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RESEARCH

Materialising Care across Borders: Sent Things and Family Ties between Sweden and Ukraine

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This article is an exploration of transnational family links and how they are materialised. Based on interviews with Ukrainian migrants living in Sweden, we discuss different dimensions of the everyday practices of sending things back and forth between family members. We find that what these packages embody and represent are more complex than tropes of economic need, obligation and responsibility allow for. Of course, in many senses they do reveal stories of highly gendered practices of care and duty, and economic divides between Sweden and Ukraine. We find, however, that they are also stories of mutuality, love, fun and shifting post-Soviet subjectivities. This article then both underlines the enduring importance of physical things in maintaining close family connections across distance and reminds us that these material connections are not fixed but instead are mutable circulations, shaping and shaped by generational change and lifecourse experiences.

Keywords: Transnational families; Materiality; Care; Love; Ukrainian migrants

Introduction

This article explores how care and love are sustained across borders within transnational families, with a focus on sent and received packages. Despite assumptions that distance disrupts care-giving (Démurger 2015), numerous studies have demonstrated that transnational families also enjoy care and emotional support, just as families living in physical proximity do, just in different ways (Parrenas 2005). This may include, but not be limited to, virtual connection (Baldassar et al. 2016), the sending of remittances (Åkesson 2011) or giving and receiving objects. We argue here that this latter practice, the exchange of things between family members, still deserves further scrutiny. As Cliggett (2005) has demonstrated, migrants often send objects such as food items, clothes and small pieces of furniture, sometimes alongside money transfers, but also as a distinct practice (Burrell 2017). This indicates that sent packages can be an important part of transnational family life and may embody far more than economic help, intended to fulfil more intimate needs of the migrants and their families back home. At the time of writing, with Covid-19 disrupting opportunities for people to physically meet up with families who live far away, these debates have become more poignant. There is a limit to what virtual contact can provide, in terms of care and emotional connection. Physical contact, materialised through the sending of things, can be seen as a vital, tangible way of keeping in touch across distance.

In this article, we draw on qualitative research with Ukrainian migrants in Sweden to demonstrate how material exchange reflects wider relationships of love and care. Because the percentage of Ukrainians in Sweden has previously been insignificant, this migrant group has not received much scholarly attention. Recently, however, the number of Ukrainians in Sweden has been rising, offering new cases for studies on migrants in Nordic countries, and new contexts for understanding shifting post-Soviet experiences and subjectivities. As we show, the study of sending and receiving practices illuminates how inventive family members are in employing various caring strategies and offers new insights into the complexities and nuances of transnational family relationships that we feel existing frameworks for understanding these practices do not fully capture.

Transnational Circulations of Materialised Care, Love, Meaning and Connection

Our interest here is in how families sustain relationships of care and love across distance. The role of care exchange, especially, has received a lot of academic attention (Baldassar 2007, 2008; Baldassar & Merla 2014). As Carling (2009) notes, for transnational families, the demonstration of care becomes particularly important because of physical distance and limited resources available to demonstrate familial solidarity. Members of transnational families have to search for strategies to transmit love and support that do not involve physical proximity and yet still give a sense of familial bond. Recent studies (Ryan et al. 2015; Francisco 2015, Baldassar et al. 2016) emphasise the role of technology as a facilitator of this care exchange across distance. The advancement of internet access has significantly flattened the digital divide based on economical (in)equality by offering cheaper connections accessible across the globe (Wilding 2006). Migrants can now use low-cost calling to enable parenting (Parrenas 2005) or to frequently chat with their elderly parents so that the latter do not feel forgotten, with easier technology enabling people to follow smallest details of each other's lives (Baldassar 2016). Visual technologies especially have significantly improved the quality of transnational communication (Ryan et al. 2015; Francisco 2015). However, virtual communication alone might not be sufficient to ensure smooth exchanges of love and care. Ryan et al. (2015: 201), stress that even in such virtually interconnected times, 'the need for physical contact has not abated'. Urry (2002) argues that moments of physical proximity with another person, the ability to sense them while being in the same place, are essential for the maintenance of close relationships. In fact, Baldassar (2008) shows that members of transnational families often long particularly for tangible experiences of being close, touching and sensing their loved ones, which cannot be achieved through virtual communication. Although technological advancement allows some level of closeness, her research highlights that special or difficult news is still left to be shared during private visits, or alternatively in hand-written letters, which are perceived to be more personal and emotionally charged (Baldassar 2007).

With this in mind, we now turn to the growing interest in material dynamics and how materiality helps to maintain familial ties across distance. Mauss (1966) has long noted the role of objects as a means to establish the sense of co-presence. He argues (1966: 10) that to give something means to give a part of oneself, whereas to receive something means 'to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence'. More recent studies on transnational families demonstrate how this ability of things to embody the spirit of their owners can turn objects into valuable tools to compress distance. Baldassar (2008) shows how received objects fill in the physical place of the sender, offering sensory experiences of touching and holding, and help to symbolically construct the presence of those you desire *to be with* and recreate moments of co-presence. For older generations, material exchange can be especially significant. Baldassar (2008) shows how much ageing parents value parcels and letters sent by their migrant children. Older people are not always comfortable with technology, whereas sent objects are perceived as 'real' things offering tangible care and solid proof that they have not been forgotten. Mason (2004) notes how in the absence of visits, packages sent to mark a specific event, such as childbirth or marriage may become an act to demonstrate familial belonging and commitment. Povrzanovic Frykman and Humbracht (2013) remind us that things received from home offer migrants familiarity and comfort, easing the process of constructing a new home.

Much of the literature on sending things highlights 'circulative' obligations at play within these exchanges (Cliggett 2005). For Abranches (2013: 511), the act of sending and receiving satisfies the complex 'systems of obligations based on giving and reciprocating', which permeates familial relationships. For Cliggett (2005), it is the *essence* of the exchange, rather than the package, that is important for the maintenance of the relationships, as it demonstrates that responsibility to ongoing familial belonging. Burrell (2017) illustrates how sending things across distances in itself takes a huge amount of logistical effort and expertise, involving considerable time and financial investment. There is a consensus here too that the efforts, obligations, expectations and responsibilities of sending things are highly gendered. Care arrangements across distance, whether real or virtual, are shaped by gendered social and kinship structures (Wilding 2006). Katigbak (2015) asserts that the moral framework of patriarchal families relies on women and their sense of self-sacrifice and familial duty. Unlike men, women are expected to sacrifice their career aspirations for the sake of family responsibilities (Baldassar 2008), making it more difficult for them to gain family approval to migrate for economic reasons. Therefore, migrant women are often more pressured to compensate for their absence by investing more time and effort to demonstrate care and familial belonging. We see this in the transnational exchange of things too; most studies highlight the central role of women in choosing and sending things back and forth (Burrell 2008; Camposano 2012). As Camposano (2012) suggests, the act of choosing a gift allows women to demonstrate their intimate engagement in the lives of their kin, thus meeting family's expectation of women to perform care activities and sustain emotional connection, extending what Miller (1998) refers to as 'provisioning' across transnational households.

If responsibility and obligation are key themes in this literature, then so too are economic asymmetries. The macro-economic remittance literature (Ziesemer 2012), for example, tends to rely on the idea of a fixed power asymmetry between migrants and their families back home, portraying migrants primarily as givers and their family back home as recipients. At the very least, care-exchanges that underpin the act of sending are framed as ultimately embedded in the economic implications of familial values. Solari's (2019) study of Ukrainian migrants in Italy shows that sent remittances operate within *transnational moral economies* based on Soviet versus capitalist subjectivities and values. It is argued that, in some cases, migrants employ the discourse of poverty as an unquestionable justification of their move, leaving any subsequent remittances imbued with sacrifice, moderation and an urge for stability. In other cases, where migrants aspire to bring Ukraine closer to Europe, the sent remittances are seen to promote a certain striving for wealth, high status and success. As Solari (2019) further shows, the use and spending of the remittances in accordance with the values attached to them almost acts as pay back, thus sustaining a familial moral framework both across distance and in circulation.

Cliggett's (2005) work points out the broad consumer differences that remain between the 'West and the rest', which sending practices highlight. Although many Western products are now present in markets worldwide, these goods often enjoy a high status, are deemed to be of especially good quality, and remain beyond the means of most people. Packages from the West can therefore allow migrants to give their families access to a much bigger material world and the luxurious life-style these products embody (Burrell 2008, 2011). These packages can sometimes take on a role of cultural remittances and promote change in cultural and/or social norms (White & Grabowska 2018). Similar to monetary remittances, sent and received things physically embody ideas which, in turn, can initiate new social practices among family members. Their inherent *materiality* is also crucially important (Bennett 2010) – what they feel like, taste like, look like, not just what they symbolise.

Of course, the presence of these Western things may also entrench and widen economic divides within transnational families.

We want to pause here and look beyond these frameworks of asymmetry and obligation, because although they are invaluable in helping analyse what sending and sent things mean, the sense that these are inherently uneven exchanges, or that they are bound purely by responsibility and duty, misses much of the complexity of these practices. Writing in a very different context, Tuck (2009: 416) argues for a move towards '… desire-based research frameworks' which 'are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction and the self-determination of lived lives. Rather than focus here on the constraints of the pressures and obligations of sending and the damage this may perpetuate, we feel there is more scope to explore the mutuality embedded in these items and activities, and the love, and even fun, they reveal.

The fact that there is reciprocity, as a form of mutuality, within these exchanges has been recognised in the literature, especially the fluid nature of reciprocity in terms of time and life-course, and practice. Carling (2008) argues, for example, that the roles of giver and receiver within transnational families can switch over the course of life. Migrants experience a range of vulnerabilities in a new country, such as linguistic barriers, absence of friends and family networks, mobility restrictions, and so on. So, during difficult moments in migrants' lives, such as childbirth, divorce or illness, family in their home country can become a vital source of emotional, practical and even economic support (Baldassar et al. 2007). Thus, as Baldassar and Merla (2014) point out, care flow between families, although often uneven, is a circuit. Care might not be reciprocated immediately but is often returned later in life and even by the next generation (Baldassar & Merla 2014). Importantly too, care might not be reciprocated in the same 'currency'. For example, Lie (2010) writes about 'flying grandparents' who, in return for economic help, would stay with their migrant children for a significant period of time to help them with childcare. It is the intimacy of the relationships, which are sustained, that shapes the care and reciprocity (Drotbohm 2009). However, we are wary that reciprocity also only takes us so far. As we will see in the following accounts, although these obligatory frameworks and 'moral economies' are highly significant, there is still room to also see these exchanges in a different light, as acts of love, which sometimes stem from responsibility but also emerge from a genuine desire to share, with nothing expected in return.

Researching Ukrainians in Sweden

We explore these material exchanges here through the sending and receiving practices of Ukrainian migrants living in Sweden. According to the Swedish Migrations Agency's reports for the past five years, the number of Ukrainians in Sweden has been steadily rising, with a current population just over 11,000 people (SCB, 2019). There is, however, no statistical information on Ukrainian migrants' gender composition and their place of residence in the country. Since the occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas in 2014, there has been a considerable increase in applications for work permit. The general worsening of the economic situation has forced high-skilled Ukrainians to migrateto do low-skilled work in Sweden, as it is often paid better than qualified work in Ukraine (Kupets 2016). Also, after the 2014 outbreak of the military conflict, there has been a considerable increase in applications for asylum (Migrationsverket, 2013–2019). In addition, the booming IT sector in Sweden has been attracting IT specialists from Ukraine as appropriately qualified but considerably less-expensive labour. The yearly Visby scholarship programme, funded by The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden since 2001, has also been sponsoring young Ukrainians to obtain Masters degrees in Sweden, and some have stayed on to continue their careers in the country. All this has been facilitated by the introduction of visa-free travel for Ukrainians into the Schengen zone in 2017, opening up new migration routes for Ukrainians, including to Sweden. Because the reasons for migration vary, Ukrainians in Sweden compose quite a diverse group in terms of age, occupation and areas in Ukraine they come from. In contrast to studies on Ukrainian migrants in Italy (Solari 2017, Vianello 2014), for example, our research includes accounts from younger, high-skilled migrants, offering new insights in postmigration material experiences.

Ukrainian migrants in the EU countries have become an important case study for transnational relationships because of their active engagement in remittance practices. As shown by a World Bank report, in 2018 Ukrainian migrants sent a record amount of more than 14 billion USD worth of financial remittances back home, more than any other migrant group in the EU. Furthermore, because of the geographical proximity of Ukraine to Western Europe, Ukrainian migrants in EU countries are actively involved in material exchange with their families (Solari 2017). We lack official statistics on the amount or value of sent things, as migrants and their families often rely on informal shipping channels, such as private courier services or friendship networks as they are cheaper, quicker and often more reliable (Bilan 2017). Visa-free travel to Sweden has contributed to a boost for the private courier-service industry, as it has become easier for the couriers to carry out regular trips. Through private Facebook groups, we have identified at least three courier-service companies regularly collecting and delivering packages throughout Sweden, primarily between Stockholm and Malmö. However, the actual number of couriers may be significantly higher, as these companies often operate informally by private individuals in Ukraine.

In our following discussion, we have chosen to focus on the narratives of three women and one man whose experiences best illustrate the nuanced nature of material exchange. In-depth interviews were collected with 12 Ukrainian migrants in total, all living in the Gothenburg and Malmö areas. The first author, also a Ukrainian migrant living in Sweden, initially used her personal experience of courier services to approach people at a private courier meeting point in one of the cities, relying on snowballing thereafter. Despite hoping to interview equal numbers of men and women, in the end, 10 women and just two men were recruited, signalling early on the gendered nature of these sending practices.

Most of our participants arrived in Sweden after the 2014 economic crisis, caused by the conflict in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea. All of the participants named economic prospects and a higher standard of living in Sweden as the reason for their move and expressed hopes to stay in Sweden permanently. Most of our participants were between 25 and 36 years old, and one respondent was in her late 40s. All of our female participants, with one exception, had completed higher education, and most of them performed highly qualified work in Ukraine, working as, for example, auditors, pharmacists and managers. Two women migrated on their own and undertook work below their qualifications, such as plant grower and care-worker, four women arrived to do their master's degrees and two women migrated with their husbands, recruited as IT-experts. One woman arrived with her family to seek asylum and one woman got married to a Swedish man. Despite all the women, with one exception, having completed higher education, several women were unemployed, financially relying on their partners, and some women relied on part-time or zero-hour contracts. Nonetheless, two of the women with Swedish university degrees managed to secure positions according to their qualifications, as an IT expert and a university researcher. The migrant men initially arrived in Sweden on their own to undertake high-skilled jobs, working as university researchers, albeit with limited contracts.

Prior to the interview, the participants received information about the project and gave their written consent to participate in it on condition that their anonymity is guaranteed. Interviews were conducted either in Russian or in Ukrainian by author A, depending on the preference of the participant and lasted between one and a half and two hours. Participants were asked about their experiences of migrating to Sweden, primarily about the contact they keep with people 'back home', and what is sent back and forth. Most people talked about the links they have been sustaining with particular family members – usually parents and grandparents, and for some, siblings and other extended family members. Almost all of the respondents, at least initially, found it difficult to reflect on their sending and receiving, as they perceived the practice as ordinary and not worthy of attention. Nonetheless, during the interview, people quickly become keen to share their experiences, revealing how significant this material exchange is for them. The interviews were transcribed into the language of the interview before being translated into English and read carefully multiple times.

We followed the coding technique presented by Saldana (2009). We started by assigning codes to the related words, phrases or paragraphs in the interviews. We then grouped the codes into categories and later arranged categories into key themes around migrants' experiences of sending and receiving things to and from home.

We turn now to our discussion of our main findings: firstly, an exploration of the gendered nature of these exchanges, and the obligations they may, or may not, reveal; and secondly, the materialised dynamics associated with sending things from 'the West', and the extent to which these perpetuate, or disrupt, assumed binaries.

Gendered Expressions and Expectations of Materialised Transnational Care

One of the themes that came through very strongly in our fieldwork was the gendered nature of materialised transnational care practices. Ukrainian migration to Sweden is not as heavily feminised as in some other countries (Italy), with men also arriving in Sweden to undertake construction and car manufacturing work as well as more high-skill specialities in IT and engineering. Although we only interviewed two men, the analysis of our data suggests an immediate difference in the sense of obligation and roles being fulfilled through transnational practices of sending and gift giving especially. These can be read as integral to wider circulations of ideas about gender social and kinship structures in Ukraine, stretching with families as people migrate. In the interviews with the two men, the desire to compensate for their absence was not as apparent as in the interviews with the women, despite the men also being close with their families. Almost all the female participants were explicit about feeling responsibility to physically take care of their parents, and all of them, without exception, attempted to maintain their parents' physical wellbeing by sending either medicine or different household equipment to ease home duties – something we will return to shortly. Interviewed men, in contrast, sent things primarily as a gesture to demonstrate their affection.

Pavlo is in his mid-20s, single and arrived in Sweden just over a year ago, to work as a university researcher. Pavlo's interview straight away reveals how much he misses his parents and brother in Ukraine. His work is demanding, so he has not yet had time to visit his family. Instead, regularly sent and received packages, along with Skype calls and texting, have become an integral part of keeping in touch with them. Although Pavlo's interview is coloured with care towards his family, he was quite specific about *not* feeling an obligation to send something:

> 'It's not like they ask me to send them something. I do it exactly because there is no compulsion. You do it because you want to, not because they need or ask for this.'

Pavlo's quote illuminates his sense of freedom in care relationships with his family, seemingly feeling he is able to decide how often and to what extent to demonstrate his love, without running the risk of upsetting the expectations of his family. As Solari (2017) has shown, Ukrainian society's expectations about family roles are generally centred on women. In Ukrainian public discourse, male migration is not portrayed as negatively as the migration of women. Ukrainian men are viewed primarily as breadwinners, which helps to justify their move in search of better economic prospects (Feduyk & Kindler 2016). Ukrainian migrant women, in contrast, can be blamed for abandoning their children, ruining families and creating a care drain in the country (Tolstokorova 2013; Kupets 2016). A Ukrainian migrant woman has to be recognized as appropriately poor to justify leaving her family to society (Solari 2019). This unequal care arrangement might account for the gendered experiences of obligation in our interviews.

We can delve more deeply into how this greater sense of responsibility manifests among our women participants and the importance of materiality to this. Our interview with Olena provided a revealing example of how these dynamics of care are reshaped and sustained across borders and the centrality of tangible things to keeping ties strong. Olena is in her early 30s and migrated to Sweden three years ago. She gave up work as a pharmacist in Ukraine, as it was not paid well, and arrived in Sweden to work as a plant grower, and later as a technician at a car company. The insecure nature of Olena's employment does not allow her regular visits home, so sending things has become a significant part of her communication with her family in Ukraine.

Olena's partner, who is Swedish, does not participate in her sending practices, neither financially nor practically, but this does not seem to bother her as she takes apparent pleasure in the act of finding and sending things. The way she described how thoughtfully she chooses objects for each family member reveals how much love and care she has for them. Nonetheless, it is her mother that occupies Olena's mind the most. Although she is only in her 60s, Olena is attuned to her increasing frailty and emerging needs, holding almost daily Skype calls to visually check on her physical health, and note if there is anything that she could get for her to maintain her wellbeing. For example, Olena has noticed that her mother suffers from chronic pain in her joints, so she has found medicines that might help relieve her pain:

> '[To my mother] I now regularly send medicines, Omega 3. The quality of these vitamins decreased significantly (in Ukraine). But here [in Sweden], there is loads of salmon. [..]Mum is already an elderly woman […], she has arthritis. Iit has vitamin D in it, so this should help.'

Olena's testimony demonstrates her particular, and everyday, attempts to try to maintain her mother's health across a vast distance as she ages (Näre et al. 2017). Not being physically present by her mother's side, makes Olena even more observant during their Skype chats, and more alert to her health issues in general. The virtual relationship sustained through Skype works in tandem with the sending of things, each a form of transnational care, but temporally and materially configured in different ways.

As part of her caring strategy, Olena also sends her mother modern electronic supplies as a way to give practical help and make everyday life easier.

> 'We used to make juice, but we used this old Soviet juice maker, […], and you are sitting there, all hunched up. So, I found an [automatic] juice maker here. Nobody asked me

> to buy it, but I know that my mother likes the juice, so I need to make her life easier, she is not getting younger.'

As we see here, some of the objects Olena sends are intended to deliver physical and practical help, translating her 'caring about' into 'caring for' her mother. The fact that she highlights that her sending is neither requested nor expected signals that it is not only about obligation to reciprocate care. Olena's sending is also an act of love, a desire to make the lives of those she loves more comfortable, with the means available to her across distance. Olena's interview not only underlines the practical value of the sent things in family members' lives but also emphasises the longevity and regularity of their use.

Apart from medicines and equipment, Olena also sends clothes, food items, cosmetic appliances she thinks her family would like or need. The fact that her family never asks her for anything accentuates how perceptive she is of their needs, relying on what Boris and Parrenas (2010) call 'shared intimate knowledge', information that is not immediately available to anyone else. For example, Olena keeps in mind her mother's medical history, information about each family member's food preferences and their body size. During the interview, Olena revealed she has a 'saving spot', an upper shelf, where she continually gathers things, which she thinks her family might like or need, to send to Ukraine – a fact that emphasises the continuity of care. Consequently, sent packages do not only embody remembrance but also testify to the time and energy invested in looking for the 'right' objects. Just as the items, Olena sends have a prominent presence in her family's daily life, finding and sending these things keep Olena emotionally and tangibly connected all the time. Despite the work involved, never once did she indicate the sending process to be an emotional, practical or a financial load. This is where we see the limitations in analysing Olena's practices *solely* through frameworks of obligation. It was clear in the interview how much enjoyment Olena derived from thinking about her family and 'provisioning' for them. Pavlo and Olena's stories show us, in different ways, that it is not just the responsibilities that come with care which drives these exchanges but also the less-conditional element of love. If we reduce these practices to obligation, we miss something important and very human.

Ella's story reveals further aspects of these gendered practices of materialised intergenerational care, shedding more light on the transnational circulations of reciprocity. Ella is in her mid-30s, and migrated to Sweden with her husband, Vadim, and a young daughter to seek asylum. Ella has recently managed to find a part-time job as a beautician, the work she also performed in Ukraine, whereas her husband took a job at a car factory. In Ukraine, Ella and her husband have an extensive family network, but it is mainly she who maintains regular contact with the relatives (Wilding 2006). According to Ella, Vadim is not particularly engaged in the sending practice, mainly performing, what she calls, 'manly tasks', such as assembling and then carrying the packages (Burrell 2017). The more hidden labour of choosing gifts and communicating delivery details sits on Ella's shoulders, which, as we saw with Olena, she does not seem to mind, something we should not ignore.

The person Ella most often sends packages to is her mother, whom she has a strong emotional bond with. Ella's move to Sweden was rushed, so she only packed the essentials. As soon as Ella and Vadim found out they could stay in Sweden, her mother started to gradually send some of their belongings to Sweden, in order to help Ella to build a life in her new country. Ella described how helpful and supportive her mother has been despite how painful Ella's move was for her, and how much she has appreciated her mother sending her these things, sometimes at her own cost. Ella only arrived in Sweden fairly recently and primarily prepares Ukrainian traditional meals, so her mother has been sending her cooking utensils, such as an old garlic crusher, to help her feel more at home in her new material environment:

> 'You see, I need to feel comfortable in the kitchen. I use these things…maybe they don't look good, but let's take this [Soviet] garlic crusher, the one my mum sent to me it, it doesn't look good, it's quite ugly, quite old, but it's so comfortable!'

As other studies have also shown (Baldassar and Merla 2013), the dynamics of reciprocity are therefore more complicated than assumptions that it is simply a case of the migrant sending and the family at home receiving. Sending practices reflect wider family relationships and caring roles. In this example, it is the mother in Ukraine providing material care across distance. This exchange of kitchen supplies between mother and daughter is an illustration of how female family members give each other practical help and support across distance.

Intergenerational dynamics were integral to Ella's account. In her interview, she shared how her mother has found it difficult that she can no longer help Ella with childcare. So, despite having a small pension, Ella's mother regularly sends gifts, especially to her grandchild. Initially Ella tried to stop her from sending things, realising how expensive this is for her pensioner's budget, but lately she has decided to let her carry on:

> 'You know, my mother used to babysit my daughter, used to help us with errands. Now she can't help, and she feels as if nobody needs her. […]. So, now she goes from shop to a shop and chooses a mug for my daughter. She really enjoys the fact that she will now buy the best mug, and send it, and she will calm down. And I can be happy because she is happy.'

Ella's story outlines how her family attempts to navigate the care arrangements in the new transnational context. Because of poor health, Ella's mother cannot be one of those 'flying grandparents' (Lie 2010), and neither can she go abroad for work to assist Ella financially (Solari 2017). As a result, Ella's mother spends a considerable amount of time and effort to find the most suitable, yet affordable, gift for her granddaughter to compensate for the inability to physically care for her. We see then how family members left behind may also send things to compensate for their physical absence, co-creating new care arrangements and finding a mutuality through a variety of different practices. When viewed in this way, these exchanges look much less asymmetrical.

The circulations of care in these examples are multifaceted. They are clearly gendered, reflecting and sustaining – but perhaps not really challenging – particular tropes about gender and family roles in Ukraine, and revealing how these roles and responsibilities reformulate and materialise across distance. Undeniably, this feels close to what Solari (2019: 762) terms the 'transnational moral economy' of dynamic social norms, obligations and economic functions, in the sense that these are circuits that oscillate within families across borders and are shaped and reshaped by wider socioeconomic contexts. However, our interviews also showed, unequivocally, that both 'ends' of these migration chains contribute to these material interactions. These items and the everyday sending practices around them cannot be easily compartmentalised – they are definitely a form of care, sometimes part remittance or obligation, often a conscious or unconscious continuation of gender dynamics, but they are also often simply acts of unconditional love.

Consuming the West? Sharing Everyday Luxuries and the Dynamics of Materialised Economic Asymmetry

Our interviews revealed a further kind of material circulation in flow between our participants based in Sweden and their families in Ukraine. Again, largely based on forms of care and love, this one was about the desire to 'share' the fruits of 'the West' by sending and taking certain gifts based on perceived elevated aesthetic qualities and sometimes status. As with the earlier examples, these are also difficult to compartmentalise. To a certain extent, these practices bely the new economic asymmetries, which migration can introduce into family relationships and consequently carry remittance-like characteristics in some of our accounts, in the sense that they are sometimes sent alongside money, would otherwise be unaffordable and are often given to meet genuine economic needs. But, as with Solari's (2019) transnational moral economy, they are more complicated than this, fulfilling a sense of shared values and experiences than just offering economic aid. As with gendered connections, this circulation is also partly shaped by the specific contexts of post/Soviet Ukraine; this time a particular desire for Western goods. This admiration of Western things, mainly caused by their inaccessibility, has been a part of Soviet and Eastern Bloc history (Burrell 2008) and has seemingly continued among the current generation in Ukraine (Sileverstova 2017). Although Western brands and products are more available in contemporary Ukraine, because of the poor economic situation they are less affordable for ordinary Ukrainians. Thus, our participants seemingly perceive this access to a Western market as especially valuable.

Nadja is in her mid-20s and moved to Sweden with her husband Sergij, when he was headhunted by a Swedish IT firm as a prominent IT analyst. Shortly after their migration, Nadja started her studies in a Swedish university, and recently took a part-time job as an HR consultant in a large Swedish firm. Both Nadja and Sergij are very close with their families. They have regular Skype chats and visit them at least once a year. As Nadja reveals, the fact that she and her husband both have managed to find well-paid work in Sweden has put additional pressure on them to financially help both of their families, who are not very well off. During her interview, Nadja talked a lot about the broad material differences between the consumer environments in Sweden and Ukraine. So, along with money transfers, Nadja and Sergij routinely send even the most basic things back home, as they believe that products in Sweden are ultimately of a higher quality than products sold in Ukraine.

> 'We send chocolates, of course. Swedish sweets are delicious, I think they are more delicious than in Ukraine. [..]. Hand sanitisers, shower gels. I think all these things are better in Sweden than in Ukraine. The quality is better. […]. Last time we visited by car and brought things from IKEA, shelves, lamps, a desk. [..]. The [furniture] design in Ukraine is not very beautiful in comparison to what you can buy in IKEA. I cannot say IKEA is superb quality, but I don't think you can find anything in Ukraine of that standard.'

Nadja is clearly aware of the different consumer environments in Sweden and in Ukraine, the contrasting lifestyles that these markets embody and the new asymmetries these have opened up within her family. The financial and cultural value of some of the objects is not significant enough to render them either as economic or social remittances – surely most of the products Nadja sends can be purchased from local producers in Ukraine – but shipping Western equivalents help her to share the high-quality lifestyle these objects represent.

This story also demonstrates how migrant's own perceptions may partly construct the needs of their families back home. As Cliggett (2005) shows, although things of low-economic value sent from the West do not offer a significant change in the lives of migrants' families, they still offer a temporary sense of luxury. By sending things from Sweden, our participants attempt to improve their families' quality of life and afford them a Western ideal of comfort – not just practical help, but extra luxuries too. Thus, Western goods in Ukraine have a status-giving feature (Sileverstova 2017), as they signify the wealth and life opportunities to which regular nationals have limited access. Getting hold of things that are inaccessible for many can also help to lift a migrant' family's social position and give them more significance in the local community. Nadja shared how they always send clothes items of a specific Italian brand to her mother-in-law, and how this affects her relationships within the community.

> 'We once sent an Eleganza bag to my husband's mother, and she was the most fashionable in the gym she goes to. So, now we always try to send things of this brand to her [..], She likes this brand because she's really a celebrity in the town. People in Ukraine know it, so she gets complimented. The bag looks quite nice, but it's important that it has a brand name on it.'

Nadja's story suggests that the actual product that families in Ukraine receive might be of less importance than the image it constructs in these local contexts. Sending expensive brands is also a chance for Nadja and Sergij to communicate to their families that they have established themselves well in a new country, but that they have not forgotten them. Although the sending reveals closeness, which connects our participants with their families, it also underlines the different economic contexts they are living in and the different consumer worlds they have access to.

It is nonetheless important to emphasise that sometimes this sending is also just about sharing different and fun parts of a new life with those back home, not necessarily in the sense of investing in a common grand new European aspiration (Solari 2019: 771), but simply including family back home in the discovery of new things. This distinction between giving and sharing is key here. Items may be given, but it is the wider experiences and sensations of a new material world that are being shared. Pavlo's interview provides an apt illustration of this sharing. Pavlo's family is doing economically fairly well, and even attempt to help him financially. So, unlike some of the other participants, Pavlo does not send things because he thinks his family might need them, but primarily because he wants to do something nice for them. Pavlo usually sends food, some delicacies but also lower-value items that he finds fun or different, for example, a pack of crispy fried onion. Pavlo explains his choice to send this food item:

> 'This crispy onion is something unique, [in Ukraine] we don't have anything like this. I sent it to them just to try, just a little bit. It's been three days that everyone talks about it. Next time I will have to send five kilos of it. That's how much everybody liked it!'

Pavlo's case here demonstrates that his sending things from the West might not have a specific purpose, such as to justify his leave or to 'educate' his families about European values (as shown in Solari 2019). For Pavlo, it does not seem to matter that the shipping cost is higher than the gift itself; he simply wants to introduce his family to something new and interesting that he has found. Although the Soviet legacy is to a certain extent present in all of the migrants' accounts, Pavlo represents this younger generation of Ukrainians, with new post-Soviet subjectivities, who do not think in clear binaries of 'Soviet versus European' values (Solari 2017, 2019). Pavlo's sending is not about introducing cultural change but simply about sharing his new material environment and as a gesture to communicate his love to the family. Once again, too much focus on a framework of remittance and asymmetry risks missing the subtleties and shifting temporalities of these transnational material connections.

We would also stress that for all this evidence of economic distance within families, our interviews underlined that, as with the previous section, these are not one-way flows in terms of giving.

We saw, for example, how reciprocity can also be expressed in forms other than giving. For instance, reciprocity of care can be demonstrated by the amount of care with which the families in Ukraine treat their received presents – the reverential treatment of these items itself almost acts like a gift back. Ella described how some of the gifts she sends home never even get opened but instead are carefully preserved:

> 'I sent my mother a beautiful set of bedding. I ask her: do you use it? She answers:
>
> No. -Why? – Let me save it, I feel bad about using it. I ask her: did I send it so that it can be put aside and saved? No, I will use it. – When? – Some day.
>
> She just can't use it! [..]I think, she wants to put it in a frame, and send it to a museum and to sign it: "This is from my daughter.'

As shown by Katigbak (2013), care can be reciprocated by recognition of the sacrifices and hardships that migrants take on to send something and a mutual wish to sacrifice something in return. However, the reaction of Ella's mother is not necessarily about sustaining the moral economy of sacrifice. Such careful treatment of the product can be rendered as a sign of pride in her daughter and gratitude that she does not forget her. Ella's story once again underlines that we should not think about material exchange only within the framework of moral economies. These exchanges are embedded in a much wider and richer spectrum of emotional connections being nurtured between family members.

Conclusions

Primarily, our research has reinforced that care does happen across borders and that the sending of things is not trivial but a tangible, practical *and* symbolic act of connecting people and keeping them embedded in their families' needs and routines. This practice is about a real presence, which requires effort and love to maintain, and it must be acknowledged.

We have also demonstrated that there are important dynamics within these materialised practices of care that often get overlooked. Although much of this kind of sending is usually couched in terms of binaries, obligation and the logics of remittance, we have shown that these practices are more nuanced and mutable than this. Although gendered codes of obligation and responsibility are clearly important, these frameworks prevent us from seeing this sending more holistically. Not only is there more mutuality in these practices than a focus on responsibility acknowledges, but the asymmetries at play, even in this Nordic/post-Soviet context, are present but not dominant. These are not *just* stories of the 'west as best', or women fulfilling prescribed roles; they are also stories of sharing, thoughtfulness, intimacy, fun and change. These accounts therefore reveal the importance of different temporalities – both at a personal scale such as lifecourse, and wider historical contexts, such as post-Soviet generational changes – in shaping the fluidity of these practices. Transnational circuits of care are not fixed but adapt as people age and as circumstances change. Our interviews with younger Ukrainians especially suggest a loosening of prescribed roles, values and obligations.

Finally, we find that, even in the age of advanced modernity and virtual worlds, materiality still matters. Things are still intricately and intimately entwined with human relationships. Our research underlines that this material exchange is as important as ever; there is, and will always be, a role for things in sustaining bonds in transnational families.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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