

Fobbing care work unto ”the other”

– *what daily press reporting shows*

Abstract

Population ageing and international migration are two of the most significant challenges that Sweden is facing today. These – combined with the scholarly debate on the ethics-of-care that notions such as ‘caring democracies’ have re-ignited – raise questions about how media representations of elderly care and migration are shaped. This research note gives insight into how care, and migrant care workers, are regarded in one of the world’s most egalitarian societies. In doing so, it suggests that the intersection between population ageing and international migration is an abundant source of information about societies’ moral compasses.

Keywords: elderly care, migrant care workers, media representations

THE GLOBALISATION OF international migration and population ageing have put care on the agenda of the social sciences. Among the topics being explored are the care chains that are created by global migration; the increasing reliance on long-term care systems on migrant workers and the gendered, racial and ethical challenges that the import of workers to the care sector entails. Few studies have, however, brought attention to how public debates about care and migration are shaped and the assumptions about migrants (and the care sector) that these discussions make. This research note is based on a project that aims to fill this research gap and on an argument developed elsewhere (Torres 2018) that care scholarship would benefit from exploring the intersection between ageing and migration.

The rationale behind launching this project is threefold. First, research on media representations has consistently shown that ethnic majorities that do not have close relationships with ethnic minority groups tend to be profoundly influenced by media coverage about these groups. Second, although Swedish media research has consistently shown that migrants tend to be depicted in negative terms, we couldn’t help but wonder if this finding would hold if we were to focus on a context known for its ambivalent regard for migrants. The elderly care sector tends namely to think of care recipients with migrant backgrounds as a challenge while care providers with the same backgrounds tend to be regarded as an asset. Third, we designed this project against the backdrop that the feminist debate on ‘ethics of care’ offers (see e.g. Tronto 1993). This

debate has been central to sociologists' understanding of how care regimes organise care work, what care entails for gendered relationships, and who we imagine being best equipped to offer care and why (as well as who we believe could be exempted from their caring responsibilities). Thus, the third reason why deemed inquiries into media representations of care and migration to be sociologically interesting is that we believe that debates on care give us insights into society's moral compass as well as its' relationship with "particular others". Phrased differently one could say that we believe there is merit to Tronto's (2013: ix) argument that societies need "to put responsibilities for caring at the centre of their democratic political agendas".

Migrant care workers in the Swedish daily press reporting on elderly care

Our project uses quantitative and qualitative content analyses to shed light on how Sweden's newspaper articles have addressed migration, ethnicity, culture, language and religion within the context of their reporting on elderly care since 1995. That was the year when the public debate on these issues started (for insights into some of our findings see the one publication in English that we have authored so far: Torres et al. 2014). Worth noting is perhaps that we began with analyses of Svenska Dagbladet but are now in the midst of analysing articles published in Dagens Nyheter which is the other major national newspaper in Sweden.

Just as expected, the recruitment of migrants is discussed in this data corpus as the solution to the staff shortage crisis that the elderly care sector is experiencing. Originally, the articles suggested that the sector should recruit people with migrant backgrounds who are living in Sweden but are unemployed. Extracts such as this one were not uncommon then:

Sweden has failed to take advantage of the 'reserve army' constituted of existing immigrants and refugees. As long as these people are excluded from the job market, possibilities for development and civic life, labour migration is surely impossible. It is morally difficult to imagine that Latvians, Romanians, Czechs and Ukrainians should be offered work in Sweden while Swedes with an immigrant background remain unemployed. And the popular resistance to large-scale immigration will no doubt continue to be significant as long as today's problems related to the multi-ethnic Sweden remain (Article entitled "Commentary – Wanted: Visions and courage", published on March 22, 2000).

The issue at hand is indeed morally contentious just as ethics of care scholars have claimed. In this excerpt, we see how immigrants are described as "a reserve army". They are framed as a resource that Swedish society in general, and the elderly care sector in particular, have yet to tap into. Accordingly, they are an army "which it is both humanely and economically indefensible not to make use of" (as stated in another article entitled "Better educated immigrants meet companies' needs" published on June

6, 2000). The military jargon that is used in these articles begs our attention since the sector's crisis is depicted as one of the "battles" that this country is losing. It is one we need "the courage" to fight and one that the "reserve army" (comprised of our settled but unintegrated immigrants) could help us win. Worth noting is also that these articles often allude to Sweden as a society that has failed to integrate its immigrant population. This is why some articles argue that it would be both inappropriate and costly to embark on labour migration schemes to attract workers from abroad; the solution to the staff shortage for which other countries have opted. However, although this line of reasoning is quantitatively speaking the most common still, we have slowly but surely seen how the media has begun to suggest that the sector's resources should be used to import workers to Sweden:

The sector where employment is growing the fastest is care for the elderly – and it is expected that by 2050, one in ten Swedes will be older than 80. Who's going to take care of you when you get old? Demanding that well educated, young Swedes do it would crush their dreams and also be enormously costly to the economy and the public finances. So why not let, say, Filipinos do it? They would earn more than they would have in Manila, and Swedes – old as well as young – would benefit from it (Article entitled "More immigrants save the Swedish welfare state", published by Dagens Nyheter (DN) on April 5, 2008).

It is not only of interest that private companies in Sweden have just started to import Filipino nurses to work in home-care services for the elderly, but also that articles like this one give us insight into how care work (and the people employed to perform it) are regarded. Helping the elderly is not namely the kind of job that people "dream" of having; in fact, the prospect of it is a "dream crusher" for some. Moreover, the care we provide to the older segments of our population shouldn't be 'costly' so importing cheap labour makes perfect sense for all since "old as well as young would benefit from it".

Allusions such as this one remind us that "relatively more powerful people in society have a lot a stake in seeing that their caring needs are met under conditions that are beneficial to them, even if this means that the caring needs of those who provide them with services go unmet. More powerful people can fob the work of care onto others: men to women, upper to lower classes, free men to slaves, those who are considered racially superior to those whom they consider racially inferior people" (Tronto 2013: 105–106). This is why care scholarship that relies on "the ethics of care" lens draws attention to how social and political institutions allow some to pass on their caring responsibilities to others. As I have argued elsewhere, the intersection of population ageing and international migration is a fertile ground from which critical social scientific inquiries about ageing, migration, and care can be launched (cf. Karl & Torres 2016; Torres 2006, 2013 and 2018).

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Corresponding author

Sandra Torres

Mail: sandra.torres@soc.uu.se

Author

Sandra Torres holds a Professorship in Sociology & the Chair in Social Gerontology at Uppsala University, and conducts research at the intersection between the Sociology of Aging and the Sociology of Migration.