

CAREGIVING IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The worldwide changes in the economic markets have led to an unprecedented increase in global migration estimated at 214 million (United Nations-International Organization for Migration, 2008). This global migration has increased the number of transnational families worldwide (Dade, 2004) that now face unique physical and psychological challenges for the provision of care for aging adults. Regardless of the precipitating event, global migration has challenged definitions of family, family responsibility, and generational roles (Baldassar, 2008). As the demographics of the world population shift towards a graying era, family therapists need to understand the impact that a changing global economy and economies of kinship have on the lives of family members who migrate and those who are left behind. The goal of this paper is to increase the knowledge base pertaining to transnational families and to make visible the needs of families who provide care across transnational borders.

Keywords: transnational, caregiving, immigration, aging, global

Cuidadores en un contexto global

Resume

Los cambios a nivel mundial en los mercados económicos han llevado a un aumento sin precedentes de la migración global estimado en 214 millones (Organización de las Naciones Unidas-Internacional para las Migraciones, 2008). Esta migración global ha aumentado el número de familias transnacionales en todo el mundo (Dade, 2004) que ahora se enfrentan a desafíos físicos y psicológicos únicos para la facilitación de servicios a los adultos de mayor edad. Independientemente del evento precipitante, la migración global ha desafiado las definiciones de la familia, la responsabilidad familiar y los roles generacionales (Baldassar, 2008). Como el cambio demográfico de la población mundial hacia una era gris, terapeutas familiares necesitan entender el impacto que una economía y la economía de los padres y madres en una mundo en transición tienen sobre la vida de los miembros de las familias migrantes y los familiares que han quedado detrás. El objetivo de este trabajo es aumentar la base de conocimientos relativos a las familias transnacionales y hacer visibles las necesidades de las familias que brindan cuidado a través de fronteras transnacionales.

Palabras clave: transnacional, el cuidado, la inmigración, el envejecimiento, globales

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Ritu is a recent immigrant to the United States, having emigrated from India in 1996. Prior to immigrating to the US, Ritu and her husband had immigrated to Kuwait, leaving behind in India her older brother and her elderly parents, and also her husband's brother and parents. Ritu comes from a small extended family with only one brother who is now divorced, and her elderly parents who live far away from Ritu's brother and now also far from Ritu who is in the US. Ritu explains that with her living in the US and her brother no longer married, the burden of care for her elderly parents and her in-laws in India is uncertain. Several other members of Ritu's extended family have already immigrated or are in the process of immigrating to other countries. For example, a maternal uncle now lives in the US, while Ritu's husband's brother is in the process of obtaining permission to immigrate to Australia.

Given Ritu and her husband's small family-of-origins, and their own immigration first to Kuwait and then to the US, both her own parents and her husband's parents are experiencing a void in care and support from their adult children. Ritu explains that in India, much of the responsibility of caring for elderly parents often rests on the older son and his wife. Because Ritu's brother is now divorced and no longer has a wife, a situation that is frowned upon in India, Ritu is finding that her parents are expecting her to pick up the emotional and financial slack that her brother's divorce created. Although Ritu is geographically further away from her parents than her brother, they increasingly turn to her for resources such as money and time, and for emotional support. Ritu tries to return to India at least twice a year but is herself struggling to care for her own family and children in the US. Financially, Ritu reports that she and her husband have the responsibility of raising their two children, one of whom will be going to college soon and financially and emotionally supporting both her elderly parents and also her husband's parents all of whom are still back in India. Ritu reports feeling stressed out by the worry and the responsibility of dealing with all of the caregiving issues that come up when dealing with aging parents while raising one's own children; being part of the "sandwich generation." Both her parents and her parents-in-law are in poor health, require a great deal of day-to-day support and assistance, and have limited financial resources of their own. Ritu and her husband are committed to staying in the US

but are finding themselves continually strained by the demands of trying to take care of and support their elderly parents in India while also raising their own children. Ritu and her husband immigrated to the US because her husband wanted better economic and job opportunities and now that he has found gainful employment, he is unwilling to jeopardize his career and his children's future by returning to India where his prospects are limited. Ritu and her husband have turned to extended family members back in India to assist them with the day-to-day aspects of their parents' care; however, Ritu explains that this care has not been consistent or reliable and that she and her husband continue to hear through the family "grapevine" that these family members are themselves strained for financial resources and are also resentful of the burden the care-giving is placing on them and their own families. Ritu's brother who is divorced, tells her that he has other responsibilities to take care of and now that he is without a wife, he feels incapable of caring for their parents. Ritu's husband's brother is available to help care for their elderly parents but could at any point receive authorization to immigrate, thus leaving his parents without anyone in charge of their immediate care-giving needs. While Ritu, her husband, and her children have benefitted economically and emotionally from their immigration first to Kuwait and then to the US, they are facing uncertainty about their parents' care and are experiencing a great deal of anxiety and stress because of their situation.

Additionally, their parents express feelings of depression, loneliness, and abandonment. Ritu and her husband believe their future and their parents' future is uncertain and they do not know where to turn for help.

Ritu and her husband's situation is a composite from the experiences of a number of individuals, but the challenges they face are not unusual, and variations of this scenario likely happen frequently across the world for immigrants and their families. The worldwide changes in the economic markets have led to an unprecedented increase in global migration estimated at 214 million (United Nations-International Organization for Migration, 2008). This global migration has increased the number of transnational families worldwide (Dade, 2004) that now face unique physical and psychological challenges for the provision of care for

aging adults. Baldassar (2008) points out the importance of receiving or providing care, “economies of kinship,” as a driving force in the global migration movement and cautions against a sole focus on ‘rational’ economics as the triggering force of transnational migration. Regardless of the precipitating event, global migration has challenged definitions of family, family responsibility, and generational roles (Baldassar, 2008). There have been five categories of care identified by transnational and proximate families: financial support, practical support, personal support, accommodations, and emotional and moral support (Baldassar, 1997; Finch & Mason, 1993). In the transnational contexts, the provision of care is “processual and fluctuating” and is mediated by time, distance, history, migration stage, family life-cycle, and “bonds of kinship” (Baldassar 1997).

Various types of transnational migration have been recognized in the literature: transnational migrants who live in two worlds and claim allegiance to both country of origin and host country (Gammonley, 2008); circular migration in which family members will come home periodically for a long period of time (Acevedo, 2004); and migration in which the family member has more permanent residency in a foreign country. All of these types of migration have an impact on the structure, roles, and developmental life cycle of families. As the demographics of the world population shift towards an aging populace, family therapists need to understand the impact that a changing global economy and economies of kinship have on the lives of family members who migrate and those who are left behind. The goal of this paper is to increase the knowledge base pertaining to transnational families and to make visible the needs of families who provide care across transnational borders.

Current literature on caregiving emphasizes the importance of physical proximity for family members to provide intergenerational support (Baldock, 2008). A thorough assessment of the family needs to incorporate an awareness and evaluation of the micro, meso, macro, and chronosystemic contexts of families’ lives (Baldassar, 2007). At the micro level, therapists need to engage in a dialogue about the family members’ experiences, history, life-cycle stage, cultural expectations and family roles. At the meso level, the focus of inquiry turns to the creation of networks over time, community contexts, and services. At the macro level, awareness and knowledge of governmental policies, support, larger social contexts, and attitudes about caregiving are important to discuss.

A critical consequence of increasing immigration to the US from a number of countries world-wide is the impact on parents and other family members left behind in the country-of-origin, and also on the family member/s who choose to immigrate. Caregiving to aging parents and other family members while being physically removed from them creates a great deal of stress on family structure, resources, and mental and physical health. As described in Ritu’s family’s case example at the beginning of this paper, immigration for many families can provide a gateway to opportunities for increased financial stability, resources, and the possibility of better quality of life; however, many of these advantages may be diminished due to the stressors of the immigration experience itself and to the increased complexity of remaining connected and providing caregiving and support to family members back in the country-of-origin.

Impact on Aging Parents Left Behind

The impact of family members’ immigration on aging parents left behind includes the diminishment of financial and emotional support, confusion of cultural expectations and family roles, a sense of increased isolation, and depression, and loneliness. Additionally, other family members left behind in the country-of-origin may be increasingly responsible for aging parents’ care. All members of the family including not only those who are left behind but also those who have immigrated may experience a sense of displacement and interrupted family life-cycle trajectory, and feelings of abandonment (Baldassar, 2007; Baldock, 2000; Zechner, 2008).

As seen in the example of Ritu and her husband, many immigrants fall into the younger to middle-age cohort which often means they are in the prime of their wage-earning capacities. However, this also means that they may be carrying the responsibilities for caring for young families of their own while at the same time being responsible for their own aging parents (Wolf & Ballal, 2006). When removed from their country-of-origin, these immigrant families’ absence is critically experienced by aging members of their family in the home country. Immigrant populations frequently experience underemployment and decreased earning capacity in their host country (Akresh, 2006; Chan & Leong, 1994), and yet they may continue to be responsible for supporting their aging parents and other family members back home. Financial support for parents back home might be affected by logistical difficulties in getting that support to them in a timely fashion, or diminished financial support due to the immigrant family member’s additional financial and

other caregiving responsibilities such as supporting young children (Wolf & Ballal, 2006). Depending on the person's country-of-origin, the challenges of relaying financial support might be complicated by unreliable methods of monetary delivery, relying on the trustworthiness of friends or others traveling back and forth to deliver financial support, or the unreliability of the postal systems (Baldassar, 2007; Wolf & Ballal, 2006). These complications can make the continued effort of providing financial support to aging parents challenging and may contribute to a decreased quality of life for family members left behind. Occasionally family members' immigration can contribute to an increased quality of life for aging parents due to increased opportunities for earnings for the immigrant family member that are then shared with family members who are left behind (Kuhn, 2005).

In addition to challenges to financial support for aging parents, continued emotional support is even more critically affected. While the impact of concrete and tangible support such as financial resources can be more readily assessed, it is more difficult to determine how much the immigrant family member's absence contributes to a lack of emotional support (Chamberlain & Leydesdorff, 2004; Parrenas, 2005; Skrbis, 2008). In the country-of-origin, family members may have lived in an extended family structure, providing each other with physical and emotional support. With the removal of one part of that extended family system, aging parents may experience a big loss in terms of emotional support. The immigrant family member may have taken along with him or her, a partner or spouse, grandchildren or even younger siblings, all of whose absence might be deeply felt at an emotional level for the aging parents left behind (Chamberlain & Leydesdorff, 2004; Parrenas, 2005; Skrbis, 2008).

With the diminished sense of emotional support, aging parents may experience depression, isolation, loneliness, and a sense of abandonment. Grandchildren, who may have previously provided a great deal of comfort and joy in the day-to-day activities of aging parents, might be sorely missed after immigration. Additionally, with various family members no longer part of the larger family system, aging parents who may have been primarily responsible as care-givers to their grandchildren, may experience a great sense of loss in their role in the family and their contributions to the whole system (Keasberry, 2001). Cultural expectations about family members' roles might be quite challenged (Zechner, 2008). For example, in many cultures, the

role of the oldest son and his family may be very critical as the primary care-taker and support as parents age (Keasberry, 2001). However, if this particular member of the family chooses to immigrate, elderly parents may be required once again to take on the role of "head of the household" despite their financial, emotional, or physical limitations. Thus they may experience a sense of displacement & disruption in their expected life cycle trajectory (Baldassar, 2007). Another potential challenge to culturally-bound role expectations is that with the immigration of an elder adult child, younger family members may have to step up to the role of primary care-taker and provider for the family system left behind, thus further disrupting hierarchical expectations. Aging parents may feel an increased sense of dependence on other family members and a feeling of being a burden to others in the family.

Impact on Other Family Members Left Behind

The impact on family members left behind may include an increased burden of responsibility for caretaking, and disruption in life cycle and family role expectations. There may also be the potential for resentment towards family members who emigrated, and feelings of being stymied in one's own desire and attempts to seek different and possibly better opportunities. Family members who are left behind may also experience a sense of burdensome obligation and abandonment (Baldassar, 2007; Kuhn, 2005; Zechner, 2008).

While the impact of a family member's immigration may be most acutely felt by aging parents and other elderly family members, there may be other family members who experience additional stressors due to the absence of the immigrant family member. Remaining siblings and their own families, uncles, aunts and other members of the extended family unit may also be subject to increased financial, emotional and physical burdens because of the absence of the immigrant family member. Other family members may be needed to step up their financial support due to the challenges of reliably getting monetary resources transferred across countries. They may also be required to take on roles that they may not have expected given cultural expectations and life cycle trajectories (Baldassar, 2007; Baldock, 2000). One example is when a younger, female sibling is left behind and required to take on the responsibilities typically performed by an older son thus challenging not only hierarchy and life-cycle trajectory expectations but also cultural

expectations based on gender roles. In some of these situations, family members remaining behind may experience some resentment to being pushed into roles at unanticipated points in their life. Or as in the case of Ritu's brother who was recently divorced, the unexpected change in a life cycle transition led to some confusion and uncertainty about roles and responsibilities. Family members left behind may also experience resentment based on a perception that the immigrant family member is living a care-free life far away from any of the responsibilities of caring for extended family members and is benefitting from all financial and quality-of-life opportunities that immigration is often expected to provide (Baldassar, 2007; Baldock, 2000). Family members may feel they do not have the same opportunities in their country-of-origin or even the opportunity to join their immigrant family member due to a sense of obligation to remain behind and support the remaining family (Keasberry, 2001). Regardless of how accurate or inaccurate these perceptions may be, resentment and a sense of abandonment may be lingering concerns for many family members left behind (Skrbis, 2008).

Impact on Family Members Who Leave

The immigration experience is frequently portrayed as one laden with opportunities for the immigrant. Mainstream media and popular stories of immigrant experiences highlight the mainly positive aspects or possibilities of the immigration experience. More recently, attention is being paid to the challenges and difficulties of the immigration experience on immigrants themselves (Akresh, 2006; Chan & Leong, 1994; Conrad & Pacquiao, 2005; Coon et al, 2004). Certainly in attempting to understand the challenges of immigration experiences, it is important to review the potential impact on issues related to the immigrant's role as care-giver. While the recent immigrant may indeed begin to experience some positive outcomes due to his or her new context and opportunities, they may also experience depression, shame and guilt at what they may perceive as "having abandoned" their family back in the country-of-origin (Conrad & Pacquiao, 2005). Guilt might arise from feeling a sense of relief for their freedom from role expectations or the immediate burdens of care-taking and financial responsibilities (Baldassar, 2007). Because of this guilt and shame, immigrant family members may also attempt to engage in "making up" for their absence by over-compensating through actions that may temporarily alleviate those uncomfortable feelings but are not particularly meaningful or useful. For example, financial

constraints due to higher costs of living in the new country and underemployment (Akresh, 2006) might lead to curtailed financial support to family members at home. However, the immigrant family member may then feel compelled to make up for this deficit by offering less meaningful or useful gifts during visits back to the country-of-origin or making promises of future financial support without tangible follow through. Despite these attempts at over-compensation due to their physical absence, immigrant family members may still want a larger role in day-to-day decisions (Baldassar, 2007) that impact the family back home but find that they are met with resistance from family members who are there on the "front lines." Finally, an additional concern may be that the immigrant family member also struggles with conflicts and challenges to her or his own cultural expectations about what constitutes an "ideal" family once they have immigrated. If they come from a culture where the expectation is that a family is ideal and "normal" only in an extended family format, it may be psychologically and emotionally challenging for the immigrant to restructure her or his ideas about what constitutes "family" and how her or his decision to immigrate has challenged and disrupted those norms (Baldassar, 2007; Baldock, 2000; Keasberry, 2001). Ritu and her husband both grew up with the experience of being raised in an extended family context with several generations living in the same household; this was their definition of "family" for themselves growing up and also after marriage and in raising their own children. One of their challenges after immigration was reassessing and redefining their meaning and experience of "family" and dealing with the ambivalent emotions this challenge may have brought up for them.

Caregiving Expectations

When considering the impact of immigration on caregiving issues, it is important to consider all the systems involved in this process. While the literature frequently focuses on the immigrant and immigration experience from an intrapsychic perspective, there is little attention given to the family systems that are left behind and the impact immigration has on cultural and familial systems and caregiving roles and expectations (Baldassar, 2007). Variables such as gender, birth order, how responsibilities were distributed in the country-of-origin and what the experience of immigration means to both parties, should be considered in understanding the challenges faced by transnational caregivers (Baldock, 2000; Chamberlain & Leydesdorf, 2004; Keasberry, 2001). In addition to the stress that immigration presents for

the immigrant and for the family left behind, caregiver burdens and responsibilities should be assessed carefully also. Caregiving to an elderly parent or family member in need is fraught with challenges of its own regardless of location. Issues such as caregiver burnout, dealing with caring for more than one generation (“sandwich generation”) at the same time, and experiencing physical, emotional and financial depletion take on added complexity and import when considering caregiving in a transnational context (Wolf & Ballal, 2006).

Caregiving is also influenced by levels of acculturation and differing cultural expectations about caregiving (Skrbis, 2008). Factors such as immigrant acculturation levels impact future decisions and choices such as how much or what type of support he or she is willing to provide, the use of what may be viewed as non-traditional sources of support such as nursing homes or non-family caregivers, the level of connection through return visits to the country-of-origin, and changing views of what is considered the ideal family or ideal ways of dealing with extended family responsibilities (Baldassar, 2007; Wolf & Ballal, 2006). Tied into these decisions and choices is the impact of the reactions and responses of family members who may be coming from what is now a very different cultural context in terms of these types of caregiving issues and expectations. For example, when Ritu and her husband lived in Kuwait (a cultural context somewhat similar to India) they received a great deal more support socially and culturally in their efforts to continue to be a major part of the care-giving process for their aging family members back in India. However, after they moved to the US, a culture significantly different than their Indian culture, they experienced less support socially and felt questioned more often regarding their decision to try to be active participants in their aging parents’ care.

Coping Resourcefulness

While families from different countries-of-origin may have varying levels of resources available to them, creativity and ingenuity in dealing with the challenges of transnational caregiving is an important aspect of developing resourcefulness and support for families experiencing immigration (Baldassar, 2007; Wolf & Ballal, 2006; Zechner, 2008). With improved technology and growing access to resources such as the Internet and international cell phone coverage, families are able to communicate and provide support across borders via mechanisms such as email, Skype, cheaper and more accessible

international cell phone calling plans, and other audio-visual means of communication (Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011). Growing acceptance of hired and professional caregivers may be a resource some families might consider at least as a minimum or adjunct to care provided by family members in the country-of-origin. Families might also be more likely to turn to caregiving alternatives within their extended family and might benefit from the development of informal, non-familial caregiving networks within the community at large. Additionally, with the opening of borders and relationships between countries, immigrant families might find it easier to obtain visas to travel between the country-of-origin and country-of-immigration as the need presents itself and also find bringing aging family members to the country-of-immigration as a less cumbersome process (Parrenas, 2005; Wolf & Ballal, 2006; Zechner, 2008). Therefore, in considering all the options that might be possible avenues for maintaining support and connection between immigrant family members and those back in the home country, families could be encouraged to explore and expand on a wide range of creative options that include information communication technologies (Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011). Part of developing creative alternative options for support includes helping families reach beyond and expand their traditional expectations of how and by whom caregiving must be provided to encompass non-traditional caregiving networks and possibilities.

Implications

Clinical implications for therapists working with immigrant families around caregiving issues would include utilizing a transnational and transgenerational extended family lens that encompasses an understanding of caregiving patterns and expectations across generations, across gender, and culture. Helping caregiver family members who have immigrated understand the need for flexibility, creativity and ingenuity in their ever-changing role as caregivers may be a focal area for clinical attention. Utilizing a transgenerational approach such as Contextual Family Therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) for clinical work with immigrant families that addresses issues of responsibility, obligation and legacies and expectations of care could be a way of exploring and dealing with transnational caregiving concerns.

On a larger systemic level, implications for policy makers should also be considered. The issue of immigration and less restrictive travel between

countries continues to be a challenge for the US and for other nations as global populations become more mobile and transient. Policies focused on restricting immigration need to be considered carefully so that they do not further penalize the families struggling to deal with the challenges of immigration and providing for their families in the country-of-origin. The process for obtaining visitor visas or visas allowing aging family members to join their immigrant family, are often cumbersome and extremely time-consuming, frequently leaving families on both sides of the ocean in perpetual limbo and uncertainty. Finally, policy makers might consider ways in which to make meeting financial and physical caregiving obligations across borders a smoother and less cumbersome process for caregivers who have immigrated.

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