Political belonging through elder care: Temporalities, representations and mutuality

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In this article, we examine the ways elder care generates political belonging. Our approach builds on studies which argue that nurture and care create kinship, but takes that argument further by suggesting that care generates membership in numerous social formations, across scales. We suggest that elder care helps illuminate key aspects of political belonging, particularly the temporality of political membership, because elder care entails mutuality and reciprocity over a long period of time. In addition, elder care is an interactive process in which older persons, their caregivers, the state, and other actors negotiate modes of political belonging that entail affect as well as rights. Furthermore, elder care has been used to construct representations of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ families which are ideologically connected to particular political formations. These representations generate difference and ‘Othering’ of internal and external populations. Ultimately, we argue that a focus on elder care collapses domains usually kept artificially separated, like kinship and the state, and private and public, in ways that are productive for social analysis as a whole.

Elder care has garnered much public interest during the past decades. However, its theoretical potential for anthropology has not yet been fully explored. Both care and old age have been mostly represented as posing ‘problems’ in the ‘private’ sphere of kinship, and less often explored as a feature of political organisation. As a result, the importance of elder care for representations of community and claims for belonging based on long-term reciprocal relationships are easily overlooked. In this article, we present a reading of elder care that illuminates these key aspects of political belonging.

We bring together diverse bodies of literature from political anthropology as well as kinship studies pertaining to belonging, citizenship, care, and age. Taking neither private care
arrangements nor public politics as a starting point, we move between scales and shed light on the temporality of political belonging. Although all forms of care have the potential to create political belongings, elder care offers a privileged entry point to analyse processes of political belonging for several reasons. First, many states emphasize the welfare of older persons in their policies and planning, because of a perceived care crisis due to societal ageing. Secondly, depictions of older persons and their care have long been central to the imagining of difference, feeding into self-representations of political communities as well as their handling of perceived ‘Others.’ Finally, a focus on elder care reveals how long-range temporalities and complex mutualities produce and reproduce forms of political belonging.

In the following sections, we advance our argument in four steps. First, we discuss how ageing and older persons have been discussed in anthropology, highlighting how age has received decreasing attention as a political factor. Secondly, we outline our conceptualizations of political belonging and care. The remainder of the article is devoted to demonstrating the importance of elder care in producing and reproducing political membership. We turn first to the temporalities of reciprocity, then focus on how temporal representations of elder care are used to construct difference between different polities, before turning to the translation and negotiation of these ideas in policies and individual encounters. To illustrate our points, we draw on our own research—Tatjana Thelen in Europe and Cati Coe in Ghana and among African paid care workers in the United States—as well as relevant work of other scholars.

The depolitisation of age and older persons in anthropological theory

Age was once a central aspect of the study of social organisation in anthropology, especially in regards to what were known as age-grade societies in East Africa (Keith and Kertzer, 1984: 21). These studies focused on the stability of social organisation and the ritual transitions from one life stage to another—often linked to political leadership. Age was considered a structuring factor of society. Likewise, life-cycle research paid attention to age. Although
such ethnographies often devoted one subchapter to ‘old age,’ they mainly focused on the
movement from youth to adulthood—such as in rituals around initiation and marriage. In
these studies, the connection between old age and political belonging as well as old age and
social change remained, in general, under-researched. The theoretical neglect of older persons
was further encouraged by the turn away from structuralist and functional-structuralist
theories.

Studies of ageing have regained some recognition since the 1980s. However, the
approach, so far, has been similar to that of childhood studies and, to a certain extent, earlier
feminist perspectives: attention to the diversity of ‘voices’ of people in different social
categories and to the various constructions of the object of study—gender, childhood, or old
age—socially and historically.¹ Age as a structuring feature by which to understand political
organisation did not re-emerge with this change in focus. Instead, age became something to
study in and of itself, rather than as a point of entry into what representations of ageing and
practices of elder care tell us about political organisation.

The ‘discovery’ of old age as a topos for research in the last decades of the 20th
century, however, changed how older persons were represented. Earlier anthropological
accounts stressed that social norms were less strict in old age, freeing older persons of much
social control, especially in the case of ageing women. Deviant roles such as ‘the wily old
man, the truly frightening powerful old witch, the curmudgeon recluse in the hills, the
mysterious, unpredictable old crone are types of exploiters of cultural freedom and confusion’
(Myerhoff, 1984:308). This earlier interest in deviant elderly has lost out to a view of older
persons as more ‘conservative’ than innovative—and perhaps even revolutionary—youth who
generate social change and instability. It seems that newer research and many anthropologists
(at least implicitly) endorsed a cultural imagination of older persons as passive, stable, and

¹ See, for example, Amoss and Harrell (1981) and Keith et al (1994).
norm-conforming and therefore insignificant in politics.\(^2\) This image is supported by a belief in the inevitable ‘modernization’ of all societies that sees older people in particular losing the power they allegedly held in ‘traditional societies due to processes of industrialization, secularization and urbanisation (Foner, 1984).\(^3\) Only in discussions of dementias does the difficult, conflict-generating older person make a partial re-appearance, but this discourse medicalises deviance and forecloses the agency of older persons. Anthropological studies of dementias and phenomena like menopause (Leibing and Cohen, 2006; Lock, 1993)—interpreted as signs of decay in old age—are mainly pursued under the auspices of medical anthropology, rather than political anthropology. In the main, representations of older persons highlight their passivity, vulnerability, and need for care.

We think this perspective requires modification. Our argument is that representations of ageing, care arrangements, and older persons shape political belonging locally and globally. We turn now to some conceptual considerations before focusing on the ways that representations of the temporalities of elder care construct differences and are translated, through policy and interpersonal negotiations, into political belonging.

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2 For example, Tamara Hareven has argued that older persons received comparatively little attention—as opposed to youth—in American society because ‘they were not considered dangerous for the social order’ (1995: 123, see also Myerhoff, 1984: 311).

3 Older persons were in fact differentiated in so-called traditional societies: the high status and political activity of an older person is often linked to wealth and political position as well as to physical and mental abilities (Bloch, 1998; Keith and Kertzer, 1984; Spittler, 1990).
Political belonging and the significance of elder care

The literatures on belonging and care have become increasingly significant in anthropology. They overlap in regard to the stress placed on reciprocal obligations and mutuality, but are otherwise considered quite distinct. Bringing these literatures together allows us to see the significance of elder care in understanding political belonging.

Belonging

Belonging has been widely used to denote diverse forms of membership such as kinship and ethnic groups, but also nation-states, categories of race, and even humanity. As a central concept, ‘belonging’ emerged relatively independently in kinship studies and political anthropology in the 1990s, which makes it useful to bridge these different literatures (Thelen and CCC, 2017). Some recent studies have used ‘belonging’ synonymously with kinship, as it has the advantage of avoiding older notions of descent (Edwards and Strathern, 2000), while in political anthropology and political science, ‘belonging’ was widely used to replace the fraught concepts of identity, citizenship, and immigrant assimilation (Geddes and Favell, 1999; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011). In both bodies of literature, the underlying theoretical concern was a move away from essentialising notions towards a more constructivist and processual view that attends to individual perspectives and pathways.

As it is used in political anthropology, belonging opens up the processual and multifactated aspects of political identification and incorporation. Through his work on farms in Zimbabwe, Rutherford (2008:73) underlines the significance of ‘routinised discourses, social practices and institutional arrangements through which people make claims for resources and rights, the ways through which they become incorporated in particular places.’ As Rutherford notes, particular dependencies and interdependencies shape modes of belonging. In this depiction, belonging comes close to how Holston and Appadurai (1999:14) describe social
citizenship as ‘the moral and performative dimensions of membership which define the meanings and practices of belonging in society.’

Citizenship can be taken as a major form of political belonging in contemporary societies, one which emphasizes the equality of all members of the political community (McClintock, 1993). In practice, citizenship is characterized by a differentiated flow of resources to persons and social groups (Turner, 1993:2) and can effectively reproduce existing social hierarchies on the basis of ethnic belonging (Thelen et al, 2011). Many formerly excluded groups (women, workers, migrants etc.) therefore used the ideal of equality to demand rights of inclusion (Holston and Appadurai, 1999, Keating, 2009). In response to these claims, states increasingly expanded social citizenship rights as welfare and redistribution to enable political participation. In contrast to charity and paternalism, the underlying justification for social citizenship relied on a shared culture as well as the reciprocal obligations of citizens towards the state (Honneth, 2003; Marshall, 1998 [1950]).

Entailed in these processes of negotiating mutual obligations are ideas about good citizens who care for their families and their country and therefore have the right to care by the state. The most prominent ‘good citizens’ were embodied in the figures of the mother and the soldier. Veterans from the Civil War and widowed mothers for example were the first to receive government pensions in the United States (Skocpol, 1992). Similarly, those considered ‘the elderly’ are often constructed as inherently needy. Claims to resources and

4 Since the 1990s, the differentiation of citizenship has become an important focus of research, mostly in regards to cities and migration (Ong, 1996; Rosaldo, 1994).

5 Some of the older order based on charity remains for those considered outside the political community: In the context of closing borders, the right to stay (not citizenship) in France requires their representation as physically suffering in order to substantiate deservingness of state care (Ticktin, 2011).
rights are negotiated on the basis of socially constructed needs. Because this neediness is linked to representations of ‘proper’ elder care and ideas about deservingness of state resources, reconfigurations of elder care entail reconfigurations of complex regimes of belonging to the nation-state.

Our goal is to go beyond the truism of a discrepancy between formal membership and substantive or social citizenship. Although the literature on citizenship emphasizes the difference-making which concerns us, we would like to part from its focus on migration and urban diversity as well as from its emphasis on the nation-state as the unit of political belonging. Rather, we see citizenship as always complicated by other belongings, some of which concern different political units such as sub-state communities, unions, or ethnic groups, but which are means, like nation-states, by which rights and access to resources are claimed. As Krause and Schramm argue, ‘other forms of incorporation may coexist with (and be in conflict with) citizenship regimes’ (2011:119). Therefore, we use the term ‘belonging’ because of its multivalence, agreeing with Crowley (1999:17) that the term is useful precisely because of its vagueness, encompassing formal rights as well as the ways in which people identify with and negotiate forms of political membership in everyday practices in multiple domains.

Belonging therefore allows us to move between scales and to see how its negotiations in every day interactions can sharpen political boundaries. These negotiations can also create opportunities for the opposite phenomenon: the widening of inclusion and new constructions of communality and thereby the production of new forms of political belonging (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011:203). In addition, the concept allows us to break from the ‘group’

6 ‘Political society’ as defined by Chatterjee (2011) in postcolonial states have the same effect, in which certain groups receive different resources and have greater voice precisely because of their difference, as slum-dwellers, mothers, or members of a particular occupational group.
perspective, which haunts much of the literature on citizenship. Instead, we focus on the micro-interactional production of mutuality as well as social actors’ understandings of such attachments as representing political belonging (Fikes, 2009; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011). We also retain the focus on power and claims-making that sometimes gets lost in the literature, as in some kinship studies, which emphasize the creation of belonging rather than conflicts over belonging (Lambek, 2011). Finally, belonging helps us to focus on the diverse forms of reciprocal relations—in multiple domains and across historical times—which create and deny mutuality (Crowley, 1999:18, 22). Comprising a logic similar to kinship, discourses of race, ethnicity, nationality, and humanity are invoked in multiple domains and used to distinguish political insiders from outsiders. These discourses should be analysed in conjunction with one another (Glassman, 2011). Many of these discourses use reciprocal care obligations, and more specifically elder care, as a means to construct political membership. The one who does not receive care has to be constructed as undeserving of membership, and therefore is denied political belonging (Biehl, 2005, Ticktin, 2011).

Care

Similar to the concept of belonging, care has recently received increasing attention in anthropology as indicated by conference themes and publications (e.g., Alber and Drotbohm, 2015; Buch, 2013; Liebelt, 2011). Care has come to the forefront for four reasons. One, processual approaches to kinship have highlighted the significance of care in making, breaking and negotiating kin relations (e.g. Aulino, 2016; Carsten, 1997; Marshall, 1977; Weismantel, 1995). Although insightful and inspirational for our own work, this literature has placed care firmly in the realm of kinship, often losing sight of its centrality for political organization (Thelen, 2015:514). We are less interested in kinship as such, but rather take kinship as one way of formulating belonging, which, as the new kinship studies demonstrate, occurs through care and nurture. Thus, we extend the work of these scholars to argue that care
also creates and destroys belonging in political collectivities like ethnic groups, unions, or the nation-state.

A second body of literature looks at care through the lens of neoliberal policies, which are re-making the responsibilities and obligations of citizens (e.g., Han, 2012; Muehlebach, 2012; Stevenson, 2014). Thirdly, feminist scholarship has used care to destabilise the distinctions between productive and reproductive work (e.g., Weeks, 2011). Finally, the transnational migration of paid caregivers mirrors global social and economic inequalities (e.g., Andall, 2000; Yeates, 2009). These literatures connect the interpersonal to the structural, and the private to the public, more than do the studies focusing on the production of kinship through care. However, we think the generative or productive force of care is often overlooked in these latter literatures. A focus on the ways that political belonging is created or destroyed through care can strengthen the connection between formal and informal domains.

We use a processual understanding of care that denotes its negotiation in practices that aim at satisfying socially constructed needs (Thelen, 2015; Thelen and ZZZ, 2007, see also Aulino, 2016). Through this definition, we move care beyond solely positive associations, sentimentality, or good intentions, in order to analyse its complexities, including negative effects and experiences of care, which often entail power asymmetries and undesired intimacy. Care mobilizes social, material, and labour resources (Buch 2015) and is the product of the moral imagination (Livingston, 2005, Stevenson 2014). The concept of care thereby helps us to understand how political belonging is understood through representations of reciprocity and mutuality.

Although care in general is significant in generating belonging, we argue that elder care offers insights into political belonging which care alone does not.

_Elder care and political belonging_
Above and beyond care in general, elder care highlights two aspects of political belonging that are otherwise marginalized in the literature.

One is how political belonging is connected to representations of community and kinship, in which older people serve as highly symbolic figures. Representations of ‘the good society’ entail ideas about older persons and old age as well as about care practices for older adults, which create a sense of shared belonging. Parenting and gender relations are used in similar ways, as has been documented (McClintock, 1993; ZZZ, 2013), but the use of elder care in such political representations has not been so well analysed. Representations of ‘good elder care’ are predicated upon images of the ‘proper’ domains of kin responsibilities as well as ‘proper’ civic and state engagement. State forms of provision for older persons, for example through pensions and health care, become signs of political belonging and thereby shared national resources, which can be claimed.

In addition, more clearly than other care practices, elder care adds to our understanding of political belonging because it enables us to see how political belonging is constructed across time and through long-term reciprocal relationships. A focus on elder care, as we document further below, reveals how political belonging fluctuates over the life course, as older persons leave or enter privileged forms of citizenships or other forms of political membership on the basis of constructions of long-term reciprocities and mutualities. Care for older persons reveals how constructions of intergenerational as well as societal solidarity play out in practice, over time. Often, elder care is linked to ongoing and past exchanges, whether older persons are cared for by the children they raised, supported by fellow union members on the basis of their earlier political solidarity, or given state pensions for their previous employment, military service, or mothering. Changes in youth employment, governments, inflation, and the value of property to be inherited affect these intergenerational obligations and reciprocities, which often assume social stability. The temporal aspects of elder care highlight how different forms of political belonging are constructed and change across the life
course. Expectations of and investments in reciprocal exchanges come with a sense of entitlement of care and thereby political belonging, which may or may not come to fruition over time. Thus, a focus on the temporal aspects of elder care shows the need for constant recuperation, investment, and recognition of political belonging, as well as the fact that it may be denied.

Using our own research and that of others, we illustrate these points below. We first discuss the construction of reciprocity and temporality in elder care as shaping political belonging, before turning to the ways that it is affected by representations of elder care.

**Temporalities of reciprocity and political belonging**

Reciprocity across the life course proves critical to the production of political belonging through elder care: for states and other forms of political organisation, as well as for care providers and older persons themselves. These exchanges serve as the justification for receiving and providing care and entail judgments about appropriate time spans for reciprocity in relation to the resources exchanged. Deferred reciprocity across the lifespan generates a sense that elder care is deserved, not only from kin, but also through state forms of exchange—for example, when pensions are interpreted as given in exchange for a lifetime of labour. Fulfilled expectations of reciprocity signal belonging and can be of enormous importance for political legitimacy and stability.⁷

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⁷ During the time of the existence of two German states, for example, shared belonging to a single political unit was legitimized in the West German Federal Republic through the construction of the German nation as extended kin. Ideally this found expression in care between relatives living on both sides of the border, which was backed up by political support, including tax reductions, appeals to send parcels as well as central writing and drawing competitions for school children on the topic (XXX, 2007a).
Historically, the introduction of pensions in Europe was an effort to secure the political legitimacy of the ruling classes, especially in Bismarckian Germany and the Habsburg Empire (Petersen and Petersen, 2009). After the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, social policy played a major role in the nation-building projects of its successor states (Szikra and Tomka, 2009:20). In this period, states tried to include workers, and provisions for elder care constituted an important element in the public and discursive construction of a political community.\(^8\)

Later, employment-centred socialist states expanded the inclusion of ageing citizens through state-owned businesses and unions. In the GDR, for example, the earlier, more exclusive care for veterans slowly expanded to include all ‘veterans of labour’, that is, all retired workers. This veteran care included a wide range of support organised by the union in cooperation with the enterprise management and its so-called department for social and cultural care.\(^9\) As unions during socialism did not have much of an adversarial position vis-à-vis management, most of the activities were perceived as non-political social events (such as

\[^8\] Unlike peasants, it was thought, workers did not own landed property as a means to compel their children to care for them until death, when the property would be transferred to the next generation. Although this image omits much more complex processes of intergenerational relations and property-holding before industrialisation, the conceptualisation of pensions as a substitute for property was pervasive.

\[^9\] The most informal support activities were organised at the level of former work teams (brigades). Retired workers visited their former workplaces, former work mates helped with renovating flats and invited their former colleagues to social activities of the brigades, such as outings or barbecues. Such activities were not officially prescribed but they were supported: for example, the best socialist brigade within the enterprise was rewarded in a yearly competition.
outings and parties), but they contributed to the development of socialist citizenship. Moreover, because during the socialist period, workplace mobility was not very high, employees observed their retired colleagues transition into veterans’ care and go on excursions. The enterprise built an expectation of future care among their current workers: an older worker deserves this kind of care in exchange for his or her lifetime of labour. German unification brought a new national model of political belonging alongside another understanding of the position and tasks of unions and enterprises. In most cases, that meant an end of enterprise-centred senior care, which was experienced by workers as a loss. Although much of this care was materially negligible, it was widely seen as an acknowledgement of a life time of labour and inclusion in a work-centred society.

Under the impression of an ageing membership and the normative expectations of easterners, some of the newly introduced West German unions tried to build up similar forms of senior care for their older members, it became more exclusive to union members, based on an understanding of a shared belonging to a political camp. Many older former socialist union members and state employees experienced a void of identification with such a political belonging and consequently also within the new state. Instead of the former socialist citizenship feeding into a unified national belonging, the loss of this type of elder care fed into the development of new regional political belonging as ‘East Germans’ opposed to ‘West Germans’ (Thelen 2007b).

More recently, governments in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and southern Africa have similarly been bolstering their political legitimacy by extending the pension system beyond the formal workforce, either by paying poor, retired informal workers an ‘old-age allowance’ or creating a universal, non-contributory pension scheme, as in Nepal or Bolivia (Ansell, 2011; Ferguson, 2013; Hujo and Cook, 2012). The poor’s inclusion into state care programs confirms their national belonging and a new way to claim national resources and rights. Studies of such pension schemes for poorer older adults in Bangladesh, Namibia,
South Africa, and Tanzania show that older persons are more recognized by their kin and have higher status in their communities as a result of these small stipends, which they tend to share broadly within their social networks (Begum and Wesumperuma, 2012, Ferguson, 2013, HelpAge International et al, 2014; Neves and Du Toit, 2013). In contrast, the lack of such state resources, based on the lack of acknowledgement of political belonging, can render older persons vulnerable and contribute to their exclusion from other forms of belonging as well. Social privilege, difference, and hierarchy are created and maintained through state forms of elder care, both interpersonally and more broadly as older persons become special kinds of citizens with politically recognized rights to greater social welfare.

Because reciprocity contributes to mutuality, the ability to follow through on expected exchanges becomes a key symbol of political belonging, and the failure to do so a sign of exclusion (Aronson and Neysmith, 2001). For example, in Coe’s research, a home health worker with a Ghanaian background who had worked many years in the United States commented that she could not afford health insurance. Despite her U.S. citizenship, she perceived this as a lack of reciprocity and exclusion of political belonging for her many years of care work. She fantasied about ageing in Ghana, where she felt she understood the rules of exchange with the state better and could experience the rewards of her lifetime of labour. As a result, she felt greater belonging to Ghana than to the United States. The willingness and ability to make claims to reciprocal exchanges indicates social actors’ political belonging.

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10 In Namibia and New York City, older persons used state-provided resources in their ongoing exchanges with kin members and neighbours (Freidenberg, 2000; Klocke-Daffa, 2014).

11 As de Jong (2005) describes, impoverished elderly women in Kerala, India can easily fall out of local support networks if they lack the resources to reciprocate.
That these reciprocal exchanges are constructed temporally, across the life course, reveals how political belonging through elder care can change over time. Many studies on negotiations of kin care show the significance of timing and timeliness for exchange (Finch and Mason, 1993; Hareven, 1982; Stack, 1996; Coe, 2016). Such obligations are negotiated not only at the level of kin care, but also in relation to wider political units including the state and its commitments to elder care. State forms of care are disputed in the public arena, through changing legislation and discourses, and the protests which accompany them. As became obvious especially in France, in the 1990s and again after the financial crisis in 2008, pension reforms can trigger furious protests. Because pension schemes embody notions of ‘rights,’ ‘fairness,’ and the ‘good life,’ they are cost-intensive for politicians to change (Petersen and Petersen, 2009). As these contestations show, these temporalities depend upon political representations of elder care, to which we now turn.

**Temporal constructions of difference and belonging through elder care**

Narratives of modernization suppose that ‘traditional’ intergenerational care in stateless or ‘premodern’ states has transitioned to institutional care within a ‘modern’ (most often thought of as democratic) welfare state. Elder care in the past, in this vision, took place among ‘warm’ extended kin, before the rise of the ‘modern’ nuclear family that neglects older persons or sends them into ‘cold’ institutions like residential facilities.\(^{12}\) Communities in the past or ‘still’ traditional societies seemingly not only value older people more but also care better for them than ‘modern’ individuals and institutions.\(^{13}\)

The idealisation of ‘traditional’ kin ties contrasted with ‘the modern family’ is not only a salient discourse as a self-description as well as self-criticism in countries in Western

\(^{12}\) In Europe, this narrative of extended families and kin care for the elderly remains hegemonic even though historians have repeatedly refuted it (Finch, 1989; Laslett, 1995).
Europe but in various political communities worldwide. The contrast became built into the self-ascriptions of these ‘other’ societies such as: ‘You might be rich and developed, but we have families and warm relations. We don’t put our elderly into institutions.’ Such was the dominant discourse in India, for example, in the 1980s (Cohen, 1998), Romania in the 1990s (Thelen, 2016) or in Ghana in the 2010s (Coe, n.d.). Such temporal attributes mean that specific caring practices can be used as markers of political belonging as well as a commentary on perceived political changes.

Care markets which rely on migrant care workers also generate discourses of global eldercare-based comparisons, which are riven through with such temporal narratives. Usually the quality of the worker is associated with national origin because of the assumed status of older persons in that political community based on the modernization narrative. For example, in Coe’s research, many nursing agency owners and managers in the United States consider immigrant care workers ‘more respectful of the elderly’ than native-born care workers because of the assumed use of kin care in the societies from which they come.

13 The image of ‘warm’ care provided by families as opposed to ‘cold’ state forms is deeply rooted in social scientific thinking that developed in the 19th century when a new bourgeois family ideal arose. Couplehood and intergenerational relations became emotionalised and bereft of its material aspects such as inheritance—at least ideologically—despite its significance for the distribution of wealth (Piketty, 2014).

14 Thus, whereas in many other areas of social life, like gender and politics, asynchronies are used to devalue non-Western cultures (Chakrabarty, 2007; Fabian, 1983), elder care suggests a rather different hierarchy. The idea that traditional care obligations weakened in Western European countries, under the impact of industrialisation and state social security regimes, while in other societies kin ‘still’ fulfil them, implies that care in Western Europe is worse in comparison to those ‘Others’.
Representations of care in ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies are also mobilised in care encounters by migrant care workers. In Coe’s work, African care workers use this same stereotype to represent themselves in interview situations as it helps them gain employment in care work. Through this narrative, their ‘Other-ness’ and foreign-ness are highlighted, giving them an ambivalent sense of political belonging: they are welcome to work in the private care market but only because of their difference, precisely because they do not belong to the nation and its more ‘modern’ ways of treating older persons. Migrant care workers also use this narrative to criticize the families for which they work for ‘abandoning’ their older relatives to their care or to institutions (Ascione, 2012). Ibarra (2013) describes how unauthorized care workers from Mexico considered Americans to be culturally ‘cold’ towards their relatives and only care about their money.

These representations of ‘good caring families’ versus ‘bad uncaring families’ seem to be established and stable everyday knowledge in many contexts, so their shifts and subtle changes are often hard to observe. During Thelen’s first period of research in 1999-2000, Romanian villagers were convinced that in Germany people gave ‘the elderly away’ while Romanian families ‘still’ cared. Ten years later, there was increasing out-migration of female care workers to Western Europe who helped older persons live at home, while some villagers were using the new option of a care home for the elderly. The villagers told Thelen, a German citizen: ‘You are doing it the right way: you keep your elderly at home.’ Their self-identification of belonging to a ‘good’ local community with caring families had been cast into doubt in the intervening years. In fact, they reversed their interpretation (Thelen, 2015). As people grapple to interpret changing patterns of elder care, they can challenge the construction of their political belonging. While in this rural environment, political belonging

15 Similarly, while Cohen (1998) described a dominant emphasis in the 1980s on the Indian ‘good family’ that took care of its elderly in intergenerational households, Lamb (2009) noted a greater openness to new forms of elder care fifteen years later.
to a ‘good’ village community is expressed through visions of ‘proper’ family care, in post-industrial communities in Northern England it takes the form of local care as an extension of mining solidarity (Dawson 2002). Similar to the above noted workers in the former GDR, care for ageing miners is locally constructed as deserved based on the lifetime of labour but in addition it is seen as deferred reciprocity within a ‘good’ political community similar to the Romanian village.

What we have argued thus far is that elder care is a component of people’s everyday representations of their own political communities and those of others. In the next section, we highlight the ways that these representations justify and sustain state practices of care.

**Translations of temporal representations of elder care into policies**

As noted above, temporal narratives of change in elder care due to modernization are linked to ideas about the ‘right way to care’ and ‘the good family’ as expressions of the ‘right’ political community. These ideas become translated into state policies that are based on assumptions about political belonging and at the same time redefine this belonging.

For example, in the 1990s, the German government supported multigenerational centres, based on an explicit narrative that ‘lost’ intergenerational support should be revitalized. In Thelen’s research in such a centre in Berlin, a cheap lunch service allowed a single middle-aged man to have meals almost every day with his retired father. Rather than enacting a kind of idealised ‘traditional support,’ the two men in fact formed a new arrangement: they lived separately while sharing ‘family meals’ in a public, state-sponsored space. Although not exactly what the state programme envisioned, this innovative combination of state and kin care was based on a state promotion of intergenerational community care on the basis of a conception of older persons’ neediness and general deservingness of such support (Thelen 2005). In contrast, governments in China, Ghana and India have used representations of how elder care is ‘traditionally’ provided by the kin group
to avoid claims that the state should contribute to elder care (De Jong, 2005; BBB 2013; Van der Geest, 2016; Coe, n.d.). The ‘proper’ citizen in these cases does not need care by the state.

As noted above, temporal ideas about care are articulated in expressions such as ‘lagging behind’ and ‘culture loss’ applied to internal ‘Others’ like ethnic minorities or immigrant communities. State actors sometimes translate these images in their programs for these populations. For example, they might see them as having less need for state elder care. This happened for example in interviews within a city department for diversity and integration in Austria about targeted service delivery to elderly migrants. Thelen was told that this was ‘so far’ unnecessary because migrants—especially those from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia—‘still’ have enough kin support. In another interview at one of the service providers, the head of a department remarked that some of the migrants had ‘already lost’ kin support. She interpreted this change as a positive sign of integration into Austrian society, thus indicating the ways that elder care practices are viewed as markers of political belonging. Implicitly, here, their belonging or dis-belonging to a national community is measured through their (assumed) elder care practices.

In another of her research projects, Thelen was interested in new state-provided home care services for the elderly in rural Hungary. Asked why the services were not delivered to elderly Roma men, the social worker answered they did not need such help because of their extended kin networks. However, several elderly Roma men actually lived alone in the village without any kin help. The differentiated delivery of welfare, based on assumed ethnic belonging characterized by intergenerational care, contributed to the reproduction of exclusion, and ultimately dis-belonging in the national community. However, the extension of state care is not always unambiguously experienced by ethnic minorities. For example, Stevenson (2014) examines Canada’s campaign against a tuberculosis epidemic among Arctic peoples. Constructing Inuit as citizens belonging to the nation, the state sees an obligation to care, but at the same time denies their belonging to a
In addition to the ways representations of elder care generate differentiated political belonging through temporal ordering, which become the basis for state policies and programs of elder care, ideas of mutuality undergird both intimate and state forms of belonging.

**Negotiation of belonging through constructions of mutuality in elder care**

Kinship is often represented as intersubjectivity or ‘mutuality of being’ par excellence (Sahlins, 2012), but discourses of race, ethnicity, national origin, and even humanity can also be used to construct ‘mutuality of being’ and thereby belonging on different scales. One privileged site for negotiating such belonging are encounters in elder care in which mutuality can be denied or recognized.

In public discourse in Western societies, care is often represented as a non-financial relation, based on kinship belonging in which love is excised from money (Zelizer, 2005; Thelen and ZZZ, 2007). If care is interpreted as ‘gifted’—meaning not paid for—it is ‘real’ and based on mutuality. Similarly, national belonging is equally conceived of as not for sale. It is for this reason that hired, foreign soldiers are stigmatised as ‘mercenaries’; soldiers should be motivated by patriotism, not material rewards.

Partly because of this preoccupation with money as ‘polluting’ care and partly because community for which the connection to and care for the dead is of immense importance.

17 One of the reasons ‘cash-for-care’ state schemes that provide stipends to kin caregivers have been so late in being proposed and implemented has been due to ambivalence about whether paid care is ‘true’ care or will transform kin care (Colombo et al, 2011, Ungerson, 2000). Another example is described by (ZZZ, 2009) in a Czech nursing home run by a Catholic order. The care by nuns is perceived as motivated by religious duty and therefore better than that of professional nurses, despite the fact that the order is compelled to run the hospital by the state, which also assumes the bulk of funding (ZZZ, 2009).
of elder care being central to self-understanding, encounters between migrant carers and citizens can become critical sites of negotiating political belonging. Examples abound of relations between migrant care workers and citizen employers in which the client or a kin member devalues the migrant care worker through a discourse of dis-belonging. In Coe’s research, a Congolese care worker was told by an elderly white American patient to leave the residence. When the care worker protested that she was obligated to stay to care for her, the patient told her, insultingly, to ‘stay with your species’ and directed her to sit in a chair in the corner of the room. In such instances, the denial of belonging in a shared humanity represents also a denial of the right to make claims (as supposedly a fellow citizen sharing national belonging could make). As opposed to the dominant imaginary of passivity and sweetness mentioned above, older persons in these situations sometimes use their power in ways neither pleasant nor norm-conforming but rather actively and even aggressively shape their care through challenging the belonging of their caregivers.

Care can also construct new configurations of political belonging. In Coe’s research, one older American introduced Coe to his ‘younger brother’ and ‘soul-mate,’ his care worker from Ghana. The elderly patient not only used these kin terms regularly but put them into practice materially by paying for the care worker’s further education as an American father is expected to do for his children. Through his reciprocal care, he enabled an encompassing of his national belonging to his care worker, who experienced this as a strong sign of his acceptance in and thereby belonging to the United States. In contrast to such interactions

18 Another reason is the contestation around ‘proper’ family care and gender that sometimes mirrors long-standing political exchanges about policies. For example, Japan introduced care insurance based on the German example (Shimada and Tagsold, 2006), but without payments for kin because of the suspicion that they would reinforce the ‘traditional’ care obligations of women.
between migrant care workers and older persons that potentially expand political belonging, migrant care workers can also be used more representationally to harden the boundaries of national belonging. As described by Muehlebach (2012), Italian volunteers for the elderly devalue the practical, physical care provided by immigrant workers in contrast to the ‘relational labour’ that the volunteers themselves perform. In this case, the presence of migrants in elder care somewhat counter-intuitively strengthens the national community and excludes migrant care workers.

As caregivers and care recipients seek to comprehend their caring relations with one another, they articulate claims to political belonging and dis-belonging through discourses of mutuality. New practices of elder care that develop with new demographic conditions and transnational care migration have an innovative potential. As our examples above show, they open up new spaces for mutuality and political belonging at the micro-level, but also for painful acts of exclusion. Care constructed through the lens of idealised kin relations can generate forms of mutuality that enhance political belonging or create new categories of difference and ‘othering’ that exclude. They reveal the potential of elder care to reproduce older forms of political ordering or induce new ones.

**Conclusions: Political belonging and temporalities of elder care**

Elder care raises critical issues about political belonging—for individual care receivers and care givers, but also local and ethnic communities as well as nation-states. The representations of elder care and their day-to-day translation into practices and institutional arrangements shed light on how political belonging is (re)produced through constructions of difference and hierarchy, locally and globally. Inclusion into the nation-state can be indicated by pensions and other material support, as well as how citizens treat migrants in everyday interactions. Elder care is also important because of the ways that ‘the family’ is constructed and difference is negotiated at different scales of political organisation. Elder care entails key
processes of social ordering, such as temporality, mutuality and social differentiation. Changes in elder care create social possibilities, including opportunities for the hardening or expansion of political boundaries.

Forms of political belonging are temporally ordered by mutuality and reciprocity. Elder care becomes a privileged site for understanding these temporalities because of the increased length of the life span and because of the ways that elder care is used to rank societies. One temporality is that of the individual life span and the personal relations within which reciprocal investments are negotiated. Exchanges over time are also important for relations between the individual and the state, such as through national pension or health insurance schemes. All these exchanges are negotiated, in times of stability and precarity, and individual and social evaluations of the fairness of these exchanges generate feelings of political belonging or exclusion.

A second temporality concerns imaginings of care—of the past in comparison to the present. Much of this temporal imaginary is built on social scientific and popular representations of the Western ‘modern family’ as leading to individual freedom, democracy, and economic progress which at the same time seem to endanger intergenerational care. This ambivalent construction is set against ‘the traditional family.’ The temporally-ordered construction of kin care is adopted in policy documents and programmes that either assume state responsibility for elder care or not. Often, they try to form ‘ideal’ caring citizens. The narrative also helps to construct migrants in Western Europe and the United States as having different capabilities for care or as needing little state support for the care of their own elderly kin because of their different belonging. These constructions also result in states of newly ageing societies such as in West Africa or South Asia relying on ‘the traditional family’ to provide care and abrogating any state responsibility for elder care. Thus, both state policy and interpersonal interactions use temporal representations of ‘the family’ to determine what is
appropriate or defensible in elder care and thereby contribute to the (re)production of political belonging.

Our examination of elder care has shown that it opens insights into the temporal and negotiated constructions of political belonging. Political belonging through elder care allows us to move across scales—from interpersonal relations between caregivers and care recipients to communal representations to state welfare policy. Elder care reveals continuities in social reproduction, as well as shifts and tensions, more starkly than other forms of care. These temporal processes highlight the ways that political belonging can be stabilised or made vulnerable across a life course. As a result, elder care provides a window onto the central anthropological concerns of shifting forms of belonging and processes of social change.
References


