

Rethinking Care: Anthropological Perspectives on Life Courses, Kin Work and their Trans-Local Entanglements

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The notion of ‘care’ is increasingly moving into the centre of sociological and anthropological attention. The international conference „Rethinking Care: Anthropological Perspectives on Life Courses, Kin-Work and their Trans-Local Entanglements“, organized by ERDMUTE ALBER (University of Bayreuth) and HEIKE DROTBOHM (University of Konstanz), was devoted to this topic and was attended by more than twenty experts, mainly from the field of Social Anthropology.

‘Care’ can roughly be understood as the work of looking after the physical, psychological, emotional and developmental needs of other persons, and it has the dual sense of work activities („to care for somebody“) and feeling states („to care about somebody“). The conference enquired into the variety of types and settings of care work, their social and cultural, local and global embeddedness, the variety of human experiences and relationships of obligation, trust, loyalty, and commitment to the well-being of others, and discourses on care. It took place at the International Research Centre „Work and the Life Cycle in Global History“ (Re: Work) at the Humboldt University of Berlin, an institutional setting particularly suitable for examining care at the intersection of work, biographies, kinship and family studies, medical anthropology, and studies on migration and transnationalism. This report gives an overview of selected papers and summarizes the results of the debates that took place.

The papers were grouped in two interrelated thematic fields (I. Care and the making of the life course; II. Institutions and care) and the participants discussed the constructions, imaginaries and practices of care work in four sessions: 1. Norms and practices of

transnational parental care; 2. Challenges and changes in elderly care; 3. Regimes framing care; 4. Labour framing care.

Several papers examined care work in the context of labour migration and transnational settings. ANNA KATHARINA SKORNIA (Berlin), in presenting ethnographic data on transnational care chains between Peru and Italy, discussed how mobility, motherhood and care work are interrelated. As in other contexts, many female migrants from Peru engage in the sector of elderly care in Italy. They are often already mothers of children or become mothers of new-borns during the migration process. This leads to intra-familial renegotiations, sometimes resulting in the follow-up migration of aging parents or other relatives to Italy. Skornia argued that negotiations concerning care involve the reproduction of intra-familial inequalities that are shaped by gendered and intergenerational norms. Filipina domestic workers are another group in the highly gendered and racialized global care economy. CLAUDIA LIEBELT (Bayreuth) examined the question how these women build solidarity networks and strategies in order to organize their families and their own lives between working abroad and coming back home. Liebelt looked at care as a form of gifting. Such a perspective, she argued, allows thinking about social relationships and obligations, as well as the affective values and ethics within the often exploitative structures of the global care chains (Hochschild 2000).¹ MIRANDA POEZE (Maastricht) analysed emic notions of care for children by discussing the experiences and practices of Ghanaian transnational fathers. Thus, she contributed to the under-researched field of care work by men. From the perspective of the interviewed Ghanaians, being a ‘good father’ entails not only providing materially for the upkeep and the education of their children, but also providing immaterial care, such as advice and guidance on how to become well-behaved and respectful adults. Poeze argued that the extent to which male migrants are able to fulfil their roles as ‘good fathers’

¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, ‘Global care chains and emotional surplus value’, in: Will Hutton / Anthony Giddens (eds.), *On the edge. Living with global capitalism*, London 2000.

from afar depends very much on the structural obstacles and opportunities they face in the host country, notably their legal status.

The challenges and changes affecting elderly care in different contexts were another important field of research and discussion. TABEA HÄBERLEIN (Bayreuth) looked at care as intergenerational kin work. In analysing two case studies from a village in Northern Togo, she showed how intra-family care is given or not given, against the backdrop of cultural expectations. She argued that care for elderly people can be seen as the result of lifelong kin work. PETER VAN EEUWIJK (Basel) examined different forms of intra-generational care in a comparative study between Indonesia and Tanzania, by examining the phenomenon of 'elder for elderly' care. Quantitative data from the field sites revealed that in approximately one third of the study households old people assume the role of care-givers for at least one other old individual. Eeuwijk showed that the burden of care not only increases the degree of vulnerability of old care-givers, but also that of old care-receivers.

Other papers examined care work in the context of institutions. HANNAH BROWN (London) looked at care practices and places in the context of the HIV epidemic in Western Kenya. She showed how social caring practices are grounded in particular places, how different domains of care – home, hospital and organizational offices – are established as such, and how they are related to one another. Brown argued that despite its rather slippery, amorphous nature, the concept of care can be a useful theoretical tool for analysing the complex mess of social life. TATJANA THELEN and MIHAI POPA (Vienna and Halle/Saale) examined the ways in which care migration processes have transformed dominant forms of self-representation and local discourses on care for elderly people in Romania. In public and academic discourses on care in Europe, a dichotomy is often made between 'good' kin care and 'bad' institutional care. South and South-Eastern European societies are sometimes perceived as dominated by strong family values and intimate care practices. At the same time, Romania experienced massive waves of female

care migration and new care practices in the decades following the breakdown of the socialist system. These transformations resulted not only in changes in local care practices, but also in changing and ambivalent representations of care practices in the West as well as in Romania. Thus, old people in Romania now often prefer not to live with relatives but to rely on the care provided by extra-familial institutions. Thelen and Popa interpret these changes as a sign of peoples' efforts at coming to terms with social change.

A particular type of care labour was examined by MARIA LIDOLA (Berlin) in the realms of the German beauty industry. Brazilian Waxing salons, specialized in the removal of bodily hair, constitute part of Berlin's gendered and ethnicized economies. Lidola showed that body labour (a concept introduced by Kang 2010) such as Brazilian Waxing not only offers options for controlling and capitalizing on dominant imaginaries of Brazilian women.² The „depiladoras“ see body grooming not as 'dirty' work, but rather as work that allows amicable relationships and more equal positioning with the German clients.

These and other papers were commented on by renowned experts in the field of Social Anthropology: CAROLINE BLEDSOE (Evanston), SIGNE HOWELL (Oslo), BRIGIT OBRIST (Basel), SUSAN REYNOLDS WHITE (Copenhagen). Among the more general insights which emerged from their comments and the general debates are the following:

(1) 'Care' as a theoretical concept

'Care' is a complex, ambiguous and polysemous concept. As a semantic field it covers different meanings in different languages (e.g. English: „to care for“, „to take care of“, „to care about“; German: „sich sorgen um“, „sich kümmern“, „sorgen für“). This goes along with different ethics and normative notions of care. As Brigit Obrist (Basel) states, the morally charged question of „What is good care?“ must be seen as being embedded in wider notions of „Who is a good person?“. Responsibilities, needs and expectations of care are important cultural concepts,

² Miliann Kang, *The managed hand: Race, gender, and the body in beauty service work*, Berkley 2010.

which can be related to other cultural patterns. They are social constructions which can change over time (for instance through the introduction of new medical services), as can moral notions of and discourses on care and care institutions. Care can be understood as an obligation, as a wish, or as a gift that may form or strengthen social relations.

The presentations revealed that care as a daily practice is caught up in the dialectic between structure and agency, which leads to further questions: How do we conceptualize agency? Whose agency should we look at? How does agency appear in long distance migration? There are also the aspects of temporality of care and of intimacy. The latter is related to bonds and boundaries: Who is allowed to give intimate care? How do avoidance rules (e.g. between generations) shape care practices? There is often the implicit assumption that care is altruistic. But the presentations revealed that care often has to do with controlling, monitoring and surveillance on different levels.

The concept of care is ambivalent and some degree of fuzziness goes along with it, not least because we live in a world of emotions. Care can be a joyful and fulfilling task, but giving care can also be a psychological, emotional, etc. burden and have negative impacts for the carer. Care can be rejected and reflect the rejection or questioning of relationships. Signe Howell therefore suggests using 'care' as an entry into ethnographic work, but as a theoretical concept it should not be overemphasized.

(2) Care work, care labour

Processes of globalization and the liberalization of market economies go along with the commodification of care work, leading to „cycles of care“ or global „care chains“. While these concepts remained somewhat unclear during the discussion, the presentations revealed that on the global labour market, care labour is often deeply related to images and representations of gender, ethnicity and culture.

Care labour involves competences (skills, knowledge, and expertise) and standards that must be acquired (e.g. hygiene, routines, timing) and it is often related to technologies like

procedures, devices, equipment, knowledge, skilled personnel, etc. These technologies also form the subjectivities of givers and recipients of care. People often imagine and/or use dichotomies („us“ versus „them“, state versus family, traditional versus modern, home versus institutions, commodity versus gift, warm hands versus cold machines/bureaucracies) in the social cosmologies of care labour, while there is much ambiguity and ambivalence in this field, as Tatjana Thelen (Vienna) pointed out. The debate showed that the relation between care work (often associated with family and/or kin relations) and care labour (as commodification of care work) and their representations remain an important field of research.

(3) The institutional side of care

Care regimes are deeply related to institutional regimes (beside others like gender, migration, and labour regimes). Western-informed institutionalized forms of care are gaining ground, and people in most parts of the world have to cope with this. At the same time, Western institutions of care are appropriated by people and institutions in diverse local contexts. State-oriented expectations of care vary from country to country, while in many countries there is presently much intervention from NGOs. But up to today, globalized development discourses actively ignore local understandings of care, as Esben Leifsen (Oslo) argued. The empirical papers raised new questions, such as in which way do international NGOs shape local care practices and vice versa? If we look at care through the lens of health institutions, whose point of view do we look at?

(4) Researching care

Doing anthropological research on the issue of care work raises a number of methodological questions. Care often carries a moralizing connotation and is often accompanied by justifications. How do we study a morally loaded topic? And, how do we study the absence of care? It was suggested that emergencies can be used as entry points for analysing care and care work: Who comes into play? Who feels pressured to care? Who does not care? Several participants underlined the importance of ethnographic observations in

studies of care. Heike Drotbohm (Konstanz) warned against the pitfalls of reducing the conceptual approach to European semantics. Rather, she suggested making use of classical cognitive methods for grasping the variety of meanings in different aspects and facets of care as a type of activity and emotional state. Erdmute Alber (Bayreuth) commented that studies with a transnational perspective and studies with a local perspective can no longer be seen as belonging to separate spheres and need to be brought together. Signe Howell (Oslo) critically asked whether interviews can be the first option in transnational settings.

The conference elucidated why care has become such a prominent issue in the social and cultural sciences. The notion of care is deeply related to people's social lives, to the political and legal regulation of life, and to society in general. As such, care is situated at the core of what the social and cultural sciences are interested in. The conference offered empirical insights into the manifold social realities of care and care work and a critical analysis of their embeddedness in local and global regimes. It showed that 'care' is a fruitful and dynamic field of anthropological research that not only connects specialists from the domains of labour, welfare studies, kinship and family studies, health studies and migration/transnationalism studies, but that has also the potential to offer insights and inspiration to practitioners outside academia. The organizers are planning to publish a selection of papers as an edited volume.

Conference Overview:

Part I: Care and the making of the life-course

Session 1: Norms and practices of transnational parental care

Jessaca Leinaweaver: Caring for a Child in the Context of Distance: Comparing Spanish Adoptive Parents and Peruvian Migrant Parents

Miranda Poeze / Valentina Mazzucato: Ghanaian transnational fatherhood: Bridging gender, class and norms of social parenthood

Session 2: Challenges and changes of elderly care

Tabea Häberlein: Care as intergenerational

kin work – notions from a Togolese village

Carolin Leutloff-Grandits: Diverse temporalities and their challenges to translocal Kosovo-Albanian kin care: Taking a life course perspective on migrant predicaments

Peter van Eeuwijk: Elderly Providing Care for Elderly in Indonesia and Tanzania: Making Old-Age Vulnerability Visible

Anna Katharina Skornia: Care and Welfare Interdependencies Through the Lens of Migration: Transnational Family Care between Peru and Italy at the Intersections of Welfare, Gender and Migration Regime

Part II: Institutions and care

Session 3: Regimes framing care

Hanna Brown: Home and Hospital: Domains of Care in the Kenyan HIV epidemic

Pamela Feldmann-Savelsberg: Mothers on the Move: Mobility and Intensive Care Work among Cameroonian Migrants to Germany

Leah Schmalzbauer: Transnational and Temporary: Experiences and Expectations of Fatherhood among Mexican Guest Workers in the US

Esben Leifsen: Care, kinship and marginal existence

Session 4: Labour Framing Care

Claudia Liebelt: The Gift of Care: on Filipina Domestic Workers and Transnational Cycles of Care

Tatjana Thelen and Mihai Popa: Care migration and reframing the „other“. Explorations from rural Romania

Maria Lidola: Of grooming bodies and caring souls. New old forms of care work in Berlin's Brazilian Waxing Salons?

Cati Coe: Temporal Strategies of Care and Entrainment of the Life Course: The Case of Ghanaian Female Transmigrants in the US

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