

**Adéla Souralová: *New Perspectives on Mutual Dependency in Care-Giving***

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Although there has recently been a boom in research on care work and on migrants' children, Adéla Souralová's book *New Perspectives on Mutual Dependency in Care-Giving* is surely of particular note, being the first academic study to bring these two distinct fields of research together. As the title of her book implies, Souralová's ambition here is to present information that will "encourage scholars to re-think the current conceptual frameworks built upon the experiences of immigrant domestic workers and middle-class families" (p. 2). This she intends to do by including the *perspective of the children* in her research, something that has so far been neglected in care work research (methodological innovation) and by taking the *concept of mutual dependency* as a starting point for the analysis of all the relationships involved, focusing on the more intimate and local aspect of care-giving (theoretical innovation).

Personally I find the "shift towards the children's perspective" one of the most interesting and original contributions of Souralová's work. Clearly, by acknowledging children's agency as a mode of understanding and gaining new knowledge regarding delegated childcare, Souralová is able to bring to the fore the emotional and intimate (rather than economic) aspects of care work, which would otherwise remain hidden. However, since Souralová's findings are based on data collected amongst

Vietnamese families and their Czech nannies, I have to pose the question "How can this book, with its focus on local Czech Vietnamese, offer a new perspective on general care work research or reveal a side of the Asian immigrant experience that has so far remained hidden (p. 2)?"

To answer these questions we need to have a closer look at some of the more original findings presented by Souralová in the seven chapters of her book.

In chapter 3 Souralová explores the first step in care work, which is the decision of her respondents to become a nanny. By taking the care-giving histories of these women as a basis of their decision making, as opposed to looking just at their structural position (all the women in the sample were dependent on welfare) she comes to the conclusion that there is more behind their decision to take this specific job than financial distress or the fact that they have sufficient free time (p. 54). She explicitly says that "these nannies need (Vietnamese) children more than they need the money they are paid for taking care of them" (p. 37). This statement might sound a bit exaggerated, since Souralová herself says that the importance of economic incentives for becoming a nanny among the women in her sample varies and that "in some cases being a nanny is an indispensable contribution to the family budget" (p. 41). However, the point is that she clearly shows that money (which in this case is very well-deserved, as the nannies often work 60 to 70 hours per week for pay that is below the minimum wage) is clearly not the only factor that "pushes" these women to become nannies, but that there are other just as important, sometimes more important factors that should be

taken into account, and that these factors may be described purely by taking the life histories of these women into account. This, above all, allows us to cast light not only on the main motivations of these women for becoming a nanny, but also on what “being a nanny” means to them.

The meaning of care giving and the depth of the child-nanny relationship is further revealed in chapter 5, where Souralová points to the connection between care-giving and kinning and describes how the Czech nannies actually become grandmothers and “Vietnamese” children grandchildren (p. 88). She looks at performative actions that respondents marked as tie-establishing, and presents some highly illuminating narratives by children that shed light on the way in which the mutual responsibility between child and nanny is established (p. 91) or how shared memories strengthen the already-established relationships. (pp. 91–99). She describes not only kinning activities between child and nannies, but also “family-building” activities, such as celebration of important days of the year, or transitional moments in children’s lives, such as the first day at school, that are usually attended by the nannies, who from this point of view are seen as a part of the family.

What I find one of the most valuable contributions of this chapter is the analysis of how children view their biological grandparents in Vietnam in comparison with their nanny in the Czech Republic. Souralová’s findings suggest that children who have formed a close relationship with their nannies find themselves in a complicated situation. It is commonly accepted that children of migrants face many difficulties in growing up “between two

cultures” (Larke N. Huang: *An Integrative View of Identity Formation: A model for Asian Americans*. Pp. 43–59 in E. P. Salett, and D.R. Koslow, eds.: *Race, Ethnicity and Self-Identity in multicultural perspective*. National Multicultural Institute, Washington, D. C. 1994). According to Souralová, when the child has a native nanny (Czech nanny) these difficulties are even bigger, because they above all have to negotiate between two sets of kinship conceptions – biogenetic (biological Vietnamese grandparents) and performative (Czech “constructed” nannies). The role of the Czech nanny in the child’s life seems, though, to be ambivalent.

The motivations of the Vietnamese parents (mothers) to hire nannies are examined in chapter two. Souralová claims that delegated child care is only partially the result of post migratory changes that often lead to work intensification. In hiring nannies, Vietnamese families are reproducing a model that is common in Vietnam, where it is normal for a woman to start work after only 4 months of maternity leave. In this situation it is most often the grandmother or other family member who looks after the children, something that is not replicable in the new migratory context, as grandparents are usually “left behind”. Nannies therefore fulfil the ideal of relatives in family life and supplant the mother and the grandmother (p. 15).

One of the more interesting insights of this chapter implicates that the reasoning behind hiring a Czech (as opposed to an “ethnic” nanny) is not based on personal preferences but rather on the structure of the opportunities. If it was only up to them, Vietnamese parents would prefer to hire a Vietnamese nanny who could teach their

children Vietnamese, which the children risk losing (as is actually happening) after they start at Czech schools and make Czech friends. This is not, however, possible while there are no Vietnamese nannies available in the Czech Republic. (It will be interesting to see if this changes in the future, once Vietnamese parents become grandparents, assuming that they do not decide to return to Vietnam.) Hiring a Czech nanny is not primarily an integrational strategy, as it might be interpreted as being, but rather a necessity deriving from the situation. The fact that children do actually integrate easily because their Czech nannies not only practise Czech with them, but also enable them to experience Czech lifestyle and culture by engaging them in activities such as mushroom picking, birthday celebrations and pig-killings, is in this case just a side effect with a mostly positive outcome (if we omit the risk of “losing” the Vietnamese language).

Views and ideals about what it means to be a good mother and care provider vary, and are in many ways constitutive to different social and cultural groups. Souralová points to this phenomenon in chapter 4, where she examines the different conceptualizations of motherhood and childcare of the Czech nannies and Vietnamese mothers, which in many regards are so different as to seem incompatible. Thus Vietnamese mothers in her sample think of good mothering as equivalent to creating opportunities for their children by securing them economically. This is not consistent with the views of the nannies, whose perception of good mothering are connected to the idea of a nurturing relationship that manifests itself in the constant presence of the mother. Although Souralová’s findings

are very interesting, her analysis is based on assumptions that the “work ethic in the western part of Europe is based on ideas of self-realization, in opposition to the work ethic of the Vietnamese, who work hard because they want to save money for their children” (p. 15). According to Souralová, staying at home with children is something rarely seen in Vietnam, and a woman with small children does not go work because of her own career, but because according to Vietnamese standards of ideal motherhood, providing for children “economically” is more important than providing for them “emotionally”. The reason for these different views on mothering strategies and how they are implemented is thus outlined as being mostly based on cultural differences (an individualist mentality as opposed to a collectivist mentality) rather than the economic situation of the families. Since research suggests that women’s work activity in Europe has lately become an economic necessity and that only a few families can maintain their living standards on one income (Alena Křížková, Hana Maříková, Hana Hašková, and Lenka Formánková. *Pracovní dráhy žen v České republice*. SLON, Praha 2011), is it not probable that the class and economic situation of the families plays a very important role in the case of Vietnamese families also?

From this point of view it would be interesting to know how the Vietnamese mothers (and fathers) would behave if they were sufficiently financially secure. Would they still work these long hours, or would they choose to stay at home more often? Would they spend more weekends with their children, or would they still give the children to their nannies to be looked

after? And would these mothers stay at home if the state support were higher? Can they actually benefit from state support? Does this affect their choices? Or is the idea of staying at home with children simply socially unacceptable under any circumstances? Soralová purposely did not speak to fathers. This, however, does not mean that questions about the role of the second parent (the father) could not have been asked. The answers to these questions would at least show us if the decision to stay at home was really only the woman's choice, the choice of both parents, or a choice against the father's wishes.

Chapter 6, which focuses on the connection between kinning and home-bonding, is from my point of view the most interesting part of the book. In this chapter Soralová uses three different case studies to describe how the process of "kinning" influences feelings of "belonging". Her conclusion is that the children she spoke to have a "dual notion of homeland – a place based on genetics, blood and family on one hand in the case of Vietnam and, on the other hand, a place of social relationships in the case of the Czech Republic (p. 121)". However, although Vietnam is seen as a homeland, the Czech Republic is where the children are planning to spend their future lives (p. 123).

Soralová further states that the children she talked to experience tension between the two kinds of kinship and that these tensions have an impact on their feelings of belonging. She states that the young people she talked to are not reconciled to their dual identity, but are "haunted" by a desire for a single, steady rock that makes their feelings of belonging less complicated (p. 112). Although her findings correspond

with the work of researchers who present children of migrants as "stuck between two cultures" (Fog-Olwig 2013), it should be noticed that research conducted on children with Vietnamese roots in the U.S. presents a much more diverse picture of this topic. For example, Kibria, to whom Soralová also often refers, describes the ethnic identity of these children and their feelings of belonging and home bonding as "changing over time", and says that the period when the children are confused and don't know where they belong is just a period in their life (Nazli Kibria: *Becoming Asian American. Second Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities*. The Johnson University Press, Baltimore 2002). Hung Cam Thai, who studied ethnic identity among second-generation Asian Americans, has also convincingly showed that her research participants experienced, during childhood and adolescence, feelings of not belonging to either their "old" or "new" social world, but that they overcome these as they reach adulthood (Hung Cam Thai: *Formation of Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Vietnamese Americans*. Pp. 53–85 in P. G. Min: *The Second Generation – Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*. AlltaMira Press, Walnut Creek 2002).

Another finding of Soralová's that raises some questions is that where she marks visits to Vietnam as a "turning point" in the identity of her respondents. She says that the children she talked to became more aware of their ethnic roots at the moment when they visited their biological families for the first time. I do not doubt that the children she talked to expressed themselves in this way; what I am asking is whether this experience is not more connected to the child's age

(phase of life) rather than (only) the visit to Vietnam. The idea that a 10-year-old child visiting Vietnam for the first time in his/her life experiences this turning point does not correspond with the findings of the already-mentioned Hung Cam Thai, who discovered that the children she talked to started to be more interested in their cultural heritage on reaching adulthood. By accepting their ethnic and racial identities at this period in their life, they became more confident about themselves and more proud of their ethnic and racial backgrounds (Thai 2002).

One of the critical issues that have been discussed in research on care work relations is that of exploitation. Souralová's work questions the scholarship that understands care work as work performed by poor (exploited) migrant/black women from the global south or Eastern Europe in families of rich or middle class western (privileged) families. As she shows us, all the women in her sample belong to the social middle class regardless of whether they are care giver or care receiver, and sometimes the Vietnamese families (care receiver) even come from a poorer background than the Czech nannies (care giver). The reason why the mothers decide to hire a nanny is not because they are so rich that they can afford it, but rather because they cannot afford to stay at home. Also, the nannies are not taking the jobs because they have to, but because they want to and because they gain more than "only financial satisfaction" from it.

Souralová further convincingly shows that the relationships that are established between the children and their nannies are based on emotional exchange, and that to understand their profundity, the inclusion

of the children's perspective is invaluable and needed. Without the emotional aspect and the bonding quality of these relationships, it would, for example, be difficult to grasp why the nannies look after the children although the wages they receive are far from ideal. For the Vietnamese families, the nannies supplement not only practical needs but also social ties and feelings of belonging to a bigger kinship group, by becoming a real grandmother to their children. As she says: "The relationships in the families are not bound by simply economic transitions, but also by pure and sincere kinship ties" (p. 97). To me the in-depth analysis of all these kinds of dependencies (emotional, generational, and socio-cultural) presented by Souralová is one of the biggest assets of her work, as it convincingly shows how complex are the relationships between employee, employers and children.

To return to the question of whether her findings bring new perspectives on care work and Asian migrants, I should say that her work definitively brings new and interesting insights into many aspects of delegated care-giving where migrant families are involved, although it may not really challenge the body of care work research since it represents a very specific case study tied to experiences of Vietnamese hiring Czech nannies in Czech Republic. On the other hand there is absolutely no doubt that Souralová's book is a much-needed contribution to Czech research on Vietnamese migrants, as it brings much valuable information on Vietnamese families and children in the Czech environment, and even on the children of Vietnamese migrants as such.

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