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ABSTRACT: POSTER

Session 1: Marriage, Unions, Families and Households

Key-words: aging, caring, home care, women, cross-cultural, story-telling

Title: Caring at home. Stories of adult, elderly women and migrant caregivers.

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Abstract:

The research is focused on the aging experience in domestic groups that include the caring relationships among elderly women, their adult daughters, and migrant (immigrant) caregivers. Italy is one of the oldest countries in Europe, with a rapidly aging population and a relative lack of public services for elderly people. Changes in the structure of society and in the role of women in Italy have been accompanied by the arrival in the last twenty years of many migrant caregivers who live together with the elderly to provide care. At the present they number ~1 million in the entire state, and are concentrated in the north and wealthier parts of the country, where it is becoming the typical way of caring for the urban-based elderly.

The research considers the area of Verona, a town in the northeast part of the country, where the caregivers are widespread, about one for every 10 families; and the majority of the elderly people living alone are women, who have a longer life than the men. Migrant caregivers are perceived as the most economical solution to caring for the aged and as a way to avoid total institutionalization for old people living alone. This system does not economically overburden public welfare resources, because the expenses are entirely sustained by the elderly and their relatives; and it also meets the need of the migrant women to find a source of income to sustain their own families who remain in their country of origin. The migrant assistants live together with the elderly, 24 hour a day, trying to maintain the original domestic situation and to care for both the home and the elderly person. Some of them are employed "in black", without a legal agreement, to avoid the expenses and the rules established by a formal contract. They live in the same house as the elderly, sometimes in the same room, with very limited personal space and time for their own needs. They are called "badanti", which is a neologism that refers to "looking after" and "controlling" babies and animals and therefore is considered a politically incorrect and discriminating expression.

The research is documenting the accounts of the migrant caregivers, and the elderly women and their daughters, who all together are involved in trying to maintain a high quality of life. The research is providing a unique opportunity to collect data that is indicative of the transformation of the roles of adult and aged women into new cultural hybrids of families in society.

Using a qualitative approach based on listening to life stories, we are collecting accounts about the relationships among the women who constitute these groups: elderly women, daughters, caregivers, and social assistants. The narrative analysis is carried out through in-depth conversations focused on the theme of caring: we have already listened to 30 accounts recorded over about 65 hours, collected inside the homes or in informal settings, with the individuals encouraged to speak about themselves and about the others in their extended care group. The participants include caregivers coming from Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Ghana, Sri Lanka, elderly women living in Verona, their daughters, husbands, social assistants from the city services, and aged women involved in the care system and in its studying. We used a theoretical sampling by choosing a process of gradual sampling, whereby we could extend the sample and collect further data on the basis of what emerged from the analysis.

In entering the homes of elderly women, the researcher discovers a complex reality that is obscure, challenging to describe, and undervalued: the presence of an external observer and listener immediately changes the way that the subjects perceive themselves, and creates a space for reflection and self-understanding. In the complexity of the caring relationship the narratives show how women craft ways to live together despite differences of generation and origins. The story-telling elicits many life stories, creating occasions of insight about the social situation, encouraging the expression of conflicts and problems, and promoting reflection and well-being between generations. Telling stories creates common places, reveals symbolic borders between generations and between cultures, and allows the individuals to explore them and sometimes to cross these boundaries. The accounts are also considered as resource material for analyzing the organization of social services offered by public and private institutions, and often reveal conflicts between different models of care and of allocating needs. The methodology of recording and transcribing enables defining the themes related to the experience of caring, aging, and migration, as it is focused on the resources of the women who maintain good relationships despite being of different ages and origins. The initial phase of open coding permits identifying themes, starting from the conversations with elderly women who reflects about home caring relationships in the new model with the home assistants.

The field research is combined with analysis of representations built from the accounts of mass-media, such as newspapers, TV, and cinema, and the descriptions found in literature from the present and from the last century about old age and the care relationships among women. The media representation is considered as a semantic space in which the care relationships happen, and where the stories of the personal experiences and accounts find a background, like a mirror of a simplified or imaginary description.

The main aim of this work with the life stories is to give worth to the practice of women who give care and to recognize the act of telling as a way of internal and social transformation. Telling, listening, collecting stories is one of the chances, sometime the most worthwhile, especially when women and men lose their own memory and relatives and caregivers can help each other in the path of caring. Life stories help with building internal images, to integrate new connections with language, with the real objects of everyday life, and with human relationships. The accounts create a dialogue about multiple images of aging, coming from different countries, where the caregivers mature into adulthood, sometimes far from the Western culture, and informed by their experiences with the elderly who are in the last stage of life. The aim of this research is neither a reconstruction of historical or social events: rather, the focus is on the construction of the relationships between women and men of different generations, between families and institutions, between caregivers and relatives. Listening to the stories becomes the central foundation for building a description of the singular experiences of elders in their newly constituted "domestic society", and particular attention is paid to the rhetorical style of telling, the manner in which the account is told, and the contents that reflect stereotypes and fears.

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