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FILIPINO AU PAIRS ON THE MOVE:

Navigating strong and weak ties in the search of future paths[1]

Abstract

Most Filipina[2] au pairs in Denmark send remittances back home, and for many, au pairing forms part of longer-term migration trajectories. This article explores how Filipina au pairs try to carve out a future for themselves abroad. It shows that they navigate within tight webs of financial interdependence, whilst they continuously form their trajectories in relation to opportunities and restraints posed along the way by their local and transnational social relations. The article argues that examinations of migration trajectories benefit from broadening the research out in both time and space by including the migrants' broader social network within the frame of research.

Keywords

Au pair • Philippines • migration • family • mobility

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Twenty-seven-year-old Gil[3] had been waiting for seven years in Manila for an opportunity to go abroad. Three of her old college friends had gone to Denmark as au pairs, and eventually, they found Gil a host family. 'This is a stepping stone to your dream', one of them told her, saying, 'Then you can go to Norway, to Italy, or you can go to Canada and then to the US'. Two years later, the three friends had married and settled down in Denmark, but Gil's au pair contract was expiring. Reflecting on her lack of opportunities to remain amongst her friends in Copenhagen, she regretfully stated, 'Two years, and then goodbye. If you don't get married, you have to leave the country'.

Gil's above statement serves to illustrate the understanding of au pairing as making possible new migrations abroad, combined with the structural limitations that au pairs may experience if they wish to remain in just one destination society. Gil was one of the approximately 17,100[4] Filipinos who, according to Statistics Denmark, have been au pairing in Denmark during the past decade. The official purpose of the au pair programme is for young foreigners to expand their cultural horizons by living together with a Danish family with children for a maximum of two years. The scheme carries the expectation that the au pair will carry out household chores for between 18 and 30 hours weekly. In exchange, the host family provides the au pair with food, lodging and a monthly allowance of DKK 4,050 (€544) as of 1 January 2016 (The Danish Immigration Service 2016). The vast majority of au pairs in Denmark are Filipinas in their mid-twenties (Liversage *et al.* 2013: 17), and almost all remit some of their allowance to their family members back home. However, like Gil, many also engage in au pairing as part of longer-term migration processes.

It is not unusual to hear the au pairs explain that their life in the Philippines evolved around the prospect of leaving. One former au pair said that her life back home was like 'stagnant water' and continued, 'I went abroad to search for my future. There is no future for me in the Philippines.' Her statement indicates that when leaving the Philippines, she did not necessarily expect to find a future in Denmark. Rather, prospective young migrants in the Philippines often explain their migration aspirations in terms of an ambition to 'go to abroad', 'abroad' being a destination in itself (for a similar observation, see Rohde-Abuba 2016, Tkach 2016). It takes considerable investment and the availability of specific migration opportunities to find employment outside the Philippines. Gil, whose statement introduced this article, described the seven years that she had spent in Manila searching for a migration opportunity as simply 'waiting time'. Au pairs like her do not aim to return to the Philippines after their two-year au pair contracts expire. However, as Filipino migrants, they face very few opportunities to stay legally in Denmark. Nevertheless, they use their placement as a platform from which they can seek out other possible destinations.

This article investigates how Filipina au pairs make use of their stay in Denmark to carve out a future for themselves abroad. It shows how the au pairs navigate not only within a space that is defined by the restrictions and entitlements of the formal category of immigrant – more narrowly, of au pairs – in which they are placed but also by the changing demands and possibilities posed by their own local and transnational social relations (cf. Bikova 2015; Dalgas & Olwig 2015). This makes it difficult for Filipino au pairs to create a well-planned and strategic migration route. Rather, they form their migration trajectories by seizing the opportunities they encounter en route. Pointing to the ways in which au pairs receive information about migration opportunities through their social networks, this article

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argues that incorporating a broader transnational network of social relations within the research framework is fruitful in the examination of the processes by which migrants on temporary residence permits, such as these au pairs, create their trajectories.

This article begins with a short introduction to my research and a presentation of the Filipina au pairs whom I interviewed. It then situates the research in the literature on au pairs and explains how the present analysis theoretically approaches migration trajectories and the au pairs' social networks. Next, the article focuses on the au pairs' family economies and thus on their strong social ties (cf. Granovetter 1973). This points to the importance of a long-term perspective on au pair migration. Whilst the article uses several cases to show the complicated field of social relations within which the au pairs navigate, the last part of the article draws on a long-term biographical account by a former au pair whom I call Ana. This case illustrates the tendency amongst the au pairs to approach the future in an open manner, and it allows for an analysis of the role of weak social ties (cf. Granovetter 1973) in the au pairs' search for new migratory paths.

Filipino au pairs

This article is based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2011 and 2012 amongst current and former au pairs in the Greater Copenhagen area, together with a total of 10 weeks of fieldwork amongst former and prospective au pairs in the Philippines. The field of my research encompassed the web of social relations surrounding individual research participants, such as host family members, friends and Philippine family members. Hence, I have conducted a total of 76 interviews, of which 4 were with prospective au pairs, 17 with former au pairs, and 17 with women who were au pairing at the time of the research. The prospective au pairs were young women who had each established contact with a Danish host family and who, at the time of the interviews, were waiting to go to Denmark. I have used Skype, Facebook and telephone conversations to follow former au pairs after they have left Denmark, and I have continued to meet with former au pairs who remained in Denmark after their contracts expired. I refer to the current, former and prospective au pairs from the Philippines as simply au pairs.

The young Filipinos coming to Denmark as au pairs share many migration incentives with au pairs from other countries. Similar to the Russian au pairs in Germany, studied by the sociologist Caterina Rohde-Abuba (Rohde 2012), the Filipino au pairs explained that they have gone abroad in order to travel and see the world, to become more independent and to release themselves from parental control (Dalgas 2015). Au pair placement is one of the few ways in which they can enter Denmark, being non-EU citizens with limited financial means. What is particular in the case of the Filipino au pairs is that they understand their journeys from the perspective of what the sociologist Maruja M.B. Asis has described as the 'Philippine's culture of migration' (Asis 2006). Hence, next to the more adventurous aspirations, the ability to send remittances is usually also a heavy migration motive for the individual au pair.

Philippine international labour migration was institutionalised by the Marcos regime in 1974 (Rodriguez 2010: 9). Of the approximately 1.83 million Filipinos who left the country in 2014, more than 207,000 were hired as domestic workers (POEA 2015, Tables 3, 7). This large-scale migration for domestic work has coincided with European au pair programmes, such as the Danish one. From 2000 onwards, a growing number of Filipinos became au pairs in Denmark, and in 2015, 81% of all Danish au pair residence permits were given to Philippine citizens (Franck 2016: 3). From the point of view of the au-pair-sending families, au pair migration is often explained to be a form of labour migration that offers more security than migration for domestic work in, for example, Singapore or the Middle East. However, the au pairs do not necessarily construe au pairing as being simply a matter of domestic employment. Rather, they may distance themselves from being positioned as low-paid employees and instead emphasise their roles as young people on cultural exchange who are not supposed to conduct heavy domestic tasks in the host family's home. Such constructions do not prevent au pairs from stressing their roles as persons who are sacrificing themselves to help their families back home (Dalgas 2016).

Most of the Filipino au pairs I interviewed explained their family backgrounds as 'between poor and middle class', and all but two of the au pairs I interviewed explained that their families were in need of remittances. Most of the au pairs had between four and eight siblings. The au-pair-sending families I visited in the Philippine countryside grew crops and raised livestock at subsistence level. Several families had a *sari-sari* store attached to their house. That is, a small shop from where they could sell products such as canned goods, tobacco and oil. Some au pairs come from households where both parents were unemployed, whilst others had a father working in low-income jobs such as a tricycle or jeepney driver, day labourer or mineworker. In a minority of the au-pair-sending families, both parents were employed. These were by far the most well off amongst my respondents.

According to a larger survey conducted by the Danish National Centre for Social Science, the Filipino au pairs have relatively high levels of education (Liversage *et al*. 2013: 17). This corresponds to my findings. I have recorded the educational level of 23 au pairs. Of these, 20 had attended college and 12 had finished their degrees. Nevertheless, like many other young Filipinos, the au pairs I interviewed tend to perceive spatial mobility – preferably in terms of overseas migration – as one of the few opportunities they have to achieve social and economic mobility. Whilst most of the au pairs had been without salaried work in the Philippines, six interviewees had been employed as, respectively, welder, social worker, midwife, teacher, bookkeeper and waiter. These jobs were typically on short-term contracts. According to the au pairs, the salary levels only sufficed to cover the living expenses for one person and were thus not enough to support their families, let alone to start having children or a family of one's own. Out of the 34 current and former au pairs interviewed, 13 had been working as domestic employees in Singapore, Hong Kong or the Middle East before coming to Denmark. Another three women had been occupied as entertainers in Japan. I have uncovered the current whereabouts of 16 of the 17 women who were au pairing when I interviewed them four years ago. Today, 4 have returned to the Philippines, whereas 12 are living in Norway, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands.

A network-oriented approach to exploring au pair trajectories

This article contributes to the literature that investigates au pair migration beyond the duration of the initial stay as an au pair (see also Búriková 2016; Cox 2016; Dalgas & Olwig 2015; Rohde 2012; Tkach 2014). Moreover, the article views au pairs as migrants entangled in networks of local and transnational relations. Such networks form part of unbounded 'social fields' (Levitt & Schiller 2004), encompassing

social relations locally as well as transnationally. Whilst networks of transnational family relations form an important part of such social fields, the observations presented in this article also embrace the broader social network that extends beyond the family. Hence, as I will make clear below, the present article uses a research frame that is broad in space as well as in time.

A central theme in research into au pairs is the ambiguous position that they are offered as students of a foreign culture, members of their host families and de facto workers. Several studies have shown how this ambiguity allows the au-pair-receiving societies to be provided with low-cost domestic labour (see, e.g. Hess and Puckhaber 2004; Mellini *et al*. 2007; Yodanis & Lauer 2005), raising frequent questions about the legitimacy of the au pair programme (see, e.g. Platzer 2002; Stenum 2008; Øien 2009). Another key topic of investigation has been the roles that au pairs fill within their host families (see, e.g. Cox 2007; Cox & Narula 2003; Sollund 2010). This research has created important insights into the position of au pairs as (unrecognised) domestic workers occupying a subordinate hierarchical position in their host families. However, as the anthropologist Pauline Gardiner Barber observed, even though Filipino migrants employed as domestic workers might experience disempowering conditions, they do not necessarily perceive themselves as disempowered (Barber 2002: 46). Rather, as several studies have shown, Filipino migrants can engage in ambivalent class processes in both the destination society and the society of origin (see Barber 2002; Bikova 2015; Dalgas 2015; Gibson *et al*. 2001; Parreñas 2001).

A growing number of works on au pair migration take into consideration the role of the au pairs' transnational family ties (see, e.g. Bikova 2015; Dalgas 2015; Dalgas & Olwig 2015; Rohde 2012; Sollund 2009). Focusing on how Filipina au pairs in Norway engage in circulations of care with their family members left behind, the sociologist Mariya Bikova (2015) showed how such transnational family relations are fraught with tensions as well as care. Equally interested in family networks, the sociologist Caterina Rohde (2012) investigated the nuclear families of Russian au pairs in Germany as subtypes of larger social networks. This allowed her to engage with the perspective of migrated daughters regarding how they practice their relations with their parents. Whilst the Russian au pairs studied by Rohde invested themselves in caring for their parents, remittances mainly took the form of gifts, and direct money transfers were taboo (Rohde 2012: 135). For the Filipino au pairs, this is quite different. As Bikova also showed, the sending of remittances to parents and siblings is expected both by and of Filipino migrants.

In order to understand how Filipino au pairs navigate between family obligations and individual aspirations, we must recognise that understandings of individuality vary cross-culturally. Pointing to Charles Taylor's concept of 'buffered selves', the anthropologist Carl Smith explained that understanding oneself as 'significantly independent of others' or of individuals in an 'atomistic and monadic sense' (Smith 2012: 58) entails placing a sharp boundary between self and other, a stance inherited from Cartesian philosophy (ibid.: 59–60). I do not imply that the au pairs are without individual aspirations or that the relationship between their own ambitions and the expectations of those left behind are free from tensions. However, I do suggest that the Filipino au pairs create a less explicit boundary between self and other, and that they generally form their individual migration aspirations from perceptions of themselves as being part of family collectives.

Several scholars have highlighted how, rather than engaging in a straightforward and predictable strategic movement, migrants form their trajectories whilst on the move (see, e.g. Amit 2010; Schrooten *et al*. 2015; Valentin & Olwig 2015). Changing migration regulations and the changing needs of those back home do not give migrants such as Filipino au pairs the luxury of engaging in long-term planning. This observation speaks to insights created by the anthropologist Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2005), who, in her work on intentionality and uncertainty, has observed that under conditions of radical uncertainty, it is more useful for the actor to be flexible and to take advantage of new opportunities, rather than aiming to fulfil prior intentions. In order to investigate how the au pairs meet their opportunities, I draw on insights produced by the sociologist Mark S. Granovetter (1973), who explained network ties as channels of information and who proposed a distinction between strong and weak social ties. Granovetter defined the strength of a social tie as a 'combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confining), and the reciprocal services which characterizes the tie' (Granovetter 1973: 1361). Such strong social ties are the au pairs' close family relations, which, as explained earlier, have served as an important theme in that research that applies a transnational perspective to au pairing. However, the role of weak social ties has not received much attention in studies on au pair migration. Whilst people know the friends, family and acquaintances of those to whom they are strongly tied, Granovetter observed that 'those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive' (Granovetter 1973: 1371). Hence, if weak social ties serve as important channels for new information, they may also play a central role in presenting those new opportunities that are vital to the formation of new migration trajectories. Focusing on the case of Filipino migrants coming through Denmark as au pairs, this article seeks to examine how these relations of strong and weak social ties define the room for manoeuvre within which the au pairs can create their trajectories.

Family economies in the Philippines

About 10% of the Philippine population works abroad, and in 2015, their cash remittances amounted to USD 25.757 billion (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas 2016). These remittances form a central pillar in both the national economy and the family economies of individual migrants. However, it is not just migrants who support their families financially. Rather, the cooperation between family members is a way for Philippine families to make do with limited financial means.

The practice of such economic collectivity can be illustrated by the case of Carol. Carol was number four in a series of nine siblings. Her mother was an unemployed widow living on a farm in the northern Philippines. Carol's oldest sister worked as a high-school teacher, and she paid for the initial tuition fees that enabled Carol and her two older brothers to enrol in college. Later on, Carol's two brothers took a break from studying in order to enable Carol to finish her degree and their younger sister Crystal to embark on college as well. When Carol came to Denmark as an au pair, she became able to pay the tuition fees for her brothers and for Crystal, so they could finish their education. After Carol's au pair contract ended, she continued au pairing in Norway, and Crystal took over Carol's host family. This enabled the two sisters to finance the college education of yet another sibling. Whilst I never interviewed Crystal, Carol's story suggests that it was expected of Crystal – and maybe also by her – that she support her family from abroad. Had she not left for Denmark, it could have damaged the collective endeavour of ensuring college education for her other siblings. A college degree strongly improves the chances of

employment in the Philippines or abroad. It thus makes the family at large more financially robust than if one unemployed sibling were in need of longer-term financial support.

Such tight webs of financial interdependence can be used as a prism through which to understand the form of individuality that the au pairs associate with their migration. Thirty-one-year-old Luwela had just returned from four years as an au pair in both Denmark and Norway. Her father worked as a tailor, and her mother was unemployed. Luwela had used most of her allowance to support her parents, but her Norwegian host mother disapproved. To me, Luwela explained, 'It is an achievement [to send money]. It is not worth anything if I only prioritize myself'. Rather than defining the value of her income in terms of the ability it gave her to engage in consumption for her own personal use, Luwela's statement shows that she attributed her income a value in terms of the ability it gave her to help her family from afar.

Like Luwela's host mother, the Danish host parents I have interviewed also preferred that their au pairs use their allowance to enjoy their time in Denmark. Some even feared that the au pairs were being exploited from home. Inge, who, during the course of five years, had been the host mother to three Filipina au pairs, explained: 'They [the au pairs] are very sweet towards their parents. But I try to make them consider what is reasonable. I told my au pair, "Listen, it is you who are here, it is you who sacrifice yourself, it is you who are far from home"'.[5] Later, she explained: 'They [the au pairs' parents] don't set them free. They [the au pairs] are like small work-machines, who need to send money home to their parents'. For Inge, what was considered reasonable was that the au pair should prioritise her own needs. Employing an atomistic understanding of the individual as significantly independent of others (cf. Smith 2012), Inge drew a sharp boundary between the individual au pair and the au pairs' family by emphasising the autonomy that she expected the au pair to enjoy by living far away. Luwela, however, did not emphasise a sharp boundary between herself and her family.

Filipina au pairs have strong obligations to care for their parents. As one au pair explained, 'Because your parents provide you with this and that as a child, you are obliged to give back something'. What she was referring to can be seen as an *utang na loob* relationship. *Utang na loob* refers to a profound feeling of unilateral indebtedness, which, for example, children owe their parents for giving them life (Kaut 1961). When Inge spoke of her disapproval of her au pairs' sending of remittances, she reasoned from the perspective of a dominant tendency in Danish society where the resources mainly flow from parents to children. However, Filipino au pairs take part in more complex patterns of exchange within their families, which entails the expectation that resources flow from unmarried children to their parents, as well as within networks of reciprocity between siblings, often even encompassing extended kin.

When considering the role of the au pairs within these systems of exchange, it matters that most au pairs are female and that in order to be granted residence as an au pair, they are required to be unmarried and without children of their own. The former au pairs whom I have interviewed, who now have settled in Copenhagen with their Danish husbands, continued to play an important financial role in their Philippine families. However, in the Philippines, the expectations that one remit to the natal home is strongest before marriage, and often the oldest sister has a special authority over her younger siblings, combined with a responsibility to support them if she can. The anthropologist Henriette Skyberg has examined the gendered dimension of au pair migration, including these exchange patterns. In her study of au pairs in Aarhus, Denmark, she observed that the male au pairs expected to save up money to invest in building their own future households, whereas the female au pairs generally faced stronger obligations to send back remittances to their families.

In order to engage in au pair migration, the migrant needs to pay for transportation to Manila and maybe even accommodation in the city where she has to participate in obligatory courses and to acquire a passport and various other documents, which are also costly. Several au pairs and their parents reported that their families had pawned land and sold livestock in order to pay for these costs. From this perspective, au pair migration becomes a family investment. Whilst au pairs are expected to benefit significantly in terms of knowledge, social status and upward economic mobility from working overseas, they and their families generally expect that the family too will benefit from making the migration possible.

Several scholars have shown that by sending remittances, the migrant shows care and commitment to the family left behind (see, e.g. Bikova 2015; Dalgas & Olwig 2015; McKay 2007). However, as I have shown above, sending remittances also means participating in an economic collectivity. In a society where most people do not have insurance and cannot expect state support in times of financial hardship, this collectivity serves as a social security net. Hence, when young migrants use au pairing to contribute to their family economies, it is not just a sacrifice conducted for the sake of those at home but also anticipates the au pairs' own future situations. Moreover, in considering au pair migration as a family investment, it also points back in time. This underlines the importance of viewing au pair migration within a timeframe that exceeds the duration of the stay as an au pair.

Ana's migration trajectories

When I met Ana in 2012, she had just finished her contract as a domestic worker in Hong Kong and was in Manila waiting for her Danish au pair contract to fall into place. She came from a family of fishermen on the island of Negros and hoped that by going to Europe, she could save up to buy a larger fishing boat that would allow the family to catch more fish. Nevertheless, Ana's first move to Hong Kong lacked any firm financial intentions, being caused instead by a disagreement she had had with her older sister, Maryanne. The latter was working in California and had left Ana to take care of her teenage children in Manila. Ana felt trapped in her sister's home because Maryanne did not want her to get married or to try her luck abroad. After a quarrel over this issue, Ana contacted a recruitment agency for migrant workers. 'I just wanted to prove to my sister that I can stand on my own [two feet],' Ana explained. She found employment in Hong Kong and left the responsibility for Maryanne's teenagers to another sister, who was living nearby.

In Hong Kong, Ana's working days were long, normally between 15 and 16 hours. One of Ana's friends in Hong Kong went to Denmark as an au pair, and when her contract was due to expire, she asked Ana if she wanted to replace her with her host family. Ana saw this as an opportunity to attain a better work–life balance, and she hoped that au pairing in Denmark would be a stepping stone to domestic employment in Spain. Being then 29 years old, Ana would soon exceed the 30-year age limit for au pair applicants to Norway.

In Denmark, Ana's host family soon asked her if she would consider remaining with them after her contract expired. She could do this as a student, receiving (yet another) temporary residence visa and being allowed to take a regular job for 15 hours a week. The host family suggested that Ana could receive food and lodging

in the family in exchange for continuing to help around the home. Having completed one year of a three-year college education, the only English-medium course in which she could potentially enrol was a preparation course for engineers at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU). However, this course would cost her DKK 45,000 (€ 6,023) per semester, and Ana did not know if her host family would help her pay such a large amount.

Ana had not foreseen that au pairing could lead to her starting studying again. Whilst staying on in Denmark as a student could help her in her desire to stay in Europe on a longer-term basis, it would also limit her opportunities to send remittances back home. Ana, therefore, still considered the option of going to Spain after finishing her time as an au pair. On an earlier occasion, her host mother had warned Ana against looking for a future in Spain because of the country's high unemployment rates. Ana did not want to ignore this warning, as this might undermine her relationship with her host mother. She also refrained from telling the latter of her doubts about staying in Denmark, and she did not ask her host mother if the host family would help pay her tuition fees if she was accepted on to the course. By not revealing any explicit strategy for the future, Ana therefore left all her options open. This was a fruitful tactic: four days after she applied for enrolment, the authorities decided to cancel the foundation course altogether. Hence, the difficult decision of whether or not to stay with her host family was taken out of her hands.

Four months before Ana's au pair contract was due to expire, she had still not decided on her next move. She had already supported her family significantly. She had provided start-up capital for one of her sisters, who wanted to start a business selling beauty products, and she had sent regular remittances back to her mother. At one point, her mother had needed hospitalisation: Ana had paid the bill, thus strongly demonstrating her position as a main family breadwinner comparable to Maryanne in California. Finally, Ana had paid for a new fishing boat for her brothers, imagining that, were she to return to the Philippines, she could use it for tourist excursions. Nevertheless, Ana continued to talk about staying in Denmark, where she had some (illegal) cleaning jobs, and she toyed with the thought of au pairing in London until she learned that Britain does not grant au pair residence to Philippine citizens. Ana's host father and a friend of her host mother's knew that Ana could only stay legally in Denmark if she married a Dane. Hence, they introduced her to some of their single male acquaintances. Whilst Ana was not interested in entering into any kind of marriage, she did appreciate the fact that the people around her were seeking for a way to allow her to stay.

A month before the contract expired, Ana established contact with an employer in Finland, who offered her a job as a nanny. She had heard about this possible migration destination when her host mother, Charlotte, put her in contact with a Filipina who was an au pair in the home of a friend of Charlotte's in Finland. Ana told me that this job would allow her to obtain a work permit related to domestic work and unlike the au pair contract, which was a one-off affair, her new contract as a nanny would be renewable. She had heard that five years of employment in Finland would allow her to apply for permanent residence, and now Ana started to imagine that her future might entail long-term settlement in the most northerly part of Europe.

Creating a future along uncertain paths

It is not uncommon for Filipino migrants like Ana to use a temporary work contract abroad as a stepping stone to a new migration destination. The sociologist Anju Mary Paul (2011) has examined such migration routes in a study of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. She identified a hierarchy of destinations in which regions such as North America and Europe are placed at the top because of their relatively high average salaries and better working conditions than other destinations. However, these 'top destinations' are also more difficult to enter than, for example, some Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries. Paul explained that migrants often engage in a strategic and stepwise movement towards their preferred destinations (ibid.: 1861). The final destination, she continued, can thus be planned beforehand, whereas the first migration destination is more coincidental (ibid.: 1864). In accordance with Paul's observation, many au pairs like Ana have developed a trajectory in which they initiate their migration in more random destinations. This choice of first destination is nevertheless stirred by the legal regulations that make the specific path possible. These first destinations often entail a greater burden of work and a lower income level than what they can achieve as au pairs in Denmark. Knowing that au pair placement in Denmark is temporary, several au pairs had ideas of how au pairing could serve as an opening to new destinations. Nevertheless, the au pairs' trajectories rarely represented a systematic execution of pre-planned strategies. Indeed, Ana had no clear idea of where au pairing in Denmark would lead her. She juggled numerous alternatives, and at the last moment, the opportunity to go to Finland appeared, which opened up the hope of a more stable and longer-term position as an immigrant in Europe. When Ana left for Hong Kong, she had not imagined that it would open up a pathway to Denmark; she had simply gone to Hong Kong because it gave her an opportunity to go abroad. Instead of having a steady plan for her future after au pairing in Denmark, she preferred to consider the many potential futures that her social relations opened up for her. Actually, as Ana recalled, she found it stressful when, more than a year before her contract was due to expire, her host mother had asked her about her future plans. She did not like to plan so far into the future. Instead, she preferred to explore opportunities as they appeared, 'as in Hong Kong', she told me, referring to the unexpected opportunity she learned of when her friend had suggested that she become an au pair.

The Philippine expression *bahala na* can help us understand this reluctance to undertake long-term planning. *Bahala na* roughly translates as 'God will show the way' or 'Come what may', and whilst the expression is often used when one is speaking from within a difficult situation, I suggest that it expresses openness about the future, rather than necessarily implying fatalism or powerlessness. Indeed, Filipino au pairs actively aim to improve their livelihood options through migration. We might perceive their trajectories as a way of navigating centred on the ability to make use of opportunities when they arise, rather than understanding these movements as the meticulous fulfilment of pre-planned migration routes. However, as Ana's story shows, they still preferred some future scenarios over others. In other words, although au pairs do not necessarily know what a journey to Denmark will lead to, they may have ideas about the potential future that au pairing can bring about, as well as an openness towards the possibility that the future might take some completely unexpected turn.

In several respects, au pairs in Denmark find themselves in insecure situations. First, as au pairs, their residence is tied to their specific host families. This means that if a host family decides to terminate the au pair contract prematurely, the au pair will lose her legal residence unless she can find a new host family within a month. Second, by having a central role in their family economies, changing situations amongst family members at home – such as illness or sudden unemployment – create new needs for the au pair

to meet from abroad. Third, changes in regulations, such as the cancelling of the foundation course, require applicants like Ana to find an alternative future path quickly. Structural conditions, such as Denmark's immigration regulations, thus limit the space within which au pairs can imagine their potential futures, whilst changes to these regulations create uncertainty in relation to migrants' future options abroad. As Johnson-Hanks noted, 'when the future decides which paths will be possible, it is not fatalistic to say that one does not know which path one will follow' (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 377). Instead, Johnson-Hanks suggested, in such situations, it is not the well-planned strategy that works, but instead an approach to the future that 'keeps every alternative open as long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise' (ibid.: 377). Hence, in order to understand how the au pairs create their migration trajectories under such conditions of uncertainty, it becomes useful to examine how their social networks can provide them with new opportunities.

Network ties as channels of opportunity

When young migrants go through the uncertainty of au pairing, it can be a way of aiming to create a secure and strong position for themselves in the family collective at home. Indeed, Ana went abroad to show her family that she could be independent, which she proved when she trumped even her sister as the family breadwinner by paying their mother's hospital expenses. By providing her with an opportunity to become au pair and helping her to move on within Europe, Ana's host family indirectly helped her strengthen her position within her Philippine family. However, they also made Ana an offer of studying, which could have placed her in a position that would have made it difficult for her to continue sending back remittances.

As Ana's story illustrates, the au pairs create their trajectories within a complex field of social relations that encompass their host families as well as their transnational family relations. On the one hand, Ana's lack of enthusiasm regarding the option of remaining in the host family as a student serves as an example of how the au pairs' transnational family relations indirectly influence their migration aspirations and their room for manoeuvre abroad. On the other hand, the fact that Ana did not inform her host parents about her reluctance to study also points to the importance she attributed to her relations with them. Hence, aiming to avoid disappointing her host mother, she nourished a relationship with a minimum of conflict and thus kept a possible future path open for herself.

The au pairs' relations with the Philippine family members they support from afar and with their host families can be seen as what Granovetter (1973) termed strong social ties. Whilst the au pairs do not have close bonds with their host families at the time of their arrival in Denmark, they can develop strong social ties during the course of the two years they live together. Indeed, Ana talked about her host family as her 'second family'. The closeness in the relation between Ana and her host parents became explicit to me after she moved to Finland, as she still Skypes with them and stays in their home when she occasionally visits Copenhagen. This points to how Ana had build relations with her host parents that entailed intimacy and emotional intensity, just as their attempts to find a way for her to stay shows how this relation also entailed reciprocal services (cf. Granovetter 1973). However, Ana's trajectory was not only influenced by close and morally obligatory social relations.

Granovetter (1973) observed that the stronger the social ties between two individuals, the more their friendship networks tend to overlap. Weak social ties, on the other hand, link individuals to a larger number of unknown others (ibid: 1376). By viewing relations as channels for resources and information, Granovetter argued that this broader linking increases ego's ability to acquire new information, what he termed 'the strength of weak social ties' (ibid: 1360). From this perspective, the au pairs' broader networks of distant social relations can become valuable channels in their search for new opportunities. It was here that Ana met an obstacle to her potential future migration. Instead of having a large network of acquaintances, she had invested her energy in creating close social relations with her host family and a few other au pairs. Her closest friend continued on to Norway, but because Ana was now over the age limit for au pairs in Norway, she needed to find new opportunities elsewhere. Even though Ana's host family wanted to help her, their options were eventually exhausted. It was a weak social tie, namely, that with her host mother's friend's au pair in Finland, who made Ana aware of Finland as a migration destination and of the country's programme for domestic work migrants. With her social relations being central channels for information about new opportunities to be seized, Ana's migration trajectory thus took another unexpected turn. In this way, her story shows how weak social ties can play a pivotal role in the provision of opportunities for further migratory moves.

Conclusion

Filipino au pair migration serves as one example of how migrants on time-limited residence, who wish to continue their lives abroad, need to navigate in relation to the migration regulations of a variety of potential destination countries. As these regulations change, this adds to the uncertainty that these migrants face. Moreover, as I have shown, the au pairs find themselves in a complex field of social relations. The relations they build whilst in Denmark, whether with their families back home, their host families or with other Filipinos, do not necessarily end with the termination of the au pair contract. Hence, from the Filipino au pairs' perspectives, au pair placement is understood as part of longer life-spans. This speaks to the importance in migration research of viewing au pairing within a longer-term perspective.

Whilst Filipino au pairs do not know to which destinations au pair placement will lead them, they might have explicit goals regarding the socio-economic goals they want to reach during their stay. Their contributions to the families left behind, such as paying the educational expenses of a younger sibling, is a concrete example of an economic achievement that gives the au pair a position as a sister or a daughter who contributes to the welfare of the family as a whole. I have suggested that the au pairs do not create a sharp boundary between their own ambitions as independent adults and the welfare of their families. Rather, their contribution to the family collective can be a way through which they develop their individuality as adults. However, when changes in the lives and needs of those back home occur, it influences the migration paths that are available to the au pair. In this way, the au pairs' position in supporting family members enhances the uncertainty within which they form their migration trajectories.

Despite this importance of close local and transnational relations, I have argued that it does not suffice to look only at the Philippine family and the host family when we examine the au pairs' long-term migration trajectories. It is exactly because au pairs navigate under conditions of uncertainty that these young migrants need to be flexible, and in this aspiration, the au pairs' broader social network

becomes crucial in terms of providing contacts and knowledge about the new migration opportunities for the au pair to seize. This means that in order to study how au pairs create their migration trajectories, it is constructive to broaden out the research frame in both time and space, beyond the au pairs' strong local and transnational ties. This insight, I suggest, is useful not only in the study of au pairs' migration trajectories but also in the research on other migrants who need to form their journeys without the luxury of long-term planning.

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Notes

1. This article draws on insights from my book chapter 'Mobile kvinder. Regel, tilfældighed og tilhørsforhold I filippinsk au pair-migration gennem Danmark' (Author 2015a)
2. From here on, I use the term 'Filipina' to denote women of Philippine origin and the term 'Filipino' to denote either males or a category consisting of both males and females of Philippine origin.
3. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
4. Data extraction from Statistics Denmark's www.statistikbanken.dk.
5. All interviews conducted in Danish are translated by the author.

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