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FACULTY OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK
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***BECOMING A MIGRANT IN THE ITALIAN
DOMESTIC CARE SECTOR. A MULTI-STAGE
MODEL OF THE DECISION-MAKING MIGRATION
PROCESS OF ROMANIAN WOMEN, 2000-2012***
DOCTORAL THESIS

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THEORETICAL POSITIONING

Depending on the theoretical framework applied to explain labor migration, the decision to emigrate has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. Some perspectives view migration as a rational strategy aimed at maximizing financial benefits while minimizing the costs and risks associated with in situ adjustment (Massey et. al, 1993; Todaro & Smith, 2006). Others interpret it as a household adaptation to self-perceived economic deprivation (Kurekova, 2011). Migration has also been framed as a lateral movement, in which people transit from a secondary labor market in a less developed country to a similar market in a more developed economy (Piore, 1979, apud. Massey et. al, 1993). Alternatively, some scholars consider migration an inevitable outcome of labour market globalization (Massey et. al, 1993), a rational decision shaped by economic considerations, interpersonal ties, and institutions that facilitate the mobility of migrants (Benner, 2003; Ban, 2009; Lalani & Metcalf, 2010; Scott, Craig, & Geddes, 2012), or a result that arises from an accumulation of structural conditions (Myrdal, 1957, apud Massey et. al, 1993).

Conversely, agent-based theories emphasize the starting point of decision-making processes in individuals' capacities to interpret environmental stimuli, plan their future, evaluate available options, and act intentionally, based on personal goals and available resources (Wolpert, 1965; Greenwood, 1975; Todaro, 1976; DeJong & Fawcett, 1981; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2009; Blake & Gilbert, 2014; Czaika, 2015).

However, just as migration theories have evolved to recognize the dialectic between structure and agency, agent-based approaches have over time integrated structural influences into migration decision-making. Economic conditions and migration policies shape both the intention to migrate and the ability of doing so (Carling, 2002; Willekens, 2021, 2022), while social interactions guide decision-making through the type of information, norms, and aspirations delivered (Janis & Mann, 1977; Kollingbaum & Norman, 2003; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2009; Willekens, 2021).

A limitation of both types of theories is the insufficient attention paid to the temporal dimension of decisions. Since the individual's ability to plan for the future might also affect migration, the construction and development of the decision to emigrate occurs over time and is strongly linked to the life stages of people (Kley, 2011, 2017; Klabunde et. al, 2017; Willekens, 2022). Temporality is also reflected in the structural contexts through which social actors navigate, thus requiring a socio-historical perspective on the surrounding environments (which themselves

consist of structural dimensions and elements) in order to capture the aforementioned dialectic. Multistage models that aimed to describe the temporal description of decision-making processes vary from two to five phases and have attempted to delineate under what conditions migration intentions emerge, what factors shape them and how they evolve into action (Janis & Mann, 1977; Carling, 2002; Kley, 2011, 2017; Klabunde et. al, 2017).

Regarding the case of post-communist Romania, empirical studies on decision-making processes for migration have largely adhered to a deterministic view, consisted mainly of structural economic factors, minimizing or denying the decision-making capacity of individuals (Ianos, 2016; Simionescu, 2016, 2017; Andr n & Roman, 2014; Noja & Moroc, 2016; Davidescu, Ghinararu & Maicananu, 2019). Other research, although not directly addressing the decision-making processes, has explored the Romanian state's migration policies in the context of its accession to the European Union, highlighting the capacity of political-institutional dimension to condition migratory behavior (Constantin et al., 2004;  erban & Stoica, 2007; Diminescu, 2009). In addition, studies examining the dynamics of migration flows have highlighted the role of social networks (Anghel & Horv th, 2009; Cingolani, 2009; Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009; Sandu, 2010, 2018) and the involvement of various actors, such as international transport operators, in perpetuating migration (Ban, 2009). However, these fragmented findings have not provided a comprehensive description of the phenomenon, much less on how labor migration came to represent a viable future trajectory for individuals.

THE RESEARCH AIM

This research proposes a multistage model composed of five stages, intended to describe the decision-making processes of Romanian women who emigrated between 2000 and 2012 to the Italian domestic sector. The model is agent-based and is built on a series of theoretical coordinates deduced from the main theories and sub-theories that have addressed migration, individual agency, and the ways in which decision-making processes are formed.

The empirical relevance of time frame 2000-2012 is linked to Romania's ambition to become a member state of the European Union, which triggered a series of transformations at the political-institutional level, the post-communist economic destructuring and the financial crisis of 2008–2012. A distinctive feature of this time interval was the expansion of female emigration, with the Italian domestic sector emerging as a key destination.

METHODOLOGY

This research represents an abductive case study on migration between Romania and Italy and an inquiry on the practices of social actors, due to its focus on their capacity to act intentionally in response to stimuli in their environment, specific to a historical-social period. A qualitative, ethnographic methodology was used to collect and analyze primary and secondary data, including data gathering instruments such as semi-structured and unstructured interview guides, autobiography, participatory observation and content analysis. The dataset comprises 54 semi-structured interviews conducted with Romanian emigrants employed in the Italian domestic sector, two unstructured interviews—one with a female representative of an Italian employing family and another with a male Romanian minibus driver—and one autobiography, alongside with eighteen interviews with Romanian-origin caregivers, conducted by journalists from the virtual magazine Rotalianul, all of which were thematically and narratively examined. Additionally, a virtual field diary, incorporating the researcher's participatory observations and self-reflections, was utilized. As part of the content analysis, 186 press articles addressing issues related to Romanian caregivers were examined to develop a typology of recurring themes and representations. Additionally, Law 156/2000 on the protection of Romanian citizens employed abroad, along with two versions of the National Collective Labor Agreement applicable to caregivers and domestic workers in Italy, were subjected to a comparative analysis. This approach aimed to assess the legislators' ongoing efforts to adapt regulatory frameworks in response to evolving labor conditions. These sources served distinct purposes in the exposition, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the migration phenomenon in the specified time frame.

THE MULTI-STAGE MODEL OF THE DECISION-MAKING MIGRATION PROCESS OF ROMANIAN WOMEN:

The first stage of the decision-making process: Formation of the predisposition to emigrate

People's positive attitude towards emigration stemmed from a culture of migration, composed of bilateral agreements and conventions for international labor signed between the Romanian state and other European states, laws that allowed the emergence and development of the institutional apparatus for intermediation of labor abroad and the regulations regarding the emigration of Romanian citizens, namely the emigration interface. This interface played a dual

role: between 2002 and 2006, it conditioned migration, while after 2007, it contributed to the uninhibited expression of emigration intentions. From an economic perspective, the destabilization of the economic structures triggered a cascading effect that disproportionately impacted individuals. This was reflected in the precarious nature of the labor market, inadequacies within the social security system, and limited access to consumer markets. Within this coercive environment, individuals were compelled to actively seek alternative sources of livelihood. In other words, economic instability heightened receptivity to labor migration as a viable alternative. The contact with the alternative of migrant labor took place in the social dimension, through the social relationships and interactions that the individuals maintain. The increasing number of successful migration stories transformed it into a socially accepted practice, which strengthened the positive attitude of individuals towards emigration (Janis & Mann, 1977; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2009), and created a link between migration and the achievement of subjective benefits (De Jong & Fawcett, 1981; Ajzen & Fishbein; Kley, 2011; 2017; Klabunde et al., 2017). People who accepted the opportunity to work abroad became aspiring migrants. However, although this aspiration marked a critical change in their perspective, it did not translate immediately into action, remaining conditional on additional factors and subsequent stages of the decision-making process.

The second stage of the decision-making process: Assessing the Feasibility of the Alternative

The assessment of the feasibility of emigration is fundamentally shaped by a perceived opportunity gap between the country of origin and the potential host country (De Jong & Fawcett, 1981). This assessment involves a self-referential analysis in which the aspiring migrant contrasts the anticipated implications of migration with his or her own perceived ability to manage them – a concept encapsulated in control beliefs (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2009). The cognitive process underlying this assessment involves imagining a life trajectory based on the new course of action in juxtaposition with the existing one (Janis & Mann, 1977). This assessment is based on the availability and accessibility of relevant information, which aspiring migrants acquire primarily through interpersonal networks, which include relatives, friends and acquaintances with previous migration experience, as well as intermediaries and international transport operators. The information corpus assembled in this phase constitutes an initial informational baggage, focused on three key aspects: the general conditions of care work, wage

structures and contractual conditions, and logistical considerations related to migration. Based on this informational baggage, the social actors build their expectations about working abroad and begin to shape a preliminary identity as migrant workers. Furthermore, the benefits, risks and costs associated with migration, foreseen in this phase are also outlined in the account of the initial information, ultimately determining whether the option is viable for the aspiring migrant's particular circumstances (Kley, 2011). The validity of the acquired information is not questioned at this stage, but is subject to empirical validation in subsequent stages. A positive assessment of feasibility leads the aspiring migrant to the next stage of the decision-making process, while an unfavorable assessment leads to the abandonment of the process.

The third stage of the decision-making process: The Family Endorsement of Emigration

This stage examines the impact of the aspiring migrant's reporting to the social reference group on the decision trajectory. The social group is analyzed through a dual prism: the household, which encapsulates the organizational and self-management capacities of the unit, and the family, which encompasses relational dynamics, including gender roles, mutual expectations, and internal hierarchical structures. At the beginning of this stage, the aspiring migrant formally presents the intention to migrate to family members, painting it as the only viable solution to the family's economic difficulties. Moreover, migration is often presented as an investment for the upward mobility of members, especially in terms of securing the financial capital necessary for the accumulation of other forms of capital. In this initial proposal, migration is conceived as a short-term endeavor, with the associated risks and costs mitigated through contingency plans.

The primary decision-makers in this phase are adult family members, who hold significant veto power, whereas children are not necessarily consulted or persuaded. While some respondents noted that they would have reconsidered migration had their children strongly opposed it, this option was not explicitly presented to them. Instead, children were reassured that, despite the sacrifice of separation, the decision was ultimately motivated by their future well-being. These communicative strategies align with what Janis and Mann (1977:176) term social tactics, which aim to increase the likelihood of securing approval from key reference groups. If family members endorsed the migration plan, the aspiring migrant proceeded with physical

preparations for departure. Conversely, if the proposal was rejected, the decision-making process was suspended indefinitely.

The woman's departure meant that the household would undergo a series of role reallocations: she would take on the role of the household financial provider (Kang, 2012; Madianou, 2012; Cuban, 2015; Christou & Kofman, 2022), and the partner (or the person who would take on most of the instrumental tasks) would become the manager of the remittances. Instrumental support, namely the fulfillment of tasks that ensured basic needs (Földes, 2016; Gassman et. al, 2017) was distributed to other family members, such as the other parent or grandparents (Gassmann, et. al, 2017; Tyrell and Kallis, 2017; Ducu, Nedelcu & Telegdi-Csetri, 2018; Matei & Bobârnat, 2022; Christou & Kofman, 2022), other siblings (Pantea, 2012), or even outsourced (Ducu, 2014). Despite their physical absence, migrant mothers retained responsibility for the emotional dimension of family relationships. In their initial strategy, mothers planned to support their parenting roles through phone calls and interactions through social networks. Over time, virtual (co)presence has emerged as the most widespread form of maintaining emotional ties, facilitated by advances in information and communication technologies. This evolving dynamic aligns with Baldassar's (2008a: 252) four modes of transnational co-presence: proxy, physical, virtual and imaginary.

The fourth stage of the decision-making process: Enacting the intention to migrate

This stage represents a critical juncture in the migration process, encompassing the formulation of a migration plan (Kley, 2011) and the execution of concrete actions driven by agency (Klabunde et al., 2017) and social influence (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2009; Kley, 2017).

From an operational perspective, the respondents went through the following successive steps: Securing transportation; Preparing travel luggage; Undertaking the migration journey itself, including international transit to Italy and border crossings.

At the outset of this stage, migrants revisited the information acquired during the second stage, regarding the procedural aspects of emigration. During these actions, migrants came into contact with new social actors and new information, having the opportunity for a first instance of *testing the validity of the information in the initial baggage*, of *re-evaluating the beliefs* of behavioral control (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2009) and of *restructuring expectations*. The role of

facilitators—including experienced migrants, intermediaries, and international transport operators—was instrumental in streamlining the migration process, thereby diminishing the autonomy of aspiring migrants. The perceived competence of these facilitators in navigating the migration journey fostered trust, which in turn shaped expectations and reciprocity dynamics.

The symbolic and practical significance of *travel luggage* in the migration process is twofold. First, it serves as a vessel for carrying essential items, reflecting migrants' anticipation of their new lives. Second, its portability allows for physical mobility alongside the migrant (Warnier, 2006). In migration studies, suitcases have been associated both with aspirations for a better life and with themes of loss, trauma, and displacement, particularly in cases of forced migration (Mertus et al., 1997; Burrell, 2008a). Consequently, luggage can function as an extension of personal identity and an emotionally charged travel companion (Burrell, 2008a: 363). Furthermore, the content of travel bags carries distinct meanings depending on the migration trajectory—whether departure or return. Packing for migration not only materializes perceptions and expectations about future employment (Burrell, 2008a) but also entails a selection process in which objects laden with sentimental value are prioritized (Cavalcanti, 2023: 104). Constraints imposed by transport regulations and legal restrictions further influence these choices. Additionally, the exchange of goods between Romania and Italy—whether items brought from Italy for family members or gifts transported to acquaintances abroad—serves as tangible evidence of transnational relationships (McKay, 2007; Burrell, 2008a). Expressions of care and appreciation are frequently embodied in food products (such as sweets or traditional Italian and Romanian delicacies), technological devices, clothing, or souvenirs.

Building on Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) notion of migration as a process facilitated by a “constellation” of agents and material elements, this stage was examined through the lived experiences of study respondents. A significant component of this experience was engagement with transitional spaces (Bissell, 2007; Burrell, 2008a), encompassing both the materiality of transit environments and interactions with transport operators and fellow migrants. Particular emphasis was placed on the international coach journey (Malichová, Cornet & Hudák, 2022; Richardsen, 2024), which constituted a pivotal moment for evaluating and expanding migrants' informational capital (Faist, 2009; Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009). Knowledge acquired in previous stages from migration networks, intermediaries, or transport facilitators was either corroborated,

refined, or contradicted through interactions with other passengers. Some information was conveyed through explicit directives from transport operators, often concerning travel regulations, luggage restrictions, or expected conduct. Other insights were imparted implicitly through observation, particularly in border-crossing scenarios, which frequently provoked anxiety (Löfgren, 1999, apud. Burrell, 2008a) or, in some cases, led to frustration and humiliation (Cunningham, 2004).

A crucial element of the migration journey, in relation to the decision-making process, was the formation of new social ties that provided additional insights for novice migrants. During transit, passengers organically formed micro-communities (Teunissen, 2018; Heller & Pezzani, 2022) through social interactions and the development of a shared “affective atmosphere” (Wilson, 2011), shaped by collective migration experiences (Richardsen, 2024). Beyond fleeting exchanges with transport operators, the most frequent interactions occurred between seatmates and passengers seated in close proximity (typically spanning two or three rows in front, behind, or adjacent to the migrant). These interactions presented opportunities for new migrants to assess the validity of their prior knowledge and acquire a secondary informational corpus—a collection of migration-specific practices related to the Italian domestic labor market, transmitted by more experienced migrants.

Furthermore, these newly established social connections contributed to an expansion of migrants’ social capital. Such networks had the potential to facilitate exchanges of material and non-material resources (Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009), as well as foster relationships based on trust (Coleman, 1990; Faist, 2009). These connections enabled the mobilization of migrant-specific security practices, including job referrals, informal financial assistance and mediation for employment opportunities.

The fifth stage of the decision-making process: Commitment to the decision

The fifth stage of the migration decision-making process involves the novice migrant's experiential validation of previously acquired information and the subsequent recalibration of initial expectations. This process occurs through firsthand engagement with intermediation practices and the submission to domestic labor. The confrontation between initial perceptions and the realities of migration prompts a reassessment of the feasibility and long-term sustainability of the decision to emigrate (Janis & Mann, 1977). In response to this confrontation,

two potential outcomes emerge: sustained commitment to migration or the abandonment of the migration project. The determination of which path is chosen depends on the extent of dissonance between the cognitive components of commitment and reality (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2009).

However, following Janis and Mann's (1977) conceptualization, a paradox of decision-making becomes apparent—namely, the persistence of commitment despite encountering doubts or negative feedback. Unlike decisions aimed at changing behavior, such as quitting smoking (used by Janis and Mann in describing their decision-making process), in which individuals might experience the consequences of their newly chosen course of action within a relatively short period, labor migration involves an extended period of time in which knowledge will be experientially tested and adapted. Furthermore, working in another country is accompanied by new discoveries (information, risks and costs or benefits). The motivations underpinning migrants' continued adherence to their migration plans extend beyond concerns about losing respect from their reference group or social influence—though these remain significant drivers for subsequent migration attempts (Janis & Mann, 1977). Rather, the long-term implications of the migration decision gradually emerge, reinforcing commitment despite adversities.

Some of these implications stem from systemic factors, such as the prevalence of the shadow economy and the precarious nature of domestic work. The expansion of informal work in the Italian domestic sector can be attributed to the mismatch between immigration quotas set for the domestic sector and the actual demand for care work (Colombo & Dalla-Zuanna, 2019; Bracco and Onnis, 2022). This discrepancy has been exacerbated by the inadequacy of the existing geriatric care infrastructure in relation to the magnitude of the demographic ageing phenomenon (Di Santo & Ceruzzi, 2010). Furthermore, social policy measures have historically prioritized the containment of public spending, establishing a “family-based social assistance system” (Capponi, 2019: 29). These structural conditions have played a crucial role in the development of the *badante phenomenon* (Capponi, 2019).

Attempts by legislators to regulate this sector have faced significant challenges, particularly in their efforts to codify an occupation that aligns with capitalist and neoliberal frameworks while still fulfilling the traditionally domestic role of the housewife (Tiraboschi, 2022). Historically, this role had been integral to Italian family structures, providing informal

childcare and elderly care. Consequently, the occupational category of *badante* (caretaker for the elderly) has evolved into a composite role encompassing diverse responsibilities, such as home maintenance, grocery shopping, and medication administration. These tasks overlap with those assigned to other established professions within the same sector, including housekeepers, cooks, gardeners, and nurses (Frisoni, Porcheddu & Prosdocimi, 2022: 214, referencing Article 9 of the National Collective Labor Contracts—CCNL).

Although demographic shifts and female labor force participation have underscored the market value of care work, the development of a coherent legislative and institutional framework to manage this sector remains an ongoing challenge. This is evidenced by the more than fifty iterations of the National Collective Labor Agreement issued over time, the majority of which date since the 2000s (Casano, 2022). The content of these agreements has often contained ambiguities that have either been intentionally or inadvertently exploited by employers or other actors. Furthermore, the responsibility for formalizing the employment status of migrants often falls on private individuals, whether they are family members of care recipients or the elderly themselves. This arrangement intensifies the migrant's dependence on their employer and contributes to precarious working conditions (Williams, 2012; Fedjuk, 2011, 2016). As for Italian family members, while legal frameworks provide for the obligation of the family to provide care for incapacitated relatives, the vague wording of these laws has led to varying interpretations of the extent and nature of these care responsibilities.

Last but not least, legislators have permitted the participation of other economic actors in the domestic labor sector, including social cooperatives and temporary employment agencies (Biagi & Tiraboschi, 2000; Spattini, 2006; Pasquinelli & Sala, 2013; Capponi, 2019). Despite the establishment of specialized regulatory frameworks, these entities have managed to develop business models that exploit migrant labor, often in collaboration with Italian employers and with the tacit tolerance of regulatory authorities (Fellini, Ferro & Fullin, 2007; Gendera, 2011; Lalani & Metcalf, 2012; Allain et al., 2013; Perrotta, 2014; Österle & Bauer, 2016; Bahna & Sekulova, 2019).

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