

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Migrant mothers: Kin work and cultural work in making future citizens

Journal Item

How to cite:

Reynolds, Tracey and Erel, Umut (2018). Migrant mothers: Kin work and cultural work in making future citizens. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 7(3) pp. 357–363.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2018 Policy Press



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1332/204674318x15384702898352>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

editorial

Migrant mothers: kin work and cultural work in making future citizens

Tracey Reynolds,¹ t.a.reynolds@greenwich.ac.uk
University of Greenwich, London, UK

Umut Erel, umet.ere@open.ac.uk
Open University, UK

This themed issue explores the caring, cultural and emotional labour of migrant mothers in raising their children, highlighting the ways in which their mothering and family practices contribute to creating future citizens in contemporary societies, increasingly characterised by ethnic, racial, religious, cultural and social diversity. A key objective of the themed issue is to probe into the practices, processes and structures shaping migrant mothers' 'kin work', while recognising the family as a site of internal and societal contestation. Kin work highlights the importance of women's culture and care work that takes places across public and private boundaries (di Leonardo, 1984), and also the way in which the link between 'race', racialisation and motherhood encourages particular kinds of mothering practices. The themed issue is multidisciplinary, combining cutting-edge work by leading and early-career researchers. The collection of articles originally emerged out of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Network, 'Migrant mothers caring for the future' (2013–15) (www.open.ac.uk/ccig/research/projects/migrant-mothers-caring-for-the-future).

key words migrant mothers • kin work • families • citizenship • 'race'

To cite this article: Reynolds, T. and Erel, U. (2018) Migrant mothers: kin work and cultural work in making future citizens, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 7(3): 357–63, DOI: 10.1332/204674318X15384702898352

Introduction

The themed section in this issue explores the caring, cultural and emotional labour of migrant mothers in raising their children, highlighting the ways in which their mothering and family practices contribute to creating future citizens in contemporary societies, increasingly characterised by ethnic, racial, religious, cultural and social diversity. A key objective is to probe into the practices, processes and structures shaping migrant mothers' 'kin work', while recognising the family as a site of internal and societal contestation. Kin work highlights the importance of women's culture and care work that takes places across public and private boundaries (di Leonardo, 1984). Black feminist scholars in the US context, such as Carol Stack (1974) and Patricia Hill-

Collins (1990) and Stack and Burton (1994), have similarly argued that the link between ‘race’, racialisation and motherhood encourages particular kinds of kin work that contests the distinction between public/private work, and that as a concept kin work moves our understanding of mothering practices beyond simply domestic work and childcare. Studies on transnational families also apply a ‘kin work’ framework to reflect on the collective labour of family-centred networks for providing emotional and practical support and in maintaining intergenerational and transnational networks (di Leonardo, 1984; Zontini, 2004; Doucet, 2009). For those mothers who are geographically separated from their children by a nation-state border, kin work in the form of capital transfer may ultimately also establish some mothers’ independence from family support (Carlisle, 2013).

In this themed section we discuss the kin work of migrant mothers. For these women, ‘kin work’ encompasses the above distinctions, and reveals complex negotiations and contestations of gender, generational and social class divisions (Kershaw, 2010). This ‘kin work’ also contains ethnic ambiguity and ethnic plurality because it relates to more than one ethnicised constellation of family and kin (Reynolds, 2005; Erel, 2013). The collection resonates with earlier studies on kin work in that we identify kin work operating in a range of intersecting social and geographical sites (the home, local neighbourhoods, nation-state and transnationally). However, we also argue that for migrant mothers, this complexity is often reduced to the stereotypical figure of the maternal immigrant, who is threatening to the social reproduction of the nation as a result of her cultural, ethnic and ‘racial’ ‘Otherness’ (Lentin and Moreo, 2003; Tyler, 2010).

Migrant mothers and racialised boundaries

As we have argued elsewhere (cf Erel et al, 2017a, 2017b), we are currently living in a period whereby we are witnessing the hardening of ethnic and racialised boundaries, as evidenced, for example, by the aftermath of the UK’s decision to leave the European Union (EU). Yet we are also living in an age of increased globalisation and immigration, resulting in a population that is ethnically ‘superdiverse’ (Vertovec, 2007). Migrant mothers, as part of their caring and parenting role, have long been recognised in the literature as being tasked with transmitting traditional, ethnically specific values and cultural resources to their children (see, for example, Gedalof 2009; Lonegran, 2015). In our analysis, we further extend this analysis, pointing to the ways in which migrant mothers are building new forms of community, citizenry and belonging in order to foster their children’s integration. We also explore the factors that facilitate and constrain this process (cf Erel et al, 2017b). In particular we draw on Isin’s (2008: 39) concept of ‘enacting citizenship’ that foregrounds transformative and creative performativities of citizenship, rather than more formalised structures and citizenship practices, with their focus on more legalised notions of belonging and inclusion. In mobilising this concept we disrupt conventional understandings and narratives of citizenship. This also allows us to consider new sites (that is, family), scales and modes (that is, kin work) in practising citizenship (cf Erel et al, 2017a, 2017b). Much of the debate that critically interrogates migrant mothers’ citizenship has emerged out of the disciplinary fields of sociology, politics, anthropology, migration studies and gender studies. Surprisingly, this issue has received very limited attention in the disciplinary field of family studies, and where this exists the research linking the macro-social to

intimate relations have tended to problematise the role of migrant families for social integration and community cohesion. Therefore, the collection makes an important intervention into the field. It advances intellectual and policy debates across the field of families and relationships in a number of key, interconnecting ways, first, by showing how migrant mothers and their families exist at the interface between the public and private and productive and reproductive spheres (Gedalof, 2009; Erel, 2013), and second, by providing a timely reminder that migrant mothers, and their families, continue to exist at the forefront of public and policy debates about the family as a juridical and political instrument (Lister, 2008). We also consider how discourses on migrant families are used as markers of difference in multicultural societies, constituting key elements of contestation over societies' moral order and broader patterns of social change (Grillo, 2008; Kraler et al, 2011). Ultimately, by foregrounding the link between citizenship and mothering, and the contested issue of what constitutes a 'good citizen', from the point of view of migrant families, the themed section contributes to key debates on conceptions of family and society and the lived experience of family life.

As intimated above, and as we know from the literature, across many ethnically 'superdiverse' regions of the Global North it is the family, and specifically the mothers, who are charged with transmitting the cultural and social capital that produces belonging to and identification with the nation (Erel, 2011). Migrant mothers, therefore, contribute to this shared future by bringing up part of the future citizenry (Erel and Reynolds, 2014; Erel et al, 2017b). Yet, despite the important role performed by these mothers, we still know little about the women bringing up this future generation of citizens (Erel, 2011). The articles in the themed section address these important lacunae within the field of families and relationships scholarship. By arguing the case for giving wider recognition to the contribution migrant mothers make to society by caring for and raising future citizens, the volume increases the visibility of migrant families as a field of enquiry within family studies, which hitherto has been marginalised (Reynolds and Zontini, 2014).

Overview of the collection

The themed section comprises multidisciplinary, cutting-edge work by leading and early-career researchers. This novel field of studies explores how migration affects the complexity and diversity of contemporary social and personal relationships. In addition, most of articles have an explicitly transnational focus, drawing on cross-cultural understandings of migrant mothering identities drawn from diverse ethnic communities (for example, Caribbean, Estonian, Iranian, Moroccan, Polish, South Asian and West African) in a range of international settings including Italy, Sweden, South Africa and the UK.

The collection of articles originally emerged out of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Network 'Migrant mothers caring for the future' (2013–15), which involved two seminars (November 2013 and March 2014) and a two-day international conference (September 2014), aimed at understanding how migrant mothers construct belonging and challenge their marginalisation from nation-states and normative understandings of citizenship. For further details and video clips of the participatory theatre and contributions to seminars and conference, see the project website (www.open.ac.uk/ccig/research/projects/migrant-mothers-caring-

for-the-future). The research network has since evolved into a related project that uses participatory arts, particularly participatory theatre and walking, to explore issues of belonging, place-making and enacting citizenship among migrant women, young girls and their families (<http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>).

A key starting point in the collection is that migrant mothers make an important contribution to society, and their kin work operates as an important vehicle in this. Studies by Gedalof (2009) and Cederberg (2014) remind us that migrant mothers' kin work takes place and is negotiated within a racialised context. This point is highlighted in the articles by Reynolds et al and Lisiak, both of which recognise that despite migrant mothers' contribution to society, they are often not recognised as legitimately embodying a subjectivity as citizens. Reynolds et al in particular highlight how migrant mothers belonging to the nations of residence are seen as tenuous, and their social positioning as racialised, gendered. As a consequence, these women are typically relegated to low-skilled, low-income paid work that offers them limited job security. They are also stereotyped as being 'incompetent citizens' (Erel et al, 2014: 107); this despite the fact that their labour is often key to reproducing the nations they live in, through, for example their economic labour in social care, teaching, domestic, cleaning, and sex work sectors (Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). Migrant women's citizenship practices are usefully explored through three key moments: first, how they become subjects with agency; second, how they substantiate their capacities as political, cultural, working, sexual and caring subjects; and third, how migrant women link these with rights-claiming and developing new ideas of what rights migrants should have (cf Erel, 2011).

Reynolds, Erel and Kaptani consider the transformative potential of participatory theatre methods: forum theatre and playback theatre to engage directly with a group of racially and ethnically diverse group of migrant mothers living in London, UK, in order to reframe notions of citizenship. Analysis draws attention to the way in which the mothers' kin work blurs the public-private distinction involved in reproductive labour on account of the subordinate racialised and gendered status in the UK. The methodological approach and performative element of participatory theatre sheds light on how migrant mothers as embodied subjects can utilise their racialised and gendered bodies to disrupt and problematise normative understandings of citizenship, and also through kin work to assert their voices and bodies in claims of rights, belonging and participation. Lisiak suggests that the kin work practices and forms of 'intensive mothering' these women engage in may serve as a form of cultural capital for migrant mothers, a means of positioning themselves favourably in a new neighbourhood or school. For recent Polish migrants to the UK she examines how intensive mothering may work to 'elevate' them beyond the migrant experience and pathologised racialised images that single out Polish mothers as simultaneously threatening to notions of 'Britishness' and the preservation of 'Polishness' (Lisiak, 2018). In this study, Lisiak reflects on how intensive mothering as a kin work practice becomes part of migrant mothers' identity work; it can operate as points of connection with other (White, British, middle-class) mothers, but at the same time reinforce hegemonic narratives of belonging. This reveals itself in the way women's mothering experiences intersect with local systems of exclusion and discrimination. Indeed, Lisiak's article reflects that after the Brexit vote in 2016 and the majority decision in the UK referendum to leave the EU, it may be even more difficult for migrant mothers to recognise and acknowledge similarities with other mothers in their neighbourhoods.

It is also important to recognise that mothers' kin work is focused around their children's day-to-day practical and economic survival. However, another significant aspect of this kin work is to disrupt and challenge the integration programmes as simplified models and advocate on behalf of migrant families for a more nuanced, contextualised and more intersectional approach to citizenship that moves the policy and practice agenda beyond a migrant group simply adopting and integrating into the host society. The use of kin work as a survival strategy in safeguarding the migrant mothers and children's current and future life is a theme that is addressed in Roll-Bennet's study on migrant women in Sweden, who migrated from Lebanon, Syria, Iran and West Africa. Roll-Bennet suggests that women's kin work entails a socialisation process that involves both 'struggle' and 'sacrifice', in order to achieve the ultimate objective of inter-generational upward mobility. Roll-Bennet's study highlights an important aspect of kin work involving 'struggle', and framing notions of 'struggle' around the important role of migrant mothers in instilling in their children the right type of values – such as educational aspiration – to become a 'good citizen'. Conversely, 'sacrifice' highlights the emotional and physical costs (including self-care) in the cultural production and reproduction of citizenship, which is generally overlooked in conventional narratives of citizenship (Erel, 2013). Roll-Bennet offers an important counter-critique to the concept of kin work, and the way it is applied in migrant/race literature on families. In this literature, kin work is largely constructed and presented as a positive thing, benefiting children and families alike. However, what is rarely discussed is the emotional and physical costs this has for migrant mothers, who are primarily responsible for shaping future citizens. D'Odorico also explores the concept of kin work to explore intergenerational practices and activities that take place between mothers and daughters and across households. This article investigates processes of construction of gender and sexuality among mothers and daughters – who, directly or indirectly, experienced migration between Morocco and Italy. In this context kin work is utilised to highlight the intergenerational negotiations and transformations that take place in marriage models, and to show the ways in which citizenship notions of rights and responsibilities are practised with transnational households involving intergenerational kinship care.

Conclusion

The articles in this section are connected by moving beyond and challenging conventional understandings of families, nation, race, ethnic identity and migration. Analyses demonstrate the cultural and social context underpinning migrant mothering and their family networks. The articles raise questions of how social networks and cultural reproduction inform mothering practices. This work also points to the need for developing methodologically creative and participatory research practices in the field to examine migrant mothers' practices.

Note

¹ Corresponding author.

References

- Carlisle, J, 2013, 'That hurt me, that hurt my family': The role of migrants' families during transnational parental child custody disputes in Egypt, *Migration, Families and Gesellschaft*, pp 279–29
- Cederberg, M, 2014, Public discourses and migrant stories of integration and inequality: Language and power in biographical narratives, *Sociology* 48, 1, 133–49
- di Leonardo, M, 1984, *The varieties of ethnic experience: Kinship, class and gender among California Italian-Americans*, New York: Cornell University Press
- Doucet, A, 2009, Gender equality and gender differences: Parenting, habitus, and embodiment (The 2008 Porter Lecture) (www.andreadoucet.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Gender-Equality-and-Gender-Differences.pdf)
- Erel, U, 2011, Reframing migrant mothers as citizens, *Citizenship Studies* 15, 6–7, 695–709
- Erel, U, 2013, Kurdish migrant mothers in London enacting citizenship, *Citizenship Studies* 17, 8, 970–84
- Erel, U, Reynolds, T, 2014, Black feminist theory for participatory theatre with migrant mothers, *Feminist Review Special Issue on Black British Feminism*, issue 108, pp 106–111
- Erel, U, Reynolds, T, 2017, Introduction: Migrant mothers challenging racialized citizenship, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, 1, 1–16
- Erel, U, Reynolds, T, Kaptani, E, 2017a, Migrant mothers' creative interventions into racialized citizenship, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, 1, 55–72
- Erel, U, Reynolds, T, Kaptani, E, 2017b, Participatory theatre for transformative social research, *Qualitative Research* 17.3, 302–12
- Gedalof, I, 2009, Birth, belonging and migrant mothers: Narratives of reproduction in feminist migration studies, *Feminist Review* 93, 81–100
- Grillo, R, 2008, *The family in question: Immigrant and ethnic minorities in multicultural Europe*, Amsterdam University Press.
- Hill-Collins, P, 1990, *Black feminist thought, knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman
- Isin, E, 2008, Theorizing acts of citizenship, in EF Isin, GM Nielsen, eds, *Acts of citizenship*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 15–43
- Kershaw, P, 2010, Caregiving for identity is political: Implications for citizenship theory, *Citizenship Studies* 14, 4, 395–410
- Kofman, E, Raghuram, P, 2015, *Gendered migrations and global social reproduction*, London: Palgrave
- Kraler, A, Kofman, E, Kohli, M, Schmoll, C, 2011, eds, *Gender, Generations and the family in international migration*, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press
- Lentin, R, Moreo, E, 2013, *Migrant activism and integration from below in Ireland*, Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Lisiak, A, 2018, Polish migrant women's narratives about language, racialised and gendered difference in Barcelona, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 25, 6, 850–865
- Lister, R, 2008, Inclusive citizenship: Realising the potential, in EF Isin, P Nyers, BS Turner, eds, *Citizenship between past and future*, London: Routledge, 48–60
- Lonergan, G, 2015, Migrant women and social reproduction under austerity, *Feminist Review*, 109, 124–45
- Reynolds, T, 2005, *Caribbean mothers: Identity and experience in the UK*, London: Tufnell Press

- Reynolds, T, Zontini, E, 2014, Bringing transnational families from the margins to the centre of family studies in Britain, *Families Relationships and Societies*, 3, 2, 251–268
- Stack, C, 1981, *All our kin: Strategies for survival in the Black community*, New York: Basic Books
- Stack, C, Burton, L, 1994, Kinscripts: Reflections on family, generation and culture, in E Nakano Glenn, G Chang, L Forcey, eds, *Mothering: Ideology, experience and agency*, New York: Routledge
- Tyler, I, 2010, *Designed to fail: a biopolitics of British Citizenship*, *Citizenship Studies*, 14, 61–74
- Vertovec, S, 2007, Superdiversity and its implications, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, 6, 1024–54
- Zontini, E, 2004, Immigrant women in Barcelona, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, 6, 1113–44