CHAPTER 17: Dutch migrants and their parents back home: caring from a distance

'All you do in life is saying goodbye'[1]

THE CONTEXT

This paper is part of a research project, funded by the Australian Research Council and conducted by Loretta Baldassar, Raelene Wilding (Anthropology Department, UWA) and Cora Baldock (Sociology, Murdoch University). The theoretical focus of the project is on developing connections between migration studies, family studies and gerontology by considering the ways in which geographic distance and national boundaries affect the obligation and ability to care for ageing parents (see Baldassar and Baldock 2000; Baldock 2003; Baldassar, Wilding & Baldock 2004). The main study analyses the impact of transnational migration on care and support between migrants and refugees living in Perth, Western Australia, and their parents in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore and Iran (in transit from their homelands in Afghanistan and Iraq). Data collection involved more than 150 in-depth interviews, half of these with migrants and refugees in Perth, the others with parents abroad.

This chapter deals with Dutch immigrants and their parents in the Netherlands who participated in our research. It explores to what extent they are able to maintain close family relations whilst they are geographically so far apart, and it reports on the highs and the lows of such transnational family connections. Interviewees were chosen using a snowball technique, building on referrals made through initial contact via my existing networks. Migrants approached their own parents to ask for their cooperation. As mentioned, all migrants lived in metropolitan Perth, but interviews in the Netherlands with their parents and other family members took me throughout the entire country, approximately one-third of participants living in small villages, another third in middle-sized towns, and the remainder in big cities. Nearly all interviews took place in participants' homes; this made it possible to gain insight in people's lifestyles, to see photographs of their distant family members, and to observe interesting symbols of transnational communication and identity such as paintings, doormats, house numbers decorated with clogs, tulips and windmills in Perth and boomerangs, kangaroos or wildflowers in the Netherlands.

Questions asked concerned the experience of transnational migration, including motive to migrate; the extent of ongoing communication between migrants and parents, including visits; the degree to which parents and migrants gave each other mutual support and care; the migrants' sense of national identity; and their notion of "home". Altogether data were gathered from sixteen female and nine male migrants. Follow-up interviews in the Netherlands took place with thirteen mothers, 9 fathers, one brother (with his partner) and two daughters of migrants. Interviews in Perth occurred from late 2000 to mid 2001, and in the Netherlands in August/September

[1] Interviewee 41102

2001. Most of the interviews were conducted in Dutch – my own native language. Interviews were transcribed and translated by a professional translator. The table below provides details about the number of interviews.

Type of interview	Number
Netherlands	
Parent couples	7
Mother only	6
Father only	2
Other kin	3
Subtotal	18
Perth	
Migrant couples	6
Son with Australian wife	1
Daughter only	10
Son only	2
Subtotal	19

THE FINDINGS

Motive to migrate and 'license to leave'

Eight of the nine Dutchmen interviewed had come to Australia as skilled or independent migrants. This included three men who defined themselves as ex-patriates, and had been sent out to Australia on limited (4-year) contracts to work for major international companies.[2] Two of the nine had actually come to marry Australian women, but only one had done so on a spousal visa – the other preferring an independent residency visa based on skill.[3] Ostensibly then, most men migrated for career purposes. However, they also mentioned other reasons why they had wanted to leave the Netherlands, such as excessive bureaucracy, pollution and overcrowding.

The story was different for most of the women; they came because they had fallen in love with an Australian, or they accompanied their husband to this country. Of the total of sixteen female Dutch migrants interviewed, only two migrated under the visa category of skilled migration. All others came on spousal visas, married to other immigrants or to marry Australian men. Some found the move a very difficult one, made with a great deal of reluctance because they preferred to stay close to home and family. One, who married an Australian, had always maintained she would not marry a foreigner, 'I'd rather marry a country bumpkin'.[4] Another resisted her husband's plans for migration for five years because she wanted to stay near her parents. But some had been pleased to migrate. Not concerns about overcrowding or bureaucracy in their case, but a sense of adventure and especially a need for independence, for getting away from home.[5] Several of the women who migrated to marry Australians had been keen travellers when they were quite young – they had in fact met their

[2] These ex-pats expected to be moved to different locations, but they said that at least 50% of ex-pats posted to Australia try to remain after the completion of their contract.

[3] This ensured that he and his partner were not under pressure by immigration authorities to get married immediately, as was expected of immigrants on spousal visas as proof that their relationship with their Australian partner was genuine.

[4] Interviewee 31222.

[5] These findings are comparable to those of Ackers (1998) for male and female migrants within the European Union.

future husbands while travelling abroad. In interview they made comments such as 'I always wanted to leave' and parents said things like: 'She always had the idea from when she was very young that she would not stay'. Some women who moved with their Dutch husbands also indicated they had always wanted to get away. One woman who emigrated in her forties said: 'When I was very young, about 17 or 18, I wanted to leave, preferably as far away as possible'.[6]

It would appear that most migrants had received 'license to leave'[7] from their parents. Only one woman faced severe resistance; she migrated on her own, partly to escape from a difficult family situation. When she told her parents she was migrating to Australia, her father would not talk to her for nine months – that is until she left, and her mother 'was telling everybody I was going on a two year working holiday and the reason she did that, according to her, was so that I would not look a fool if I came back earlier'.[8] Although other parents had ostensibly given license to leave, the women (though not the men) said that they had found it extremely difficult to tell their parents that they had decided to migrate, because they knew this news would be upsetting – it was difficult for their parents to let go. Female migrants indicated at the same time that their parents had been quite stoical – some had not commented at all, others had shown little emotion when they heard about their emigration plans. One woman who emigrated to marry an Australian had this to say:

> When we decided that I would migrate, I told my parents. And they had something like: oh, very good, then we will have a holiday destination [laughs]…and I was a little bit disappointed, like is it that easy for them to see their daughter go off to the other side of the world??…But they are very matter-of-fact, so it is very hard to find out what they really think…and they won't show emotions very easily, also to make it easy for me.[9]

Interviews with parents showed clearly that they had actually been very upset about their children's decision to migrate to Australia. In fact, one of the most enduring impressions of interviews with Dutch parents concerned the depth of their emotions about the absence of daughters. Of course, parents also missed their sons but on the whole they were more matter-of-fact about this. After all, sons were expected to venture out to forge careers. Their decision to move abroad was for most a career move and as such acceptable, even inevitable. The father of a male expat working for an international firm made this clear when he said: 'If you want to have a career, you have to go abroad, with that company'.[10]

Not so, however, in the case of daughters. Daughters were expected to stay close to home, to be protected by their parents when young and to provide companionship and care as parents aged. Daughters also were meant to provide their parents with the joy of grandparenthood. When it was in fact a daughter who ventured out, this was particularly difficult to come to terms with.[11] Some parents even expressed resentment

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[6] Interviewee 31072.
[7] See Baldassar (2001) for this concept.
[8] Interviewee 31232.
[9] Interviewee 31112
[10] Interviewee 41151
[11] See also Morris (1999: 8-12) on women and travel.

that their son-in-law had taken their daughter away to another country, despite the fact he had been doing quite well career-wise in the Netherlands. And parents who saw their daughter marry an Australian had extra concerns about her safety and happiness living in a totally different and faraway country. Nonetheless, most said emphatically that they had never put obstacles in the way of their daughter's wishes. In fact, they said time and again that they would never want to upset their children with their problems. An expression sometimes used in this context was: 'after all, you only have your children on loan'. This meant to them, that you should not burden your children, and that you should learn to distance yourself from them as they grew up.[12] As one interviewee said, 'my [own] mother used to say, I live for my children. I think that is the wrong attitude, because you only got your children on loan, for a while, and then they go their own way if everything is all right.'[13]

The practice and management of communication from afar

The practice of staying in touch

After arrival in Perth, all Dutch immigrants settled in a routine of regular phone calls, faxes or e-mails with their family back home, and in that way stayed in close touch. Migrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s initially relied mainly on letter writing, but at the time of interview all said that the telephone was now the main avenue of contact. Everyone recognised the value of cheap phone calls, and most now enjoyed lengthy and frequent long-distance phone calls with each other. The use of faxes was also quite common. Often, letters by fax were sent once a week. Most also developed regular patterns of weekly or fortnightly phone calls - in some cases even more than once a week. For example, one of the fathers – a widower - said he was on the phone to his daughter two or three times a week. And a female migrant, married to an Australian, had this to say:

> We call. My mother has a fax now. She does not have e-mail. We call. And write. At the beginning I used to write a lot. But writing is so…slow. So I call, I just take the phone and I call. That is a condition of the relationship [with my partner] that we are not going to nag about me calling to the Netherlands. That is part of it. So, yes, I call just whenever I feel like it. Sometimes it's every day…[14]

The traditional "kinwork" (Di Leonardo 1987) of writing letters and making phone calls was generally women's business. Understandably, women who married Australians maintained contact with their own families back home, because their partners were insufficiently versed in the Dutch language. However, women who had settled in Perth with Dutch husbands also acted as their family's main communicators. One migrant who came to Australia in the early 1980s and left a big family and many friends behind, said:

> In the first year I wrote, I think, about 370 letters. That is more than one letter a day. Handwritten…I kept that up for a couple of years…because everybody would write… they all wrote to *one* person, but I had to write back to everybody

[12] It is possible that these 'theories' of parent-child relations have their origins in the profoundly Calvinist heritage of Dutch society (see e.g. Schama, 1997)
[13] Interviewee 31072
[14] Interviewee 31172

> and my husband did not like writing very much, so…now it is all e-mail of course, that is *ideal.* [15]

Being the family correspondent usually meant staying in touch also with in-laws in the Netherlands. One woman, who maintained a vast network of cousins and friends, was also expected to take the initiative in contacting her husband's parents. She said: "My husband never calls. He has never been like that, his mother said the same: 'if it was up to him, we would never hear from him again'. And I was such a good daughter-in-law, because I would write a lot".[16] Interestingly, the Australian wife of a Dutch migrant followed a similar pattern. She had made a lot of effort to learn Dutch, and she and her husband would jointly write a weekly fax to her in-laws. As her husband described it, this was 'normally two pages from me and the same from my wife in English and as much Dutch as she can put in there'.[17] This Australian woman, then, saw letter writing as her business, even although she could easily have opted out (like the Australian husbands of Dutch women) because of language obstacles.

Several migrant families used modern IT technology such as digital cameras and video-clips to stay in touch. This has brought a sense of closeness and immediacy to the relationship that was not available to transnational migrants of the past. For example two sets of Dutch parents received the first photos of their newborn grandchildren by digital camera within an hour of the birth. Husbands sometimes were in charge of these IT media, particularly if e-mails were sent and received at their workplace. Husbands also usually handled the digital camera and video-clips. In the case of parents, letter writing was generally the mother's domain, but it was always the father who showed me the fax machine, and explained its frequency of use. In many cases both parents would participate in phone calls, but it was usually the father who had made an extensive study of phone companies offering the cheapest rates and kept track of costs. In the case of divorced parents, migrants retained very close contact with their mothers, but communication with fathers was limited or non-existent. If there was contact, it was by phone.[18]

The contents of such long-distance communications were extremely variable. Routine letters, faxes, phone calls and emails would contain news about everyday events, but were also expressions of mutual support: some mothers would provide recipes, or views on how to deal with a newborn baby, whilst some migrant daughters would give advice on issues of health and medication. In crisis situations communications would become more frequent, sometimes even daily and became expressions of emotional support. Some migrants needed such support especially during the first few months after they had left the Netherlands, as they were trying to cope with homesickness, but others also at the time of childbirth or marital break-up. For parents such emotional comfort was important during times of serious illness and hospitalisation.

[15] Interviewee 31072
[16] Interviewee 31182
[17] Interviewee 31101
[18] This confirms Finch & Mason's findings (1990) on family support patterns after divorce.

The management of communication from afar

Most Dutch immigrants in Perth, WA and their parents in the Netherlands were thus in regular and frequent contact with each other. The telephone was clearly the main avenue for this, particularly for special events, whether joyful as in birthday greetings, or sad, as in communication about illness or death. However, maintaining telephone contact did not always run smoothly, and could in fact engender conflict. For example, one migrant daughter seriously upset her mother when she phoned her a few days after her birthday, rather than on the day itself. This occurred only once, but it created a lingering tension between them – both raised this issue quite spontaneously during interview. And a mother upset her migrant daughter when she phoned, by saying she would call back after she had finished watching her favourite TV program. Such examples illustrate the unique features of long-distance phone calls: the communication is seen as special, different from routine calls to people who live close. It is expected that both parties treat the call as a special event, and are available to respond whenever a call is made.[19]

Sometimes access to telephones appeared to be used as a form of control, and thereby became a source of conflict. In one case, a father in the Netherlands objected strongly to lengthy phone calls as too expensive and censored the length of time his wife could talk to their migrant daughter. This happened for many years, in fact until his death, regardless of the increasingly cheap rates for international calls. This migrant said in interview that she now phones with her mother weekly and at length. In another instance, phone calls from a migrant daughter were *always* answered by her mother. This became problematic when her father's health deteriorated. She described this as follows:

> The last five years, my mother always answered the phone…She always said how terrible it was for her that he was deteriorating, but she would never say: "Here is Dad". I would have to ask for that: 'Mum, I want to talk to Dad'. And if I did not push it through, then I would not talk to my father for months. Then there would only be contact with her. [20]

In both instances, these communication problems had probably been there before migration. There are, however, other reasons why communications sometimes don't run smoothly that are specifically *caused* by migration. Distance makes it possible to keep issues hidden from each other that cannot possibly remain hidden if people live in close proximity. Migrants hide issues from their parents, and vice versa.

As to migrants keeping secrets, this applied particularly to the women who migrated for the sake of an Australian under the category of spousal migration. They came typically on a tourist visa for six or twelve months. Because of government's concerns about sham marriages (Crock 1998, pp 68-79), they were strongly urged to get married before these tourist visas expired, as this would strengthen their case to gain a temporary visa. Once they received this, what was required of them to gain permanency was to stay in Australia for a probationary period of two years and during that time not to engage in paid or volunteer work. The need to decide about marriage on the basis of imposed, bureaucratic criteria, rather than at their own pace (or not

[19] The time difference of 6 or 7 hours between the Netherlands and Western Australia is a constraining factor; because of this using the phone can never just be a spontaneous act.

[20] Interviewee 31042

marry at all) created serious tensions and anxieties in some cases. Not being able to take on any kind of work meant that some of these young women felt very lonely and isolated. Not being allowed to make a return visit during the two years probationary period added to this sense of isolation. Several described their state of being during these first years in Australia as akin to depression. However, these were *not* problems they could readily discuss with their parents. As one mother said: 'she had a very difficult time in the beginning. We did not know everything, because she did not write about it. I am glad I did not know, because I had enough sadness to cope with the first two years.' [21]

Some of these young women who had married Australians felt especially lonely at the time their children were born, and pleaded to their mothers to come and help at the birth. One mother found out when she responded to such a plea that her daughter had been 'sick for nearly all those nine months…and we didn't know about that. She didn't tell us that, no, no, no'.[22] This daughter, then, had hidden from her parents that she was homesick and in ill health. Another migrant, in a conspiracy maintained with the help of her sister and her ex-husband, even managed to postpone for two years telling her parents that she had divorced and was living at a different address.[23]

As said, parents also kept secrets. In fact, one of the big worries for migrants was that their parents would not tell them if something serious had happened. One daughter said: "they do it to protect us I believe, because they absolutely don't want you to worry about them".[24] Another suggested this be due to the distance: "yes, because you are so far away, they want to spare you".[25] There were many examples of this. Parents had not told their migrant children when a close relative died for fear of upsetting them; migrants were not told about a major illness, or an operation one of their parents had to undergo. When queried about this, parents' responses showed that many wanted to tell their migrant children as little as possible, so as not to upset them. Migrants said that their parents' reluctance to keep them fully informed about their state of health, made it often very difficult to decide whether and when they should make a return visit. All migrants felt that their parents should be less stoical, and let them know of any problems as soon as they came to light.

The practice and management of visits

Visits were challenging opportunities for strengthening intimate relations between migrants and their parents, and to fill in the gaps for what could not be expressed/communicated by phone or e-mail. Visits (except those made because of illness or death) were generally planned meticulously and anticipated with a mixture of joy and trepidation, because they were important in maintaining and revitalising the long distance relationship. For many there was tremendous joy in reunion. At the same time, the brevity of visits and the desire to create a 'perfect' visit for all concerned may lead to disappointment. To discuss this, I deal separately with return visits and visits by parents to their migrant children.

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[21] Interviewee 41092
[22] Interviewee 41082
[23] This was in the days when phone calls were infrequent. Whenever her parents called, her ex-husband would say she was out, and would call back.
[24] Interviewee 31122
[25] Interviewee 31112

Return visits: The practice

There were two distinct patterns of return visits. The first was one of frequent returns, usually combined with work. This applied to about two-thirds of the Dutch migrants who returned 'home' at least every other year (in a third of these cases every year). For ex-patriates and their wives and children it was part of their contractual rights that they would return to their home country once a year; their company paid for one trip a year for the entire family.[26] Others were able to combine family visits with work-commitments such as sabbatical leave, conferences, or business meetings. Such visits did not always include partners and children, and were sometimes very brief. The second pattern concerned one-third of Dutch migrants who due to family circumstances and costs made infrequent return visits, on average every six to eight years; these were generally longer trips, and combined visits to family and friends with more extended European holidays.[27] Where possible visits were arranged to coincide with special events such as birthdays or wedding anniversaries. Regardless of the average frequency of return, there was a tendency for visits to increase in number as parents aged. In some instances such accelerated return visits began after the death of one parent, when the remaining parents became more fragile and required extra comfort and care. Several migrants had made emergency visits to attend funerals, and many said they were prepared for such crisis visits, having put money aside for this purpose.

Routine return visits (whether or not combined with work) were generally motivated by a complex set of reasons: genuine desire to see family and friends, to show off a new baby; a wish to strengthen or restore bonds with the home country, and – importantly – a sense of obligation towards one's parents. During such visits, migrants would usually stay with their parents or other relatives, and then travel around to meet up with other family and friends. The motives for special-purpose visits were usually different; they were made especially for the sake of practical or emotional support. Migrants returned home to help out during serious illness or hospitalisation of one of their parents; one woman helped her sister choose a nursing home for their ailing mother; another assisted her parents to move house; and several migrants went home to find out what was *really* going on – having realized, but not knowing for certain that one of their parents was in bad health.

The management of return visits

The long-distance migration process can be profoundly disrupting and the sense of place, embodied by the parental home possibly one of the few remaining certainties related to the homeland, particularly for migrants who have not been away from home for very long. When such migrants returned and were able to stay with their parents, they were at the same time returning to their roots, a place they could truly call home. This had interesting consequences, and led to tensions that were not always acknowledged. For example, several parents expressed concern that when their migrant children returned to the parental home, they seemed to revert to their teenage years. They expected to be waited on hand and foot, invited all their friends to visit (and stay for dinner), and generally assumed that their parents' lives and activities

[26] If unable to travel, they could cash in the value of such tickets.

[27] Three interviewees who arrived in Australia in the late 1990s had not yet returned to their home country at the time of interview. One of these was waiting for her two-year probationary period to expire; the other, a couple, had a large family and could not afford the costs.

would stop on their behalf. This happened to the mother of one ex-pat couple, when they came to visit in order to show off their young baby. She found she had no personal space, and had to withdraw to her office at paid work for some peace and quiet. As she said:

> When they come over now, they come over for three weeks. Well, that is quite an invasion. And … I've experienced that as a difficult period, even though that may sound funny. But you have expectations about that. And then you think: oh, God, and then it doesn't all come true, like you would like it to be, and …after three weeks I think: well, phew, phew, I'm very happy the gang is leaving again, because … I was exhausted.[28]

Several other parents said they loved their children to visit but they would also be pleased to be by themselves again. In these instances it was often that children had not adjusted to the changes that had taken place in their parents' life.

To avoid such tensions, some migrants and their parents would arrange alternative accommodation. Several migrants travelled around a lot, and shared their time between parents and friends. In most cases such solutions worked effectively, but it always remained a fine balance between not encroaching on each other's space, whilst still spending quality time together. These tensions are not just about hosts and visitors, who need to accommodate each other's needs for private spaces, but particularly, about the home-coming that is involved in migrants' return (see Baldassar 2001). This was clearly behind the fact that one daughter insisted putting her mark on her parents' new house, by telling them how to arrange the furniture, although she would never be able to call it her family home. It also explains another migrant's anger with her mother when she decided to sell the family home to move into a smaller, more manageable flat. This migrant daughter said: 'I was very angry with her, we had a fight because …we could not stay with her any more, and I thought there was no need to sell the house really, …and it was the house where I was born'.[29]

Return visits did sometimes enable conflicts to be resolved, and issues to be dealt with. This occurred, significantly, for one migrant daughter, who was able to spend many valuable hours over a period of several weeks with her dying father, and could subsequently express her feelings for him publicly at his funeral. It also occurred for a migrant son, who managed to be at his mother's deathbed; this reconciled him with the fact of her dying. One daughter found out during a return visit, what her parents had been unable to tell her over the phone or by letter, 'something was wrong with my mother. It was just, she just did not look good and she was quiet, and … I knew it was not right'.[30] In the end things turned out all right, but she felt terrible that they had not told her before she visited. But for some the hidden tensions remained. For example, one mother was still profoundly upset about her feelings of guilt well after her migrant children visited, and a daughter was unable to reconcile with her father before he died due to his advanced Alzheimer.

It is important to acknowledge also that for some migrants their visit involved an assessment of whether they still considered the Netherlands to be a place they wanted

[28] Interviewee 41102
[29] Interviewee 31062
[30] Interviewee 31122

to return to. Several migrants and also expats who had been away from the Netherlands for some time expressed great ambiguity in this regard. They had vivid and fond memories of people and places, but many other aspects of Dutch life they did not accept – in fact, aspects that had made them leave in the first place. One migrant, who vowed he would never return to the Netherlands unless for urgent family business said: 'there is nothing I miss from Holland. I seem to be getting worse, every time I come back from Holland I realise more and more why I left'.[31] But for others disenchantment with their home country was also due to the demands placed on them during their return visits. The wife of one expat encapsulated some of these feelings:

> And people will say why don't you go for six weeks. Then I think that's a waste. Because I don't think the Netherlands is that much fun any more. And I have seen everybody after three weeks…also for the children, it is quite a task to sit in the car every day… No, there are things you are forced to do, that you would really not do, if you would have the choice and be selfish, because it would not be a holiday. Usually we return from the Netherlands exhausted.[32]

Another migrant voiced a similar complaint when she said: 'a lot of your paid leave seems to go up in these what are often obligatory visits…I'd love to just go to a little holiday spot…you can't afford that, because it all goes over there'.[33]

It is important to remember that long-distance migrants spend long periods apart from their transnational families and their home country. It can be very daunting to meet up with one's parents after years apart. Return visits, then, may require a considerable amount of 'management' and can be fraught with tensions. Despite the difficulties involved, most Dutch migrants nonetheless saw visits as extremely important. The visit enabled relationships between people to be cemented and reaffirmed. Many migrants described visits as revitalising their connections with kin and they often enjoyed a period of increased contact (by phone and mail) immediately following a visit. For some it was the only sure way to find out exactly how parents were getting on. Many migrants also talked about the importance of taking their children to visit grandparents, to meet their extended family and to get to know their roots.

Parents' visits: The practice

Generally speaking, visits by parents appeared much less frequent than return visits by migrants, but there was at the same time an interesting inverse relationship between the frequency of migrants' travel and that of their parents. If migrants returned often to the Netherlands (mostly because they were able to combine family visits with work), their parents' visits to Australia were generally infrequent. On the other hand, if migrants did not travel often, usually due to costs or their stage in the family life cycle (being pregnant or having young children), parents travelled more frequently. For example, one migrant returned on average only once every eight years; her parents visited her the same number of times (with an extra visit by her mother to assist with childbirth). This is in contrast to another migrant who usually returned every two years, but had only one visit from her widowed mother. Of course, it is important in this context to take parents' ages into account. Most migrants who

[31] Interviewee 31051
[32] Interviewee 31182
[33] Interviewee 31232

arrived in Australia in the 1990s were quite young, with young families, and their parents were also usually still young and active, willing to undertake the long journey to Australia for special celebrations such as weddings and childbirth. For example, a young woman who had migrated to marry an Australian invited her entire extended Dutch family for the wedding. She was not able to travel herself because she had not yet acquired a permanent visa. And another migrant, who was able to make two return visits before her children were born, then had two visits from her parents to see their newborn grandchildren and one extra visit from her mother to help in childbirth.

The Management of Parents' visits: parents as strangers

The dynamics at work when parents visited their migrant children were quite different from those when migrants returned home. On their first visit, parents came to unknown territory, a place that their migrant children had established for themselves, in which they were 'visitors', 'strangers'. Such role reversal between parents and children, where parents become houseguests receiving the hospitality of their children, would involve a certain amount of adjustment in any event, regardless of distance. However, in the case of visits to migrant children, some special factors came into play. Firstly, because they had to come from so far, some parents felt they had to make the most of it, by visiting for lengthy periods of two to three months. This could be a strain for migrants, especially if they did not have a large home and growing children. Even if parents were aware that a shorter period was better, they would seldom come for less than three to four weeks. Secondly, in many instances their migrant children had married an Australian, someone the parents didn't know very well, and could not converse with because of language difficulties. Thirdly, some parents were not able to speak English and needed to be entertained constantly. One daughter said that when her parents visited, it would be like 'where are we going today… are we going out today? It is 1.30, when are we leaving? And I am working, so I try to keep a job with all this'. [34]

Finally, some parents would be apprehensive upon arrival, fearful that their grandchildren would not recognize them, or not take to them. In one instance a daughter said her parents criticized her for the fact that her son could not speak Dutch. They said: 'the reason why we don't have a relationship with him is your fault, because you did not teach him to speak Dutch'.[35] Some parents would deal with the awkwardness by criticizing Australia constantly. One migrant said about her father, a widower, who used to come for long periods:

> [he]…said he did not like it. He was always making comparisons that would make my hair stand on end. But once back in the Netherlands there was no place as good and as beautiful as Australia. He liked it here, but would not admit it to us.[36]

Interestingly, when parents visited as a couple, one parent might play out this scenario, whilst the other professed a desire to stay. As one daughter commented: 'my father loved it here. So they have been here nine times together. *Wonderful* (her

[34] Interviewee 31122
[35] Interviewee 31122
[36] Interviewee 31072

emphasis), my father in the garden, a glass of wine, a book, wonderful weather: "I want to stay here"…My mother: "This is terrible, I can't live here"'.[37]

Whether visits would be successful was also dependent on the attitudes of migrants' partners. Some women hinted at their partner's lack of interest in parental visits, and implied that most of the entertaining that had to be done was their responsibility without their partner's involvement. Of course, if male partners had to work during the day, that was an excuse for non-involvement. One migrant said that when her father visited, 'my husband had no problems there, [because] he would be in the office everyday and I could sort things out'.[38] Another migrant, who worked full-time, was expected to entertain her parents, even although her Australian husband worked from home.

Of course, many parents – especially if they spoke English well, and were able to visit again – found their visits very enjoyable. Western Australia became more familiar to them, and sometimes they made friends in the Dutch-Australian community. One father used his visits to help his migrant son build a new house, gaining a tremendous pride from his contribution. The parents of another migrant attended her wedding to an Australian, and subsequently travelled with the young couple on their honeymoon. In-laws of Dutch migrants who had married Australians were sometimes also supportive.

The opportunity to spend a long stretch of quality time together with their parents and other relatives when they visited, meant according to some migrants, that their relationships were closer than they would have been if they had all remained in the home country. For example, one migrant's daughter, who lives in the Netherlands, came over especially one year to spend time with her mother in order to get a better understanding of her family history. As an outcome of this, she said 'the relationship between mother and daughter has shifted to a sort of equal relationship – at least that is how it feels for me'.[39] Importantly, migrants mentioned the value of quality time only with regard to family visits in Australia, *not* regarding their own return visits. Possibly a family visit to Australia gave more space for uninterrupted conversation; also, if going home meant a reversal to childhood status, this might not be conducive to mature communication.

On the other hand, some tensions remained, hidden behind a facade of apparently smooth visits. Sometimes these were due to ongoing misunderstandings that were never resolved, stories told and retold without resolution. For example, one mother said that her daughter had never wanted children, whilst her daughter said the opposite, and another migrant had to tell her mother to stop 'nagging' her about having more children, because she had tried and could not. Such issues could fester in any family, but due to distance it is more difficult to resolve them. And, of course, even if there were no apparent tensions, visits by their nature remained artificial. This is illustrated well by the following comment from the Australian wife of a Dutch migrant:

[37] Interviewee 31042
[38] Interviewee 31072
[39] Interviewee 41062

> With my parents I am very open about the contact that we have with [my husband's] parents, but I also try to be open in the sense that while his parents are here, I particularly would hand the baby over to his parents…almost exclude my mum and dad, and my mum and dad totally understood. Like my mum said to me one day, it is really important, that they are here for such a short time that they sort of get precedence.[40]

The visiting parents in this case were clearly treated as special, given precedence in their contact with the baby, because they were only 'here for such a short time.' Their interaction with their grandchildren, seen only for such short periods of time, could therefore never be an ordinary, everyday event. In fact, children, parents, grandparents and in-laws all had to be on their best behaviour in order to maintain the ideal of harmonious family relations.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Dutch migrants and their parents had extensive and close contact with each other as they endeavoured to maintain family relations from a distance. The greater use of e-mail, fax, and mobile phone has certainly made these communications from afar less precious, particularly for younger immigrants. Nonetheless, the absence of regular face-to-face contact, and the sheer mystique of distance give a special edge not found in everyday contact between family members who live nearby. As mentioned, some migrants hid from parents that they were homesick or ill; parents would not tell their migrant children about their own health crises or deaths in the family. Most show an overwhelming commitment and preoccupation with maintaining good, ongoing relations with each other. Not letting each other know about any problems they face is in itself a form of emotional support. Unfortunately this is not always helpful, especially to the migrants.

There are then many subtle pressures on family members who live at great distance from each other. I suggest, that these are often about attempts to maintain the semblance of continued close relations, about efforts to live out the ideology of harmonious kin relations and to transmit to each other notions of an 'ideal' family, rather than allowing the discomforts of everyday family life to come through. In making such efforts, special rules of conduct apply. The migrant is protected from hearing bad news, and secrets are kept so as not to upset those who are so far away. In a sense the migrant is provided with a legitimate excuse[41] not to participate, to remain distant from the everyday burden of pain and grief. There are, however, only very few migrants who actually accept the legitimacy of an excuse based on distance. Those who do are generally men. Women – with very few exceptions – retain the burden of responsibility and the sense of guilt for not being there, not doing enough, and for not ensuring that their parents are able to see their grandchildren as they grow.[42]

[40] Interviewee 31102

[41] See Finch and Mason, 1993 for this concept.

[42] See Baldock (2003) for detailed examples

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