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REVISITING THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTANCE IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY LIVES: *How and why Danish migrant parents transmit 'Danishness' to their children settled in Australia*

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Abstract

In recent years, a body of research has aimed to 'de-demonise' distance in transnational family lives, arguing that transnational families compensate for physical co-presence with other means of caring and 'being there' for each other, particularly by way of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Although many researchers claim to study transnational families, they mostly study the relationships between ageing parents in 'home' countries and the migrant son or daughter overseas. In this article, I propose to broaden that scope to include generations further apart too. In analysing how and why Danish migrant parents work to transmit their Danish culture and language to their children settled in Australia, I argue that geographical distance continues to matter, not least to the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren separated by this distance but also due to the complicated relationship between migrants and parents which is fostered by separation.

Keywords

transnational families • distance • emotional labour • intergenerational transmission • Danishness

Introduction

Migrant parents' attempt to maintain and transmit their 'homeland cultures', including the practice of sending the children back to the country of origin to learn about the family's culture, is often problematized and stigmatized in Europe, not least in Scandinavian countries. This article, however, turns the attention around – and points to a case of Danish *outmigration*. Because Danish migrants may uphold practices of celebrating and transmitting 'Danishness' to their children abroad without any questioning or stigmatisation by dominant societies, presumably privileged by their white capital as

Scandinavians (Lundström 2014), these practices are performed by Danish migrants in many places on Earth today. This article finds it pertinent to explore why.

The article examines the transnational family lives of Danish migrants living in Melbourne, Australia. Empirically, it builds on 14 biographical narrative, in-depth interviews with first generations of Danes who migrated to Melbourne between the 1950s and 1980s and their 'second-generation' children. At this point in time, partly since they were pushed by financial difficulties in the Danish labour market and pulled by promises of attractive jobs on the other side of the world, many Danes migrated to the country farthest away from their country of origin. From 1945 to 1968, approximately 7000–10,000 Danes migrated to Australia, some with the General Assisted Passage Scheme (GAPS), which was launched by the Australian government to meet Australian post-war labour scarcity (Birkelund 1988; Griffiths 1983). In Melbourne, some respondents were part of this pool. However, other respondents had migrated because they, sometimes as a product of the increase in overseas travels among Danish youth in the 1970s and 1980s, had found Australian spouses and consequently decided to settle in Australia.

In recent years, the emotional challenges faced by families who are separated by distance due to migration have gained broader attention. Baldassar (2008), for example, explores a similar post-World War 2 phase of European migration to Australia, focusing on migrant feelings of longing and 'missing kin'. In extending her studies, Baldassar (2016) ultimately argues that geographical distance between migrants and their families in 'home' countries does not necessarily worsen family ties and relationships, since transnational families find new ways of caring and 'being there' for each other through information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp and texting (SMS). Thus, she attempts to 'de-demonise' the distance between family members living apart (Baldassar 2016). Considering the complicated or sometimes even impossible exchange of care and communication with the family left behind in historical migration cases, Baldassar rightfully recognises that in the age of globalisation, the world has indeed become a smaller place. The possibilities of ICT use are ever developing, and they bring significant changes in transnational family relationships. However, judging from the respondent statements of this study, spatial distance continues to play an essential role in family relationships, not least to generations further apart.

In addition, from a massive pool of publications on Australia's migration history, more focused research on Scandinavian emigration to Australia is largely reduced to the works of Koivukangas and Martin (1986), particularly *The Scandinavians in Australia*, and from a Danish perspective an article by Birkelund (1988), none of which are concerned with qualitative studies of post-World War 2 migration.

Moreover, aside from inverting the notion of *immigration* in a Danish and Scandinavian context, by exploring the transnational lives of *Danes* abroad, this article contributes to a prevailing debate about the impacts of distance on transnational family lives (e.g. Baldassar 2008, 2016; Baldock 2000; Wilding 2006). The article also provides knowledge, not only on 'second-generation' identity outcomes but also on the processes through which the second-generation identities are shaped, which is scarce in research so far (noted e.g. by Baldassar

2001; Somerville 2008). This is possible through the appliance of an intergenerational focus, which accordingly contributes to the scarce amount of research on intergenerational transmission, requested, for example, by Bertaux and Thompson (2009). Finally, the article brings new ideas and perspectives to the study of emotional implications of transnational family life, as called for, for example, by Skrbis (2008) and Brownlie (2011), including further discussion on migrant motivations for doing emotional labour (Parreñas 2001; Skrbis 2008).

Theoretical framework

The article uses and discusses concepts associated with transnational migration research, particularly that which is concerned with the role of 'distance' and 'visits home' (e.g. Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007). 'Distance' is discussed in relation to a concurrent debate about the effects of geographic separation on transnational family relationships (e.g. Baldassar 2008; Baldock 2000; Lin & Rogerson 1995). In line with this debate, it is here mainly referred to as a geographic, transnational distance which separates families. The Danish migrants who are studied here are spatially about as far removed from their Danish families as they can possibly be. Considering how life course and special life events may impact migrant identities and inclinations to practise and transmit homeland culture, the article also discusses the aspects of temporal distance as well as gendered influences.

The return visits which many migrants more or less frequently make to their country of origin have been categorised in different ways by Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding (2007). These include the following: crisis visit, duty and ritual visits, routine visits, special visits and tourist visits. Baldassar has also written about the *guilt trip* (2015), in which this article expands by proposing that migrant parents also bring their second-generation children along on 'visits home' to strengthen transmission of Danishness, partly due to feelings of guilt.

The article also discusses the emotional toll of transnational migration, recently theorised by Skrbis (2008). Skrbis (2008: 236) reminds us that emotions are a 'constitutive part of the transnational family experience itself'. As immigrant emotions such as longing and homesickness have been found in relation to historical migration cases such the Great Migration from Europe to America (e.g. Handlin 1973; Skårðal 1974), Hirschmann (2004) reminds us that even in this age of instant communications and inexpensive travelling, transnational migration can be a traumatising experience. This article engages with literature on feelings of guilt, longing and homesickness, ambivalent notions of home and identity as well as motivations for doing emotional labour (Parreñas 2001; Skrbis 2008).

Finally, this article discusses the aspects of intergenerational transmission. Bertaux and Thompson (2009) argue that families continue to be a source of primary relationships which channel the transmission of 'language, names, land and housing, local social standing and religion; and beyond that also social values and aspirations, fears, world views, domestic skills, taken-for-granted ways of behaving, attitudes to the body, models of parenting and marriage (...)' (Bertaux & Thompson 2009: 1). Families also channel what Bourdieu

(1986) refers to as material, social, cultural, symbolic as well as what has recently been conceptualised as ‘white’ capital (Lundström 2014), and they often play significant roles in the shaping habitus and how ‘selves’ ‘become’ (also Miller 2000: 4). Moreover, as family ties can be pulled when support is needed, a family may sometimes even be considered a type of capital in itself (Bertaux-Wiame 2009). In Melbourne, collecting the life stories of more generations within the same family provided an instrument to observe the transmissions of various kinds of resources and capital, essential to the focus of this article.

Biographical narrative interviews with two generations

The empirical data on which this article is based are constituted by 14 biographical narrative interviews collected in Melbourne, Australia, in February and March 2016. The biographical narrative method was introduced with Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1919–1921) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, in which the authors analysed the letters and other personal documents of Polish immigrants, seeing those as rich sources of how the immigrant ‘self’ ‘becomes’ over time and in social processes (Stanley 2010).

Similar to the ideas of Giddens (1991), the biographical narrative approach presupposes that individuals constantly construct their biographies through stories (narratives) to create logic and order in their life histories. During interviews, the approach proposes to ask people to tell their life stories on relatively free terms. By paying special attention to the way individuals narrate their lives, the method is particularly suited for studying individual self-perceptions and how these affect and are affected by concrete acts, practices and turning points throughout life (Kupferberg 2012; Miller 2000).

Out of 14 interviews, nine were with people who emigrated from Denmark. Of these nine people, who at the time of the interview were in their 50s–80s, four were females and five were males. Their occupational profiles ranged from skilled workers to highly educated professionals; five were retirees. The remaining five interviews included five ‘second-generation’ children, among whom four were females and one was male. The second generations gathered two females in their 20s, two in their 40s and the one male at the age of 19 years and their occupational profiles ranged from university students to skilled and highly educated professionals.

Respondents were recruited unsystematically through snowball and gatekeepers’ referrals. To diversify the sample, I posted an advertisement in a Danish online newsletter which is regularly circulated among Danes in Melbourne and solicited the interviewees from various sites such as the church, the club and ethnic events. The second generations were accessed through their parents. During recruitment, the request was broadly defined as the wish to speak with ‘Danes who had migrated to the Melbourne area in between the 1950s and the 1980s and/or their children’. It is hence important to note that the sample on which this article is based, is constituted by people who more so than the average Danish migrant perhaps, takes an interest in the Danish activities in Melbourne. Considering the limitations of the sample, the aim of this article is therefore merely to explore *how and why*

migrant parents attempt to pass on Danish culture and language to their children, *when and where* this actually takes place. Results presented in this article are moreover supported by various informal conversations and field notes.

Passing on Danish culture and language: how?

Melbourne has a number of ‘Danish spaces’. For example, a *Danish Club* has existed since 1889. These days, the club met at *Denmark House* in the city’s busy business centre, a modern restaurant and bar decorated with Danish design furniture. Melbourne also has a Danish Australian Cultural Society (DACS), which is the organising body of special cultural events, sometimes held at *Denmark House*. Melbourne also has a Swedish church. However, once a month, a Danish minister who serves the Danish churches in both Brisbane and Sydney too performs a Danish service here. It is therefore also often referred to as the ‘Danish church’. The church serves different purposes to the Danish migrants and their families. During ‘Danish-style’ services, Danish hymns are sung, and afterwards a small shop sells Danish open-faced sandwiches, made by the city’s Danish baker. Visitors can moreover buy some imported Danish or Swedish goods to take home. The church also hosts the yearly Christmas bazaar, a popular event for Scandinavian–Australian families along with other cultural events such as ‘fastelavn’ (a Danish costume party for children) and ‘Sankt Hans’ (a midsummer celebration for families). More so than the club and the cultural society, the church functioned as a ‘cultural centre’ which engaged both migrants and second generations, offering ‘hands-on’ experiences with – and exposure to Danish culture and language, not least through programmes for children. The church also used to house the Danish language school, which has now been relocated at *Denmark House*, however. More of the second generations interviewed in this study had been encouraged by their parents to attend this school, and many parents who were interviewed conveyed that the fact that their children would learn to speak Danish was highly important to them.

As perhaps the most important one, *the home* in Melbourne could be characterised as an important space through which the contact to Denmark was kept, both through means of ICTs and through the practice of – and exposure to – things considered Danish. Annie, 50 years, who migrated to Melbourne to settle with her Australian husband, points out a number of micro-social home activities such as practising the Danish language, reading Danish children’s stories and listening to Danish children’s music. As the mother of two teenagers, passing on Danish culture and language and keeping the bonds to Denmark during their upbringing are described by her as a ‘big thing and a goal’ of hers.

Indeed, as Bourdieu (1986) has argued that the family is a most significant institution for the transmission of cultural capital, so the home in Melbourne would have potential to effectively pass ‘Danishness’ on to the children.

As the interviewees conveyed, depending on whether one or two parents had Danish origins, practices in the home could decisively decide how children’s ‘selves’ would ‘become’, which habitus would be formed and internalised and finally the degree to which

‘Danishness’ would characterise everyday practices and come to constitute their individual self-perceptions.

Through conversations in Skype or on the phone, the home would also be the basis of direct communication with family in Denmark. As Baldassar and others have noted elsewhere, ICTs were commonly used among Danish migrants to keep the contact to their families in Denmark and perhaps create a sphere of co-presence and ‘being there’ despite distance. The interviews rarely indicated that second generation took up this practice too, however, leaving the impression that communication through ICTs among generations further apart, such as grandparents in Denmark and grandchildren in Australia, was less practised or even absent.

The interviews conducted in Melbourne also pointed towards another important place for the transmission of Danish culture and language: Denmark. Most first-generation respondents in Melbourne had been to Denmark several times after they had migrated to Australia. Karen, for example, states that in the 25 years she has now spent in Melbourne, she has visited Denmark at least once a year. Evald has visited about every third year and hopes to do it more now that he is retired. The interviews include many examples of migrant parents who have brought their children along to Denmark – for shorter or longer periods of time.

Baldassar has pointed out different kinds of motivations behind ‘visits home’. Yet, the interviews on which this article is based show an additional category, as they indicate that such visits are sometimes a deliberate ‘strategy’, in an effort to improve the children’s ‘Danish skills’, culturally and language wise. Karen, for example, mentions that she used to take her children home ‘strategically’ to improve their abilities to speak Danish. Karen also mentions that she recommended this to many other Danes with children in Melbourne whom she was acquainted with, which indicates that visits to Denmark, which serve this purpose, may be common practice. The privilege of the fact that the migrants could get away with such practices which in other migration cases might produce stigmatisation and be problematised by the dominant society seemed surprisingly unnoticed by the Danish migrants. Pease (2010), however, reminds us that ‘not being aware of privilege is an important part of privilege’.

Reasons for transmission of ‘Danishness’ and the impacts of ‘distance’ on transnational family relationships

When the interviewees were sometimes asked if they could try and explain why it was important to them that their children should learn about the Danish culture and speak Danish, many would find it difficult to answer. Yet, I was curious to find out whom it would serve. Was it for the children’s sake? Or for their own? And why is passing down culture to the next generation seemingly important to many people? The life stories of the Danish migrants and their children give certain indications.

For the sake of the children

One possibility worth exploring is that migrant parents find it important that their children learn about culture and language – for the children's own sake. Annie, 50 years, tells:

Another way I have tried to strengthen the bonds to Denmark and work with the language was to take the children out of primary school. I think they were in (...) second and fifth grade and we were in Denmark for a full term so they went to school in Denmark for 3 months. It was a big experience for them and paid off well in many ways. Both the fact that they got to know some children so that every time we have visited Denmark (...) they could walk down the streets you know, and suddenly one says 'Hi! Are you back home again?' you know, and have someone to visit and some teachers and there are some friendly faces.. so that has meant a lot, it was really good that we did that.

For Annie, it has been important that her children would gain a sense of Denmark as a 'home' of friendly and familiar people. Annie is very pleased that her efforts worked out and her children made bonds and connections there. Annie also at one point states that she believes it would 'enrich' the lives of her children. Her son, Oliver, 19 years, correspondingly seems glad to have been to Denmark often and he appears to appreciate everything that is Danish. Aside from his comments, this is symbolised by the fact that he, quite successfully, attempts to complete the full interview in Danish, since he now 'gets a chance to practise'. However, from his life story account, you also learn that Oliver is well aware that his mother has had a difficult time coming to Australia to live. For example, he mentions that his mother speaks on the phone with his grandmother in Denmark every single night. At one point, Annie says:

This Christmas I could not help but smile because I was listening to 'Det Kimer Nu' [the title of a Danish Christmas carol] which I played on a CD and I think it was Oliver who came into the living room and said 'Oh, mom, that is just my favourite Christmas carol.'

Annie laughs heartily afterwards and clearly pleases that her son recognises and appreciates the Danish carol. Oliver's and Annie's life story accounts indicate that Oliver has partly embraced the Danish to make his mother happy. For example, he has also been confirmed in Denmark, but does not really know why.

Aside from bringing the children to Denmark as they were young, other migrant parents had encouraged their young adult children to try and live in Denmark for a while. For example, 'sending' the children off on stays to Denmark appears to have been the strategies of both Lily, 60 years and her Danish friends in Melbourne:

They [Lily's daughters] were both in Denmark also.. it was probably me who pushed them a little to go and get an experience of living in Denmark. We [our Danish friends in Melbourne and us] have also all sent our children back by now heh. We have probably all thought that our children should try and live in Denmark for a while.. so many have gone back to stay at a folk school for a while, to study part time or to work.

Lily's admittance that she 'pushed them a little to go' indicates that her girls may initially have been hesitant or simply not motivated to go. It would have been important to Lily, however, just like it was highly Karen's need that her daughter should learn to speak Danish. The type of visit conducted by descendants, which Lily describes above, would presumably fall into Baldassar's category of a 'tourist visit'. However, considering Lily's 'pushing' and efforts that her children should 'try and live in Denmark for a while', could also add to other indications that Danish migrant parents, consciously or unconsciously, intend for *the visit* to assist transmission of 'Danishness' to the children.

Lily's daughter, Julie, had thus travelled to visit her Danish grandparents in Denmark throughout her childhood and also, on her mothers' suggestion, taken a stay at a Danish folk school. In an interview with Julie she indicates, however, that going to visit the family in Denmark is not always as easy as her mother would like it to be:

It's funny (...) in terms of contact (...) Always interesting is that you're really closely related to these people like my grandma and grandpa, but they're not a part of your life, they're not a part of you and it's just like meeting strangers. And you feel obliged to, you know, kind of get that connection and be really comfortable and uhm.. close with them but you're just.. not! Yeah, so I think I found that the last time I was there (...) you don't have a.. base of sameness (...) They don't know your life, you don't know their lives or how they act and react.

Julie 'has her own life' in Australia, a life separate from that of her family in Denmark. Julie's statement clearly also suggests that her relationship with her grandparents suffers. They do not have a 'base of sameness', 'a connection' is missing and despite the close relatedness, her grandparents feel like 'strangers'. Julie's statement also indicates that ICTs, whether or not put into use as a means of communication between grandparents and grandchild would not, in any case, have been 'adequate' in sustaining their relationship. Julie speaks of two separate lives. Moreover, even though grandparents and grandchildren in general can be close to each other in proximity and yet have a poor relationship, 'distance' seems vital to what Julie senses as a lacking 'base of sameness'.

The fact that Julie feels 'obliged' to 'get that kind of connection' also says something about her mother's ambitions for her to connect with the Danish family. Migrant parents' statements sometimes illustrate that 'getting the connection', or learning the language, is more so a need of the Danish migrant parents. It is quite possible that parents intend well, wishing to teach their children how to 'act' within a Danish society, making the children aware that they have 'family ties' to pull or cultural capital to activate, should they one day decide to move back to Denmark. As I will return to, this is in some cases namely an option which is often taken into consideration by the parents. Yet, Julie also states that after her folk school stay in Denmark she was left confused about whether she should stay in Denmark or go back to Australia, having now found a good life and friends in her mothers' birth country. In spite of good intentions, this suggests that parents may – as they transmit to their children a transnational sense of belonging – simultaneously project their ambivalent notions of home and identity on to their children (see also Wolf 2002).

For the sake of the deprived grandparents

Julie's statement that she feels obliged to get a connection to her grandparents is interesting in another way too. The interviews with the Danish migrants namely also contain indications that parents attempt to pass on culture and language and strengthen the children's bonds to Denmark – for the sake of their families in Denmark, their parents in particular. To understand why, one needs also to recognise the guilt Danish migrants sometimes feel towards their 'abandoned' parents in Denmark. When she left Australia, Karen for example tells that 'it was the only time I have ever seen my father cry'. Correspondingly, Evald states that 'both mom and dad were sad when I left'. First-generation migrants obviously know that they have caused severe suffering for their parents, especially. As some now watch their parents grow old and in need of care, they must rely on their families in Denmark, such as their siblings, to assist them. Moreover, sometimes family in Denmark is hurt that they chose to migrate in the first place. For example, Annie says:

I am often accused, you know, perhaps not from my nearest family, but I have often heard, as I know many other people have too, that 'yes, well, but it was your own choice to go so far away'. Yes, perhaps, you chose it yourself but that does not make the consequences easier to cope with (...) Families always accuse them of that.

As the quote illustrates, the emotional implications to Annie and other respondents also involve a sense being hurt or angry that they are granted no sympathy from their Danish families, nor, as others would mention, as many visits to Australia as they had expected. This may resemble the fact that some migrants are not granted 'licence to leave' from their nearest families, if decisions to leave are not rooted in absolute economic necessity, for example, but due to what is considered less acute reasons, such as romantic impulses (Baldassar 2008: 261). Annie migrated to be with her Australian sweetheart, which may explain the 'accusations' she experiences and is hurt by. Her statement above also indicates that since families are unwilling to lend ears to migrants' complaints, migrating could have been lonesome. Annie also notes that she knows that her parents have 'suffered severe deprivation' due to inability to spend time with the grandchildren. In many ways, the relationships between migrants and their parents appear to be complicated. Although one might question whether contact and time spending would have necessarily increased if the family had lived closer together, *distance* matters here not least because it is *perceived* to matter, thus prompting a set of difficult emotions in both the hurt and deprived parents in Denmark and the guilty feeling migrants overseas. But perhaps, if parents in Denmark could speak and be close with their grandchildren, would this soften feelings of guilt? The interviews indicate that transmission to second generations is part of what could be characterised as emotional labour efforts performed by migrants to heal some of the emotional wounds fostered by separation (Parreñas 2001; Skrbis 2008). For example, Annie is quite aware that she wants to make strong bonds between her children and her family in Denmark. She says about her boys' ability to speak Danish that 'They are always praised

such when being in Denmark. (...) I think people are glad that they are interested and want to do it'. Clearly, it matters to her what her Danish family thinks.

To find a way 'home'

As there are hence indications that migrants' attempts to pass on culture and language to their children settled in Australia could be done for the sake of their parents in Denmark or, as some say, for the sake of their children, long life story parts indicate that it may largely be related to migrants' own emotional coping with the migration process. Karen, for example, says:

I would be devastated if my children could not also speak Danish! Because, well then we go back to all the sentimental stuff.. or maybe it's pure survival, because that is YOUR background (...) so you're flexible enough to go to another country and integrate in a new society, which I really care for... but you also want to bring something of yourself and language is a big part of yourself because language is not just language it is also history, tradition, all kinds of things (...) it is not only communication.

The statement shows that her children's ability to speak Danish is so important to Karen that it is a matter of 'survival', it is *her* urgent need and connected to 'bringing something of herself'. Clearly, migrating has marked what Kupferberg (2012) describes as a significant 'turning point' in respondent lives. For example, Karen also mentions that 'It is just like sitting on a branch and you cut it down and you know that you are doing it. (...) I was deeply sad when I moved and so were the people at home'. Karen knows that she might have had a depression the first couple of years after coming to Australia. Annie has clearly also found it difficult to adapt. Furthermore, she obviously perceives 'distance' as the very concrete key problem to many of the things she has 'missed out' on. For example, she mentions 'family assistance', 'the chance to provide help and moral support', 'weddings, childbirths, birthdays'. In her case, at least, ICTs do not seem to have provided a sense of *adequate* co-presence or feeling of being in touch *enough*, as Baldassar has noted elsewhere (2016). These statements also show that 'distance' does not only matter psychologically as a 'mental load' and emotional complicatedness which may arise in transnational families from the *thought of* living at a great distance, but that 'distance' also continues to have very concrete consequences resulting from absence. Despite relatively inexpensive travelling and ICTs, you may still 'miss out' on important things.

The ambivalent notions of 'self' and 'home' (explored further e.g. by Nielsen 2005) were moreover evident in reflections about how some migrants continuously speculated about *where* they actually belonged throughout a number of years, ambivalent in their minds about where to settle. In fact, respondents' emotional coping with migrating often revolved around finding 'ways home'. In addition, from visits and contact to Denmark through ICTs, respondents had thus also been actively engaged in Melbourne's 'Danish spaces'. The club, for example, seemed to function as an 'emotional refuge' (Handlin 1973), an 'easy

way home', a place to belong and a place to remember, maintain, reaffirm and 'enact' an identity which was vulnerable in a new setting (Hirschmann 2004; Levitt 2009). Moreover, transmitting 'Danishness' to the children could be viewed as another way of creating a 'way home' which could be appreciated in everyday life.

Annie, Karen, Evald and Per all had the wish to be in Denmark for longer periods of the year. Yet, based on her own experiences, Annie expresses her knowledge that returning home permanently would have severe consequences, *if* her children 'decide to stay in Australia':

I know my family has suffered severe deprivation, particularly my parents, from being unable to spend time with their grandchildren as they would have liked and ... I do not want to be in that situation too. So if my children decide to stay in Australia, I would like to stay here too most of the time and be part of their families.

Annie does not want to be in her own parents' situation. The statement also reveals that Annie perhaps hopes that her children might, instead, choose to settle in Denmark. Baldock (2000: 219) has noted that migrant parents retain a higher sense of belonging to their homeland insofar as their children decide to settle there as adults. Yet, this study indicates that such a decision may be influenced by the parents in the first place, as they transmit a sense of belonging to Denmark to the children during their upbringing.

Gendered and temporal influences

Most expressions of feelings of guilt towards parents in Denmark were found among female respondents, as with Lily, Karen and Annie. Moreover, although the emotional challenges of migrating were obvious among the majority of interviewees, they appeared to be less pronounced among males. It is also interesting to note that male migrants seemed less eager, or perhaps felt less obliged, to bring their children to Denmark than the female. Although Torben is thus aware to teach his young daughter a few Danish words, it seems more the wish of his Philippine wife to have brought her to visit Denmark. Torben's recent travel 'home' was his first in 30 years. The daughters of both Evald and Per had been to Denmark a handful of times, although the interviews do not indicate any sort of pressure that they should go. Accordingly, although many male respondents expressed that they were still 'Danish by heart', to different degree still kept a contact to the Danish environments, kept some Danish traditions and still visited Denmark once in a while, most seemed more at peace with the fact that they had now worked and created for themselves a good life in Australia.

The gendered differences of transnational care are currently the interest of many scholars. Although females in this study thus seem more emotionally challenged than males and also expressed a greater devotion to transmitting 'Danishness' to their children, this could confirm a gender-related aspect of transnational care noted elsewhere. As female migrants have been shown to feel a great obligation to nurture the emotional well-being of

people at home (Parreñas 2001), it has been demonstrated that females express a stronger sense of obligation to provide ‘hands-on’ care and visit parents often and that they are generally also more expected to do so (Baldassar 2008; Baldock 2000). The families of male migrants could have thus been more accepting of their departure, relieving them of their obligation to ‘care’, simply due to gender.

The devotion of female migrants to transmit culture could simply point to a gendered aspect of cultural transmission and support the idea that females take on central roles in maintaining family traditions as ‘symbolic bearers’ of the nation (Sharp 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997). Yet, this study indicates that such efforts are partly connected to, or may be enhanced by, feelings of guilt and partly motivated out of a gendered inclination to perform emotional labour towards parents. It is also possible, however, that families in Denmark would increasingly have granted males ‘licence to leave’, as many of them had migrated due to unemployment in Denmark. Finally, in evaluating expressions of such feelings of obligation, it should also be considered that there may be gender-related constraints in *speaking* of emotional topics. The interview with Evald, for example, clearly also indicates that he *thinks* about the weakened relation between his mother in Denmark and his daughter and granddaughter in Australia.

Coming to terms with life in Australia as well as efforts transmit ‘Danishness’ to the children out of feelings of guilt towards parents in Denmark may also have a temporal aspect to it. In the past few years, a growing body of literature on ageing in transnational contexts has emerged (e.g. Horn & Schweppe 2016; Näre, Walsh & Baldassar 2017; Walsh & Näre 2016; Wilding & Baldassar 2018), proposing that various aspects of ageing, life course and certain life events restructure transnational family relationships. This study indicates that migrants’ emotional hardships and efforts to transmit ‘Danishness’ to second generations may not only have a gendered but also a temporal aspect to it. Inga, for example, the oldest of the female respondents, who like Egon and Per had by now lived by far the most of her life in Australia, more so than the other females seemed at peace with her Australian life. Inga used to teach Danish language to children in Melbourne and struggled to hold on to ‘the Danish way’ when she first settled in Australia. As the following quote illustrates, she successfully transmitted Danish language to her children, although she only remembers this for a fact because she recorded it on a tape which was returned to her after her parents’ death:

We told Elisabeth [Inga’s youngest child] that she spoke Danish when she was 2,5 years old and I know that for a fact because we had these small tapes (...) and we sent those back and forth from Denmark. When she was 2 and it was Christmas, we made a tape for grandmother and grandfather in Denmark (..) and she had got birthday presents and Christmas presents and said “Tak, mormor, tak, tak for gaven” [Thanks, grandma, thanks, thanks for the present].

Both of Inga’s adult children are now married to Australians, however, and Elisabeth, Inga tells, does not remember much Danish anymore. Inga is also now witnessing her grandchildren growing up in Melbourne, the Danish language is disappearing more and

more from family conversations, and she now – with increasing willingness – lets it go. Like Per and Evald, she also never visits the Danish club anymore. The fact that her parents in Denmark are no longer old and in need of care may also play a significant role; they passed away years ago. Although aspects of temporal distance could be explored further, this study indicates that efforts to transmit Danish language and culture to the second generations could partly be viewed as part of the emotional labour work of female migrants, meant to soften feelings of guilt and recover a complicated relationship towards abandoned and deprived parents overseas. As time passes by and the parents pass away, however, those practices lose their urgency and the edge is taken off the emotional hardships.

Concluding remarks

Recent research has argued that ICTs can provide an ‘adequate’ means of ‘being there’ and sustain transnational family relationships despite great distances, especially as regards the circulation of care. Yet, most research looks only to the relationship between the two generations closest to each other but separated by distance, such as an ageing parent in the sending country and the migrant daughter or son overseas. In this article, I have proposed to broaden the scope to include generations further apart, since distance seems to play a significant role, not least to the relationship between grandparents in Denmark and grandchildren in Australia.

Through analysing the life story interviews of Danish migrants and their children in Australia, I have noted that migrant parents are particularly tuned at transmitting Danish self-perceptions and life practices to their children in Melbourne. Practically, this is done through a set of Danish spaces, which offer hands-on experiences with – and exposure to Danish culture and language, thus socialising second generations to Danish ways. The Danish church and the home in Melbourne appear to be central to this transmission, as well as visits to Denmark.

The interviews conducted in Melbourne indicated that migrant parents’ efforts to transmit Danish practices and self-perceptions to their children settled in Australia could be explained in different ways. Partly, they indicated that transmitting Danish culture and language to the children could relate to migrants’ emotional coping with the transition to a new country, particularly with feelings of being split between two countries and longing to be ‘back home’. There is no doubt that migrating to Australia has marked a significant turning point in the lives of the Danish migrants, a turning point which has triggered questions of identity, home and belonging. Passing on culture to their Australian-born offspring could be seen as a way of softening what is felt as lost, and, perhaps, as another way of creating an emotional refuge, a ‘way home’ which can be practised and appreciated in everyday life.

It is also possible that transmission of Danish self-perceptions and practices is done for the sake of the migrant children. One parent stated that she believed it would ‘enrich’ the lives of her children to know about Danish language and culture. Parents may feel that their

children would benefit from being able to ‘pull family ties’ and ‘act’ within a Danish society, should parents one day decide to move back to Denmark permanently – a possibility which is often taken into consideration.

Yet, I have also demonstrated that migrant parents’ efforts to teach their children about Danish culture and language are in some cases done for the sake of their parents in Denmark, as a practice of emotional labour meant to ‘recover’ a complicated relationship and heal emotional wounds fostered by migrants’ decisions to live at a distance. There is a reason to think that parents in Denmark perceive ‘distance’ as a problem to family relationships. One of the quotes in this study for example stated that parents in Denmark always *accuse* migrants of *going so far away*. Migrant parents realise that they have deprived their parents of their grandchildren. The life story of Julie, a descendant, confirms this. She notes that she ‘lacks a base of sameness’ with her grandparents in Denmark, and she stresses that they are not part of each other’s separate lives. Moreover, the interviews indicate that second generations only spend little time, if any, in maintaining the relationships with the family overseas through ICTs. Therefore, while transnational family relationships, not least between grandparents and grandchildren, may suffer due to distance, so does distance *indirectly* seem to affect the relationship between migrants and their parents in Denmark. Perhaps due to the lack of ‘licence to leave’, and also because of what is perceived as a ‘relational robbery’ of the grandchildren, migrants experience the relationship with their parents as connected with emotions such as guilt, anger, sadness and being hurt. Those feelings are fostered by separation.

Although migrants strive to transmit Danish culture and language through the church and the home in Melbourne, the visit is yet of vital importance. Bringing the children to visit Denmark becomes a strategy employed by migrants in making the transmission of ‘Danishness’ successful. Perhaps due to the privileged nature of Danish migration, this function of *the visit*, however, seems largely unnoticed. The visit also has potential to soften emotions of guilt towards parents in Denmark. Through transmission and visits, migrants can prove to their parents that they can speak and be close with their grandchildren, despite the decision to migrate. Therefore, second generations are encouraged to learn Danish language and cultural skills. But as *habitus* and self ‘become’ both through influences of family and environment, and as Australia seems to have become the primary place of belonging among the second generations in this study, the interviews rarely indicate that it is their own need from the outset. Rather, the interviews indicate that migrant parents influence children’s ‘becoming’ and ‘install’ within them a sense of belonging to Denmark through cultural transmission during their childhood and youth. The study also shows that the efforts to transmit culture and language to the children could be viewed as a part of the emotional labour efforts done primarily by female migrants to recover a damaged relationship towards their deprived parents in Denmark. Yet, as time passes and parents pass away, the study also indicates that practices are increasingly let go and emotional hardships relieved. All in all, however, despite the ever-evolving possibilities of ICTs, there may yet be reason to question the impacts of ‘distance’ in transnational family lives.

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