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Caring by Silence: How (Un)documented Brazilian Migrants Enact Silence as a Care Practice for Aging Parents

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ABSTRACT

While existing work on transnational aging and care has largely focused on the substance of transnational communication and what is being said, this article examines what is being ‘silenced’ during transnational exchange. I argue that to better understand aging and intergenerational caregiving we need to pay careful attention to what is *not* being said during transnational contacts, suggesting that silence and ‘communication voids’ are often formulated and enacted as a care practice. Drawing on ethnographic research with Brazilian migrants in the United States whose aging parents live in Brazil, I illustrate how migrants curate their lives abroad and sieve their lived experiences as an act of care for their aging parents back home. In so doing, I reveal the significance of faith as a coping strategy in the process of silencing and concealing emotions and as a means to fight loneliness, cope with adversity, and protect family exchanges.

KEYWORDS

Aging; intergenerational care; silence; faith; Brazil

Introduction

As an immigrant, I avoid certain things that hurt me. For instance, I don’t call Brazil often. I don’t get in touch with my family in Brazil often because it hurts. It’s not that I became a cold person, but in order to protect them and me I chose not to have too much contact ... there are things that need to be silenced, I had to swallow that pain.

Tells me Marcelo, a man in his early 40s, whose 79-year-old father is in Brazil, as well as other siblings and relatives. For him, silencing and sieving through his lived experiences in the Greater Boston area, and his feelings about family in Brazil, have become crucial everyday practices of transnational care – for his aging father, for his family, and himself.

Research on transnational care and transnational aging has been prolific over the last decades. Existing scholarly work has carefully examined different types of care across distance, namely financial, practical, personal (hands-on), and emotional and moral types of support (Baldassar et al., 2007; Finch, 1989; Hromadžić & Palmberger, 2018). Within this scholarship, it has been widely

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recognized that communication plays a meaningful role in non-copresent care that is increasingly prevalent today (Arnold, 2020). Studies have chiefly focused on the substance of transnational communication and what is being said, and have drawn attention to the role of emotional support across borders and the significance of communication technologies (Baldassar, 2007, 2016; Baldassar & Wilding, 2019; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Silence and what is *not* being said during transnational communications, however, has seldom been captured as an everyday formulation and practice of care and caring.

Drawing on ethnographic research with Brazilian migrants in the United States whose aging parents remain in Brazil, I argue that to better understand aging and intergenerational caregiving we need to pay careful attention to what is 'silenced' during transnational contacts and exchange, suggesting that silence is often enacted as a care practice. In so doing, I draw on theories of care, silence and transnational migration to dissect the processes through which migrants curate their lives abroad and convey their lived experiences in 'purer' or idealized terms to their aging parents in the home country. While silence involves non-verbalized expressions of thoughts and emotions, what I describe as 'sieving' refers to acts of filtering and curating the information that is transmitted during transnational exchanges. Taken together, these processes enable the adult children to communicate their lives abroad stripped of daily tensions and hurdles, such as difficult labor conditions, health problems, legal anxieties, and a permanent fear of deportation, thus shielding and caring about their aging, and sometimes vulnerable, parents back home. In the process of caring by silence, the interlocutors reveal the significance of faith as an alternative outlet that compensates for what is 'left out' in transnational exchanges, helps mitigate anxiety, and thus contributes to sustaining wellbeing in cross-border communication in contexts of family separation.

I suggest that paying close attention to these 'communication voids', and what is *not* being said in contexts of transnational aging and caregiving, can help better weave together the living and aging experiences of families across borders. This proves particularly valuable in contexts of vulnerability, such as those prompted by current immobility regimes (see Merla et al., 2020), in this article demonstrated through the experiences of undocumented Brazilian migrants in the United States and their aging parents in Brazil. Engaging with transnational aging, care, family, and migration literature, the article strives to extend existing knowledge of how care is articulated, negotiated, and enacted in contexts of transnational migration, (im)mobility, and the need to care for and about, through an exploration of the role of silence as a care practice. It does so, in a two-fold process. First, it examines migrants' accounts of transnational exchanges with their aging parents in Brazil, revealing how conversational strategies, namely silences and sieving practices, are deployed as formulations of care. Such investigation uncovers the importance of religious and spiritual coping strategies to fight loneliness resulting from

transnational ‘communication voids’, and cope with adverse circumstances beyond one’s control. The article contributes to the literature on transnational family communication, by drawing attention to the significance of silence as a formulation and deployment of care within transnational family life.

Care and caring in transnational aging contexts

Intergenerational care in transnational aging contexts has been a flourishing field of research over the last decades. Three intersecting trends demonstrate the relevance of the subject: an increase and diversification of international migration, rapid population aging across the world, and sustained development of travel and communication technologies (Baldassar & Wilding, 2019; Wilding & Baldassar, 2018). Existing studies have examined how issues of economic inequality shape experiences and access to international migration (Sheller, 2018), and how different constellations of mobility (Cresswell, 2010) originate from different lived experiences abroad and transnational exchanges of care (Parreñas, 2001; Yarris, 2017). Care has been captured as both a resource and a relational practice, that unfolds across vast spaces and multiple generations (Buch, 2015; Hromadžić & Palmberger, 2018). The study of intergenerational care chains has gained growing relevance in a time of increasing inequality between countries, constraints to human mobility across borders, and growing numbers of undocumented migrants abroad. Yet, less has been written about care in contexts of immobility and hard borders (notable exceptions include Brandhorst, 2017; Kilkey & Merla, 2014; Merla et al., 2020).

Shamir (2005) argues that the social nearness brought about by globalization has also generated processes of social distance. The author shows that while most research produced celebratory accounts of mobility within and across borders (see, e.g., Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2003), scant attention was paid to the emergence of a global mobility regime that seeks to contain social movement (Sassen, 2001; Sheller, 2018). In a particularly useful way to this article’s argument, Shamir (2005) contrasts ideas of ‘death of distance’ (Cairncross, 1997) with notions of ‘closure, entrapment, and containment’ (p. 199) that actively restrict, prevent, and block movement – especially across national borders. As Bauman (2002, p. 83) has pointed out, in contemporary societies, there is a ‘blatant inequality of access to mobility’, where mobility is a scarce resource and the vast majority of the world’s population is more or less permanently immobilized. The differential ability to move across borders and access to opportunities for movement has become a ‘major stratifying force in the global social hierarchy’ (Shamir, 2005, p. 200).

In practical terms, this tension between trans-national (‘open’) and national (‘close’) principles has shaped and limited possibilities of care and caring due to, for instance, increasing experiences of ‘illegality’ across borders, thus

making it difficult if not impossible for older parents to visit and/or reunite with their adult children (Merla et al., 2020; Zechner, 2008). Yarris' (2017) ethnography with Nicaraguan grandmothers whose children have emigrated to the United States compellingly demonstrates this. The study captures grandmothers' embodied distress of *'pensando mucho'* (thinking too much) while caring for their grandchildren and having little capability of ever reuniting with their adult children, who often lead undocumented and precarious lives abroad.

For families separated across borders, information and communication technologies (ICTs) become a powerful force in allowing everyday communication and fostering transnational relationships. Through a communicative care approach, Arnold (2020) demonstrates that language operates at multiple levels to facilitate, enact, and signify care among Salvadoran families stretched across borders. 'Polymedia environments' are, in this context, essential tools in transforming how family relationships are experienced across borders and shaping and monitoring patterns of communication across distances (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Crucially, they enable a sense of co-presence and ordinary co-presence routines that allow for easier recognition of emotional states (Baldassar, 2016; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016).

Whereas care as a 'hands-on' resource may face restrictions to its circulation across borders, the act of migration itself can be understood as a care practice. Ahlin's (2017) study of transnational Indian families shows that, despite the distance, elderly care continues to take place with the help of ICTs. Through what the author describes as 'technological relationality', both ends of the communication act as active co-creators of care practices. Earlier works from Baldassar (2007), Baldassar et al. (2007), King-O'Riain (2015), and Wilding (2006), among others, also captured the decisive role played by technologies and the new media in actively shaping transnational caring relationships and keeping emotional ties 'alive' despite geographical distance. Vertovec (2004, p. 220) describes cheap phone calls as 'a kind of glue connecting small-scale social formations across the globe', whereas King-O'Riain's (2015) concept of 'emotional streaming' shows how the use of Skype among transnational families allows for the creation of spaces of transconnectivity, 'internet-based intimacies' (Hromadžić & Palmberger, 2018, p. 2) and an overall sense of wellbeing and 'familyhood' across different temporal and geographical distances (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 18). These studies are instructive in showing that beyond mere communication tools, polymedia plays a central role in 'staying in touch', hence allowing for a multiplicity of forms of care to be enacted and keeping embodied closeness (or skinship) despite physical distance (Baldassar, 2007; King-O'Riain, 2015).

'Digital kinning', a more recent term introduced by Baldassar and Wilding (2019), problematizes the dichotomy of proximate and distant care, revealing the significance of care and caring relationships maintained over distance in

the form of regular calls, text messages, and social media. In so doing, the authors show that ICTs have turned communication into a concrete set of care practices, support, and emotional exchange. This includes what Elliott and Urry (2010) have described as practices of ‘emotional banking’ and ‘affect storage’, where affects, moods and dispositions are negotiated, transmitted and stored across space. Emotions are indeed fundamentally constitutive of the transnational family (Baldassar et al., 2007) and transnational families put considerable effort into managing transnational emotions such as loneliness, homesickness, support and obligation (Ryan, 2008; Svašek, 2008, 2010).

Whilst ‘staying in touch’, including the need to ‘hear’ and ‘see’ each other regularly plays a central role in transnational nonphysical care practices (Baldassar, 2007), emotional containment through storage of stories and photos (King-O’Riain, 2015), but also by selecting, curating and withholding information, I suggest, is equally important. If emotions can be embodied as discourses (words), practices (actions/interactions) and experiences (Baldassar, 2008; Ryan, 2008; Svašek, 2010, p. 869), I posit that they may also be present in silences, ‘communication voids’, and what is not being articulated in transnational care relations. In this sense, polymedia can be a useful tool in sieving and managing emotions across time and space zones, and an effective way of managing ‘truth and distance’ where distance can be used to hide the truth (Baldassar, 2007). Remarkably, most existing literature has focused on elderly parents concealing the truth about their health condition from their children living far away, rather than the other way around (Baldassar, 2007; Baldock, 2000).

Transnational exchange of care is also dependent upon individual (or collective) capability, forms of obligation and cultural expectations, and negotiated commitments (family relationships and migration histories), which may change over the life course of a family and individual (Baldassar, 2007, p. 393). As Pinazo-Hernandis (2010) pertinently notes, intergenerational relations encompass different levels of social units, and micro-level interpersonal relationships do not exist in isolation, but rather in close interaction with meso- and macro-level socio-economic structures and policies. Brandhorst’s (2017) research on transnational care circulation between Germany and Cuba, where the influence of structural constraints such as restrictions to travel and access to ICTs have historically shaped transnational family’s articulations of care across borders, persuasively demonstrates this. Importantly, the studies cited so far draw attention chiefly to the vitality of transnational articulations of care. This article seeks to contribute to and extend these debates by shifting the focus to the role of non-verbalized formulations of care and what is being omitted in cross-border exchanges affected by immobilizing migration regimes.

So what is the role of silence in care and caring relationships? The focus of existing research has been, as previously noted, mostly on verbalized forms of

care, and exchange of emotional and moral cues across distance. A more modest number of studies have noted the salience of ‘communication voids’, fragmented conversations, uneven sharing, and processes of selectivity in exchanges of information across borders, particularly in contexts of ‘forced’ family separation. Amelina and Bause’s (2020) research, for instance, demonstrates that for Syrian and Afghan migrants in Germany, the contents shared across borders vary depending on which family members are involved in the conversation, revealing that communication with siblings tends to be less guarded than with parents. Similar findings are reported by Näre (2020), who compellingly shows how the temporalities embodied in what the author describes as ‘bureaucratic borders’ affect the lives of refugees in Finland, putting their transnational family lives on hold. Such experiences indicate the political, legal and financial nature of silences and ‘avoidances’ in transnational family communication, and reveal how uncertainty translates into fragmented exchanges across borders. While these studies are important pointers of the relevance of silence and ‘communication voids’, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the significance of silence and sieving in the moral and affective economies of transnational family life.

A fertile strand of research on silence has developed within social anthropology and cultural geography which focuses on the spaces of silence, the materialization of silence through technologies, and the role of silence in exile and death. While separate from the literature on transnational migration, aging and care, this body of work on silence can be particularly useful for understanding care in transnational settings and its intersections with non-articulations and processes of sieving and curating the information that is shared across borders.

Meyer’s (2016) work is instructive in stressing the importance of recognizing the multivocality of silences and their role in shaping social lives. The author notes that silences may be strategic, respectful, and culturally valued; furthermore, silences may also signal experiences that are too dangerous or painful to articulate or indicate the desire to forget or leave certain subjects unspoken. In a sense then, silence can be understood as a process of sublimation through which impulses are contained and may signal ‘psychopathologized processes of avoidance and repression’ (Kidron, 2009, p. 6; see also Gemes, 2009). Altogether, these studies show that the multiple readings of silence determine its fundamental indeterminacy, but also its multiple possibilities, materializations and relational nature. As Weller (2017, p. 3) observes ‘silence is more opaque, more resistant to confident interpretation, than nearly any form of more audible communication. There lies its tragedy and hope.’

When sharing emotions and concerns with family across borders is not possible or desirable, faith and religious and spiritual coping strategies can become paramount in the lives of migrants abroad. Faith and becoming actively involved in the church can generate a sense of belonging,

strengthen one's identity, and create a network of support fundamental in contexts of transition, adaptation, and potential isolation and homesickness (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2017; Lusk et al., 2019; Sheringham, 2013). Faith and the church can represent significant support upon arrival in an unfamiliar environment, not speaking the language, sometimes lacking documents, and having to find low-paid, often exploitative, jobs. The church can, in such instances, as well as over time, function as a 'mobile sanctuary' (Guzman Garcia, 2020), a place of comfort, and a 'breathing space', even if temporary, to the physical and emotional hardships of life as a migrant and separation from family (Sheringham, 2013; Straut Eppsteinerand & Hagan, 2016). As I shall show, religious and spiritual coping strategies can act as a vital respite from all that is silenced, sieved and withheld from aging parents and relatives back home. In some instances, the church can serve almost as a 'surrogate family' and a safe community to confide in and find strength, which in turn helps migrants in their silencing and sieving practices aimed at protecting family from 'difficult conversations'. While silence is a manifest lack of verbalization of certain emotions, it does not necessarily represent emotional absence or lack of care and caring.

Methods and research setting

The findings presented in the article draw on ethnographic research conducted during 2018 and 2019 in the context of a larger project focusing on the (im)mobilities of aging and care among Brazilian transnational families. During this time, I 'followed' the lives of aging parents in Brazil and their offspring in Greater Boston, tracing their transnational exchanges and how migrants abroad navigate everyday problems and communicate these across borders. These daily encounters revealed the vitality of silencing and curating (in as much as expressing) as key instruments in the everyday practices of transnational care of adult children abroad for their aging parents in Brazil. The analysis is based on these rich observations, and specifically on a set of 38 life narrative interviews with Brazilian offspring – both documented and undocumented migrants¹ – whose aging parents are in Brazil. The participants were selected through existing local networks in both sites – first, the city of Governador Valadares, Brazil, followed by Greater Boston, United States – which allowed me to build rapport and a trusting relationship with my informants. Contacts in Greater Boston emerged, in some cases, from the field research in Brazil, through personal recommendation, followed by a snowballing methodology. Having access to these networks was essential for the success of the research, for allowing proximity and trust in living contexts that were, in some cases, highly sensitive. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese.

During the interviews, conducted mainly at the participants' homes, and sometimes in a nearby café or park, I drew on a life narrative methodology that enabled the participants to recount their own biographical narratives as socially situated and subjectively constructed over the life course and across borders (Polkinghorne, 1995). A biographical and family-focused approach had the advantage of connecting micro-, meso- and macro-level life dimensions, thus weaving together individual, family, and structural threads (Brandhorst, 2017; Rosenthal, 2006). Participant observation and written reflections within the in-depth qualitative research enabled a wider grasping and critical engagement with the stories that were being told in relation to everyday interactions. Upon collection, the interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed using NVivo software.

The average age of the participants was 43 years old, and they originated from a number of Brazilian states, although the majority came from Minas Gerais. They represented a balanced group regarding gender, and the sample also included a smaller number of couples. The migrants' parents in Brazil were mostly in their 70s. The majority of the interlocutors had a working-class background in Brazil, particularly those originating from smaller cities and towns in Minas Gerais.² In the Greater Boston area, men worked mainly in construction and landscaping services, and women in house cleaning and daycare. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, I have used pseudonyms throughout.

Significant immigration from Brazil to the United States started in the mid-80s (Sales, 1999; Siqueira, 2018). Within the United States, the Boston Metropolitan Region is one of the regions registering the highest and most rapidly increasing number of Brazilian migrants. Data from the Migration Policy Institute shows that, as of 2017, 373,000 Brazilians are living in the United States, with Middlesex County in Greater Boston registering the highest number of Brazilians in the country (30,600 individuals) (MPI, 2013–2017). These figures are admittedly underestimations, since they do not include undocumented migrants. The choice and timing of immigration and settlement in the Greater Boston area are connected to two main occurrences: the downturn in the Brazilian economy during the 1980s, marked by high inflation, rising interest rates and growing debt and unemployment; and the existence of a long-established Portuguese-speaking community in Massachusetts which helped to facilitate the settlement of Brazilian arrivals and their participation in local churches and community institutions (Margolis, 2013; Martes, 2000, 2011). Whereas the first wave of Brazilian emigrants to the Boston area was middle class and relatively educated (Margolis, 2013), later the flow diversified to include also less educated migrants from working-class backgrounds. Brazilians in Greater Boston tended to find jobs mostly in construction and services, and have been active in creating their own self-employment niches, which include construction and

landscaping, mostly among men, and house cleaning and daycare work among women (Lima & Siqueira, 2007; Martes, 2011).

Caring by silence: intergenerational care practices among Brazilians abroad and their aging parents in Brazil

In the following, I explore the accounts of Brazilian migrants in the United States, focusing on how silence and processes of ‘sieving’ and ‘curating’ are played out in contexts of intergenerational transnational care and imposed physical distance. The stories discussed reveal how care is formulated and enacted across borders through conversational strategies, omissions and ‘communication voids’, in contexts in which mobility, physical proximity and ‘hands-on’ type of care are not always possible. Such an investigation evinces the role of faith and religion as coping strategies and a source of endurance in the face of loneliness, hardship, and the need to silence certain emotions in cross-border communication.

Silencing, sieving and caring

‘We try to hold it in, try to be strong. I don’t cry, but inside I’m crying’. This is how Fabrício describes some of his interactions over the phone with his parents in Brazil. In the United States for 18 years, and still unable to get his documents after having crossed the Mexican border illegally, Fabrício (early 50s) has learnt over the years to silence and carefully select the information he shares with his aging parents, now in their 70s. When the topic of ‘the documents’ comes up – Fabrício has been trying to regularize his situation for the last four years – he has learnt to give brief answers.

My father is not hearing well, he is half deaf. When we speak, he always asks me: ‘son, are the documents out yet? When are you coming to see us?’. I reply ‘God willing I will come. I believe it is happening soon’. I try to disguise in our conversations, but of course I miss them so much, my parents’ affection. There is the longing, the fear, the uncertainty – will I see them alive?

For Fabrício, caring is about not worrying his parents, even if that means spending longer periods without speaking to them. In the process of concealing and sieving what information is transmitted to aging parents, the choice of communication technologies plays an important role. Across the board, ICTs play a fundamental role in sustaining the physically distant relationships and daily care practices of Brazilian migrants abroad and their aging parents back home (for a parallel see Ahlin, 2017). Fabrício recollects spending almost six years without seeing his parents until Orkut (social networking site popular in Brazil in the early 2000s) appeared. More recently with WhatsApp, communication has become more immediate and easier to manage and sieve

information. Notably, it has allowed for the option of speaking, sending a short voice message or simply texting.

I saw my parents for the first time [after arriving in the United States] through Orkut. Then came Facebook, and now with WhatsApp everything became easier. If you don't feel like talking, you can just send a message saying that everything is fine.

Gabriela (early 40s) learnt the hard way that over-sharing can become a liability for managing transnational family relationships. In the United States since the late 90s, it was 10 years before she could travel back to Brazil to visit her mother, now in her 60s. With a heavy heart, Gabriela once confided:

My mother knew everything about my life, and I think that was bad for our relationship. Today, I know it's not a good thing for the family to know everything that is happening. Especially at the emotional level, because it's such an intense process and you are so far. My mother would say 'why don't you come back? Come live close to your family, your mother needs you' ... it's been 21 years fighting for the same thing.

Since then, Gabriela has made a conscious decision to share less in a way that avoids tense conversations and gives fewer reasons for her mother to become anxious about her life abroad. Gabriela's experience suggests that over distance, and with the help of ICTs, tactics of withdrawal or refusal to engage in certain topics can be more easily deployed (for a comparable analysis see Baldassar, 2007). Her account also resonates with experiences recounted by migrants in other contexts. For instance, Romanian migrants in Switzerland who, while their country was under a repressive communist regime, would omit important information about their professional difficulties and urgent necessities in order not to worry their parents back home (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016).

Unlike Gabriela, Milena (late 40 s), in the United States since 2008 and only recently able to resolve her legal situation in the country (upon marriage to a U.S. citizen), has always limited her sharing with her family in Brazil, particularly with her 72-year-old mother. For ten years she was unable to visit her mother in Brazil. Her aging mother, who suffers from osteoporosis and has mobility problems, was also unable to travel to the United States. For Milena, sharing less has been a strategy to protect her mother and herself from the pain of separation and avoid having second thoughts about staying abroad.

I had to disconnect a little to find peace, to survive and grow here. I needed to let go of what was behind and start anew here. It's a form of protection. I speak to my family, I have WhatsApp, Facebook, etc. but I don't stay there long ... I speak to my mom for 5, 10 minutes to know how she is doing, but I avoid overly sharing because it creates angst. *C'est la vie.*

The same perspective is endorsed by Marcelo, whom I introduced at the beginning. For him, survival abroad for the past 15 years, being still unable to visit Brazil, has been possible through what he calls ‘sublimation’, the act of repressing and blocking the deep pain of not being able to see his father and relatives or ‘say a last goodbye’ to his mother when she died. This also means sieving and curating the information that is shared, in order to protect or at least not preoccupy those who are far.

You have two options: either you stay very connected and then you end up jeopardizing relationships, getting involved in conflicts you can’t resolve, getting and making others anxious, and that takes your focus away from life here; or you simply disconnect from things in Brazil so you don’t suffer as much. This is the sublimation I was talking about, for me this was my way of survival.

In the process of caring for himself and his aging father, Marcelo has limited his contacts over the phone where emotions and moods can be more easily detected and where he has to deal with the painful realization that his father is now an older man with hearing issues and frail health. Instead, he prefers to talk with his siblings to catch up with the news or follows the family WhatsApp group where he can check, ‘from a distance’, what is happening. Marcelo’s choice of type of transnational contact reveals complex ongoing emotional negotiations and how these are uttered in contexts of separation. It also shows, as in Brandhorst’s (2017) study of transnational care circulation between Germany and Cuba, how the lack of access to travel may help to legitimate a certain distancing from family affairs and care responsibilities that are delegated, in this case, to Marcelo’s siblings living in proximity to their aging father.

With my father, I speak every two weeks, or once a month. It’s little, you know? But we have a WhatsApp group, and every now and then I get news from him. Because he’s getting older and older, sometimes he doesn’t understand me on the phone, or the connection isn’t great, and I don’t want to tire him. I prefer to follow what’s happening in other ways . . . and my siblings always keep me posted.

At critical junctures in life, it can be too painful to share information, particularly when transnational mobility is not possible. Augusto (early 50s) spent 13 years without seeing his parents before he got his documents in 2011. While Augusto likes sharing and keeps little from his parents, there were periods in which he limited the information he would send back, for fear of overly worrying his parents or negatively affecting their health and wellbeing. This was the case when he got seriously injured at work. He had to undergo several surgeries to his hand and spent four years recovering at home with limited financial resources. This happened at the time when Augusto’s wife was pregnant and they were both still unable to travel. Another difficult period was when a bogus lawyer charged them US\$ 5,000 and provided fake documents, disappearing without a trace. The couple received deportation letters but finally managed to successfully resolve

the situation. As in Baldassar's (2007) research with transnational families, in this case, too, most interviewees found that the best way of supporting distant kin was to protect them from bad news. According to Augusto:

These were the most difficult events of my life here, but all was worth it and here we are. No need to worry my parents back home, there are things only you can do, only you can resolve.

While selecting the information communicated to his parents back home is one of Augusto's concerns in order to protect and care for them, he keeps a very close relationship with his 79-year-old mother and 83-year-old father, and dutifully calls them every day; 'sometimes even more than once a day', he says cheerfully. When asked about the substance of their conversations, Augusto says:

We catch up on the gossip. Sometimes my mother repeats what she told me the day before, and in the morning, and will tell me the same in the afternoon, but it's nice to hear her talking, I don't even mind. 'Mom, so what's new?'. It's not about me, it's about her, and that's good.

Augusto's account suggests a conversational strategy that places his mother at the center of the conversation, simultaneously allowing him to retreat from oversharing about his everyday occurrences. Such a practice can be interpreted as a form of cross-border emotional care that sustains a 'healthy' relationship and generates intergenerational wellbeing. Even if migrants actively sieve the information they convey to their aging parents, the struggles of being a migrant in the United States are well-known in Brazil. In a sense then, there is an unspoken mutual understanding between both ends of the communication thread that, in order to preserve the family relationship and maintain a feeling of optimism and hope over time, it is necessary to curate exchanges and avoid painful conversations about circumstances that are unlikely to be cursorily resolved.

The participants' accounts suggest that silence as a communicative strategy is conceived and deployed over time through learned experiences. Namely that too much involvement of their aging parents in their lives abroad can generate strain; that to 'integrate' and 'succeed' in the receiving country it is necessary to restrain communication; and the realization that a situation that was deemed transient – lack of documents, decent work conditions and housing etc. – might be lasting. In the process of caring by silence, the interlocutors reveal the significance of religious and spiritual coping strategies as a means to cope with loneliness and emptiness resulting from concealing emotions and managing adversity in their daily lives.

Caring by silence and enacting faith as a coping strategy

In the act of preserving transnational family exchanges, by voluntarily withholding information about their hurdles abroad, my interlocutors

talked about finding religious and spiritual coping strategies. Above all, faith played a vital role in their lives as a way of navigating and overcoming everyday challenges. Participation in the church has been shown to play a significant role in migrants' lives upon arrival in unfamiliar environments when feelings of loneliness and disorientation can be particularly acute (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2017; Lusk et al., 2019; Sheringham, 2013). As Sheringham (2013) notes for the case of Brazilians in London, in a way that resonates with my own findings in Greater Boston, in contexts of despair, loss, and sometimes humiliation, arising from not speaking the language, not knowing the system, and having to find work in low-paid and difficult jobs, the church is described as a safe place that enables migrants to regain strength and a sense of dignity. Likewise, Guzman Garcia's work (Guzman Garcia, 2020) with undocumented Latina/os in California reveals similar religiosity patterns where immigrants embody, enact, and negotiate their religious practices to alleviate ongoing fears and anxieties related to deportability.

Among the interlocutors in Greater Boston, the void left by the lack of exchange with the aging parents (and other relatives) was also counterweighed by a strong belief in the presence, guidance and protection of 'God'. While for some, the church was already an important part of their lives in Brazil, for others the challenges of migration and life in an unfamiliar place prompted a re-connection with their faith. Brazilian community churches in Greater Boston – mainly Evangelical denominations and Catholic Church – thus became important social anchors upon arrival and in the course of their lives in the United States. As Gabriela told me:

It's not easy to come live in the United States. Family is far, there isn't much they can do for you. I say that what has helped me a lot to cope is my relationship with God. I'm evangelical and He is everything in my life. Because there are times when mom is not around, but God is always with me . . . I went through a serious depression 10 years ago and I suffered a lot, and I say that if it wasn't for God I wouldn't be here today. I would have gone crazy.

In Milena's experience, too, God was the most powerful ally in a context of family separation and the desire to protect family from the problems and hardships experienced abroad, that those back home can do little about. Faith and emotion-focused strategies can thus become significant devices to address and cope with circumstances beyond one's control (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2017; Guzman Garcia, 2020; Sheringham, 2013). For Milena, one of the most difficult times abroad was when she found a lump in her breast. She did not want to concern her mother until she had the biopsy results and knew exactly what challenges lay ahead. She silenced her pain and found comfort in her faith during this difficult time. Attending the *culto* [service], and feeling part of a community also represented a way of 'escaping', even if temporarily,

from a reality difficult to deal with, and finding support, friendship and, to some extent, a ‘surrogate family’ abroad through hardship.

In the end there’s nothing they [family in Brazil] could do. I understood this when the doctor called me in to his room and it was just me. It was just Jesus and me. You have to learn to walk alone. You have to learn the hard way by yourself, because at some point life is going to get you, and you’ll have to face things alone, used to it or not.

Periods of suffering tended to be, for the most part, concealed. For Fabrício, this was the time when, not long after arriving in the United States, he got seriously ill and had almost nobody to rely on. In such moments, he professes, God proved to be an unshakable source of strength and faith became a vital coping instrument. As in Lusk et al.’s (2019) study with migrants and refugees from Mexico and Central America to the United States, also in Fabrício’s case, faith turned out to be a fundamental coping strategy to impart meaning to his hardship and distress.

When I got seriously ill, I missed my parents so much but I didn’t want to worry anybody. But God put people on my way to help me. The man I was working for in his house noticed my absence, and he and my boss at the time came to see how I was doing, took me to the emergency room and paid for my treatment.

For Fabrício, a devoted church-goer, very engaged in his Evangelical Church, God has been a source of faith and vitality through the hardships of his migration journey. It was at church that he met his wife and found a network of support and reliance in an everyday context of fear of being deported (for a parallel see Guzman Garcia, 2020). Fabrício’s experience resonates with that of migrants in other settings who also found in the church an anchoring space upon arrival to a new place. For newcomers, particularly vulnerable migrants, the church offers a safe space and social hub for meeting other co-nationals in similar circumstances, learn about job opportunities, and create meaningful networks of support (Sheringham, 2013; Straut Eppsteinerand & Hagan, 2016). For Fabrício, in particular, knowing that he cannot fully disclose his fears and concerns to his parents, faith and a sense of belonging to a religious community, has been a source of trust and perseverance throughout the years.

Last year, my father aged a lot. He had a heart problem, had to undergo surgery and almost died. It’s sad right? It’s sad to know that at any moment you can receive the news, your phone rings when your father is sick, and you think ‘Oh my God, did my father die?’ So I pray and ask God that He gives health to my father so that he can see me again, and that He gives me the chance of seeing my father again. It’s very sad for us here, God is all we have.

For my interlocutors, faith, and getting involved in the church, acted as a ‘safe harbor’, a place of gathering, and sometimes as a surviving strategy. In the absence of family, in the process of coming to terms with the costs of

migration, and learning to navigate a new context, faith and involvement in the church prove to be an effective way of confronting loneliness, developing a sense of belonging, and grounding oneself to a new life. In the process of silencing and concealing emotions, which often results in further vulnerability and loneliness for the migrants themselves, the interviewees find in their faith a confidant, a counselor, and often too a mediator of care.

Conclusion

In this article, I argue that to fully understand how aging and intergenerational care are articulated in transnational settings, we need to pay careful attention to what is *silenced* during transnational exchanges. Drawing on ethnographic research with Brazilian migrants in Greater Boston whose aging parents are in Brazil, I demonstrate that silence and acts of sieving and ‘curating’ information that is transmitted across borders are often formulated and enacted as care practices. These acts of care consisting of non-verbalizations and silencing of certain emotions are negotiated across distance through technology – for instance, through limiting contact, shorter calls, and preference for certain means of communication (e.g., text messages instead of a video calls) – and mediated through faith.

The interlocutors’ accounts reveal that social ties at a distance – particularly in contexts in which physical mobility is not always possible – require skillful coordination, negotiation, and articulation (or lack thereof). They show that oversharing with their aging and sometimes increasingly vulnerable parents back home can come at an emotional cost, and that sieving what is said or omitting feelings and events that are too painful to share can be enacted as acts of care. Moreover, the stories recounted suggest that caring for others is deeply entangled with caring for oneself and that silencing and actively selecting what is and what is *not* being told protects both ends of the transnational exchange.

Silence as a formulation of care is deployed among the interviewees regardless of their gender, age, or education. However, time abroad is shown to prompt further conversational strategies, including silencing, as a way of sustaining transnational family relationships and aging parents’ wellbeing. While the article focuses on the migrants’ narrations, this is not to suggest that silencing and sieving are practices solely enacted by the migrant offspring. Instead, uneven communication and reciprocal omissions take place both among younger and older generations (see, e.g., Baldassar, 2007).

When sharing with aging parents and relatives abroad is not possible or desirable, the interlocutors emphasized the role of faith and religious and spiritual belief as coping strategies and daily sources of endurance. Many highlighted that not being physically present, parents could do little to help, plus they had their own tribulations back in Brazil. In such contexts, not knowing is suggested as the best strategy to protect aging parents from bad or

worrying news. Silence and sieving practices are deployed, in these cases, as affective concern and as a way of forging resilience in transnational relationships.

In showing the significance of silences, silencing, and sieving as transnational care practices, this article widens the focus of existing work on cross-border care, which tends to focus on material and spoken dimensions of care. The participants in this research reveal silences and selected lighthearted conversations (such as Augusto listening to his mother's gossip) as 'soothing' emotional interactions, and show that managing and negotiating frequency and forms of contact are paramount to maintaining 'healthy', worry-free relationships across stringent borders. By providing brief answers to upsetting issues and focusing on the parents' everyday rhythms, the interlocutors avert the anxiety of everyday distresses in their lives. In selecting different types of communication technologies to connect with their aging parents, they find ways to silence and disguise emotions, shaping discourses, practices and embodied experiences of togetherness and long-distance family life.

Silencing and sieving the information that is transmitted across borders is appealing because what is not said is somehow 'not fully materialized', and thus does not need to be dealt with. This is particularly valuable for the interlocutors, because some of the troubles they face, such as legal hurdles and the everyday uncertainty of losing the life they have built abroad and being deported, are not easily solved. Thus, the distance generated by existing immobility regimes serves as a disguise and sometimes as a hideout from hard truths and difficult conversations. Silences and 'communication voids' are purposefully enacted, sometimes as the only possible form of care that participants can deploy under strict border regimes. For now, then, in-person intergenerational care remains largely 'on hold' for many of them.

Moving forward, more attention needs to be drawn to what is not being articulated in intergenerational exchanges, particularly in contexts of undocumented migration, stringent borders, and the inability to reunite with aging parents. The article also opens avenues for future research that considers transnational exchanges among both adult children and aging parents to better understand the mutual use and understandings of silence and sieving as care and caring practices.

Notes

1. Undocumented Brazilian migrants residing in the United States, including some of my interlocutors, have entered the country in a variety of ways. Common entry paths include a legal entry with a tourist or student visa and later overstay, or illegal entry via the Mexico-U.S. border. Living undocumented in the United States is a significant obstacle to access state welfare and health care, and restrictions vary according to the state of residence. In this regard, the state of Massachusetts, where Greater Boston is

located, is one of the most progressive states regarding immigrant rights (for a review see Hacker et al., 2015). The path to obtaining legal documents is highly contingent upon migrants' entry path to the United States and fast-changing immigration laws (Cohn, 2015). Some of my informants were able to regularize their situation through 'The Legal Immigration Family Equity Act' of 2000, Deferred Action for parents of American and lawful permanent residents (DAPA) and DACA programme extended (2014), and through marriage to American citizens.

2. In this regard, it is important to consider regional differences. Although a detailed analysis of class and regional provenance goes beyond the scope of this article, in broad terms Brazilians originating from São Paulo and adjacent areas and state capitals tend to hold higher levels of socio-economic capital (see Martes, 2011; Sales, 1999).

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