



## Growing old in a transnational social field: belonging, mobility and identity among Italian migrants

Elisabetta Zontini

To cite this article: Elisabetta Zontini (2015) Growing old in a transnational social field: belonging, mobility and identity among Italian migrants, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38:2, 326-341, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2014.885543

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.885543>



© 2014 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.



Published online: 04 Mar 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1694



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 16 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Growing old in a transnational social field: belonging, mobility and identity among Italian migrants

Elisabetta Zontini

(Received 10 January 2011; accepted 8 January 2014)

This article focuses on ageing in transnationalism. Drawing on the experiences of Italians in the UK as a paradigmatic example of settled European migrants, it explores the lived experiences of this group of older migrants. Using Levitt and Glick Schiller's framework, it concentrates first on migrants' ways of being and then on their ways of belonging. The article argues that a transnational lens is necessary to understand the experiences of older migrants and that a focus on older people needs to be incorporated into studies of transnationalism. Through a discussion of their narratives and experiences, the article offers a long view on the migration process and brings attention to the significance of gender, time and the life course to understand both migrants' transnationalism and their integration.

**Keywords:** ageing; labour migrants; transnationalism; identity; belonging; Italians

## Introduction: the ageing of labour migrants

The 2001 census revealed an increase in the number of older migrants in Britain, many of whom are retired labour migrants. This increase reflects the wider trend of Europe's ageing population, which has implications for society as a whole and for families in particular (White 2006). However, the experiences of ageing retired labour migrants have so far received little academic attention (Burholt 2004; King et al. 2004; for exceptions see Gardner 2002 and Ramji 2006). This lack of attention is surprising given the growing concern about ageing across Europe and the economic and social contribution that this group of migrant workers made to both their countries of origin and settlement (White 2006).

Drawing on the experiences of Italians in the UK as a paradigmatic example of settled European immigrants, this article explores the lived experiences of this group of older migrants. The article will start by reviewing what has been said about migrants and ethnic minorities in later life, linking together the fields of migration, transnationalism and social gerontology. It will then briefly describe the group studied and the methodology. The first empirical section deals with the issue of gender, which emerged as crucial to interpret the elders' experiences. The remainder of the article adopts Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) framework focusing first on migrants' *ways of being* and then on their *ways of belonging*.

### Towards a transnational perspective for the study of later life

Migration studies have largely ignored older migrants, with the exception of wealthy Northern Europeans seeking 'sunset lives' along the shores of the Mediterranean upon retirement (King, Warnes, and Williams 2000). Recently, however, attention for this topic has grown with studies looking at the different ways in which old age intersects with migration. King and Vullnetari (2006), for instance, have looked at what happens to older people as a result of the outmigration of young people, focusing on what they termed 'orphan pensioners' in Albania. They have also considered the experiences of migrating grandparents: the phenomenon by which older people, especially women, migrate in order to fulfil caring tasks for their children, particularly in relation to childcare (Goulbourne et al. 2010; Zontini 2010). Others have explored the care provided by migrants to older people in various European countries (Escriva 2004; Van der Geest, Mul, and Vermeulen 2004).

Torres has pointed out that 'ageing as an immigrant is not the same as migrating as an elder' (Torres 2006, 1325) and further work is needed to explore the specificities of both processes. Authors who have looked at those 'ageing in place' have found that return seems a major concern for those migrants. Scholars have explored the factors that push migrants to return after retirement (Rodriguez and Egea 2006), settle permanently in the new society (Ganga 2006), or travel between countries in order 'to maintain cultural, symbolic, concrete and affective ties with both countries' (Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial 2006, 1359).

What emerges from these studies is that gender is a crucial variable in analysing older migrants' experiences (see Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003; Maynard et al. 2008). Women, for instance, are more reluctant to return (Bolzman et al. 2006). Additionally, older migrants ageing in place continue to have an ongoing relationship with their country of origin. Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial (2006) talk of 'a way of life with cultural, symbolic, concrete and affective dimensions, based on contacts in two countries' (Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial 2006, 1372). Warnes and Williams (2006) recognize that many older people 'can exploit, maintain and continue to develop residential opportunities, social networks and welfare entitlements in more than one country' (1265).

Social gerontology has also afforded the experiences of migrants' limited attention. The main focus of this literature has been on inequalities in ageing in relation to ethnicity (Walker et al. 2001; see Nazroo 1997) and more recently on older minority people's quality of life. The first body of literature has stressed the economic and health inequalities suffered by older people of ethnic minorities, while the second has started to move away from an exclusive focus on structural variables and also take into account the subjective experience of ageing. Some of the latest work has tried to combine both perspectives to look at the role of *shared* experiences of specific groups (Maynard et al. 2008; Moriarty and Butt 2004). This approach is particularly useful for studying migrants for whom the *shared* experience of migration can be seen as especially significant.

Maynard et al. (2008) have explored the experiences of older women from different communities. They argue that ideas of what it means to age successfully differ culturally. In fact, the ideas that many women from minorities hold about successful ageing differ from ideals in the West, where success is linked to independence. The

women that Maynard et al. interviewed focused on the importance of shared identities, language, culture and traditions in their lives. They sought interdependence and close relationships with their kin and communities. Their sense of purpose was linked to their central role in the kinship group, roles from which they derived pride and self-esteem. Another key finding of the book is that although migration tends to be seen as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, in fact these single past events continue to shape women's lives and in order to understand the experiences of ageing as a migrant, life histories in their entirety need to be taken into account. These women have not just been migrants but also transmigrants – that is, people who have lived in social fields that encompass more than one location in different countries (Grillo 2007).

Similarly, on its part, literature on transnational families has said little about those growing old in a transnational social field, having focused on old age mainly in relation to caregiving, exploring how geographical distance affects practices adopted in care for the aged and the ways in which different migrant groups address this challenge (Baldassar and Baldock 2000; Burholt 2004; Goulbourne and Chamberlain 2001; Goulbourne et al. 2010; Reynolds and Zontini 2006; Zontini 2006; Wilding 2006). These studies have shown that care can be done from a distance and that elderly migrants are both providers and receivers of care in their transnational families. This literature, although important as it brings attention to the 'economies of kinship' (Baldassar 2007), does not put older migrants central stage and provides little knowledge of what it means to become old as a transmigrant.

In an attempt to contribute to the limited knowledge that has been accumulated up to now, this article starts from the premise that older migrants' experiences cannot be looked at in relation only to their situation in the country of settlement. Their lives are shaped not just by their relationships with local services and institutions, but also with family members, places and homes both locally and elsewhere (Ganga 2006). In Vertovec's (2009, 67) words, their habitus has become 'bifocal' – that is, they have developed 'a dual frame of reference' through which they constantly compare their situation in their 'home' society to their situation in the 'host' society. Thus far, very few scholars have considered what that might mean for migrants and those around them as they age.

The distinction made by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) between '*ways of being*' – the transnational practices migrants are engaged with – and '*ways of belonging*' – the identities and sense of self that result from connections to different locales – is particularly relevant to understanding their experiences. Questions that need further exploration include: What are the implications for older migrants of having worked and raised a family in a place that is different from where they grew up? How do such experiences affect their sense of identity and belonging to various communities? How do their transnational lives affect their experiences of ageing and their quality of life? What resources can they draw on, both locally and transnationally as they age?

### **The study and the group**

This article focuses on migrants who arrived in the UK after the Second World War to work in factories when Britain was actively recruiting 'manual labour from abroad.

Although it focuses explicitly on the experiences of Italian migrants of this type, similar patterns can be found among migrants from other Southern European countries, the Caribbean and South Asia (Goulbourne et al. 2010) who arrived in Britain during the same period. Those at the heart of this study are working-class migrants who came for economic reasons during a period of twenty years between the 1950s and the 1970s, leaving precarious lives as agricultural labourers, mainly in the south of Italy (Bottignolo 1985; Cavallaro 1981; King 1977). On arrival in the UK, they were employed in factories in mid-sized industrial cities such as Peterborough, Bedford and Nottingham where they worked until retirement. Women worked too, the majority of them also as factory workers. In so doing they departed from the role of stay-at-home mother and wife that was still prevalent in their villages in Italy.

The material presented below is based on ongoing research into Italians in the UK, which started in 2004 as part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on Transnational Families and Social Capital (Goulbourne et al. 2010; Zontini 2004, 2006). The initial research focused on different generations and included Italians from a variety of migratory waves from pre-First World War to the recent professional one. In London, Oxford, Peterborough and Bedford, I interviewed thirty older first-generation migrants. In Italy, I interviewed another twenty to explore the experience of return migration. In the UK, I visited several clubs for older Italians and conducted participant observation in the Peterborough club. As my research progressed, I realized that gender and generational divisions were particularly salient in my data and decided to deepen the project in order to focus on specific stages of the life course. I began to pay closer attention to the experiences of the so-called 'second generation' (Zontini 2007), while also researching the lives of older migrants, this time focusing specifically on working-class post-war migrants, who were the largest group of Italians ageing in place. This led me to further participant observation, this time in two community centres for older migrants in Nottingham where, together with a research assistant, I conducted the bulk of my current research. A group of about sixty elders meets once a week in these two centres, playing cards (men) and bingo (women), drinking coffee, chatting and spending a few hours together. Fieldwork involved spending time at the centres, attending community and family events, as well as meeting the men during their regular morning visit to the local shopping centre. Council officials and welfare officers were also interviewed. Additionally, ten biographical interviews were carried out with members attending the two centres or drawn from networks originating there. The reason for the relatively low number of formal interviews is that the regular group participants did not see the need for a formal tape-recorded interview conducted in a different setting as they felt that they had already told us everything. They clearly felt more comfortable chatting freely in front of me and the other researcher, and one another. They also invited us to their homes where they showed us pictures, their furniture and other important objects such as religious figures from Italy. The observations we made on these occasions also form part of the data-gathering process. This research practice is well recognized by anthropologists who are wary both of using 'an artificial procedure' or a 'forced situation' (Miller 2012) to gather data on local 'cultures', relations and groups, and of research that is 'interview-privileged' and solely 'rooted in text and word' (Oakely 2012, 1).

Several women commented that their lives were very similar. However, I do not want to convey an excessively homogeneous account of ageing in transnationalism and therefore will present the ‘typical story’ alluded to by my interviewees alongside two other typologies, which, although less frequent, encapsulate the experiences of other people that I came across during fieldwork and illustrate the complex and varied nature of these processes.

### **Gendered experiences of migration and ageing**

When these migrants left Italy, they had planned to return. As Baldassar (2001, 2007) observed in the Australian context, although their families had granted them the licence to leave, they also carried an obligation to return. Like other Italians of their generation living elsewhere, they maintained close contact with families and friends back home in preparation for their later return (Baldassar 2007; Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial 2006). Irrespective of the course of action that they eventually chose, they all had to consider whether or not to return at some stage in their life. There are, however, gender differences regarding how these crucial decisions and processes are experienced. Men tend to wish to return, completing the migratory trajectory that they had anticipated when they left Italy years ago. Giorgio explained to us that although his plan to return had failed, he was very happy to have attempted it. For him, going back was part of what he had to do:

It doesn’t matter how long you been in England, when you’re born in Italy ..., you are born in a different country you always think that you want to go back. That was my feeling and if don’t try one day I might cry and say: “oh I wish I had gone to Italy”. (Giorgio, age seventy-seven, in the UK since 1955)

Back in Italy, returning men who are able to buy property, and in some cases land, and live securely on their pension are seen as successful migrants. Those who ‘have to’ live abroad are pitied and seen as having failed their migration project (Baldassar 2007; Zontini 2010).

Women wish to stay (Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial 2006) for at least two important reasons. First, although they have been workers, they still see their roles and identities as tied to their families, especially their children and grandchildren (Baldassar and Gabaccia 2011; Ganga 2006; Maynard et al. 2008). Their quality of life is closely linked to the kind of relationships they have with them. Once retired, they want to have more time for their friends and families. Returning would mean creating new separations and this is something that they are not prepared to do. Second, as a consequence of their experiences as workers and changes to their values and lifestyle, they are quite clear that they are better off in the UK than they would be in their villages of origin. All of the women were adamant that they did not want to return. This is how Gabriella put it:

My husband he wants to go back... a couple of years ago we were fighting and I say “well look if you want to go back you go back and I stay here.” [There] I still got to wash cos I haven’t got a washing machine there I have to wash by hand, I have to cook

everyday and I'm not going anywhere (...). There he's on holiday... I am worse than here and then all his family come to see you... and you make coffee and you make coffee and you make coffee all day long... it's no good for me. I'm not on holiday, I work double the time there. (...) And me I have to go back to S. Giuliano to have that life for good? No chance! At least here I go to town, I got my bus pass... my grandchildren are here... I can have a meal, have a laugh, I got my group, it's a different life, no chance!! (Gabiella, seventy, in the UK since 1962)

These examples show that because women's and men's ideas about retirement and old age can be quite different, a gender analysis is necessary for interpreting migrants' experiences, confirming what other authors have pointed out (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003; Maynard et al. 2008; Wray 2003). In what follows, I adopt Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) framework for interpreting the elders' everyday experiences, focusing in turn on their ways of being transnational and their ways of belonging.

### **Ways of being: visits and the life course**

Whether or not the migrants eventually return to Italy, their initial migration to Nottingham means that they are now enmeshed in a transnational social field that incorporates at least two locations: Italy and the UK. They could be called 'transnational villagers' (Levitt 2001) as a large group of them come from the same village in the south of Italy – S. Giuliano – to which they maintain strong bonds. Although lacking the formal organizations that link Miraflores (the village studied by Levitt) to the USA, migrants from S. Giuliano and living in Nottingham remain interconnected socially and economically, if not politically, with their home community. Several rituals and other symbols connect the two locations. Nottingham, for instance, has a plaque that was unveiled by the mayor of S. Giuliano. In turn, S. Giulianesi and their offspring living in Nottingham maintain some of the traditions practised in their area of origin both in the UK (for instance with a procession for a religious figure) and by visiting S. Giuliano every year to celebrate the patron saint. The annual visit seems particularly important in strengthening connections and fostering a sense of belonging (Baldassar 2001; Reynolds and Zontini 2006). This is why in order to understand current experiences of older migrants in the UK, their transnational ways of being need to be taken into account. In what follows, I will present three typologies.

### ***The typical trajectory***

The 'typical' trajectory followed by the majority of those attending the older Italians' clubs seems to have entailed an initial migration period during which there was no visiting their country of origin, as the migrants' economic conditions and their working schedules did not allow them to travel. Later, when families became slightly better off, the migrants started to visit Italy, initially every few years and then more often. This later period coincided with their parents becoming increasingly old and frail, thus more visits were made in order to offer care and relieve pressure from the siblings. Subsequently, some of the migrants started to go back to Italy for leisure, as they no longer needed to look after older relatives and they owned properties where they could now spend time with their spouses, children and grandchildren. This

phase, however, tends to have been short-lived because ill health and ageing bodies made it increasingly difficult for them to travel.

Gabriella has followed this rather typical trajectory. She seems to be still connected to S. Giuliano, the village she comes from and where she owns a property that her family uses for their holidays. Her house in Nottingham is full of reminders of Italy, including the statue of the village's patron saint. Italian television was on during our visits and Gabriella and her friends discuss the plots of several Italian series when they meet at the older Italians' club.

Gabriella waited eight years before returning to Italy for the first time because of financial constraints. She explained that those visits were not a choice – they were an obligation, something all migrants had to do in order to keep their connections alive (see [Baldassar 2001](#)). Asked about her visit, she said:

You not do anything else, no holiday, only to the village to see the family cos you had to do that (...) [I went] the first time [after] eight years and then after four years and then after two years and then, after the girls were married, every year. My mamma was there and I was thinking: "well after next year she might not be there" and err... we went every year.

When I first met Gabriella, she was planning her annual August trip to the village. She was going to a family wedding and there was also a big celebration planned for her seventieth birthday, which both her Italian and Nottingham family were to attend. However, she later had to cancel her much-anticipated trip as her husband became increasingly ill and eventually died.

Illness, either their own or that of their spouse, is a growing obstacle to these migrants' travelling. Both Francesca and Giuseppe, who are in their eighties and attend the older Italians' club, told me that they can no longer manage a flight and then a long car journey. One man said: 'We are tired of all this travelling.' Gabriella, however, was already planning her next trip for the spring, when she wanted to combine her attendance at the village *Festa* with sorting out some legal paperwork for her house in Italy.

As we can see, in spite of her class location, Gabriella has always been engaged in transnational ways of being. Her life in Nottingham could not have been understood without taking on board her wider connections and responsibilities as they have shaped her entire life course.

### ***Re-transnationalization in later life***

Flora has a less typical story. I am presenting it here as an example of an individual who is less connected with the Italian community but who realizes that she is ageing in a country that she does not feel is entirely her own. Flora migrated in 1961, following in the footsteps of her elder siblings. At sixty-two she is much younger than the other members of the older Italians' club. She does not go to the weekly meetings but has started to attend the special monthly meal. Flora is married to an Englishman and lives in an affluent part of Nottingham. Arguably, she is the most integrated of the migrants (her job was clerical, not manual; her English is perfect; and she has British



citizenship) but she is very interested in rediscovering her Italian identity and is bitter about having lost touch with her community and country.

Flora's story shows how migrants' current quality of life can be affected negatively by past limitations that they have imposed on their transnational connections and visits – even if those limitations were imposed willingly. Flora now deeply regrets her past choices. She feels that she has not managed to maintain a connection with her family in Italy as she should and has failed to pass on to her children what she now perceives as a valuable transnational experience. Asked about her visits, she said:

We still went but when the children were little there was never enough cash (...), I regret not taking the children to Italy maybe for three months, they could have seen that side of it. It's nothing I can do now but at the time I was so content I didn't do it, but I regret that for them as well, because they could have stayed there for three months, even if I couldn't they could have stayed with my family. I do regret that, I wish I took them.

After re-evaluating her life and past choices, Flora became determined to re-establish links with Italy and also with the Italian community in Nottingham with which she had never previously had much contact:

It's only in my 40s that I started going home more. I started to miss home more and that feeling of family being together.

As she explains, her interest in Italy grew as she became older, thus contradicting common conceptualizations that see the passage of time as weakening transnational bonds. When Flora was in her forties, she even considered returning for good, encouraged by her family back in Italy. After talking about this with friends in Nottingham, she decided to stay but continues to maintain her transnational connections and is also desperately trying to get back her Italian passport. Flora's situation illustrates that ageing does not necessarily mean a decline in transnational ways of being. It can trigger the opposite – a desire to return to one's 'roots', to rediscover the past and re-establish lost connections that did not seem so important during one's youth.

### *Little contact due to marginality*

Maria is among the least transnational of my informants. She is in her mid-sixties and has been in the UK for more than forty years. However, her story is not an example of successful integration into the host society. On the contrary, her minimal contact with Italy is the result of a difficult life story and increasing marginalization. Maria's experience echoes those of people like her who fail to maintain meaningful connections due to conflicts back home, marginality in the UK, or sometimes both.

Maria arrived in the UK alone to work as a nurse in a hospital. At the hospital she met her husband, with whom she had a son. She used to return to Italy every year to visit her mother, until she brought her back with her to the UK. However, after only a year Maria's mother wanted to return to Italy. This upset Maria, who described her mother's movements as 'up and down like a stupid yo-yo on a string'. Maria continued to visit her every year, taking her children with her. She eventually took her

mother back to the UK again when she became frail. She transferred her mother's pension to the UK where she was living, something her Italian family never forgave her for. When her mother died, Maria informed the rest of the family in Italy and invited them to the funeral, but nobody came. They also stopped contact with her. She has not been to Italy since. Additionally, her son's transnational contacts ceased. Maria now lives in a warden-assisted council flat in Nottingham. Even her Italian TV channel, which she used to watch, as she put it 'went away'.

Maria's story, although extreme, shows that family connections across countries might become strained and wither. Migrants, especially women, are tasked with keeping these connections alive, doing the 'right thing' while negotiating new values and practices (Di Leonardo 1984). Losing one's network might result in weaker support in later life and increased marginality.

### **Ways of belonging: habitual spaces and ideas of home**

As we have seen, the older migrants' ageing bodies put a brake on their *ways of being* transnational. In what follows, I will explore what happens to their *ways of belonging*.

#### ***'Habitual spaces' in Nottingham***

Fortier (2000) has analysed in depth the formation of Italian migrants' belonging in Britain. She concluded that their cultural identity developed between transnationalism and localism being 'at once deterritorialised and reterritorialised' (1). In her view, re-territorialization occurs through the creation of 'habitual spaces', which, in Ganga's (2005, 147) words, can be defined as places 'where allegiance to a place of origin is reproduced'. According to both Ganga (2005) and Fortier (2000), Italians draw on the past and nostalgia to create familial spaces and activities (such as churches, community clubs and rituals) to re-establish group identities.

In the case of Nottingham's older Italians, everyday life is articulated around a few specific places. The local central shopping centre does not at first sight seem to link Italians to their rural past in southern Italy. Yet it can be understood through Fortier's framework as malls perform for Italian migrants a similar socializing space function as their village's main square would have done in Italy, while protecting them from the cold and rain of Britain. These malls feature prominently in the older migrants' everyday lives and they are what many of them – especially women – miss when they return to Italy. As in other more traditional 'Italian' spaces, in the malls gender differences operate through the use of space (Fortier 2000). Men meet at the shopping centre in the morning before going home for lunch. They sit on benches chatting and watching the world go by. Women meet at the café, chat and shop before going home to prepare lunch for themselves and their husbands.

Other 'habitual spaces' for older Italians in Nottingham are the two older Italians' clubs, which are hosted weekly in a church hall and in a community centre. Similar clubs exist in Bedford, Peterborough and London (Fortier 2000; Goulbourne et al. 2010). In the clubs, Italians spend a couple of hours playing bingo or cards and chatting with each other. They meet as Italians but they have much more in common than their ethnicity. They all arrived in the UK at roughly the same time, to do very similar factory

jobs, and they often originate from the same villages (Ganga 2006). As Moriarty and Butt (2004) have pointed out, such shared experiences of migration, work and hardship are particularly significant for the migrants. The similarities strengthen the connections among them, but also their connections with Italy and their villages back home. People travel to Italy, come to visit and bring news and gossip about families across the transnational social field. This is a place where they can be 'Italian' without being concerned about the majority gaze.

Religious practices emerged as important not only in forging an Italian cultural identity (Ganga 2005; Fortier 2000), but also in helping migrants to define their social role (Maynard et al. 2008). Women were particularly happy to once again have an Italian priest celebrating mass and other daily rituals from his home. They attend these services in addition to the Sunday mass, which is celebrated by an English-speaking Catholic priest. These extra worship events are seen as occasions for meeting each other and provide an activity that takes place outside of the home (see Maynard et al. 2008). Franca, a long-standing member of the Labour party, confessed that she is not a believer yet she attends these services 'to have something to do'.

### *Ideas of home*

Because of their complex experiences, these older people's ideas of home are shifting and fluid. In Fortier's (2000, 158) study, questions of home and belonging 'emerged as sites of conflicted meaning'. For many, both their village of origin and Nottingham are home, although in different ways that gain salience at different times. Flora expressed this ambivalence:

Well, going back 10 years we didn't want to stay in X and we were thinking about buying in Italy and going there. X was never my home, Nottingham and Italy were my home, but probably more Nottingham because I had come here when I was young and was happy here.

As Ganga (2006) has noted, although many feel Italy as 'home', they feel somewhat displaced when they are there. The older migrants talk about not feeling confident there any longer. This prompts them to reassess how to define 'home' now. Flora explains:

It's very difficult because when I'm here I miss a lot of people there and when I'm there I miss a lot of people here. There's a lot of things for me here and it's a calmer life for me, there it's more active and I'm doing things there. It's quite a funny feeling when I go there and go shopping I'm not confident there as I am here you know, it's funny.

Asked to elaborate, she points to the ways in which she is seen by others in Italy and how that makes her question her sense of belonging:

I speak how I speak – dialect and English – so I think well I don't like my voice or my accent (...) I think they know in my village, they know who I am, but they say I'm a foreigner and that's the worst thing. They know I'm Italian come back on holiday [but

I'm classed as] a foreigner and then I'm classed here as a foreigner. You can't bloody win!

Several of the older Italians share Flora's discomfort when in Italy. Having left more than fifty years ago, they find it difficult to keep up with the ways in which Italy has changed in their absence. The men at the club explained how no one there knew them any longer as many people of their generation had died, and how sometimes the Italian people could not understand their dialect because, as they put it, 'everyone in Italy talks the same way now'.

For Flora, the Italian club is very important to reaffirm her Italian identity. However, she does not feel like a full member there either. As she says:

'I only go once a month to the meal, it is difficult to walk into those places.' My sister says: "why are you going there? Don't go there". I say to her: "I need to keep my Italian roots." Same as the Italian passport, I don't need it but I want it. It proves to me I am Italian. When I go abroad I don't want to use the English passport. I want an Italian passport – it's very important to me.

For these older Italians, home has become less linked to place and more to people. Home is where their immediate family is (Ganga 2006). This comes through not just in relation to return, but also in discussions about death and burial. Contrary to the Bengali transnational migrants studied by Gardner (2002), who wanted to be buried in the Dosh – the homeland, these Italians have made arrangements to be buried in the local (Nottingham) cemetery where their close families would be able to visit. Being sent back to Italy for burial is seen as a sign of not being liked by your family in the UK, rather than as a sign of attachment to the homeland.

### ***Remaining connected***

Contrary to examples cited in some of the literature (Wilding 2006), my participants' use of technology to maintain their transnational life is very limited. An important exception to this is television and in particular satellite channels, which feature prominently in their homes. The older migrants watch a lot of Italian television, from soaps set in Italy, to football, news and chat shows. This means that they stay abreast of news and events in Italy, which they comment upon when they meet at the Italian club. On one of my visits to the club, people expressed surprise at my ignorance of some current Italian events. However, their bifocality was also evident in their television preferences as they all tend to watch a great deal of UK TV as well, such as the news and a number of soaps like *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, which are followed and discussed by a lot of the women.

Phone calls, visits and 'gossip' still seem to be the main forms of communication and of keeping in contact for this generation, although things might be different for their children and grandchildren. The older migrants also continue to stay connected to Italy in very practical ways. For instance, some still own properties in Italy and many receive Italian pensions. A welfare rights office based in one of the community centres is dedicated to helping them navigate their entitlements between Italy and the

UK, especially in relation to pensions. Other support includes consular services such as help with passport applications and other bureaucratic matters concerning Italy. Interestingly, as also noted by Baldassar and Gabaccia (2011), the migrants retained their Italian citizenship and often this is the case for their British-born children. At this centre, they also receive culturally competent help and support to access services more generally, also in the UK. As Cook (2010) and Maynard et al. (2008) have pointed out, cultural and community organizations play a particularly important role for migrants and minority elders as they bridge ‘the gap between formal services and the lives of older migrants’ (Cook 2010, 254) and also connect Italy to their local community.

These examples show how the migrants’ very local practices are attempts to reproduce and adapt the practices of back home, showing the complexity of their experiences and giving a sense of their transnational ways of belonging.

### **Conclusions: transnationalism, ageing and the life course**

This article has brought together insights from migration studies, social gerontology and transnationalism. In doing so, it has highlighted the importance of a transnational lens in understanding ethnic minority elders’ current experiences, sense of identity and quality

of life, as well as the significance of research with older migrants for refining theories of transnationalism.

The article has shown that the majority of these migrants are transnational, as they have strong, positive practical and emotional ties both locally and abroad. Their experiences also show that successful ageing does not necessarily mean staying independent for as long as possible; interdependency and strong reciprocal bonds with kin and co-ethnics both locally and transnationally are perceived and experienced by these older people as positive ageing. Reflecting the findings of Maynard et al. (2008), the older Italians whom I interviewed shared their belief that community and belonging enhanced their quality of life. However, my research also reveals that this belief is not only linked to a nostalgic memory of an event – migration – which happened in the past (Fortier 2000; Ganga 2006), but is also the result of the migrants’ continued and ongoing practical and symbolic connections with other locales. Those with weaker transnational connections seem to have access to fewer emotional and practical resources. They also seem to have more difficulty in accessing and feeling part of the local Italian community.

The older migrants’ stories show how transnational connections are linked to time in a non-linear way. A life-course approach seems crucial to understanding their experiences (King et al. 2006) as it shows how transnational connections vary in intensity through time. Focusing on older migrants is not only important in itself as it allows us to understand the subjective experiences of a neglected group in sociological research, but is also important at a more theoretical level as it may help us to better understand processes of migration, settlement and transnationalism. Their experiences, in fact, afford us a long view of the migration process, rather than a snapshot at a particular time in the migrants’ life course. This enables us to see what

happens to migrants and their relationships with their 'homeland' over time, a perspective that so far has been neglected in the migration literature.

If we look closely at the stories of these migrants, their visits seem to peak in frequency at particular stages of the life course and then decrease with the advent of old age. However, my research also shows that re-transnationalization can occur later in life (Levitt 2002). Various factors seem to affect these processes, including the role of the ageing body (Gardner 2002), financial constraints, and the location and influence of other family members.

What ageing in transnationalism means is that *ways of being* become less transnational because in old age mobility may be increasingly difficult to sustain. However, the same cannot be said for the migrants' *ways of belonging*, which continue to incorporate more than one place. The older Italians' sense of identity and well-being is tied to their experiences as migrants *and* transnational subjects. This particular class, ethnic and transnational identity offers them the basis for their social life and networks that seem crucial for providing support and well-being as they age.

More broadly, their experiences problematize the current neo-assimilationist discourse according to which migrants should be required to show greater conformity to British national values and way of life and are expected to shed their loyalty and connections to the places they came from (Però 2008). Based on this case study, we can argue that 'integration' is not a linear process because feelings of belonging change over the life course in complex ways. An important policy implication that follows from this theoretical point is the need for new policies for ageing migrants that support rather than hinder their multiple connections.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Lisa McKenzie, who worked as a research assistant for the Nottingham part of this project, and all the participants who shared with us their time and their stories, thus making this study possible. I also wish to thank the two anonymous referees for their insightful comments.

### Funding

Part of the project was funded by the New Researchers Fund of the University of Nottingham, which I gratefully acknowledge.

### References

- Arber, Sara, Kate Davidson, and Jay Ginn. 2003. *Gender and Ageing: Changing Roles and Relationships*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Baldassar, Loretta. 2001. *Visits Home: Migration Experiences between Italy and Australia*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Baldassar, Loretta. 2007. "Transnational Families and Aged Care: The Mobility of Care and the Migrancy of Ageing." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (2): 275–297. doi:10.1080/13691830601154252.
- Baldassar, Loretta, and Cora Baldock. 2000. "Linking Migration and Family Studies: Transnational Migrants and the Care of Ageing Parents." In *Theoretical and Methodological*

- Issues in Migration Research, Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, edited by B. Agozino, 61–89. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Baldassar, Loretta, and Donna Gabaccia, eds. 2011 *Intimacy and Italian Migration: Gender and Domestic Lives in a Mobile World*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Bolzman, Claudio, Rosita Fibbi, and Marie Vial. 2006 “What to do After Retirement? Elderly Migrants and the Question of Return.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32 (8): 1359–1375. doi:10.1080/13691830600928748.
- Bottignolo, Bruno. 1985. *Without a Bell Tower: A Study of the Italian Immigrants in South-West England*. Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione.
- Burholt, Vanessa. 2004. “Transnationalism, Economic Transfers and Families’ Ties: Intercontinental Contacts of Older Gujaratis, Punjabis and Sylhetis in Birmingham with Families Abroad.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27 (5): 800–829. doi:10.1080/0141987042000246354.
- Cavallaro, Roberto. 1981. *Storie senza storia. Indagine sull’emigrazione calabrese in Gran Bretagna* [Stories without History. A Study of Calabrian Emigration to the UK]. Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione.
- Cook, Joanne. 2010. “Exploring Older Women’s Citizenship: Understanding the Impact of Migration in Later Life.” *Ageing and Society* 30 (2): 253–273. doi:10.1017/S0144686X09990195.
- Di Leonardo, Michaela. 1984. *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience. Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian-Americans*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Escriva, Angeles. 2004. *Securing Care and Welfare of Dependants Transnationally: Peruvians and Spaniards in Spain*. Working Paper No. WP404. Oxford: Oxford Institute of Ageing.
- Fortier, Ann Marie. 2000. *Migrant Belongings. Memory, Space, Identity*. Oxford: Berg.
- Ganga, Deianira. 2005. “Religion and Identity: Families of Italian Origin in the Nottingham Area, UK.” *Migration Letters* 2 (2): 144–152.
- Ganga, Deianira. 2006. “From Potential Returnees into Settlers: Nottingham’s Older Italians.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32 (8): 1395–1413. doi:10.1080/13691830600928789.
- Gardner, Kathy. 2002. *Age, Narrative and Migration: The Life Course and Life Histories of Bengali Elders in London*. Oxford: Berg.
- Goulbourne, Harry, and Mary Chamberlain, eds. 2001. *Caribbean Families in the Transatlantic World*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Goulbourne, Harry, Tracey Reynolds, John Solomos, and Elisabetta Zontini. 2010. *Transnational Families: Ethnicities, Identities and Social Capital*. London: Routledge.
- Grillo, Ralph. 2007. “Betwixt and Between: Trajectories and Projects of Transmigration.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (2): 199–217. doi:10.1080/13691830601154138.
- King, Russell. 1977. “Bedford: the Italian connection.” *Geographical Magazine* 49 (7): 442–449.
- King, Russell, Mark Thomson, Tony Fielding, and Tony Warnes. 2004. *Gender, Age and Generations*. Amsterdam: State-of-the-art-report- IMISCOE Network of Excellence on Immigration. Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe.
- King, Russell, Mark Thomson, Tony Fielding, and Tony Warnes. 2006. “Time, Generations and Gender in Migration and Settlement.” In *The Dynamics of International Migration and Settlement in Europe: A State of the Art*, edited by R. Penninx, M. Berger, and K Kraal 233–268. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- King, Russell, and Julie Vullnetari. 2006. “Orphan Pensioners and Migrating Grandparents: The Impact of Mass Migration on Older People in Rural Albania.” *Ageing and Society* 26 (5): 783–816. doi:10.1017/S0144686X06005125.

- King, Russell, Tony Warnes, and Williams Allan. 2000. *Sunset Lives: British Retirement Migration to the Mediterranean*. Oxford: Berg.
- Levitt, Peggy. 2001. *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Levitt, Peggy. 2002. "The Ties that Change: Relations to the Ancestral Home over the Life Cycle." In *The Changing Face of Home. The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*, edited by P. Levitt, and M. Waters, 123–144. New York: Russell Sage.
- Levitt, Peggy, and Nina Glick-Schiller. 2004. "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society." *International Migration Review* 38 (3): 1002–1039.
- Maynard, Mary, Haleh Afhsar, Myfawny Franks, and Sharon Wray. 2008. *Women in Later Life: Exploring Race and Ethnicity*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Miller, Daniel, Sarah Elsie Baker, and Rosalind Edwards. 2012. *How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough?* Discussion paper, Southampton: National Centre for Research Methods. <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/>.
- Moriarty, Jo, and Jaber Butt. 2004. "Inequalities in Quality of Life among Older People from Different Ethnic Groups." *Ageing and Society* 24: 729–753. doi:10.1017/S0144686X04002521.
- Nazroo, James. 1997. *The Health of Britain's Ethnic Minorities*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Oakely, Judith. 2012. *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method*. London: Berg.
- Però, Davide. 2008. "Political Engagement of Latin Americans in the UK: Issues, Strategies and the Public Debate." *Focaal –European Journal of Anthropology* 51: 73–90.
- Ramji, Hasmita. 2006. "British Indians 'Returning Home': An Exploration of Transnational Belongings." *Sociology* 40 (4): 645–662. doi:10.1177/0038038506065152.
- Reynolds, Tracey, and Elisabetta Zontini. 2006. *A Comparative Study of Care and Provision across Caribbean and Italian Transnational Families*. Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group Working Paper No. 16. London: London South Bank University.
- Rodriguez, Vicente, and Carmen Egea. 2006. "Return and the Social Environment of Andalusian Emigrants in Europe." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32 (8): 1377–1393. doi:10.1080/13691830600928771.
- Torres, Sandra. 2006. "Elderly Immigrants in Sweden: 'Otherness' Under Construction." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32 (8): 1341–1358. doi:10.1080/13691830600928730.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak, Anke Mul, and Hans Vermeulen. 2004. "Linkages between Migration and the Care of Frail Older People: Observations from Greece, Ghana and The Netherlands." *Ageing and Society* 24 (3): 431–450. doi:10.1017/S0144686X04002302.
- Vertovec, Steven. 2009. *Transnationalism*. London: Routledge.
- Walker, Joan, Alexis Manoogian, Margaret O'dell, Lori Mcgraw, and Diana White. 2001. *Families in Later Life: Connections and Transitions*. London: Pine Forge Press.
- Warnes, Anthony, and Allan Williams. 2006. "Older Migrants in Europe: A New Focus for Migration Studies." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32 (8): 1257–1281. doi:10.1080/13691830600927617.
- White, Paul. 2006. "Migrant Populations Approaching Old Age: Prospects in Europe." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32 (8): 1283–1300. doi:10.1080/13691830600927708.
- Wilding, Raelene. 2006. "'Virtual' Intimacies? Families Communicating across Transnational Contexts." *Global Networks* 6 (2): 125–142. doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00137.x.
- Wray, Susan. 2003. "Women Growing Older: Agency, Ethnicity and Culture." *Sociology* 37 (3): 511–527. doi:10.1177/00380385030373007.
- Zontini, Elisabetta. 2004. *Italian Families and Social Capital: Rituals and the Provision of Care in British-Italian Transnational Families*. Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group Working Paper No. 6. London: London South Bank University.



- Zontini, Elisabetta. 2006. "Italian Families and Social Capital: Care Provision in a Transnational World." *Community, Work and Family* 9 (3): 325–345. doi:[10.1080/13668800600743636](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800600743636).
- Zontini, Elisabetta. 2007. "Continuity and Change in Transnational Italian Families: The Changing Practices of Second-generation Women." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (7): 1103–1119. doi:[10.1080/13691830701541622](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830701541622).
- Zontini, Elisabetta. 2010. *Transnational Families, Migration and Gender. Moroccan and Filipino Women in Bologna and Barcelona*. Oxford: Berghahn Press.

**ELISABETTA ZONTINI** is Associate Professor in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham.

ADDRESS: School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK. Email: [Elisabetta.zontini@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Elisabetta.zontini@nottingham.ac.uk)