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Positionnements professionnels et valeurs personnelles vis-á-vis du regroupement familial transnational avec des parents ágés: le travail social dans un champ émergent

Marilène Vuille, Claudio Bolzman & Elisabeth Hirsch Durrett

National rules for family reunification take place in an increasingly transnational context. Social workers in Switzerland, whether they work in services for migrants or for elders, are confronted with requests for transnational family reunification with older parents. Such requests, while relatively rare, elicit responses which must be viewed as largely founded on professionals' values and norms regarding the care of elders, family cohabitation, the influence of cultural factors, and examined against a backdrop of increasing suspicion of motives for migration—especially in fields where migration issues

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have not been at the forefront of professional debate and practice. The militant stance of some services for migrants can thus be contrasted with the relative inexperience of professionals active in social services for elders, who rarely encounter recent migrants. The latter are more likely to reflect their own private—and unexamined—views when advising clients in a field characterised by complexity and instability. The authors interviewed social workers and families in two Swiss cantons. Their results point to ways in which distinct professional cultures could enrich each other and provide social workers with tools to critically analyse their own practice in a very difficult field, the contours of which remain largely unexplored.

Le regroupement familial est encadré par des législations nationales, mais prend place toujours plus souvent dans un contexte transnational. En Suisse, les travailleurs sociaux de services destinés aux migrants comme aux personnes âgées sont quelquefois confrontés à des demandes concernant le regroupement familial avec des parents âgés. Les réponses apportées par les professionnels se fondent pour une grande part sur leurs valeurs et leurs normes relatives aux soins aux personnes âgées, à la cohabitation familiale et à l'influence des facteurs culturels. Elles interviennent en outre dans un climat de suspicion grandissante envers les motifs qui poussent à la migration. L'attitude militante qui prévaut dans certains services pour migrants présente un contraste avec le manque relatif d'expérience des professionnels actifs dans les services sociaux pour personnes âgées. Ces derniers rencontrent rarement des migrants récents et sont plus susceptibles d'offrir à leurs clients des conseils fondés sur leurs opinions personnelles, dans un domaine caractérisé par une complexité et une instabilité juridique très grandes. Les données sont issues d'entretiens conduits avec des travailleurs sociaux dans deux cantons suisses. Leur analyse conduit les auteurs à distinguer des cultures professionnelles qui pourraient s'enrichir mutuellement, afin de fournir aux travailleurs sociaux des outils d'analyse critique de leurs propres pratiques dans un champ épineux et encore très peu exploré.

Introduction

This article deals with the types of professional stance exhibited by social workers, as well as the personal values they describe, when confronted with situations involving transnational family reunification with older parents. We shall analyse how they position themselves when faced with families asking for advice on the possibility of an older parent joining them in Switzerland. We shall attempt to place the strategies

they utilise within a framework of models of social work practice as well as a frame of reference of values founding their actions and the advice they give families.

The article is divided into two parts. Following a brief presentation of our research methodology, the first part of the article outlines the social and legal context in which family reunification with older parents takes place; we focus on information about reasons put forward for reunification, prevalence of this phenomenon and we outline constraints facing families attempting this process. The second and most central part of the article specifically deals with the types of interventions carried out by social workers working with migrant families who turn to them for help with transnational family reunification with an older parent. We first present the main models of social work action underlying interventions with these families; we then describe the method used for analysing the stance adopted by social workers in our study; finally we discuss our main results in a general conclusion.

Research Design and Sample

This article is based upon a study funded by the Swiss National Research Fund Science Foundation conducted by the authors in two Swiss cantons between 2006 and 2008. This study focused on the exploration of two main questions: (1) for what motives, under what circumstances (within or outside legal boundaries) and with what type of outcomes do families choose transnational reunification with an elderly relative? (2) under what circumstances do social service professionals encounter situations of family reunification with elderly people, how do they view these situations and how do they deal with them?

We conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with social workers and with families in the two cantons. Identifying cases proved to be particularly difficult. Even social services for older people, where case files are systematically opened for clients, do not use criteria that would have enabled us to determine whether a client had recently moved to Switzerland to join his or her family. We thus had to rely on the knowledge of social workers about their own cases to identify the situations we were targeting. As a consequence, we were not able to collate a complete population of relevant cases in order to draw a sample from it. This flaw in sampling is clearly a common feature of studies focusing on populations lacking visibility and legally or administratively pre-defined characteristics.

We interviewed *48 social workers* from services that may be divided into three broad groups, according to the types of clients they serve as well as according to their private or public character:

- 'Social services for older people': i.e. those whose target clientele is comprised only, or mostly of elderly clients. These services constitute approximately half of our sample. These services may be public or private non-profit structures; they are all active in the field of help and support to elderly clients, of advocacy for the rights

of retired persons, or in the fields of home care or nursing homes. Organised on a cantonal or on a national scale, some of them manage important budgets as their mission includes financial help to low-income retirees. For the most part, they are subjected to specific local rules as well as complex legal constraints. In particular, some of these services can only intervene when potential foreign clients hold certain types of permits, have resided in Switzerland for the prescribed number of years for eligibility for certain benefits; having contributed to the Swiss system of social security is also an important eligibility criterion. Yet professionals from social services for older people were not specialised in immigration legislation, nor in international social security issues. None of the social workers we interviewed had received any specific training in these fields. On the other hand, most of them had been active in gerontological social work for over 10 years and were highly competent in matters of available benefits for retirees who had lived in Switzerland during their work life.

- 'Social services for migrants': i.e. those whose target clientele is comprised only or mostly of immigrants. These services represent about a third of our sample. All services in this group are private; some of them have been set up by churches or by religious communities. Their activities take place in two main fields: on the one hand, information and legal help for migrants, and on the other hand financial aid, restricted to persons in need. These services have few elderly clients other than immigrant workers nearing retirement age coming in to inquire about the conditions under which they can receive their pension if they return to their home country. Social workers from this group of services systematically told us they had chosen to specialise in helping immigrants. Yet most of them had acquired specific knowledge of the field through practicing alongside more experienced colleagues and not through specialised continuing education (such as courses on articulations between social insurance and immigration legislation). All of them were fluent in one or more foreign languages and several of them were themselves first or second-generation immigrants.

- Finally, we met professionals active in general public services (cantonal administrative services, city social services as well as hospital social services). These services implement, and sometimes contribute to elaborating, according to state and federal legislation, specific rules pertaining to benefits in their specific field of action (residency permits, emergency care and health care for chronic conditions, financial assistance). Criteria for obtaining benefits are specified in such a way that certain categories of foreign residents are defined as ineligible (those without a valid residency permit or holding a short stay permit, or those not receiving a Swiss old-age pension). Moreover, in some cases, benefits—if they are granted—can be a cause for non-renewal of the residency permit when it expires. Social workers active in public social services are often facing paradoxical situations: their work is framed by norms and rules, and their margin for action apparently much more constrained than that of social workers in the private or faith-based field when it comes to responding to the requests for help from the families of

recently arrived elderly immigrants; yet in most cases public services end up jumping into the breech when acute needs arise—such as finding a nursing home placement for an illegal elderly migrant.

We interviewed social workers about cases of family reunification they had encountered during the past few years, on the basis of closed or open case files whenever files were kept. For each case identified, we asked questions about needs expressed by the elderly person or their relatives, about the way they had acted or responded, about possible difficulties they had faced, about how they had coped with them as well as on their view of the situation of elderly immigrants and their families who had gone through family reunification. All interviews were taped and fully transcribed.

We also met *24 families* and asked family members (either the elderly person himself or herself, but most often one of the adult children or sons/daughters-in-law) to tell us about their experience of the process of family reunification, their motivations, their assessment of positive and negative aspects of their situation as well as the nature of their contacts—if any—with social services. We recruited these families through contacts with a large number of public and private services, as well as community associations. We wrote to a broad range of services explaining the topic of our research and asking them to pass along this information to persons corresponding to our criteria who might then get in touch with us. Some families who had achieved family reunification and were followed by social workers authorised these professionals to give us their address. Other families were reached through compatriots active in community associations. Establishing contact was time-consuming as we had to call on intermediaries in order to convince families that we were trustworthy and to get them to agree to be interviewed by us.

Due to the varied means by which we had to resort to find relevant cases, both our samples (social workers and families) are heterogeneous. On the one hand, this has added to our understanding of the great diversity of situations experienced by families living with an elderly parent as well as of the means used to overcome the wide variety of difficulties likely to arise. On the other hand, it must be made clear that our samples were constituted without real opportunities to select the most prevalent types of situations on the basis of a systematic identification of the range of existing case configurations. Especially where the families we interviewed are concerned, we met with all families who were prepared to talk to us, without selecting them on the basis of saturation nor according to a typological model that emerged from initial analyses of our data.

The first part of this article, dealing with motivations for family reunification with an older parent, is largely based on data collected through our interviews with families. The second part, focusing on professionals' experiences and views, is based on interviews we conducted with the social workers. While all the professionals had encountered cases of transnational family reunification with elderly parents in their practice, not all the interviewed families had had contacts with social services: some

families had carried out all administrative tasks on their own and had no obvious need for assistance; others were not aware of the existing social services or were wary of them. The data collected from families about their encounters with social services was, therefore, spotty and not reliable or systematic enough to be used in our analysis of social work interventions.

Part I: Family Reunification with Older Parents: an Issue and Its Context

Transnational Family Solidarity and Family Reunification with Older Parents

Transnational approaches have emphasised that migration does not extinguish the links between family members who have left their country and those who have stayed behind (Vatz Laaroussi *et al.*, 2008). In fact, despite distance and duration of separation, diversified forms of relations arise between family members living far apart. We may of course mention visits, but also contacts at a distance including letters, phone calls, Internet messaging and social networks as well as the circulation of money, goods and gifts. Some families are in daily contact, and even able to manage care and assistance from afar (Baldassar, 2008). Thus, despite some members of the family having emigrated, a continuity of relationships and exchanges persists. Ways to maintain 'distanced intimacy', along more or less close and regular lines, have arisen and continue to connect generations across national borders.

Family reunification with older parents is usually only envisaged when a disturbance arises and alters the precarious equilibrium families have found in their transnational existence. Most often, a specific *life event* sets the process in motion by modifying the situation of the elderly person (or persons), of their children, or of relationships existing between them. We may distinguish three main types of reasons leading to family reunification: the older person needs help, his or her children require the elder's presence with them, or the socio-political context becomes altered and renders contacts easier, or more difficult. We shall outline these reasons very briefly as they represent the backdrop against which social work interventions take place.

Many life events, such as becoming widowed or divorced, may affect the elderly parent, most often an elderly *mother* because of the longer life expectancy of women as well as because of age differences within marital couples. New situations may result in greater social isolation and increased frailty. Changes in the health of the elderly person due to disease, accidents or the ageing process itself may affect his or her autonomy; the absence of relatives living nearby may lead to questions about the most appropriate structures, services and location for care provision. Isolation may also lead families to be concerned about the actual economic survival of their elderly relative in environments where little protection is available.

We also encountered situations where older migrant workers return to their country of origin after a prolonged period of unemployment, after taking early retirement or at normal pension age; they sometimes cannot get used to life in their own country, which has become a 'foreign' land for them, and they wish to return to

the country where they spent their adult life and where their children and grandchildren still live.

As far as *migrant children* are concerned, they may also experience *life events* that modify their social, family or economic situation. These events may relate to marital status in the case of separation or divorce or, more rarely, widowhood. Other changes in family composition such as the birth of children may also affect the functioning of the couple. The combination of familial and economic factors such as the need for both spouses—or for single parents—to work outside the home to ensure enough income for families to survive may render the organisation of family daily life more precarious. In this context, it is worth mentioning that affordable quality childcare places are hard to come by in Switzerland. In those types of situations, we may observe the emergence of unmet needs for support in the material as well as the emotional realms. Adult children may call upon their elderly parents to help them out, for periods of time of various durations.

Macro-social contextual events may also affect the transnational lifestyles families have devised, or open up new opportunities for intergenerational contacts. The requirement, introduced by the Swiss Government, of tourist visas for travellers from some countries, meant that some families sought family reunification in order to simplify visits from their parents. In fact, when faced with administrative requirements, families may have to imagine new ways of ensuring that intergenerational contacts continue to exist; family reunification may then become one the few viable alternatives. In other cases, interethnic conflict, civil war or generalised violence in the country of origin may lead children to attempt to get their elderly parents to join them as an emergency measure, as was the case during the war in the former Yugoslavia. On the other hand, the demise of the 'iron curtain' meant that new possibilities of direct contacts arose, including family reunification, between parents who had stayed behind in Eastern Europe and their children who had moved to Switzerland.

As we can see, family reunification most often constitutes a form of *regulation,* i.e. a response devised by families to overcome, correct, alleviate or compensate for the impact of disturbances affecting the older parent in most cases, but sometimes also the adult children who have emigrated. Regulation is thus also a form of adaptation to an unstable macro-social context.

In order to be able to examine the positions taken by social workers confronted to a complex field which proves difficult to integrate into commonly used professional analysis and practice models, some contextual elements are necessary. We will then attempt to link the types of professional stances we observed with the professional context in which the social workers we interviewed are active.

An Infrequent Phenomenon, Constrained by Complex Legal Obstacles

Family reunification of elders is an infrequent phenomenon. It only represents a small proportion (around 1%) of legal family reunification in Switzerland, a field that

mainly concerns spouses and minor children. It is thus rare to see this issue specifically brought up in official statistics, political discourse or in discussions of migration policies.

Indeed very restrictive conditions limit possibilities for family reunification of elders.[1] In order to be able to obtain resident status in their own right, older parents must have very substantial financial means at their disposal; conditions are even stricter for persons coming from 'third States' (i.e. non EU/EFTA countries) than for European citizens. This is undoubtedly why social workers are rarely in contact with families whose elderly parents came, or are planning to come to reside in Switzerland with legal *pensioner* status.

The legal framework concerning entry into Switzerland with a 'derived' status, i.e. due to the legal presence of one's children, requires at the very least that families demonstrate that they were contributing financially to the support of their parent while the latter was living abroad, before family reunification was envisaged; adult children must also pledge to continue providing this support in order to avoid any recourse to public funds for the parent's daily life needs, or for his/her social or medical care. This regulation specifically applies to EU/EFTA citizens, for whom a possibility of family reunification is explicitly mentioned in the AFMP.[2]

For non-EU/EFTA citizens, there is no legal basis for family reunification of elders as such; thus, obtaining permission for an older parent to come and join the family requires special status to be granted under immigration law. As we mentioned, coming into the country as a pensioner is usually impossible because a high level of financial resources is required; in most cases, the only option is thus to request a *humanitarian* residency permit. Reasons must include the impossibility for the elderly persons to remain in their own country under conditions deemed acceptable by the authorities. Dependency must be documented; in particular, family members living in Switzerland must show that they were providing steady financial support before the application was made. Relatives must also make a formal commitment to continued complete financial support once the older parent joins them in Switzerland, and prove that they have the financial means to do so.

Obtaining resident status for the elderly relative is thus conditional, whether it takes place within family reunification provisions or is granted for humanitarian reasons, upon a written commitment from resident children pledging complete financial support. Moreover, intergenerational cohabitation is most often the only realistic option for economic reasons, other arrangements proving too expensive for families and elders having joined them.

Part II: Social Work and Family Reunification with Older Parents

Social Work Models of Action and Professional Dilemmas

One of the central tasks of social work is to provide support and assistance to vulnerable individuals, families or groups in order to help them find the necessary internal or external resources to obtain a secure and recognised place in the society in

which they live. Social work professionals found their actions, in part, on legal norms that provide the framework to interventions they conduct with this broad goal.

One of the difficulties confronting social workers today is the fact they must rely on national legal systems designed for persons having spent most of their working life in one national context and having primarily contributed to the social security system of one country. Yet, in a world characterised by increasing international mobility, social workers encounter more and more clients whose life course is far different from the type of situations for which current laws were meant to provide a normative framework. A fault line may thus open between modes of action provided for by existing legal instruments and realities encountered in the field by social work professionals. As Righard (2008, p. 3) points out:

> there is a growing discrepancy between the organisation of territories and of people in terms of States and legal citizenship and the way in which people actually organise their lives. While States in general, and welfare states in particular, are organised around borders and limits which are distinctive and significant for each State, social actors have a tendency to live their daily lives *across* these borders and limits.

Family reunification with older parents who have remained abroad is precisely a field where tension between national welfare and solidarity policies and transnational lifestyles is at the forefront (Bolzman *et al.*, 2008). Such reunification is usually envisaged only as an exception by national immigration laws, as the Swiss example shows. Even when reunification is deemed legally possible, it is constrained by a whole series of conditions, particularly in financial terms. These tend to place the support of foreign elders joining their families firmly in the private realm, the burden being placed almost exclusively on the families themselves. The 'elbow room' for social workers is very limited, rendering their task particularly delicate when they try to provide help and support to families and their aged parents. In some cases, social workers attempt to take into account the transnational issues characteristic of the situation of these families; in others they focus on national norms to try to respond to the requests they receive.

Social workers may found their professional responses on at least two major conflicting models that have been highlighted by earlier studies. Chaudet *et al.* (2000) have called these models respectively regulation-oriented and emancipation-oriented. The first model views problems experienced by migrants as primarily due to their difficulty in adapting to a societal context described as functioning satisfactorily. Professionals thus have the task of helping migrants to overcome the problems they encounter and to modify behaviours that are seen as inadequate in their new environment, so that they may fit in to society more successfully. We may note a similarity between this professional model and the assimilation model, according to which immigrants are 'handicapped' by their lack of understanding of the cultural codes of the society (Bolzman, 2002). This model predominates in official institutions and 'mainstream' services. The second, which focuses on emancipation, views the roots of problems experienced by immigrants as largely due to obstacles put

in their path by the society to which they have moved. Immigration policies, in particular, create many structural obstacles for migrants and their families. Professionals may make such a diagnosis when they see that their clients systematically run into the same difficulties, for instance, in terms of legal constraints. Migrants may thus be seen as handicapped more by inadequate legal provisions than by cultural factors. When this approach is taken, professionals may take it upon themselves to act more collectively in order to attempt to obtain changes in rules and regulations, so that migrants' rights may prevail and so that their clients might find a recognised place within the society. This model is more frequently found as a basis for professional action in the field of associations and militant groups whose goals include the promotion of the rights of migrants, or of human rights in general. Differences between the type of services in which the social workers we interviewed are active (associations and militant rights groups, or public, mainstream services) will be used to test their link to underlying models of the goals of social work intervention.

Yet another important dimension of social work action, highlighted by Cohen-Emerique and Hohl (2002), concerns the place of professionals' personal values in the field of social work with migrants. According to these authors, professionals frequently evaluate the needs and demands of clients defined as 'others' on the basis of value judgments that do not necessarily stem from professional ethics, but rather from their own personal values. These evaluations are not always carried out in a fully conscious manner in terms of their underlying ethical values. We may thus wonder whether this phenomenon is found in social work practices with families seeking reunification with older parents.

Categories of Requests to Social Services Relating to Family Reunification of Elders: Needs and Expectations Expressed by Elderly Immigrants and/or Their Relatives

Social workers received three main types of requests from families dealing with family reunification of elders: (1) services were contacted by families who wished to find out about the possibility of family reunification, or about the chance of obtaining legal status for a parent who had already joined them; (2) they received requests for financial assistance (one-off or regular), in which case legal rights to social insurance or welfare benefits would differ according to national origin and categories of migrants concerned; and (3) they were contacted because of demands relating to the declining health or disability affecting the elderly parent (about possibilities of nursing home placement, or opportunities for receiving help to take care of a sick or disabled elder at home). These categories were not mutually exclusive. In this article, we focus on the first type of requests; they seem particularly appropriate to highlight stances taken by social workers that we view as closely linked to their representations of clients in the realm of family reunification of elders. These representations take place in a climate of increasing suspicion against migrants, especially where migrants from outside the European Union are concerned; these migrants are often accused of abusing the asylum

or humanitarian dispositions of Swiss law for 'purely economic' reasons (Lakoff & Ferguson, 2006). Dominant views about health and social costs due to ageing and care of elders must also be taken into consideration, old age being widely considered as a social burden that could become overwhelming (Walker, 2008).

Contacts with Social Services Relating to Legal Opportunities for Family Reunification of Elders: Practice Models and Ideological Stances of Social Workers

Social services were not the only instances with which individuals or families wishing to get an older parent to join them in Switzerland get into contact, and they may not have been the first. Families who were concerned with acting within the boundaries of the law first got in touch with the embassy or consulate of the home country of their parent, or turned to the town administration of their own place of residence in Switzerland. Yet all social services we contacted, be they elderly- or migrant-oriented, had been solicited at one time or another by families seeking information about opportunities of legal possibilities of resident status for an older parent. In situations they viewed as complex, professionals oriented the families to another, more competent service specialised in legal help and advice for migrants. This referral is predicated upon well-informed professionals who have a complete view of the service network and its specific resources, as is the case for social referral activities in general.

Families also turned to social services for help or support when they were envisaging family reunification as an option; they sometimes wanted assistance in examining possibilities for a temporary visit to change into permanent resident status, or in finding a way to legalise the presence of an elder whose tourist visa had already lapsed. In some situations where reunification had been achieved in practice but was never formalised through legal proceedings, the older parent might have lived in Switzerland for years as an illegal alien before specific events, be they gradual or sudden in onset, affected the ability of family members to provide support and forced them to seek legal status for their older relative.

Social Workers as Counsellors: Informing, Warning, Discouraging...

The most straightforward situations encountered by social services concerning family reunification of elders were contacts aimed at obtaining information on its feasibility. The interviews we conducted gave us a glimpse of a wide range of attitudes when social workers received such requests for information on reunification prospects.

In the capital city of one of the cantons selected for our research, a private social service specialised in migration issues offers two weekly anonymous and free 'open appointments' in the evening. Many people interested in family reunification of elders seek information during these evening sessions. According to the social workers staffing these sessions, after having received information about the very restrictive legal conditions for such reunification, families usually understood that there was little hope and either gave up on their plans or opted for illegal reunification. Whenever social workers felt there might be a chance to obtain a

residency permit for the older parent, a formal appointment was arranged in order to set the process in motion (assembling necessary documents and pieces of evidence, preparing supporting arguments for the permit request). Another important part of the social workers' job with persons seeking legal reunification with their older parent consisted of furnishing help towards lodging an appeal in administrative court after canton authorities had refused to grant the requested residency permit.

Professionals working for associations or for older people's social services were often consulted by persons who were themselves retired and who felt that getting their very elderly parents, whose health was declining, to come over and join them would be a good solution. In such services, information supplied focused more often on risks associated with family reunification than on its restrictive legal framework. Social workers reported that they 'warned' families about future problems that may bring about important difficulties in the financial and family relationship realms. Some professionals '*worked on the initial request*' with the person, asking them for instance '*what [was] the most important factor about getting a parent to come over and join them, after that parent [had] lived away in his or her own place for a long time*' and by '*leading*' them towards a decision. Several of them stated that they did not hesitate before '*strongly advising against*' reunification or '*discouraging*' families who were considering initiating the process.[3] This attitude stood in sharp contrast with non-directive counselling approaches, defined by Wertz *et al.* (2003, p. 31), albeit in a health care context, as 'the provision of accurate, full, and unbiased information in an empathic relationship that offers guidance and helps people work through to their own decisions'. These authors further state (p. 32) that: 'In non-directive counselling the professional avoids purposely slanting information that may lead people to do what the counsellor thinks best'.

Motivations leading social workers in services for older people to adopt an attitude meant to turn families away from the reunification project differed from one professional to another. Three major factors proved to be prominent: the integration of the older person, financial issues and family dynamics.

- One frequent cause of professional reluctance about reunification on the part of social workers concerned the reduced capacity of persons coming to Switzerland in later life to leave their familiar milieu and to get used to daily life in a new country, where they usually do not speak the language and where they may not know anyone except for their children. A social worker (older people's services) explained for instance that an elderly lady from Kosovo '[might] not live in a heated studio apartment in her village there, but there would be other contacts which would mean her quality of life would be better'. The idea that leaving elders in the familiar surroundings (although the said surroundings might vary in scale since one might be referring to an apartment, a town or an entire country) frequently came up, even in cases where one might surmise that the elders in question had already left their own area, having been displaced within their country or outside of it by strife or by war.

- Financial issues stemmed from various types of concerns. Some social workers feared, as immigration authorities do, that the older person might end up representing a 'burden' for Swiss society. Others were afraid that the financial situation of the family might become very difficult, that adult children might go into debt and that the entire family group could become impoverished. Several professionals in our sample were not opposed in principle to families taking in their elders, as long as '*this [could] take place with a sufficient level of comfort for all concerned*'—while taking into account the fact that defining such a level might presumably vary according to socio-economic background, cultural customs and world views as well as personal experience. A negative attitude towards reunification based on financial issues could thus derive from two opposite logics: for some, the goal was to protect society against the financial burden which elder migrants, and possibly their adult children who could not cope with the financial strain and would become poor themselves, would represent; for others, the issue was a somewhat paternalistic view of the protection of the interests of their clients. Older migrants and their families then 'deserved' to be warned against financial risks stemming, in part, from strict legal constraints for reunification which include the written commitment by children to completely support the elderly parent.
- Some social workers also feared that the presence of the elder might upset the family's equilibrium, especially when lack of resources implied that two or three generations would be cohabiting.

> For families . . . I can imagine it isn't so easy . . ., especially if reunification means that everyone will be in the same living space. . . . I imagine that it can change a lot of things in the family dynamics, all of a sudden to have one's elderly parent, with everything that parent might bring as baggage in terms of principles, of how a family functions. (Social worker, older people's services)

Some felt that spouses might not look kindly upon the presence of a father- or mother-in-law, especially if his or her own parents had had to stay abroad and might not be able to join the family. On the other hand, minor children in the family were more frequently described as benefiting from the presence of grandparents, at least during early childhood.

We discovered that social workers' attitudes were informed less by previous experience of situations which went well—or badly—than by their own private values about migration in old age, about modes of social integration, about family solidarity, about intergenerational cohabitation, about granting social security benefits to various categories of immigrants, about the rights of individuals to live as a family group and to seek better conditions in another national context, and even about North-South issues. In that sense, it was difficult to identify positions which were typical of a *specific service,* with the exception of a private social service specialised in migration issues, with a clearly marked militant ideological position

(e.g. taking part in a network of associations fighting for the rights of illegal immigrants). This militant stance did seem to be reflected in the attitudes of social workers who tended to take into consideration the request which families presented to them and attempted to respond accordingly, without passing judgment on it in terms of their own values. These social workers described to us how, when handling these cases, they attempted to meet the clients' demand by resorting to any type of argument (legal, economic, pragmatic, emotional) liable to further the goal stated by the client, even if it meant making use of loopholes in the law or contradictory legal provisions. In order to achieve results, they spoke of relying on an analysis of what had worked or failed in previous cases handled by their colleagues or themselves. This experience, as well as some basic stances on values (respecting and broadening human rights for all persons, even where this meant opposing some current immigration policies), was shared within the social work team and transmitted to new workers joining the organisation. None of these social workers ever mentioned 'working with clients on the nature of their demands' to encourage service users to modify their goals. However, this practice was frequently described by social workers in services for older people. The latter seemed to approach these cases, perceived as out of the ordinary, in two different ways. They sometimes relied on their own unexamined beliefs (for instance, their opinion that elders cannot adapt to new environments, or that cohabiting with one's older parents is always a problem). They also resorted to a regulation-based approach of social work (Chaudet *et al.*, 2000), inciting clients to adapt their goals and pursue objectives congruent with current Swiss legal provisions and immigration policies.

The distinction between informative and 'leading' counselling may be viewed as resting upon the credit implicitly awarded to the good judgment of the persons seeking advice: were they viewed as capable of self-determination and able to weigh the pros and cons in view of the range of their own interests, or were they seen as not responsible enough, not able to discern what might be '*best*' for them and ready to '*forge ahead regardless*'? These distinct attitudes towards their clients expressed by social workers have moral, but also political implications. The first, opting for a professional response derived from the clients' explicit wishes, constantly questions the normative framework of intervention with migrant persons and seeks to redefine it, thus attempting to widen the manoeuvring room of clients. The other, choosing a professional response in line with ever more rigid Swiss norms on immigration, places the actions of both social workers and clients in an increasingly constrained framework. These two types of positions represent apt illustrations of the distinction between regulation-oriented versus emancipation-oriented social work as discussed above.

Family Reunification: 'Cultural' Phenomenon and 'Forced Migration'
The professionals we interviewed freely admitted that they did not know a lot about the modest number of situations identified for our study.

Cases we were able to bring out—there are not that many of them—well actually, if we don't have that much to say about them, it's because we did not know them that well. So I would not presume to go as far as to say 'These people had such and such a problem'. Money problems yes, that I can say because that is what we see..., but integration problems, I would be hard pressed to say. The same goes for difficulties to do with being uprooted.

Yet the same social worker (older people's services) later stated:

I mean people who land here at 70, even if they are coming to join their son or daughter, they leave a whole network behind, they leave social relationships, they leave... they leave... and that, I think, is hard.

Even when they lacked solid data about the life course of elderly immigrants and about the exact cause of family reunification, even though they did not have a global view of the current situation of elders and their families, social workers often constructed a scenario of these cases on the basis of relatively meager clues. Yet, while the ability to pick up on clues and to interpret them is a basic competency for social work practice, especially in intercultural situations, professionals must be able to contextualise and give meaning, 'in a stance of discovery of the other's standpoint, rather than one of confirmation of preconceptions' (Cohen-Emerique & Hohl, 2002, p. 172).

Social workers from older people's services, used to working with Swiss elders or with long-term residents, experienced difficulties in perceiving the perspective and the logic of action of late immigrants and of their families. The desire for reunification was then most often described as a constraint derived from tradition, from irrepressible filial loyalty which prevailed in an almost automatic manner:

I completely understand the reasons that compel these people to get their old parents to come over. It's their attachment, their sense of duty, of loyalty, their culture tells them that's the way it is, that's all they have always seen and practiced, their own mother took care of her aged parents, etc. It's always been done this way and it isn't even a question, to not take care of one's parents. ....They can't do it any other way.

Another social worker from the same team said: 'It is a very 'Russian' kind of arrangement. One has to support one's old parents, so...that's it, it is a duty, it's family, there's nothing worth discussing about it'. A third professional declared:

Well, they got them to come over because, for them, it goes without saying, it is their burden to bear. ....I don't know, strong ties that bind. Often with people from the South...I feel it's beyond any kind of questioning, it's just the way it is.

In other cultures—Oriental (Russian, or from the Balkans region), South American, Southern European (Portuguese, Italian, Spanish) or just from 'the South'—all these loosely 'regional' categories having been mentioned to us—filial piety was described

as an unshakeable cultural cornerstone. One may deduce, as a mirror effect, that in Swiss society a different kind of culture (presumably more individualistic) would give adult children greater leeway in choosing how their aged parents will be cared for. Surprisingly, the absence or shortage of infrastructures offering care at home or nursing home placement in the countries from which foreign clients come, as well as material and psychological difficulties stemming from trying to assist and support an aged parent from afar were very rarely mentioned by social workers. Family reunification was thus described by interviewees less as an attempt at rational regulation on the part of families than as the result of a form of cultural determinism, where culture is viewed as a sort of 'second nature' (Bolzman, 2002).

This way of viewing others' culture as a rigid set of relationships, or even as shackles allowing very little leeway for individual choice, is reflected in current policies aiming at restricting immigration adopted by most EU/EFTA countries with higher standards of living. In France for instance, conditions for family reunification have become more and more restrictive during the past 15 years (Baudet, 2008). The Interior Ministry contrasts two views of immigration—on the one hand 'chosen migration' (migration of the labour force which corresponds to French national economic needs), which must be encouraged, on the other hand 'passive' or 'forced' migration (family reunification), which must be restricted. This terminology has spread to other countries and outside the conservative political milieux that introduced it; it can now be found in the discourse of professionals in the social and health care fields. This binary conception of immigration may lead professionals to view elderly parents primarily as 'victims' of 'forced' migration, uprooted from their home environment, unable to adapt to the society to which they have moved, a society then faced with problems and future financial burdens.

In Switzerland moreover, populist right-wing movements have managed to impose their vision of migration issues; public debate has become polarised between 'open' and 'closed' visions. According to these views, policy alternatives on migration issues are played out between two radically opposed sides, which are described as more, or less 'realistic': 'those who can afford the luxury of adopting a moralising stance of openness and tolerance against those who—the Swiss 'people' included—understand that times are hard. Faced with this kind of dilemma, elitist good intentions obviously cannot outweigh 'popular realism' (Amarelle 2005, p. 17). The populist right promotes this vision and comes up with one proposition after another aimed at restricting immigration, including measures limiting the right to family reunification.[4]

The social workers we interviewed took a stance within the force field of this binary reasoning. The 'filial piety' that seemed to many of them more characteristic of their foreign clients than of their Swiss ones, was viewed with sympathy, sometimes even with admiration. Yet 'realism' dictated that their clients' enthusiasm had to be curbed when they tried to concretise this loyalty:

> Migrants who live in X. [capital city of one of the two cantons] quickly get the impression that the Swiss system should take care of them. But if the deep truth be

known, there is no reason why the Swiss social welfare system should pay for elderly migrants from the whole planet. It is simply not possible. The standard of living here is very high, but we can't offer this standard of living, it's impossible. (Social worker, older people's services)

Some other professionals, fewer in number, defended—*a contrario*—the idea that letting elderly migrants come and spend their old age with their children was only fair, since Switzerland actively recruited abroad the labour force it needed for certain sectors of its economy. These professionals were aware that their position was not shared by a majority of social workers: 'I have a more idealistic world view, see, a utopia' (Social worker, migrants' social service).

Discussion and Conclusion

Although they are infrequent, situations involving family reunification with older parents are liable to raise difficult issues for social workers: they require articulating the social security system, very complex in itself with (1) various social security international agreements as well as (2) residency regulations and immigration legislation, with a multiplicity of entitlement conditions, restrictive clauses, special regulations and extraordinary measures. It is thus very difficult, even for experienced social workers, to identify the most appropriate way to act in any specific situation. Then again, all avenues may be blocked by a precarious residency status (receiving welfare benefits can lead to losing one's residency permit) and by the commitment formally made by children to support their parent . . . . Sixteen years ago, Cousin (1996, p. 145) drew attention to the following transformation of social work: from now on, the specific characteristics of clients are less important for defining the users of social services than the context of the measures used to help them. We may take this statement one step further and claim that the criteria for access—or lack of access—to social security benefits are most significant to define some migrant populations, including older migrants within the context of family reunification.

Immigration policies and social policies currently conducted in many European countries tend to restrict the possibilities of legal entry for certain categories of migrants; for those who have already arrived—legally or illegally—access to social security benefits or welfare are further restricted, at least for citizens of non EU/EFTA countries, in order to limit the so-called 'magnet effect' (Carde, 2009). Social workers thus simply cannot help some categories of migrants, excluded from support measures by clauses making these measures contingent upon residency status. A partial exception to this restrictive context may be found in the extended access to benefits open to some EU/EFTA citizens within the framework of AFMP. Yet for our target group of elder reunification candidates, conditions permitting reunification remain difficult to meet.

Elderly migrants joining their families are an exemplary case of a group confronting social workers with highly complex problems; they and their families are a category of clients liable to make professionals feel unable to provide acceptable

solutions (Weinberg, 2010). Might the predominant view, which holds that this type of migration and the modes of family organisation it implies represent an unsatisfactory solution leading to cultural and financial problems, then only be reinforced by actual contacts with real-life clients? Yes, if the professional's gaze is fixed on immigrants' 'culture', leading them almost mechanically to finding themselves in very difficult straits (this view tended to be put forward by professionals in older people's services). No, if public policies of countries like Switzerland are examined from a critical standpoint (this is more often the case in services for migrants, which tend to be private and hold militant positions on human rights). Focusing on the other's 'culture' and on difficulties in becoming 'integrated' may obscure—or at least prevent a clear view of—racist political structures and discriminatory policies causing specific problems to certain categories of clients of social services (Wright 1998; Brotman, 2003).

Our study aimed at highlighting a little-known phenomenon, the size of which was difficult to determine; it also had the goal of supplying social workers with tools for improving their practices, and heightening their sensitivity to the context of cases of elder family reunification. We knew that professionals were acting within a context of complex rules and rapidly changing regulations and we felt that furnishing them with structured information would be a positive step. As it turns out, even though improving the level of practical knowledge of the issue among professionals remains an important goal, another crucial aim has emerged: it seems to us that in-depth discussions about the stance of social workers towards migrant client groups, about their capacity to steer away from stereotypes and to adapt their practice to situations far removed from issues of filial piety or of cultural differences must be pursued. Social services active in the migration field could play an important part in transmitting their knowledge and in clarifying their professional positions and modes of practice to social workers in the field of services for older people, who still have not been confronted to migration issues on a regular basis, and whose foreign clients were usually older European immigrants who came to Switzerland in the 1950s and 1960s.

Our data thus lead us to believe that cooperative work and joint, or mutual training among social workers involved in different fields of practice should be pursued. Whilst we were able to pinpoint the impact of different attitudes and professional approaches in terms of concrete actions in the field of defending migrant clients' rights, we may surmise that the lack of specific knowledge of difficulties encountered by families dealing with dependent elders hampers the practice of social workers in the migration field dealing with family reunification. Mechanisms for exchanges should be devised and they should include in-depth discussions of values as well as information on specific legal and service provision. In our views, real changes in professional practice, including more grounded social work interventions benefiting families confronted with complex issues as well as legal and administrative uncertainties, would follow.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1]   For a detailed presentation of the Swiss legal framework and rules on family reunification of elders and other avenues for immigration in later life (see Bolzman *et al.*, 2008).
[2]   Article 3, Annex I to the AFMP RS 0.142.112.681. (Agreement between Switzerland and the EU and its member States on free movement of persons signed 21 June 1999, implementation date 1 June 2002.)
[3]   All quotes in quotation marks and italics are from interviews conducted for the study.
[4]   Four parliamentary motions aimed at restricting family reunification and reducing extra-European immigration, were proposed to the Federal Parliament in 2011 and supported by the relevant Parliamentary Committee in the House of Representatives (*Conseil National*).

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