

INTRODUCTION

Aging in place in a mobile world: New media and older people's support networks

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This Focus Topic brings together an analysis of cross-cutting fields of critical importance for the future: aging, migrant transnationalism, and new media. While each of these fields has prompted vast literatures, their intersections remain surprisingly under-acknowledged. Yet, it is at these intersections that a significant social transformation is currently underway that requires attention from researchers, policy makers, and service providers engaging with older populations.

It is now common knowledge that population aging is a significant and growing issue for many developed nations around the world, raising important questions about how to best accommodate the needs and opportunities of large numbers of older people, comprising a larger proportion of the population (Ezeh, Bongaarts, & Mberu, 2012; Lutz, Sanderson, & Scherbov, 2008). One common response to this issue by policy makers has been to explore strategies to promote and support “aging in place,” by improving the ability of older people to remain living independently in their own homes and local communities, regardless of age, income, or ability level (Hillcoat-Nalletamby & Ogg, 2014; Vasunilashorn et al., 2012). Studies of aging in place have demonstrated the benefits that can be gained from facilitating people's engagement in their local neighborhoods and communities, including the prevention of social isolation that might result from reduced physical mobility. This has the advantage of reducing the costs of aged care and fulfilling the goals and aims of many older people to remain in their own homes, especially those living in western countries. However, the emphasis on what services and facilities are required in local neighborhoods or communities to support healthy aging in place tends to overlook the increasing role of migration, mobility, and new media in the lives of older people.

It is now clear that more and more people are living “mobile lives” (Elliott & Urry, 2010) as a result of international and intra-national, permanent and temporary forms of migration and movement. Indeed, many of the developed nations that are experiencing population aging also have large – and aging – migrant populations. Aged migrants include both people who arrived in countries of settlement as young adults in the twentieth century as well as those relocating to establish new lives in their retirement in the twenty-first century. For these populations, “aging in place” is not a simple formula. It is not always clear in which “place” older migrants are willing or able to live as they age. While many elderly migrants

have been living and working for decades outside of their countries of birth, a good proportion of them nevertheless maintain connections to and longings for the places, people, and cultural practices of the nations they left behind. They sustain transnational social networks, transnational families, and transnational communities that link people and places across national borders and across distances. Then there are the growing numbers of elderly “non-migrants” who have remained in their country of birth, but whose children and grandchildren have moved away (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007). Whether their loved ones live great distances overseas or in neighboring towns, these “stay-behind” elderly also become members of families separated by distance. Aging in place for these people also involves grappling with support networks that transcend physical space.

Current studies of transnational migration and “mobile lives” include detailed investigations of how social relationships are sustained across distances (e.g., Elliott & Urry, 2010; Madianou & Miller, 2012). However, they generally focus on young and middle-aged adults, with little attention to the experiences and practices of elderly people. Yet, experiences of aging are becoming increasingly characterized by transnational orientations as well as by ongoing geographic mobilities (Baldassar, 2007). Older people are now traveling regularly and routinely across significant distances. It is also clear that many older people are sustaining transnational imaginaries and belongings that support practices of and desires for movement across borders (e.g., Gardner, 2002). This new reality of increasing mobility requires studies of aging, and studies of aging in place, to move beyond paying attention to the ability of older people to negotiate a local neighborhood, and instead begin to consider how to best facilitate their movement and engagement across national borders and across vast distances (see, for example, Buffel, 2015; Coe & Dossa, 2017; Gorfinkel & Escrivá, 2012; Heikkinen & Lumme-Sandt, 2013; Horn & Schweppe, 2016; Horn, Schweppe, & Um, 2013; Nare, Walsh, & Baldassar, *in press*; Torres, 2013; Zhou, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Zontini, 2015).

Virtual forms of mobility, in this perspective, are no less relevant than physical ones. An important aspect of transnational mobilities is the new technologies that make it possible for people to stay connected and remain socially engaged across distances and in spite of movement. Everyday lives have been transformed by the emergence of new media, including “a plethora of internet- and mobile-phone based platforms such as email, instant messaging (IM), social networking sites (SNS) and webcam via voice over internet protocol (VOIP)” (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Yet, in spite of these dramatic transformations of the social landscape, the literature on aging remains focused on assumptions that aged care and support networks are necessarily local and proximate. The transformation of communication technologies and practices as a result of the emergence of new media and associated infrastructures and platforms is an important part of the newly emerging and increasingly complex picture of transnational aging.

The papers in this Focus Topic seek to highlight the pressing need to examine the transformation of aging by transnational migration and new media. Collectively, they demonstrate that policies and understandings of aging in place largely fail to acknowledge the cultural diversity of aging and the increasing complexity of notions of “place” (Gieryn, 2000) in people’s everyday lives. The papers here provide evidence that, increasingly, people are aging within social contexts that are geographically dispersed, both within and across national borders. This can take a number of forms, with some surprising shifts from classical understandings of migrant trajectories as one-way movements culminating in settlement. For example, older migrants who continue living in the nation to which they have migrated may

nevertheless direct their imagination towards the nation in which they were born as their most important site of home and belonging. As Glenda Ballantyne and Liam Burke argue in their paper titled 'People live in their heads a lot': Polymedia, life course, and meanings of home among Melbourne's older Irish community (this issue), the migration experience of these "classic migrants" continues to shift across the life course. While the Irish migrants they interviewed had limited connections to Ireland when they first arrived as young adults and then while they were busy raising their families, this changed as their children attained independence. As they became older, the ties to their Irish home were sometimes felt more strongly, prompting additional efforts to make regular visits back and, in particular, more consistent engagement with the daily news and events of Ireland as part of the routines of their everyday lives in Australia. The capacity to stream current news in Australia as it is being broadcast in Ireland helps to create a new sense of multiple homes that serves to weave together past and present, here and there in a new mode of "aging in place."

An important distinction to be made here is between transnational "belonging" on the one hand, and transnational "behavior" or "practices" on the other (cf. Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). This is the focus of the study by Jolien Klok, Theo G. van Tilburg, Bianca Suanet, & Tineke Fokkema, titled "Transnational aging among older Turkish and Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands: Determinants of transnational behavior and transnational belonging" (this issue). In this paper, an analysis of the Longitudinal Aging Survey in the Netherlands is used to explore the factors impacting on transnational behavior and belonging of two distinct groups of migrants, those from Turkey and those from Morocco. The findings are complex, pointing to the important role of social norms and cultural expectations in shaping how people respond to opportunities and constraints as they age. For example, while those more satisfied with their incomes might be expected to be more capable of traveling and visiting their country of birth, they were nevertheless found to be less likely to undertake such travel. While many older migrants might be inclined to reminisce about their countries of birth and express a desire to return, the complexities of their social relationships and circumstances often inhibit translating this into the increased practice of visits or of permanent return. Family connections in both the country of birth and the country of settlement play an important role in shaping the extent to which older migrants orient themselves towards each country or express an emotional attachment to each place. The important role of the "visit home" in migrant trajectories – particularly the longed for and imagined (as opposed to the real) – takes on special significance as people age and as their mobility often becomes more limited (Baldassar, 2011).

Wherever the place in which they are aging, increasingly older people are actively engaged in caring for their children and grandchildren who live at a distance (e.g., Sigad & Eisikovits, 2013). Their experiences highlight the important role of technologies, and the challenges of accessing and using them, in the lives of aging transnational family members. Studies of new media that focus on older people tend to emphasize the digital divide and the generation gap, with the elderly mostly appraised as opting out of engagement with new technologies. The fast-growing literature on assistive technologies in aged care tends to confirm this view by pointing to the tendency for older people to reject new technologies being imposed upon them (Procter, Greenhalgh, Wherton, & Sugarhood, 2014). What is less often considered is the capacity for older people to engage with new technologies – including new media – that are meaningful to them, and that support their own desires to remain connected and engaged with people and places dispersed across distances, as the study by

Loredana Ivan and Mireia Fernández-Ardévol (this issue) shows. Their paper, titled “Older people and the use of ICTs to communicate with children and grandchildren,” offers an important corrective to the litany of “failed outcomes” reported in the literature on assistive technologies for the elderly. While study after study of excellent technological interventions show a lack of sustained engagement by older users, Ivan and Fernández-Ardévol highlight the fundamental role of motivation in the successful uptake of new technology use. The very diverse range of older participants in their study, living across several places (including Barcelona, Bucharest and rural areas, Toronto, Los Angeles, Montevideo, and Lima) *all* showed a keen interest in using ICTs for the purpose of staying in touch with family members who are living long distances away. This motivation – to sustain care and support networks and to give and receive support across distances – was the essential ingredient in successful uptake and use.

This is a critical finding for future policies in aged care, particularly those focused on aging in place. Whether they continue living in their own homes or move into residential care, older people often experience a decline in social engagement over time and poorer health and wellbeing outcomes as a result. This can be particularly acute when family members live at a distance or even overseas. The article by María Brandhorst, titled “A lo lejos’ – Aging in place and transnational care in the case of transnational migration between Cuba and Germany” (this issue), provides a case in point. We know from work on transnational families that ICTs and new media, and digital citizenship more generally, can play a transformative role in increasing the social connectivity, independence, social engagement, and health and wellbeing outcomes for older people (Coeckelbergh, 2013; Coelho & Duarte, 2015; Garattini et al., 2012; O’Mara, 2014; Saborowski & Kollak, 2015). This is a matter of real connections, but also of the “work of imagination” around them, as Brandhorst remarks. There is hardly a way of making sense of these interpersonal virtual connections, whatever their actual reach, except by looking also at “the emotional closeness and the feeling of connectedness” that they are expected to mediate. However, even when older people are able to and interested in using these technologies, the issue of their distribution, cost, and accessibility should not go unnoticed. As Brandhorst’s case study suggests, new technologies may also have the potential to reproduce, or exacerbate, pre-existing inequalities – based not only on the selective ability to use them, but on their material availability in the first place.

The work of imagination is made palpable and embodied in Maria Marchetti-Mercer’s paper (this issue), aptly titled, “The screen has such sharp edges to hug’: The relational consequences of emigration in transnational South African emigrant families.” In her examination of the relational consequences of emigration in transnational South African emigrant families, Marchetti-Mercer shows that for elders remaining in their country of origin, the effectiveness of virtual connectedness for maintaining family relations across borders is also largely linked to the extent to which communication technologies offer them new means to retain their identity as “elders” in the family. Here we are reminded of the important symbolic work of maintaining the status of elders in the family system; by continuing to care for their children and grandchildren, by playing an active role in the transmission of family cultures across generations, and by co-creating a “shared history” with their distant kin. In order to fulfill these various tasks and roles through ICTs, elders need to develop the capacity to re-create routines, to contribute to social networking websites to feed the family’s narrative and co-create new memories, and to imagine creative ways of interacting with younger children on Skype. The challenges implicit in developing these new capabilities leads

Marchetti-Mercer to describe the elderly as “technological migrants” who navigate a whole new world of communication, and who often struggle to find satisfactory ways to compensate their need for physical co-presence through virtual contacts. This chapter brings forward a relational perspective of “home” as an emotional space where people feel they belong. As much as a physical home, though, this emotional space needs to be carefully attended to, over time, in order to retain a sense of “homeliness” (Boccagni, 2016a).

Taken together, the papers in this Focus Topic explore some timely questions as they make an important contribution to examining mobilities and technologies in approaches to aging. It also builds on our own previous work examining aging, mobilities, and technologies as a new paradigm for reassessing care and support networks (Baldassar, 2016; Merla, 2015). In their research on transnational families, Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla and Wilding (2016) have highlighted how there is much that is *presumed* to be different about caring in proximate and distant contexts, such that distance and mobility have persistently been seen as an obstacle to the delivery of care, creating a conceptual roadblock to analysis of aging and care in a mobile world. In comparison to local informal support networks, distant care networks are evaluated as lesser forms of caregiving because of the very powerful dominant normative understanding of care as requiring proximity (cf. Baldassar & Merla, 2014). This is in distinct contrast to recent research on transnational families that demonstrates that a broad range of caregiving relationships are now conducted across distances and national borders, including those between spouses (e.g., Mahler 2001), those between mothers and their dependent children (e.g., Gardner, 2012; Carling et al., 2012), and those between aging parents and their adult children (Zontini, 2012). As Merla, François, and Janssen (2014) note, members of transnational families experience a tension between geographical distance and emotional proximity, which can partly be alleviated through virtual communication. But, as the papers in this Issue reveal, this potential may not be realized for those elders who are not comfortable with virtual communication and have the feeling that technologies do not allow them to sustain intimate relations across distances in a way that balances the absence of physical co-presence.

There is much work still to be done and a host of questions to consider. For example, how is the emerging polymedia environment transforming the ways in which the elderly experience aging in place? In what ways is the social (and even intimate) life of the elderly no longer conducted wholly “in place,” within neat physical and territorial boundaries? How can ideas about “aging in place” be conceived of as incorporating distant ties and connections? How are elderly bodies located in particular places able to best be supported by access to new media? Is the thesis of “aging in place” simply about being supported to remain in a specific geographic location or is it best understood as an embodied and culturally informed experience of location that is shaped by social interactions that can be face-to-face or mediated, local or distant? In the latter sense, the notion of *place* could perhaps be revisited through the more subtle category of *home*. This points to the relevance of the environmental, affective, emotional, and relational underpinnings of older people’s wellbeing which, indeed, need not overlap with one location but may be stretched across several, as long as meaningful connections are built and reproduced between them (Boccagni, 2016a; Walsh & Nare, 2015). The potential for such conditions to exist, and the structural factors that shape them, emerge as a critical background for research on aging, migration, and distant care.

With this Focus Topic, the authors explore new perspectives for revaluing aging in ways that recognize that the strategies people use to maintain contact across distances are transforming the very nature of relationships and the foundations of human relatedness, inter-subjectivity, autonomy, and interdependence (Madianou & Miller, 2012, p. 2; Ling, 2008), including those that are the basis of the care, support, and personhood of older people. The papers in this collection provide detailed ethnographic evidence that shows how “neighborhoods” and “social contexts” are not necessarily bound by location but rather occur in multiple spaces simultaneously (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). The collection considers how the recent proliferation of a wide range of affordable communication technologies is central to this transformation in our social and intimate lives, with a particular focus on what these new media mean for aging and the importance of “aging in place.” This also highlights the importance of developing digital literacy programs for elders in order to support their capacity to “stay in touch” with their distant relatives in satisfactory ways. The delivery of health services across transnational networks is also implicated here, with trailblazing work being done by Bacigalupe and his colleagues (e.g., Bacigalupe & Cámara, 2012; Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011). The implications for social and migration policy are significant, yet remain largely invisible (Boccagni, 2016b). Indeed, the emphasis on policy development around “aging in place,” while important, serves to distract attention away from other possible experiences of aging. It is now necessary to consider the implications of aging “out of place” and even “beyond” place, as new transnational and virtual social fields become more significant for social life.

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