Aging Away: Immigrant Families, Elderly Care, Ethnography and Policy

Rita Henderson

ABSTRACT: This article considers how immigrant retention relates to family obligations, drawing a complex portrait of a common family dilemma involving the care of aging kin. The ethnographic life-history approach offers an important perspective on how health and well-being are not simply structured by formal access to institutions of care, but by the socio-cultural, economic and geographic flexibility of families to accommodate their needs. Analysis draws on the interdependant migration histories of a family of six adult sisters originating in Tanzania. In the case of this family, the dilemma surrounding the care of aging parents is not so much caused by migration’s disruption of traditional filial obligations. Instead, it is the effect of social pressures stirred in both sending and receiving countries, which frame opportunities for eventual social integration, relocation or sometimes reluctant repatriation. A reflexive approach argues for the active presence of ethnographers in policy debates.

KEYWORDS: health, immigrant retention, life history, Tanzania, transnationalism, well-being

This article is structured along two overlapping discussions, one involving the ethnographic process itself, the other considering ethnography’s relevance outside of anthropology. The first discussion revisits the transnational family biography I compiled with six adult sisters and their close kin living in different parts of the world. Members of this family now live on three continents, having settled and resettled in as many as a dozen countries since their first migration to Germany as a family during the sisters’ early childhood. In that project, I asked what the experiences of these young, educated, ‘black’ women coping with a rapidly changing world have to offer our general knowledge about what it means to belong to a nation. Their collective life history offers a nuanced picture of contemporary migration, in which migrants are not simply portrayed as disempowered casualties of the political régimes that decide their formal status as citizens. In the course of my research, most members of the family I was studying confessed to me both personal and collective anxiety over who would care for their aging parents when they could no longer care for themselves. In the end, the concerns raised about the precarious nature of elderly care in this transnational network remained unmentioned in the final text. Considering now what before I left unspoken, my objective here is not to ‘set the record straight’, but to reckon with the predicament still faced by the family I studied. Not unlike the participants of most anthropological studies, the people involved in this project live in a world in which state and capital interests, cultural politics and other material and ideological influences frame, for better or for worse, their life choices and opportunities. They have an immediate interest in the academic knowledge that was generated from their circumstances, as that knowledge meets audiences that are actively pursuing positive social change.
The second discussion addresses the potentially clumsy insertion of ethnography into policy discussions, relating an episode that transpired when I first presented results from this project to a policy-interested audience. Although awkward, the episode underscored the difficulty of effectively conveying to non-anthropologists the valuable context and nuance of migrant decision-making, processes that are generally only accessible through extended participant observation among small groups such as this. Part of the problem arose from my reluctance to parcel analysis into thematic areas encouraged by the policy research domain with which I was familiar. Consequently, I permitted myself to believe that my anthropological concerns were simply incompatible with the applied drive of policy research. In hindsight, I am curious as to how my idea of policy research at the time of writing the Mistral family biography constrained my ability to classify and analyse this particular family dilemma, which crosses the frontiers between typical policy research themes such as (1) immigration and citizenship, (2) health and aging, (3) gender and family, (4) paid and unpaid labour in formal and informal economies, (5) social capital and (6) foreign credential recognition. I argue that my apprehensions about explicitly directing analysis towards policy initiatives were merited, given institutional differences in research goals and approaches. Nevertheless, my critical energy might have been strategically incorporated instead of allowing it to distance my analysis from innovative perspectives circulating in policy networks in Canada and internationally.

**A Transnational Family Biography Revisited**

As multisited research that ‘followed people and their biographies’ (Marcus 1998: 90–94), the Mistral’s family biography is situated between oral and life-history methods. Over a period of four months, I travelled to London, Berlin, Dar es Salaam and Calgary to the various homes of Mistral family members, meeting all six sisters, the four husbands of those who were married, their children, parents, and paternal grandmother. I directed attention to learning their collective history, while emphasizing experiences in their current locations. Of primary interest were the stories that the sisters emphasised when they described to me their migration experiences. How did they attribute personal, historical and social meaning to the stories they chose to tell me? And what did reflections on their lives and transnational mobility communicate about migrant agency? The life-history method has faced criticism for its heavily localised scope and tendency for sentimental underpinnings (Crapanzano 1984: 954). Mindful of the challenge, I drew on Alessandro Portelli’s work on oral sources as offering invaluable knowledge about political processes through the examination of personal experiences. Through oral history, he argues that many disciplines (including history, sociology, psychology, linguistics, ethnology and anthropology, folklore and music) tap into the past, which is available, distorted and ultimately given greater meaning through memory and dialogue (Portelli 1991: xi, 52). In Portelli’s words, ‘[o]ral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did’ (50).

Some years ago, I had met Agatha, the youngest of the Mistral sisters, while we were both working as au pairs (foreign nannies) in Finland. The year following our meeting, I helped Agatha arrange to study Travel Tourism at a technical college in my hometown of Calgary, where she lived for several years before moving to Berlin and marrying her Danish boyfriend. Prior to re-
search, I had only ever met Agatha and Annika (who also eventually came to Canada for studies), although their sister Heidi and Agatha’s husband, Tim, had themselves met my family in Calgary on occasions when I was at university across the country. While I had made arrangements in rented accommodations during fieldwork, and planned to carry out semi-structured interviews as my primary source of information, the sisters I already knew insisted that the family would anticipate my staying in their homes. As is bound to happen when a researcher shares lodging with those she or he studies, participant observation quickly replaced my early plans for recordings and interview transcripts. In fact, interviews were virtually impossible given that they seemed to provoke an unnatural distance between myself and the people I was trying to learn about. The information that interviews were designed to draw out was abundantly available in friendly conversations while preparing dinner together or while driving to another town.

Methodologically, the collective life-history approach injects current perspective into kinship studies, a theme long central to anthropology’s understanding of culture (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958; Mintz 1960; Lévi-Strauss 1963: 50; Shostak 1981; Cruikshank et al. 1990; Muratorio 1991; Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004). Similarly, the project stirred poignant and sometimes unexpected reflections on what often seem like more fashionable research themes, including globalisation (Appadurai 1997; Sassen 1991; Bauman 1998; Smith 2001), post-colonialism (Bhabha 1994), and transnational migration (Basch et al. 1994; Brah 1996; Papastergiadis 2000). Among the arguments to emerge from my analysis was that, as the Mistral family reveals, transnational communities involve many more people than just ‘immigrants’ living away from ‘homes’. Such migrants do not usually leave familial responsibilities behind upon migration. Typically, migrating to a developed country increases the pressure on a person to provide for more people than they would have otherwise (cf. Fuglerud 1999; Jayapalan and Oakley 2005). Finally, migration is far from a unidirectional, temporally fixed event. It frequently involves interdependence between sites in diaspora, remittances, regular return visits and voluntary or involuntary repatriations (cf. Ong 1999; Gamburd 2000; Fournon and Glick-Schiller 2001). Given this, not only citizenship status, but gender, race, ethnicity, age, education, religion, sexuality, language, skills and plain good luck inform a person’s access to resources that can enable or impede social mobility and personal well-being.

Despite the sometimes comforting rationality of kinship diagrams, the task of ethnographically profiling a family is particularly complex. Although group membership may be relatively unambiguous, identifying dominant personalities can be as difficult as grasping the subtleties that years of intimacy can bring to relationships between individual members. In this case, tensions resulting from the family’s unresolved dilemma over care for their aging parents are framed by the sisters’ various insertion in the societies in which they live, their access to economic security, and the influence of their Western husbands. As will be elaborated in the text that follows, the problem is not so much about the disruption of family traditions or the much-needed accommodation in North America and Europe of elderly citizens from cultural minorities. It is in the context of their own migrations to and from Tanzania that the Mistral sisters have become increasingly apprehensive over how to ensure the care of their aging parents, who wish to remain in Dar es Salaam. Nathan and Evangeline themselves care for Nathan’s elderly mother, Emily, who is over 100, now blind and nearly deaf. All three belong to a Kihaya-speaking diaspora from northwestern Tanzania, now
living in the country’s largest city. This dilemma is further complicated by Nathan and Evangeline themselves, who have insisted on remaining in Tanzania, where they have networks of social support, but where few of their daughters feel at home or are prepared to return permanently. The parents wish to remain in the bungalow they secured from a religious community upon leaving it over ten years ago.

A significant aspect of the Mistral family’s collective biography is that for twenty years, starting during the sisters’ early childhood, the family belonged to a transnational religious community in which they lived and worked. A central goal of the Christian Integrated Community (CIC), which was founded in Europe following the Second World War, was to pursue a brighter and more viable future for what members saw as a divided, post-war world. The Mistral family first moved to Germany as part of the CIC, their purpose being to learn faith-based communitarianism in order to one day build a collective farm in Tanzania. It was ten years before anyone in the family returned to live in Africa, and close to twelve before a collective farm in south-central Tanzania was converted into the first African chapter of the congregation. As the Mistral family described it to me, the spiritual basis of the CIC united a diverse group consisting mostly of Europeans, many of whom were disillusioned by their fast-paced, workaday lives, which had left them spiritually lost. The sisters explained that in their childhood experiences, exclusion or discrimination simply did not exist among members of the Community. As members lived together, the sisters grew up with doctors, lawyers, professors, mechanics, midwives and cooks in their home. This close contact with all kinds of people coming together in Christian faith is what all the Mistral’s attribute to giving them the social ease in relating to anyone as an equal, no matter what his or her background.

The family eventually parted ways with the CIC on somewhat sour terms because some of the sisters opted to withdraw as adults in order to pursue their personal life paths. As Nathan and Evangeline explained to me, even though they were pressured into leaving because of their daughters’ choices, it is important for them to retain a connection to many people they knew there. The youngest sister, Agatha, once told me that she and her sisters often avoid speaking with strangers and friends alike about their years with ‘the Community’ (or at least its religious aspects), because it is frequently chalked up to being naïve or cult-like to those who do not understand the impact it had on their lives. She observed that few Community outsiders have appreciated how involvement afforded this family the chance to move to Europe when otherwise their modest circumstances would have made it difficult to accumulate enough financial capital to let anyone go at all, let alone for all to go at once. Furthermore, unlike many immigrants to Germany and other Western nations, the Mistral’s were immediately welcomed into a largely German milieu thanks to the generosity of their hosts. What is more, belonging to the Community enabled Nathan and Evangeline to trust that they could grow old surrounded by the support of an extended network, free from the worry of having had no sons, who according to tradition are the ones who would normally care for aging parents. However, Nathan and Evangeline’s eventual and unfortunately reluctant departure from the Community has meant that the sisters have had to anticipate a burden that their parents once hoped to spare them. Each with dependants of her own, the sisters now find themselves pinched between ensuring the well-being of their parents and that of their children and husbands.
Immigrant Families and Elderly Care

Table 1 The Mistral Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY MEMBERS</th>
<th>CURRENTLY LIVING IN:</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>DEPENDANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nathan and Mid-Evangeline</td>
<td>Dar es Salaam</td>
<td>70's</td>
<td>Nathan's mother, Emily, who is blind and almost deaf at over 100 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Married, 2 young sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariannik</td>
<td>Dares Salaam</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Married, baby daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Divorced, no children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annika</td>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Never married, no children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vero</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Married, daughter, baby son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agatha</td>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Married, no children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complicating Concepts: Ethnography and Policy Research

My familiarity with social policy research derives from my association with a significant international network of policy makers, scholars and interest groups specifically brought together with the goal of optimizing the exchange of policy-relevant immigration research. Throughout studies for my master’s degree, the network was working with interested academics in several universities and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in Canada’s Maritime region to establish a research centre in the Atlantic Provinces. Prior to beginning fieldwork, I had worked as a research assistant for a citizenship action group. I had also attended the network’s national conference as a volunteer representative of a local NGO providing legal services to asylum seekers.

By the time I travelled to Calgary, London, Berlin and Dar es Salaam to meet the Mistral family, I had become weary of what I perceived to be an absence of ethnographic analyses found in published work in the network. I could not discount that the network had achieved a success uncommon for social policy research, bridging a gap between the knowledge-base of universities and the practical worlds of government and interest groups. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary nature of the network’s research objectives meant that a range of disciplines seemed to compete for funds to research similar areas of interest. Unsurprisingly, some disciplines seemed more conceptually ready than others to adapt to the policy-interested audiences keen for fresh analyses of immigration’s impact on Canadian society. However, as I saw it at the time, I was reluctant to reduce the life histories of the Mistral sisters to what seemed like policy objectives driven by a fashionable concern for immigrant integration and retention. These sisters had a vast bank of cultural capital that enabled them to adapt to a range of social milieux, be they in North America, Europe or Africa. If one were to seriously explore their integration and retention in various host countries, a critical observer would quickly discern that the motives behind their frequent resettlements had less to do with their own abilities to adapt, than with host societies themselves.

By the time I presented my research results at an international conference organised by the network, I had resigned myself to believing that anthropology as I understood it was incompatible with the immigration-policy domain. I presented an ironic sketch of minor political subversions that Heidi, a Mistral sister then working in short-term call-centre jobs in London, enacted in her everyday life. I simply hoped to complicate how we might conceptualise multiculturalism, offering a view of how at the level of the individual, the principle of protecting cultural pluralism is often lived through cultural essentialisms (Taylor 1992). I did not...
expect to be given much more than passing
regard. However, during a coffee break in
our session, I was approached by an official
in a Canadian bureau responsible for citizen-
ship and immigration. Apparently my article
had struck a negative chord. Rather than crit-
iquing my interpretation and analysis of the
data, it seemed that my methods were the
most troubling to my critic. She asked exas-
peratedly: ‘So what if one black woman in
London finds a personal space in which she
can bite back at the various regulative au-
thorities which marshal her behaviour, dress,
and her very sense of happiness and social
belonging?’ For my critic, this family seemed
an incredible exception to the immigrant
norm. She questioned how their stories were
possibly representative of anything beyond
the family itself. In retrospect, I had miscal-
culated my policy audience. I mistook the
unfamiliarity of audience members with an-
thropology for actual lack of interest in
applying qualitative research to policy. I had
tried to translate my research from one for-
eign language into another, from thick eth-
nographic description into a theory-rich cri-
tique of multiculturalism, neither offering
clear lessons for the policy-interested. But I
had neglected to explicitly articulate that our
methods of participant observation and eth-
nographic description are uniquely poised to
reveal phenomena that are scarcely other-
wise accessible, elaborating how statistics
and trends are lived in the everyday as hopes
and strategies that frequently subvert nor-
mativity. I might have noted that without
knowledge about how immigrants like Heidi
perceive policies designed to encourage plu-
ralism in the workplace, we risk not grasping
whether such policies are experienced as ef-
fective by the very people they aim to help.

Any critical understanding that research-
ers may generate about the health and well-
being of immigrant groups, as an example
specifically relevant to this special edition
of Anthropology in Action, should necessarily
recognize that the concepts and categories
we use to characterise such populations are
textual and often in important need of
qualification. It should go without saying
that calculating social integration would be
reductive if any one indicator—such as citi-
zenship, level of education, age or duration
in the country of residence—eclipsed all oth-
ers during analysis. Contextualisation of con-
cepts and categories of analysis implies that
we at least anticipate how such indicators
are lived, and not treat them as variables
alone to integration. Without question, all
aspects of the sisters’ identities are relevant
to evaluating their different degrees of well-
being. Ethnographically considering indica-
tors together enables us to envision how
some categories play out more significantly
depending on the individual. Taking age as
an example, the order of the Mistral sisters’
births played a significant role in determining
where (in Europe or Africa) each sister lived at different points during her youth
and education. As it happened, the two el-
dest (Julia and Mariannik) were approxi-
mately nine and ten years old when the
family first moved to Germany from Tanza-
nia, whereas these were the approximate
ages of the two youngest (Vero and Agatha)
when the family returned. Upon the family’s
repatriation to Tanzania, the three eldest sis-
ters remained in Europe to finish their sec-
dary and eventually post-secondary
studies. This meant that by adulthood, Heidi,
who is the youngest of the elder sisters who
remained in Germany, had lived in Africa
for far fewer years than any of her sisters,
both older and younger. This affected her
decision to renounce Tanzanian citizenship,
whereas all her sisters have refused to so
drastically disclaim official connection to
their country of origin.

Although the Mistral sisters are extraordi-
nary for their global mobility and adaptabil-
ity to a range of cultural contexts, their
experiences of transnational migration are
not unlike those of many others who find themselves as strangers in new locales. And although they may seem privileged in comparison to other Tanzanians and residents of the largely impoverished nations of the southern hemisphere who can expect little socioeconomic mobility in their lifetimes, the Mistrats were not always as fortunate as they appear today. Removed from abstractions in social theory, the life histories of the Mistrat family subvert prevailing understandings of transnational migration, which reduce the phenomenon to questions of integration and retention in receiving countries. Through the particularities of this family’s story, rather than through that which renders the Mistrats representative of countless others like them, we can begin to envisage the horizons of policy broadening beyond inadequate dualisms, categories of immigrant versus native, home versus host, integration versus exclusion.

A Family Dilemma

As if there were an elephant in the room that everyone was trying to ignore, I too avoided the troubling question of who would ensure Nathan and Evangeline’s comfort in coming years. I followed the Mistrat sisters and their husbands in relegating uncertainties about the care of their elderly parents (who were by then in their early seventies) to sometime in the general future. I was myself bewildered by the lack of any obvious or agreeable resolution. At times during our correspondence I desired to mention the various solutions presented by family members, but it seemed unfair to draw on one person’s reflections, without contrasting them with the perspectives of others. For instance, Mariannik’s German husband, who had recently moved to Tanzania for his second time, explained to me that either Annika or Heidi (the only two unmarried sisters) would soon be obliged to return to Tanzania to care for Nathan and Evangeline. As he told me, the other four sisters were unable to do so because of commitments to their husbands and children. This was a substantial statement, given that his wife was, at the time, the only Mistrat sister then living in the same country as their parents. It seemed as though, for him, being single women made Annika and Heidi available to fulfill a family duty for which their married sisters were too occupied caring for their own families. I was confounded as to how to relate such comments to passing pronouncements of other family members about how much financially each sister should contribute to their parents’ care. These comments were usually part of broader conversations about financial assistance for studies and emergencies, sums transferred regularly across this small transnational network as part of their ethic of support. Sometimes the differential financial security of the sisters stirred suggestions that the wealthiest among them should contribute a greater overall amount to the care of their elderly parents. However, such speculations were generally balanced when others would comment that each sister should be ‘held accountable for her own life decisions’. Those purporting this view seemed to be suggesting that they thought it only fair that all should contribute the same amount, be it financially or otherwise.

This last proposition seemed to pin subtle judgment on Heidi in particular, who was unmarried in spite of several genuine marriage proposals over the years, and who in her early thirties remained unsettled in her career. As mentioned already, in having acquired a German passport several years earlier, which was actually done through a staged marriage and divorce, Heidi renounced her Tanzanian citizenship (as the African nation does not recognize dual citizenship). As she told me, feelings of being ‘at
home’ in her country of birth were uniquely reserved for visits to family. Given that she speaks Swahili with a German accent, she is generally mistaken in Tanzania for South African, a group that according to the family is increasingly perceived to be (and resented for) dominating the country’s post-socialist economy. Without Tanzanian citizenship, Heidi is now required to apply for a visa whenever she visits her family in Dar, making it further unlikely she will ever permanently return.

It is difficult to ignore the significance of marriage in establishing long-term well-being among these sisters. Unlike Heidi, those who have also married Western husbands (Mariannik, Julia, Vero and Agatha) have chosen not to pursue the acquisition of new citizenship. Incidentally, none lives in the country of her husband’s nationality, which makes it difficult to speculate how being married to Westerners has increased the long-term well-being of the married Mis-tral sisters. For instance, Julia’s Australian husband, who owns an African art gallery in London’s trendy Notting Hill neighbourhood, started his business over twenty years ago. Through his business reputation, Julia has acquired permanent residence in the United Kingdom, where she gave birth to their second son. Having visited Australia on several occasions, she carefully explained to me that London’s racial and cultural diversity seem the more promising for her eventual reintegration into the workforce as a nurse.

Also unlike Heidi, Mariannik did not renounce her Tanzanian citizenship for a European passport upon marrying a German. She instead holds an indefinite visa to Germany. However, marriage to a German has not necessarily implied that she would remain there permanently. A few years ago, Mariannik conceded to her husband’s dreams to build a business in Tanzania, and returned to her country of origin to live. Putting his training as an engineer to good use, her husband created a sturdy iron-framed wooden-door design and set up a small business that now employs more than two dozen local workers on a plot of land on the western edge of Dar es Salaam. For Mariannik, the return to Tanzania has been a trying process. Accustomed to the company of others, the isolation of her new living arrangements seemed to be taking a toll when I met her in Dar. This was especially the case since giving birth to her daughter only three months before my visit. In Germany, she had been used to a houseful of people, having worked for a wealthy couple who had adopted children from Sudan, Ethiopia, India and Rwanda. Unable to travel anywhere by car without someone to hold her newborn daughter, Mariannik was often frustrated in Tanzania. Just to be able to securely stroll down the road with her newborn and a friend was an impossible comfort that left her homesick for the safety and extended support networks she knew in Germany. While she would spend days and nights on end at her parents’ bungalow, located in a more central Dar neighbourhood, during my visit Mariannik seemed like a new mother in a foreign land who was in as much need of care and support as were her aging parents.

Regarding accountability to life decisions, Annika seemed to be spared the harshest of judgment. As I was frequently reminded, had it not been for her working as an office manager in an international safari company when the family first left the Christian Integrated Community, much of the family would not be as financially secure as they are today. Julia insisted that Annika was like the family’s living angel. Had Annika not been able to afford private school tuition during the late-1990s, Agatha and Vero may never have finished high school. Had Annika not purchased Agatha’s flight to Finland as the first means of finding her youngest sister opportunities in Europe, Agatha would
never have met me or wound up in post-
secondary studies in Canada. Annika was
the only one among her sisters and parents to
secure stable employment during the period
immediately following the family’s depart-
ture from the Christian Integrated Com-
unity. Had she not shared her income so
widely, the garage on Nathan and Evange-
line’s property would not have been trans-
formed into a guesthouse that they now rent
out for a small income. Had it not been for the
renovation of the guesthouse, Nathan would
not have met his current boss, also from Bu-
koba and a native Kihaya-speaker, who hired
him as a mechanic in a large trucking com-
pany for which he still works. None of her
sisters could fault Annika for pursuing stud-
ies into her thirties, as it was widely believed
that she was the most academic in the family.
Many expressed great relief that she found
the opportunity to study in Canada, since
her attempts to pursue a degree in linguistics
at the University of Rome fell through for
the unfortunate reason of an abusive boy-
friend and his family who initially sponsored
her move to Italy. Although her dreams for
an education were bitterly compromised
throughout her twenties, her sacrifices for the
family’s welfare did not go unappreciated by
her sisters.

However, gratitude for Annika’s resource-
fulness would not be enough to enable her
to stay abroad. As I was finishing the project,
she received news that in spite of finding a
job upon graduation from college in Canada,
her work permit application was denied. Ac-
cording to Citizenship and Immigration Can-
da, because of her special circumstances in
having her study permit extended for a sec-
ond programme, she should have found a
job in her last three months of studies and
applied for the permit prior to graduation,
instead of within the three months following.
It was a bitter end to a three-year attempt to
increase her status and credibility in Western
countries in order to successfully migrate to
Canada. Because of the short timeline of her
departure, she was unable to secure visas to
join her sisters in London, and in the end
was pressured into returning directly to Tan-
zania. In the years since, Annika has admit-
ted that she desires to permanently move
abroad again, as she sees little future in Dar
es Salaam for career and marriage opportuni-
ties in line with her life experiences. As time
passes, her family in Tanzania has shown an
increasing need for her support. Mariannik
appreciates the presence of her sister,
whereas Annika’s presence with her aging
parents is a comfort for those living in Eu-
rop. She may not yet be the emissary sent
to care for her parents through old age, but
circumstances have once again conspired to
make her the most likely to sacrifice personal
goals to fulfill this family obligation.

Although the dilemma over Nathan and
Evangeline’s elderly care was presented to
me as a minor concern confronting the Mis-
tral family, the specific predicament it posed
for each sister raises interesting questions
about how researchers like myself might an-
ticipate the social pressures faced by immi-
grants, and subsequently how we frame
arguments about why immigrants leave or
why they stay in a given place. This led me
to ask why I avoided addressing the family
tension over Nathan and Evangeline’s el-
derly care. Why did I relegate explanation
away from my interest areas of immigration
and citizenship, and towards another re-
search domain vaguely to do with health and
aging? The answer to this question is two-
fold. First, it was not immediately evident
that the dilemma of caring for elderly parents
had much to do with immigration at all. All
manner of families of adult siblings, even
those in which all live in the same city, face
such uncertainties and tensions. One could
ask whether the Mistral’s dilemma was not
rather a symptom of modernity’s disruption
of traditional customs surrounding the care
of aging citizens? But then again, it is increas-
ingly difficult to ignore that the frustrations Annika faced as a young, single, 'black', educated, and underemployed female migrant in Western Europe and North America are significant in how her family eventually came to depend on her to return to Tanzania. As a result, the looming resolution to the family’s uncertainty seemed in large part structured by international citizenship régimes that judged Annika’s presence in Western countries as less worthy of permanent status than that of her sisters.

A Place for Ethnography in Social Policy Research

At their annual meetings held in June 2005, the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association (CSAA) co-sponsored an invited panel on the theme of immigration and aging with the national branch of the migration policy network discussed earlier. The panel was an encouraging move on the part of researchers to generate increased awareness of problems uniquely facing the elderly and their families in the context of transnational migration. Some important points underlined by presenters were that elderly care, whether or not it occurs in a transnational context, is generally a highly gendered domain, frequently involving unpaid work for those who cannot afford (or those who simply refuse) to put an elderly family member in a long-term care facility. Presenters also noted that elderly citizens of diverse ethnic origins face particular challenges in terms of language and cultural adaptation to Canadian society, as well as access to community support. Unquestionably, policy research is needed in the area, and I believe the panel demonstrated clear progress in Canadian research into questions around immigration and aging. Only four years earlier, some of the researchers involved in the panel had outlined a modest policy research platform calling for age-sensitive research to address “...how advanced age relates to the processes and consequences of immigrant integration” (Durst 2001: 1). At that time, the scholars remarked that neither gerontological, nor immigration literature sufficiently treated scholarly and policy issues surrounding relocation later in life. Extending ethnographic knowledge generated from the Mistral’s experiences of migration, we can complicate this research area further: What impact on local communities in developing countries might Canada’s open recruitment of educated young foreigners have? What obligation do our policies have to ensure that our poaching of skilled labourers from underdeveloped economies does not endanger the lives of elderly relatives and dependants of those we encourage to immigrate? Might official recognition of such circumstances foster sensitive policy that could increase immigrant retention? If we desire to understand why immigrants stay and why they leave, ethnography offers a valuable guide for directed research and analysis. It is at this juncture, the point at which policy research becomes innovative in its categories of analysis, where anthropologists have the greatest to contribute.

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Notes

1. Domestic servants for the family in Dar es Salaam were Malawians in the country unofficially.
2. Marriage and children opened many of the sisters into host country networks that Annika and Heidi lacked as single women.
3. Both Annika and Heidi had post-secondary educations in line with which they were challenged to secure and retain work.

4. The Christian Integrated Community, like the personal and family names of Mistral family members, is a pseudonym used to protect the collective identity of those studied. In this article, whenever the word ‘Community’ is used on its own and capitalised, it refers to the Christian Integrated Community to which the Mistral were members for almost twenty years.

References


