlements and access to the welfare mainstream provision abroad (Morissens and Sainsbury, 2005).

That said, delving into the multifaceted influence of left-behind kin is critical to understanding the interface between migrants' transnational engagement and their own living conditions. It is also necessary for enhancing the connection between the transnational family debate (e.g. Dreby and Adkins, 2010; Madianou and Miller, 2012) and the migration and care literature (e.g. Yeates, 2011): two research areas that tend to be unnecessarily separated from each other, as a result of the disciplinary divide between family and social policy studies. A conceptual bridge can be provided by the notion of (transnational) social support, which covers both instrumental and affective forms of help and concern between movers and stayers, as mutually constituted and enacted through their interpersonal ties (cf. Amelina et al., 2012). After a theoretical section and a methodological one, I explore the twofold impingements of transnational ties – on the wellbeing of left-behinds and of migrants themselves – building on the narratives of 46 Ecuadorian immigrants employed as domestic workers in Italy.

Migrants' interdependence with left-behind kin, revisited

International migration is in many ways a challenge to the established boundaries of social welfare in the countries of destination (Schierup et al., 2006). Less visibly, at a micro level, it destabilizes the informal, family-based practices of care and support of those involved. As far as family relations are concerned, an extended physical separation is likely to affect the availability and distribution of resources for mutual care, assumed as a marker – although a far from obvious or generalized one – of 'sedentary' family life. Borrowing from Finch's classification of 'proximal families', as revisited by Baldassar et al. (2007), caregiving activities can be grouped into five categories – financial, practical, personal, accommodation and emotional support. Some of these can be effectively enacted from afar, as my research material also indicates. Others, such as hands-on care and accommodation support, are hard to be conceived unless in physical co-presence. In essence, then, both migrants and left-behind kin find their networks of mutual support (and control) to be weaker and more costly to activate over time.

As much ethnographic work has shown, long-term family separation is potentially a source of distress for leavers and stayers alike – whether in an emotional and affective domain, or in terms of everyday social reproduction (Parrenas, 2005; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). Among other factors, the impossibility of reproducing hands-on care practices between movers and stayers may enhance their vulnerability, creating new needs for institutional social support on both sides (Kongeter and Gringrich, 2013). Such needs, however, are unlikely to be grasped from within the 'sedentarist' perspective of national welfare arrangements (Righard, 2008). The latter may contribute to migrants' social protection *within* receiving societies. Yet, they generally fail to encompass the possible downsides of the affective, moral and economic interdependence *between* migrants and left-behinds (Boccagni, 2014; Chambon et al., 2011).

The gap between transnationally induced needs for social support and the institutional welfare provision of receiving (or for that matter, sending) countries need not mean that these social needs are unmet. Transnational migration itself is as much a challenge to pre-existing family balances, as a way of accruing greater resources to sustain them – and potentially, to set the basis for better future life conditions. How physical separation can be compensated by mutual attachment, and how distance between migrants and nonmigrants can be negotiated through their ways of 'doing family', are the central questions in the literature on transnational family life (Baldassar and Merla, 2013; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). As a burgeoning number of case studies has illustrated, migrant family-based affections and obligations *are* materially and symbolically reproduced from

afar, in ways that vary with migrant life course and specific circumstances, within the constraints of globally spanning 'care chains' (Hochschild, 2000). This is primarily the case along the axis of intergenerational relationships, although in often deeply gendered ways (Carling et al., 2012; Dreby and Adkins, 2010).

The literature on family-based migration and care,[1] therefore, offers a good terrain for appreciating the potentials and limitations of cross-border social support. Migrants' caring practices are a remarkable example of transnational social protection from below – a process which primarily builds on remittances, and only on limited political and juridical infrastructures (Faist, 2013). Central to this field of practices, though, is a framing of the migrant–left-behind nexus along lines of one-sided dependency – an ironical outcome, as the emphasis on the role of 'left-behinds' has been a hallmark of the transnational perspective, from the seminal work of Basch et al. (1994) onwards. The fact remains that non-migrants' contribution to transnational social protection has been relatively neglected and under-conceptualized so far.

No doubt, transnational family relationships are marked by power asymmetries between leavers and stayers, notably in terms of access, potential at least, to material resources and life opportunities. Nonetheless, an understanding of migrants as net providers would be short-sighted. As I show in this article, migrants' own narratives about their transnational relationships point to a more nuanced and complex picture.

Once the focus is on the affective and moral interdependence between movers and stayers, in forms that vary along their life course trajectories, transnational social support can be appreciated as a fundamentally bidirectional process. It is through this lens that I revisit the biographical accounts of almost 50 Ecuadorian domestic workers in Italy. As this data archive suggests, non-migrant kin 'deserve' to be also understood as a social resource – not only a source of costs and obligations – for migrants' everyday lives abroad.

The backstage of domestic work: An archive of in-depth interviews of immigrant domestic workers in Italy

This article draws on an original archive of in-depth interviews of immigrant domestic workers in Italy, collected between 2005 and 2008 within the PRIN project *Nazionalità, genere e classe nel nuovo lavoro domestico* ['Nationality, gender and class in new domestic work'] (Catanzaro and Colombo, 2009).[2] Within this rich dataset, which includes almost 700 narratives of migrants from more than 50 countries, I focused on a sub-set of 46 semi-structured interviews with Ecuadorians. To give some basic details, women comprised about 85% of these interviewees, and about 80% of the total had been interviewed in Genoa and Milan – the two primary 'poles of attraction' for Ecuadorian immigration to Italy (ISTAT, 2012). Half of the respondents were employed in a live-in arrangement, with an average length of stay in the country of seven years. Three out of four interviewees had one or more dependent child left behind in Ecuador, whereas about 20% had reunited with at least one of their children in the country of destination. The age of most respondents was between 30 and 40 years.

Overall, such an immigrant profile would seem unfavourable to a 'strong' transnational engagement. Apart from being stretched across a large distance, the Ecuador–Europe migration system is relatively unstructured, marked by a disadvantaged 'civic stratification' (compared with intra-EU migration), and little conducive to circular mobility. There is no denying, in principle, the influence of an extended geographical detachment on the enactment of in-kind care and, to a variable extent, on care provision overall (Baldassar et al., 2007). At the same time, the relatively limited length of stay of Ecuadorians in Italy, hence the short time-span of their detachment from home, likely results in migrant family members experiencing a strong need for mutual support. This particularly holds in cases of female-led migration, such as the one at stake here.

The choice of this immigrant profile was influenced by my particular interest in the Ecuadorian case, given my past ethnographic fieldwork on Ecuadorians in Italy and on their cross-border family ties (Boccagni, 2013). Thanks to my previous research, and despite the limitations inherent in the data, I had enough background knowledge and contextual understanding to be able to interpret the narratives and to comprehend the references to their backgrounds in Ecuador. The themes and subtexts in the interview narratives were familiar to me, as were the interviewees' prevalent self-representations, use of idiomatic expressions, implicit references to the homeland, and so forth.

As a result, the interview material I selected provided a good deal of 'thick description',

first, on how migrants construct and (reportedly) utilize their transnational ties and contacts; second, on the consequences of such connections on *their* social conditions and needs. It goes without saying that the data stemming from this archive are not statistically representative – the broader survey itself could hardly have aimed at that. All the accounts generated through the interviews reflect the specific mind sets and orientations of each narrator. Although the interview schedule had been carefully structured in advance, all responses were contextually mediated by migrants' selective and subjective reflections about their past lives. Likewise, these narratives were affected by respondents' distinct attitudes and moods, and by their variable capability to report their life experiences and elaborate on them.

Even so, this source has generated valuable insights on the subjective constructions of migrants' transnational engagement. By investigating their views of left-behinds' potential 'contribution', I map the mixed ways in which transnational family ties affect immigrants, against the background of their employment in domestic work – a labour market niche with particularly strong ethnic and gender segregation, in Italy or elsewhere (Ambrosini, 2013; Lutz, 2011).

The bright side of the moon: Transnational ties as a oneway, homebound channel of social support

Migrants can, and often do provide help to their family members (and broader communities) back home in a range of ways. Of primary significance are obviously their monetary transfers. At an aggregate level, the weight of remittances in the social protection of the recipient households – and often in maintaining them above the poverty line – is well established (De Haas, 2007; World Bank, 2011). More contentious and case-specific is the influence of remittances on the structural patterns of social inequality in home societies, or their capacity to foster social development processes in the medium to long term (Hall, 2007). In the narratives of the Ecuadorian domestic workers, which invariably touch on the point, sending remittances to non-migrant kin is constructed as a way of respecting the 'natural order of things': something migrants feel as a duty, regardless of their real remitting practices. In fact, as I will show, such practices are strongly, if tacitly, embedded in a pervasive expectation of reciprocity.

That said, migrants' contribution to the social protection of stay-at-homes need not be a matter of money alone – though it tends to be portrayed as such in the more stigmatizing social representations of emigration (see e.g., for Ecuador, Boccagni, 2014). This is not only because, importantly, their money transfers are imbued with symbolic and emotional meanings, embedded as they are in unwritten regimes of shared moral economies (McKay, 2012). As a matter of fact, financial remittances are (over)burdened with meanings and expectations, as they should make for 'a substitute for physical intimacy' (Krzyżowski and Mucha, 2014: 33). As importantly, and besides all transnational caregiving practices, migrants can also be a source of loans, information and contacts, not necessarily disinterested, to other prospective leavers. 'I've brought someone here' – generally a family member – was the typical reply of the Ecuadorian domestic workers when asked if they had ever helped anybody. Their potential and limitations as transnational help providers deserve further reflection to appreciate, first, the consequences of this cross-border engagement on migrants' own social conditions; and second, the range of ways in which non-migrants do reciprocate and affect the life prospects of those who left.

Remittances and transnational care in practice: 'Stratified reciprocity' and the need for interpersonal mediation

Migrants' responsibilities towards their family members at home are often difficult, or awkward, to be formally defined or agreed upon. They are driven by a clear and purposeful logic, though, in terms of social distribution (of senders and recipients), rationale and (expected) effects. Judging from my narrative material on Ecuadorian domestic workers in Italy, a 'hierarchy of obligations' (Finch and Mason, 1990) – or a 'moral economy of social belonging' (Hage, 2002) – can generally be traced at the roots of transnational family life (Baldassar et al., 2007). This privileges dependent children, then partners (if any) and elderly parents (especially as long as the latter are responsible for the former). All other kin tend to have lesser salience. A stratified field of obligations also underlies their much less frequent remittances for community purposes, on an individual or a collective basis (Boccagni, 2013; Goldring, 2004). Public initiatives such as celebrations, festivities, infrastructural projects and the like catalyse migrants' mixed attitudes to

home: nostalgia and belonging, along with the reassertion of a distinctive social status of their own. As the interviews I analysed indicate, a division of responsibilities can also be traced among members of the same family network abroad, whereby migrants with fewer dependants abroad are assumed to have greater obligations to provide, on a periodic basis at least, for those still in Ecuador.[3]

A still different matter is on what kind of support, and under what conditions, recipient kin can rely. Migrants' money, whatever the efforts made to save it (and then to complement it with phone and other forms of contact from a distance), cannot 'act by itself'. Especially as relationships with dependent or frail persons are at stake, the mediation of other left-behinds is fundamental. Even in the best of the cases, a division of labour emerges whereby migrants – such as the Ecuadorian woman in the following quote – enact their kin-addressed obligations in basically economic terms. At the end of the day they sponsor other persons, family members or not, and enable them to provide hands-on care. While a migrant like M. frames her long-distance contribution as 'assistance', somebody else has physically replaced her in doing so, in practical terms. In a way, then, M.'s absence necessarily expands the scope for 'commodifying' the everyday assistance to her dependent sister, as a care chain approach would maintain. At the same time, M.'s economic support would make little sense and would hardly be retained, if it were not underpinned by a persistent moral and affective commitment towards a close family member.

Do you have any relatives left behind … that are in need of care? Does anybody have to assist them?
Well, my family members … if you mean 'assistance', I mean, we have always assisted my sister – she's sick. It is we ourselves who – we still …
So you too – you used to take care of her, before –
Yes.
And now, who takes care of her?
Now my elder sister does, as my mother too is here now – it is only she who takes care of her, 'cos she has a small child too and – it is she who takes care of my sister. And we take care of her, economically speaking.
(M., 34 years old, in Italy for 5 years)

Whether they send remittances for care or for any other purpose, migrants have a typically limited control on the ways in which 'their' money is spent (Carling, 2006). Furthermore, they would be unable to turn remittances into in-kind care and other forms of social support without the mediation of some trustworthy (or supposedly so) nonmigrant. I return to this point below.

Importantly, as my case study suggests, individual remittances for household livelihoods tend to become less frequent over time, as family reunification proceeds. Their frequency and intensity vary remarkably along migrants' life course – as is typically the case for migrants' family obligations (Krzyżowski and Mucha, 2014) and for their transnational engagement more broadly (Ambrosini, 2014; Kobayashi and Preston, 2007). Yet, the decreasing trend of remittances has many exceptions and is far from irreversible. Within a given family (or neighbourhood) network, emergencies may always occur – e.g. a sudden disease or the loss of employment – which migrants are expected to address somehow through their money.[4] Following again Baldassar et al. (2007), therefore, the difference between routine (or ritual) and crisis-related care practices should be kept in mind, as much as their mutual interdependence. In fact, a widespread and deep-rooted household strategy of informal social insurance is tacitly at work here, as emphasized by the New Economics of Labour Migration approach (Stark and Bloom, 1985).

Once migrants' cross-border ties are appreciated within the regimes of reciprocity that underpin them, therefore, they turn out to be a mixed phenomenon. As long as such ties maintain their strength, expectations and obligations of transnational support – to be fulfilled or not – are likely to persist among family members and even beyond. No matter their actual achievements abroad, migrants are likely to be framed anyway as potential providers, even more so when it comes to emigrant women. The gendered scripts to which the latter are traditionally subject, in countries such as Ecuador, are unlikely to lose salience in the short time-span of their absence from home.

A good case in point is offered by the bitter remarks of A., a lone mother with six brothers in Ecuador. After explaining that she tries 'in every possible way to stay in touch with them, to see how they are doing, or if they need something – because they always

need something, and I try to help them somehow', A. marks a clear, if thorny line between her caring attitudes and the material help she provides:

> My family or my friends too – every time they ask me for some economic help, I tell them: 'I can't, maybe you just don't realize that I've got my children [here], I'm alone, I don't have a husband that shares his wage with me. Life is difficult, I must make ends meet with the money I earn'. That's, I mean, a big suffering.
> (A., 33 years old, in Italy for 5 years)

On the paradox of being those who can afford to help the rest

As the above quote suggests, transnational ties may convey further pressure on immigrants' livelihood arrangements. The moral and affective obligations they channel are often turned into claims, regardless of migrants' typically low wages or of the dependants they may have abroad. In principle, those who left have obviously the last word – they can withhold their support and loosen or sever these ties. Such an option is not without costs, though, especially as long as migrants frame their communities of origin as 'home' and cultivate an expectation to return there. The fact remains that, ironically, cross-border ties can even compound migrants' vulnerability – hence, indirectly, their need for support – abroad. That their overexposure to transnational family obligations is also a source of additional social exclusion from the receiving society, particularly under the current recession, is a surprisingly under-investigated issue (among the exceptions, see Krzyżowski and Mucha, 2014).

An awareness of being systematically pictured by non-migrants as a potential source of support, or even as the goose with the golden eggs, is abundantly clear throughout the domestic workers' narratives I selected. Some anecdotal evidence from my fieldwork with Ecuadorian migrants in Italy, related to a questionnaire survey with a number of them, is also helpful here.[5] As I tried to investigate their perceived sources of potential help, I was typically faced with very cautious or evasive answers. Such answers would turn even more sceptical and disenchanted, however, if I hazarded a reference to their homeland as a 'source of help' for their livelihood abroad. 'It is we who [have to] help them – not the other way round!', was typically their final exclamation.

Yet – is this the whole story? In a sense, as far as material welfare provision is concerned, it is likely to be so. In another sense, on a closer look, it need not be. I now try to provide some theoretical glimpses on the backward, less visible 'dark side of the moon' – namely, the opposite direction of the migrant–left-behind nexus, as a category critical to the broader migration–social support nexus.

Non-migrants' contribution revisited: (Also) a source of social support?

How, and under what conditions, do transnational ties work also as a corridor for migrants to be supported from afar? Based on my interview content analysis, I have outlined three heuristic categories to map left-behind kin's supportive potential. Along a continuum between short- and long-term biographical prospects, the categories are as follows: (1) *Reverse remittances*, as empirically observable cross-border transactions that are started from the left-behind side; (2) *Emotional support*, as a shared (but not necessarily conflict-free) way of feeling which underpins transnational practices of family-doing and family-displaying; (3) *Future-oriented embeddedness*, as the marker of a long-term 'home attractiveness' that may span beyond the boundaries of transnational family life. In all of these respects, the relationships migrants negotiate with left-behinds affect their life prospects overseas in many ways – even more so if they have an expectation (to be fulfilled or not) to return home.

Reverse remittances: Being helped (in taking care of 'what' was left behind)

This emerging category, which is still remarkably under-theorized, stands for all the 'flows of goods, money, and especially services from countries in the Global South to migrants' (Mazzucato, 2011: 454). Reverse remittances undermine the construction of home societies as a passive receptacle for migrants' cash transfers and investments. Whatever migrants *remit*, they can simultaneously *extract* a variety of resources from their communities of origin, in and out of the family realm: better education for their children (if still there), cheaper health care (even for themselves), consumption products, and so forth.

To the extent that reverse remittances are mentioned in the literature, this is almost exclusively in terms of reverse money flows – from home communities to emigrants. Such flows are especially likely under hard economic circumstances, as the recent crisis has widely shown (Mohapatra and Ratha, 2010). They are unlikely, however, to be much more than a remedial, emergency option (Skeldon, 2010). Far more often, reverse remittances do matter in the early stages of the migration process: regardless of their contacts overseas, would-be migrants may well rely on a range of (more or less speculative) lenders at home, including their family members. Another relatively widespread example is represented by educational migration, whereby immigrants-as-students keep being maintained by their parents in the home societies (e.g. Singh and Cabraal, 2013). In each of these instances, migrants turn into net recipients of the monies sent from home, rather than vice versa.

If reverse remittances are understood in a broader sense, however, they involve much more than an inversion of monetary flows (which is comparatively rare – and downright absent, apart from 'start-up' cash transfers, in the narratives of these Ecuadorian domestic workers). The point is that, whatever migrants' transnational feeling of dual belonging, the structural reach of their social actions from a distance is inherently limited. Most of their home-related projects, interests and concerns cannot be carried out without a degree of collaboration – and sometimes a very active involvement – of those who stayed there. Hence, in-kind services provided in their local contexts of origin are probably the most significant and neglected form of reverse remittance; indeed, one difficult to appreciate unless a transnational lens is assumed. And at least in some respects, such as the everyday support to (and social reproduction of) left-behind elderly and youth, reverse remittances are a clearly gendered issue. Migrant women are more often dependent on them, and non-migrant women are more often expected to provide them, as my qualitative material suggests.

The day-to-day hands-on care provided to migrants' children left behind (including those of several of the domestic workers analysed here) is a major demonstration of how movers depend on non-movers. This primarily involves grandparents and other members of their extended family networks, whose contribution has been relatively neglected in the literature (with exceptions such as Bastia, 2009; Lutz and Palenga, 2012; Pantea, 2012). While this delegation of care does not directly affect migrants' life conditions abroad, it does enable them to negotiate such conditions with some degree of autonomy and security. Yet, their reliance on deputy caregivers – be they even kin – raises a variety of dilemmas both in the relationships with them and with the children themselves. Of relevance, here, are issues such as discipline and control, emotional proximity, loss of meaningful communication, guilt and victimization, and so forth (Bonizzoni and Boccagni, 2013; Dreby, 2010). In all of these regards, migrants' potential to steer transnational relationships is obviously affected by the assets they have accumulated abroad – including their individual and family position in the 'civic stratification' of the receiving country (Bonizzoni, 2011).

Impossibility to control, and a strong need for mutual trust, also inform movers' relationships with those non-movers who, among other things, look after their new or refurbished houses (or are paid to build them); manage their micro-entrepreneurial activities; or watch over (or again, work in) the plots of lands that are another typical investment of the monies gained overseas. Generally speaking, all these forms of non-migrants' contribution do not directly affect migrant structure of opportunities overseas.[6] They are critical, however, to the social reproduction of their family members left behind, to the maintenance of their properties and, consequentially, of their social status in the homeland, and of their life projects that still involve it. It is not only for mutual affection and obligations, but also for very pragmatic needs and interests that most first-generation migrants have 'a paramount concern' in 'maintaining good relations with those at home' (McKay, 2012: 107).

Apart from all the tangible outputs, reverse remittances enable migrants to systematically cultivate a second-best option. They should act like a proof that their homeward bound identifications and affective projections still have solid grounds. Given these premises, a case can be made for reverse remittances to be also a source of social and emotional support for migrants themselves.

As most of the interviews I analysed suggest, however, left-behind kin's support is far from granted. It presupposes some success in the molecular processes of 'kin-work' (Di Leonardo, 1987) whereby intra-family ties are mutually delimited, cultivated and displayed (Finch, 2007). This emotional and relational work is particularly delicate and time-consuming whenever the boundaries of a family are stretched over a large distance (Baldassar, 2007). What typically occurs is an evolving negotiation between the parties

at stake, concerning their respective expectations and obligations.
Furthermore, reverse remittances should arguably be appreciated, no less than 'ordinary' remittances, as an unequal and socially stratified asset. Not all left-behind kin share the same interest or capability in sending them. Just like other remitting behaviours, reverse remittances should be understood in the light of their underlying social and economic stratification. They are strongly dependent on the cohesion of family networks and on the distribution of several forms of 'capital' among non-migrants – not to mention the idiosyncratic quality of their relationships with those who left. Although such arrangements are invisible from the viewpoint of receiving societies, they do result in a differential endowment of 'personalized' social resources accessible to every migrant.
Having spoken of reverse remittances as a transfer of tangible resources (or anyway as indirect material help), my interview analysis points also to other forms of substantive, if less easily detectable contribution from the left-behind side. This deserves further elaboration now.

Emotional support: Feeling cared about (though not necessarily understood)

As the literature on remittances has been flourishing in the last decade, the label of remittance has come to apply broadly – even confusingly – to a very diverse set of material and non-material flows, including those of information and emotions between home and host societies. The emerging literature on social remittances is particularly telling as a symptom of, and a contributor to, this multivalence (Boccagni and Decimo, 2013; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). Without entering into the definitional implications of this overuse, a point is to be highlighted here: the support which emanates from non-migrants cannot be reduced to their observable social practices in the local contexts of origin.
At least as far as a few family members are concerned – children, elderly parents, possibly partners and siblings – the migrant domestic workers, whose narratives I revisited, maintain strong affective connections which they 'consume', as it were, as much as produce. The notion of the circulation of care (Baldassar and Merla, 2013), as a mutual (if asymmetrical and socially stratified) process, is relevant here. Sociologically speaking, the migration process as a whole can be understood as part and parcel of an intergenerational transfer of family resources. As this process evolves, even over distance, adult migrants can be at the centre of various 'emotional and support relations' (Kohli and Kuhnemund, 2003) that connect them with the previous and with the following generations of movers, and/or of stayers.
As to the ways of cultivating such relations, judging from the (mostly female) domestic workers in my case study, phone communication is by far the prevalent currency of cross-border engagement. While in many ways more effective, internet-based communication turns out to be less widespread and accessible. In principle, there can be little doubt that 'polymedia' hold an unprecedented potential for facilitating transnational caregiving (Madianou and Miller, 2012). In practice, though, their social distribution is far from obvious or irrelevant. While clearly non-representative, my sample of middle-aged immigrant women in highly segregated jobs suggests some caution in that respect.
Having said this, transnational communication between migrants and left-behinds works as a source of emotional and practical support, hence of personal wellbeing, for the former as well. *Feeling cared about* from afar is a transnational asset that should not go unnoticed – whatever the channels and ways of displaying it – against the background of social isolation which is often associated with immigrant domestic work (Shutes, 2012).
The narrative of B., a single woman working as live-in caregiver, is a case in point:

Do you keep in touch by phone [with your family members in Ecuador]?
Sure – many many times! I mean, that's really a boost for me [spreads out her arms and breaks into laughter]. That's a boost, I keep waiting for that.
Do you often call them up?
I call them up every week – call mum or one of my brothers, this way they'll tell me how they are all doing. But I talk with all of them because – I mean, I was really blessed … this is, for me, something that makes up for all because, for instance, the first time I went back to Ecuador I felt like I was an important person – from the very moment I landed, they were all being waiting for me … it was beautiful for me, because they made me understand that they loved me. They were all with me …
(B., 52 years old, in Italy for 6 years)

As one delves into B.'s narrative, and into so many others, transnational communication can however be appreciated as an ambivalent process – even more when it cannot be supported with frequent return visits, such as in the Ecuadorian case. Apart from being exposed to information asymmetries and misunderstandings, cross-border communication seems to be systematically affected by some purposeful reticence. This is understood by migrants – and presumably by their counterparts – as a way of 'protecting' the other(s) from any bad news that would however lie out of their control (cf. Baldassar, 2007; Wright, 2012). Moreover, interactions from a distance may well be a field for mutual tensions, disagreements and conflicts to occur; or possibly worse (to those concerned), of gradually more superficial and formulaic interactions, in a sort of 'transnational void', as physical separation extends over time.
All of these emotional tensions and ambivalences are exemplified by M.'s disenchantment about the intermittent communication with her mother and siblings in Ecuador.
Even so, as the same excerpt suggests, keeping in touch is something more than a moral obligation – it is also a way for migrants to make sure that life goes on 'as before', for better or worse:

How is it that you keep in touch?
I write to them and call them up a couple of times a month – that's enough to make sure that they're fine. In fact, even if something bad happens, they just won't tell me – they don't want me to get worried. …
Whom do you talk with?
With my mother. Yeah, always with her … don't even stay long on the phone; I haven't much to tell her either, everything is always the same for me. They sometimes ask me: What's new, there? Nothing new, I tell them, nothing new – the same routine all the time.
(M., 37 years old, in Italy for 4 years)

Judging from these interviews, immigrants' contact with children or other left-behinds is also a source of personal consistency. Their transnational engagement reflects (and in turn breeds) a moral background which legitimates and makes sense of migration altogether. As 28-year-old S. explains, making explicit a point emerging among other interviewees as well, '[in the past] my mother has always worked for us – it is we who have to work for her now'. Again, the intergenerational contracts underpinning family life, before and after migration, are unlikely to lose relevance as spatial and temporal distance increases, despite being often fraught with burdensome implications. This calls for deeper appreciation of the intergenerational patterns of mutual solidarity and obligations which underpin family remittances. Kin-based contracts across generations, while being delicate and invariably negotiated over migrants' life course, should be understood as a resource (and an object of study) in itself – rather than a mere channel for circulating money, or whatever else, between host and home societies.
If and once closer relatives are reunited abroad, nonetheless, homeward connectedness tends to lose saliency in most of the life stories I analysed. It is in fact relegated to a less emotionally laden but not irrelevant function, to be addressed in the next section. This shows how the notion of embeddedness, which is typically associated with particularly places (hence with a *space* dimension), can be revisited in a *time* optic – and projected into the future – to appreciate another kind of 'contribution' which migrants can derive from their home communities.

Future-oriented embeddedness: Keeping a locus for belonging (and possibly return)

After revisiting Ecuadorian domestic workers' self-accounts, one could argue that *home* also *matters* – and impinges on migrants' psycho-social wellbeing – at a more abstract level: as a repository of significant (often selectively good) memories and emotions about their earlier life experience. Whether primarily focused on past family life (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff, 2004) or on the homeland overall (Svasek and Skrbis, 2007), a strong homebound identification can persist even while cross-border relationships get weaker. Ironically, this is not incompatible with the interviewees' often critical attitudes towards Ecuador concerning, for instance, the 'typical' lifestyles of those still there, the lack of economic opportunities or the frailty and unreliability of its public institutions.
While symbolic and even depersonalized, migrants' nostalgic attachment is not addressed only to the past. It also impacts on the here and now of their everyday life

abroad – at least as a source of self-identification and of future, more autonomous life projects that should reward migrants for their present hardships. For many of the Ecuadorian domestic workers without strong family ties in Italy, it is an aspiration of a future affluence *there* – though systematically postponed over time – which gives a meaning to often disadvantaged life conditions *here*, and a direction for their efforts to move forward. In the words of another female interviewee:

> After you leave, you must always keep up the idea of returning sooner or later … to me, it would make no sense to keep working so hard, so hard, and then stay here for ever.
> (E., 33 years old, in Italy for 4 years)

In this sense, and across the narratives I have analysed, the homeland remains a meaningful point of reference within otherwise very uncertain future life projects. Once again, the allure of 'home' should not lead to any rosy or idealized picture of the migrant–left-behind nexus. The fact remains that, for many of these first-generation newcomers from Ecuador, home(land) acts *per se* as a strong emotional catalyst. A deep-rooted feeling that there will always be a second option (if probably a disadvantageous one) is not much, in practical terms, to improve their life prospects abroad. It is still something, nonetheless, as a personal reservoir of sense, consistency and self-worth. To be sure, its actual substance cannot be checked out – one will never know how life back home will really be, before returning. It cannot even be undermined or questioned, though, by whatever trouble or difficulties migrants experience away from home. Despite its elusive contours, therefore, future-oriented embeddedness should also be appreciated as a resource, however immaterial, which migrants can extract from home communities.

Conclusion

As my case study suggests, left-behinds can be a source of social support in several respects. Some of these are evocative and symbolic (though not irrelevant to migrants' wellbeing), whereas others have more practical implications for the social security of emigrants and for their future chances of progress as returnees. All of these 'counterflows' stem from regimes of family reciprocity that have a degree of resistance to physical detachment. As a way of accounting for this, the notion of the circulation of care (Baldassar and Merla, 2013) has aptly highlighted the potential for movers and stayers to mutually affect their life trajectories across borders. However, this potential is contextdependent, asymmetrical and, more fundamentally, twofold: the consequences and feedbacks of these transnational ties for migrants themselves may be as significant, and worthy of further research, as the consequences of all the forms of care and support that they 'remit' towards home societies.

Having said this, non-movers' capacity to affect movers should not be exaggerated or idealized. It is constrained, first, by a clearly asymmetrical structure of opportunities; second, by the changing relevance of the homeland in migrants' eyes, which tends to mirror their life course trajectories – hence, to decrease over time. It primarily involves, accordingly, first-generation and recently arrived migrants. Moreover, non-migrants' potential as social support providers is highly stratified all across the home society, besides being differentially shaped by cultural and kinship-based obligations. It is also contingent on the quality of the interpersonal relationships with their migrant counterparts (and of course, on the latter's investment in remittances, transnational care and so forth). In essence, left-behinds' contribution is significant insofar as migrants are interested, motivated or necessitated to keep strong connections with them. As long as homeland matters, typically depending on their connectedness with closer kin living there, a mutual and unequal interdependence is retained. A degree of cross-border engagement needs then to be taken into account, as one investigates migrants' search for wellbeing and their need for social support.

Importantly, as my study indicates, transnational ties may facilitate migrant wellbeing *or* induce further distress, depending on a range of factors. Migrants' sociocultural, economic and relational assets in the homeland are obviously one set of factors. However, the social conditions they achieve abroad are likely a much stronger predictor of the category – asset or liability – into which such connections fall. Put differently, transnational family ties and informal social transfers via ethnic networks are a good complement, but an inherently poor substitute of migrants' inclusion into the receiving society. Even while it contributes to migrants' wellbeing, informal transnational support cannot question their structurally disadvantaged position vis-a-vis the welfare arrangements of

receiving countries. As a result, a transnational lens enables a richer picture to be drawn of the migrant–social protection nexus. It still leaves us, though, with the local contexts of settlement abroad as the central stage for immigrants' social welfare.

Migrants, at the end of the day, are not only net contributors to their family members left behind – they do benefit from the latter, in turn. It is the life conditions they achieve 'here', however, that account most for the richness and variety of their remittances – be they 'ordinary' or, to a lesser and emerging extent, 'reverse' ones.

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Notes

1. A state of the art of the literature on migration and care would require a paper in itself. See however, among others, Kofman and Raghuram (2009) for a gender perspective; Williams (2010) for a social policy approach; and Yeates (2011) for a critical map of the transnational care chains literature.
2. This qualitative research produced an unprecedented collection of about 680 life histories of migrant domestic workers in Italy (Catanzaro and Colombo, 2009). While the bulk of each interview involved migrants' participation in the domestic work sector, a sub-section was specifically dedicated to their multifaceted, if mostly piecemeal contacts with their home societies. This dataset was produced through a purposive sampling strategy at national level – based on a variety of informal networks, but following specific selection criteria. In order to ensure a reasonable diversity within the sample, the number and distribution of interviewees had been predefined along lines of gender, length of stay, domestic work arrangement (live-in or not), city size and geographical area.
3. Interestingly, an oft-quoted concern in these interviews was the risk of creating a remittancedependency among recipients – an especially undesirable after-effect if the latter are young and healthy. Ironically, the fear of remittance receivers' parasitic attitudes parallels the commonsensical criticism of over-relying on welfare subsidies, hence of living in (undue) dependence, which immigrants often face in host societies.
4. Even second-generation members may keep sending remittances, typically to lesser extents – as Kasinitz et al. (2002), among others, have pointed out.
5. During a national referendum held in Ecuador in 2008, in which emigrants were admitted to participate via external voting, I co-organized an exploratory survey beyond the polling stations in several immigration countries, including Italy and Spain (Ramirez and Boccagni, 2013). To the question 'On whom could you rely if you had an exceptional need?', three out of four respondents indicated *(Immigrant) family members*. This source of help was perceived as much stronger than *Ecuador* (22.4%), which might refer to either left-behind family members or the homeland welfare institutions. Relatively greater was also the perceived relevance of the *Receiving state*, regarded as a potential source of help by one in three interviewees ($N = 530$; no significant difference between respondents in different host countries).
6. Unless, of course, migrants' kin, such as elderly parents, emigrate in turn and directly contribute to their everyday social reproduction abroad – for instance, by taking care of their children in the local context of settlement (cf. Plaza, 2000).

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Résumé

Cet article réexamine le soutien social informel dont bénéficient les migrants sur la base d'une étude des échanges de ressources matérielles et immatérielles avec les membres de leur famille restés au pays. Ces derniers sont généralement perçus comme nettement bénéficiaires de la lutte des migrants pour acquérir des moyens de subsistance à l'étranger, et même parfois comme un obstacle potentiel à leur épanouissement. En s'appuyant sur une étude qualitative d'employés de maison équatoriens en Italie, l'auteur de l'article étudie plutôt la question de savoir si les membres de la famille restés au pays peuvent être aussi une source de soutien social pour les migrants. Effectivement, les relations familiales transnationales peuvent faciliter la circulation de ressources significatives pour la qualité de vie des deux côtés. Tandis que les migrants sont censés partager transnationalement les bénéfices tirés de meilleures conditions de vie à l'étranger, « ce » qu'ils ont laissé derrière eux contribue à leur bien-être personnel à trois titres : transferts de fonds inversés, soutien affectif, et apport d'un centre de gravité leur permettant d'entretenir leur nostalgie, leur attachement et leur statut social. L'influence mêlée des liens et obligations liés à la famille dans le pays d'origine est évaluée en fonction de la trajectoire de vie et des modèles d'intégration des migrants. D'une manière générale, leur interdépendance avec ceux qu'ils ont laissés derrière eux représente des avantages, mais aussi des coûts, qui ne devraient pas être négligés.

Mots-clés

Familles transnationales, Italie, migrants équatoriens, services à la personne, soutien social, transferts de fonds inversés, travail domestique

Resumen

Este artículo revisa el apoyo social informal de los migrantes mediante el estudio de sus intercambios de recursos materiales e inmateriales con los miembros de la familia que dejaron en el lugar de origen. Estos últimos se constituyen típicamente como beneficiarios netos de las luchas de los migrantes para ganarse la vida en el extranjero, e incluso, como un obstáculo potencial para su autorrealización. Sobre la base de un estudio cualitativo de los trabajadores domésticos ecuatorianos en Italia, el autor explora – en su lugar – si los familiares que quedan atrás son también, potencialmente, una fuente de apoyo social para ellos. De hecho, las relaciones familiares transnacionales pueden facilitar la circulación de recursos de bienestar relevantes desde ambos lados.
Aunque se espera que los migrantes transnacionales compartan los beneficios de las mejores condiciones de vida en el extranjero, "lo que" dejaron atrás contribuye a su bienestar personal en tres aspectos: remesas inversas, apoyo emocional y provisión de un lugar para el cultivo de la nostalgia, el apego y el estatus social. La influencia mixta de los lazos y obligaciones de la familia de origen se analiza en el contexto del ciclo vital de los migrantes y de sus patrones de integración.

En términos generales, su interdependencia con los que dejaron atrás es una fuente de beneficios, y costes, que no debe pasar desapercibida.

Palabras clave
Apoyo social, cuidado, familias transnacionales, Italia, migrantes ecuatorianos, remesas inversas, trabajo doméstico