

Salvadoran Migrants in Australia: An Analysis of Transnational Families' Capability to Care across Borders

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on the transnational care practices of Salvadoran refugees living in Perth (Western Australia) and who care for their ageing parents who have remained in their home country. The analysis is based on a conceptualization of transnational care as a set of capabilities that include, but are not limited to, mobility, social relations, time allocation, education and knowledge, paid work and communication (Merla and Baldassar, 2011). I focus in particular on the impact of Salvadoran refugees' difficult access to, and use of, these capabilities on their capacity to fulfil their culturally defined sense of obligation to care for their ageing parents. Results show that extended transnational kinship networks play a major role in helping migrants overcome obstacles to transnational caregiving.

INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES AND CARE

Transnational families have been defined as "families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely 'familyhood', even across national borders" (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002b: 18). Research has shown that, contrary to the assumption that geographical distance negatively affects kin relationships (Joseph and Hallman, 1998; Morgan, 1975), transnational families exchange all the forms of care and support that are exchanged in proximate families (Al-Ali, 2002; Baldassar et al., 2007; Zontini and Reynolds, 2007). These not only include financial assistance, but also emotional and practical support that can be exchanged transnationally through the use of communication technologies, and personal care and accommodation that require co-presence and can only be exchanged during visits (Baldassar et al., 2007). Goulbourne et al. (2009) see the exchange of care across boundaries as a key factor for the maintenance of transnational families. Baldassar et al. (2007) define transnational caregiving practices as being mediated by a dialectic encompassing the capacity of individual members to engage in caregiving and their culturally informed sense of obligation to provide care, as well as the particularistic kin relationships and negotiated family commitments that people with specific family networks share (Baldassar et al., 2007). Power relations and inequalities shape transnational caregiving practices. Factors such as gender, social class or ethnicity create inequalities within and between transnational families

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(Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002a; LeGall, 2005). State policies and international regulations also play a major role in facilitating or hindering the maintenance of family solidarity across borders (Al-Ali, 2002; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2007; Merla and Baldassar, 2011). Elsewhere, I propose with Baldassar a conceptualization of transnational caregiving as practices that are influenced by a set of capabilities that includes mobility, social relations, time allocation, education and knowledge, paid work and communication (Merla and Baldassar, 2011). We underline that access to, and use of, these capabilities is strongly influenced by both home- and host-country formal institutional and informal policies. Drawing on this conceptualization, I focus in this paper on the impact of Salvadoran refugees’ difficult access to, and use of, these capabilities on their capacity to fulfil their culturally defined sense of obligation to care for their ageing parents.

DATA COLLECTION

I have drawn the data for this paper from comparative research on transnational care practices of Latin American migrants living in Australia and Europe, which analyses the impact of low levels of social, economic and/or cultural capital on migrants’ ability to exchange care across borders with their elderly parents. The study focuses on migrants who occupy a low-qualified and/or low-remunerated position despite coming from a mix of working-class and professional backgrounds. Data collection in Australia comprised 22 life-history interviews and participant observation with Salvadoran migrants living in Perth, Western Australia, the majority of whom arrived under the United Nations Refugee Programme in the 1980s and the 1990s. Between 1982 and 1993, a total of 9,993 Salvadoran refugees migrated to Australia, the majority arriving between 1988 and 1992 (Santos, 2006: 80). According to the Western Australia Community Profile 2001 Census, 1,200 Salvadorans live in Western Australia (Office of Multicultural Interests, 2005: 8).

The characteristics of the 22 Salvadorans who participated to this study are described in Table 1. Participant observation involved observing people’s lifestyles, the display of photographs of their distant kin and other signs and symbols of transnational family relations in their homes, and participation in the activities of Latin American social clubs and churches. Key informants such as community leaders and social workers were also interviewed. Data were analysed using the Nvivo software.

TABLE 1
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SALVADORANS WHO WERE INTERVIEWED

Number of participants	22, of which 6 couples	
Gender	Female	13
	Male	9
Occupation in El Salvador	Professional and qualified positions	17
	Low-qualified	4
	Unemployed	1 (low-qualified)
Occupation in Australia at the time of the interview	Professional and qualified positions	6
	Low-qualified	14
	Unemployed	2
Age at the time of the interview	31–40	5
	41–50	7
	51–60	7
	60+	3

FAMILIALISM IN EL SALVADOR

El Salvador is an informal–familialist welfare regime, in which families not only carry the full burden of care duties but also turn into production units and social protection networks to compensate for the absence of the state and the weakness of formal labour markets (Martínez Franzoni, 2008). Only a small proportion of Salvadoran households (13.8%), mainly headed by professionals, benefit from a weak level of social protection and can afford private services. The majority of households (53.7%), with low and unstable incomes, count on extended family solidarity and community networks to face social risks. The rest of the population (32.5%) manages social risks through a mix of family and market, but without the financial security of the first group or the stable and extended family networks of the second group (Martínez Franzoni, 2008: 81–82). Elderly Salvadorans who cannot afford private care rely entirely on family and community solidarity, not only for the provision of personal “hands-on” care but also for financial support, as pension benefits and free public health services are only available to a small proportion of the population. Remittances and extended family support are critical strategies to increase income and manage unpaid work. If women assume the quasi-exclusive responsibility of unpaid work in general, and care in particular (Martínez Franzoni, 2005), the idea that children should support their parents financially, practically and emotionally is widespread among the Salvadoran population, all classes and genders included (Benavides et al., 2004). There is a strong sense of duty to care for one’s ageing parents, and this sense does not fade with distance (Merla, 2010).

THE CAPABILITY OF SALVADORAN MIGRANTS TO EXCHANGE CARE WITH THEIR ELDERLY PARENTS ACROSS BORDERS

Capabilities refer to “what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead” (Sen, 1987: 36). They represent people’s potential functionings, or freedom to be and do what they want to be and do, and together constitute what makes a life valuable. This approach acknowledges that people differ in their capacity to transform the resources that are available to them into capabilities. Personal, social or environmental factors, such as physical and mental handicaps, economic resources, social and cultural norms, public infrastructure and formal and informal policies, mediate the possibility of achieving functionings. Examples of capabilities include being well fed, taking part in the community, relating to other people, working in the labour market, being healthy, and being able to raise children and take care of others (Robeyns, 2003: 63). In an effort to underline the links between migrants’ well-being and care, I propose with Baldassar a conceptualization of transnational caregiving as practices that are influenced by a set of capabilities that includes, but is not limited to, mobility, communication, social relations, time allocation, education and knowledge, and paid work (Merla and Baldassar, 2011). The capabilities that influence migrants’ ability to exchange care with their parents living in a distant country are presented in Table 2.

Access to, and use of, these capabilities is influenced by home- and host-country formal institutional and informal policies. These include, among others, migration and employment policies, work–family balance, education and gender equality policies, airline and communication regulations, and the development of communication infrastructures. The ability to travel back home and host parents is influenced by migration and visa policies, leave policies and airline regulations. Employment, leave policies and gender equality policies partially shape men’s and women’s capacity to have time to exchange care with distant relatives. And migrants’ ability to communicate at a distance largely depends on communication regulations and infrastructures. In the book chapter in which Baldassar and I presented this model (Merla and Baldassar, 2011), we did not reflect on the specific characteristics and interrelationships of the different factors that we included in our

TABLE 2
FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CAPABILITY TO CARE ACROSS BORDERS

Mobility	Being able to travel back home when necessary, and to host parents
Communication	Being able to communicate at a distance and to send items; this includes the physical ability to communicate
Social relations	Having access to a social network of mutual support in the host and home country
Time allocation	Having time to exchange care
Education and knowledge	Having the possibility of learning how to use IT, and of learning English; recognition of qualifications
Paid work	Having access to a satisfying employment situation and, if unemployed, to unemployment benefits

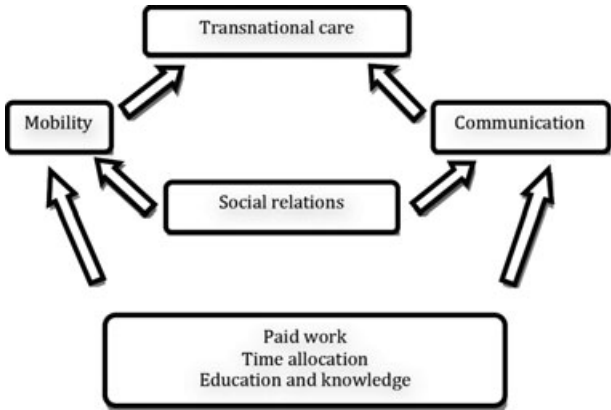
analysis. However, as Figure 1 shows, the factors listed in Table 2 can be classified in three inter-related categories.

Mobility and communication are transnational practices themselves, and it is through them that care is exchanged across borders. The capacity to travel and communicate at a distance is influenced by another set of factors that includes paid work, education and knowledge, and time allocation. For instance, having access to a satisfying employment position or unemployment benefits influences a migrant’s capacity to travel and communicate at a distance, while having the possibility to learn how to use IT impacts on the capacity to communicate with relatives. Social networks occupy a specific position in this framework: they can potentially help migrants overcome obstacles related to insufficient access to paid work and education and knowledge, or to difficulties in allocating time to transnational caregiving. In the remainder of this paper, I illustrate these interrelationships through the analysis of Salvadoran migrants access to, and use of, mobility and communication for transnational caregiving purposes. I pay specific attention to the role that migrants’ family networks play in improving their capability to care across borders.

Restricted mobility

Frequent journeys between the home and the host country are one of the main features of transnational families (Baldassar, 2001) and an essential way of maintaining kin connections (Mason,

FIGURE 1
A CLASSIFICATION OF THE FACTORS LISTED IN TABLE 2



2004). All the Salvadorans who were interviewed in this study expressed a strong desire to spend time with their parents in their home country or to invite them to visit Australia. Unfortunately, the frequency of visits to El Salvador is very low – some migrants have not paid a single visit to their families. The prioritization of remittances and telephone conversations is the main factor that explains this situation. Migrants whose parents benefit from a pension and free health services have better opportunities to save money for a trip back home than those who regularly send them remittances. But even when remittances are not regular, the ability to finance travel is seriously affected by the precariousness of Salvadoran migrants' economic situation, especially in the first years following settlement. These financial limitations are related, among other things, to very restricted access to the capabilities of paid work and education and knowledge.

Salvadoran refugees who migrated to Australia during the civil war included semi-skilled and unskilled workers, as well as professionals such as engineers and doctors, but few of them were able to find a similar position in Australia. As part of the settlement scheme, and until they found appropriate housing, refugees were usually accommodated in migration centres, where they had access to English classes, health and unemployment benefits, and other services (Santos, 2006: 82). Refugees were also offered employment search support, and some professionals were invited to upgrade their training, but both of these avenues required a good command of English. As Santos points out, for Salvadoran migrants, "the need to learn the English language and to have their qualifications recognized in Australia proved insurmountable. Often this results in being downgraded in their employment or becoming unemployed/underemployed for long periods of time" (Santos, 2006: 83). These difficulties are also reflected in the socio-economic situation of the Salvadorans who participated in this study. Seventeen occupied a qualified or professional position in their home country, working as nurses, doctors, engineers and so on. After several years, only six of them were able to get a similar position in Australia. Several factors contributed to these difficulties. Migrants with children could not afford to go back to university and live on unemployment benefits, and took the first job they could find – usually low-qualified employment in the cleaning industry (for men and women) or in the caring sector (mainly for women). In some families, women postponed their return to the labour market to look after their young children and help them adapt to their new environment, while their husbands took a low-qualified job. This was the case for Monica, a sewing worker in El Salvador, and her husband Alex, a primary teacher. Monica gave up her English lessons because she worried about her 2-year-old son, who she left in a crèche where no one could speak Spanish. She also found the classes too difficult. She stayed home to look after her youngest son and Alex took a casual cleaning job in a supermarket. A few years later, he became a school gardener. When her youngest child reached school age, Monica got a sewing job in a private company, but soon resigned because of her poor English. Since then, she has been working casually as a cleaner.

Even those who took English classes struggled to acquire a sufficient command of English, and this represented an obstacle to their insertion in the labour market. Despite taking English classes at university and hiring a private English teacher, Amparo and Roberto, who were, respectively, a manager and an accountant in their home country, never became fluent in English. Soon after their arrival, Roberto earned money by distributing magazines to people's mailboxes. Amparo helped him occasionally. Later, Roberto took a cleaning job in a shopping centre, while Amparo stayed at home to care for their young children. When their youngest daughter entered primary school, she trained to become a patient care assistant and has been working in this area since then.

As a result, all the migrants I interviewed were confronted with financial difficulties that impacted on their capability to care for their parents who had been left behind. Confronted with limited resources to invest in transnational caring, migrants generally focused on giving their parents financial support to cover daily expenses and/or urgent needs, and on staying in touch through telephone conversations – and, in a limited number of cases, Internet conversations. The scarcity of

resources probably has its greatest effect on the ability to finance travel. As Al-Ali notes, scarcity of resources in transnational migrant families involves a constant negotiation of how much to spend on one's life in the host country, how much to send back home and how much to save (Al-Ali, 2002).

It is important to acknowledge that the situation of families changes over time. During their first years of settlement, all the Salvadoran migrants were confronted with financial difficulties, but the financial situation of some families improved: four migrants completed university degrees and found a well-paid job; others saved enough money to buy their own houses; and adult children started to contribute to the family budget.

Visits from parents are also exceptional. Australia classifies Latin American countries as high-risk countries (which means that the probability that visitors will try to remain illegally in Australia is high), and El Salvador citizens require both expensive visas and health insurance, which are more expensive for elderly people, making it more difficult, time-consuming and costly for elderly Salvadoran parents to visit. The parents' mobility is also restricted by their lack of familiarity with air travel, and their subsequent fear of travelling alone and having to transit through non-Spanish-speaking airports. Health problems such as a reduced capacity to walk also make travel more difficult. Malena, a former shop owner in El Salvador who now works as a casual carer, would like to invite her disabled mother to Australia, but cannot afford to finance the trip for another relative who would assist her during the journey. Travelling for extended periods of time also involves a negotiation of family duties and commitments: parents may be reluctant to leave their children and grandchildren behind for several weeks, and those planning to travel alone for practical or financial reasons face the prospect of leaving their partners behind. This is one of the major obstacles to a visit from Malena's father. He refuses to travel without his new wife.

Iñacio, a former anaesthesiologist who is now a part-time cleaner and pastor, has not seen his mother since he left El Salvador 13 years ago. He explains the reasons for not visiting her:¹

One of the reasons is that we all want to go [Iñacio, his wife and their six children], but this involves too much money, a lot of money. With God's help I'd like to go there, but only for a short period of time, because I've always been close to my mum and it's already been 13 years since I last saw her, and it's hard. ... As my wife says, we talk, we chat together, but it's not the same ... And many people say "yes but you send her money", but it's not the same; sending US \$100 does not replace being with her when she's unwell. One time she was very ill, she had a car accident. We didn't know what to do, I even considered travelling there, but my mother told me not to worry and that the best thing to do was to save that money and send it to cover her medical expenses. And that's what we did.

As this example shows, the decision to travel is subject to family negotiations that include several people, such as the migrants' parents, his or her siblings, his or her partner, and sometimes their children. Different aspects are weighed up, such as the ageing parents' current need of financial support; the availability of funds for financing the trip, including the willingness of siblings to help out; the number of persons who will benefit from the visit; the time that the traveller can spend away from his employment and household members, including availability of paid leave; the partner's capacity to look after himself and/or his children in the absence of the traveller and the help he/she might get from other relatives; and so on. For instance, Alex and Monica agreed that they would travel in turns for 4 weeks, every 2 years. Alex accumulates his annual paid vacations and uses them to visit his family. Each made the first visit with their youngest child (as children under age 2 pay a reduced fee), and travelled alone the following times. The partner who stays in Australia looks after the children and the house. They prefer to visit El Salvador rather than inviting their parents to Australia, as they can be reunited not only with their parents, but also siblings and other relatives.

Communication patterns

Not being able to travel regularly to El Salvador limits Salvadoran migrants' capacity to provide hands-on care to their parents. Their main contribution, apart from providing financial support to their kin, consists of offering them emotional and practical support at a distance, through letters and telephone and Internet conversations. As Zontini and Reynolds underline, "Frequent and regular telephone conversations are an important way to keep families together, updating scattered members about what is going on in each other's lives, providing emotional support and even directing and organizing more hands on care from other family members" (Zontini and Reynolds, 2007: 5). Migrants' capacity to communicate with their parents and send them gifts largely depends on the availability and affordability of communication technologies in both the home and host countries, such as a reliable postal system, telephone lines and Internet connections. In this regard, the gap between Australia and El Salvador is striking. According to the "ICT at a glance" World Bank statistics,² in 2005, 14.1 per cent of Salvadorians had access to telephone main lines, compared to 56.4 per cent of Australians. Internet users represented 9.3 per cent of the population in El Salvador, compared to 69.8 per cent in Australia. And only 5.1 per cent of the Salvadoran population had access to a personal computer, compared to 68.3 per cent of Australians. The pricing tariff for the Internet is quite similar in the two countries (US\$22.6 per month in El Salvador and US\$22.8 in Australia), a figure that is particularly salient considering that 19 per cent of the Salvadoran population live on less than US\$1 per day. As a result, communication between migrants and their distant kin goes one way, from Australia to El Salvador, except in cases of extreme emergencies. Despite these difficulties, the vast majority of Salvadorans keep in regular contact with their distant kin. The frequency of telephone contacts ranges from weekly conversations (in the vast majority of cases) to four calls per year. Migrants also communicate with their parents on special occasions such as Christmas or Mother's Day. The frequency of contact increases when a problem arises, such as a major health issue. When his father suffered from depression, Rafael, a former chemistry student who is now a hair stylist in Perth, called his parents several times a week to provide them emotional support and make sure they had everything they needed.

In contrast, Internet communication is very limited in this sample. This is not only due to the North–South digital divide, but also to inequalities within Australian society. When they arrived in Australia, very few migrants were familiar with computers, and none of them took IT classes in Australia. However, some families use the Internet, with the assistance of their Australian children. Iñacio exchanges daily emails with his mother. He bought a computer for his children, and they showed him how to use the Internet. His mother is a retired secretary who has a computer and Internet connection at home. In El Salvador, ageing parents can also sometimes count on the help of their children or grandchildren, who use the technology on their behalf and play the role of key informants. This is one of the many examples of the role that family networks play in facilitating the exchange of care between adult migrants and their parents. This will be the particular focus of the next section.

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY NETWORKS

Extended family networks, including, among others, the migrant's children, siblings, nieces and nephews, play a major role in facilitating the exchange of care across borders. Family solidarity plays out at different levels. Kin help to compensate for the lack of a communication infrastructure through family members offering their own telephone lines, computers and Internet connections in the service of transnational caregiving. They also help to overcome financial difficulties linked to the prohibitive cost of telephone communication between El Salvador and Australia. A typical example is a brother living in the United States (USA) who relays information between his parents

in El Salvador and his Australian sister. In emergencies, family members in El Salvador know they can call family in the USA at a lower cost and ask them to inform the migrants in Australia. Kin living in El Salvador also assist illiterate parents in the exchange of letters and emails with their distant child.

The family network of solidarity that is organized around Esmeralda's well-being provides an example of the influence of social relations on the capability to care across borders. The main members of this network are Esmeralda's children: Sonia and Malena, who live in Australia and who participated in this study; Eva, Lara and Fredo, who live in the USA; and Carla, Fidel and his wife Anna, who are based in El Salvador. Sonia worked as a secretary and shop holder in El Salvador. She moved to the USA in the 1980s and worked there for several years as a cleaner. She is very close to her mother, who lived with her for a while before moving to Houston to work as a domestic employee and help her daughter Eva raise her disabled child. In 2002, Sonia and Esmeralda visited Malena in Australia and Sonia fell in love with an Australian citizen. They got married and she moved into his house. For 2 years, she worked at the same egg farm as Malena, but in 2004 she stopped working to care for her husband, who suffers from schizophrenia. Over the years, Esmeralda's health has declined. Eva looked after her while working full time, but when Esmeralda became unable to walk, the family agreed that she would move back to San Salvador to live with her youngest daughter, Carla, and three adult granddaughters.

According to Coenen-Huther et al.'s (1994) typology of family networks of solidarity, Sonia is the main "organizer" and "sentinel" of her kinship network (Coenen-Huther et al., 1994: 137–138). She is a sentinel, because she always knows what is happening to her mother, when she needs help and what she needs, and she circulates the information within the network. She is also the network's main organizer: she organizes the provision of care at a distance by mobilizing other network members. Sonia fulfils this double role thanks to her impressive communication network. She has weekly telephone conversations with her mother and regularly calls her siblings and her sister-in-law Anna. When she cannot get in touch with Esmeralda, she calls Anna in San Salvador or Eva in Houston, and they call Carla to check that everything's fine – sparing Sonia the cost of an international telephone call to her sister's mobile phone. Sonia can also count on nieces and cousins living near her mother:

All my antennas are switched on, you know. I call my nieces, I tell one, go to my mum's house and check how she is.

Sonia's sister-in-law is her major source of information and, as the following quote shows, often provides Esmeralda with the personal support that Sonia cannot offer at a distance, with the help of her husband and son:

I talked to mummy and she wasn't feeling well, she was in terrible pain and she said that my sister had left her alone, so I called my sister-in-law, look, mum's very sick, don't leave her alone ... So my sister-in-law called my mother ... she couldn't cope with this pain and the fever ... [So my sister-in-law's son] went to her house ... and the next day my brother took an appointment with a specialist ... and they drove her to the appointment ... and my sister-in-law bought her medicines.

Sonia also provides her mother with emotional support during their weekly telephone conversations, and indirectly via other forms of care, such as practical and financial support. All the members of the network contribute to Esmeralda's financial well-being by sending regular or emergency remittances. Fidel collects these funds, redistributes them to his mother, and buys medicines and goods for her when necessary. In order to reduce transaction fees, migrants prefer to send their remittances via Western Union rather than through bank transfers. One family member is often in charge of collecting the money at the local agency, and either bringing it to the parents or using it to make the necessary purchases.

Malena's position in the family network is more discreet than Sonia's, and combines the provision and reception of support in a more pronounced way. She migrated to Australia in 1989 with her husband Carmelo and their two sons. They benefited from the United Nations Refugee Programme after the guerrillas murdered their third son in retaliation for Malena's political activities. The transition was extremely difficult, due to the pain of losing a child and leaving their families behind as well as to a sharp decrease in their standard of living. The couple lived a comfortable life in El Salvador, where Malena owned a shop and Carlos was the manager of an export company. In Perth, they were only able to find unstable and low-qualified jobs (collecting eggs, caring for elderly people) and are regularly confronted with financial difficulties. This does not prevent them from supporting their ageing parents at a distance. Malena regularly sends money to her mother, but when an emergency arises her siblings only call her if they are unable to raise the necessary funds. She used to call Esmeralda in the USA every fortnight, but now she can only afford to call her once a month. Sonia keeps her updated about their mother's situation, and also informs their distant kin about Malena's physical and mental health (Malena suffers from depression). Sonia asked her siblings and mother to avoid worrying Malena, and they regularly keep their problems secret.

Over the past 17 years, Malena has seen her mother twice. Twelve years ago, Esmeralda visited her with Sonia, in order to help Malena recover from knee surgery by looking after her children. Malena financed her mother's flights and 6 months' visa, and hoped to convince her to move to Australia permanently. But after 4 months, Esmeralda flew back to the USA. Her lack of knowledge of English and difficulty in creating a social network in Perth made it too difficult for her to adapt to Australia. As Esmeralda's health declined, the need to be reunited became more urgent, but the daughter could not afford the trip. So 3 years ago her siblings invited her to the USA, offering her what seemed like a last opportunity to see Esmeralda alive. This is one example of how family solidarity helps to overcome difficulties related to mobility. In many cases, siblings based in the USA and enjoying a relatively good economic position help migrants finance a visit to their ageing parents, especially in case of emergency. Kin may also help to overcome problems generated by visa regulations that restrict the parents' possibility of visiting their children by inviting both the parents and the Australian sibling to meet at their house in the USA.

Carla is the main provider of hands-on care within the network, but her relationship with Sonia is fraught with tensions. As Coenen-Huther et al. note, interpersonal tensions are common within family networks, and tend to be more openly expressed between siblings than between parents and their children (Coenen-Huther et al., 1994). According to Attias-Donfut et al. (2002), it is more acceptable to express tensions between siblings than between parents and children. Open conflicts between siblings are often an indirect expression of children's bitterness towards their parents (Attias-Donfut et al., 2002). Sonia strongly criticizes her sister, accusing her of leaving Esmeralda alone and using her as a domestic servant:

She has three grandchildren, one grandson and my sister, and she's the one who cooks, and she's 83! Do you understand? She shouldn't be cooking; she's there to be taken care of, not to be used as a servant.

Sonia also thinks that Carla regularly prevents her from talking to Esmeralda. She accuses her sister of stealing part of her remittances. Sonia complained to her mother and considers her refusal to share her concerns as a sign that Carla is the favourite child. This also explains why Sonia avoids direct confrontation with Carla, as she fears that her own relationship with Esmeralda might be affected.

Sonia feels frustrated about not being Esmeralda's primary hands-on carer, but she still manages to play an important role. Without being physically present, she actively participates in the provision of personal and practical care to her elderly mother by proxy, making sure that she receives

adequate care. In my view, this partly challenges the idea that personal care cannot be exchanged at a distance. Sonia's case suggests that geographically distant kin can participate in the provision of hands-on care, even if they do so indirectly. Sonia does not cook for her mother, does not help her dress and does not drive her to the doctor. But she does make sure that other family members who act on her behalf perform these tasks effectively. Funerals are another occasion on which family members act on behalf of their absent kin. Migrants are rarely able to attend their parents' funerals, due to the cost and length of the trip and unavailability of paid leave. They miss a ritual occasion that is of particular importance for the maintenance of family relations (Charles et al., 2008). In several families, Salvadoran migrants still ensured their virtual presence at their parents' funerals with the help of relatives who bought flowers and read messages on their behalf.

Sonia's case also highlights the fact that migrants can count on networks of friends in their home and host countries. The Salvadoran community in Perth is split into several subgroups, mainly organized around Spanish-speaking churches, and mixed with Latin American migrants from all origins. Members develop friendships that can be mobilized in times of crisis to help a migrant finance an emergency trip back home, or facilitate the exchange of remittances and gifts. Malena's husband Carmelo regularly asks Salvadoran friends who are planning to visit their families to visit his parents and bring them money and gifts. Carmelo has also remained in close contact with friends in El Salvador. He knows that in emergencies they will give money to his parents and wait until he can reimburse them.

We saw that the role that members of Esmeralda's family play in the network of solidarity varies from one person to the other and over time. The types of services that circulate within family networks vary according to the family cycle (Attias-Donfut et al., 2002). Studies of family solidarity in Europe have demonstrated that people's participation in care of the elderly is influenced by a multiplicity of elements that include socio-economic, demographic and normative factors (Attias-Donfut et al., 2002; Finch and Mason, 1993). These studies show that the involvement in caregiving is the result of a family history, of the "negotiated commitments" (Finch and Mason, 1993, ch. 3) that emerge out of the personal reputations that family members develop over time concerning the level and type of support that can be expected from them. Sonia's involvement in transnational caregiving can be seen as a product of her strong relationship with her mother, and a continuation of the support that she already provided when the two women lived together in El Salvador and in the USA.

Women play a key role in this network, and this seems to confirm the gendered division of caregiving. Researchers such as Zontini and Reynolds (2007) and Al-Ali (2002) have identified gendered differences in migrants' involvement in the provision of support to elderly parents. Zontini and Reynolds (2007) note, in their study of Caribbean and Italian migrants in the United Kingdom (UK), that female kin are more involved in providing practical support and contributing to "kin-keeping" – that is, facilitating and maintaining family ties between family members – while men are more likely to provide financial support. Al-Ali (2002) identified, among Bosnian refugees in the UK and the Netherlands, a propensity of wives to try to compensate for a feeling of isolation by maintaining contact with distant friends and relatives. This was particularly the case for those who had been professionals in their home country but could not find a similar position in their host country. However, she notes that not all women feel deprived by their loss of socio-economic status, and she observes a similar tendency to invest in relations with their home country among several men who have experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation. The example of Esmeralda's family shows further nuances in the gendered division of caregiving within transnational family networks of solidarity. First, in this case daughters – with the exception of Malena – contribute as much as their brothers to Esmeralda's financial well-being. Even if Sonia and Malena's migration to Australia was not motivated by economic factors, they both feel that it is their duty to provide financial support to Esmeralda. Second, men also provide personal support to their ageing mothers. In our example, Carla is the primary "hands-on" carer, but her brother Fidel regularly offers

practical and personal support to their mother. And in other families, sons living with their ageing parents become their primary personal carers when their health deteriorates. Third, participation in transnational caregiving varies from one daughter to the other. Sonia's involvement is related to the history of her relationship with Esmeralda and to the fact that she has no children to look after. Caring for her mother also helps to compensate for her feeling of being socially isolated in Australia. Malena provides lower levels of support to her mother because she already invests a lot of time and money in her sons' education, because her household also supports Carmelo's parents, and because her painful history partly relieves her from her filial duties. Finch and Mason note that gender does not suffice to explain the involvement of a particular person in caregiving (Finch and Mason, 1993). Similarly, gender does not entirely explain variations in the intensity and forms of involvement in transnational caring activities that appeared in the Salvadoran sample. Only the provision of hands-on care during visits was clearly more common among daughters than sons. In Australia, some men and women only engaged in sporadic exchanges with their parents, providing financial, practical and emotional support only in times of crisis, while other men and women, such as Iñacio and Sonia, were in constant communication with their mothers and sent them monthly remittances. Because of difficult political and economic circumstances, all Salvadoran migrants (regardless of gender or social class background) expressed a keen sense of obligation to provide financial and emotional support to their parents, especially to their mothers, with whom the majority reported sharing a special relationship. As research on geographically proximate family networks has shown (Attias-Donfut et al., 2002; Bonvalet and Ortalda, 2006), participation in caregiving is largely influenced by the family circle's morphology. Several factors come into play, such as birth order (being the eldest or youngest child), the composition of the network (absence of daughters) or personal circumstances (being childless and/or single).

CONCLUSIONS

The capability of Salvadoran migrants to provide financial, practical, personal and emotional support to their distant parents is strongly affected by a lack of public awareness of their contribution to the well-being of their kin. Major obstacles arise due to their difficult insertion in the labour market, inadequate provision of leave options, restrictive visa regulations and inequalities in access to, and the use of, communication technologies. Still, Salvadorans do invest a lot of time, energy and money in staying in touch with their ageing parents and fulfilling their filial duties. Extended family networks appeared to play a major role in helping migrants to overcome obstacles to transnational caregiving. Maintaining the relationship between parents and their distant children involves the participation of a network of relatives from different generations, often spreading across several countries. Transnational kinship groups represent a form of transnational social space in which mobile and immobile persons exchange their resources and capital within the constraints and opportunities arising, between others, from regulations imposed by nation-states (Faist, 2000). This study of Salvadoran transnational families shows that obstacles to family solidarity that are specific to a certain institutional context can be partially circumvented via the mobilization of family members located in a more favourable environment. Relatives residing in the USA, and who benefit from cheaper communication, become the "hub" through which information flows between kin based in El Salvador and Australian migrants. In this study, I have provided many examples that contradict the assumption of the demise of the extended family and its attendant responsibilities for extended kin (Parsons, 1965). Migrants' willingness to contribute to their parents' well-being leads them to maintain and sustain links with relatives that may have been weaker or non-existent if they had remained in their home country. As Bryceson and Vuorela (2002b) suggest, geographical distance increases the need to keep family ties alive and to renew them more often. The mobilization of

resources within families whose members are separated by national borders requires the active pursuit of familial blood ties, as denoted by Bryceson and Vuorela's concept of "relativising", which stresses "the sense of relativity, or being related, that occurs in transnational families" (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002b: 14).

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NOTES

1. All the quotes from Salvadoran migrants are translated from Spanish.
2. Accessible on the World Bank's website (<http://www.worldbank.org/>) as of 1 September 2008.

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