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Tuning Care Relations between Migrant Caregivers and the Elderly in Singapore

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Abstract: The literature on care relations and eldercare has directed attention towards recognising the interdependence between ‘carer’ (familial caregiver or home support worker) and the ‘cared for’ (the older person). Such an approach gives attention to the contingencies and entanglements that shape the relationships among differently positioned members of care dyads. Drawing on in-depth and ‘go-along’ interviews, we examine how relations between migrant caregivers and their non-migrant elderly charges in Singapore are spatially negotiated—formulated, sustained and reworked—on an everyday basis through Alfred Schütz’s framework of intersubjective ‘tuning’. Owing to the unequal ways that migrant caregivers are positioned within Singapore society, moments of positive family-like regard towards them are almost always preceded/superseded by forms of negativity and vice-versa. The employer-employee care dyad is therefore best understood as a relational process that requires constant ‘tuning’, as the elderly employer needs care which no one else will provide, while the employee needs the job in order for the migration gamble to succeed. The paper concludes by drawing together the spatial and temporal insights that the conceptual approach of ‘tuning’ brings to analyses of care relations.

Keywords: Intersubjective Tuning, Elderly Singaporean Citizens, Migrant Domestic Caregivers, Care Relations, Spatial Politics, Temporalities
Introduction

Stories describing acts of abuse and even murder committed by foreign nationals often take centre-stage in media reports on the relationship between migrant caregivers and elderly care recipients (Yahoo, 2018; The Straits Times, 2016). Although such occurrences, especially murder, are rare (MOM, 2019), they have led to some wariness towards migrant caregivers amongst Singaporean families. At the other end of the spectrum, there are also heightened accounts put out by local and international non-government organisations that emphasise the precarity and exploitation of migrant domestic workers at the hands of their employers (e.g. HOME, 2019). In comparison, accounts that foreground congenial eldercare relations tend not to be newsworthy and are relatively few. Set against such a backdrop, this paper aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between migrant caregivers and elderly care recipients that go beyond sensational portrayals of care relations.

Accounts of the relationship shared between a non-migrant elderly charge and his/her foreign carer tend to depict care as moving unidirectionally, especially when such ties are underpinned by highly asymmetrical power dynamics that usually favour the former. However, Baldassar et. al (2017) also remind us that caregivers themselves can also receive assistance and/or concern from the very individuals whom they purport to look after. Emplacing a foreign national within the private realm of the home sphere, even if the primary intention is care provision, therefore requires careful negotiations and constant adjustments on the part of both parties. In what follows, we first provide an overview of the eldercare deficit situation in Singapore before introducing the Schützian-inspired framework of intersubjective ‘tuning’ that forms the conceptual locus of this paper. Next, we outline the methodology, followed by three vignettes illustrating how moments of positive family-like regard (‘tuned in’) shared by the care dyads almost always oscillate with forms of disconnections (‘tuned out’) within the home environment and beyond. We conclude by drawing together the spatial and temporal insights that the conceptual approach of ‘tuning’ brings to analyses of care relations.

Singapore’s Eldercare Deficit and the Family as the Locus of Care

In the face of rapidly greying populations, eldercare has emerged as a key priority for many developed countries in Asia, including Singapore. The predominant logic in the state’s eldercare framework is to ‘shift the centre of gravity of care delivery from the acute hospital closer to the community and patients’ homes’ and to promote ‘ageing-in-place’ (MOH, 2018:...
11). Privileging the ‘home’ as the main site of care imposes considerable pressure on the family—principally women—to resolve care deficits ‘within the family’. Despite women’s growing participation in the workforce, women shoulder the triple burden of career building, child-raising, and eldercare, made more difficult not least because the household division of labour by gender remains relatively rigidly drawn in many households. With intergenerational co-residence declining, the burden of care that working women carry is also heavier since there are fewer extended family members to share domestic and care work.

A common eldercare strategy used by middle-class Singapore families is to employ live-in foreign domestic workers to fill the household labour gap and ease the pressure of balancing paid work and home-based care work (Koh et al., 2016). Dependency on female migrant labour to address the growing eldercare deficit in Singapore families has steadily increased. There are now an estimated quarter of a million foreign domestic workers (or roughly one domestic worker to five households) employed as substitutes for family caregivers in Singapore households. In a national survey of caregivers, Chan et al. (2012) noted that almost half (49%) of the 1,190 caregivers employed a foreign domestic worker specifically to care for frail and older family members; significantly, they found that children and ‘other’ caregivers were more likely than spousal caregivers to hire a foreign domestic worker to render care. According to Ostbye et al.’s (2013) study using the same survey data, the instrumental support provided by foreign domestic workers was associated with better outcomes (less disturbed schedules, better health) among informal caregivers (either family or friends) of the elderly, especially when the latter suffer from more severe physical, functional or behavioural impairment. Ostbye et al. (2013) reasoned that live-in foreign domestic workers buffer caregiving burdens by providing support across a broad range of tasks and by being available throughout the day and night. For families that can afford the costs, importing a live-in foreign domestic worker is a common mode of providing eldercare.

Foreign domestic workers are recruited into Singapore homes as live-in contract workers without full employment rights; they are mainly from Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar. Under Singapore’s regime of ‘permanent temporariness’, these women are employed in a highly managed system of two-year work permits (for easy repatriation) and foreign worker levy payments (to regulate their numbers) (Koh et al., 2016). Given the growing eldercare deficit, the state has liberalised its stand towards households employing foreign domestic workers for the purpose of eldercare. Policy adjustments include reducing the monthly foreign
worker levy payable to the state if the employer is aged above 65 years old, and offering a monthly grant of S$120 for lower- and middle-income families who employ a foreign domestic worker for eldercare purposes. Persons aged 60 years or more who do not have the means to employ such a worker can do so if a ‘sponsor’ (a child or his/her spouse) is willing to be jointly responsible for the salary, levy and maintenance of the worker (MOM, 2018). Such government policies underline the integral role played by foreign domestic workers in Singapore households for eldercare purposes.

Although state subsidies have made hiring foreign domestic workers to substitute/supplement eldercare duties much more feasible financially, these migrant caregivers bring with them ‘culturally specific views’ (Bastia, 2015: 123) of how their local older care recipients should be looked after. At the same time, those elderly care recipients have their own expectations of what constitutes good care, or may resist being cared for by a non-family member, especially one who is a foreigner. The preconceptions of care that both parties have does not necessarily translate to harmonious working relations and can give rise to tensions between the employer and employee (Yeoh and Huang, 2010). We propose using the notion of ‘tuning’ to finetune our understandings of the complex relationships between caregivers and recipients.

‘Tuning’ as a Conceptual Lens for Understanding Care Interdependencies
In the recent literature on care relations (in the context of eldercare), scholars have pointed to the importance of moving away from caregiver/recipient dichotomies and towards recognising the interdependence between ‘carer’ (familial caregiver or home support worker) and the ‘cared for’ (the older person) (Ho et al., 2018). Cloutier et al. (2015: 768) argue for the importance of acknowledging that ‘what I do affects you, and what you do affects me’ (citing Bergum and Dossetor, 2005). The mutuality of care between differentially positioned subjects, however, is not always—if ever—performed under conditions of social and economic equality. Baldassar et al. (2017: 526) argue that despite the ‘care exploitation’ of paid caregivers by their employers, a process of ‘kinning’ (i.e. forming ‘fictive kin-like ties’) transforms the everyday domestic space into an affective sphere of reciprocal, even if uneven, care exchange among migrant caregivers, elderly care receivers and their extended families.

While we concur that carework ‘is fundamentally relational and performative’ (Baldassar et al., 2017: 526), the authors’ preference for the term ‘kinning’ suggests that care dyad pairs will almost always develop affective ‘familial relationships’ (p. 525) with time. We are more
persuaded by Lovelock and Martine’s (2016) proposition that in the arena of care relations, ‘outcomes… are anything but certain… carry[ing both] risk[s] and desire[s]’ (p. 392). We therefore seek a conceptual framework which gives more attention to the contingencies and entanglements shaping the relational process between differently positioned members of care dyads, leading us to engage with Schütz’s notion of ‘tuning’, both for its denoted meaning (to ‘adjust’/’modulate’) and conceptual promise.

The tuning metaphor was first employed by the late phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (1951) in his research on intersubjective life-worlds and social relations. For Schütz, two or more parties are perceived to have cultivated reciprocally meaningful relationships — i.e. they are said to have ‘mutually tuned-in’ — when their rhythms are synchronised (Schütz and Luckmann, 1989). While such an approach usefully points out that individuals interact as co-performing subjectivities rather than uncoupled objects, it remains at a high level of abstraction and gives little weight to grounded notions of power and inequality operating in care relations in everyday life (Crossley, 1996). We seek not to apply this theorisation religiously but to take the ideas as guiding points that offer new opportunities for understanding the politics of mutuality and interdependence between older Singaporeans and their migrant caregivers. In what follows, we discuss three aspects distilled from Schütz’s original work on ‘tuning’ that we wish to deploy in this paper: (i) inner/subjective times; (ii) face-to-face interactions; and (iii) social intent/motives.

(i) For Schütz, people inhabit two sets of time concurrently, especially when engaged in a shared activity such as the co-making of music. The first is ‘objective time’, also called ‘outer time’, that is mainly quantified via measurement devices (e.g. watches, clocks) and understood to be physically and spatially lived through. In contrast, ‘subjective time’, or ‘inner time’, refers to time as consciously experienced, such as the prolonged stillness felt when caught in a worrisome situation, or the sense that time is slipping away rapidly when immersed in fun and games. Such heuristic distinctions are instructive as they draw attention to the notion of a ‘time gap’ between ‘lived experience and reflection, between [physical] experience and consciousness of the experience, between experience and meaning’ (Muzzetto, 2006: 12). Compared to the static nature of universal outer time, the internal consciousness of time is embedded in a ‘continuous change of… states… [each brimming with rich] qualitative moments’ (ibid).
Schütz’s notion of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ time bears strong semblance to Lefebvrian theorisations of rhythmanalysis which foregrounds the existence of ‘internal measures’ and ‘internal worlds’ (Pigrum, 2012) that are set apart from the ‘external’. Here, time is not only conceived as a lived experience, but also imbued with ‘dynamic, multiple and heterogeneous’ (Edensor, 2010: 1) meanings. Such lines of inquiry lend themselves well to our analysis as members of each care dyad often participate in the same activities and traverse the same spaces based on outer time, but could have varying responses to people, objects and environments given differences in inner time as well as differential capacities to act. By juxtaposing their intertwined yet polyrhythmic trajectories, we gain insights into convergences and divergences within these shared, oft-repetitive routines (Marcu, 2017; Lager et al., 2016), and how care relations are forged, sustained and/or eroded in everyday happenings.

(ii) Schütz accorded considerable significance to social relations that are built on ‘true face-to-face’ (1951: 95) interactions—that is, where two or more individuals participate in a set of experiences in shared space and time. For him, occupying a common spatio-temporal horizon means that the ‘Other’s facial expressions, his gestures… in short all the activities of performing… can be grasped by the partner in immediacy’ (1964: 176). The successful making of music thereby requires that each ensemble cast will ‘not only… interpret [his/her] own part [but] also… anticipate the other player’s interpretation of [his/her]—the other’s—part and even more, the other’s anticipation of [his/her] own execution’ (Schütz, 1951: 94). Individuals co-located in the ‘here and now’ (Dreher, 2011: 496) during face-to-face interactions are seemingly presented with more opportunities to correct any misunderstanding that may emerge through direct, unmediated communications (Yu, 2014).

Indeed, care migration is inherently premised upon bringing differently positioned bodies together in care provisioning. Elder care responsibilities entrusted to migrant careworkers often involve dealing with the elderly ‘body’ (e.g. cleaning of expelled matter) and can only be achieved at close quarters (Twigg, 2000; Wiles, 2003). Besides facilitating the enactment of ‘heavy… hands-on’ care (Jegermalm, 2004), Sihto (2018) highlights that bodily proximity is often intimately associated with ‘social and emotional closeness and distance’ which can prove to be either ‘liberating or constraining’ (p.63). Where bodily impairments or disabilities deter linguistic exchanges over distance, non-verbal communicative cues/gestures and affective valences at close range become paramount for furnishing quality care (Butler and Parr, 1999). As aptly summed up by Nishihara (2013: 30), intercorporeality or co-presence has the potential
to cultivate ‘sympathy [alongside other] styles of cooperating, reciprocal helping and mutual profit in living-together’ although the opposite effect is equally viable (Fernandez, 2010). After all, Schütz (1964: 87) also acknowledged that particular ‘structures of relevance’ (e.g. motivations) influence the context in which two individuals interpret each other’s meanings.

(iii) Schütz (1967) promulgated the need to distinguish ‘in-order-to motives’ from ‘because-motives’, with the former understood as the expected goals of planned actions and the latter as causal meanings attributed only retrospectively. In-order-to motives are therefore aims and outcomes that are rooted in the future or, as Dreher (2011) puts it, conscious projects one imagine[s] to be achieved before a deed is actually undertaken. In contrast, because-motives can only be grasped ex post facto upon reflection and are reactive in nature as they reference something preceding the act in question, such as the actor’s past experience(s) and particular conditioning (social categories of difference) that led him/her to opt for a specific response (i.e. why did s/he choose to respond in a particular fashion). Nonetheless, a person’s because-motive is constitutive of his/her in-order-to motive (Rhoads, 1991), i.e., one’s because-motives are not independent of one’s in-order-to motives developed over one’s life.

Schütz drew on these typologies to further understandings of intersubjective relations. He posited that successful interactions—taken to mean more than verbal conversations and includes gestures, writings etc.—are the result of interlocking motives, or when one’s in-order-to motives have become the other’s because-motives through these interactions. Such idealised instances of reciprocity rest on the presupposition that the actors involved are bounded by a common set of worldviews and shared social locations, even though what unfolds in reality will never be an exact replica of what was envisioned (Venturini, 2015). Indeed, extant studies on care dyads (within and beyond the scope of eldercare) have shown that asymmetries of power splintered along citizenship, racial, gendered, classed, linguistic lines often inhibit the cultivation of more carefull relations between the cared for and carer (Ochiai and Aoyama, 2014; Cloutier et al., 2018; Bastia, 2015). Thus, the degree to which one’s ‘in-order-to’ motive and the other’s ‘because’ motives are complementary or misaligned provide clues to the mutability of care relations, ranging from those that are mutually adjusting (in the process of being tuned in) to those moving towards increasing disjuncture (more and more out of tune). Time here is more than an ordering device that allows us to differentiate between motivated (because) and motivating (in-order-to) factors, but also instrumental in underscoring how such motives change/evolve temporally.
We use these three components derived from Schütz’s idea of tuning as a framework to understand the dynamics of interdependency in care relations in our empirical study. While the kinds of ideal mutuality described by Schütz are rarely achievable, it is important to view care relations as ever-mutable, contingent and open to ‘new possibilities of connections that may not be visible or even imagined’ (Bartos, 2018: 3). Our discussion contributes to—and arguably extends—Schütz’s works by refracting his theorisations on social relations through the prism of the aged ‘cared for’ and migrant ‘carers’. We show that giving and receiving care is not only perceived and experienced differently in different places by different people (Geisbrecht et al., 2016), but also characterised by disharmony, improvisation, and constant retuning.

**Methodology**

The data for this paper is derived from a project entitled Transnational Ageing and Care Ethics (TRACE), a multi-sited study examining how global care circulations mediate experiences of ageing within and across national borders using Singapore as the key hub. Respondents were recruited through formal (community centres, family service centres, daycare centres) and informal (personal contacts and networks, public spaces) channels. Efforts were made to ensure that the Singaporean sample comprises a reasonable distribution across gender, ethnicity and (older) age, while the migrant caregiver sample featured the three main nationality groups of these workers (Indonesian, Filipino and Myanmarese) in Singapore. We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 69 older Singaporean adults and 35 foreign domestic workers employed in Singapore homes for eldercare, of which 24 were dyad-pairs.

Subsequent ‘go-along’ interviews were conducted with 20 older Singaporean respondents whose mobility patterns range from those whose daily activities were confined mainly within their neighbourhoods to those who travelled farther out. The ‘go-alongs’ involve accompanying the participants as they go about daily activities that take them outside the home, mostly on foot but also involving ‘ride-alongs’ (e.g. public transport, private motorcars) in some cases (Figs 1, 2). This method allowed us to gain valuable insight into everyday interactions as we ‘walk[ed] through… [their] lived experiences’ with them (Carpiano, 2009: 264). Choosing to move with them stimulated other topics for conversation prompted by encounters with what Evans and Jones (2011) call ‘meanings and connections to the surrounding environment’ (p.849). ‘Go-alongs’ proved useful in changing the setting of our conversations to a more informal setting. Being immersed in the multi-sensorial experience
ourselves of walking with our respondents also meant that we could better observe the ‘hidden’ cues or habits typically left out of verbal responses, as well as the exchanges between the elderly and their carers and passers-by. Consent from the participants was obtained prior to the commencement of each go-along, including permission to record and take pictures and videos. All names are pseudonyms and photographs have curated to ensure that identities are kept confidential.

**Figures 1 and 2.** Illustrations of the ‘go-alongs’ (photographs taken by authors)

**Tuning Care Relations**

In this section, we draw on the framework of ‘tuning’ to extend understandings of the manifold ways the ‘carer’ and ‘cared for’ negotiate their shared lives daily as they experience various activities within and beyond the home sphere. Our analysis focuses on three care dyads drawn from the wider sample, each pair featuring a Singaporean Chinese elderly and a foreign domestic worker who has been employed to provide care. While we have emphasised a particular component that makes up the ‘tuning’ framework in each case, the notions of ‘inner times’, ‘face-to-face interactions’ and ‘social intent/motives’ cut across all three cases presented below. By employing a narrative style, we show (not tell) the ‘varied affinities and
distanciations’ (Wylie, 2005: 234) embedded within the performative milieu of eldercare provision/reception.

**Inner/Subjective Times**

It is often posited that engaging in shared repetitive routines over a prolonged period of time will deepen relationships for care dyads (Cloutier *et al.*, 2015), with the gap(s) between their respective subjective worlds becoming narrower and more entwined. We use the case of 74-year-old Madam Cheong and Penden below to demonstrate that care relations do not necessarily progress in such a linear fashion, but are constantly co-constructed through ‘tuning in’ and ‘tuning out’. The inner times or internal consciousness of this care dyad deviate, brush against each other and converge at unspecific temporalities while on the move.

Madam Cheong is a widow who lives in a private condominium apartment with her single daughter whose hectic work schedule leaves the latter with little family time. Madam Cheong’s son moved out following his marriage, leading her to lament that he has ‘become other people’s [implying her daughter-in-law’s] property’. Care duties are hence outsourced to Penden (hired by Madam Cheong’s daughter), a 28-year-old university graduate from Myanmar, who has been employed as a caregiver to the 74-year-old. Although Madam Cheong does not require any physical assistance with her mobility (high blood pressure levels controlled through medications), her children worry that she would slip and fall, particularly during her pre-dawn walks around the neighbourhood. They have stipulated that Penden must accompany Madam Cheong on all her daily routines outside the home.

Madam Cheong had agreed to let us (the researchers) accompany her on her regular morning routine. We met her at 6 a.m. when the sky was still dark along the pathway that she takes to get to the community center (a communal space sponsored by the government for community activities) where *qigong* sessions—a meditative Chinese exercise—are held. She greeted us with a wide grin and seemed bemused that we could match her early-rising routine; in contrast her Myanmarese caregiver appeared rather listless. Beyond a fleetingly weak smile to acknowledge our presence, Penden did not speak or interact with Madam Cheong or any of us. With her earphones plugged in, Penden appeared to be in her own world. Instead of walking by Madam Cheong’s side along the empty pathway, she trailed behind her elderly charge with sluggish steps. If the ‘way one move[s] with others expresses [one’s] dis/connection to them’ (Edensor, 2010: 74), it was clear that neither ‘carer’ nor ‘cared for’ was interested in
synchronising their inner time-spaces during the 20-minute walk to the community centre. This
detachment was also evident during the five-minute interval midway when Madam Cheong sat
down to rest—Penden opted to sit away from her employer and kept to herself.

The reason why the dyad pair was ‘out-of-sync’ became clearer when Madam Cheong
explained why she chose a meandering route to the community centre rather than take the
quicker, more straightforward alternative. As she used to live in this area, taking this route
increased the chances of bumping into her former neighbours. We learnt from a subsequent
conversation with Penden that taking the longer route meant she has less time to chat with her
good friend (also a migrant careworker) at the community centre. This lack of synchronisation
of inner time was further evident when Madam Cheong told us that allowing Penden to come
along ensures that the latter would not ‘feel lonely’ on her own at home. In a separate chat with
the Myanmarese caregiver later that morning, she clearly did not concur with the 74-year-old:

Interviewer: How do you feel waking up early and doing exercise together?

Penden: This [activity] is done for health purposes [for the elderly] and it doesn’t
fit with young people. Sometimes, I feel sleepy and [find it] boring because their
exercise is slow moving exercise. Some parts are okay [when there is] a little
fast action. This exercise is especially for the elderly and sometimes, I sit [out].
But nai nai (grandmother, a term of respect she uses to address Madam Cheong)
asks me to follow the exercise and I comply. I try to adapt to nai nai.

While her words expressed effort to somewhat ‘comply’ (i.e. stay in tune), her actions reflect
otherwise–literally plugging herself into alternative rhythms that are diametrically opposite
(fast-moving musical beats on her mobile phone) in order to cope with the ennui stemming
from having to endure what she perceives as a laborious daily morning ritual. However, she
can get away with doing so because she has learnt Madam Cheong’s routine over time.
At the community centre, Penden continued to put some distance between Madam Cheong and herself as they joined in the *qigong* class. With her back facing Madam Cheong (Fig 3), Penden was unaware that her employer had made two trips to the bathroom without informing her. Such a spatial arrangement (i.e. out of sight and out of mind) is again symptomatic of their unsynchronised inner times.

After the class concluded, we followed the dyad to an air-conditioned food court; here the pair became noticeably more in-tune with each other. Using simple Mandarin phrases that Penden was able to comprehend, Madam Cheong consoled her Myanmarese carer over the fact that her (Penden’s) friend did not show up that morning. The point therefore is not simply that the ‘carer’ and ‘cared for’ can experience the same external time-space dissimilarly, but also how the different inner times generated can ‘modify [their] possible field of actions, changing their capacity to… act’ (Bissell, 2010: 273). The pair then proceeded to share a meal, with Madam Cheong encouraging her employee to have more, as she retracted her fork to indicate that she had finished breakfast. Their conversation progressed to what should be served for dinner, with each proffering suggestions for the other’s consideration. When we eventually parted, Madam
Cheong and Penden were last seen heading towards the wet market across the road—this time side by side—with the latter patting the former’s back affectionately. Rather than being just a recipient of care, Madam Cheong had assumed the responsibility as caregiver, which prompted Penden to reciprocate the former’s concern.

Yet belying such seemingly harmonious relations are some veiled grouses that Madam Cheong holds towards her paid caregiver. When we interviewed the pair separately, Madam Cheong said that she intentionally limits Penden’s movements out of the house apart from the morning exercise routine. By Madam Cheong’s own admission, they have cultivated functional yet respectful (‘we are not the tightest pair but we depend on each other’) ties over the course of 20 months. Care relations are hence built upon the variable rhythm of ‘tuning in and out’ between the care dyad that persist over the mundane course of daily routines. Whilst ‘fluxes of inner time’ (Schütz, 1951: 118) can converge among individuals who are separated in space and time, it is the immediacy afforded by the interplay of both anticipatory and reactive gestures in face-to-face relations sustained over quotidian times that fosters relations of care.

**Face-To-Face Interactions**

As among the most intimate and expressive forms of social practices, the frequency of face-to-face interactions is often correlated with the strength of a particular relationship (de Jesus, *et al.*, 2013), including within the realm of eldercare. While sharing a common spatio-temporal horizon enables the caregiver to anticipate the other’s specific needs and fulfil those more efficiently (that is, ‘tuning in’), caring simply in terms of establishing co-presence or ticking tasks off a checklist do not necessarily yield congenial ties, at least not enduring ones (resulting in a possible ‘tuning out’). We turn to our next care dyad to demonstrate the possible effects of face-to-face co-presence and/or intercorporeality.

Retired teacher Mr. Andy is currently cared for by 28-year-old Myanmarese national Myine (a university graduate) who began working for him five years ago after Mr. Andy was hospitalised. Since the 86-year-old is single and lives on his own, the doctor mandated that Mr. Andy could not be discharged unless round-the-clock care was assured. While the care dyad struggled to understand each other at the start, Myine has been quick to pick up English and diligent in improving her command of the spoken language, primarily through constant usage ‘chit-chatting’ with her *ah gong* (grandfather) as she refers to Mr. Andy. While Mr. Andy concurred that conversing with Myine did enliven the day, he was also quick to venture that they only
chatted about mundane, ‘unimportant things’. When it came to matters of the heart and health concerns, he would turn to ‘family’—either his younger sister or his god-daughter—as the preferred options even though he meets them or speaks to them by phone only once a week (or at even longer intervals). While Myine drew on the familial trope of ‘grandfather’ (like Penden above) when describing her relations with Mr. Andy, the latter opted for the classed descriptor ‘helper’. Such sentiments provide preliminary clues about their discordant inner times despite having shared external space-times for half a decade.

![Figure 4. Mr. Andy exercising with Myine behind him (photograph taken by authors)](image)

Nonetheless from Mr. Andy’s perspective, Myine’s live-in presence is important to extending his physical mobility beyond the home, particularly his daily trips, on a wheelchair, to the public fitness corner near his apartment for his exercise routine. When we arrived at the fitness corner, Mr. Andy was busy working his arms using one of the two pedal exercisers, while Myine stood quietly behind him quietly (Fig 4)—her arms folded and her gaze keenly fixed on her elderly charge. Myine also benefits from wheeling Mr. Andy out every morning as she uses the opportunity to befriend and socialise with the other migrant caregivers performing the same task. Two other dyad pairs (both older women with Myanmarese caregivers) were indeed present and the three migrant caregivers including Myine were engaged in sporadic chatter while paying occasional attention to their elderly charges, tuning in and out with the ease of
practice. But when she noticed that Mr. Andy’s bodily movements were slowing down as fatigue set in, she halted Mr. Andy’s arm movements and unlocked the bolts on the footrest of her charge’s wheelchair in order to move him to the next routine at the adjacent pedal exerciser (meant for lower limbs). Resting his right foot on one pedal, Mr. Andy waited patiently for Myine to stabilize the other pedal before placing his other foot on it. The ease and familiarity in anticipating and coordinating bodily movements pointed not only to Myine’s careful attention to detail, but also how bodily care requires ‘a creative reciprocity… tuning in to [each other]’ (Zaner, 1961: 93) through face-to-face encounters.

Figure 5. Myine steadying the pedal for Mr. Andy (photograph taken by authors)

Our chat with Myine revealed other anticipatory acts of rendering embodied care. During the night, she wakes up voluntarily to check on Mr. Andy despite sleeping in the adjacent living room. This is to ensure that his needs are met during the wee hours of the morning, such as going to the toilet or quenching his thirst with a hot drink. Ensuring that Mr. Andy is well cared for serves Myine’s own purposes. She benefits from working for him as she is able to squeeze in quick meet-ups with her newly-wedded husband (a Myanmarese national) working in a nearby automobile shop during grocery and other errand runs. This would not be possible should Mr. Andy not trust her, or if she is transferred to a different household elsewhere in Singapore where live-in caregivers are accorded fewer degrees of freedom of mobility.
While Mr. Andy was generally pleased with Myine’s carework performance and appreciated constant presence in his daily routines (and has renewed her contract twice), he also reiterated that he saw Myine as someone who primarily extends his bodily movement (such as exercise) and meets his daily needs (preparing food and drink). As an example of why Mr. Andy felt that co-presence had not led to the development of more sympathetic care relations, he complained that she wheeled him to the neighbourhood mall ‘only once a week’. In turn, Myine expressed annoyance (rolling her eyes and wearing her frustration on her face openly) at this recurring point of contention. She felt that it was ‘unfair’ for Mr. Andy to expect her to enable him to resume the active routine he once had before he lost strength in his legs and became confined to the wheelchair. The unforgiving weather (‘so hot’) in Singapore also made journeys outside the home difficult and in her mind, the weekly trip to the mall was sufficient. It is noteworthy that Mr. Andy does not project this expectation onto his familial caregivers (god-daughter and sister) who do not live with him—even declaring that his weekly (sometimes less frequent) trips with them are ‘enough’. His attitude towards Myine is different, seemingly because he sees her chiefly as ‘paid help’ and thus is ‘deaf’ (that is, tuning out) to the latter’s views. This dissonance in expectations for physical mobility beyond the home has become a wedge that makes it difficult for this care dyad to formulate ‘mutually recognizing actions’ (Zaner, 1961: 93). Thus, while face-to-face settings allow for care dyads to (learn to) act synchronously out of shared motives – ‘or motives that, if different, are at least mutually comprehensible to each other’ (McDuffie, 1998: 97) – as Schütz argued, mutual recognition of needs is also important in translating embodied routinised co-presence into empathetic understanding.

**Social Intent/Motives**

For dyad pairs involving migrant caregivers, those who pay for care substitutes often assume that these substitutes will act, be motivated by and think similarly as they do (Zaner, 1961). When such expectations are not realised, conflicts and disagreements leading to strained and weakened ties often ensue. Seventy-year-old Madam Fong and Mya represent such an archetype in which frequent misinterpretations of the other’s motivations have led to perceived disjuncture in their respective intents, leading to them being ‘out of tune’. Over time, transitioning from a comparatively one-sided care relationship to one that more closely resembles mutuality is not a foreclosed possibility as motives do evolve contingently and can end up complementing others (‘attuned’) or moving out of step.
Madam Fong is a 70-year-old divorcee with an adult daughter and godson who live separately from her and her Myanmarese caregiver Mya (32-year-old). The former is conversant in Cantonese and Mandarin, both of which the latter barely understands, increasing the probability of misunderstandings between the two. Indeed, one of the first things Madam Fong mentioned was that she dislikes Mya and prefers not to involve the Myanmarese national in her personal matters as her caregiver tends to mistake her intentions (‘She always thinks I am scolding her’). Such motivational dissonances, or the absence of a ‘reciprocal orientation’ (Crossley, 1996: 80), are exacerbated by the fact that Madam Fong is medically blind, which compels them to communicate in largely auditory but not necessarily comprehensible ways. Madam Fong’s loss of vision has also meant that she is unable to complete many ‘activities of daily living’ independently. Despite her reluctance to do so, she has little choice but to interact with her caregiver frequently:

I will be in trouble when she is no longer around… I really need someone to assist me… I just have to wait for just another month for [Mya’s] contract to end. I just hope that I can get a placement at the… nursing home.

Here, we learn that what Madam Fong ultimately seeks (i.e. her ‘in-order-to motive’) is for her physiological needs to be met. Currently, this is to be placed in a nursing home. She had lived in one for approximately a year previously. This explains Madam Fong’s insistence on visiting a near-by Senior Activity Centre (SAC) daily as it closely resembles the care space she longs for – one with well-trained nurses, social company, and good amenities. Such a yearning is understandable as Mya’s lack of experience (this is her first caregiving stint) has led her to adopt several poor caring practices, such as dictating the showering process rather than according her charge a certain degree of autonomy. The 70-year-old is often reminded of her vulnerability and helplessness, indicative of how bodily proximity has the potential to subvert care relations, thereby fissuring the occupants’ inner times. What were deemed ‘careless’ acts contribute to Madam Fong’s anger towards Mya and a desire to be placed in an institutional facility where she can receive ‘proper’ care – her ‘because-motive’ turned into an ‘in-order-to’ motive.

Although Mya has not taken well to Madam Fong's obvious hostility, the Myanmarese national views such antagonisms as idiosyncrasies similar to those associated with the aged back in Myanmar (‘Never mind [shakes her head]. I understand her. Old already.’). She sees Madam
Fong’s temperament as reminiscent of her own grandparents’ and something she must endure to achieve her personal aspirations to provide for her family (in-order-to motive). Viewed this way, it is easy to understand why Mya has chosen more conciliatory approaches (‘Slowly, slowly’) that are aligned with her own cultural specificities and minimizes the chances of being dismissed from employment and repatriated to Myanmar. Such choices are also undeniably underpinned by their differences in social locations, all of which exemplifies Rhoad’s (1991: 140) reasoning that ‘because-motive[s are] obviously a cause of the in-order to motive[s]’.

As she has gained experience, Mya’s ‘game plan’ also became more detailed. The 32-year-old referenced massages as one strategy, albeit unexpected, that has proven to be effective in mellowing the 70-year-old’s hardheartedness. These massages represent one of the few instances whereby Mya’s because-motive (i.e. common Myanmarese practice of massaging elders) complements Madam Fong’s in-order-to motive of receiving quality care, thereby allowing them to be ‘in tune’ with each other:

Mya: I do. I massage ah ma. One time 45 minutes, sometimes 30 minutes, sometimes one hour. When ah ma say[s] okay then I stop. Ah ma never okay, I never stop.

Madam Fong: Oh, she knows. She helps me… [with] my arms and legs. This one I acknowledge that she does well. I guess you have to say both the bad and the good.

The point is not simply that tactile contact is able to meet particular objectives, especially when verbal recourses are unavailable between the elderly recipient and his/her migrant caregiver. It is also about the idea that there are ‘appropriate’ junctures to enact ‘skinship’ (Wright, 2018) practices. Such moments of consonance have positive transformative effects as evident from Madam Fong’s anecdote below, where she has clearly began to display bouts of consideration towards her caregiver and a mild blurring of roles, in spite of the many misgivings she still has about the latter:

Interviewer: What if you need to go the toilet at night?
Madam Fong: I'll use spittoon beside the bed. In the morning she will clean it.
Interviewer: What if you need to pass motion at night, she assists you?
Madam Fong: I will do it in the morning; I don’t do it at night. I will keep my manners.

Although Madam Fong had initially wanted to terminate her caregiver’s services and be admitted to a nursing home, she has modulated her view over time. In leaving the decision entirely in the hands of Mya (‘She can decide if she wants to continue to work for me’), it signals how Madam Fong’s plans have evolved to encompass her migrant carer. As Rogers (1983) argues, a failure to unpack the variegated and mutable motives behind particular actions ‘distort[s] our understanding of how individuals determine their future conduct and experience their outcomes’ (p. 63). This observation explains how and why certain care dyads such as Madam Fong and Mya can share a multiplicity of external space-times—possibly more than other pairs due to the septuagenarian’s impaired vision—but often fail to synchronise their inner times. Instead of forging congenial ties, these prolonged face-to-face interactions cause more frictions. Nonetheless, as we have found, spatial proximity provides opportunities for improving care relations over the course of the day (i.e. morning/night massages versus mid-day) and longer temporal periods (i.e. first day compared to eight months on). Taken together, they typify how care dyads are entangled in a relational process—one needs care which no one else will provide, while the other needs the job in order that the migration gamble succeeds—that requires constant tuning.

**Conclusion**
Our paper drew out the discordant (‘tuning out’) and concordant (‘tuning in’) relations punctuating the everyday, ‘messy’ realities of three employer-employee care dyads. The cases presented underline how the older adult and his/her migrant caregiver can transverse and dwell in the same spaces/places concurrently, but their subjective inner times are more accurately described as oscillating. From Madam Cheong and Penden, we learnt that the onus to attune—either ‘slowing’ down or ‘speeding’ up to match the other’s spatial-temporal trajectory—does not always fall on the migrant caregiver but could unfold in the opposite direction. The attunement they experience at specific moments show that sharing time and space could enable one party to anticipate the other’s needs and fulfil those accordingly. Nevertheless, from another care dyad, Mr. Andy and Myine, we found that face-to-face co-living can conjure certain expectations of the proximate carer (i.e. the migrant worker) that other distant carers (i.e. the sister and god-daughter) are exempted from. Propinquity risks perpetuating classed
notions of servility. Relatedly, the synchronicity of care dyads depends a large part on the compatibility of the care dyad’s in-order-to motives and the factors (because-motives) that surround their choice of action to realise said goals. The third care dyad, Madam Fong and Mya seek to realise the ‘same project’ (i.e. reception/provision of quality care services), but their differential social locations and biographies regularly lead to mismatches in the way such aims are actualized, despite occasional unexpected synergies (e.g. Burmese-style massages). Our paper refines media and public discourses that depict elderly care relations in absolute terms (i.e. either positive or negative). Rather, care relations are mutually entangled in a manner that requires constant fine-tuning to (re)calibrate care relations within and across a multiplicity of sites and times, rather than existing a priori.

Although this paper has prioritised the notion of a relational dyad pair to further discussions on eldercare provision/reception in Singapore, the co-constructed and relational aspects of care discussed extends to other actors embroiled within wider web(s) of care. The insights we shared trouble existing attitudes that view elderly care recipient/migrant caregiver relations as a key means in which hierarchical orderings are upheld. It is only through demonstrating that the social world is shared by individuals living and engaging in a series of interlocking activities (Schütz, 1951) that a relational ethics framework can be advanced, emphasising the building of carefull ‘we-relations’. To develop a ‘genuine mutual tuning-in relationship’ (ibid: 93) requires that both the elderly and migrant adopt a dialectical openness towards extending care bidirectionally. In terms of wider theoretical building, we have engaged with Schütz’s concept of ‘tuning’ by segmenting Schütz’s original hypothesis into two parts (‘inner time’ and ‘face-to-face interactions’), as well as extending it by integrating his theory on motivations to nuance our analyses. Although it can be difficult to grasp intents or distinguish neatly between subjective and objective motives at times, our revised ‘tuning’ framework provides a useful approach for evincing the indeterminate nature of care relations and politics of mutuality.
References


