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Erasmus

Filling in the Empty Spaces
Understanding Moldovan Transnational Family Lives by
Unpacking the Meanings and the Makings of a Popular
Sending Practice

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Disclaimer:

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List of Acronyms

EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IOM	International Organization of Migration
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
MLPS	Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali
UK	United Kingdom
USSR	Union of Soviet and Socialist Republics

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Abstract

This paper uses the phenomenon of parcel sending as a lens onto Moldovan transnationalism, unravelling how transnationalism is done, experienced and remembered by and from different subject positions. Parcel-sending practice emerged some 20 years ago in the context of women's increased involvement in emigration and limited communication possibilities. The practice of parcel sending became an essential means of keeping in touch and staying close between migrants and their family members who stayed behind, especially migrant mothers and their children, expressing transnational care and mothering. Despite the significant transformations in the governance of EU-bound Moldovan migration and technological advances in the communication field (i.e., internet, money transfers), this practice did not disappear; instead, it remains an essential feature of Moldovan transnational life. By applying a historically informed ethnographic approach, I tease out how the meaning of parcel sending and its role in Moldovan transnational migration has changed over time.

By 'unpacking the parcel' methodologically, theoretically and empirically, I argue that parcels and items from the inside are not mere commodities. The content of a parcel and how it is put together, wrapped, and sent matters and varies for sending and receiving sites. It conveys multiple meanings, such as expectations, obligations, keeping promises and connections. It has its social life, emotions and memories. In transnational and family studies, parcels represent affection – wrapped and sent. This research has also shown that despite having diverse ways of staying connected and providing material and emotional support, contemporary migrants continue practising parcel sending attributing to it new meanings in this technologically, geopolitically and legally reconfigured transnational field. In addition, by shifting the analysis from the visible to the invisible of parcel sending, I discuss the role of sensory dimensions, such as taste and smell, in understanding how migrants live and remember their transnational experiences.

Relevance to Development Studies

“[I]n this era of heightened globalization, transnational lifestyles may become not the exception but the rule” (Levitt 2001: 4).

In development and migration studies, there had been an increased interest in studying the processes of adaptation and integration of immigrants on the one side and the economic and social impact of remittances on receiving societies on the other side. Since economic, political and social relationships between the sending and receiving sites of migration have become more visible and of increased interest for researchers, a significant body of literature has focused on studying the intimate relationships between migrants and those who stay and their ways of staying connected and experiencing transnational life. However, insufficient attention is paid to the analysis of the transnational exchange of material objects and how this speaks to what people value while also reflective of broader processes of social change.

By analysing a transnational family practice of staying connected, such as sending and receiving material objects across space and time, this research is written as a contribution to current scholarship on transnational family studies and material culture in the context of migration. Using historically informed, ethnographic, multi-sited methods and memory narratives, my research has shown that studying transnational family practices, such as parcel sending, have the potential to say more about how migrants and their families experi-

ence, live, and remember their transnational lives and can be used as a lens to understand transnationalism in its broader sense.

Keywords

Migration; transnationalism; doing transnational householding; transnational care; popular culture; material culture; ethnography; Moldovan migration; parcel sending; memory; sensory experiences; Italy; transnational mothering.

Introduction

Just before Christmas in 2020, the Moldovan pop band AKORD launched a new song and video clip entitled “I Am Waiting for You on Christmas Eve”. The clip’s story is inspired by real cases and is based on the happy confusion caused when a wrong address is communicated for picking up parcels sent by Moldovan migrants from abroad.

Imbedded Video 1

Introducing the parcel as a popular theme in Moldovan spaces



Source: Official video clip posted on the AKORD’s YouTube official account. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcRY10aMids&t=199s>

Video clip shows a scene in which a few people are waiting to collect their parcels at a collection site. This dialogue occurs between two men arriving at the site (the first few seconds of the clip):

- “[Are you] also [waiting for a parcel] from Italy?”
- “No. [Mine is] from Spain.”

Then, due to issues with the data system, people are told another address, and the story unfolds further.

During major holidays like Christmas and Easter, widely perceived as occasions when family members gather, the quantity of parcels sent to Moldova by Moldovan migrants abroad increases significantly. Sometimes, because of this overload, such confusion might occur during the transportation and distribution of parcels.

The music video illustrates that the focus of this RP, the practice of sending parcels by Moldovan migrants to their family members, is indeed a popular practice which is engaged with in Moldovan popular culture too. Even people who have never received a parcel

themselves (me included) know about this phenomenon. Some of the positive comments¹ posted on YouTube refer to the parcel scene as the best video feature, indicating the popularity of this practice among Moldovans.

Despite this and a few other bits of information captured in this scene², the song does not pay the parcel much attention, and it remains unseen, undiscovered and still packed. We see people who are waiting for them, but not the relationship between them and the senders. We see those who work for transport van companies, but not their role in Moldovan transnational life. We can even see the parcels themselves in the storage room during the clip. However, we do not know who sent those parcels and why. What is inside them? Why these items?

This paper uses the phenomenon of parcel sending as a lens onto Moldovan transnationalism, unravelling how transnationalism is done, experienced and remembered by and from different subject positions. Parcel-sending practice emerged some 20 years ago in the context of women's increased involvement in emigration and limited communication possibilities. The practice of parcel sending became an essential means of keeping in touch and staying close between migrants and their family members who stayed behind, especially migrant mothers and their children, expressing transnational care and mothering. Despite the significant transformations in the governance of EU-bound Moldovan migration and technological advances in the communication field (i.e., internet, money transfers), this practice did not disappear; instead, it remains an essential feature of Moldovan transnational life. By applying a historically informed ethnographic approach, I tease out how the meaning of parcel sending and its role in Moldovan transnational migration has changed over time.

By 'unpacking the parcel' methodologically, theoretically and empirically, I argue that parcels and items from the inside are not mere commodities. The content of a parcel and how it is put together, wrapped, and sent matters and varies for sending and receiving sites. It conveys multiple meanings, such as expectations, obligations, keeping promises and connections. It has its social life, emotions and memories. In transnational and family studies, parcels represent affection – wrapped and sent. This research has also shown that despite having diverse ways of staying connected and providing material and emotional support, contemporary migrants continue practising parcel sending attributing to it new meanings in this technologically, geopolitically and legally reconfigured transnational field. In addition, by shifting the analysis from the visible to the invisible of parcel sending, I discuss the role of sensory dimensions, such as taste and smell, in understanding how migrants live and remember their transnational experiences.

This paper is organised into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the research interest, objectives and questions that guided me throughout the research process. It also situates the parcel phenomenon within broader literature and presents the conceptual tools I

¹ Examples of comments (retrieved and translated by the author):

- "What more can a Moldovan wish for – to receive a parcel and to have someone to open it with"
- "It is an amazing clip. The parcel theme must be continued"
- "An invaluable script!!!! How many beautiful emotions I experienced regarding this little music video!!!! Excellent is too little said ... for all those who participated in the realization of this thematic moment".

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcRY10aMids&t=19s>

² Such as informational banner, which indicates that sending countries are Italy, Spain and France and what kind of transportation delivers parcels to Moldova.

used during the research. Chapter two sets out the overall argumentations of research methodology and offers the specific methods employed in this paper. It also introduces my informants and contains some reflections on methodological dilemmas, such as my positionality and reflexivity of research. The third chapter discusses socio-economic, technological, geographical, and historical factors that gave rise to the parcel-sending practice within Moldovan transnational fields and further shows that as these factors changed, this transformed parcels' social meanings. Chapter four focuses on the empirical aspects of the 'making of the parcel' and reveals insights into understanding everyday transnationalism by analysing inscriptions, packaging, time, place and networking in an ethnographic manner. The last chapter elaborates on the senses of doing transnational life, in which I discuss the role of sensory dimensions such as taste and smell in understanding migrants' transnational experiences. After, I conclude.

Chapter 1 Introducing the Parcel to the Reader

1.1 Why following/unpacking/researching the parcel?

My research interest developed based on personal encounters with Moldovan migration. Throughout those encounters, I noticed how parcels play a significant and persistent role in Moldovan transnational family life, often, but not always, related to transnational mothering. After listening to migrant mothers and their children's accounts and witnessing some of the packing and unpacking of parcels, I realised that parcels are not mere commodities. The content of a parcel and how it is put together, wrapped and sent matters and varies from sending and receiving sites to those who transport it and check it at the borders. It conveys multiple meanings, such as expectations, obligations, promises and connections. Parcels have a social life (Appaduray 1986), evoke emotions (Burrell 2017) and are anchored in memory. In transnational and family studies, the parcel represents affection – wrapped and sent.

However, there is also a negative connotation attached to the parcel-sending practice in transnational migration. For example, it relates to the transnational “commodification of love” (Parreñas 2001). According to this idea, migration may result into replacing emotional and intimate relationships between family members with material goods (sent as parcels) and remittances. Some studies (Schmalzbauer 2004; Parreñas 2001) emphasise narratives that describe how “gifts and remittances serve[] as an imperfect replacement when parents migrate transnationally” (Coe 2011: 8). Another discourse emphasises how material objects sent from abroad increase the material aspirations of those in receiving countries and how parents are spoiling their children while trying to compensate for their absence by sending toys and clothing (Jingzhong and Lu 2011; Dreby 2006). Also, many migrant parents, especially mothers, are blamed by society (and themselves) for leaving their families (children, husbands, and elderly parents) without proximate care and supervision.

Some of the popular Moldovan songs about female emigration to Italy reflect the above: Italy stands as a metaphor for feminised migration and women are blamed for being the primary reason for many family and societal issues:

“Oh, Italy! You ruined the world! The men are alone, [they] were left without women.

Oh, Italy! You ruined my wife, here she was a good housewife, there she's a foreign servant...

Since the woman left, the families felt apart, Men weaker in nature, [they] got drunk...

She left a year ago but did not send any money. Children are hungry; they do not have parental affection...”

(Lyrics from the song *Italia* by *Formatia Magic*, translated from Romanian by the author)³

Although in Moldova, alcoholism among men⁴ is an actual social problem, there are indeed children who live below the poverty line, and many migrant women are care or domestic workers in Italy, the majority of the social issues enumerated above cannot be re-

³ The song is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtySvjU61rc>

⁴ The rate of alcohol use disorders and dependence among males is almost 5 times higher compared to females (2016). Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/983807/moldova-alcoholism-prevalence-by-gender-and-type/>

duced only to migration as lyrics suggest⁵. On the contrary, some comparative studies (Gassmann et al. 2013) have shown that the well-being of Moldovan children whose parents, especially mothers, emigrated is better than those who live in non-migrant families, receiving better care and support due to a high level of monetary and material remittances sent. However, because “popular music [is] rife with messages about all sorts of social issues” (Maratea and Monahan 2016: 2), linking them to stereotypical narratives about women and migration and “mak[ing] their way into the public consciousness” (ibid.: 3), the public at large perceives female emigration as problematic (Pantiru et al. 2007) and any transnational material care through a kind of judgemental lens.

So, what are parcels? Are parcels spoiling the children and increasing the material aspirations of those from countries of origin? Or are they a crucial element in maintaining transnational family relations? What other dimensions do parcels transcend while crossing the borders? What other borders? These questions are essential to understanding parcel sending as an important social phenomenon that shapes transnational family members’ lives and migration experiences.

1.2 Stamping objectives and questions of the research

In my research, I discuss how transnational Moldovan families make sense and experience their transnational lives through the lens of parcel-sending practices. I argue that sending practices are essential in maintaining transnational family ties by showing how objects from the inside of parcels convey multiple meanings and emotional connections and create memories. Because parcel-sending practices emerged in specific socio-economic, geographical and temporal contexts over 20 years ago, I unpack the meanings that parcel sending has for Moldovan transnational fields and how these have changed over time by exploring temporal and gender dimensions of this practice.

Two decades ago, only a few affordable and accessible communication means allowed transnational family members to stay connected. In addition, many migrants were undocumented and could not visit their families back home for a long time. Despite multiple changes such as improvements in interstate migratory terms and conditions and the digitalisation of communication that have allowed transnational families to stay in touch more easily, parcel-sending practices have remained a significant feature of Moldovan transnational fields. This is why my analysis’s main objective is to understand the meanings Moldovan transnational families attribute to parcel-sending practices, how these changed over time, and why.

Moreover, because “the widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) generates a multiplicity of flows characterised by the simultaneity and intensity of transnational exchanges” (Nedelcu 2012: 1340), I pay closer attention to the role of digitalisation in parcel sending. Accordingly, I discuss how ICTs influence this everyday transnational practice and shape parcels’ content, frequency and value.

My interest in studying parcel sending as a gendered practice is based on three things. First, the intersection of the Italian crisis of care and Moldovan economic and political crises led to the feminisation of emigration from Moldova to Italy. Second, the emergence of parcel-sending practices and their further development was bolstered by the inventiveness

⁵ Although the notion of ‘Italian syndrome’ is used by Moldovan doctors to describe alcoholic men whose wives emigrated to Italy (Roache 2019), this is not a research-based medical conclusion. Available at: <https://time.com/5654052/moldova-drinking-problem/> (Accessed 01.11.2021).

of migrant women to stay in touch and maintain their parental relationship with their children who remained home. Third, the continuously increasing feminisation of migration driven by high demand for female labour in the Italian care market has maintained parcels' gendered aspect. Furthermore, my encounters with the parcel phenomenon are also tightly linked to mothering. This is why I explore the gender dimension of sending parcel practices, in particular how these convey the idea of transnational care and mothering.

Apart from transnational family members, I acknowledge the importance of other actors that play a significant role in parcel-sending practices, such as parcel-van companies (drivers) and the Moldovan Government (border control). However, learning how migrants and their stay-behind families perceive the role of the private sector and the state in the practice's functioning has not been the prime focus of my research because this has already been documented by other scholars (Caracentev 2020).

To achieve my research objectives, I ask the following research questions:

What is the role of parcel sending and receiving in maintaining transnational family ties, and how does the practice reflect (changing) realities in Moldovan transnational migration?

To make the task doable, throughout this paper, I answer the following sub-questions:

1. What gendered meanings do transnational family members attribute to parcel sending and receiving?
2. How have these changed over time, and why?
3. How is parcel-sending practice done and received, and why so?

1.3 Delivering the answers

Following Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004), I use the concept of the transnational social field as a social space comprising movements and flows where “migrants are often embedded in multi-layered, multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1003). In my research, migrants maintain their relationships between countries of origin and host countries in multiple ways through flows of financial, material, social, emotional care and support. I argue that Moldovan migrants and their stay-behind families operate, live and stay in touch in transnational social fields by exchanging material goods that take the shape of parcels. Thus, parcel sending represents a *transnational practice*.

In my analysis, I apply a gender lens to the parcel-sending practices and build on the phenomenon of feminisation of labour migration by studying women's involvement in transnational migration and their role in practices within transnational fields (Zontini 2010; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014; Cohen 2015). Due to the increasing rates of female emigration from developing countries to more affluent ones, many migrant women found themselves practicing transnational mothering (Parreñas 2001; Schmalzbauer 2004; Carling et al. 2012; Cohen 2015; Safaler 2019). Thus, I argue that parcel-sending practices represent ways in which *transnational maternal care* is expressed and received.

In migration studies, a large body of literature studies remittances and how migrants make monetary and non-monetary transfers to their country of origin. Here, in the wider literature, parcels fall under the *non-monetary remittances* or *gifts* category. As I mentioned earlier, in transnational family studies, the concept of the commodification of love refers to the replacement of emotional and intimate relationships between family members, especially parents and their children, with material objects such as food, clothing, toys and other gifts. Thus, there is a belief that parental love and care is commodified through material objects sent from overseas. However, because the materiality of love and care, as suggested

by Caty Coe (2011: 21), is “important in and of itself as well as its signal of emotional depth and closeness”, I approach the concept of remittances and their economic and emotional dimensions as intertwined instead of separated (Coe 2011). Thus, I argue that the materiality of parcel sending signifies much more than the parcels’ monetary value, and material care sent and received through parcels is *a sign of love and affection*.

In addition, after analysing parcels as part of the material culture and migration, I argue that material objects from inside the parcels are *social* (Appaduraj 1986) and *reinforce and maintain social ties* between migrants and their places of origin, in some cases, facilitating options to return (Cliggett 2005). They also convey the idea of *not being forgotten* between friends and family members on both sides of migration (McKenzie and Menjivar 2011). Finally, sending material objects is also a way to *stay physically present* while being away (Frykman 2009; Vilar 2010).

Literature in transnational family studies has established the meanings of sending material goods, especially food parcels, across borders and what these mean for family intimate relations in local and transnational contexts (Mata-Codesal and Abranches 2018). For example, studies on Balikbayan Box (Hof 2018; Camposano 2018) – parcel sending practised by Filipino migrants – reveals that sending and receiving material goods and foodstuffs play a significant role in maintenance of intimate family relationships across borders. Requiring intensive work from migrant women, this practice expresses a form of “global householding” (Camposano 2018) and care and love (Hof 2018). Similarly, Caribbean mothers were “sending love in a barrel” to their children (Crawford 2003), trying to “compensate for their long absence” and supporting their families and households from a distance (Crawford 2003: 108).

In my research, I build on the works of Kathy Burrell (2017) and Sanda Caracentev (2020) who have conceptualised parcel sending as part of migration infrastructure and its role in maintaining transnational family relationships of Poles and Zimbabweans (Burrell 2017) and Moldovans (Caracentev 2020) in the UK. That is,

“the desire to send gifts, clothes, food, medicine and sofas can be seen in itself as an attempt to bridge the physical distance that migration has created – material culture can connect people as powerfully as communication technology and has the advantage of, food aside, providing a solid presence, and greater longevity of this presence, even when the other person is far away” (Burrell 2017: 817).

Focusing on how parcel-van companies play a significant role in maintaining this connectedness, Caracentev’s research (2020) is one of the first significant attempts to study the parcel phenomenon within Moldovan transnational fields. In her research, she argues that “in close relation to communication technologies like Skype, parcel sending creates co-presence, allowing these connections to persist, embodied in practices like sharing foodstuffs and redecorating dwellings” (Caracentev 2020: 3). My research contributes to this study with a few but essential differences at the design level.

First, I researched Moldovan migrants in Italy, while Caracentev (2020) studied Moldovan immigrants from the UK. The most significant difference occurring due to this variation in the migratory destination is migrants’ age. Migrants from my study are part of a particular generation of migrants – “the pioneers” Safaler (2019) – Moldovans who emigrated to Italy in one of the first waves of emigration (1998-2006) from Moldova. Consequently, my informants were aged between 45-55 years at the time of study (2021). Over time, with the change in migratory conditions for Moldovans in Europe due to their rights to claim Romanian citizenship and Romania’s integration in the EU, other waves of ‘legal’ emigration followed to many European countries, especially the UK. Those migrants were predominantly younger, usually with a different educational background and emigrating for

more than economic reasons – they were looking for greater living and development opportunities as well. Thus, in Caracentev’s study (2020: 60), the migrants were between 22 and 45 years old who were sending parcels mainly to their parents and grandparents in Moldova.

Second, by focusing on a different wave of migration than Caracentev (2020) my study goes beyond the temporal dimension captured by her study, which is largely confined to seasonal dynamics in parcel sending (*ibid.*: 63). My informants were mostly experienced migrants. Some first migrated to Italy in 1999. When still young they sent parcels to their young children in Moldova. As their children became adults, my informants increasingly started sending parcels to their elderly parents and/or other (non)family kin in Moldova. This larger history reflected in my sample meant that I have been able to work with my informants’ memories about past experiences of parcel sending and receiving. Thus, I stretched the analysed period to almost two decades by relying on memories as an essential data source.

The next chapter provides important methodological details that characterise my research and explain any other differences or similarities between the two studies in more depth.

Chapter 2 Introducing the Research Context

This chapter sets out the overall argumentations of research methodology and the specific methods employed in this paper. It also introduces research informants and situates them within the research context. Finally, chapter two concludes with reflections on methodological dilemmas, such as my positionality and reflexivity of research.

2.1 Methodological orientation and methods to unpack the parcel

My research aims to understand the meanings attributed to parcel-sending practices by Moldovan transnational families and how these have changed over time. To achieve this, I obtained my informants' past and current personal accounts about parcel-sending practices and observed and analysed the process of making the parcel.

Methodological orientation

In my research, I applied an ethnographic approach for data collection because this gives the best tools for “making sense of the social world that we all use in our mundane lives” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 4) and serves perfectly for understanding an everyday social practice such as parcels-sending. Furthermore, conducting this study in an ethnographic manner, I believe research “does not imply that it must be primarily directed towards changing (or for that matter preserving) the world in some way or other” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 18). Instead, my “orientation is an exploratory one” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3). My “task is to investigate some aspects of the lives of the people who are being studied, and this includes finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves” (ibid.). Thus, through my research, I explored the parcel phenomenon by bringing to the knowledge surface a mundane social activity widely practised by Moldovan transnational families and learnt the meanings they attribute to it.

Also, my informants are members of transnational families and are situated in multiple geographical and cultural locations. This is why my study took the form of a multi-sited ethnography, which is the most relevant approach to study contemporary social phenomena such as migration (Marcus 1995). In my study on parcels, Moldova and Italy “are connected with one another in such ways that the relationships between them are as important for this formulation as the relationships within them” (Hannerz 2003: 206). “[T]he translocal linkages, and the interconnections between those [sites]” (ibid.) are not limited to only parcel-sending practices but also characterise multidimensional transnational family relationships. Establishing those multiple linkages by empirically and theoretically unpacking the parcel is the main objective of my research. Because of limited time and resources, I strategically “stretch[ed]” them by focusing on the “right sites” (Fitzgerald 2006: 3), to which I had access through the social network of my key informant. My informants are Moldovan migrants, mainly women, who live and work in the Italian city of Reggio-Emilia (the senders), and their family members in Moldova (Cornești city in Ungheni district) or settled in other countries (the receivers). To visualise the geographical sites, see Image 1.

Image 1

Parcel-sending destination from the research context (Italy-Moldova)



Source: Destinations drawn by the author on the map-image retrieved from <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/85/1f/98/851f98cfd67c59b5322584509bc9a43f.jpg>

However, instead of “following the people” (Marcus 1995) as one of the most obvious ways to go about a migration study, I focused on understanding their means of staying connected by following the parcel. By “tracing the circulation...of a manifestly material object of study” (Marcus 1995: 106) or following the parcel, the research was constructed in a multi-sited space and involve the mobility of material things. Depending on the ‘site,’ these meanings might differ. I understand that my research involved a few sites both geographically and socially constructed: the sending and receiving ends of the parcel trajectory are the main focus of my study while the drivers of transport van companies and the European/Moldovan regulatory bodies (border control/ tax authorities) that facilitate or restrict parcels mobility are excluded from my research to make the task manageable in terms of time and resources. Also, because I focused on understanding how the meanings attributed to the parcel-sending practices have changed over time, my research has a historical dimension.

Methods and data collection

I built my data on a combination of various ethnographic research methods, such as participatory observation, semi-structured and (mostly) unstructured qualitative interviewing (online and face-to-face), visual research, digital ethnography and “whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3).

First, for learning my participants’ individual experiences of sending and receiving parcels, I conducted individual unstructured qualitative interviews with nine research participants, which took the form of conversations – informal, yet “more focused, more in-depth, and more detailed than ordinary conversations” (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 2). In addition, I

conducted research based on multiple interactions with my participants. Some of these took place face-to-face and others online (semi-structured interviewing). Moreover, to cover a variety of perspectives and to capture the current state and the change over time of the researched phenomenon, I held conversations with migrant senders and receivers from different age groups.

Second, I conducted participant observation by following the parcel throughout several stages of its trajectory. That is, I ‘followed’ two of my informants by following the parcel “in [its] ‘natural’ setting” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 4) from the moment of buying, choosing, wrapping, and packing the objects in the parcel and bringing it to the collection point in Italy. I did not follow the parcel on its journey to Moldova due to coronavirus-related health risks. Due to the same risks, I did not meet any of the receivers to learn from their accounts of these particular (or another) parcels. Instead, we held online conversations based on photographs and videos of received parcels.

The third ethnographic method that I embraced in my research is visual research of photographs and videos. I asked my participants with whom I did not meet face to face (both receivers and senders) to take photographs or make videos of items from the parcel, their use, or anything else (choosing the items, (un)wrapping, sending, receiving). I also analysed media files I took myself during fieldwork.

Finally, as you might sense from the beginning of this paper, my research looks at Moldovan popular culture, specifically music videos and songs about migration or related practices. By conducting digital ethnography, I analysed texts and images that refer to migration and, where relevant, parcels to triangulate the individual research cases and aspects with broader trends from Moldovan transnational fields.

A few methodological and ethical dilemmas were tackled during the research, such as fulfilling ethical obligations towards the ‘researched’, which I discuss in Appendix 1, and how my positionality might have affected data collection and therefore knowledge production, which is explored later in this chapter.

Next, I introduce research informants to the reader.

2.2 Introducing the senders and receivers

“The selection of people, places or activities suitable for study” (Lee 1993: 60) is crucial in conducting any research. People with whom you research, their characteristics and number speak about the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of research findings (Devine and Heath 2009: 5). However, none of the above-mentioned methodological principles matches the scope of my research. Instead, I conducted an in-depth qualitative study of the parcel phenomenon with a group of nine informants from a particular setting and argue for its ‘relativeness’ to the broader context of Moldovan transnationalism and claim no universality of my research in general.

Based on the concept of the transnational social field (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), I refer to my informants who live across the borders as *transnational family members* and the multiple interactions and connectedness they engage in to stay in touch as *transnational life*. Also, throughout this paper, I use the term *informants* because I am “naïve and must be instructed about what is going on in a setting” (Morse 1991: 403), as is transnational parcel sending. Thus, my informants are Moldovan migrants and their family members who stayed behind and operated, lived, and continue to stay in touch in transnational social fields by exchanging material goods through parcel sending.

I gained access to the research field and my informants through my key informant - my mother-in-law - and her network. Some of them are part of my close and extended family,

whom I approached individually. This has significant implications for the positionality and reflexivity of research which are part of the next section's discussion.

Overall, five informants, including my key informant, represent a particular generation of migrants – the pioneers – mainly Moldovan women who emigrated 15-20 years ago to look for economic survival for their families overseas. Most of them had young children and shared two common migratory objectives: to put their children on their feet and help their ageing parents. The other four informants are now adults who received parcels for most of their childhood from their mothers in Italy while they lived in Moldova with their fathers, grandparents, or siblings.

As you can see in Table 1, all of my informants used to both send and receive and have continued practising parcel sending to different extents. Parcel sending started with pioneer migrants and children who stayed behind, being predominately senders and receivers, respectively. However, over time, some of them have switched roles and changed the sending destinations or both for two main reasons: “all the children grew up” (Iulia), and some families reunited. Four pioneer-migrants permanently moved to Italy and now live there with their Moldovan and Italian-Moldovan families. One pioneer is engaged in circular migration; she continues living in Moldova but still works in Italy most of the time. They all are still involved in parcel sending, but instead of for their children, for their elderly parents, extended families or just “sending things home” (Iulia). One of the now-grown children who was reunited with her family in Italy while she was an adolescent now sends parcels to her grandparents who looked after her when she was in Moldova. Another two are migrants themselves in other European countries. One still lives in Moldova and continues receiving parcels from her family from Italy. In total, seven women and two men either have received or sent parcels, or both.

Table 1

The research informants' relation to parcel sending

Informants	Gender	Transnational fam. member	Relation to parcels	Sending/receiving to/from
Iulia	F	Pioneer	Sender/receiver	Children & Home/ daughter
Maria*	F	Pioneer	Sender	Children & parents Nephew
Nina*	F	Pioneer	Sender	Children & non-relative elderly man
Joachim*	M	Pioneer	Sender	Children & elderly mother
Elena*	F	Pioneer	Receiver/sender	Husband/Children El- derly parents
Olivia	F	Stay-behind child	Receiver	Mother
Irina	F	Stay-behind child	Receiver/sender	Mother/mother
Mihaela	F	Stay-behind child	Receiver/sender	Mother/grandparents
Alex	M	Stay-behind child	Receiver	Mother

Source: Author

*Pseudonyms

Family relationships between receivers and senders differ from each other and, therefore, reveal multiple meanings. Some of them play/played both roles: receivers and senders. In other cases, some senders and receivers are participants of the same parcel trajectory. That means I could tell the story of the same parcels from different perspectives. Last

but not least, I conducted multiple interactions with my informants, such as exchanging photos and media files, online interviewing, exchanging messages during follow-ups, participating in and witnessing wrapping and sending episodes.

Despite its limited size and migration network and context, my informants represent an extensive range of diverse transnational family relationships, parcel trajectories, meanings and perspectives. All are revealed through a material, mobile and emotional package – the parcel – the lens that I suggest looking through at transnational families’ lives and experiences. Further I elaborate on how my positionality and personal perspectives about transnationalism in the research context might have influenced the narratives interpreted in this research.

2.3 The insider-in-law: A reflexive journey of a *Signora*

“Hello, this is Cristina, Iulia’s daughter-in-law”.

This sentence began my first direct interactions with the informants that my key informant – my mother-in-law - strategically snowballed to contribute to my research. Iulia emigrated to Italy seventeen years ago and has been engaged in circular migration, working in the care sector since then. She started sending parcels almost immediately to three of her children “because [she] was their mama” (Iulia). Since then, Iulia has been sending parcels to them and now most often just home (to her husband, mother and mother-in-law and other relatives). In image 2, the reader can witness a signed package wrapped and ready to be sent to Iulia’s home in Moldova. The name on the top is the same as my surname taken after getting married. Iulia’s children Alex, my husband, and Irina, his younger sister, took part in my research as well.

Image 2

Researching with your family-in-law



Source: Taken by the author during fieldwork.

These research details illustrate one aspect of my positionality towards some of my informants and the research in general.

Positionality refers to how the researcher’s multiple “aspects of social identities” are engaged in multidimensional power relations, such as race, gender, age, nationality, social and economic status, emphasising how these power identities may influence data collection and, thus, knowledge production (Rose 1997: 308). The process when the researcher herself, while “mapping [the] terrain” (Marcus 1995: 99), reflects on this influence is called reflexivity of research.

This influence is not limited only to data collection and interpretation but also to the entire research process, beginning with deciding to research a particular topic with and about a specific group of people (Rose 1997; Crossa 2012). In this sense, my research interest in understanding the role of parcel sending in Moldovan transnational family life emerged after I gained the title “in-law”. I grew up in a family that was little affected by migration. Even though two of my uncles (one paternal and one maternal) emigrated from Moldova almost 20 years ago, I grew up with both parents home in a relatively stable financial situation. I experienced migration through gifts and sweets brought by my uncles during rare visits home. Many Moldovan villages were heavily affected by migration during my childhood. However, most of the population where I grew up practised short period circular migration to Russia, and parcel sending was rare or non in relation to Russia-bound migration. After getting married, I witnessed numerous parcel-making, mainly receiving and unwrapping, scenes and listened to my family-in-law’s narratives about their migration experiences in Italy. Despite my husband’s and my places of origin being situated only one hundred kilometres away, the migration stories I learnt were utterly different. They have reshaped my thoughts and perceptions about Moldovan transnationalism and laid the foundation, initially, for a simple interest that eventually developed into *the* research interest. Or, as in ethnographic research, it is often “not clear” when and where “within a setting” the research observation began (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 4).

In an ethnographic study where the researcher herself is a “research instrument par excellence” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 17) who tries to understand how people she studies with make sense of their daily experiences and practice (ibid.), unequal positions of power relations between the researcher and her informants present a significant consideration for knowledge produced. The question that it is essential to raise in this regard is what social and political differences between researcher and researched create distances that situate the former in position(s) of privilege or power (or any) in rapport to the latter and how these matter in the research context (Rose 1997: 312). In this sense, I reflect on how my preconstructed identities as a young, educated Moldovan woman, relatively financially secure, a migrant mother myself and a master’s student in the Netherlands influenced conducting ethnographic research with Moldovan migrants in Italy and their families that are part of my extended family network at the same time.

In migration studies, it is becoming more common that migrants from developed countries “complete university degrees in the social sciences and humanities and do research on the migrant group that they are part of” (Carling et al. 2014: 38). As a native Moldovan conducting research on and about Moldovan migrants, I was immediately positioned as an ‘insider’ researcher by myself and my informants. On one side, being part of the same ethnic group facilitated access and interactions with my informants because of “linguistic or cultural skills” (Carling et al. 2014: 38), making it easier to hold direct conversations and observe the parcels scenes. In addition, being connected to their network through family ties made me “*an honorary insider*” (Carling et al. 2014: 50) that contributed to this belief. On the other side, knowing that I would conduct the research myself was highly welcomed. At first, some of my informants were quite reluctant to participate as they thought ‘someone’ would come and interview them. The question to reflect upon is whom they expected to see and why so. As in development studies, an outsider sometimes is positioned in colonial terms as “white research on black lives” (see Agyeman 2008); in the migration context, my informants would have probably portrayed an adult European man, a professor – *a someone* – as not part of their migrant group. This example illustrates how the difference between an insider and an outsider researcher implies not only methodological aspects but also has political implications. However, after learning that *that* someone was ‘only me’, they felt relieved, saying that I should have told them this in the first place.

This relief contradicts my pre-research expectations. Being an in-law, it was not the first time I had entered the research field. Specifically, while living for a short time in Italy, I often visited many of my to-be informants. During those visits, I always felt treated differently, especially by female kin. Even though a migrant woman as they were, I had taken a break from my office job in Moldova but did not work while living in Italy. They called me (with humour) *Signora*⁶ because I “was too educated to perform care or domestic work” as most of them did. This speaks to how my migration experience was and has remained different from theirs. Similarly, to Cecilia Menjívar (2000: 245) while researching with her Salvadorian compatriots, “I was never an undocumented immigrant, never lived in the neighbourhoods where my informants lived, never held the kinds of jobs they did, and never experienced most of what has shaped their lives”, including sending or receiving parcels. Because of this, I was concerned that my education and privileged migrant status would make me an outsider despite being of the same origin. That may be what Carling, Erdal and Ezzati (2014: 51) call *an apparent insider* where an “ethno-national insider researcher would want to emphasise insider status as source of legitimacy and authority, but that the informants would see the researcher as a clear outsider on other grounds” (ibid.).

It is crucial to remember that one particularity of my research context is that my informants are part of two distinct groups: the migrant pioneers and the now-adult stay-behind children. Thus, being *Signora* (or educated) hardly affected the interactions with the latter group of informants as the status of educated was one of the shared similarities, among others, such as being young and privileged migrants compared to migrant pioneers. However, these shared identities did not close the “gap” (Moss 1995) between me and this group of informants, as I have never experienced growing up with parents who were abroad and have never received love and care through parcels. Similarly, despite what studies by Carling et al. (2014) have shown, sharing a universal experience such as parenthood with the pioneer migrant informants did not “create a sense of commonality” (Carling et al. 2014: 46) in my case. On the contrary, being a migrant mother who has never had to experience mothering at a distance widened the differences between us. I would have never understood what feelings they were going through and what sending parcels genuinely meant to them.

Here, acknowledging the role of my emotions towards my informants (both the mothers and the children) and the research subject (experiencing family life across borders) is an essential part of my reflexivity as it “has important affective dimensions with implications for research practice” (Gray 2008: 936). Thus, throughout the entire research, I had to mediate my underlying assumptions about migration, materialism in transnational practices, migrant women, motherhood, care and love, which were continuously “shaped, (re)produced, and in some cases reconstituted” (Crossa 2012: 126). As a result, my emotional attachment and distancing toward the ‘researched’ engulfed me with feelings of guilt, blame, compassion, love and respect, to name only a few. Because “intellectual and emotional investment in the research will to some extent shape the research narrative” (Gray 2008: 946) and the knowledge produced, making it visible and transparent is a necessity “so that the reader can position herself and her interpretation in relation to different voices and positions in the text” (ibid.).

However, like Rose (1997), despite believing in the transparent reflexivity that I attempted above as a necessary step to knowledge production, I acknowledge my research contains “some absences and fallibilities while recognising that the significance of this does

⁶ Italian word - title of respect given to women, especially married. In the described context, this title carries also meaning of a highly educated woman and having a white-collar job.

not rest entirely in [my] hands” (Rose 1997: 319). In the next few chapters, the reader has the chance to do it herself after listening to the stories behind the parcels, starting with the story of when and how the parcel was born.

Chapter 3 The History of Parcels – Continuity and Change in Parcel Sending

This chapter discusses socio-economic, technological, geographical, and historical factors that gave rise to the parcel-sending practice within Moldovan transnational fields. The chapter further shows that as these factors changed, it did not lead to the disappearance of parcel sending but rather transformed its social meaning.

3.1 At the intersection of two crises: the parcel was born

During the first decade after the collapse of the Union of Soviet and Socialist Republics (USSR, 1990-1998), Moldova failed to perform necessary adjustments and economic reforms. As a result, a series of macroeconomic and geopolitical imbalances occurred that led to high unemployment rates among active populations, the significant rise of shadow economy (Pantiru et al. 2007: 3) and uncontrollable inflation that dramatically decreased people's purchasing power (Cashu 2000: 744). Because of massive strains on the state's payment capacity and protection systems, all state workers' salaries and pension payments were delayed or stopped due to the state's financial inability to meet ends, triggering social inequalities among all populations.

As a result, Moldova went through severe waves of emigration during these uncertain times (Vanore and Siegel 2015: 4). Active and productive populations faced several challenges, such as unemployment and economic incapacity to *care* for their children and ageing parents. Therefore, many men and women fled the country, looking for means of economic survival overseas.

Over time, Moldovans have continued emigrating for other purposes such as family reunions or academics, but labour migration has remained predominant. Migration destinations are mainly determined by ethnic, linguistic and political preferences influenced by the Moldovan socialist past (see also Caracentev 2020: 53-54). In general, most Moldovans have either Romanian or Russian as their first spoken languages. Russian speakers (who may also live in a predominantly Russian speaking village) prefer Russia or Ukraine as the country of destination, while those who speak Romanian choose to emigrate to Romania and other European countries, predominantly Italy, Portugal, France⁷ and the UK (Cheianu-Andrei 2013). It is estimated that 29% of the total Moldovan population are currently engaged in permanent, circular and other types of international migration, predominantly labour migration (IOM 2021).

Elsewhere, Italy was facing another kind of crisis – a crisis of care. A combination of multiple social and economic phenomena, such as a deficient level of public provisions towards the dependent population, the increasing ageing population, high rates of female participation in the labour market and transformations in family structures and modes of living dramatically weakened the functioning of the Italian 'familist model' of care, where family and network kin secured provision of care for a long time (Ranci 2007). Because of this failure, Italian society faced an unprecedented crisis of *care*, especially for the elderly, which increased the demand for female migrant care workers, following a dominant global trend

⁷ The fact that Italian, Portuguese and French are a part of the same Latin language group as Romanian might explain linguistic factors as an important one.

in which “many families rely on migrant care and domestic workers to meet their need for caring labour” (Tungohan 2019: 229) and reinforcing the discourse of women being the primary care provider in transnational migration (Amelina and Lutz 2018).

The intersection of the Italian and Moldovan crises led to the feminisation of emigration from Moldova to Italy. Currently, 13 % of the Moldovan migrant population is in Italy⁸ (IOM 2021: 6). Out of this, two-thirds are women (Mincu and Cantarji 2013; Vanore and Siegel 2015; Mosneaga 2017; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (MLPS) 2019), living and working predominantly in Italian provinces Veneto and Emilia Romagna⁹ (MLPS 2019).

The first Moldovan migrant women in Italy encountered many difficulties while abroad, including keeping in touch with their family members who remained behind. In the 2000s, mobile phones were rare and expensive technology for migrant women and their families. At that time, the primary means of communication between migrants and their family members were expensive phone calls and letters that took a long time to reach Moldova.

This was why many women started to send their letters home with bus drivers (buses traveling between Moldova and Italy). In the beginning, they were sending only letters. Later, they started sending small bags or packages with sweets and clothing for their children, “which were carefully selected. Would they like it? Would it suit them?” were the questions that bothered them” (Safaler 2019: 176, translated from Romanian by the author). That was when the parcel-sending practices emerged for the first time within the Moldovan contemporary transnational field. Further, because most migrants were undocumented and could not visit their families back home for a long time, the practice of sending parcels developed and became a significant feature of Moldovan transnational life.

Over the last 15-20 years, a few geopolitical and migration policies have changed and allowed many Moldovan migrants return to Moldova or reunite with their family members and permanently move to Italy. One of the first significant political changes happened in 2003 when many migrants in Italy benefited from the strategic management of care crisis of the Italian government that granted *permesso di soggiorno* (residence permit, Italian) to all immigrants engaged in elderly care work. Another change occurred for many Moldovans who became able to gain Romanian citizenship granted on an ethnic basis by the Romanian Parliament (1991), which entitled many migrants to work, live and travel freely and legally within the European Union after Romanian EU integration in 2007. Apart from these, Moldovans obtained visa-free travel rights to the EU and Schengen countries from 2014 (EEAS 2016) that, together with the spread of low-cost flights to Moldova, created new affordable travel possibilities to Moldovan family members, which significantly increased home and Italy visits.

At present, in addition to facilitated political and travel mobility, transnational Moldovan family members have myriad ways to stay connected in an easy and relatively cheap manner. For example, internet-based video calls have become a common and affordable form of communication, and international money transfers are uncomplicated and fairly cheap. Given these diverse ways of staying connected and for providing material and emotional support, one may expect that the practice of parcel sending would have disappeared. Well,

⁸ However, this data might be treated with consciousness. Many migrants reside abroad based on their dual citizenship (Romanian and Italian), and the actual number of Moldovans in Italy might be even higher. Some Moldovan migrants in Italy (as some of my informants) have gained Italian citizenship overtime of their immigration.

⁹ Reggio Emilia – the Italian site of my research is situated in provinces Emilia Romagna.

it did not. Yet, the practice acquired new meanings in this technologically, geopolitically and legally reconfigured transnational field.

3.2 Parcel Sending: Transnational mothering and beyond

“But Cristina, all the children grew up” (Iulia).

During the research design, I asked Iulia to connect me with other migrants who send parcels to their children in Moldova. Her answer above speaks about one essential point: children have grown up, but people still send parcels. Next, I explore this change in two following ways. First, I analyse what historical meanings children and young mothers attributed to parcels and how they remember them. Then, given that migrants no longer send parcels to their children, I seek to understand to whom they do, why so, and whether parcel sending acquired different meanings and functions.

One of the critical findings on change reflects how meanings of transnational care and support practised through parcel sending have shifted from expressing mothering and care for children to homemaking and preparing for the future return. This change occurred due to the ageing of children – the primary receivers of parcels in the past. The following quote demonstrates how my respondents drew a timeline between the past and now, reflecting such shifts:

“In the past, I used to send parcels to my children, and I liked doing it so much... It brought me so much pleasure. I felt like I was going home every time I was sending a parcel. So, I did it every week. But now, when something good is on sale, I buy it, and I am sending parcels home because it is cheaper and better quality” (Iulia).

Meanings conveyed by the same type of transnational practice differ in the two timelines mentioned above. Although the receiving place is the same, Iulia differentiated it by naming children in the past and home in the present. This differentiation speaks about the meanings she attributed to parcel sending: care and homemaking when her kids were young and adults, respectively. Also, sending “to [her] children” speaks about creating co-presence every time a parcel is sent and received, while “sending parcels home” is more about implementing transnational arrangements for her future return in Moldova. In addition, there is a solid emotional connotation when she recalls past experiences and a more rational and practical tone in the second part of the quote.

From a transnational field perspective, the example mentioned above also reveals what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) call ‘ways of being and belonging’ that “go hand in hand” (ibid.: 1011) in both separated timelines. On the one hand, in both situations, by sending parcels, Iulia “engage[s] in social relations and practices that cross borders as a regular feature of everyday life, [she] exhibit[s] a transnational way of being” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1011). But, on the other hand, she “explicitly recognise[s] this and highlight[s] the transnational elements of who [she is]” (ibid.), as a mother in the past and a housewife in the present.

Similarly, Nina used to send parcels to her young child (son) in Moldova. However, after he became an adult and emigrated, she stopped having any transnational family relations with her homeland. Despite this, she is engaged in another parcel arrangement – caring for an elderly non-family member in exchange for his property, securing in this way her future return. Thus, Nina explicitly expresses transnational ‘ways of being’ in the past and the present. However, compared to Iulia, Nina does so currently “because [she has] some sort of connection to way of belonging, through memory, nostalgia or imagination” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1011) of return. By contrast, although entangled in a Moldovan trans-

national practice and planning his retirement, her Italian husband clearly demonstrates transnational ways of being while not expressing any transnational ways of belonging within the Moldovan transnational field. This is an example of how “[i]ndividuals can be embedded in a social field but not identify with any label or cultural politics associated with that field” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1010).

Another critical factor contributing to a significant change in parcel sending is the growing-up process that partly explains why parcels’ contents and frequency change with children’s age.

“But she used to send parcels more often when I was younger, and as I grew up, the parcels became rarer” (Irina).

“But from what is different, now, mama sends things that are essential for home...Now that I am not little anymore, I receive fewer parcels...parcels arrive more often during the holidays like Christmas and Easter” (Olivia).

Irina and Olivia’s accounts demonstrate how parcels express a widely accepted belief that young children need more proximate parental care and attention than the oldest ones. Thus, the sending frequency is indirectly proportional to children’s age. Here, parcels are part of “new strategies for dealing with maternal roles” (Cohen 2015: 156), and as I argue in the next section, contribute to creating physical co-presence through the material object from inside, maintaining emotional closeness between transnational family members, such as migrant mothers and their children. It also shows the relation between ageing and parcel’s content, which has gradually shed off maternal care and has gained the label “essential for home”.

In addition, parcels’ contents were further influenced by children’s agency that became more prominent with children’s age.

“In general, when I was little, my mom decided 100% what to pack in the parcel. As I grew up, I started to ask for things” (Irina).

Migration and family studies have shown there are many important indicators of children’s agency, such as their capacity to cope and adjust to their parent’s migration (Asis 2006), participating in their parents’ decision to migrate and return (Lam and Yeoh 2019a) and reacting differently to their return (Lam and Yeoh 2019b), and verbalising their wishes by requesting gifts from their parents (Lam and Yeoh 2019a). Although some might consider that those requests illustrate how children have high material aspirations and are spoiled by their parents, others suggest that in this way, “[children try] to exert their agency over their migrant parents to ensure that they remained in their absent parents’ thoughts” (Lam and Yeoh 2019a: 3092). However, my research has shown that ‘asking for things’ is not a mere “articulation of material wants” (Lam and Yeoh 2019a: 3092) or a simple expression of children’s agency.

“Now, the difference is also one that mama calls every time and asks what I need...” (Olivia).

“When I was little, I rarely had the opportunity to talk to my mother. ...When we have access to the Internet and mobile phones, it is much easier to keep in touch. Regarding the packages, my mother calls me through the video and shows me what she is thinking of putting in the box, and I choose” (Olivia).

Instead, as you see in the quotes above, it speaks about communication, keeping in touch and learning about each other when discussing parcels’ contents and then again during and after receiving them. It also flags the role of digitalisation in parcel sending and how it affects the meanings it carries for those involved, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Further, as children grew up, migrants' parents were ageing as well as migrants themselves. This led to a change in the transnational intergenerational care and support structure. On the one side, the receivers have changed from children to elderly parents. As children grew up and some emigrated from Moldova, migrant-pioneers continued sending parcels to their elderly parents and other family kin. They send packages with food, medicine, warm clothing and various items for elder care, transnationally fulfilling their child-parent obligations to 'fetch a glass of water at old age'¹⁰. This goes in line with the broader sense of what literature calls the intergenerational contract, where "productive members of families feel responsible for those who [...] are no longer productive" (Whitehead et al. 2005: 3). This obligation is socially bent and "governed by norms and customs" (Kabeer 2000: 466 cited in Whitehead et al. 2005: 12) that make adult migrant children feel responsible for their elderly parents in front of broader society. However, despite having all the features of transnational intergenerational care, my informants emphasise sending parcels because of the need to help rather than the obligation to care for their ageing parents, for example, the need for 'good' food and medicine or warm shoes and clothing for the winter season. Also, satisfying the need for appropriate elder care is reflected by sending a state-of-the-art bed with functions to accommodate reduced mobility for elderly persons.

On the other hand, some receivers have become senders. This inversion of roles in parcel sending has exposed mixed meanings of care, help, gratitude and paying back:

"Mama sent parcels to us to show her affection because she was physically absent... [but now] I send parcels [to my grandparents] to help them. So, they would not spend money and to make their life easier. Mainly food, such as canned food: easy to deliver, easy to cook; especially when my grandmother was still in Italy, I used to send to my grandfather lots of canned food so for him it would be easier in grandmother absence; pasta, because Italian pasta is better; mortadella [a kind of Italian processed meat] and, of course, coffee, because my grandfather really likes it; toiletries like shaving stuff so my grandfather would not spend money on it"(Mihaela).

Mihaela drew a difference between what parcels meant for her when she received them from her mother while being young and what it means now as she moved to Italy with all her family, and she regularly sends parcels to her grandparents (at first, only to her grandfather and then to her grandmother as she returned permanently to Moldova). As a receiver, she attributed the meaning of affection to parcels, while as a sender thinks of parcels as help for her grandparents' needs. Mihaela's narrative emphasises the word help to "make their life easier", putting in the spotlight their need for appropriate food and the release some of their financial burdens. Also, sending canned food because it is easy to deliver and cook reveals particularities of sending practice, gender roles and feminisation of Moldovan emigration. In addition, the affirmation "of course coffee" and mentioning other Italian specific foods speak about how some items inside the parcel became transnational and knowable within Moldovan transnational fields.

Somebody can definitely think of parcels as 'helpful' as they answer the receiver's needs, though this meaning was conveyed when speaking about sending parcels to elderly parents and grandparents. Another striking feature in this regard is that although wiring money would be a quicker, cheaper and less time-consuming way to answer the needs of their elders, parcels remain the primary means of expressing this help transnationally.

The 'natural' time and the ageing process is one of the temporal factors that has contributed to the change in meanings attributed to parcel sending enumerated above. Further,

¹⁰ A popular Moldovan saying that is used by parents to teach or remind children about their duties to care after them when they get old.

I discuss how meanings of this transnational practices has changed because ‘the times have changed’ in its global sense. Specifically, I discuss how globalisation process such as the spread of digitalisation have transformed the parcel-sending practice and its meanings over time.

3.3 Digitalisation and transnational meanings of co-presence

“When parents from away are sending clothes, chocolates

But [they] would give them all, If [they] could, for one minute to hug their children

Even [their] heart if [they] could, [they] would have sent it in a package”¹¹

(Georgeta Voinovan, Moldovan writer, composer and singer)

I mentioned in the beginning of the paper how popular culture may sometimes spread and reinforce stereotypes about certain social issues and link them to migration. However, “[t]hrough popular culture, people are [also] able to socially locate relevant fads and trends and adopt (or reject) them as a means of expressing their individual and shared identity within society” (Maratea and Monahan 2016: 19), as it is reflected in the above text of a popular song about migrant mothers and their children.¹² The lyrics speak about one of the key findings that emerged during the analysis of the conversations with my informants about their past experiences. That is, that parcel sending contributed to maintaining emotional bonds across the distance between transnational family members, mainly migrant parents in Italy and their children who stayed in Moldova. The emotional bonds were tightened by each parcel sent and received because of material objects inside the parcels, which expressed transnational maternal care, love and affection. Moreover, parcels played a significant role not only in maintaining but also in creating and developing the emotional closeness between mothers and children, which was challenging to implement across distance, especially in the absence of regular communication between family members specific to the past.

In transnational family studies, distance is perceived as one of “frictions which underpin migration” (Burrell 2017: 814), and migrant’s transnational practices, such as parcel sending, overcome this friction, managing and “negotiat[ing] bond of emotions” (Baldassar 2007: 387). Similarly, to how “visiting provides an opportunity to share knowledge that is not based in verbal communication” (Baldassar 2007: 386), parcel sending creates physical co-presence through the material object from the inside the parcel and provides a unique opportunity to create, develop and maintain emotional closeness between transnational family members: mothers and their children. My research reveals this at both ends of the parcel trajectory.

¹¹ “Când părinții de departe/ Trimit haine, ciocolate/ Însă tu le-ai da pe toate/ De-ai putea, un minut/ Un minut să-i strângi la piept/ Chiar și inima din tine/ Le-ai trimite-o la pachet” (lyrics from song *Du-te, Dorule!* by Dorin Galben (an adult stayed-behind child and a journalist) and Georgeta Voinovan dedicated to all Moldovans from Diaspora and the homeland. Voinovan wrote the lyrics based on Galben’s personal story. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tapn2sJ8HeU>

¹² Voinovan wrote the lyrics based on Galben’s request and personal story, who is an adult stayed-behind child and currently a journalist and video-blogger.

“In the past, I used to send parcels to my children, and I liked doing it so much... It brought me so much pleasure. I felt like I was going home every time I was sending a parcel. So I did it every week” (Iulia, migrant mother).

The testimonies from the receiving side confirm and reinforce the idea of creating co-presence. That is, the intention to be closer through sending was also received at the other side.

“This (the parcel and items from inside) was a portal through which you could feel a bit of warmth, the hug which other (children) had in their proximity while me... I had parcels” (Olivia, grown-up child/receiver).

This speaks perfectly about what Katy Burrell (2017: 823) calls the “sense of proximity in the face of physical distance”, which is possible to achieve through “tangibility of things” (ibid.). The clothing hugs you, the chocolates replace the mother’s heart.

Over the last two decades, the changes in migration and travel policies have intervened and shifted the sense of proximity and distance within the transnational Moldovan field, allowing many families to manage the distance physically. However, because “some families seem to become entangled within a never-ending migration cycle” (Lam and Yeoh 2019: 3093), parcel sending has become a transnational strategy to manage a household, raise children, provide care and stay connected for long time.

“It seems like parcels were present during all stages of my life: childhood, adolescence and now adulthood” (Olivia).

Throughout this time, the sense of proximity was developed and maintained through the tangibility of parcels and the emotional closeness created by advanced means of communication.

In this paper, I look at digitalisation through a transnational lens. Over the last twenty years, transnational practices and multiple ways of being and belonging simultaneously to multiple places (Levitt and Schiller 2004) have undergone impressive changes for migrants and non-migrants. As we all moved into the digital era, migrants from all over the world have developed new transnational practices of staying in touch, and reshaped existing ones in the process. Furthermore, the Internet and other means of modern communications “diversif[ied] ways of being together and ways of belonging at a distance” (Nedelcu 2012: 7). In this sense, ICTs did not replace parcel sending but complimented it, reinforcing and reconfiguring some of the parcel-related procedures and the meanings that parcels conveyed before that. There are a few aspects that are worth mentioning in this regard.

First of all, digitalisation replaced letters and photographs that were part of the parcel sending and receiving routine, creating channels for communication and closeness.

“No, there was no Internet back then; I spoke to mom once a week for two minutes. Instead, when we (dad and my grandmother) sent parcels back to Italy. I always wrote letters and sent photographs wearing clothes that she sent from Italy” (Irina).

However, emotional bonds and closeness were further maintained and intensified through contemporary informational technology during the exchange of multiple phone calls that accompanied every parcel sending and receiving.

“With the Internet, we started unpacking parcels with the camera to show what and how is received and whether the items were safe. My mother and I started to communicate more often, and we became closer” (Irina).

Intense communication is one of the significant features of transnational mothering. Together with remitting financial and material support, “transnational mothers manage to sustain emotional ties, spoil, advise, discipline, reprimand, supervise, educate, criticise, and

love their children across national borders” (Cohen 2015: 157) via numerous phone calls and Internet communication. “I raised all of my three kids via phone”, answered Iulia to emphasise the role of telecommunications in her transnational experiences. By contrast, giving and receiving instructions during phone calls related to parcels shed some of “the mystery attached to parcels” before the digital era and “the parcel does not appear magically from nowhere like during the childhood” (Olivia). Thus, ICTs did not displace parcel-sending but got intertwined with it, changing the context in which parcels were sent and received.

However, one of the primary meanings of parcel sending has remained unchanged and is recognisable across distance and time: realising transnational care through the uninterrupted presence of material objects from inside of parcels received, creating and maintaining emotional bonds between family members.

“Also, it did not change the feeling that you are loved and protected by someone who is not home... who is not home for the same reason to take care of you, raise you, and offer everything the best for you. Be it even in a package” (Olivia).

All the social, political, and economic factors mentioned above have changed parcel-sending practice and its meanings to a certain extent. This demonstrates how parcels’ meanings go beyond their economic value or substitution of mothering and care. Despite all the rational arguments, such as an easy, cheap and quick money transfer, home visits or phone calls, transnational family members continue practising parcel sending, attributing them meanings of care, protection and emotional connections, co-presence, homemaking, and return. In the next chapter, I discuss how parcel sending is currently done within the Moldovan transnational field.

Chapter 4 The Story of a Parcel - The Ethnography of the ‘Making the Parcel’

This chapter focuses on the empirical aspects of the ‘making of the parcel’ and sheds light on how migrants experience and do transnationalism within Moldovan transnational fields. By discussing some ethnographic episodes observed during the fieldwork and complimenting them with a brief analysis concerning inscriptions, packaging, time, place and networking, this chapter highlights how studying the making of the parcel can reveal insights into understanding everyday transnationalism.

4.1 Filling in the empty spaces

Ethnographic observations of the ‘making the parcel’ process shed light on how parcels and the items inside fill in the empty spaces from the package and, eventually, from home and the families back home.

Migrant women pay close attention to the composition of items inside the parcel. They arrange items inside the parcel to make it compact, protected, and, most importantly, complete, with lots of effort, time, and creativity. For example, Iulia added two scarves to everyday household items and food when making a parcel: each for her mother and mother-in-law. Those two scarves serve one main purpose – “to make the parcel softer” (Iulia). However, apart from shaping the package and protecting other things from breaking, these scarves serve as gifts and speak about family micro-politics, which I refer to later in this chapter.

Also, some small items inside the parcels appear random. Indeed, according to senders, such small items have no particular purpose. These are there just because they fit to fill small empty spaces between the larger and more important things.

“Mom used to put in parcels everything, from clothing, food, sweets to small things that might have made no sense for someone, but for me, it was like a girlfriend shares with you everything she has” (Olivia).

As the quote above shows, these little things gain significance on the way to Moldova and become emotionally loaded for the receiver. Thus, the items inside parcels are not mere commodities due to the meanings they carry while being sent and received, but also because of the moment *when* an object meets its final destination. The moment between purchasing what eventually would be sent and when it is received is the time needed for the items from a parcel to gain both emotional and economic values. Emotional because of meanings that senders and receivers attribute to them, and economic because of the added price for the transportation (1 EUR/kg).

For example, some items take lots of space and monetary effort and carry deep meaning for the senders, but which meaning is lost on the receivers. This is illustrated by Irina’s account of a waffled bathroom towel she once received. This huge bathroom towel took up much space in the parcel, which was justified because of the special qualities the sender attributed to it. Its waffled structure and expensive cotton made it perfect for drying hair without damaging it, “and Irina, she has such beautiful hair” (Iulia, Irina’s mother). Raising her daughter from a very young age at a distance, Iulia was rarely able to “brush Irina’s hair” herself – something that traditionally falls under a mother’s responsibility. Instead, an

exceptional quality towel genuinely served and expressed transnational care and motherhood. However, this meaning did not travel. Irina remembered receiving the towel but admitted paying little attention to it. “I have probably used it only once,” she said.

This demonstrates how items’ value changes on their way to the destination sites, regardless of their size, or economic and emotional weight, either gaining or losing this. It speaks about the relative side of the purposeless and meaningfulness of transnational materialism, highlighting contradictions that ‘doing transnationalism’ implies in practice.

4.2 What is written with a pen cannot be cut with an axe

Next to the items, migrants also send words inside the parcels. Two photographs below (Image 3) show the contents of two parcels sent from Italy to Moldova by one of my informants. As you can see, there are hand-written inscriptions on top of some products, and plastic bags that serve as packaging for some items. These hand-written notes are instructions on using and preparing the product inside and the name to whom it must belong after receiving from family or community members. There are a few significant aspects important to mention in this regard.

Image 3

Inscriptions - revealing political past and family politics



Source: Fieldwork 2021.

These ethnographic snapshots unravel significant temporal, political and linguistic particularities of parcel-sending practices. For example, the same person wrote in the Romanian language but used two different scripts – Romanian and Cyrillic¹³. This shows that my informant is part of a particular generation of migrants – those born, raised, and educated during the USSR regime. In addition, because of this linguistic and political influence from the past, many Moldovans, abroad and at home, use in their daily conversations a sort of Moldovan creole characterised by a mix of Romanian and Russian words, suffixes, prefixes and accents (see also Caracentev 2020: 72). For instance, despite having Romanian as their primary language, my informants say – “Mă duc să trimit o *posâlca*” instead of *colet* (the Romanian word for parcel). In this conversational example, my informant says a Romanian sentence¹⁴, using the Russian word *посылка* (parcel) but with a Romanian suffix.

¹³ In image 3, the inscriptions on items wrapped in plastic bags are written in Cyrillic. Cyrillic was official script used in the Republic of Moldova during the Soviet Union rule (1924-1932 and 1940-1991). In these periods Romanian was disapproved as official language and was transcribed into Cyrillic – Romanian words written in Russian alphabet – this was named Moldovan language.

¹⁴ “I go to send a parcel” (Romanian).

Also, the names on the items inside the packages help identify the politics and social dynamics behind the parcels within transnational families. On the one side, transnational family arrangements often involve the participation of other family members in what Dreby and Adkins (2010: 678-679) call “transnational affairs” and including them in parcel distribution is part of family economics. On the other side, extended family kin might be part of this distribution, regardless of their contribution to the non-migrant household. In this case, the gift-giving process can be perceived as a “[t]echnology [that] facilitates the maintenance of kinship ties across borders” (Dreby and Adkins 2010: 680) as part of family politics of keeping in touch and non-forgetting. As in the example:

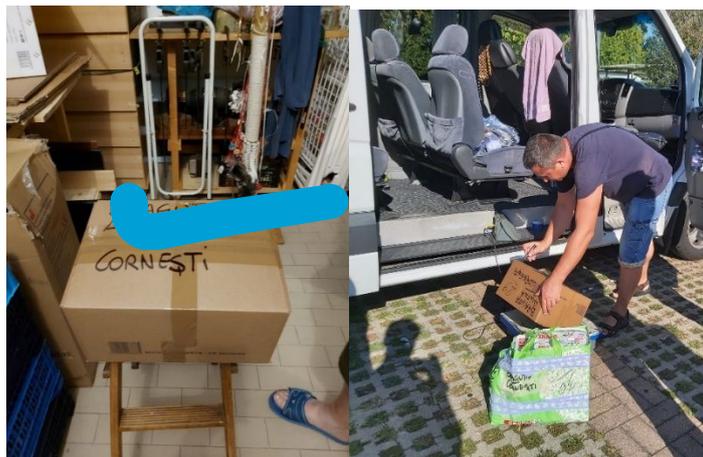
“... [She] wrote my name on the wrapped clothes that were for me; or if something was for grandma, aunt, grandpa, cousin, it came with instructions. My mother didn’t send parcels just for me, she did so for the whole family, and she was felt at home by everyone through things she was sending” (Olivia).

“[I]n order to cope with the reproductive vacuum left behind by the migrant mother” (Hoang et al. 2012: 733) and fill in the emptied social spaces within the household and extended family, migrant women signed parcels and their content with an individual touch, making sure “she was felt at home by everyone” (Olivia). Similar to how a mother would have probably brought together family members through a special meal if she had not migrated, a migrant mother does so by means of parcels, expressing a form of transnational mothering.

In addition, the individual written touches continue outside the parcels (Image 4). For example, the senders usually sign it and include the receiver’s name and the village/ city of destination. However, this is unnecessary as van-drivers attribute numbers to every parcel and keep all the contact information in notebooks (for more on parcel-sending infrastructure, see Caracentev 2020).

Image 4

Writing the vector of destination



Source: Fieldwork 2021.

Despite knowing this logistical particularity, migrants write their and receiver’s names on every package because “numbers are numbers” and are not sufficient to make sure their intention, effort, time and every meaning that carry a parcel “will not get lost” (Iulia).

4.3 Waiting to become a parcel

Image 5 pictures a parcel wrapped, signed and ready to be sent. Iulia prepared this parcel on a weekday during her lunch break and placed it on a book shelf in her nephew's room until Sunday – the departure day for parcel-vans in Reggio-Emilia. This ethnographic episode of the 'making the parcel' reveals how time, place and network are navigated, employed and experienced by transnational migrants, speaking about 'doing transnationalism' in empirical terms.

Image 5

Waiting to become a parcel



Source: Fieldwork 2021.

One of the significant features of parcel-sending practice as a way of doing transnationalism is that for migrants, “[it] is a time-consuming part of everyday life, seeping into daily decisions and structures” (Burrell 2008: 15). Indeed, the process of ‘making the parcel’ is long and laborious and implies rigorous planning of the parcel’s content, wrapping, storing and transporting it to the collecting point and eventually sending it.

The first moment concerning time refers to parcels’ contents and the fact that items put in the parcel are not bought in bulk. On the contrary, everything is collected gradually and patiently in advance and put together once it is complete. Some items are bought a long time in advance depending on the supermarket sales and migrants’ pay check day; they are stored and collected until the whole parcel composition is complete, waiting to be placed in a parcel.

After it is ‘ready’, migrants pay close attention to wrapping - another time-consuming moment. Again, migrants invest lots of time, effort and creativity to put together all items in a composition that would work ‘well’ during long-distance transportation. On the one hand, wrapping fragile items to protect them from breaking, leaking or crushing requires skill and patience that came with experience (Iulia) that reflect the genuine care characterising mothering.

“[Mama] was arranging all items with care so they would arrive safely at the destination.

Oh, she spent one whole day only wrapping and arranging the items in the parcel” (Irina).

The attention to packaging is further extended with instructions and guidelines, helping the receiver navigate the act of unwrapping.

“The parcels from mama were always accompanied with instructions in advance. She told me by phone how and in which order everything is arranged so when I open it, I would not cut/break something by mistake. Every item was wrapped very attentively” (Olivia).

On the other hand, “the act of wrapping becomes an extension of the sender’s touch” (Gell 1993 cited in Caracentev 2020: 106). It becomes an expression of care, protection and connection between senders and receivers, exceeding the mere intentions of safety and carefulness. Senders’ personal touches might reveal this through the choice of the wrapping paper and other small insignificant details that nonetheless are valued and remembered at the receiving site.

“Mom puts everything in beautiful wrapping paper or paper bags... I used to collect all the paper and bags and keep them. I had an entire drawer full of used wrapping and paper bags” (Irina).

In contrast to these details from inside the parcel, the outside packaging is another important detail of being prepared in advance, revealing additional particularities of doing and experiencing transnationalism. For example, seeing a ready cardboard package during the wrapping episode, I asked Iulia where it was from. She answered:

“There is a pharmacy here not far away, and they let their boxes from delivered and unpacked medicine outside. There are always plenty of them. So, we go there and take them” (Julia).

Revealing an example of “juxtapositions of locations” (Marcus 1995: 105) brought as an argument in favour of multi-sited research, this quote demonstrates how the physical presence of recycled paper boxes from one site establishes a connection with the receiving site through the act of packaging, bringing the local into transnational practice, at the same time. It also reveals the sense of collective belonging to a migrant group - “we” – migrants who send parcels and are part of the same migrant network within a place.

However, wrapping is not the end of the parcel preparation process. After being wrapped and ready to be sent, a parcel waits (see Image 5) to be transported to the collecting point and eventually sent. In this regard, it is essential to mention the role of place and networking in the ‘making the parcel’ process.

First, the particularities of live-in work in which many Moldovan migrant women are employed in Italy make a difference in ‘doing transnationalism’. Despite having strategic benefits such as solving the housing issue that includes all living expenses (Zontini 2010), live-in work reduces and shapes migrants’ possibilities to practice parcel sending. Second, the existence or lack of migrants’ networking and support might further shape, allow or constrain the ‘making of parcel’ in terms of sharing their place, offering transportation or advice. For example, working as a care giver for an elderly person, Iulia lives where she works and has limited personal space and time to collect and keep stuff-to-be-sent - a time and place consuming process - at her workplace. Instead, she does it at the home of her brother, who moved permanently to Italy with his family. Owning also a car, he helps Iulia bring her parcels to the collecting point. Similar to how migrant women make use of the “network made up of relatives, friends and fellow countrywomen in order to secure jobs, which proves quite successful” (Zontini 2010: 104), Moldovan migrant women rely on kinship networks to make the ‘making the parcel’ practice successful.

Also, this ethnographic data on parcel sending reflects a few types of social inequalities between migrants of the same migration network. First, migrants within the same migration network perform jobs that differentiate them in terms of class and living conditions. Although many of them started their migration journey in similar housing and employment conditions, not everyone could “move from live-in to live-out domestic work” (Zontini 2010: 211). This might have had a direct contribution on the second migratory inequality within migrants – the difference in their family members’ mobilities. That is, family physical reunion is directly proportional with the migrant housing and employment possibilities, which draw a difference between those who managed to reunite with their families in the country of destination and those who continue managing the distance, employing transnational practices. For example, the parcel pictured in Image 5 is waiting for its delivery in the bedroom of Iulia’s nephew, who himself used to receive parcels during his early childhood. Soon after emigration, his parents brought him and his brother to Italy while his cousins stayed in Moldova and have continued receiving parcels throughout their entire childhood. Nonetheless, he continues being entangled in parcel sending by participating and sharing his space in his aunt’s ‘making of the parcel’. By contrast, having the possibility to rely on a kinship network, Iulia is privileged in rapport with other migrant women who don’t have such support. For instance, while Iulia brought her parcels to the collection point with her brother’s help, a few migrant women came to the site by bicycles and brought little packages in their bike baskets.

That made me think of the importance of migrants’ networking, job conditions and even the distance to the collecting point in the making of the parcel and its composition, and how these might deepen the social inequalities between those who can collect, store and transport parcels and those who cannot.

This chapter has discussed some ethnographic episodes concerning the visual of the making of the parcel and how it speaks about transnationalism in broader terms. The next chapter elaborates on the senses of doing transnational life. Shifting the analysis from the visible to the invisible of parcel sending, I discuss the role of sensory dimensions such as taste and smell in understanding how migrants live and remember their transnational experiences.

Chapter 5 Memories, Senses and Transnationalism

“So, I have lived without parents since I was four years old, and I started receiving parcels since then. I received parcels from Mama. By sending parcels, my mom, I think, wanted me to feel her close because, at such a young age, the child does not remember [her parents]” (Olivia).

Olivia started her narrative by going to the moment *when* everything started: her parents’ emigration, followed almost immediately with “[her] Mama” sending parcels. She continued her story by saying that she “met [her] parents for the first time” aged seven *when* her parents returned home for a short visit. In the absence of her parents, it was through parcel that Olivia learnt about them, especially the mother.

Childhood memories and values, beliefs, and emotions related to and experienced in everyday life play a crucial role in children’s development, learning, perceiving, and making sense of the world. Studies have shown the existence of strong linkages between places and identity formation (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), children and youth identity formation (Jack 2015) and how different environments influence memory creation (Carsten 1995; Sandberg 2003). Others also demonstrated that “[c]ontext is a fundamental organising feature of memory” (Bulkin et al. 2016: 958). In transnational family studies, migration and related practices represent such an environmental context. Therefore, parcel-sending practices have features similar to a physical environment that “[have] social, emotional and historical dimensions as [they] create[] memories” (Sandberg 2003: 207). This is why analysing parcel-sending practices based on memory narratives helps better comprehend this phenomenon, its meanings, and why people value and continue practising it.

Additionally, sensory dimensions, such as taste and smell, evoke memories from the past, especially memories about “the banal, the mundane and taken-for-granted aspects of [every day] social life” (Low 2012: 274; see also Low 2009; Sutton 2010). The role of senses has also been acknowledged in studying transnationalism, giving rise to the term ‘sensorial transnationalism’ (Low and Kalekin-Fishman 2010: 198 cited in Low 2012: 279). This emphasises the importance of sensory memories that goes beyond materiality, places, and spaces in a transnational context. This chapter shows how through the senses memories of parcels are evoked, and thereby lived experiences of transnationalism are remembered.

I argue that sensory memories of parcels are temporal and spatial dimensions that fill in with emotions and care the empty spaces created by the emigration of family members, maintaining and reinforcing the emotional closeness once created through sending and receiving parcels. Also, because “senses form modes of knowing” (Low 2012: 274), they reveal knowledge about material conditions of migration and particularities of transnational lives, such as migration struggles and class. These conditions are disclosed through the items inside the parcels. They remain stored in transnational family members’ senses, showing more about their migration journeys and how they perceived and continue making sense of their transnational lives.

5.1 The special taste of transnational life

“I remember sweets. But the most special memory [I have about parcels] was strawberries I received during the wintertime” (Mihaela).

While the acts of preparing, wrapping and sending a parcel often represent expressions of care, mothering, love, obligation and help, it is essential to look at migrants’ choices of

what to place in a parcel. When asking my informants directly if it wouldn't be easier to wire money instead of practising laborious and time-consuming parcel sending, their main argument in its favour was the emphasis on the better quality of Italian goods. All food, toiletries, household items, clothing, medicine, furniture, and electronics that have Italian origins are perceived by Moldovan migrants as *roba buona* ("high-standard goods" in Italian) and worth investing in despite the extra transportation costs.

In addition, migrants' choice of what to send might reflect "a material way of sharing an important moment with a person considered as important" (Caracentev 2020: 125). Moreover, the desire to create a special moment by sending something extraordinary adds intimate value to this choice, further exceeding its economic value. Thus, on the one side, sending something as special as strawberries in wintertime speaks about the uniqueness of some items inside the parcel in connection with receiving societies while on the other side, it shows that the receiver is special to the sender, making the parcel memorable.

By contrast to its specialness on the receiving end, sending strawberries in wintertime might also reflect the controversial feeling of guilt. Some studies have linked feelings of guilt with other "emotional strains of transnational mothering" such as anxiety, helplessness and loneliness, with mothers mediating these with material goods sent from overseas (Parreñas 2001: 371). Despite this, I believe "emotions should not simply be seen as a convenient and occasional resource called upon to explain certain peculiarities of transnational family life but they need to be seen as constitutive part of the transnational family experience itself" and analysed through the lens of other concepts such as gender and class (Skrbiš 2008: 236).

For example, some of my informants recalled sending parcels with foodstuffs exclusively because of guilt, especially at the beginning of their migration journeys when their children were young.

"I could not eat anything (*losing the appetite because of having a strong emotional feeling concerning eating that food*), knowing that they did not have it at home. This was why I put in parcels the same things I ate myself" (Iulia, my emphasis as a try to clarify the Romanian expression used in original quote).

However, as the quote shows, migrant mothers' choice of material goods does not reflect a mere compensation for their physical absence by clearing their conscience of the feeling of guilt. Instead, their sending choice was influenced by their desire to share and transfer the experiences of their 'other' life in Italy. Olivia's memory of receiving some items from her mother demonstrates this from the receiving perspective.

"It was like a girlfriend shares with you everything she has... Through these items you could truly know your mother... and you learn not only about your parents but also about the culture and the country they live in. For me, it was like a cultural shock because, back then, the stuff she sent through parcels, we (in Moldova) did not have" (Olivia).

There is also an important social distinction between transnational family members and those not engaged in migration. By receiving something unusual to the Moldovan social landscape, migrants' family members have the privilege of access to Italian goods (from parcels) – symbols of the 'good life' – that the non-migrant families cannot. In this way, migrants transfer bits of "amenities associated with life in an industrialized nation" (Dreby and Adkins 2010: 683) that they have access to and share with their families back home through parcel sending. By doing so, the latter gain a different, usually higher, status while the former sometimes "experience a drop in social status post migration" (ibid.: 682).

However, the special taste of strawberries in wintertime does not reveal this.

5.2 The senses of the hardship behind transnationalism

“This biscuit tastes exactly like the kind of biscuits my mom used to send us from Italy during her first year of being abroad!” (Alex)

It was late afternoon when Alex and I had a cup of infused herbal tea and some biscuits I had bought the other day from the supermarket. That was the first time I had purchased this kind of biscuit - a long rectangle package divided into three small divisions, each containing four biscuits covered with a thin layer of cheap chocolate. Saying nothing of my visibly new ‘foodie’ acquisition, Alex took one biscuit and started to chew it with a good appetite. The exclamation with which I have opened this section followed immediately. As a powerful blast from the past, the taste of cheap chocolate biscuits evoked “memories of childhood and key events [that were] often strongly associated with certain foods” (Janowski 2012: 176). Key events like the change that occurred due to his mother’s emigration and receiving parcels in the first year of her absence created a solid sensory and memory connection about childhood.

Even though some might doubt whether food-memory, as all kinds of memories, can be reliable on recalling the actual events of the past, I believe that it has “huge potential as a means of remembering the past, whether deliberately or otherwise” (Sutton 2001 cited in Janowski 2012: 176), saying more about surrounding circumstances that occurred in the recalled episode and helping further unpack Moldovan transnationalism.

“...In the first year after my mom left, she did not have a job. There were times that she did not have any income. Migrants like herself used to go to the church or Caritas that provided shelter and food for migrants without a job or home. That year, our mother sent us only things such as canned, packed food that she took from these organisations. These biscuits are exactly like those. She sent them only in that jobless year. After she got a job, the food and things from parcels were completely different” (Alex).

This specific food memory reveals some of the time- and place-related circumstances about one’s migration journey and class. Specifically, the story above shows how some migrants often struggle during their first period of emigration, caused by unemployment, a lack of financial resources or housing and, essentially, food. In this regard, local social organisations that provide shelter and food for migrants in need are essential for their survival. Also, at the intersection with another categorical boundary – gender – in the migration context, “different forms of disadvantage intersect and thereby explain the specific experience of certain groups of women on the basis of gender, race and class simultaneously” (Bastia 2014: 239-240). For example, from thirty biographical accounts of their migration story in Italy (Safaler 2019), most Moldovan migrant women recall attending Caritas¹⁵ regularly as the only possible way to have two meals a day while still looking for a job. Also, many of them, including a few of my informant-pioneers, used to live in the (local) church for the first few years of immigration until they could afford and move to appropriate housing.

Also, back home, family members recall being aware of struggles and difficulties their mothers may have been undergoing, concluding this from the content of parcels (Alex) and their frequency (Olivia).

¹⁵ Caritas Italy is a pastoral organisation that provide everyday social protection and services to the most vulnerable populations, including immigrants, in many Italian cities. Available at: <https://www.caritas.org/where-caritas-work/europe/italy/>

“I do not remember how often she used to send parcels, but I assume it was according to her possibilities. My mom left when it was very difficult from the financial point of view” (Olivia).

However, they did not know about these circumstances immediately. Only later when they learnt more about their parents’ migration were they able to rationally explain the connection between experiences reflected in parcels and the significance of the taste memory. As in “armchair nostalgia, nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory” (Appadurai 1996: 78), transnational family members, especially children, might construct their memories based on their parents’ narratives about past events, changing the meanings of taste memories. Thus, parcels’ meanings are not limited only to providing care and love, and to creating emotional closeness, they also signal migration stories that are not shared with young children, like the following one:

“I did not have money to buy things to put in parcels, but I had to send something because I knew my kids were waiting for parcels every (or second) week. They knew I was going to send it. So, I took food from Carita and sent it to my kids in Moldova...

They [my children] had plenty of food at home. Their grandmother always fed them well. But I sent parcels, not because of food. I sent it because I was their mother. All mothers did and still do so” (Iulia).

Despite experiencing severe financial, social and emotional difficulties, migrant mothers resisted migration struggles by managing the distance and fulfilling maternal obligations through parcel sending. However, these obligations carried meanings beyond the role of women in everyday cooking and the role of food in caregiving and mothering (Bajic-Hajdukovic 2013; Janowski 2012; Law 2001). Although food is central to parcel sending and maternal care, the practice itself became a reflection of mothering enriched by the mere obligation to send and expectation to receive that led to telling the story of hardship remembered through its taste.

Along with the taste of hardship, memories can also evoke its smell. The strong relationship between smell and recollections of one’s past experiences make it a good reason to analyse the socio-cultural meanings of smell by employing “olfactive frames of remembering”, such as childhood memories, family relationships or memories of difficult times and hardship (Low 2013: 689). Also, studies suggest that “odours evoke memory recollection which are usually emotionally loaded” (Low 2013: 693), as in the next parcel recollection:

“And the most important thing was the smell [from second-hand clothing]. The same smell was constant and was present all the time I opened a parcel. I did not know whether that was the smell of detergents, soup or perfume, but I was sure that was the smell of my mother” (Olivia).

This memory demonstrates how smell acts as a bridge that connects one’s experiences with a particular time and object. Receiving parcels regularly during her childhood, Olivia associated the specific fragrance of second-hand clothing, constantly present in parcels, with nothing but her mother’s scent. In this case, the smell of objects from a thrift shop characterised not only her childhood experiences of parcel receiving, but also “acted as an avenue of solace and comfort” (Low 2013: 695). Given her mother’s physical absence during that time, the smell of thrift clothing also recalls the accounts of her relationship with the mother, and how she was felt and remembered.

In addition, because “[a]romas, as a result, can bring back memories or move us to actions without our even realising it” (Winter 1976: 17–8 cited in Low 2013: 693), olfactory sensations that trigger memories of the past might be relevant for current personal encounters.

“From what is the same... in parcels, you can find the same second-hand clothing with the smell of my mother. Through this my mom made me love second-hand shops and everything that is vintage like bags, jewellery and accessories, in general” (Olivia).

By creating a strong positive emotional association between parcels and her mother’s odour, Olivia re-experiences these emotions, demonstrating how “olfactive memory [might] affect[] behaviour and attitude in the present-day context” (Low 2013: 689).

Though for Olivia this sensorial memory speaks more about her childhood and relationship with her mother from a distance, for her mother, the same fragrance reveals the hardship of her migration journey. Second-hand clothing is considered a “low commodified common good” and using second-hand markets and shops for clothing and other household items is a common coping strategy for poor and low-income households (Dagdeviren and Donoghue 2020: 96) such as migrants. Employment in low-paid jobs for the short term, zero hours, or no contract, migrants have to endure income uncertainty and little to no social protection. Thus, relying on second-hand shops and flea markets is their socio-economic practice to deal with hardship.

In addition, some migrants in Italy engaged in domestic and care work receive used and unwanted items, especially furniture, from their employers. Many large items such as old tables, chairs, mattresses or beds that I saw at the parcel-collecting point during my field work were objects destined for landfills. However, migrants take and send them home as parts of parcels because “despite being old and used, these are still good and of better quality than something bought in Moldova; it would be too bad if wasted” (Iulia).

It is also important to mention the importance of the relative class differentiation. Similar to how parcels’ Italian content differentiates receivers within Moldovan social contexts, second-hand items like clothing and furniture also stand out positively. However, in Italy these are markers of the low-class positions that migrants usually occupy, and through parcels, migrants realise degrees of class distinction in Moldova. Thus, parcels can also reveal the relativity of class in a transnational context.

Conclusion

This study shed light on how Moldovan transnational families stay in touch and keep close to each other in the transnational space between Moldova and Italy through the analysis of parcel-sending practice. Parcel sending emerged in specific socio-economic, geographical, technological and historical contexts over 20 years ago. The inventiveness of migrant women bolstered this practice to maintain intimate family relationships with their family members who stayed home, especially children, expressing genuine transnational care and mothering. The research has shown that parcels played a significant role not only in maintaining but also in creating and developing the emotional closeness between mothers and children, which was challenging to implement across distance, especially in the absence of regular communication between family members specific to the past. However, despite the significant changes in migration governance, international communication and travel fields that facilitated the ways to stay connected and provide emotional care and support in an easy, quick and relatively cheap manner, parcel sending did not disappear. Instead, the practice acquired new meanings in this technologically, geopolitically and legally reconfigured transnational field.

One of the crucial transformations in parcel sending occurred due to the change in transnational intergenerational care and support structure. On the one hand, because of the ageing of migrants' children and parents, the meanings of transnational care and support practised through parcel sending shifted from expressing mothering and care for children to homemaking, caring for elderly parents, and aspirations for the future return. On the other hand, some receivers have become senders, exposing mixed meanings of care, help, emotional connections and co-presence, gratitude and remembering through parcels. The research has shown that despite all the rational arguments, such as an easy, cheap and quick money transfer, home visits or phone calls to provide care and support, transnational family members continue practising parcel sending and receiving, attributing them social and emotional meanings. This demonstrates how parcels' meanings go beyond their economic value or substitution of mothering and care.

Another significant factor, such as the spread of digitalisation, have transformed parcel-sending practice and its meanings over time. On the one hand, the sense of proximity and emotional closeness was developed and maintained through the tangibility of parcels. On the other hand, emotional bonds and closeness were further maintained and intensified through contemporary informational technology during the exchange of multiple phone calls. However, in this sense, ICTs did not displace parcel sending but got intertwined with it, changing the context in which parcels were sent and received. Because phone and video calls accompanied every parcel making, sending, and receiving, ICTs created and reinforced channels for communication and closeness.

By focusing on the empirical aspects of the 'making of the parcel', this research sheds light on how migrants experience and do transnationalism within Moldovan transnational fields. Ethnographic analysis concerning inscriptions, packaging, time, place and networking reveals significant insights into parcel-sending practices. For example, one of the research findings demonstrates how the meanings and emotional value of the items from inside the parcels change on their way to the destination sites, highlighting contradictions that 'doing transnationalism' implies in practice. Also, the research has emphasised the importance of migrants' networking and job conditions in the 'making the parcel' process due to the long, laborious and rigorous planning of the parcel's content, wrapping, storing, transporting and eventually sending it.

In addition to the 'making the parcel' process, the complexity of migration experiences was also revealed by analysing the senses of doing transnational life. Shifting the analysis from the visible to the invisible of parcel sending, I discussed the role of sensory dimensions such as taste and smell in understanding how migrants and their families live and remember their transnational experiences. The research has illustrated how memories of parcels are evoked through the senses, telling migration stories beyond parcels' content and meanings, such as migration struggles, inequalities and degrees of class distinctions between migrants and non-migrants within local and transnational fields. Thus, parcels reveal knowledge about complexity, contradictions and relativity of class in a transnational context and can serve as a lens in studying transnationalism in its broader sense.

This paper also shed light on the gendered aspect of parcel-sending practice, emphasizing women's involvement in transnational migration, their significant role in providing moral, social, emotional and material care and their active participation in maintaining households and family ties. Also, this study has shown the implication of parcel sending in maintaining everyday and intergenerational relationships within transnational families. Because through the means of parcels, migrant women perform a series of reproductive activities, such as household maintenance and care provision for dependent individuals such as children and elderly persons, one can conclude that parcels reflect a form of social reproduction and the shifts in this transnational practice might also speak about broader processes of social change.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Methodological dilemmas

I earlier referred to how the ongoing global pandemic impacted my research in terms of applying research methods in a full ethnographic sense. Fulfilling the obligation of the researcher to protect her informants from any physical harm required an exceptional degree of reflexivity, especially because my research involved participatory observation, thus, physical presence. Being aware of face-to-face research risks, I incorporated alternative digital methods such as visual research and digital ethnography in my design. Even though I believe that alternative methods for doing research remotely (Lupton 2020) have significantly benefited my study, I acknowledge that limited in-person interactions and observations with some of my informants might have left some research aspects undiscovered and not fully developed.

To ensure my participants' informed consent, I verbally (and via text messages) informed them about my study, the purpose, and how I would use the information received from our discussions at the beginning and throughout our interactions. I did not ask my informants for written consent for two reasons. First, for Moldovans of some of my informants' age-group, signing any forms is strongly associated with fraudulent practices common in Moldova during the transition period¹⁶. Second, I “recognise that consent needs to be thought of differently in ethnography, where the research undertaken is based upon ... emergent relationships of trust” (Parker 2007: 2252) and not as a contractual agreement (Murphy and Dingwall 2007: 2226).

In terms of confidentiality, I had to consider that anonymising my informants' names may not be enough to protect their identities. For example, in my research, I refer to some of my informants as part of my extended family. “[O]thers can figure out who [I am] speaking about” based on “who is doing the speaking” (O’Leary 2017: 70). To solve this ethical dilemma, I “[sought] approval for disclosure” and “further mask[ed their] identity” (O’Leary 2017: 70).

¹⁶ Here, transition period refers to economic, social and political changes that Moldova undergone from 1991 to 1998 in order to make a transition from planned Socialist economy to market economy. These times are considered and remembered by the society at large as turbulent and insecure due to considerable illegal and fraudulent activities that took place in many social spheres, including money laundering, privatization of individual properties and others.

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