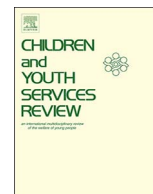




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## Circulation of care among unaccompanied migrant youth from Guatemala

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## ABSTRACT

From ethnographic research with unaccompanied children in the United States and Guatemala, this paper explores emergent and, at times, conflicting narratives of care that young migrants encounter while in U.S. federal custody. They are depicted as ‘ideal’ *victims* deserving of care and simultaneously as unauthorized *outlaws* subject to state discipline via detention and deportation. In contrast, Guatemalan youth and their families speak of migration as a cultural elaboration of care in which they are *agents* of caregiving, employing transnational migration as a collective and historically-rooted survival strategy. By examining the multiple conceptualizations of care that young people encounter and embody, this paper problematizes theorizations of ‘care’ by tracing the conflicting meanings assigned to it. Informed by the perspectives of young migrants and their families, the paper suggests ways that service providers might better serve them.

## 1. Introduction

Each year, an estimated half of a million migrant children journey from countries around the globe and enter the United States with no lawful immigration status, many of whom have no parent or legal guardian to provide care and custody. In fiscal year 2010, 8207 unaccompanied minors<sup>1</sup> entered into the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). In 2014, the number of unaccompanied children in federal facilities swelled to 68,500 children (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2017). The influx of migrant children has garnered significant media attention, intense speculation on a wide array of causal factors, and a significant uptick in the moral panic surrounding children on the move. Reports by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) largely attribute the increase of migrant children to gang violence, child abuse and deepening poverty in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala (Frydman, Bookey, & Dallam, 2014; U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014). These explanations characterize the experiences of some Central American youth, yet fail to reflect the varied experiences and perspectives of young people.

Logistically, the influx of unaccompanied migrant children has also generated an expansive network of NGOs subcontracted to “care for” children in immigration custody while the state simultaneously attempts to remove them via deportation proceedings. In practice,

unaccompanied children encounter contradictory messages of care. Immigration authorities frame unaccompanied children as unauthorized *outlaws* subject to state discipline via detention and deportation (Heidbrink, 2013; Portes, 2001; Solis, 2003). Among legal and social service providers, however, unaccompanied children are cast as an ‘ideal’ *victim*, “a person or a category of individuals who—when hit by crime—most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim” (Christie, 1986: 18; Somers, Herrera, & Rodriguez, 2010; Wynne, 2017; Young & McKenna, 2010).

From ethnographic research in U.S. federal facilities for unaccompanied children and with indigenous migrant youth and their families in Guatemala, this paper explores how these dichotomous discourses mischaracterize the decisions and experiences of young migrants and their families. Interviews and observations across multiple U.S. federal facilities for unaccompanied children reveal how legal and social service providers depict young migrants as vulnerable victims, dependent upon adults as decision makers and providers for children. Correspondingly, unaccompanied migration is held as a consequence of parental (ir)responsibility or culpability. While the pathologization of parents may open avenues for legal relief, it also may limit young people from meaningful access to critical legal and social services. In contrast, research with young migrants in the U.S. and Guatemala reveals that youth understand migration as a cultural elaboration of care in which they are *agents* of caregiving who themselves manage and employ transnational migration as a collective and historically-rooted

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. legal code defines *unaccompanied children* as those under age eighteen who have no lawful immigration status in the United States and are without a parent or legal guardian in the United States who is available to provide care and physical custody (6 U.S.C. §279(g)(2)). In this paper, I enlist the term “migrant youth” because the statistical majority of apprehended unaccompanied children in the U.S. is 13–17 years old (White House, DHS, and HHS, 2014), and because, in their own cultural contexts, young people are understood and understand themselves as ‘youth’ rather than ‘children.’

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survival strategy. Cultural understandings of care and care work shape their migratory decisions and the conditions of youth upon arrival. By tracing the multiple conceptualizations of care that young people encounter and embody, this paper problematizes theorizations of care in contexts of migration by tracing the conflicting meanings assigned to it. Informed by the perspectives of young people and their families, the paper further suggests ways service providers might better serve migrant youth.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Global care chains

In contexts of globalization, child migration and care are intimately linked. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas examines the transnational transfer of caregiving and reproductive labor by women in the Philippines who travel to serve as caregivers for children and the elderly in the Global North (Parreñas, 2000, 2001). With decreases in public services in migrant-receiving countries in the Global North, Parreñas and others argue, women from the Global South enter into the workforce abroad often becoming low-paid caregivers of the elderly and children (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Parreñas, 2000). In turn, Filipinas leave their children in the care of poorer women in the Philippines, who entrust their children in the progressively lower-waged labor or unpaid care of family members. Thus, women increasingly enlist caregiving in contexts of migration to navigate growing global structural and gendered inequities, creating an ‘international division of reproductive labor’ in which poorer women in the sending nations provide reproductive labor to “wealthier women in receiving nations” (Parreñas, 2000: 561). Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2000a) synthesizes this growing phenomenon of women migrating transnationally to perform care and social reproduction with the concept of ‘global care chains,’ a concept which productively underscores the interconnected social and transnational kinship networks in which migrants and caregiving are embedded.

While Parreñas and Hochschild depict an interlocking linear chain of caregiving between sending and receiving nations, scholars have increasingly focused on how care *circulates* across geopolitical borders reciprocally but often unevenly (Ariza, 2014; Baldassar & Merla, 2014). As Aihwa Ong argues (Ong, 1999: 10), people move through time and space with increasing flexibility and uncertainty. This is particularly reflective of Central American migration to the United States. Over the past twenty years, the U.S. has seen record levels of government funding of immigration enforcement (Andreas, 2012; Rosenblum, 2012); the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border (Loyd, Mitchelson, & Burridge, 2013); an infusion of U.S. funding, technology, and training to Mexican authorities to thwart migration through Mexico (Vogt, 2013); and the parallel growth, heightened coordination, and extreme brutality of gangs and cartels throughout Mexico and Central America (Naim, 2005). In an era of heightened immigration enforcement and the pervasive global practice of deportation, unauthorized migrants have little stability and certainty in their migratory routes or settlement possibilities (Abrego, 2014; De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Meyer & Boggs, 2016; Zatz & Rodriguez, 2015).

In response to this shifting landscape, the ways that care circulates through families and households also changes. Anthropologist Kristin Yarris's (2017) exploration of the ways Nicaraguan grandmothers care for their grandchildren when mother migrate productively underscores how care moves across generations and how moral and cultural values are brokered and regenerated by grandmothers. Building on this life-course approach, I argue that indigenous Guatemalan youth also enact care and caregiving—in communities of origin and as migrants themselves—in contexts of growing global inequity. Examining the ways that care circulates in and through households allows for the recognition of how young people participate in transnational caregiving across borders and generations and how the migration of indigenous youth is a

*cultural elaboration of care*. That is, in a cultural context which values and depends upon their contributions to households and communities, indigenous youth turn to migration as a historically-rooted strategy to navigate growing poverty and instability in Guatemala. Through their care work at home and increasingly abroad, young people seek to fulfill their social obligations to kin and community. Thus, to understand the unaccompanied migration of young people, it behooves scholars and practitioners to examine care within the historical and socio-cultural frameworks of young people and their families.

### 2.2. Youth care work

Migration scholarship has long oscillated between framing children as *beneficiaries* of parental migration which enhances a child's social status, education and access to resources, most often through remittances (Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2014; Zhou, Murphy, & Tao, 2014), or as *victims* of parental absence which halts a child's social and emotional development (Falicov, 2005; Foster, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). The literature on global care chains also adopts this binary by framing children as either left behind in the Global South or as privileged beneficiaries of caregiving in the Global North (Hochschild, 2000b; Parreñas, 2005; Yeates, 2005). Whether framed positively or negatively, an examination of the impact of parental migration on children ultimately presents parents as actors, and thus implicitly relegates those children “left behind” as indicators of parental success or failure (Heidbrink & Statz, 2017). This not only reduces the complex conditions that spur parental migration, but likewise fails to reflect young people's contributions to collective decisions about whether, when, and where to migrate.

Research with young migrants uncovers that children are agents of transnational caregiving as their paid labor and unpaid care work circulates through geographic and virtual spaces and across generations. The paid labor of young migrants may include economic contributions through domestic labor, childcare, work in a family business, and piecemeal tasks, such as sewing, often with minimal financial compensation if at all. The unpaid care work of migrant youth includes cooking, cleaning, shopping, childcare, elder care, maintenance, and tending animals. Among immigrant entrepreneurs, young people provide labor in family-run business, often with little to no personal financial remuneration (Lew, 2006; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Young people who more readily learn languages provide critical translation and interpretation support to family members with limited language proficiency (Orellana, 2009). In addition, young people shape household bonds and mediate conflict by providing emotional and social support to family members adapting to new cultural, social and economic contexts (Foner, 2009; Moran-Taylor, 2008; Smith, Lalonde, & Johnson, 2004). Rather than reinforcing a bright line distinction between paid labor and unpaid care work, Nicola Yeates (2009: 5) suggests that care “covers a range of activities to promote and maintain the personal health and welfare of people.” Accordingly, care work allows for consideration of both the material and immaterial ways in which youth contribute to household well-being and the ways families may express their cultural and social valuation of young people's labor, which is “often overlooked and undervalued” (Baldassar & Pyke, 2014: 129).

## 3. Present study

This paper emerges from a 4-year, multi-sited ethnographic study of the migration and deportation of indigenous Mam and K'iche' children and youth in space of detention in the U.S. and following removal to Guatemala. This study necessarily situates the experiences of young people within a context of U.S. and Guatemalan immigration policies and institutional practices of detention and deportation of children. Drawing from previous research within U.S. federal immigration facilities for unaccompanied children (Heidbrink, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2017), this paper brings together research with youth as they circulate

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