

Development in the context of care migration from rural Hungary: An agency-based approach

Krisztina Németh – Monika Mária Váradi

nemeth.krisztina@krtk.hu, varadim@mta-rkk-tko.hu

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Abstract: This paper aims to create a better understanding of the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency in the process of international labor migration based on empirical evidence collected in Hungarian small towns and villages. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability-based concept of development, and a theory of agency elaborated by Emirbayer and Mische, the paper focuses on live-in care migration as a specific form of female circular migration from Hungary to Western European countries, and highlights the varying and dynamic nature of migrant women's agency within the complexity of structural constraints. The object of this paper is twofold: first, it compares and systematically analyzes Hungarian migrant elderly care workers' coping strategies in the face of constraints set in the global context of care work. Second, it aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework based on the concepts of agency in which diverse empirical findings – human games within a host household and narratives problematizing these specific social roles – can be interpreted. Our empirical evidence shows that human games and tactics are triggered precisely by structural constraints; they are directly inspired by limitations. Although these tactics are potential tools for enlarging individual room for maneuver situationally, they evidently cannot alter structures. The asymmetry of structure and agency is clearly demonstrated in the fact that the overwhelming majority of Hungarian care workers describe individual gains from their jobs as fragments of development. These fragments reflect not only structural constraints, but also highlight potential gains from this specific type of circular migration, pointing out that the concept of “remittances” is more complex than a mere increase in financial stability.

Keywords: migration and development, care migration, agency, tactics, narratives

Introduction: Migration, Development and Agency

In the debate about the nexus between migration and development, the emphasis has been placed on financial remittances and the contribution migration makes to economic progress on a national level and to income-generating capacity on a household level (see de Haas 2005; de Haas–Rodríguez 2010; Kapur 2004). From this one-sided, instrumental, rather utilitarian perspective about migration and development, the complexity of the social, cultural, political, and gendered impacts of migration on the lives of migrants and their family members cannot be grasped. The limited understanding of migration and development can be overcome by drawing on

Amartya Sen's notion of development, conceptualized as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" (Sen 1999: 3). Sen operationalizes these freedoms by using the concept of human capability, which he defines as "the capabilities of persons to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value" (Sen 1999: 19).

Drawing on Sen's concept of capability, Hein de Haas (2014) interprets migration capability as people's freedom to decide where to live, irrespective of whether they aspire to leave or to stay, as their freedom to control their own lives. To develop a meaningful understanding of agency in migration processes, de Haas proposes a meta-theoretical conceptualization of "migration as a function of aspiration and capabilities to migrate within the given set of opportunity structures" (de Haas 2014: 4). As he points out:

Because people have agency, their mobility is also a potential force for structural change, because it can play an important part in altering the social and economic conditions in both sending and receiving countries. (...) However, it is important to emphasize that all migrants face structural constraints and (that) the degree to which they can exercise agency is fundamentally limited. This also limits the extent to which migrants can bring about structural change (de Haas 2009: 2).

This paper aims to create a better understanding of the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency in the process of international labor migration based on empirical evidence collected in Hungarian small towns and villages.¹ We will focus on live-in care migration, a widespread form of female circular migration from Hungary to Western European countries, because of its specific features which highlight the varying, dynamic nature of the agency of migrant women within the complexity of structural constraints.

In the research on international care migration, the agency-based approach is anything but novel. In her seminal book, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas explored the means by which Filipina migrant domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles resist or negotiate the effects of the structural "dislocations" they face in their lives in both cities (Parreñas 2001). Helma Lutz emphasized in her book on the "new maids" of Europe that migrant care workers are "not puppets" of economic and social constraints, but "human individuals seeking to improve their living conditions across frontiers" (Lutz 2011, 24), and also analyzed the strategies and tactics migrant domestic workers adopt to achieve (relative) autonomy and self-determination in their relationships with employers. In accordance with Lutz's analytical approach, Tünde Turai considers Hungarian migrant elderly care workers in different countries as active and influential actors maneuvering within structural limits and controlled social spaces (Turai 2017, 2018).

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Drawing on this theoretical and empirical background, the object of this paper is twofold: first, we will compare and systematically analyze Hungarian migrant elderly care workers' experiences, coping strategies, and tactics within the constraints set in the global context of care work. Second, we will provide a comprehensive theoretical framework based on the concepts of agency and tactics in which diverse empirical findings can be interpreted.

Context, Methods, Scope and Limits

Selection of the research sites² was based on prior research experience. We had previously built contacts with respected local people, mostly women, who helped us to find interviewees involved in international labor migration. This support seemed necessary for overcoming the potential distrust of interviewees stemming from the sensitivity of the topic of migration and their vulnerability, given that many of them worked informally. We conducted a total of 250 semi-structured interviews at three different research sites with international labor migrants and their family members, as well as with local stakeholders and experts. From all the interviews, 25 were conducted with women who were working as live-in migrant care workers in Austria and Germany at the time of the research, or had done so at a previous time.

In order to understand the migrant trajectories of Hungarian elderly care workers, it is important to emphasize that the context of migration from Eastern and Central European countries differs from global patterns of transnational care migration. In this region, shorter geographical distances as well as national and European-level migration regimes trigger a specific circular migration pattern organized in a shift rotation system in two-, four-, or six-week periods (Lutz–Palenga–Möllenbeck 2011, 2012, 2016; Palenga–Möllenbeck 2013, 2014; Turai 2017, 2018). Shift-based care work also shapes transnational family ties and parenting strategies (Lutz 2011; Turai 2018). Due to the shift rotation system, migrant elderly care workers maintain a more balanced life between their workplace in host households and their families at home than migrant women from “developing” countries who spend long years working abroad, often without visiting family members left behind.

Compared with the literature on international care migration (Parreñas 2013; Lutz 2011; Fedyuk 2015), the striking feature in the Hungarian case is that among women who decided to go and work abroad, only a few had small children (see also Turai 2018). It seems as though migratory decisions in Hungarian families conform to rather traditional gendered roles in the nuclear family.³ Consequently, most of our interviewees migrated to perform care jobs only after their children had grown up

² The scope and scale of the research sites were not equal across settlements. Although we began our fieldwork in two small towns and one village located in different regions of Hungary, we soon extended the research to the surrounding settlements following the networks of our interviewees.

³ Analysis of the Hungarian census of 2011 shows that it is mostly men who work abroad, usually circulating between the host and origin countries (Blaskó–Szabó 2016).

and left home. As a result, the overwhelming majority of our sample of women were middle-aged or even of retirement age. All of our interviewees had worked for years or decades as employees of local/regional enterprises, factories, or in services, and only a few were qualified in health and social fields. Because of the lack of professional training and expertise in care work, they could only rely on their personal experience to guide them in caring for elderly and sick people. In addition, most of them could not speak the host language at all when they began working in German-speaking households. As our empirical evidence shows, elderly Hungarian care workers rarely made an effort to improve their language skills in order to become more competent in their host countries. The main reason behind this phenomenon is that the women involved in circular care migration did not aspire to settle or re-unite their families in the host countries. They decided to go abroad as care workers not because of any personal aspiration to do so, but because of the existential crises faced by their families – unemployment, decreasing incomes, and indebtedness – and the fear of impoverishment.

Interviews were conducted when the women were at home (between two shifts). Although we also planned to ask the husbands of the former about their own experiences, emotions, and opinions about their wives' migration, we had very little success. We were only able to speak with three men (two of them were present during the interviews with their wives), while in other cases we could not speak to them because of their reluctance to participate (Turai [2018] reports the same situation).

In this paper, we follow two strategies for analyzing our empirical evidence. Instead of providing case studies of women's entire migratory history, we explore the *common patterns* of migrant elderly care workers' perceptions and interpretations of their controversial situation. We crystallize and synthesize their experiences and modes of operation as the *tactics* and *narratives* they use to resist, negotiate and adopt to the effects of their dislocations. In the last part of the paper we analyze two specific types of narratives (*housemaid and self-development narratives*) by describing certain cases in more detail. These examples also reflect the limits of their agency in the host households.

Theorizing agency: perception, problematization, tactics, and narratives

We interpret our empirical findings through the conceptual framework of agency developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), which allows us to focus on the *perception*, the *framing* of everyday experiences, and the *problematization* of elderly care-giving as a social role. Given that all these cognitive processes require significant mental activity and strongly influence action, they are elements of agency. They are also the preconditions for the negotiation of this specific role, and consequently have the potential to create greater room for maneuver for elderly care workers in the host

households. For the analysis of these efforts and games (see Kordasiewicz 2016), we used de Certeau's notion of *tactics* (de Certeau 1984) as an inspiring tool for scrutinizing migrant women's multi-layered experiences and their reactions to their positions.

Human agency is *temporal*: it is simultaneously embedded in the past and present and oriented towards the future. The agentic orientation can dynamically shift in terms of action through the selective re-activation of past experiences and patterns of thought that stimulate practical evaluation or judgment of the present situation, or facilitate the development of alternatives by the projection or imagination of the possible future outcomes of the action. Although habituated, routinized action is overwhelmingly oriented toward the past, even the employment of repetitive practices and know-how requires cognitive effort throughout *typification*, since there is never a perfect match between schemas and actual situations. *Problematization* "requires the contextualization of habitual practices within the concrete circumstances of the moment" (Emirbayer–Mische 1998, 997). The perception of situational settings and the capacity to frame by characterization presupposes the mobilization of past experiences. Since emotions and cognitive efforts are intertwined, "perception is a complex response of the entire personality" (Nussbaum 1986, 309, cited by Emirbayer–Mische 1998: 998). The *practical-evaluative* aspect of agency is predominantly oriented towards the present, and enables actors to react to the contingencies and ambiguities of the present situation and/or to intervene. *The projective character* of agency is dominant in an action orienting toward the future, and is exercised by imagination and "role-experimentation" (Emirbayer 1998, 996; Goffman 1956). These experimental or "local actions" (Emirbayer–Mische 1998, 1001) are based on the recombination of existing schemas and models, which allows for the performance of a role without long-term engagement or the claim to canonization (Emirbayer–Mische 1998).

The notion of tactics highlights how agents creatively play against the routine modes of the exercise of power and control mechanisms, and gain inspiration by their everyday practice and thereby practical sense. Although de Certeau tacitly shares Foucault's vision of social reality penetrated by power, he emphasizes individual agency and the potential for resistance. "The goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'" (de Certeau 1984, xiv-xv).

A deeper examination of everyday practices reveals how the determining power of structures can be temporarily eased by creative improvisation. Tactics are calculated in the sense that they cannot rely on "proper" resources (controlled space, or institutions). They must be operated by the creative combination of heterogeneous elements of dominant structures. Consequently, a tactic is an intrinsically temporary and unfinished synthesis; that is, a way of making, or the "art of making" (de Certeau 1984).

Tactics are created against the predominance and determining power of the structure (de Certeau 1984). While they inherently involve a spirit of resistance and innovation, they must also encompass some level of adaptation to hegemonic structures in order to be successful. Agents adapting these tactics wish to play them out for a moment by unexpected recombination, or unanticipated improvisation. Although the relationship between employers and migrant live-in elderly care workers is based on mutual dependency, it also includes multiple asymmetrical, unbalanced power relations. Living and working in “other’s places,” care workers are restricted to exercising their agency in rather indirect ways: by manipulating situations or performing hidden forms of resistance. Consequently, in this analytical framework *tactics involve human games and struggles for the control of spaces and situations, for shaping relations, and for establishing a clear system of obligations and competences* which define their role as care workers and also require complex boundary-making processes in the host households.

Beyond their improvisations or practices of adapting to enlarge their room for maneuver, migrant care workers’ narratives crystallize their experiences retrospectively, which helps them to re-interpret their social role and to typify their position while changing from family to family. Migrant women’s *narratives highlight the dynamics of perception, framing and interpretation through problematization*, and link different dimensions of time.

Although tactics give intrinsically rapid feedback about challenging situations, their adaptability depends on their availability. The more often the common stock of knowledge is mobilized – meaning the more often experiences are recalled and shared with others – the more available and adaptable they are (de Certeau 1984). Narratives as crystallized experiences gain their reproductive potential through performance and narration, but they can be future-oriented as well if we consider their potential as a transformative power. The narrative dynamics of *role-taking* or *role-distancing* reveal not only the perception and the framing of elderly care, but also the potentialities for resistance and changing future aspirations. Migrant care workers’ tactics and narratives, whether understood as a diagnostic or prognostic function, reveal Hungarian rural women involved in international care migration much more as active agents than as passive individuals completely determined by micro- and macro-level economic and power relations and systems of dependency.

Live-in elderly care in host households as arenas of agency

As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) assert, the more complex the relational setting is and the wider the range of possible factors that come into play, the more likely the provocation of communication and (self)-reflection which makes actors negotiate

their situation or generate alternatives.⁴ Domestic work and elderly care, especially the live-in forms, are situated at the intersection of traditional and modern female roles. Paid domestic work involves many ambiguities and paradoxes. The “commodification of care” (see Anderson 2004; Rivas 2004; Parreñas 2001) on one hand provides an opportunity for migrant women to undertake a paid job, while on the other hand it (re-)produces the complex system of global economic and gender hierarchies by reinforcing the need for traditional female work and the dependency of migrant care workers’ families on remittances (Parreñas 2001).

“The global re-division of women’s traditional work” (Ehrenreich–Hochschild 2004: 11) has led to the “feminization of migration,” further deepening many dimensions of inequality and pitting modern female roles against traditional ones (and vice versa). The “new gender arrangement” (Friese 1996, cited by Lutz 2011, 10) exempts Western women from unpaid, low-prestige and invisible reproductive (house)work by relegating all these duties to migrant women, reproducing the multi-dimensional inequalities and dependencies within these households (Lutz 2011). It may create hierarchical relations between employer and employee, and reinforce traditional (gender-based) patterns of the division of labor instead of cooperation based on mutual respect (Ehrenreich–Hochschild 2004).

Care work inevitably includes elements of emotional work (see Parreñas 2001; Lutz 2011; Hochschild 2000). The very presence of care workers in foreign households represents a “care-drain,” which causes a “care deficit” in the family left behind. Domestic work is “a ‘labor of love’ and a ‘labor of sorrow’” (Jones 1985, cited by Parreñas 2001: 120), since care work undertaken in the host family constantly reminds these women of the painful choice between their family’s financial and emotional security, and recalls the pain of family separation. Domestic work demands a continuous response to the diverse needs of the person being cared for, and also requires all-day availability and preparedness, which isolates women and encloses them in the household.

Moreover, housework and caregiving are relatively undefined social roles. However, they can hardly be detached from the role of their historical precursor, the housemaid. This historical-cultural heritage, together with the changing transnational context and a struggle for professionalization and *formalization*, is a seedbed of further uncertainties, contradictions and frictions (see further: Lutz 2011; Németh 2016). The low prestige of reproductive work is stigmatized even now. Stigmatization stems from the housemaid’s role and vulnerable position within the patriarchal family model in which “service was infiltrated by relations of personal dependency” (Gyáni 1983, 22). Informal jobs and illegal immigration status still increase migrant workers’ vulnerability, especially in the case of caregivers who live in

4 David Stark (2009) demonstrates in various case studies how different “orders of worth” or modes of thinking trigger creative frictions that stimulate innovation in various fields. He reveals that certain economic organizations in fact exploit ambiguity and dissonance, transforming them into creativity and innovation.

the host family's private space (Rivas 2004; Lutz 2011). Moving into the employer's private household, however, also involves further contradictions since it might be a seedbed of exploitation and abuse, or a place of shelter and satisfaction of basic needs. Besides overt degradation, moderately changing but persistent forms of social or racial stigmatization are still adapted in both the global and regional context. Coping with (potential) stigma requires significant cognitive and emotional effort, as well as bridging cultural differences by adapting to the host family's needs and everyday routines.

The persistent ambiguities, contradictions and frictions stemming from this specific social role stimulate negotiations about the role and its content (i.e. tasks, competencies, and responsibilities), and trigger tactics (active or passive forms of resistance and imaginary or real role experimentation). Elderly care workers may take advantage of these inherent paradoxes, but at the same time these ambiguities also indicate the limits of exercising and expanding agency within this context. The intersection of household and family and traditional and modern female roles increases the complexity of the situation, requiring boundary-making mechanisms and the management of emotional tensions resulting from a demanding but low-prestige job. All of these factors make the host household an arena for agency.

Spatial dimensions of agency

Emotional tensions do not only stem from family separation and the demanding character of the job, but from the interplay of individual aspirations and structural constraints. Parreñas (2001) uses the notion *dislocation* to grasp the inherent difficulties and strains related to the contradictory class mobility of Filipina migrant domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles. Dislocation in a *social* sense refers to these usually highly qualified women's feelings of being forced to undertake such low-prestige, stigmatized jobs to maintain the financial stability of the families they have left behind. Additionally, domestic work is considered to be a "natural" female job which does not require any specific qualifications. The experience of *de-skilling* as a loss of competency is deeply intertwined with the decline of former social status, while improvements in financial situation – the higher salary earned as a domestic worker – provides primarily material compensation. (As we also see below in Agnes' narrative, dislocation in terms of *de-skilling* was the most frustrating and degrading experience among professionally trained and experienced nurses who began working as live-in elderly caregivers.)

Dislocation also denotes a *loss of home*. Habitual aspects of agency are related to well-known places where repeated actions, habits and routines provide the actor with a feeling of control (Emirbayer–Mische 1998). Consequently, well-known places are constitutive parts of identity through emotional bonds to place (*place attachment*, *place identity*): they are sites of developing agency where the individual feels safe and

confident. In contrast to this, a loss of space can cause a temporary loss of agency, as well as distress, crises, and disorientation. Loss of space and relocation affects primarily social identity and demands the “fitting” of the new place into the frame of the old place, maintaining continuity throughout diverse psychological processes such as effects, orientation, systematization, categorization, manipulation, memorization and recollection (Dúll 2015 a,b).

Consequently, individual agency is embedded in both the social and private space. The home and private sphere are places for creating emotional and social bonds, and are ultimately sources of self-esteem and positive personal identity. Moving abroad challenges these spatially and socially embedded relations, and makes the host household a place (an arena) for building up personal autonomy through claiming a private place within the house. These efforts are manifested in boundary-making processes and human games that are played to gain control over at least a small part of the other’s private space. The control of the outside *social* space encompasses various processes such as “taming the unknown” by adoption of a daily routine, and inventing places for socializing. In this sense, meeting points or community places do not simply dissolve loneliness and isolation, but are the preconditions for any kind of coordinated social action.⁵ Consequently, isolation involves significant emotional work while it continuously menaces the subject by narrowing social ties and contacts.

Hungarian elderly caregivers in our sample often complained about feelings of isolation, confinement or even boredom that they had experienced while being “locked-in” to host households. Kata cared for an old man who had had both of his legs amputated.

His daily routine is strongly regulated, in fact, I cannot go out and leave him alone. I do not like to talk to him, because he is always telling the same stories. I am bored. In the evenings I Skype with my boyfriend, and in my free time I play on the internet, watch films and series. But you can get bored with this too, there are no series I did not see in these four years. The old man goes to sleep early, but “I do not go out, I do not like to walk around in strange places. I rather stay at home all the time, waiting for the three weeks to pass.

Elderly Hungarian caregivers have very limited opportunity to discover the places where they work or create spontaneous social encounters, even when they work for years in the same households. Their daily routines allow them only a small amount of free time (if any), restricted to short encounters in shops and on the streets. The possibility of such social contacts is also limited by the fact that most Hungarian care workers work without legal permission in Germany, and thus carefully avoid spending too much time alone in public spaces. Occasional neighborhood

5 Housemaids in this sense were highly separated and atomized in the past because they lived in separate households. This spatial setting, among other factors, prevented almost any kind of collective action (Gyáni 1983). Parreñas used the term “hidden transcript” to refer to the discourses that Filipina domestic workers maintained outside of their employers’ homes. As she points out, there are different sites in Los Angeles and Rome (such as churches, community centers of the Philippine diaspora, buses, and magazines) where migrant Filipina domestic workers “brew tactics” for negotiating their everyday experiences, challenges and strategies (Parreñas 2001: 194).

relationships or spontaneous encounters with other Hungarians working in the same area show precisely how narrow, homogeneous and fragile these social contacts are. Due to circular migration, workers usually do not aspire to build up deep contacts with Hungarian migrant communities, and do not wish to be integrated into host countries. Given that they are constantly moving between the sending and the host countries, they need a special kind of (limited) support, which includes emotional support and the sharing of information. Access to the telephone, the internet and Skype are important matters which contribute to the maintenance of social and family ties and prevent total isolation.

However, there are some “extreme” examples of expanding one’s agency in the host household. Lena, one of our interviewees, took care of an old woman for five years in a small town in Germany. Lena was able to capitalize on her communication skills, personality and endurance. She organized a place for other Hungarian care workers on the terrace and in the basement of the host house where they could smoke and drink coffee together, and built up many social contacts that allowed her to undertake short-term, occasional jobs in addition to full-time care, such as cleaning or mowing lawns for other families once or twice a week. She used her free time to do other jobs and save more money. However, the precondition for this large-scale room for maneuver was the fact that her employer and other local contacts were of Hungarian origin and there was no language barrier between Lena and them. Another precondition was the tolerance and the mental and physical state of the old woman, who did not require all-day care and attention. As Lena summarized her exceptional situation: “*We were allowed to do everything, there was no other place in the world like this.*”

Agency is strongly attached to the household as a site of privacy, while elderly care can be characterized by the “absence of privacy” (Parreñas 2001:159). The host households are “other’s places” (de Certeau 1984) where employees need to find a place for themselves, but in doing so can mobilize a very limited range of their own resources. Consequently, everyday actions and even possible resistance must be performed and developed in a setting defined by asymmetric power relations. Tactics in this sense are the “power of the weak” as they exploit and recombine separate elements of dominant power structures through unexpected, innovative reactions and improvisations to enlarge the horizon of action and room for maneuver.

Playing with roles – tactics

In most cases, elderly care is not restricted to the task directly connected with the old *person*, but demands a holistic approach that improves the recipient’s well-being, including working with the human body, nurturing and reacting to the other’s emotional, social and mental needs, tidying his/her personal environment, and running the household. The situation is even more complex when more elderly people and their family members live together. The presence of a paid employee represents

a paradox: it reflects a deficit of care, but may lead to a surplus of “housewives” at the same time. The female employer (the person being cared for, her daughter or daughter-in-law) probably has her own “housewife” routines, ideas of order, values, expectations and competencies, but these are partly delegated to the employee, who in turn brings her own routines and preferences into the setting. Thus, housewife routines, competences, and systems of expectations must be negotiated or divided up. Consequently, human games usually aim at negotiating the roles and struggling for the recognition of individual merits and competencies. Given that these women can usually mobilize a limited range of skills, their room for maneuver, their autonomy, and even one potential source of positive self-esteem might be at stake when negotiating competencies related to the role of housewife. The question here is who makes decisions about everyday shopping and food budgets, or whose needs and tastes must be taken into account and which cuisine or diet is to be followed. Enlarging competencies as a housewife, nevertheless, can be a controversial strategy, since the “overplaying” (the exaggerated performance) of traditional female roles can easily become a seedbed for exploitation, which partly stems from the reproductive character of housework and partly from the dominant historical pre-figure of the housemaid (Gyáni 1983; Czingel-Tóth 2014).

At her first workplace, the aforementioned Lena could overcome the distrust of her employer by overplaying her housewife competencies. As she said: *“She was a sweet, nice, small aunt, but as I firstly recognized, she did not love me, she was German, and said ‘nicht gut Frau’ [not a good woman], because I could not speak German. Then I said Damn your mothers!, you will see. And [I cleaned the windows], washed and hung all the curtains. Then I was good. Everything was good. The whole family loved me.”* Recalling her experiences in different households, Lena emphasized that she always used her housewife competencies, especially cooking, to “tame” the families of the elderly person being cared for. This meant cooking lunch every day, for example, even for those family members who did not live in the household of the cared-for elderly person. Although she likes to cook and proudly considers the daily visits for lunch as recognition of her competency as a housewife, the fact is that cooking for the whole family was not originally a part of her duty. Since there was no legally recognized work contract (only a verbal employment agreement) she had no other opportunity but to satisfy the new demands of her employer’s family.

The negotiation of competencies is even more complex when human games involve the search for balance in personal relationships instead of one-sided dependency. Elderly care does not simply involve a vulnerable household worker, but often an old, ill, often bed-ridden, physically dependent person, who is also fighting the loss of their own competencies and to maintain agency. While complex and professional care must reflect these personal problems and help the elderly to maintain their skills and capabilities, it remains a crucial question whether the mutual negotiation of agencies

is a zero-sum or a win-win game between two vulnerable people. Consequently, intimacy and care can be an arena for relative empowerment as well as abuse. Caregivers can cause harm intentionally or unintentionally.

As our interviewees attested, it was a permanent challenge to tame the unpredictably aggressive behavior of the elderly who suffered from dementia. Some of them tried to attenuate or deflect this aggression through “clowning,” humor, and laughter, while others emphasized feelings of empathy and compassion for patients suffering from dementia. However, there were also women who answered aggression with aggression: “*When he hit me, I hit back.*”

One woman, who often changed workplaces, said: “*Every time I decided to leave I did not say anything to anyone.*” This is a typical “white lie”; the caregiver promising that they will return to their workplace from home when the time for their shift starts. But ultimately they do not, because they can easily find a better place. Leaving without any warning may help care workers to cope with changes, but can cause uncertainty, emotional distress and a loss of trust for the elderly. There are further examples of unbalanced relationships: infantilization may occur when an old person is handled as a child due to their dementia and loss of capabilities. However, if a mental disorder prevents the building up of contact with the elderly, it increases the social isolation and frustration of the caregiver. Successful mutual negotiations are marked by instances when situations of vulnerability dynamically change in interpersonal relations, increasing self-reflection and leading to the mobilization of personal skills (including caregiver competencies as mother, (house)wife, etc.).

Some interviewees referred to the cared-for elderly as “Oma” or “Opa” – “*I care for her as if she were my grandma*” – re-positioning themselves in these relations as a grandchild, irrespective of their actual age (there were a few cases when the care worker was older than the cared-for person). Others reformulated the mutual but asymmetrical dependency between the care workers and the cared-for persons: “*You should keep a distance, but it is impossible in an atmosphere of intimacy like when you wipe her bottom – it is like the relationship between mother and child.*”

This dynamic may simultaneously link elderly care in the realm of *personal attachment* (perceived as friendship or familial kinship) and *work* as (friendly) professionalism (see: Parreñas 2001, 2004; Kordasiewicz 2014).

Juggling with roles – problematization in narratives

Games played to “manipulat[e] circumstances to turn [them] into possibilities” (de Certeau 1984, ix) are even more complex when they are performed as roles to be systematized and accepted. When the role itself is at stake, no temporary (“Pyrrhic”) victories are “proper.” Claims may become holistic (even if the process is only partly conscious): for example, balancing asymmetric relationships or re-framing elderly care

as a job in the familial context. There is the potential for resistance in both the silent but persistent rejection of stigmatization and oppressive working conditions, on one hand, and the hidden transformation of roles by changing the practices (tactics) and narratives on the other. From a theoretical point of view, tactics in this context are manifested as *role performance* or *role distance* in the Goffmanian sense. Role-performance fundamentally means taking on a role, at least temporarily, without totally identifying with it (*role-enactment*). Role-distance is used when someone wishes to express at least some doubt or disagreement with expectations related to the role, or wants to demonstrate that they are not entirely engaged in role-taking for various reasons (Goffman 1959).

Kordasiewicz (2014) analyzed two strategies of Polish migrant women working in Napoli: *professionalization* is based on the re-framing of household work, including elderly care, as a profession. This framework enables migrant women to express their needs and interests as employees, emphasizing their wish for their working conditions to be regularized. It also facilitates a decrease in their personal dependency within the informal, intimate sphere of the host family. Overall, it is an active but *defensive way* of dealing with potential oppression and exploitation (Kordasiewicz 2014), while it shapes not only the perception of a job but the aspirations and even narrative accounts of workers. *Personalization* can be considered a withdrawal from asymmetric power relations by emphasizing personal relations and a struggle for equality and distance based on mutual respect.

However, Polish women working in Napoli found it unacceptable that their “overt degradation” was masked in the discourse of “*fictive kinship*” that appealed to their sense of loyalty. This strategy is based on the declaration that the elderly caregiver is a quasi-family member. The main function of this approach was to legitimate overwork by integrating carers into the familial system of unreciprocated duties and services without any remuneration or respect. This is rather manipulative rhetoric from the host family, since it indeed integrates the worker’s role into the informal hierarchy, which is hard to control (Kordasiewicz 2014). As Parreñas (2001) also noted, there is a wide consensus in the literature that the perception of domestic workers as “one of the family” reproduces unequal, hierarchical power relations. However, domestic workers might also be interested in maintaining this self-identification in order to upgrade their low and dependent status in the host family (Parreñas 2001, Lutz 2011).

When some of our interviewees confidently stated that they were treated as family members, they confirmed this claim by mentioning that their presence and work were appreciated, and that they ate and spent coffee breaks at the same table as their employers – “*Because I was a family member and not a maid.*” They also told us stories about gifts received from their employers on their birthdays and Christmas, or chocolates, toys, and clothes sent by the employers to their children and grandchildren. From the point of view of our Hungarian interviewees, having a “good workplace” typically means being considered one

of the family. This discourse glosses over the status of elderly care workers as paid domestic employees and their vulnerable position in the respective host families.

However, we also identified certain fragments of the counter-discourse of “true love,” which inverts the discourse of fictive kinship from the perspective of the caregiver: “In my opinion, nobody loves the people we are caring for. I must also love them. Because nobody loves them – even if they have a family.” In this discourse, the emotional ambiguities and tensions inherent in the role and position of the care workers within the host families are reflected in a way that provides them with a sense of moral superiority, since they offer more (true) love than the real family of the cared-for person.⁶

Turai (2014, 2018) identified three types of discourses among Romanian and Hungarian women from Hungary, Romania and Ukraine working as elderly caregivers in Hungary, Italy and Israel. Hungarian women working in Israel represent their experiences through an *exotic discourse*, while the *ethnocentric discourse* was organized along with ethnic Hungarian identity, as well as geographic and cultural proximity to Hungary. The *victimhood and suffering discourse* emphasizes Romanian women’s experiences of family separation and exploitation in Italian host households and reveals their coping strategies.

In our research, elderly care workers represented themselves through two specific narratives. The *housemaid narrative* as well as the *self-development narrative* share commonalities with the aforementioned strategies and discourses. One of their main functions is to interpret *retrospectively* the contradictory class mobility and ambiguous status of domestic workers at the intersection of family and household. Creating a more or less coherent narrative also enables them to systematize their everyday experiences and mitigate ambiguities by re-framing the experiences and the perception of this role. Problematization of the role eventually facilitates adaptation.

The housemaid narrative

The housemaid narrative can be considered a rhetorical tool for expressing or releasing tensions originating from this specific social role. This narrative’s primary function is to articulate (possibly repressed) emotions such as anger, disappointment and frustration stemming from *dislocation*, ambiguities of contradictory class mobility, and the pain of family separation (see Parreñas 2001, 2004).

It also reveals how the perception and the (re-)framing of experiences work throughout the problematization of the role of domestic worker. Since concrete emergent situations and models stored in the common stock of knowledge never completely match (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), the analogy in itself demonstrates how the dominant historical pre-figure of the housemaid is used for interpreting the

6 Unconsciously, the discourse of “true love” reflects the concept of “emotional surplus value” developed by Hochschild (2000).

role of the former, and how it helps to articulate problems, needs and expectations relating to their actual jobs. Due to the stigma related to the figure of the housemaid, *role-enactment* in the sense of role fulfillment is hardly possible. The function of the housemaid narrative is not even about *role-taking*; on the contrary, this rhetoric aims to increase *role-distance* through problematization (Németh 2016). Role-enactment would also mean that one is totally absorbed by the role,⁷ immersed in the totality of informality, which may even prevent the taking on of other social roles (Kordasiewicz 2014). Therefore, the role-dynamic is a crucial issue for these women who want to represent themselves not only as employees, but also as mothers, wives or competent housewives, as well as human beings in host households, emphasizing that they do have a personality beyond these roles. Consequently, dealing with social isolation is of special importance from their point of view, as are self-defense mechanisms against being neglected in the presence of family and excluded from communication. This is *non-person treatment* in the Goffmanian sense (Goffman 1956; Kordasiewicz 2014; Parreñas 2001, 2004; Turai 2018).

The metaphor of housemaid was reflected by most of our interviewees (see also Turai 2018),⁸ but only a few of them used it deliberately while describing their position. One of the former was Agnes who, following retirement, began working abroad as a caregiver because of financial difficulties. In Hungary, she was trained and worked for long years in social services and health care, and thus found it degrading that in most cases the families of the elderly she cared for did not need or appreciate her professional knowledge and skills. In her narrative, the figure of housemaid was clearly linked to her social dislocation as a professional caregiver and served to increase role-distance. The employer family wanted her to do everything around the household and on the family farm without remuneration or any appreciation of her overtime work. "*The maid is expected to work as a stupid animal.*"

In her narrative, the metaphor of maid was also used for those women who allowed themselves to be exploited instead of developing resistance and defending their own interests. Now, Agnes has finished working as a care worker abroad.

When we met Ilona, a woman of about 80, she had been working for 10 years in Germany. She decided to migrate because she felt morally obliged to meet the needs of her family; she helped her daughter to pay back her debts, financed the studies of her grandchild, and supported her poor relatives. She planned

7 Elderly care might be a total social role: the absence of privacy and autonomy, the informality, the requirement for day-and-night availability aggravated by emotional involvement, and the mix of hierarchy and intimacy may limit the caretaker's autonomy. Most menacing in a total social role is that the personality may be dissolved by role-expectations (Kordasiewicz 2016).

8 According to Turai (2018), the ambiguity characterizing the work and position of elderly caregivers is reflected in the confusion with which her interviewees tried to identify their status. The women used terms such as "family member," "maid," "nurse," "relative," "worker," "friend," "guard," and "master" to describe themselves. She found that the most frequently mentioned was that of "maid" ("servant" or "slave") which was most often reflected even in cases associated with the work and status of caregivers when not used to describe their own work and position (see details: Turai 2018, 111-131).

to return home for good. She reported an experience of non-person treatment when she was not offered a drink at a family event while sitting at the same table as the host family. *“It was Christmas Eve, the son and daughters came to visit their mother. Everyone but me was offered champagne. It was so humiliating – not that I like champagne, but I was sitting there to help the aunt to drink. And neither the daughters nor one of the grandchildren said, ‘pour a drink for Ilona.’”* Her housemaid narrative was built not only around her humiliating position as care worker but also her vulnerable situation in her own family. She felt that her family members (tacitly) expected her to work abroad without respecting her advanced age because they needed her earnings.

Similarly to the aforementioned victimhood and suffering narrative (Turai 2014, 2018), the housemaid narrative emphasizes the structural constraints, economic pressure and hardship which push women into this job. However, this does not necessarily mean that these women are totally passive in their roles as care workers.⁹ The narrative is in fact an example of active, but mostly hidden resistance, since it is used to express a rejection of subordinated situations and exploitation, a refusal of undefined competencies and unlimited tasks, and of working day and night. This rhetoric exploits the power of stigma to express a rejection of exploitation and de-skilling. Non-person treatment or the experience of exploitation trigger the metaphor of housemaid, but, as in the case of Ilona, it may uncover inter-generational conflicts within the worker’s own family, mutual dependencies, and the pain of self-sacrifice for other family members.

The self-development narrative

The housemaid narrative is far from being universal, but a complete self-development discourse is even more rare (see also Turai 2018). However, rarity does not necessarily undermine the relevance and explanatory power of these narratives. In many cases, narratives thematized individual harm and suffering without using the *housemaid* metaphor, while fragments of (self-) development – that is, individual or family gains from circular migration – were more often displayed. Various fragments of self-development discourse made the whole narrative more open and proactive. The interviewees referred to financial and social remittances encompassing improvements to living conditions, material goods and skills thereby obtained, strategies for adaptation, and various tactics for overcoming problems as evidence for development in the sense of expanding freedom. Besides efforts to secure financial stability, maintain the social and economic status of the family and facilitate the next generations’ mobility, they pointed to the skills they had obtained (limited language skills, bits of know-how), changing values, and moreover, a kind of openness toward the world and an increased level of spatial mobility. Some women showed their ability

9 Emirbayer and Mische (1998) also emphasize that “empirical social action will be never be completely determined or structured. (...) There is no hypothetical moment in which agency actually gets ‘free’ of structure.” (Emirbayer–Mische 1998: 1004).

to entirely re-frame unfavorable situations related to the role of care worker, and emphasized the power of negotiations and prudent but persistent manipulation of circumstances.

The most powerful form of resistance seems to be the *self-development narrative*, which highlights how people exercise their agency by *projectively* orienting towards the future, while recollections in interviews also encompass and systematize past experiences. The re-composition of experiences can give a hypothetical resolution to current problems through role-experimentation. In this sense, these narratives are not simply imaginary tools of agency, but “provide maps of action,” as Ricoeur states (Emirbayer–Mische 1998, 989). In this way, they might become a possible tool for resistance by rejecting subordination or inventing new frames of perception.

Ditta, a middle-aged woman, went to Germany to save only enough to buy a family car. After a few months this goal was achieved, but she decided to continue her work as a caregiver, and [at the time of interview] had been working abroad for six years. During her first experience she had faced enormous difficulties – “*I cried so much*” – but she had learned how to “tame” the shouting patient until she recognized that “*The elderly need someone to help.*” Since then, Ditta’s aim has been to find the perfect way to meet the elderly’s diverse personal needs. She was not content with everyday practices, so she began to study, and is now qualified as a social and domestic care worker and is also trained in pedicure, manicure, and massage. She said, “*Ten years ago I had not thought I would find the job I love to do in elderly care.*” For her, caring for the elderly had become a “*nice profession,*” and now she works in the elderly care home in her village in Hungary.

The self-development narrative in its most developed form makes not only role performance but even *role-enactment* possible throughout the complete re-framing of the perception of care work. Consequently, the self-development narrative is independent of the metaphor of housemaid, which is exactly how it changes the evaluation of elderly care. Changes in perception and evaluation, as the case of Ditta shows, can lead to the (partial) re-formulation of the whole life story which articulates the aim of the migration. In the most elaborate narrative of this type, elderly care becomes a real profession, a “calling,” and a tool for self-development through learning and obtaining new skills. In other words, care work performed in foreign households becomes the aim of migration and provides freedom in the sense that Sen defines it: it is the capability of living a valuable life even in a situation defined by structural constraints. This type of narrative involves the core elements of both *personalization* and *professionalization* strategies, as it represents elderly care as a professional way of reacting to one’s complex needs while keeping personal relationships balanced. It is regulated by distance, but also emotions.

The fact that self-development narratives are independent from housemaid narratives does not necessarily mean that everyday practices do not involve at least

some elements of tactics. This contradiction still implies that asymmetrical power relations underlie the determining power of structural constraints and shows precisely the limits of exercising agency in this specific context.

Limits of agency

Non-professional elderly care workers have a limited set of assets and skills to mobilize in the elderly-care work personal relationship; it is indeed their interiorized pieces of know-how and certain elements of traditional female roles that they can use. Because of the inherent contradictions in paid care work and a lack of proper language skills, our interviewees tended to express their care and attachment through touching, caressing, goodnight kisses or gestures of care such as cooking, dressing, or shaving their elderly charges. All these limitations may trigger overplay (exaggerated performance) of the caretaking role.

In those cases when caretakers lack professional and language skills, *role-overplay* can be manifested either in emphasizing personal attachment or a strategy of overwork. The latter is primarily used to prove personal qualities by highlighting caregiver and housewife competencies, and may even trigger competition with other caretakers. At the micro-level, this strategy is an important characteristic of the Eastern and Central European context of care migration: in the shift-work system, elderly care workers are substituted when they return home, which can lead to competition that emphasizes individual performance and the interests of the working pair instead of their cooperation. At a macro-level, competition is even sharper between care workers who come from different Eastern and Central European countries. There is a labor surplus on the European domestic and care work market, so employers can easily select between care workers and choose the “cheaper” ones. Hungarian migrant care workers often complain that women from Romania, Poland or Ukraine take jobs with lower wages and longer shifts. They tend to downplay their vulnerable situation by creating symbolic boundaries, emphasizing their superiority to the “dirty,” “lazy” and “unreliable” Romanian, Polish and Ukrainian caregivers. The creation of moral superiority is one of the most prevalent self-defense mechanisms in this context, played out against either a replacement person or a care worker from a different country (see further: Parreñas 2001; Turai 2014, 2018; Melegy et al. 2018). From a social-psychological point of view, this moral superiority is provoked by asymmetric power relations or stigmatization, while it is manifested in overplaying of roles. Indeed, the creation of moral superiority can be considered the fragmentation of stigma (see: Goffman 1956; Kovai 2017), which implies that individuals attempt to maintain their self-esteem by emphasizing their competence and deflecting stigma to other caregivers. This strategy, played for temporal or personal recognition, may result in increasing exploitation through the carer’s undertaking of an unlimited range of tasks to prove their qualities by role-performance. While the “fictive kinship”

strategy is adapted by the host family to extort the greatest amount of work without proportional remuneration (Kordasiewicz 2014). The strategy of overplaying is rather self-exploitative as it has its own stake of self-representation and self-defense.

Although various tactics are adopted in response to overwork and exploitation, this tactic is performed in order to gain respect. However, it is somehow “*distorted*” and counter-productive, since it may trigger a tendency to self-exploitation, even if the fundamental motivation of the tactic is to enlarge one’s room for maneuver by the temporary subversion of the hegemonic order (Emirbayer–Mische 1998). Even if the most elaborate self-development narrative featured stories about at least the temporary or the “strategic” acceptance of subordination. Ditta told stories about how she “tamed” elderly men and how she made efforts to find out their uncommunicated needs and wishes. Her repertoire of “taming” included responding tenderly to verbal aggression, tolerating shouting or even outbursts, and coping with the (temporary) rejection of her personal presence and help by the ill elderly person.

The strategy of “*taming*” as an “extreme case” (Takács 2017) therefore highlights the limited range of assets that may be mobilized and the limited room for maneuver in this context. It also points out that it is an intrinsically double-edged strategy which usually does not challenge but rather reinforces elements of the hegemonic order and expectations related to the traditional female role. The overplaying of a role by self-exploitation reveals the inherent limits of playing with traditional female roles either in host households or in this specific segment of the labor market, aggravated by mostly temporal and informal home-stays and harsh competition between employers (Melegh et al. 2018). Besides other and more direct tactics that are performed to evade structural constraints, these “*distorted tactics*” – irrespective of their *situational* success – show the hard barriers to playing with traditional female roles and the limits of exercising agency in the context of domestic care. Our empirical evidence shows that even if migrant Hungarian care workers become the breadwinners in their households, this fact does not alter their traditional gendered roles and role expectations regarding the gendered division of labor in the families. Nor does the traditionally gendered and undervalued care work performed in foreign households challenge patterns of traditional (power) relationships, either in the host families or in their own families.

Finally, one additional note should be made regarding the limits of agency of the migrant caregivers. Care workers always have the ultimate choice to leave “bad places” or even “good places” when they have the chance to find better ones. Because their (mostly illegal) employment is based on verbal agreements, they can leave without risking their reputation and will always be able to find new workplaces due to the continuous demand for care on the labor market. However, the possibility of leaving and changing their workplaces does not alter the structural constraints and contradictions inherent in their status as care workers.

Conclusion

Agency cannot be interpreted by itself; it exists in a dynamic interplay with structure. It is, like tactics, inherently situational. Our micro-level approach aimed to grasp different manifestations of agency in the context of domestic care based on the systematization of literature and our empirical evidence. Our empirical evidence shows the (limited) power of tactics and narratives at a micro-level, but also implies macro-level structural constraints; that is, the limits of agency.

Live-in elderly care is deeply embedded in the systems of global economy and transnational migration, and is also located at the intersection of traditional and modern female roles. Consequently, it reproduces the need for undervalued and underpaid female jobs in both sending and receiving countries, as well as in the sending and host families, and reinforces the overlapping patterns of constraints and dependencies that exist from micro- to macro-, and even global levels. With regard to the agency of migrant Hungarian care workers, however, we emphasize the uniqueness of the Eastern and Central European context which defines a specific room for maneuver shaped by regional peculiarities.

In analyzing agency we have seen that *tactics* are dominantly present-oriented, inherently temporary, and unfinished. They may, however, have a hidden transformative power through the cumulative effects of unintended consequences. Narratives are more future-oriented, and they may have some transformative power through *problematization and role-experimentation*. While the *housemaid narrative* aims to create distance between live-in elderly care and its dominant historical pre-figure – the housemaid –, the *self-development narrative* makes role-enactment possible through the complete re-framing of care work; it can also reformulate the life story in relation to scrutiny of the aim of migration.

Human games and tactics are triggered by structural constraints; they are directly inspired by limitations. Our empirical evidence shows that *human games* and *tactics* are potentially tools for enlarging *individual* room for maneuver *situationally*, but they evidently cannot alter structures. The asymmetry of structure and agency is clearly demonstrated in the fact that the overwhelming majority of Hungarian care workers were able to describe the individual gains of this job only in terms of *fragments of development*, while consistent and complete *self-development narratives* were extremely rare.

These fragments, however, highlight possible gains from this specific type of circular migration which are more complex than the improvement in the situation of the migrant workers or an increase in their financial stability. They specifically refer to social remittances in the larger sense: (limited) language skills that are obtained, acquired know-how, moderately changing values, increased openness toward the world, and an increased level of spatial mobility. These fragments of development not only open narratives toward the future by scrutinizing the experiences of *agency*, but may also challenge the one-sided conception of development and offer alternative ways to interpret migration and development. The analysis of interviews also highlights

that, despite the overlapping structural constraints, live-in elderly care may increase control over one's life and provide an opportunity to enlarge one's freedom in the sense that Sen develops it: freedom as the capability of living a valuable life even in a specific and limited situation.

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