Transnational grandparenting in the digital age: mediated co-presence and childcare in the case of Romanian migrants in Switzerland and Canada

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Abstract Taking transnational families of Romanian migrants in Canada and Switzerland as a case in point, this paper accounts for the emergence of new patterns of “grandparenting” and “doing family” practices in the digital age, based on ICTs-mediated co-presence. It shows that migrants’ parents are able to acquire manifold technological skills in order to cope with distance and separation and to improve the quality of their interaction and relationships with children and grandchildren living abroad. Ordinary co-presence routines within polymedia environments allow grandparents to take on their role as childcare providers across borders and develop new transnational lifestyles. Thus, despite contrasting feelings of well-being and distress that mediated co-presence generates, migrants’ parents are able to place themselves as key actors within the transnational family in the digital society and invent new grandparenting practices.

Keywords Transnational grandparenting · *Zero generation* · Transnational family · ICT-mediated co-presence · Intergenerational solidarity · Childcare

Skype and Internet now drive my life. When I am here [in Canada], I need to know what is happening back home, that my husband is doing well and my other children too. I need to read the Romanian

newspapers each morning, and to keep updated with every item. But when I go back home, I live by the Canadian clock. I spend hours on Skype... first, with my daughter... when she is home, Skype is always turned on, and we cook together, we drink coffee and life is as one in spite of distance. And with my granddaughter, I speak every day, in Romanian... and I supervise her homework. This is my life now, since I’ve gotten familiar with Internet... I’m always here, but there. (woman, former teacher, 62 y.o., RO-CA)

Introduction

Grandparents put to the test of migration take on their role in various ways, both by caring for left behind (grand)children in sending countries and by engaging in back-and-forth mobility or long-term migration to provide childcare in receiving countries. These kinds of transnational mobilities are rather unexpected forms of migration, emerging on the edge of the recent increase in labor migration flows of young professionals. The ones we have called the *zero generation* of migration (Nedelcu 2007, 2009a)—i.e., the elderly members of transnational families who step into international mobility to care for their grandchildren—are actively taking part in intergenerational solidarity over borders. Besides, in the digital age, new polymedia regimes of instantaneous communication contribute to reinventing transnational family practices (Madianou and Miller 2012; Baldassar et al. 2016). In this context, transnational grandparenting acquires new dimensions through information and communication technologies (ICTs), as the quotation introducing this paper illustrates. In her words, a Romanian grandmother, who used to spend several months per year in the home of her migrant daughter resident in Toronto since 1999, describes the way she

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organizes her daily life in order to be (co-present) with her absent loved ones. Regular back-and-forth mobilities between Romania and Canada give rhythm to the life of this recently retired woman who shares her time and resources between family members dispersed in two countries. ICTs and Skype in particular allow her participating on a daily basis to family life and intergenerational exchanges in two distant locations separated by almost 8000 km. This paper addresses the question of how do migrants' parents cope with distance and separation from their children and grandchildren by using ICTs. How routines of ordinary co-presence (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016) interfere with the role of migrants' parents as active providers of childcare within transnational families? What are the limits of mediated co-presence experienced by transnational grandparents in contrast with physical co-presence? More generally, how is transnational grandparenting taking place in a mobile world driven by fast developments of sophisticated communication technologies?

First, a theoretical discussion sets transnational grandparenting in the digital age inside the framework of care circulation within transnational families; in particular, practices of “doing family” across borders are conceptualized through an ICTs' lens. Second, a short methodological chapter introduces the two qualitative empirical studies on which this paper is based on, with regard to Romanian transnational families in Canada and Switzerland. Third, grounding on the results of these studies, we show that transnational grandparenting starts with a learning process through which migrants' parents acquire manifold technological skills that endow them with a renewed capacity for actively contributing to the care circulation within transnational families. Then, instantaneous communication and ordinary co-presence routines in which Internet and Skype play key roles create the premises for everyday transnational family practices to evolve. As a result, grandparents are able to take on their role as childcare providers across borders, while developing new transnational lifestyles. However, ICT-mediated co-presence also reflects in more negative effects when it generates new expectations of intergenerational solidarities, as well as feelings of resourcelessness and constraint. In conclusion, we argue that migrants' parents are able to invent new grandparenting practices and revive intergenerational relationships, situating themselves as key actors within the transnational family in the digital society.

Transnational grandparenting in the digital age: a theoretical approach

The role of grandparents from a transnational family perspective: care circulation and the zero generation

In the context of sociodemographic transformations engendered by global aging, the intergenerational

solidarities express in new and diverse forms, within and beyond (transnational) families and family configurations, across three, four and even five generations. In particular, as aging belongs together with increased health and life expectancy, the “grey revolution” (Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000) pushes seniors on the front of the stage as key actors for care circulation. Thus, the grandparents have a new role to play with regard to important transformations in the modes and the intensity of (social, cultural, and economic) support toward the downward generations, both their children and grandchildren (Arber and Timonen 2012; Attias-Donfut 2008; Coenen-Huther et al. 1994), representing what Hagestad (2006) calls a “reserve army.” With grandmothers as the main pillar of childcare, they are central to the cohesion of modern families within variable family configurations (Widmer 2010); moreover, they are responsible for the continuity of family ties within a wide range of family situations, including divorce and remarriage, monoparental, or recomposed families (Attias-Donfut 2008; Widmer 2010).

In a context of increased international mobilities and diversified migration patterns, grandparents are summoned to rise to the challenge of taking on their role across borders, within transnational—dispersed—families. Defined as relational, pluri-generational, multi-sited entities, with the ability to “create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely “familyhood, even across national borders”” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 3), transnational families make up a group implanted within different national, political, and institutional realities, in which various forms of care are exchanged across borders. Baldassar et al. (2007) argued that, driven by norms and obligations of family solidarity and support, the same types of resources identified by Finch (1989) in the case of non-dispersed families (i.e., emotional, financial, practical, personal support and accommodation) are exchanged in spite of distance and separation.

Although a significant part of the existing scholarship focuses on solidarities and care arrangements that young adult migrants provide to elderly left behind (Baldassar 2008), migrants' parents also represent “active members in (transnational) networks that mobilize kin and community resources” (Baldassar 2007: 278). Thus, they are more than “orphan pensioners” (King and Vullnetari 2006) and passive recipients of care across borders, being able to endorse an active and protective role within transnational families and to take over as transnational grandparents. This phenomenon was recently documented in a number of studies that have brought into the debate a new conceptual terminology, such as “transnational flying grannies” (Plaza 2000), “transnational grandparenting” (Da 2003), “seniors on the move” (Treas and Mazumdar 2004), and the “zero generation” (Nedelcu 2007, 2009a).

These studies highlighted the capacity of (certain) grandparents to get used to international migration and install a back-and-forth mobility in order to provide hands-on care for their children and grandchildren. Mobility patterns are complex, deploying in accordance with life-course events, personal resources and structural factors, as documented by empirical case studies with regard to migrants of Caribbean origin in Great Britain (Plaza 2000), Chinese in Australia (Da 2003), Romanians in Canada (Nedelcu 2007, 2009a), Peruvians in Spain (Horn 2017), as well as migrants of Chinese, Bangladeshi, and other origins in the USA (Treas and Mazumdar 2004; Treas 2008; Lie 2010; Xie and Xia 2011). Transnational grandparents are playing a significant role in the integration of their migrant children in host countries. In addition, they contribute to the transnational socialization of their grandchildren, perpetuating cultural traditions, language abilities or culinary habits from their country of origin. Nevertheless, despite their noteworthy contribution to the well-being of the multi-generational transnational family, mobile grandparents also experience vulnerable situations because of various reasons (lack of language skills, shortage of social networks and integrative resources, financial and housing dependency on their offspring, deterioration of health condition,...). Moreover, they usually face legal and administrative restrictions and organize their stays in host countries by juggling with migration regimes. Treas (2008) showed that migrants' parents in the USA were able to navigate across immigration laws in order to maintain transnational lifestyles and commitments. At the same time, even when entitled to permanent residence, transnational grandparents keep up strong ties with their country of origin (Nedelcu 2009a).

These examples offer strong arguments for considering older people in transnational families as important agents of transnational solidarities and encourage a more systematic examination of the role of the *zero generation* from a “care circulation” perspective. Developed by Merla and Baldassar (2016), this approach provides both a “conceptual framework and a methodological lens” to study care exchange mechanisms within transnational families. From this perspective, observing care giving across borders and life course allows “to capture all the actors involved in family life as well as the full extent of their care activity, including practical, emotional and symbolic, that defines their membership in a family” (Merla and Baldassar 2016: 276). Moreover, within this framework, transnational family scholars focus on various factors shaping processes of care circulation, whereas institutional contexts merge with family configurations and individual resources (Kilkey and Merla 2014; Merla 2014; Merla and Baldassar 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). As a result, care arrangements within transnational families may strongly vary according

to origin and host countries, family life course, class and gender factors, and transnational resources. In this context, transnational grandparenting represents a particular life-course-related form of care circulation, enabled by renewed mechanisms of intergenerational support.

Although ICTs received yet little academic attention with regard to transnational grandparenting processes, we argue that they are tools of crucial importance (Nedelcu 2009a), representing “an important part of the newly emerging and increasingly complex picture of transnational aging” (Baldassar et al. 2017). Even though media studies put much emphasis on a generational gap in the use of sophisticated technologies, recent scholarship suggests that the motivation to give and receive support across distance and share daily experiences with children and grandchildren abroad represents an important incentive to use Internet and more diversified technologies of communication (Ivan and Fernández-Ardèvol 2017; Baldassar et al. 2017). Furthermore, elderly can innovatively use ICTs for maintaining significant meaningful family relations across borders and generate transnational habitus (Nedelcu 2012). Therefore, as our findings will demonstrate, transnational grandparenting deploys as a phenomenon deeply embedded within technological developments that complement grandparents' geographical mobilities.

ICT-mediated co-presence as a key premise for transnational grandparenting

Grandparenting involves regular and intense contacts and exchanges between grandparents, parents and grandchildren. Baldassar et al. (2016) argued that it is not so much different about caring in proximate and distant contexts when (ICT-) mediated forms of co-presence can successfully create the sense of a shared experience of everyday doing family practices (see also Baldassar 2008; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016).

The recent development of a technological “environment proliferating communicative opportunities” addressed by Madianou and Miller (2012) as “polymedia” considerably boosts the possibility of “being co-present” via ICTs, by combining different tools (phone, Skype, chat, email, ...) and functionalities (written, visio, ...) depending on the context, the interlocutors and the purpose of ICT-mediated communications. A sense of closeness and togetherness develops irrespective of face-to-face interaction and local proximity as “mediated intimacy at a distance often feels very tangible” (Wilding 2006: 133), those who are physically absent becoming present in everyday situations (Madianou 2012; Nedelcu 2012). Thus, transnational ICT-mediated practices are conducive to the emergence of a “transnational everyday reality (...) based on ubiquity, simultaneity and immediacy of interaction over borders” (Nedelcu 2012: 1346).

In their efforts to better elaborate a concept of ICT-based co-presence, Baldassar et al. (2016) distinguish new forms of mediated co-presence that go beyond the four types of co-presence that Baldassar (2008) previously demonstrated to be at the core of transnational family life, i.e., physical, virtual, proxy and imagined. They argue that “virtual co-presence,” i.e., via ICTs (Baldassar 2008), enables a range of qualitatively distinctive ways of being co-present at a distance. It results “different experiences of co-presence that are generated out of diverse contexts and modes of connectivity” (Baldassar et al. 2016: 138); for instance, “ambient co-presence”—which is a form of peripheral awareness of relatives’ lives via social networks and without being in direct contact (Madianou 2016), and “ordinary co-presence”—expressed through the emergence of daily (ritual, omnipresent and reinforced) co-presence routines (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). These forms of co-presence reinforce the feeling of (continuously) belonging to family networks; they also allow to transnational family members to promptly interact and take decisions, enhancing their agency. In other words, ICTs are giving rise to co-presence regimes that create a sense of everydayness, a sense of regularity and a sense of fluidity within transnational family life, thus shaping family practices (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). This way, transnational family members invent new ways of being and doing together, but apart, which are part and parcel of “doing family” (Morgan 1996) processes across borders. Distance and separation, as well as ICT-mediated co-presence, can be considered as intrinsic dimensions of contemporary family, challenging its representation as a process mainly based on face-to-face routines and interactions (Baldassar et al. 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016).

In this context, we argue that ICT-mediated co-presence regimes generate a spectrum of transnational lifestyles that concern, to a certain extent, all the members of transnational families. Grandparents are developing new manners to express intergenerational solidarities and participate to childcare and grandchildren’s socialization across borders (Nedelcu 2012). At the same time, ICT-mediated practices of grandparenting are expected to be subject of asymmetry in technological skills. Moreover, unequal time resources and affective needs conflate the possibility to potentially be continuously connected with family members across borders, and the personal availability and capacity to do so. It is not rare that such situations generate new pressures to “do family” at a distance that are mirrored in feelings of control and suffocation (Nedelcu and Wyss 2015, 2016; Wilding 2006) together with increased expectations of co-presence. But it is no doubt that ICT-mediated co-presence transform transnational grandparenting, while challenging family norms and practices.

Method

This article is based on data gathered from two qualitative studies conducted with Romanian migrants in Canada and Switzerland. While Romanians’ flows reflect a mass labor migration phenomenon across Europe, especially since the end of the nineties (Michalon and Nedelcu 2010), Canada and Switzerland received in particular highly skilled migrants. This population was in the focus of both studies that looked more generally at the impact of ICTs on transnational and integration processes. The first study¹ was conducted between 2002 and 2007 on the basis of virtual and ethnographic fieldwork combining netnography (Nedelcu 2009b), participant observation in situ and 62 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with Romanian migrants in Toronto (eight of which took place with migrants’ parents). The second study² was carried out between 2009 and 2012, and build on 39 semi-structured interviews involving Romanian migrants in Switzerland, five of them being aged 60+.

These two studies have revealed that skilled Romanian migrants in Canada and Switzerland share common patterns of communication with their relatives back home and that their parents are at the core of transnational family dynamics (Nedelcu 2009a, b; Nedelcu and Wyss 2015, 2016). Although transnational grandparenting was not in their initial focus, they also showed that ICT-mediated practices within transnational families are crucial for creating lively and meaningful relationships across borders. Interviews have highlighted how important intergenerational ties and transmissions are to understand the emergence of new routines of ordinary co-presence (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016), along with the central place that migrants’ parents play as childcare providers, both in face-to-face and distant settings. Observation in a few Romanian households in Toronto allowed understanding the role technological devices play within transnational families. In some cases, migrants and their parents accepted to explain in front of their computers how they use it, inviting us to browse their favorite websites related to Romanian news and broadcasting and even, in one case, to assist at a Skype conversation. In addition, the use of virtual methods, and in particular netnographic observation of group discussions in ethnic forums related to a key website for Romanian migrants in Canada (Nedelcu 2009b), provided interesting evidence with regard to childcare, intergenerational transmissions, and grandparents socialization embedded with

¹ This study resulted in the author’s PhD dissertation *Migratory patterns and cosmopolitanism in the digital age. The highly skilled Romanian migration to Canada*. For more details, see Nedelcu (2009b).

² Swiss National Foundation Research Grant 100015-124842. For more details, see Nedelcu and Wyss (2015, 2016).

ITC-mediated community activities in the case of Romanians in Toronto. Yet, there are two methodological aspects to be stressed here: the findings discussed in this article are mainly based on the narratives of the (migrant) children generation, and our interviewees are mostly highly skilled, in possession of a high human, social and mobility capital.³

ICT-mediated co-presence and transnational grandparenting

Migrants' parents and ICTs: the learning process

Migration has a strong impact on doing family practices and communication at a distance is a key tool to express various forms of intergenerational solidarities. Often, while preparing to emigrate, migrants have anticipated communicational needs, providing their parents with the necessary technology and skills to manage a large palette of synchronic and instantaneous forms of communication (email, chat, sms, ... Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, ...). Thus, as an emigrated young scientist explains, creating the necessary environment for daily communication is part of the migratory process and guarantees the conditions for family ties to evolve across borders:

Before leaving Romania, I already had in my head the idea of teaching my parents how to use a computer and I provided them with a reliable one. At present we write each other one or more emails each day; at least once a week we chat via Skype, and we can see each other by webcam. In this way we have been able to keep up-to-date with daily life; they are confident that I am doing fine and they were already able to know what our life in Toronto was like, long before they came to see it by themselves. (man, bio-engineering researcher, 28 years old (y.o.), Canada)

Although there is a digital divide differentiating generational use of polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2012; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016), parents put to the test of their adult children's migration find strong motivation to adopt advanced modern communication tools, as Ivan and Fernández-Ardèvol (2017) recently argued. However, the

learning process is generally mediated, or at least facilitated, by youngsters, as this older woman explains:

The first months I was struggling a lot with anything that had to do with a computer and the Internet, it was really a challenge to connect to my mailing account, write an email, and download or attach photos... I was always asking for help from my grandson, my daughter's son who lives in the same neighbourhood [in Romania]. When I managed to do my first messenger communication without assistance, it was my highest technical prowess and I was very proud of myself. But I was also very determined to succeed, because it was the only way to have news and see my son and my grandchildren who are living in Toronto (woman, former teacher, mother of a Romanian migrant in Canada, 64 y.o.)

The initiation to Internet and ICTs tools is often refined during the grandparents' sojourns in their migrant children households in the host countries. As a case in point, we have observed that IT Romanian professionals in Canada usually possess several computers in their homes; co-habitation gives migrants' parents the possibility of taking advantage of their children IT expertise to keep up to date with new software and diversify their use of technology. Besides, Internet courses have been organized within the Romanian community in Toronto, addressing the specific needs of grandparents to cope with transnational communication and information. Thus, whereas they have typically experienced censorship and limited communication before the fall of the Romanian communist regime in December 1989 (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016), migrants' parents prove a strong motivation to acquire manifold skills and use different ICTs in order to cope with distance and separation and to improve the quality of their interaction and relationships with children and grandchildren living abroad.

Routines of ICT-mediated ordinary co-presence: contexts, meanings, and limits

Transnational family studies stressed that there are life-course events that demand hands-on care support (Baldassar 2007; Baldassar et al. 2007; Merla 2014). The birth of a child in the host country is often the trigger event that decides grandparents to settle into a back-and-forth mobility between origin and host countries (Plaza 2000; Lie 2010; Nedelcu 2009a). Grandmothers are most often the ones who will move first to take in charge housework and provide practical help with newborn babies (Plaza 2000; Bastia 2009). Personal resources (time, health, money), family obligations (responsibility for other family members and dependent-relatives), and legal restrictions

³ These aspects suggest that our findings cannot be easily extrapolated to Romanian grandparents, nor to migrants' parents in general. However, preliminary findings from an ongoing research (entitled "Intergenerational solidarities in transnational families. An approach through the care arrangements of the Zero Generation, these foreigner grandparents involved in raising their grandchildren in Switzerland")—in which we are interviewing dyads composed from migrants and their G0 parents originally from Germany, Italy, France, Portugal, Romania, Brazil, Algeria and Morocco—let us think that migration regimes and structural constraints are more discriminating factors than social class and geographical distance.

(Nedelcu 2009a) determine the length and the frequency of their stays. Periods of co-habitation are usually limited in time and strictly restricted by migration and visa regimes.⁴

At the same time, polymedia regimes enable different types of ICTs-mediated co-presence (Madianou and Miller 2012; Baldassar et al. 2016). They generate routines of “ordinary co-presence” (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016) embedded within a ubiquitous technological environment that enables a sense of being and doing things together across distance. Such routines give rhythm to the everyday life of transnational families with regard to various day-to-day situations. For instance, many migrants use to turn on their computers and stay connected all day long. Their feeling of ubiquity is then reinforced by the possibility to interact at any moment, continuously, while still going about their ordinary activities.

Before, we have just showed short signs of life by phone, it was expensive; we could not see each other... But now, we can stay for hours and sometimes even more... if we are at home, we are all the day online. The entire family meets and you can see everyone. [...] This is more than just communicate. We chat, the children recite poems, it's a show, and it's a big family reunion by Skype. (Man, orthodox priest, 43 y.o., CH)

⁴ At the time when the interviews were conducted, conditions in Canada and Switzerland differed noticeably in this respect. In Canada, the *zero generation* grandparents arrived for the most part with a visitor's visa, which was usually granted for a maximum of 6 months during a year; but many migrants' parents were also entitled to family reunification, as Canadian immigration law allows for the sponsorship of parents and grandparents under certain conditions. The Canadian Federal Family Reunification Plan has changed in 2010 when the Federal government put a moratorium on this sponsorship program. A “parent and grandparent super visa” was implemented as a “stop gap,” providing multiple entries for a period up to 10 years, which entitles eligible parents and grandparents to visit family in Canada for up to two years without the need to renew their status. Since 2014, an annual quota of 10,000 applications was introduced for family reunification sponsorship for parents and grandparents. In Switzerland, family reunification for migrants' parents is rather unusual, and it is rarely achieved (Bolzman et al. 2008). Since 1998, Swiss migratory policy based on a binary model, the so-called model of two circles, makes a distinction between EU nationals and nationals from other countries. This policy reveals unequal opportunities for elders of the *zero generation* to enter, sojourn and establish themselves in Switzerland. Romanian nationals experienced both status: as non-EU citizens prior to 2007 when Romania formally adhered to the EU, they couldn't enter Swiss territory without a tourist visa until 2004; after June 2009, when Switzerland extended—under certain transitory restrictions—the Agreement of Free Circulation to Romania, they gained more freedom and could potentially reside there on a permanent basis as retired Europeans, if they were able to meet certain (high) economic requirements. Interviews conducted in 2010 and 2011 showed however that childcare arrangements in the Swiss homes of Romanian migrants usually involved multiple short visits, but also (ir)regular overstays frequently associated with social isolation and vulnerability.

In this case, “doing family” means sharing common everyday situations. Such a regular and instantaneous communication entitles grandparents to be continuously informed about family events and daily life. Transnational communication noticeably intensifies during periods that immediately precede and follow childbirth, especially when physical co-presence cannot be considered straightaway, or in the long run. Combining audio and video functionalities, Skype gives grandparents a sense of their grandchildren's growth and reinforce the feeling of taking part in their development, even when face-to-face meetings are rare in time. Besides, migrants' parents are very demanding in this respect, as a young father explains below:

It is so important for my parents to participate in every stage of their grandson's development... they need to see him [via Skype] each week, to witness his first steps, his first teeth... they are always asking what's new, what he did last week, what new food we have introduced him to, how it's working out... they need us to share with them all these experiences and therefore be part of the story (man, IT programmer, 34 y.o., Switzerland)

Thus, grandparents are able to maintain a significant place within the transnational family setting, and take on their role despite physical separation. Sometimes this happens in surprising innovative ways, such as the example of transnational babysitting described in his words by a young engineer travelling very often between Romania and Switzerland and whose mother has taken care of grandchildren on a regular basis in both situations of ICT-mediated and physical co-presence.

During my trip back home, for about five hours in total [i.e. during the flight from Bucharest to Zurich and the travel by train from Zurich to Neuchâtel], my mother kept an eye on the children. My wife had to go to work and she didn't find a babysitter, so my Mum said: ‘no problem, I'll stay with them’. But you see how she did it, from her kitchen in Bucharest [Romania], while the kids were at home in Neuchâtel [Switzerland] (man, engineer, 36 y.o., Switzerland)

Grandmothers are once again predominantly involved, providing moral and practical support, for instance by sharing advices, baby food receipts and other childcare tips. They are also more willing to engage with sophisticated technologies and develop versatile communication patterns to adapt to their children and grandchildren practices and daily schedules, switching from synchronous (Skype) to asynchronous (sms, email or Facebook) communication during the day.

For *zero generation* grandparents, who are regularly visiting their children and grandchildren in host countries,

ICTs-mediated co-presence routines have a particular significance. Indeed, they become effective instruments to cope with a new lifestyle, i.e., «a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity» (Giddens 1991: 81). This lifestyle is embedded within new transnational “ways of being” and “ways of belonging” (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004) resulting from the incorporation of migratory experiences, combined with family norms of solidarity and intergenerational relationships. Many of the interviewed grandparents highlight that ICT-mediated communication routines brings a transnational dimension in their everyday life, replacing absence and separation by a feeling of usefulness and ongoing solidarity that give sense to their life, especially after retirement.

In this context, the transnational family becomes the environment in which intergenerational exchanges unceasingly evolve, both ways. On the one hand, cultural values and traditions are reproduced and grandchildren learn more from their grandparents about their country of origin and develop their mother tongue abilities. On the other hand, new social norms and values centered on mobility, dispersion and long-distance exchanges are widespread in grandparents’ ways of living transnationally, as the words below of a Romanian mother in Toronto demonstrate:

My daughter is very close to her grandmother. When my mother-in-law goes back to Romania, we have a clever way for them to keep in touch and spend time together at a distance. Every morning they both connect their webcam and chat for about two hours. My mother-in-law gives Alicia (the 13-year-old daughter) advice and supervises her homework. [...] She tells her about Romanian traditions and encourages her to talk Romanian. But it works both ways; my daughter tells her grandmother what she has learnt from her best friend, a Vietnamese girl. They often discuss cultural diversity and its wealth (Woman, computer scientist, 35 y.o., Canada).

A transnational everyday reality emerges, based on ubiquity, simultaneity, and immediacy of interaction over borders, as well as a transnationally shared knowledge embedded in everyday practices. Besides, ICTs-mediated co-presence routines give room for different forms of intergenerational support, engendering a form of “transnational affective capital” (Leurs 2014) that provides trust, helps to manage anxiety and promotes “ontological security” (Giddens 1991). An interviewed woman expresses this reality in a metaphoric way:

I feel like a flower that grew high but still put its roots deep in the country of origin and draw its life-blood

from them... my family, and in particular my parents back in Romania and the continuous contact we have play this role for me [...] and without ICTs and Internet this would certainly not be possible (Woman, dentist, 40 y.o., Switzerland).

Nevertheless, this same sense of ubiquitous co-presence generates new expectations of solidarity and support, which can also have negative impacts on the well-being of migrants and/or their parents. For instance, the migrants are regularly less available than their parents for spending time online. They can experience the need of the grandparents to continuously be in touch and follow step-by-step their grandchildren development as a burden, facing difficulties to cope with this new pressure to communicate on a daily basis. On the other hand, they may also feel more responsible for their left behind parents when those ones call upon care and support themselves. Ongoing transnational communication can also reawaken intergenerational tensions and conflicts, mirroring the functioning of transnational families as “normal” families (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016).

At the same time, transnational grandparenting through ICT-mediated ordinary co-presence also creates emotional stress for grandparents. Being daily connected to their children and grandchildren also means for them to share day-to-day difficulties from a distance. Without the possibility to provide hands-on care and practical support, grandparents can feel resourceless in family crisis times. Some of our respondents have reported situations of illness or physical accidents as particularly trying and difficult to manage from a distance. Even a banal flu of a grandchild gives cause for concern and engenders additional anxiety. In this situation, mediated co-presence paradoxically reinforces the feeling of absence and distance becomes (again) a very tangible constraint.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have showed that in the digital age transnational grandparenting expresses in renewed “doing family” practices. Although digital divide along with age is widely acknowledged in the literature, our study shows that migrants’ parents display a high motivation to acquire manifold technological skills in order to cope with distance and separation and to improve the quality of their interaction and relationships with children and grandchildren living abroad. The learning process is usually mediated by youngsters, and grandparents, especially grandmothers, express a vivid interest in the use of more sophisticated and diversified technologies of communication to better adapt to their migrant children and grandchildren needs,

communication habits and daily schedules. Thus, ICT-mediated co-presence creates an everyday environment in which grandparents can take on their role as childcare providers across borders and develop transnational lifestyles. ICT-mediated family practices give rhythm and sense to the everyday life of elderly members of transnational families. In the same time, the emotional effects of these practices are rather contrasting: on the one hand, ordinary co-presence routines enhance grandparents capacity of “being and doing things together” at a distance and engender feelings of usefulness and emotional well-being. On the other hand, in times of family crisis the same co-presence regimes can also reinforce discomfort, distress and feelings of powerlessness, remembering that physical co-presence and hands-on care is irreplaceable in certain situations.

As a conclusion, the findings of our study contribute to document a new dimension of transnational grandparenting processes, in which ICT-mediated co-presence is central. They show that the “grey revolution” (Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000) is settled within two prominent social transformations of our times: increased mobilities and migration flows, as well as the digital revolution. By drawing attention to the emergence of renewed mechanisms of intergenerational support within transnational families in the digital age, we suggest that future research should address transnational grandparenting processes not only by taking more systematically in consideration the existence of a large spectrum of various types of (ICTs-mediated) co-presence, in conjunction with mobility patterns of migrants’ parents, but also by observing differentiated practices from a life-course perspective, along with personal, family, and institutional factors.

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