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**LIVING IN-BETWEEN.
The transnational lives of
Romanian women working
in Italy as *badanti***

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Introduction

When I was a child, we used to visit my grandmother twice a week. I liked those moments because in the neighborhood were also living other relatives. One of my grandmother's sisters was a very interesting character. Me and my cousins were amazed by her and even now – that she passed away - when we talk about her, we recall happy moments or events. She left us with very funny memories. She was the younger sister and she was absolutely different from my grandmother or the other women of the small town where we used to live.

She was eccentric or at least at that time she seemed that way in our eyes. She dyed her hair, she used to wear colorful dresses and shoes and she always had colorful accessories matching her clothes. She had many beaded necklaces and clip earrings. She was a spot of color between many women dressed all in the same way - with the same dark colors or in black because they were widows - with their white hair sometimes covered by a headscarf.

Her house was the meeting place for her brother, sisters, in-laws, nephews. Sometimes while we were all gathered there, she took the accordion that she brought from Germany and she started to play, improvising, because she didn't know how to actually play it. Her house was filled by objects and gadgets she got in Germany. She loved to show them proudly to us. And she was randomly telling us German words or sentences. Germany was a constant presence in her life. She lived there

for about ten years. Like many Italians, she moved there, in a place near Freiburg, together with her husband. She worked there in a factory and at some point, as many others like them, they came back to Italy.

Back then, being a child, I couldn't realize. She was just a fascinating, out of ordinary woman. But now, as a sociologist, I realized that what we all thought were signs of an eccentric personality were actually something else. Even if she was physically in Italy, a part of her was still in Germany. Or, at least she tried to bring Germany with her to her hometown. Living and working there, for so long, made her experience a completely different world. She had a different attitude toward life compared to my grandmothers, for example. She was funny and had many jokes. She was a different kind of woman between the restricted possibilities of being a woman offered in an isolated small town, in one of the poorest regions of southern Italy during 1980s and 1990s. She was from some points of view, completely out of place.

But now I can see her with a different glimpse and with the glasses of a sociologist I can say that most probably the experience in Germany changed her and made her different from her sisters. I will never confirm or deny this hypothesis, for obvious reasons but, I can think about my personal experience and of course about the experiences of all the people who can tell me their migration story.

My glasses of sociologist have the lens of the habitus and the theory of practice by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and this work tries to sketch some futures of the habitus of Romanian women working in Italy as "badanti".

How and why, I chose the topic of my research

What I proposed through my doctoral research is to identify some of the changes experienced through the

migration experience by the Romanian women working in Italy as *badanti*.

My scientific interest on migration from eastern European countries is not new, but has its starting point in the environment in which I was trained as a sociology student, namely Italy in the 2000s when migration grew to become a recurrent topic of debate in the political and media agenda. Of course, at the same time, the subject has also received increased attention from an academic point of view.

In that decade immigration had become the symbolic site of struggles between political parties for electoral gains. On the one hand, right-wing parties promoted an image of immigration as an invasion and a threat¹, while left-wing movements, associations and some representatives from left-wing parties tried to fight this discourse². This climate was also supported by the proliferation of news reporting negative or criminal actions committed by illegal immigrants, creating an association between illegal status and delinquency. In general, the subject of immigration was (and still is) treated as a matter of public order and urgency to be dealt with by repressive measures. More than that, there is a tendency in the press to ethnicize the perpetrator of the criminal action, even if his origin is only assumed (Solano, 2014).

It is the mechanism known as *moral panic* (Cohen S., 1972). When migrants became increasingly visible and present in the lives of Italians, they were perceived as a threat and this idea was supported and fed by the discourse of the media and politicians in a vicious circle that even at the moment has not been broken.

Sociology back then not only focused on the dynamics of the migratory phenomenon but also worked on these symbolic

¹ <https://www.repubblica.it/online/politica/immigra due/inizio/inizio.html>

² <https://www.repubblica.it/online/politica/immigrazione/attacco/attacco.html>

representations in connection with the phenomenon and on the de-structuring of this discourse that sees migration as a problem. The sociology of migration course captured my interest in this approach to deconstructing stereotypes. At the same time, in that course, I learned that the way a society treats and relates to the migratory phenomenon says a lot about the society itself.

In this climate I found myself as a sociology student and I chose this subject for my Bachelor and later Master's degree thesis. During that period, there was a consistent increase in the number of migrants from Eastern Europe. I was surprised to meet more and more often in the small provincial town where I grew up, foreign women, mainly Romanian women who spent their time together, between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., walking on the main street regardless of the weather condition. For the locals, it was an absolutely new phenomenon, as we were all used to the emigration that had started after the Second World War and is still continuing right now. Irsina - that's the name of the locality - in the 60s and 70s saw a considerable decrease in the resident population. As happened in many small towns in the south of Italy, young people migrated to the northern regions or to a lesser extent abroad in search of a job.

I was curious to know more about this absolutely new phenomenon for our small community and I started to collect information.

After a few years, I moved to Romania and when I started the procedures to apply for a PhD and had to think about a research proposal, it seemed natural to me to continue on the same topic but this time I could take advantage of the sight my dual relationship between Italy and Romania, from several points of view, namely geographical, linguistic, cultural, social.

Just like Romanian migrants living in Italy, I am also in this space that connects Romania with Italy. My path followed an

opposite direction compared to the Romanians and perhaps it can result unusual. Of course, my position in the host society is very different from the position of a care worker in Italy, and most probably our motivations in choosing to migrate are different as are the opportunities and experiences we have. However, we both live in this transnational space that connects Romania with Italy, and I hope that this common ground helped me to catch some nuances that otherwise I would not have caught.

Structure of the work

The main objectives of this work are first of all identifying some of the characteristics of the habitus of Romanian women who work in Italy as badanti and the way their habitus changes through migration, if it changes. In order to meet those objectives, this work is structured in six chapters.

In Chapter 1, I briefly outlined the background of the phenomenon. The economic and political instability together with the new possibility of movement for Romanians in the wake of the event of December 1989, intersected in the same period the growing demand for domestic and in-home care assistance for elderly and frail people in Italy. Domestic work in Italy is a secondary job market that means that its characteristics made it available for immigrant from specific nationality. Romanian women have been and in part still are, migrant workforce which fills this segment of the labour market in Italy.

In Chapter 2, I set the theoretical framework of my research. Through a systematic literature review, I analyzed 38 studies selected in two scientific databases in order to investigate how the concept of habitus by Pierre Bourdieu has been applied to migration phenomena. Drawing on the methodology of meta-ethnography (Noblit and Hare, 1988), I

outlined the theory of the transnational habitus which results from the scientific production on the topic.

In Chapter 3 are presented the methodological aspects of the present study and an overview of the sample of the participants to the research.

The following three chapters get to the earth of the study. Habitus – and of course its transnational version – is a complex concept, multifaced. This work, obviously, has not the claim to grasp its totality but the analysis in Chapter 4, 5 and 6 focuses on three relevant aspects in the migration experience of Romanian badanti.

The topic of Chapter 4 is the badanti work life. I first presented the transnational labour market as a field of power which redirect migrants from different origin to specific segments of it. Then I tried to highlight the mechanisms which redirect Romanian women in the market of care services. Finally, I entered in the details of the accounts of the informants discussing with them how they accessed the market, how they approached the job and gained experience, the impact of the job in their life and the strategy they applied to exert some forms of control on their job which has many constraints.

The topic of Chapter 5 is family and the role of the informants within it. As part of a transnational family, the Romanian badanti in Italy are forced to reframe their role of mothers and the related caring duties according to the resources and constraints associated to their condition. In the same time, daily practices of care at their workplace could give rise to voluntary kin with the person being assisted. As a result, the notion of family, for the participants to this research, stretches between Romania and Italy and it contributes to keep them in-between.

Chapter 6 focuses on cultural aspects. Helped by the bourdiesan concept of hysteresis, which accounts for those situations in which social actors experience a disruption, it

emerged how the Romanian badanti - as expected - had that kind of experience when they moved to Italy but surprisingly it happen also when they go back to Romania for visits or vacation. This account for changings from a cultural and lifestyle point of view.

Finally, the last section of this work is dedicated to the conclusive remarks and general conclusions which represent a synthesis of all the topics covered in the light of the theory which guided this entire work.

CHAPTER 1

Framing the phenomenon

Migration from Romania's perspective

The year 1989 represented for the countries of Eastern Europe – previously under the influence of the Soviet Union - a watershed moment in their recent history, from several points of view. The changes occurred around that year marked the transition to democracy in a more or less tense way, the opening to the market economy and generalized changes in the society. The end of the communist experience allowed a greater degree of mobility for the citizens of those states and introduced a new component to the migratory system in Europe.

Regarding the case of Romania, during the communist period, the permitted migration had an ethnic connotation. Only the members of the ethnic minorities (Jews, Germans, Hungarians), at that time, were able to leave the country. For the rest of the population, leaving Romania was illegal, that's why, for example, only a small number managed to leave the country and reach Germany as an asylum seeker (Anghel et al., 2016).

In the migratory dynamics after 1989, Sandu (2010) identifies three typologies of Romanian migrations, namely: internal, permanent and temporary migration. Immediately after the revolution, there was an increase in internal migration from the countryside to the urban centers. Although these population movements were also present in the pre-revolution