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Abstract (150 words):

The concept of care circulation, coined by Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla in 2014, encapsulates the reciprocal, multidirectional, and uneven exchange of care within transnational family networks. It challenges the prevailing notion that physical proximity is essential for caregiving, highlighting the various forms of support that can be exchanged across distances. This framework expands beyond mother-child relationships, revealing the complex and intergenerational care dynamics within families. The asymmetry in exchanges reflects power imbalances, with women often giving more care. Additionally, it emphasizes the roles of often overlooked family members such as the elderly, children, and men. The concept underscores the significance of considering local family cultures and kinship systems in understanding care practices worldwide. This perspective also aligns with a constructivist view of the family, emphasizing the importance of family practices in shaping a sense of belonging across borders. The research in this field explores the forms and factors influencing care circulation, spanning various family configurations, migratory statuses, and socio-economic backgrounds. Key themes include the role of technology and the impact of migration policies on caregiving capabilities.

Keywords: care, transnationalism, family, gender, belonging, ICT

Care circulation is defined as ‘the reciprocal, multidirectional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks subject to the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of both sending and receiving societies’ (Baldassar and Merla 2014, p. 22).

This concept was developed in 2014 by Loretta Baldassar, an anthropologist of migration, and Laura Merla, a family sociologist, to capture the ways in which members of transnational families exchange support across distance and geographical borders. It aimed to overcome the idea, dominant at the time, according to which physical proximity is a sine qua non condition for the provision of care, meaning that

migration inevitably deprives migrants from the ability to care for their family members at a distance. The authors built on Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding's (2007) definition of 'transnational care' as multidimensional, including five forms of support: physical, 'hands-on' care that can only be exchanged in situations of physical co-presence, as well as four types of care that can be exchanged at a distance using new media and communication technologies such as phone calls, texts, emails, social media, or video communication apps like Skype. These types are emotional care, practical care (for instance in the form of exchange of advice), financial and material care (including remittances and the sending of equipment or medicines), and accommodation (via the construction or provision of housing).

Baldassar and Merla proposed to conceive these forms of support as "circulating" within transnational family networks. The circulation metaphor completed the feminist theory of global care chains, which denounced a global system of exploitation of reproductive labour (Hoschschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2000) but failed to acknowledge the extended, inter- and intra-generational, and complex care relationships that characterize transnational families. The care circulation framework extends the analysis of care dynamics beyond mother-child dyads, by showing that various forms of support 'circulate' within family networks, and in multiple directions (within, and across generations; upwards and downwards). Care is given and returned at different times, under various forms, and to various degrees across the life cycle, following a logic of reciprocity that does not need to be immediate nor fully equivalent, and governed by cultural understandings and histories. The asymmetry of these exchanges reflects the unequal power relations that characterize family relationships, where women for instance tend to be more on the giving than the receiving side, depending on their position in the family/life cycle. At the same time, the concept makes visible the active contribution of often invisible actors such as the elderly, children, and men, and highlights the importance of taking local family cultures and kinships systems into consideration, as the way 'family' is defined and practiced varies tremendously across the globe.

This angle of analysis is also in line with a constructivist and relational perspective of the family, which focuses on family practices and the meaning that the actors give to these practices. In this sense, the circulation of care is both a concept and a methodological invitation: that of "following" the practices and flows of care in time and space in order to delimit the contours of the transnational family and make visible the way in which these practices nourish and support feelings of belonging. The concept is indeed part of a body of work that sees care as one of the central processes for maintaining a sense of belonging across distance and geographical borders.

The attention to care practices goes hand in hand with an analysis of the elements that facilitate, or constraint, the capacity and ability of transnational family members to support each other. This involves identifying the resources needed to provide and receive support. These include mobility, communication,

social relations, money, knowledge, time, and appropriate housing (Merla 2012). It also requires an in-depth analysis of the institutional factors that facilitate – or hinder – people’s access to these resources and capacity to use them. This aspect has been particularly explored by social policy scholar Majella Kilkey and sociologist Laura Merla (Kilkey & Merla, 2014) through the notion of a ‘situated transnationalism’ focusing on local migration, gendered care, welfare, and working-time regimes, as well as policies affecting the availability and affordability of banking, communication, and travel infrastructures.

Research in this perspective has mainly consisted of identifying and describing the forms that care circulation takes within family networks - including quasi- or fictive kin (Gotehus, 2022) - and the factors that influence people’s (non) participation in these flows (see for instance, Horn, 2017; Serra Mingot, 2020). While the concept is mostly used to study relationships between adult migrants and aging parents, there is also work that applies the framework to other family dynamics, including childcare (Lamas-Abraira, 2021), and sibling relationships (Baldassar & Brandhorst, 2021). The circulation of care has been applied to a wide variety of transnational family configurations, ranging from refugees and irregular migrants (Näre, 2021) to the middle and privileged classes (De Silva, 2018). The key themes found in this literature are the role played by information and communication technologies in the exchange of care at a distance (see for instance, Baldassar et al., 2016; Ho & Chiu, 2020) and, more recently, the impact of increasingly restrictive migration policies on the ability to cross borders to give, and receive, care (see for instance, Merla et al., 2020; Herrera et al., 2022).

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Further reading :

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