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# Childcare, Mobility Decisions and ‘Staggered’ Migration

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**Abstract.** *Migration to Australia is increasingly ‘multi-step’ or ‘staggered’ (Robertson 2013), often involving extended periods on temporary visas before permanent residency is achieved. This paper explores how the uncertainty around long-term migration outcomes that structure staggered migration impacts on how migrants’ make decisions about mobility that concern their children and their care. This paper utilises data from in-depth narrative interviews with Asian migrants in Australia who have experienced ‘staggered’ migration across multiple visa categories. It explores three key mobility decisions migrants make around children: bringing their children to Australia; mobility of families and family members for child-care arrangements; and considering their children’s future mobility and citizenship. We argue that multiple factors come into play in these decisions about children, mobility and care. Specific policy constraints of temporary visas (such as lack of access to subsidised social services or family reunion) shape options, but migrants’ overall sense of social and economic security in the long-term is also significant.*

## Introduction

In this paper, we seek to add to debates around temporary migration and care of children by looking beyond ‘transnational caregiving’ models and arguments about equitable access to services in host countries. Instead, we examine decisions around mobility between home and host countries (of children, parents and other family members) in relation to care as part of the multiple ways that temporary migrants negotiate and manage their work and family life in the context of ongoing mobility. Specifically, we explore the consequences arising from the uncertainty of ‘staggered’ (Robertson 2013) migrant mobility in Australia — when migrants follow complex and protracted pathways from temporariness to potential permanence — and how these pathways impact upon the ways that migrants experience, negotiate, and understand mobility decisions that impact on their children and their care. In this article, we focus on ‘middling’ migrants (Conradson and Latham 2005a, 2005b), neither elite, nor unskilled. These migrants were mostly tertiary educated but experienced different forms of deskilling or downward social mobility as a result of their migration. We explore three key types of decisions migrants made around mobility and their children’s care — whether and when to bring their children to Australia; whether families or family members should move transnationally for better opportunities to balance work and care; and how to imagine and

plan for future mobility for the benefit of their children. We explore the major considerations that impacted these decisions, arguing that present and future-oriented practices of care are deeply embedded in many decisions about mobility.

The overall aims of this research were to explore migrants' complex mobility pathways over time, and the ways their experiences of migration uncertainty impacted upon their everyday lives. The sample consisted of 42 migrants who came to Australia on temporary visas, had been in Australia for at least 2 years, and who experienced ongoing transitions to their visa status over time. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with participants from the top six Asian source countries for temporary visa schemes: India, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines (DIBP 2013). 39 of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in 2015 in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane, while three were conducted via Skype with migrants currently living in regional areas of Australia or overseas. All interviews were conducted in English – as mostly tertiary educated migrants who had been in Australia for a minimum of two years, all migrants had good English proficiency. Participants were recruited initially through ethnic and community organizations, alumni associations, professional associations and social media advertisements, and subsequently snowball sampling. Participants were asked to narrate their migration journeys, and to outline important life events and decisions that occurred during these journeys. The main topics covered in interviews included their migration timelines and visa transitions, living arrangements, social and family relationships, work experiences and place attachments and sense of belonging, and the general impacts of the experience of 'staggered' migration on their lives. Analysis of the interviews revealed an important subsample of 11 participants who were parents. Of these, five were fathers (from India, Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines) and six were mothers (from India, Korea and Malaysia). We focus on the narratives of these migrants in this paper. Below we briefly review the literature on migration and childcare, focusing on the various conditions that can structure migrants' choices around their children. We then discuss participants' narratives around three key decision-making processes that emerged as significant across the sample in discussions of children, mobility and care. The sample in this study was purposefully diverse in terms of culture, country of origin and gender. This was with the aim of understanding how conditions of mobility in the host country (in this case, 'staggered migration'), rather than political or cultural conditions in the home country, impact on migrants from diverse backgrounds. While we acknowledge that culture often played an important role in care decisions, and discuss this in relation to individual participants where relevant, it is beyond the scope of the paper to provide detailed discussion of socio-cultural conditions in all the countries of origin.

### **Children, Care and Transnational Migration**

Hawthorne (2010) has referred to the increasing capacity for migrants in Aus-

tralia to transition while onshore from temporary visas (such as student or temporary worker visas) to permanent visas as ‘two-step’ or ‘try before you buy’ migration. Under increasingly neoliberal immigration policies, these pathways are seen as a way to gain value from temporary labour and select the ‘best and brightest’ permanent migrants. However, as other work has shown (Robertson 2015; Mares 2016), such pathways have numerous, and often under-researched, social consequences. While the impact of these pathways on migrants’ labour rights and experiences have been frequently documented in academic research (see, for example, Sutton 2008; Oke 2012), the impacts on family life remain under-researched. In Australia many migrants on temporary visas (including student, graduate and skilled work visas) can bring their partners and dependent children under the age of 18 (or in some cases 21) with them (DIBP 2014, 3). Spouses of primary visa holders are also usually granted full work rights. However, access to family reunion beyond the nuclear family is severely restricted for migrants on temporary visas. In policy, eligible dependents are limited to spouses and under-age children. The importance of extended family and kin (such as parents or adult siblings) to reciprocal care relations and decisions for many migrant families is not recognised under policy models that centre the nuclear family. We acknowledge, therefore, that notions of ‘family’ in transnational and cross-cultural contexts are complex and defined differently for different migrants. In this paper, we look specifically at the impacts of ‘staggered’ migration pathways for migrant parents on decision-making around dependent children and their care. As such, references to ‘family’ throughout the analysis, including in interview data, refer most often to nuclear family formations – when extended family relations are mentioned, these will be explicitly noted.

There is a wealth of extant literature on how transnational and temporary migrants negotiate childcare in relation to temporariness and migration precarity. In the following section, we briefly summarise some of the key findings that are most pertinent to the empirical context of this paper. In the literature on temporary and circular migrants and childcare, often the focus is on the separation of parents (usually mothers) from their children because of work visas (usually for domestic workers) which explicitly do not allow migrants to be accompanied by dependent children (see, for example, work by Parrenas 2005; Hoang and Yeoh, 2015), with some notable exceptions that consider men as fathers in the migration process and the issues involved in fathering transnationally (see: Pribilsky 2004; Parrenas 2008; Kilkey 2014). Other important work, particularly on skilled migration, focuses on changes and negotiations of care and domestic labour within nuclear families who migrate as a family unit, often illuminating the gendered dimensions of these negotiations (Ho 2006; Ryan 2007; Raghuram 2004).

In Australia, there is a limited amount of research on temporary migrants in relation to how the governance of ‘staggered’ migration impacts on families and care. The existing literature often notes the lack of access to social services as a key policy problems in relation to the rights and wellbeing of migrants

and their families in the host country (Bahn, Barratt-Pugh and Yap 2012; Marginson 2013). In the case of this study, migrants have various resources at their disposal as ‘middling’ transnationals and ‘skilled migrants’, and few explicit legal restrictions on their ability to migrate with their children. However, as our subsequent analysis will show, issues of work, resources, time and gender still impact on ‘middling’ migrants and their mobility decisions in relation to care. This reflects the findings of scholars who have looked at gender and skilled migration in various contexts (see for example, Ho 2006; Ryan 2007; Raghuram 2004). Skilled migration can be associated with downward social mobility and economic instability (Datta et al. 2009; Merla 2012). This is particularly pronounced for women, resulting in under-employment, a shift away from the chosen career or retraining, and can add additional pressure to childcare responsibilities (Meares 2010). For skilled migrants in Australia therefore, particularly women, work is a factor that heavily influences care practices and limits care choices, especially when migration security (such as obtaining PR) is dependent on particular employment arrangements. As previous research has shown, demanding work schedules can impede the ability of individuals to provide care (Svašek 2008), and migrant mothers with a lack of co-present familial support may not get adequate opportunity to rest (Li-amputtong and Naksook 2003, 33). The gendered aspects of parenting roles and family life that intersect with the process of migration are crucial, and can lead to a ‘re-domestication’ (Yeoh and Willis 2005, Ho 2006) of women, meaning that gender roles are further entrenched as domestic work devolves to women after migration.

Furthermore, ideas of migration and care go beyond the everyday care for children’s immediate physical and emotional needs. Migration can be a ‘care practice’ in and of itself, in that it is often a strategy to provide for the family (Datta et al. 2009, 856). Migration can be predicated on the parent’s long-term aspirations for themselves and their children, and relate to aspects such as citizenship rights, education, and other benefits not available in the home country (Connell 2013; Nori 2016). We explore these relations between mobility and care as long-term decisions, alongside the negotiation of mobility for everyday care arrangements.

### **Bringing the Kids: Deciding when to Bring Children to Australia**

All the migrants discussed in this paper who already had children prior to migration had 457 skilled temporary work visas or student visas that legally enabled them to bring their children to Australia. However, often the particularity of their circumstances meant that this was not possible, due to economic circumstances or concerns about uprooting children for only short periods of mobility. Consequently, some migrants had to make alternative arrangements for looking after children in their home countries, but also had to consider if and when they would bring their children to Australia as their migration trajectories progressed.

Those who migrated without their children were with one exception all

male. These fathers usually felt it would only be possible to bring their children once they had achieved permanent residency. Callum, a landscape gardener on a 4-year work sponsored 457 visa, had left his wife and 3 children behind in the Philippines. He said: 'You really miss the family, you got Skype and everything, but [...] being with them is something, feel better'. Despite living in Australia for over 2 ½ years, without the stability of permanence, Callum did not want to bring his family to Australia, explaining: '[It's] Not the right time, at the moment'. Likewise, Gabriel, also from the Philippines and a landscaper, had an 8-year old daughter back home. He said: 'I want to bring them here, but I can't bring them here until I can get my residency here'. For Callum and Gabriel, a temporary visa was an impediment to bringing their children to live in Australia, even though the governance of their visas allowed it. Reasons for this were mostly economic – although their salaries could support their families in the Philippines, they would struggle to support them with the higher cost of living in Australia – but other issues were also at play, such as not wishing to uproot children's schooling, and the less than family-friendly accommodation that the men lived in while working.

Both Callum and Gabriel imagined a future moment in time when they would be permanent, and when it would be more suitable to bring their children and wives to Australia, effectively 'deferring' their time with family in order to fulfil other obligations (Hochschild 2013, 69). Gabriel expressed the emotional consequences that he felt, saying he was 'very alone' without his family: 'you cannot make yourself complete without having your family with you'. For these migrants, permanent status will not just mark legal certainty and rights to residence, but also the chance to 'become complete' through reunion with their partners and children.

Instead of waiting for permanent residency, sometimes personal circumstances were a trigger to bring children to Australia despite ongoing migration uncertainty. For example, Yun-Seo had initially come from Korea to Australia on a student visa, leaving her two young children (both under 3) in the care of their father and her parents in Korea. Yun-Seo decided to migrate temporarily without her family because she believed studying and caring for her children at the same time would be difficult. However, future aspirations around her family life were a motivating factor in her decision to study in Australia, as she hoped that a career change from pharmacy to natural medicine (a qualification not available in Korea) would allow more work-life balance "You have to work more than 14, 16 hours, even 16 hours a day. And I had my two children but you don't really get to spend time with them." Coming to Australia meant a separation from her children in the short-term, in the hope that it would lead to a career that could allow her more time to care for them in the future. Initially Yun-Seo planned to go back to Korea after she finished her course, however, during her time in Australia she discovered her husband was being unfaithful and made the decision to divorce him and seek sole custody of her children.

Two years after arriving in Australia, Yun-Seo managed to gain custody

of her children through the Korean Family Court, and brought them to Australia. Becoming a single parent was a motivating factor for Yun-Seo to seek permanent residency rather than returning to Korea. She explained: 'I brought my children here. So, we don't get any comments or any staring or anything'. Yun-Seo used her migration as a 'strategy of avoidance' (Rutten and Verstapen, 2014, 1228) to escape negative social opinions in Korea, where, she said, as a single mother 'you don't have any status.' For Yun-Seo, caring for her children as a single mother was less stigmatised in Australia. This motivated her to move her children to Australia permanently, despite the legal and financial challenges she faced in doing so.

### **Staying or Going: Return Mobility Decisions and Care Arrangements**

For both migrants who brought their children to Australia and migrants who started families while in Australia, navigating childcare was explicitly linked to their migration situation and subsequently their decisions about staying in, or leaving, Australia, both temporarily or permanently. A number of structural factors make childcare arrangements complicated for temporary or 'staggered' migrants. While the lack of access to state subsidised childcare is one factor, also highly significant are particular visa conditions that require specific hours or types of work, and the lack of local extended family who would ordinarily assist with childcare. As a result, whether the whole family or specific family members should return for better care provision was often a decision that migrant parents considered. These decisions had to be balanced with other lifestyle, work or emotional reasons for staying.

Some participants who experienced these kinds of negotiations were Dali, Sima, and Darya, who had all given birth to their first child at various stages of their migration journey. A key theme in their interviews was the struggle to balance paid work, visa conditions and the actual availability of childcare. All three of these women were from India, and all felt childcare arrangements would be more easily managed if they returned, due to the availability of paid domestic help as well as extended family. This was in contrast to the parents in the sample from East Asian cultures such as Korea – although they similarly felt it was a challenge to arrange care in Australia, also tended to believe that intense work cultures at 'home' were a greater impediment to family life.

Dali came to Australia from India to study an MBA and had unexpectedly fallen pregnant. At the time of her interview she was on a temporary spouse visa, and was waiting for Permanent Residence (PR). Her baby (18 months) and her husband, who was also from India, were Australian citizens. Despite being relatively settled in Australia prior to having her baby, Dali started to consider returning to India after she had her baby, explicitly because of her lack of access to extended family (particularly her mother) to provide care support for her as well as the baby.

I had to manage everything by myself. My mum was here to help me initially, but then after that she just went back, and I was like, are we

going back or should I be staying here?

Dali was only able to have her mother's help for a limited period, an example of a 'crisis visit' which is when there is a particular need to provide 'hands on' care (Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding 2006, 140). Furthermore, despite relative migration security because of her husband's citizenship and her pending PR, financially Dali could not afford childcare, which meant that she could not work because she had to stay at home and look after her daughter. Although she and her husband planned to stay in Australia, Dali felt somewhat stuck in a full-time care role, and said that she would have greater options to return to work in India.

Sima had initially come to Australia to study a business degree, then met and married her husband, also an Indian migrant to Australia, soon after graduating. Sima wanted to get PR, however after three failed attempts to pass the requisite English test and under pressure from her extended family to go back, Sima and her husband returned to India, where their son was born. However, her husband was unhappy in India so after three years they decided to move back to Australia. This decision to return to Australia was driven largely by her husband's frustrations with his career prospects and difficulties in starting a business in India. Sima, in contrast, was content in her nine to five accounting job with her mother-in-law caring for her son:

I was very happy with my job [...] I was very much happy because I was close to my parents, my son was in good hands, my mother-in-law was looking after him and like you feel so much secure and safe and that you don't have a chance to think about anything negative. But it didn't work for my husband, he was very much upset [...] I was happy to go with my husband whatever he says. [...] I was thinking whatever will happen I'm ready to do anything, if you are happy I will go with it. So I said, "Okay no problem we'll go back."

Although this mobility decision was led primarily by her husband, available visa options required Sima to 'lead' the migration as the primary visa applicant, reflecting Cooke's (2008, 255) finding that men are more likely to initiate the decision to migrate than women, even when the woman has a higher status. Sima's visa conditions required her to work full time for one-year. Sima was concerned about how she would manage her work with a young baby to look after even before she came back to Australia: 'Who's going to look after your son at 6:30 in the morning, even the childcares are not open?' In contrast to her living situation in India, where Sima felt 'safe and secure', was 'close to her parents', had her mother-in-law's help, a large house and paid domestic help, in Australia she lived in 'one room', and as a courtesy to other residents tried to keep her baby quiet, 'You can't make noise, you know,' which added to her overall feelings of stress. Sima's experience provides insight into the types of negotiations that young migrant couples with

children must have about mobility decisions, particularly when career, family and lifestyle benefits may be unevenly distributed across places, and unevenly experienced by different family members.

Employment barriers post-migration can often be more pronounced for women than men (Goldring and Landolt 2011). In keeping with this literature, for the first month after returning to Australia, Sima was unable to find work in her professional field of accounting. Subsequently, without other options, Sima returned to the food service industry where she had worked as a student. Sima was reluctant to refuse shifts, in case she was not offered ongoing work, which could leave her in breach of her visa conditions to work 36 hours a week. Sima experienced a 'working-time regime' (Rubery et al. 1998, 72 in Kilkey and Merla 2014, 251) that meant she did not have enough time to undertake caring responsibilities. Sima thus abandoned any expectations in relation to her family life until she achieved PR, and instead focused on getting through a temporary state that she 'endured' in order to gain permanent migration (Hochschild 2013, 67).

In suspending her role as mother, Sima needed additional help with child care. Sima's mother-in-law came to Australia to provide care for her grandson on a 6-month visitor visa, but had to return to India after one month due to an illness in the family. She was then unable to return to Australia on another tourist visa, because she would not be considered a 'genuine visitor' under immigration criteria. With no other option for childcare in Australia, Sima sent her son to India for six months where her mother-in-law was engaged as a 'caretaker' (Blustein, 1991, 149, 151), which was emotionally very stressful:

It was really difficult like I was crying all the time when I see little kids playing and laughing, yeah, so that was very sad part.

Sima's story was complex, involving her need to balance multiple factors to make immediate childcare decisions. These were a combination of personal desires and structural constraints: her desire to make her husband happy; a need to meet her visa requirements; negotiating her mother-in-law's visa governance; downward social mobility; employment barriers; and anti-social work hours. All these components placed limits on the care that Sima could provide for her son, with the ultimate decision for her son to return to India temporarily to be cared for there. Sima's choice, although painful, was reconciled by the long-term value ascribed to the projected reward of achieving permanent migration to Australia for herself and her family (Blustein, 1991, 40). Cultural understandings of the constitution of 'family' in relation to the care of children also drove Sima's decision to send her son to live with his grandparents, rather than to seek out other care arrangements locally.

Darya, who had achieved PR, was still uncertain about remaining in Australia because of challenges balancing her work and childcare:

I think about it every second day [...]. I have these conversations all

the time [with my husband]. He's ready to move back [to India] any time. He always says to me "We should go back." and I only want to go back to be honest because [...] there's a lot more domestic help and support if you're raising a young family than there is in Australia. I need to go to work but there is no childcare. There's a two year childcare waitlist if I want a childcare facility from the council. If I had to manage my career and work then I need childcare but there are just no childcare spots.

The stark juxtaposition of limited childcare options in Australia versus the abundance of domestic help in India was a source of internal ambivalence, and tension between Darya and her husband. Darya's ambivalence was exacerbated by her long migration trajectory to Australia. Whilst studying in Australia for her PhD, Darya had worked in 'all sorts of really odd jobs' to keep 'financially afloat'. Darya said: 'It took four years before I could get my first university job that complemented my PhD skills'. After many years as a temporary migrant seeking an academic position, Darya had finally secured a highly coveted 'tenured opportunity' which she was reluctant to leave despite her difficulties with childcare. Her story reflects the myriad ways in which migration involves considerable investments of time, money, and emotional energy (Baldassar, 2001, 209; Rutten and Verstappen 2014). Darya had, for the time being at least, decided not to move back to India due to these investments. However, this was a difficult decision because of the clear and immediate benefits of going back in relation to care arrangements for her daughter. This reflects how periods of migration insecurity, even if temporary, can have long-term impacts over the life-course (Goldring and Landolt 2011).

### **Negotiating Citizenships and Identities as a Future-Orientated Practice of Care**

Migration can offer the chance for a migrant to improve their 'life chances' and also those of their children (Bargłowski, Krzyżowski, and Świątek 2015, 262). Hence, another feature of care decisions as a temporary migrant parent involves the desires and expectations for their children's national identity and citizenship in the future. Effectively, migration choices can be a means to 'safeguard' 'the next generation's future prospects' (Rutten and Verstappen 2014, 1217). We continue the example of Darya whose transnational childhood biography was a factor influencing her perspectives on her daughter's future mobility and citizenship. Darya had grown up in Dubai where she was without citizenship, an experience that strengthened her determination that her daughter would be an Australian citizen, with a clearly defined national identity:

So that is something that I can give to Bavya saying she is born in Australia. I made that decision. [...]. Her passport has [her] place of birth: Sydney. So that in the future she doesn't have these multiple

issues of explaining where she was born and where did she grow up and then where did she--I'm born in Mumbai, raised in Dubai, spent all of my youth in Australia and it's kind of skewed and I didn't want that for her. So I'm hoping that I can provide the stability. [...] I'm always very conscious of ensuring that she doesn't have to go through what I did in terms of those multiple sites of citizenship and identity.

Despite her difficulties in finding immediate, daily childcare for her daughter in Australia, Darya's desire to stay was also oriented around a longer-term sense of caregiving – an aspirational mode of care in relation to her daughter's future security and stability, both legally and in terms of her identity.

The type of lifestyle that remaining in Australia could offer families in the long-term could also influence migration decisions. Ji-Min and her husband had initially come to Brisbane from South Korea solely for Ji-Min to complete her PhD, with no specific plans to stay in Australia. Whilst Ji-Min was studying she became pregnant, which was a trigger for them to stay in Australia:

After my field research I learnt that I'm pregnant and yes I gave birth in here and so I thought it would be good to apply for PR because I don't know if you know but Korea is a very, like I said, we work very hard so more than fifteen hours per day. So my husband and I feel blessed to be here because I can spend a lot of quality time with my baby. Yeah so, I think that was that main thing that yeah, led me to apply for the PR.

Australia offered Ji-Min and her husband better work-life balance meaning they could spend time together as a family. Ji-Min perceived this would lead to better care for her son in comparison to Korea. In Hochschild's (2013, 72) terms, this is a strategy of 'exiting' which is when people remove themselves from the 'time-crunch' of work and family life. In this instance however, the exit is to another country. However, there can be nuances to the evaluation of what will benefit a child. Ji-Min ultimately had mixed feelings about the long-term benefits and draw backs for her son in terms of being brought up in Australia:

Yes the first thing is the language. I mean me and my husband have gone through some language difficulties but my boy wouldn't experience this, so it would be good for him. But one thing is this is I feel sorry for him because there is no family members who can love him. So yeah but other than that I think, because like Korea very populated country, the competition is really, really high and very young kids, even two or three years old, they started getting some extra curriculum studies, personally I don't quite like this. So yes I hope my boy can experience many stuff in nature.

Ji-Min's account demonstrates the complexity of migration as an opportunity cost, with benefits and drawbacks that she weighs up, and different dimensions of 'care' that she considers in relation to her son's future. Ji-Min lamented the loss of extended family members to offer co-present love to her son. However, like Darya, she felt Australia offered educational and lifestyle benefits that would be valuable to his future. She perceived that this would give him an advantage with his English language ability, and avoid undesirable Korean cultural norms around competitive education.

### **Conclusions**

We have highlighted a number of interconnected issues regarding the ways that migrants negotiated decisions around children, care and mobility. Overall, this paper has demonstrated that the experience of unfinished mobility leads to temporariness and uncertainty which has an impact on the family and their decision-making about when to move, stay or leave. This impact can reverberate even after permanent status is achieved. Children and their long-term and short-term care can be a decision-trigger for leaving or staying, but the care benefits of mobility are also carefully considered alongside work and lifestyle factors. Broadly, participants grappled with three key decisions in relation to children and their mobility, which were: bringing their children to Australia; leaving their children at home or sending them back home; and, leaving Australia as a family and moving back home with their children.

The individual circumstances of the migrants in this study varied considerably in terms of their specific resources, family structure, gender, marital status and the cultural and social contexts of their countries of origin. The aim of this paper has not been to unpack these variations in detail, but rather to understand how similar migration conditions structured through the governance of staggered migration pathways can impact on how mobility is negotiated in relation to childcare decisions. There are several key commonalities that we have identified.

First, being a parent in the context of 'staggered' migration led to a continual evaluation of decisions in relation to the self and family members, gender norms and roles. Gender was particularly significant in negotiations of care and mobility. While we have included the experiences of both mothers and fathers in this paper, across the interviews, it was women who assumed the greatest responsibility for care, and tended to bear the greatest burden of mobility decisions that impacted on care, and men who were more likely to migrate without their children. Career and lifestyle preferences of men sometimes took direct precedence over the preferred care arrangements for women, and women also often felt they had to choose between work and care roles. Structural factors also played a part in shaping decisions, for example: availability of childcare, employment barriers to suitable jobs and working hours. The childcare needs of each individual varied over their migration trajectory as their personal conditions and resources changed, and each stage required a

need to manage mobility decisions for their current situation. ‘Staggered migration’ forms part of a broader life project, and migration goals and outcomes have to be negotiated by parents as migration pathways intersect with different life stages and transforming priorities. Hence decisions were far from static, as choices about children and their care could ebb and flow as visa conditions, employment statuses and family structures changed, sometimes causing emotional turmoil as individuals grappled with and tried to manage their circumstances. Migration security in the form of PR did not always resolve the complexities of childcare negotiations, demonstrating that the impact of staggered migration can resonate beyond the immediate timelines of temporary visas and their associated conditions. Yet, as many participants noted, migration security could, in the long-term, offer new options and advantages to their children. Thus, for some participants, these immediate decisions for care were also shaped by future expectations for their children which involved preferences for projected citizenships and national identities, involving components of language, culture and education.

This article has sought to provide insights into how the experience of ‘staggered’ migration influences decision-making about children, mobility and care for ‘middling’ migrants. Building on existing literature that reveals the complex interplay of structural and relational considerations that impact on the choices of migrant families, we have demonstrated how, despite relatively open access, legally, to nuclear families remaining together under Australian immigration policies, the specific context of ongoing migration uncertainty leads to a number of complex negotiations for migrant families around care and mobility.

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