IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

MASTER'S THESIS

COPING STRATEGIES OF ALEPPIAN ELDER PARENTS FROM AN INTERGENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: ALEPPO AND ISTANBUL

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THESIS ADVISOR
ASSIST. PROF. TESNIM KHRIJI

ISTANBUL, 2025

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by
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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Sociology

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ACADEMIC HONESTY ATTESTATION

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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ÖZ

KUŞAKLAR ARASI BİR PERSPEKTİFTEN HALEPLİ YAŞLI EBEVEYNLERİN BAŞA ÇIKMA STRATEJİLERİ: HALEP VE İSTANBUL ÖRNEĞİ

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Temmuz 2025, 142 Sayfa

Sosyoloji alanındaki araştırmalar, özellikle baba ya da ataya dayalı otoritenin çözülmesiyle birlikte zayıflayan ailevi bağların ve buna eşlik eden kolektif bilincin, Batı toplumunun standart bireyinin psikolojisi üzerindeki etkilerini derinlemesine incelemiştir. Ancak yaşlı bireylerin bağımsız bir araştırma konusu olarak ele alınması, sosyolojinin kendi içsel sorgulama süreçlerinden geçmesinden sonra mümkün olmuştur. Öte yandan göç çalışmaları da yaşlılık olgusunu, özellikle "geride kalanlar" örneğini, uzun süre marjinalleştirmiştir. Bu çalışma, yaşlılık ve göç araştırmalarında önemli bir boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamakta; özellikle "norm dışı" yaşlı bireylerin ele alınış biçimini sorgulamakta ve çağdaş gerontoloji ile ulusötesi çalışmalarda yaygın olan pozitivist yöntem anlayışına eleştirel bir yaklaşım getirmektedir. Araştırma, Halep'te yaşamaya devam eden yaşlı ebeveynlerin baş etme stratejilerini incelemekte; İstanbul'da çocuklarıyla birlikte yaşayan bazı örnekler üzerinden karşılaştırmalı bir perspektifte sunmaktadır. Kuşaklararası dayanışma ve çelişki (ambivalans) kuramını merkeze alarak ve fenomenolojik yaklaşımlardan da beslenerek, bu tez yaşlı ebeveynlerin teknoloji aracılığıyla iletişim kurma, dini yaşantıya yönelme ve mekâna/aidiyete dair algıları gibi baş etme stratejilerinin, kuşaklararası ilişkiler ve geç yaşlarda ailevi bütünlüğü koruma arzusuyla nasıl şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Baş Etme Stratejileri, Göç, Kuşaklararası İlişkiler, Yaşlı Ebeveynler.

ABSTRACT

COPING STRATEGIES OF ALPPIAN ELDER PARENTS FROM INTERGENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: ALEPPO AND ISTANBUL

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Scholars in sociology extensively explored the repercussions of deteriorating familial bonds, particularly the decline of collective consciousness associated with paternal or ancestral authority, on the individual psyche of the standardized Western individual. Interest in elderly individuals as a subject of research emerged only after prolonged self-reflection within the field of sociology. Besides that, migration studies had further marginalised old age, especially the case of the left-behind. This study endeavours to address a gap within gerontology and migration studies, specifically concerning the treatment of "non-normative" elder individuals, and to challenge the positivist methodologies employed in contemporary gerontology and transnational studies. It explores the coping strategies of Aleppian elder parents who remained in Aleppo, with a few monitoring examples from those who reside in Istanbul with their children. By integrating *intergenerational solidarity* and *ambivalence theory,* and incorporating phenomenological insights, this thesis shows how intergenerational relationships and the desire for familial cohesion in later life shape the explored coping strategies of elder parents—namely, technological mediation, religious engagement, and personal perceptions of place and belonging.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Elder Parents, Intergenerational Relations, Migration.

DEDICATION

To her long-imagined co-presence...

To my mother, who left this world before meeting her grandsons.

To every trembling voice and every heart that has endured the pain of separation in the Syrian diaspora.

I humbly dedicate this work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Professor Tesnim Khirji, a scholar and a person whose presence in my academic journey has been a profound gift. I met her in the winter of 2023 during a research methodology course, where her rigorous and thoughtful teaching left a lasting impact. Through her insistence on intellectual focus and her guidance in helping students anchor all their academic efforts to a clearly defined research interest, the seeds of this thesis were planted very early. That clarity allowed me to engage with the topic deeply, evolving over time until this work became more than a thesis — it became part of who I am.

Throughout this journey, Professor Khirji witnessed the evolution of my ideas, their growing complexity, and the many shifts in my research trajectory. With patience, humility, and generosity, she challenged my thinking, offered corrections, and, when appropriate , gave encouragement and praise. Over the course of a year and a half, she was far more than an advisor. She was a guide and a model for what rigorous and humane scholarship can look like. I am also grateful to the professors in the Sociology Department at Ibn Haldun University: Prof.Ramazan Aras, Prof.Heba Raouf Ezzat, Prof. Alev Erkilet, Dr. Nursem Keskin, and Prof. Diane Pranzo, whose seminars and discussions served as intellectual beacons and contributed significantly to both my academic and personal development. To my dear colleagues and friends, Evin, Dhilruba, and Nurafşan, thank you for your companionship, patience, and unwavering support. You stood by me in moments of doubt and exhaustion, and I am lucky to have walked this path alongside you. I owe special thanks to all the Aleppian mothers and fathers who generously participated in this research. They welcomed me with warmth and sincerity, shared their joyful and painful memories, and allowed me into their everyday lives. In their company, I felt a sense of belonging, as if I were one of their children, living far away yet still deeply connected. I remain grateful for their trust, kindness, and continued presence in my life even after the research came to an end.

My heartfelt thanks go to my parents, family, and extended relatives. The diversity of their experiences and affiliations offered me a rich landscape for reflection, self-understanding, and critical thought.

To my beloved city, Aleppo, despite the destruction and sorrow it has endured, it continues to pulse with life, spirit, and meaning. It remains an endless source of inspiration and memory.

Finally, I thank my husband, Mudhar Faress, my partner in life and thought. We met during our master's studies in Aleppo, and together we navigated the challenges of exile in Istanbul. His unwavering belief in me, along with his emotional and financial support, sustained me throughout this journey.

And to my two sons, who will grow up without any memories of their grandmother, who loved them deeply, but our smartphones were never honest to that love, this work, too, is for you.

Dima FARESS
İSTANBUL, 2025

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IG Intergenerational Relations

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the crisis experienced by the Syrian people in the aftermath of the revolution, over fourteen years, has profoundly reshaped the structure of familial ties and personal relationships. While scholarly studies on this evolving reality remain sparse and slow-moving, historical events have unfolded with great urgency and acceleration. When I was planning this thesis and collecting data in 2023, the fragmentation and dispersion of Syrian families had reached a peak, and I was driven by a deep personal pain. At the time, I carried the heavy fear that my ailing mother in Aleppo might pass away without ever meeting my sons, who were born and raised in Istanbul. That year, my fear came true! Despite the traumatic feelings I had, I proceded in my thesis and wanted to touch upon this pain in any possible way. I was one of millions, and other families were still enduring the same profound pain of separation, while restrictions on Syrians' mobility were still making reunion increasingly difficult. Later, at the time of writing this thesis in 2024, the Syrian regime long responsible for the fragmentation of countless Syrian families has fallen, but yet many of the psychological and social consequences it produced remain irreversible and deeply felt!

In academia, most sociological research on the Syrian context has tended to focus broadly on themes of migration, displacement, integration, longing, and identity in the diaspora. In contrast, studies that probe the internal fabric of Syrian society—its intimate structures and everyday social dynamics—are almost nonexistent. The majority of what is published centers on macro-level issues such as reconstruction, economic deterioration due to sanctions, lack of employment opportunities, or the political struggles and sacrifices made during the revolutionary years.

In response, this thesis represents an attempt to illuminate a fertile but overlooked space within the literature on the revolution and its aftermath. Specifically, it explores the lives of Aleppian elders—a population shaped by unique cultural and social specificities—as they strive to create and preserve meaning and to cling to an identity

rooted in familial roles and intergenerational bonds, despite the overwhelming transformations that surround them. However, participants alternated between two locations, Aleppo and Istanbul, to support comparative insights and to trace expressions of intergenerational solidarity across changing environments.

Being part of the Aleppian cultural fabric has enabled me to detect layers of meaning that might otherwise elude an external gaze, while my position as both a migrant and an academic researcher based in Istanbul has provided the necessary distance to reflect critically and mitigate the emotional biases inherent in insider status. The focus on intergenerational relations and familial cohesion has thus emerged as the central thread that weaves through Aleppian elders' attempts to reconstruct meaning and maintain a sense of control over their lives in later age, an insight grounded in a deep understanding of this society's cultural specificity.

However, the significance of intergenerational relationships and the value placed on familial cohesion are far from theoretical luxuries but rather are lived realities that can alter the course of history. It is not an exaggeration to think of these relationalities as a slow, undetected, but persistent force, which eventually had undermined authoritarian despotism. As it was struggling to survive in the aftermath of the Syrian revolution, Al-Assad regime's skeletal existence relied heavily on the emotional manipulation of family bonds to extract financial resources from citizens. Many of these parents rushed to pay exorbitant sums either to exempt their sons from military service or to smuggle them out of the country through intermediaries. It was, in fact, these acts of sacrifice made by elder parents, sending their sons into exile with their own hands and accepting their estrangement out of fear for their safety, that ultimately led to the regime's depletion of both its human and material resources. Theoretically speaking, while totalitarianism emerged and expanded within the context of modern individuation in Western societies[1], its historical imposition on tightly-knit, solidaristic communities—of which Aleppian society is a prime example—created a structural dissonance that ultimately contributed to the collapse of authoritarianism and affirmed the resilience of the Syrian relational mode of existence.

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), https://archive.org/details/TheOriginsOfTotalitarianism/page/n335/mode/2up.

Still, such a narrative remains partial and surface-level, glossing over the pain and personal suffering embedded in every act of sacrifice. From this suffering, however, arise countless small, often unnoticed acts of resistance, and it is those quiet subtle victories that form the heartbeat of this thesis. From this perspective, daily human activities, such as working, forming social connections beyond the family, engaging with digital technologies, or turning to religion—emerge as deeply intertwined strategies, each informing and reinforcing the other. What ultimately gives these actions meaning is the persistent determination of elderly parents to fulfill their familial role, through which they construct a sense of purpose and identity. An identity that stands in stark contrast to individualistic societies, where meaning is often derived from personal achievements and a legacy of self-directed accomplishments tied to an autonomous self.

Anchored in qualitative inquiry and informed by ethnographic and phenomenological sensibilities, this thesis draws on oral histories, participant observations, and digital ethnography to explore the multi-layered strategies Aleppian elder parents adopt to make sense of their realities. It aims to contribute to emerging conversations in the sociology of aging, migration studies, and intergenerational theory. In short, this study offers a culturally specific perspective that situates Aleppian elders not at the margins of sociological inquiry, but at its center where the intimate meets the structural, and where stories of survival resist erasure.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Where do I begin? And where do I end?
And time just cycles infinitely
All I have in my exile
It is a bundle: a dry loaf… and longing,
And a journal that shoulders some of my burden
I have spat upon its pages the bitterness that choked me.
Where do I begin?[2]

In this chapter, I seek to introduce my research topic and to draw focus on the methodological framework and tools that I employed during my research journey. I, reflexively, ground my choices in an awareness of my positionality and the socio-spatial context of the field. Since my interest in the topic stems from a convergence of personal experience and sociological inquiry, I begin by outlining the underlying motivations that led me to pursue this specific topic. I reflect on how my multiple identities and social roles have shaped my engagement with participants and influenced both the process of data collection and the interpretation of narratives. I then turn to the practical dimensions of fieldwork and highlight the methodological decisions I made in response to on-the-ground realities. I also reflexively address the methodological hybridity adopted in this research, particularly the integration of traditional ethnographic tools with digital methods, as a necessary response to the transnational nature of intergenerational relations among Aleppian elders. Next, I introduce the target group of the study: elderly Aleppian parents who either remained in Syria or migrated to Istanbul, and outline the socio-cultural lens through which I am looking at this population. This perspective will later inform the development of my theoretical focus and much of my analytical discussions.

[2] Mahmoud Darwish, 'A Letter from Exile', *Nomad78*, accessed 18 February 2025, http://nomad78.weebly.com/2/post/2020/08/a-letter-from-exile.html.

2.1. Positionality Statement

2.1.1. A Phenomenological Moment of Affective Awareness

On an afternoon in late autumn, in the month of November 2024, as the cold grew harsher and the clouds obscured the sunlight for an indefinite period in Istanbul, I walked home with the idea of my research occupying my mind, asking myself: Where does it begin? Along the way, I started gazing at people's faces, wondering to what extent I now truly feel a sense of belonging to this country eleven years after my arrival. Am I really a part of the fabric of this society? To what degree am I, unconsciously, dedicating my research as a way to heal from my sense of estrangement? I caught sight of an elderly man walking slowly along the road. I observed him, and for a moment, I felt something shift in my emotions—I felt guilt**.** After minutes of reflection, I realized that guilt had always accompanied me, lying dormant in the depths of my being, only surfacing into my consciousness when I saw a man the same age as my father.

I remembered all the Aleppian elders I had interviewed during my digital field work in October and November of 2024. I recalled the tears of one father, his voice choked with emotion as he described the suffering of his young son in Turkey, who had a retinal condition that left him struggling to see, enduring harsh working conditions while hiding his affliction from those around him, fearing that he would be fired and deported. I recalled what another Aleppian, but more privileged, elder had told me about his sense of belonging to the city. He could not leave it, as part of his belonging lies in sharing the suffering of those around him. I wonder how shared suffering could create a sense of belonging! Was not that exact feeling that has driven me towards my thesis topic? When I decided to speak about the abandoned elders and listen to their agonies tirelessly, was I unconsciously seeking to belong to something greater than myself, something that could reunite my scattered identity into a single time and place, even if only imagined!? Perhaps the reality of my academic journey over the past years, dedicated to the study of sociology, was being the unconscious tool to dismantle and break down the sense of guilt that has accompanied me since I first set foot on this land.

I did not know its source, nor did I understand how its malignant roots had embedded themselves so deeply within me. And I still do not know to what extent the study of sociology has really succeeded in freeing me from this feeling. In reality, one could say that sociology has given me the tools to liberate myself. Yet, I often find myself surrendering to this feeling almost instinctively. Perhaps this feeling, despite its harshness and destructive energy, like many of the deeply entrenched evils in this world, is necessary to propel us toward building, working, and achieving.

2.1.2. A Reflexive Account of Research Motivation: Sociological Imagination Thanks to Alienation

Actually, my interest in the research topic did not arise suddenly; rather, it was a thought that slowly matured, driven primarily by a personal concern and a unique life experience. In 2013, after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the ensuing war had not yet reached my hometown, Aleppo, and I had moved to Turkey to start a family in Istanbul. I was newly married and my husband, like millions of Syrian males, had to flee from military service and search for better life opportunities. At that time, I believed that I could visit my family whenever I wanted, and that they could visit me too. As years went by, the lives of Syrians became more and more complicated, and I was only able to visit my city thrice. The last two were illegal and risky journeys, where I had to spend two days in harsh circumstances in border villages. When I arrived on the first of these memorable journeys in 2018, it was almost midnight, I was emotionally overwhelmed and thrilled that I totally forgot my exhaustion. My phone had died for the last 12 hours, electricity was out, and I saw my parent's faces illuminated only by the dim glow of handheld devices. My mom was crying of fear and joy intertwined, and my dad was trying to calm her down. Time had aged them, and I could not help but think how deceptive mobile photos are, and how do our gadgets betray time! The second of which was in the summer of 2024, and this time it was buildings, streets, walls and doors that were aged and worn out, that I spanned several times around the location trying to figure out where the door is?! And, when I came in it was only my father awaiting; my mother was not there!!!

During my years away, my parents' hair turned completely white, and their strength faded with war and its aftermath accelerating the passage of time. The moment I left

home to Turkey, their parental role towards me diminished, as they could no longer be able to support me at any stage of my marital life. Their role as grandparents was also limited to brief moments on a phone screen, dependent entirely on the availability of electricity and internet connection. This split—between two family ties, two histories, and many identities—has left a profound impact on me, one that I am still trying to piece together and come to terms with. Whenever I spoke to my family members in Aleppo, hardly any conversation would pass without the familiar remark: *'You are lucky, and God loves you! You escaped all of that! You are in Istanbul living comfortably.'* No one knew how much those words deepened my sense of estrangement and fragmentation!

Year after year, the borders between Turkey and Syria were more and more hardened, and they no longer separated two countries or two geographies; it came to separate a person from themselves. The multilayers of estrangement began to govern all of my life aspects, influencing my decision-making and reactions. The most important and life-changing of these decisions was to study. Though it was an accidental choice, sociology was my means to develop what C.Wright Mills calls the "sociological imagination."[3] It was this deep sense of wanting to relate to something bigger, to make sense of this state of "anomie"[4], to connect my personal life to the historical era I was living in—an era I was involuntarily part of shaping. It was the unintentional inclination to "grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world"[5], to liberate myself from the guilt of failing to alter the course of events and the burden of trying to bring happiness and reunion to familial relations severed by war. Through it, I have come to understand my position in this world more clearly, and without a doubt, this understanding will profoundly shape all aspects of this research design—my methodology, writing style, selection of interviewees, and the process of analysis.

[3] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Grove Press Inc, New York, 1961), http://archive.org/details/sociologicalimag0000cwri_i5t4.
[4] Durkheim Emile, 'The Division Of Labor In Society', *New York: Free Press*, 1933, http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/Class%20Readings/Durkheim/Division%20Of%20Labor%20Final%20Version.pdf.
[5] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 4.

2.1.3. Resilience Reimagined: An Inward Outward Reflexive Turn

I believe that, as agential beings, humans are born to resist[6]. Just as I found my own way to resist in my life, my aged parents, too, had found their own resilience tools , shaped by their own reality and whatever available tools to them. My brother got married and he gave them a granddaughter, who became the center of their world. The photos I received—from their celebrations with neighbors, holiday gatherings, my mother's handmade crafts and knitted clothes for her granddaughter, the garden blooming with fruit trees and colorful flowers, and their navigated family dramas with all its ups and downs—filled me with joy and hope. These constantly reminded me that life did not stop after my departure and that the void I left was beautifully filled by other meaningful experiences, although I was not part of any. However, I still couldn't understand my mother's insistent need to stay on the phone as long as possible, even when I was crossing the street, entering a shop, or boarding a bus in Istanbul. I didn't understand her need for this massive collection of photos of my children and all the family moments I experienced, or her sadness when she found out that I hadn't shared a certain family event with her. I also failed to recognise the role of technology in the fulfilment of her grandparental role because I simply didn't realize how much this role meant to her, giving her a sense of continuity, hope, and optimism as she aged, without me even noticing. Deeply internalized, these insights shifted my focus away from the traumatic dimensions of this fragmented reality toward hope, resilience, and the pursuit of meaning. My research, therefore, is dedicated to the brighter side of our enduring human effort to relocate ourselves, to belong, and to sustain a sense of continuity through intimate interactions and family life.

2.1.4. Between Familiarity and Suspicion: Negotiating Access in a Fragmented Field

I began this study with a personal concern to better understand the dynamics of family relationships under the changing conditions my community is experiencing during and after the war. But I am fully aware, at the same time, of how my personal experiences, cultural and intellectual background have shaped the form and content of this research

[6] Kay Aranda et al., 'The Resilient Subject: Exploring Subjectivity, Identity and the Body in Narratives of Resilience', *Health* 16, no. 5 (2012): 548–63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26650201.

and influenced the way I interpret and draw conclusions. In addition, I had chosen to undertake this journey despite the complexities I faced as I was negotiating my insider/outsider duality. This ambivalence and fluctuating position required a delicate balance of empathy, trust building, a critical perspective on my subjectivity or what Suzanne Day describes as a constant "Reflexive problematization of identity, which involves thinking about how identity is an ongoing process, co-constructed in the research experience."[7]

Undoubtedly, the shared cultural background and my familiarity with the social fabric and stratifications in Aleppo community and the subtle nuances of family dynamics—details that an outsider's eye might easily overlook—played a crucial role in building a sense of trust and comfort between my participants and me. Firstly, my personal experience of the same fragmentation and separation faced by most families due to Syria's political and historical turmoil has furthered a relation of 'responsiveness' and empathy[8]. This connection was vital, especially when discussing sensitive topics like feelings of separation, abandonment, and describing life circumstances of their children in Turkey, or culturally specific coping strategies like religious practices.

In reality, my shared personal experience was the key to gaining not only the participants' acceptance and trust, but also to further a sense of equality, which are essential components when conducting a qualitative research[9], especially within a politically troubled community. As the entire Syrian society obviously lives under a constant state of fear and suspicion due to the sensitive political climate, many parents are extremely cautious about sharing information regarding their children or personal lives, fearing the reach of security forces in Syria or the risk of deportation policies in Turkey.

[7] Day, Suzanne. 2012. "A Reflexive Lens: Exploring Dilemmas of Qualitative Methodology Through the Concept of Reflexivity." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 8(1):6. https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.8.1.04.
[8] Ziyanda Mwanda, 'Text, Voice-Notes, and Emojis: Exploring the Use of WhatsApp as a Responsive Research Method for Qualitative Studies', *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* 10, no. 1 (2022), doi:10.14426/cristal.v10i1.423.
[9] Henk Driessen and Willy Jansen, 'The Hard Work of Small Talk in Ethnographic Fieldwork', *Journal of Anthropological Research*69, no.2 (June 2013): 249–63, doi:10.3998/jar.0521004.0069.205.

As a result, I had to maximise the use of my personal network to secure participants. Fear as a main component in Syrian social psychology did not only impact the ease of recruiting participants but also influenced the type of information shared, the nature of our conversations, and the cautious selection of words[10]. This challenge was further amplified by the technological mediation of interviews, considering the often-questionable reputation of digital communication platforms regarding privacy and data security.

Honestly, I initially thought my interviews about coping mechanisms would go so smoothly, as my questions do not tackle any politically sensitive issues. However, once I initiated my fieldwork, I quickly realized that to study any aspect of life, no matter how seemingly simple it is, and how avoidant of political discussions a researcher tries to be, the political context will continue to pop up and complicate the scene. This realization struck me early on when I interviewed the first elderly man in Aleppo via WhatsApp. Although I knew from his daughter in Qatar that his sons were in the liberated area of Idlib, he insisted on telling me that they were in Gaziantep, Turkey. After all, being in Turkey was less incriminating than being in the liberated areas in Syria.

Actually, the situation was so sensitive that, at times, no amount of "insiderness", shared experiences, familiarity, or even personal connections was enough to build trust. For example, my mother's elderly friend in Aleppo, who worked for a regime-affiliated charity, insisted on treating me as an outsider and a threat to her social status and network in Aleppo. Another Aleppian female senior of similar social standing cut the interview short, giving only brief, superficial answers that painted a sanitized version of reality, devoid of any personal emotions or subjective impressions. This suspicion required me to respond with patience, respect, and empathy, maintaining the highest ethical standards of academic research. It also demanded a sensitive and reflexive approach, navigating the dynamics of my positionality throughout research steps.

[10] Wendy Pearlman, 'Narratives of Fear in Syria', *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (March 2016): 21–37, doi:10.1017/S1537592715003205.

My position as an outsider was furthered by the fact that I, unlike many of my Aleppian participants, live in Istanbul, hold Turkish citizenship, enjoy freedom of movement and most importantly enjoy the identity of an academic researcher. These factors created a distance between me and the participants, placing me in a perceived privilege and authority position, while making them, in many cases, feel inferior and vulnerable, no matter how hard I tried to bridge this gap by intimate personal self-introductory stories. For this, some participants, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds in the eastern regions, mistakenly perceived me as an authoritative philanthropist who could bring positive change or improve their living and psychological conditions, which definitely had impacted the kind of data they shared[11].

Moreover, my innate sense of outsiderness stems from the fact that I do not belong to the same generational cohort I was studying, nor did I experience the war intricacies as the elder parents who remained or were forced to leave due to losing their homes or loved ones. Therefore, as an outsider, I had to be cautious not to impose or introduce unfamiliar narratives, or exaggeratedly romanticize their coping mechanisms. However, these challenging instances should not overshadow the many other cases of trust, openness, and comfort shown by several participants, of which I made sure to maximize the outcome. Honestly, these positive interactions were predominantly with female seniors, and were exclusively with those residing in Aleppo, not in Istanbul. I observed that, in these cases, senior women perceived the interview itself as a means of emotional relief and an opportunity to vent out[12]. They expressed joy, comfort, and even exhilaration in knowing that their stories mattered and that their feelings were valued. Some continued to stay in touch, asking about the progress of my research. One of them once messaged me, saying, *'Please write about us in a way that moves people. Let the world know what we went through.'*[13]

Ultimately, my negotiated positionality depended primarily on the participants themselves. They were the agents who had determined how they perceived and shaped

[11] I was also surprised to receive messages from strange contacts asking for financial aid or psychological consultation.
[12] Roni Berger and Ruth Malkinson, '"Therapeutizing" Research: The Positive Impact of Family-focused Research on Participants', *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 70, no. 2 (1 March 2000): 307–14, doi:10.1080/00377310009517594.
[13] "Najwa," interview by author, Aleppo, November 15, 2024.

this relationship. A perception influenced by their life experiences, economic conditions, and social roles. For that, it was not surprising that an elderly woman, driven by maternal emotions, grappling with the separation from her children, and feeling powerless in the face of overwhelming circumstances, would eagerly seize the opportunity to reclaim agency by narrating her story. In these cases, the temptation of storytelling as means of life construction[14] will outweigh any concern about the technological medium or an interviewer whose identity is largely obscure.

2.2. Methodological Synthesis

2.2.1. Practicing Ethnography with Phenomenological Sensitivity

The results of this study rely on hybrid research methodologies, which is a common feature of qualitative studies. Firstly, I chose the ethnographic approach due to its variety of methods and inherent flexibility, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon. Ethnography primarily depends on the researcher's output and his/her effort in utilizing all available research tools to extract as much descriptive data as possible about the studied cultural group, including their behaviors, values, and all aspects of their life[15]. Therefore, immersion in the fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth interviews as ethnographic methods all fundamentally rely on the researcher's ability to craft and interpret the findings. The most distinctive feature of this approach is its focus on contextualising life events and situating individual life trajectories within broader historical and cultural specificities[16]. This is particularly relevant to this study, as the Aleppian cultural and economic background, as well as their family situation significantly influence the coping strategies adopted by elders—all of which are shaped by the realities of war, crisis, and the rapidly changing historical circumstances in Aleppo.

[14] Kirti K. Kalinga and Renuka Kumar, *Sociology of Ageing (MA Sociology Paper-18)* (Utkal University), accessed February 19, 2025, https://ddceutkal.ac.in/Syllabus/MA_SOCIOLOGY/Paper_18.pdf.
[15] John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed., vol. 16 (Sage Publications, 2007), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1524839915580941.
[16] Ibid., 16:76.

However, ethnography, with its roots in anthropology, is traditionally built on the notion of a strict separation between the subject and object, which depends heavily on the researcher's ability to maintain a clear boundary between subjectivities. Consequently, concerns have arisen regarding the agency of the research subjects and to what extent the researcher can detach from their own personal experiences and ideological biases when analyzing the social structure under study.

This is where phenomenology becomes crucial in modifying the ethnographic approach, as it brings the focus closer to the subjectivity of the target group—those who possess the authority of lived emotional experience—rather than relying on the fragmented intersubjectivity of the researcher attempting only a temporal simulation of that experience. In this way, those experiencing the studied social phenomenon become co-creators of research outcomes through their narrative power and the depth of their genuine experiences[17]. While ethnography focuses on the description of shared cultural structures, phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of the studied phenomenon[18]. Thus, combining the two approaches provides the researcher with greater flexibility to zoom in and out when examining sensitive social phenomena such as migration, being left- behind, and the meanings generated from these experiences.

The ontological logic of a qualitative researcher necessitates viewing reality in its multiple dimensions, while epistemological logic dictates the degree of closeness a qualitative researcher maintains with the studied participants[19]. To this end, this study draws from phenomenology some of its epistemological sensitivity to grasp the multifaceted reality of what it means to be an elderly in the context of socio-familial fragmentation and economic exhaustion caused by war.

2.2.2. Locating Phenomenological Effort in the Ethnographic Field

In my research, I employed ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, field notes, and in-depth interviews conducted via WhatsApp, to flexibly contextualize

[17] Elizabeth Pope, 'From Participants to Co-Researchers: Methodological Alterations to a Qualitative Case Study', *The Qualitative Report* 25, no. 10 (24 October 2020): 3749–61, doi:10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4394.
[18] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 16:58.
[19] Ibid., 16:16–18.

the everyday lives of Aleppian elders within their broader cultural, economic, and familial environments. At the same time, my phenomenological orientation influenced the design and tone of these interviews. İt becomes evident in adopting a semi-structured, and in some cases unstructured, format that relies heavily on open-ended questions based on the imaginative variation of given answers, which revolves around meaning making and reminiscences to elicit rich descriptive narratives. I also conducted the interviews in an empathetic, non-judgmental, and slow-paced manner to create space for emotional reflection and deeper self-expression.[20] On the analytical level, the process required three basic steps in accordance with Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological research methods. The first step is the first naive encounter with the transcripted material of interviews where the first intuitive grasp, and a holistic and empathetic sense of the lived phenomenon understudy happens. The second is a structural analysis where the researcher systematically breaks down texts into units of meaning, to be later categorized and distilled into larger themes. The last third step is the comprehensive understanding of the material, where a researcher revisits their naive understanding and structural analysis to weave them into existing literature and theory[21]. Ricoeur referred to this overall analytical process as the '*hermeneutic arc'* which involves a back-and-forth movement between understanding and explanation[22].

On the theoretical level, I was inspired by Hanna Arensdt's critical phenomenological interpretation of the embodied and relational human existence and activity adopted in her book the Human Condition[23]. Thus, my work can be viewed in parallel with Arendt's investigation into human existence in the modern world, though it is specifically tailored to the elder parents population. At its core, it revolves around the question: What does it mean to be an elder parent in a modern world plagued by war, social inequality, rapid change, and socio-familial rupture? This orientation becomes evident in my selection of relational framework through the focus on both *solidarity*

[20] Mark T. Bevan, 'A Method of Phenomenological Interviewing', *Qualitative Health Research* 24, no. 1 (January 2014): 136–44, doi:10.1177/1049732313519710.
[21] Ma. Ángeles De Juan Pardo, María Teresa Russo, and María Victoria Roqué Sánchez, 'A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Explorations of Living in Old Age', *Geriatric Nursing* 39, no. 1 (January 2018): 9–17, doi:10.1016/j.gerinurse.2017.04.010.
[22] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (TCU Press, 1976), 87.
[23] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), https://research-ebsco-com.offcampus.ihu.edu.tr/linkprocessor/plink?id=f73e0a1c-856e-3ed9-a0b4-39606f931c7c.

and *ambivalence* models of intergenerational (IG)[24] relations to frame the entire process of analysing and discussing themes from collected data. From this perspective, insights like the embodiment of coping mechanisms and investigating presence versus absence in the originality of human communication within transnational IG contexts become a major interest in my theoretical discussion. Furthermore, my phenomenologically driven framework, had allowed me to observe human elders' existential effort to transcend the ephemerality and fragility of their existence, where socio-economic crises cruelly unmasks these harsh realities for them. This dual ethno-phenomenological approach becomes a necessary tool to capture both the collective conditions and the individual meaning-making processes that inform how coping is enacted and narrated.

Above all, studying elders' relational dynamics and reciprocal interactions that play a fundamental role in creating meaning and shaping human identity, alongside understanding their coping strategies in their reflexive state, is undeniably a phenomenological endeavor[25]. While coping strategies are dynamically shaped by and actively shape the social and familial conditions of the elders in their environments, the role of the researcher, as a social constructivist grounded in phenomenology, is to accumulate and interpret the meanings that people create around their lived coping experiences[26].

2.3. In the Heart of Aleppo: Field Engagement for Contextual Depth

To bridge the macro-micro interrelation in fieldwork I had to undertake a trip to Syria in the summer of 2024, lasting approximately 40 days. During this time, I visited relatives and family friends on both my father's and mother's sides who were mainly elderly parents, having some or all of their children abroad. This immersive experience has allowed me to engage in participant observation, closely examining social

[24] The Acronym *IG* is frequently used throughout this thesis as an abbreviation for *intergeneratios or intergenerational* relations to avoid repetition in some places.
[25] Jason L. Powell, '"You'll Never Walk Alone": Phenomenology and Ageing in Contemporary Culture', *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 27 (May 2014): 19–30, doi:10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.27.19.
[26] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 16:22.

interactions, coping mechanisms, and daily struggles, especially among those left behind.

Furthermore, physical co-existence provided me with a deeper and more coherent understanding of the reality of Aleppian seniors. It gave me insights far clearer than the fragmented information I had previously received through social media—whether from my relatives' comments about life in Syria or from widely circulated news and social media posts. Especially that the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and tight security surveillance restricted the sharing of information, both at the individual level and through public media channels.

During this trip, I gathered detailed observations and field notes about the living and social conditions of a large group of Aleppian elder individuals. My initial plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews, but I found myself struggling with the contradictions and ambivalences I carried with me on this journey as both a family member, reuniting after considerable years of absence facing defined social and familial expectations, and as an academic researcher attempting to maintain an intellectual objective stance. The emotional and positional tension of navigating my insider-outsider status ultimately created a psychological barrier, preventing me from fully carrying out this task.

2.3.1. Reflection and Fieldnotes: Observing Daily Realities of Aleppian Seniors in Crisis[27]

This visit provided me with a significant chance to intimately witness first hand and observe the lived experience of Syrians from Aleppo, specifically in terms of familial disintegration, economic crisis, and social changes that result from those conditions. I directly observed the heavy burden of socio-economic hardship and its real effect on the health, both physical and psychological, of numerous elderly individuals, whose health was declining with alarming urgency.

On my visits to many of the elderly parents left behind—mostly living alone or with limited support—I was closely observing their behaviors and emotional states,

[27] Author's fieldnotes, Aleppo, August–September 2024.

specifically in terms of their use of technological communication tools. I observed the centrality of said tools (e.g., WhatsApp) in their daily reality, but this was not as luxuries but as emotional lifelines in the context of their children's absence. This was in stark contrast, however, with their limited access to basic services like electricity and water, which are still sporadic and unpredictable.

Under conditions of such instability, I noticed an adaptive tendency on the part of many elderly individuals to recycle and reuse their belongings, both out of material need and emotional need. This was quietly resistant to consumer culture increasingly embraced by successive generations—even during crises—pointing out an intergenerational tension of lifestyle and values.

One of the most poignant trends was the formation of compensatory relational forms in the absence of children, in large part through enriched neighbor relationships. In one of the neighborhoods, several elderly residents—many of whom had lost their partners and whose children had emigrated—had created a tight, familial mini-community. This was evidenced by the common visits, exchange of meals, and loaning of household items in order to reduce economic hardships. All of this kind of solidarity went beyond material reciprocity and included deeply symbolic expressions.

A poignant illustration of this was Umm Qadri, a woman in her sixties, knitting a wool sweater for her aging neighbor Abu Bilal, also in his sixties and living alone. What was significant about the act was the fact that the sweater was originally begun by Abu Bilal's recently deceased wife, and Umm Qadri was going to finish it not for its functional value but for Abu Bilal to have as a keepsake—a sentimental token of his lost marriage.

Through those experiences, I began to notice repeated symbolic exchanges that became emotionally resonant: the act of retaining objects for memory, imbuing them with meaning, and creating a sense of spiritual affiliation that rested upon memories of intergenerational relationships and a shared past in a place—even as material and functional connections with a family had weakened.

One of the most poignant observations I made during fieldwork was the cumulative immobility of Aleppian elders. Already constrained by age-related limitations and illness, their immobility was further compounded by structural and political obstacles. At the softer end, it was the prohibitive cost of transportation; at the harsher end, it was the fragmentation of internal geographies and militarized governance that rendered even the simplest forms of social interaction an exhausting ordeal. As Sheller and Urry have argued, mobility is never merely about movement, it is entangled with power, inequality, and access to rights[28]. In the case of Aleppo, mobility becomes not just restricted but securitized, moralized, and often criminalized.

This immobilization is starkly embodied in the proliferation of checkpoints and crossings around the city, spaces where what Giorgio Agamben has termed the *state of exception* becomes the norm[29]. In these spaces, individuals are compelled to barter their identity for movement, navigating a bureaucratic and militarized terrain where legal protection collapses. Names dissolve, time slows, and waiting becomes a daily sustenance, lasting for days and nights, while familial life and social existence are suspended, deferred possibilities lying just beyond the next barrier.

At these crossings, what remains of family life is pieced together. The sweetness of reunion is inevitably laced with the bitterness of hardship. The waiting areas overflow with children, women, and elderly people who endure sleeping outdoors, exposed to fear, darkness, and financial extortion. And lastly, they embark on smuggling journeys through shadow economies controlled by armed groups that operate on the basis of violence, coercion, and theft. And all of this is but for the simple human longing of an aging parent to hold their children who fled regime persecution and forced military conscription, or to revisit a house and land property that now lies at the edges of contested terrain, under the control of rival factions.

Briefly, this fieldwork provided the empirical basis on which most of my research was constructed. It explained the centrality of family life in the psychological adjustment

[28] Mimi Sheller and John Urry, 'The New Mobilities Paradigm', *Environment and Planning A* 38 (1 February 2006): 207–26, doi:10.1068/a37268.
[29] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Available at: https://www.thing.net/~rdom/ucsd/biopolitics/HomoSacer.pdf

of older Aleppians, and gave me preliminary insight into the adaptive and coping strategies upon which they rely in managing their fragmented social realities.

2.4. Digital Ethnography and the Use of Social Media: A Multi-Sited Approach

After my return to Istanbul, I continued data collection through WhatsApp interviews, a method falls under digital ethnography, recently developed to extend traditional ethnography to accommodate the realities of globalization and technological advancement besides the decolonization tendency towards erasing the hierarchical relation between the researcher and the studied cultural groups[30].

In utilizing digital communication tools and conducting remote interviews, I was fully aware of both the advantages and limitations of this method. One critical challenge is the risk of studying a community detached from its context[31]. However, my fieldnotes, including participant observations, helped bridge this gap, providing a comprehensive understanding of the social and conditions.

My personal transnational reality, combined with the study's focus on comparing this phenomenon between two environments—Aleppo and Istanbul, and the fact that digital communication tools are now an integral part of the elderly's coping mechanisms, have all contributed to shaping the research design as a dynamic 'multi-sited'[32] ethnography of flexible fieldwork. For me, fieldwork is not limited to my observations and visits on the ground but also extends to the social media space as a form of virtual fieldwork, where 'co-presence' becomes an 'epistemological strategy' comparable to 'co-location' in the research process and the utilization of research methods for knowledge production[33].

I was also acutely aware of the ethical challenges posed by this method, particularly regarding participant privacy and safety besides any stimulated doubts about my

[30] Angela Delli Paoli and Valentina D'Auria, 'Digital Ethnography: A Systematic Literature Review' 11 (1 January 2021): 243–67, doi:10.13136/isr.v11i4S.434.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Anne Beaulieu, 'From Co-Location to Co-Presence: Shifts in the Use of Ethnography for the Study of Knowledge', *Social Studies of Science* 40, no. 3 (2010): 453–70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25677416.
[33] Ibid.

positionality and intentionality. Therefore, I made it a priority to introduce myself clearly, explain the purpose of my research, and eliminate any ambiguity about the overall destination of data they provide. I also ensured informed consent by asking for permission to record the interviews and emphasized their anonymity in the research I intend to present.

Leveraging digital communication as a research method enabled me to study the behavior of the elderly in the context of transnationalism. This approach provided a deeper understanding of the role of digital tools as a coping mechanism for them. Therefore, my interaction with social media as a researcher is twofold:

a) Technological Mediation, mainly WhatsApp, in conducting interviews[34].
b) Discourse Analysis and behavioral observations in how the elders utilise technology as a coping mechanism to foster intergenerational relations[35].

2.4.1. Rationale for Methodological Hybridity and Multisited Fieldwork

Given the varying social, cultural, and psychological backgrounds of the participants, as well as the differences in technological accessibility and comfort, the interview style was marked by flexibility, as explained below:

i. Semi-Structured short Interviews: Some participants did not feel comfortable with open-ended conversations and preferred to answer specific questions at set times. Therefore, these interviews adopted a semi-structured approach, with open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate if they wished, while ensuring key points related to coping strategies, lifestyles, and challenges were covered.
ii. Narrative Interviews: Other participants were more open to extended conversations, and the act of talking itself became a form of emotional release, particularly when discussing sensitive experiences such as losing a child to the war, displacement, children fleeing compulsory military service, and their family relationships before and after the crisis. Consequently, these interviews took the

[34] Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al., 'WhatsApp as a Qualitative Data Collection Method in Descriptive Phenomenological Studies', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (1 April 2022): 16094069221111124, doi:10.1177/16094069221111124.
[35] Celiana Azevedo and Cristina Ponte, 'Intergenerational Solidarity or Intergenerational Gap? How Elderly People Experience ICT within Their Family Context', *Observatorio (OBS*)* 14, no. 3 (27 August 2020), doi:10.15847/obsOBS14320201587.

form of oral history, where the questions focused on the impact of major events like war and migration on the family lives of the elderly, in which participants had the narrative agency to express their perspectives on these events. This approach was naturally suited to the Aleppian elder demographic, who often have rich memories to share[36], particularly in exceptional historical circumstances. These individuals represent a mobile memory, and a walking history, therefore, oral history with its inherent advantages is an integral method in studying the coping mechanisms of Aleppian elders.

The overall aim of interviews was to locate and examine the relationship between the strength of family ties and their disintegration or cohesion with the psychosocial well-being of the elderly. It also seeks to extract patterns of adaptation followed by the elderly in coping with their changing reality.

2.5. WH-Questions on Participants' Selection

Since the classification of old age is largely a social construct shaped by cultural, economic, and institutional factors[37], and in line with my IG theoretical framework, the group of elders I am specifying in my research is strictly defined by their position in their familial hierarchy. So, in accordance with Chris Philipson's terminology, participants are not restricted to *age group* or a specific *historical generation* but rather are classified as a *family generation* located "in a system of ranked descent."[38] Thus, one of my criteria to select participants is the existence of a third generation in their families. The second criterion for those who are in Aleppo and who compose the majority of participants was the migration of some or all of their children. Data was collected from 20 interviews, of overall 22 participants distributed between Aleppo and Istanbul. My first set of questions targeted their familial situation in general: their place of residency, number of children, and family members around, with whom they

[36] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader.* London and New York: Routledge, 1998. Reprinted in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003

[37] Chris Gilleard, 'Revisiting the Social Construction of Old Age', *Ageing & Society* 45, no. 3 (March 2025): 500–513, doi:10.1017/S0144686X23000570.

[38] Chris Phillipson, "Globalization, Global Ageing and Intergenerational Change, " in *Ageing and Intergenerational Relations: Family Reciprocity from a Global Perspective*, ed. Misa Izuhara (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010), 14. https://research-ebsco-com.offcampus.ihu.edu.tr/linkprocessor/plink?id=f4adbb7d-08fa-31ef-95d2-d0ece0a983fb.

are living, and whether they are working or retired. The second set was targeting their memories about their children's migration and their own displacement, and the following changes in their life rhythm, which allowed me to identify a variety of their coping mechanisms. he table below outlines participants' demographic characteristics and the respective methods used for data collection.

Table 2.1. Demographic and Background Information of Participants

Name[39]	**Gender and Age**	**Living Situation**	**Original Residence in Aleppo (pre-war)**	**Current Residence Place**	**Data Collection Method**
Radwan	M, 68	Married, 4 children, 2 abroad	Eastern	Eastern	Semi-structured voice notes interview
Abdurrahman	M, 65	Widowed \ living alone \3 chil \ 2 abroad, one around.	Western	Western Aleppo	Participant observation / Semi-structured voice call interview
Maher	M, 72	Married, 3 children abroad one remained	Western	Eastern	Semi-structured voice call interview
Zukaa	F, 61	Married, 4 children all abroad	Western	Western	Semi-structured voice call interview
Raifa	F, 83	Widowed with 4 children, 2 abroad	Eastern	Manbij (Northeastern)	Semi-structured voice note interviews
Lam'a	F, 60	Widowed with 33 children all abroad	Western	Western	Semi-structured voice notes, Face-to-face unstructured interviews
Luna	F, 58	Married, 5 children, 3 boys only abroad	Western	Western	Semi-structured voice call interview
Zakaria	M, 66	Married, 3 children, only son abroad	Eastern	Eastern	Semi-structured voice note interviews
Samir	M, 70	No children (Monitoring participant)	Western	Western	Semi-structured voice note interviews
Asiya	F, 59	Divorced\only son abroad	Western	Western	Semi-structured voice note interviews

[39] The names in this list are pseudonyms used to protect participants' confidentiality.

Table 2.1. (cont.)

Abdul-Salam	M, 60	Married, 4 children around (monitoring participant)	Western	Western	Semi-structured voice notes interview
Adnan	M, 69	Married 4 chil\ wife and 3 chil abroad, one son around	North western Aleppo	Northwestern Aleppo	Semi-structured voice call interviews
Najwa	F, 54	Married 5 children 2 (sons only) abroad	Eastern	Western Aleppo	Semi-structured voice note interviews
Suaad	F, 62	Married, 4 sons, 3 abroad, one is illegally staying	Western	Western Aleppo	Semi-structured voice call interviews
Umm al-'Ashara	F, 73	Widowed, 10 children, no home \ living with a daughter \ The rest are either in Idlib or in Turkey	Eastern	Eastern Aleppo	Semi-structured voice call interview
Diya Abdu	F, 53 M, 63	Married Couple \ 5 chil co-residing with her daughter in Sultanbeyli \1 lost son and 2 other migrants.	Eastern	Istanbul	Participant observation, semi-structured voice call interviews
Hassan Malak	F, 71 M, 73	Married Couple\ wheel-chaired man\ living in Esenyurt \3 chil \ a son near them in Istanbul, the other 2 daughters are migrants abroad.	Western	Istanbul	Participant observation / Face-to-face unstructured interview
Aliyaa	F, 59	Divorced 7 chil \ co-residing with 2 \ 2 around \ the rest abroad	Eastern	Istanbul	Participant observation
Fatima Ahmad	F, 69 M, 71	Married Couple\ 5 chil co-residing with son and daughters in Dudullu \1 lost a son and one abroad.	Eastern	Istanbul	Participant observation

2.5.1. Justifying the Focus: Why This Group Matters

There is no doubt that my belonging to the city of Aleppo was a driving force behind my decision to write about issues that concern Aleppian society and to shed light on the dynamics of family relationships within it. On a personal level, growing up in the heart of the city, between two markedly contrasting environments, had greatly enabled me to observe subtle details in the psychology of my community, its cultural nuances, and the transformations affecting familial and personal relationships over time.

Then came my eventual formative separation experience from Aleppo, which mirrored the broader displacement and estrangement experienced by Syrians on a larger scale, though the consequences on a personal level were not uniformly shared. My long-lived process of seeking healing led me to question how Syrian families, fragmented by migration and crisis, navigate their current realities. I gradually came to realize that as long as I centered my own perspective, my understanding would remain partial. This realization prompted a methodological shift: to examine the experience of estrangement from the left behind, who are mainly elderly parents. Initially, my attention was directed primarily toward those who remained in Aleppo. However, I found a rich parallel field of inquiry around me in Istanbul, among elderly parents who share their young children a different life trajectory. Apparently, these families showed greater signs of adaptation and resilience in facing displacement. This elementary observation, in turn, encouraged me to continually draw mental comparisons, through which I came to recognize the centrality of family relations in shaping how individuals experience spatial and geographical environments, and their entire physical world with all its constraints.

Sociologically speaking, I choose to focus on Aleppian elder parents because they represent a highly relevant yet understudied group within the nexus of forced displacement and familial fragmentation. This community occupies a unique generational position in the context of the Syrian crisis, as they have been among the most vulnerable groups affected by the rupture of traditional family structures due to war and migration. At the same time, they continue to serve as emotional anchors and moral authorities within their families, which makes them a rich site for exploring intergenerational dynamics, coping mechanisms, and the symbolic meanings of family

and belonging. It becomes clear, though, that shedding light on this group and restoring their centrality within extended familial and intergenerational relations enables researchers to gain a broader and more holistic understanding of the psychosocial forces and sub-dynamics that shape much of migrants' lived realities and decision-making processes. Aleppian elders actively draw on culturally embedded practices, such as religious beliefs and kin-based social networks, to reconstruct a sense of meaning and continuity amid displacement, loneliness, and economic hardship. To investigate these dynamics more deeply, I begin with an overview of the traditional family structure and cultural repertoire that historically served as the foundation for elder care and support among Aleppians. By tracing the transformations that have impacted this historically multigenerational model of co-existence, I argue that the Syrian crisis marks the culmination of a long-term erosion of elder parents' agency and familial caregiving systems. Understanding this erosion is crucial to grasping the broader consequences of displacement on family life, generational roles, and the evolving landscape of care in times of crisis.

2.5.2. A Cultural Overview on the Status of Aleppian Elder Parents and the Transformation of Multigenerational Spaces

Studying coping strategies in old age through the lens of intergenerational relationships in a rapidly evolving society like Aleppo prompts us to take a look at the cultural transformations in these IG relations shaped by various structural shifts. By shedding light on these cultural insights, I am trying to support the view that, in traditional care systems like that in Eastern cultures, only through fully saturated intergenerational familial solidarity grounded on shared geographies can an elder parent preserve a sense of meaningful life and well-beig at old age.

From a cultural perspective, religion represented in Islamic heritage , has long shaped the city's identity despite cultural diversity and, thus, played a crucial role in preserving intergenerational cohesion and extended family structure. Rooted in the principles of Islamic law, it has upheld the status of the elder parents, honouring them in many of

religious texts and securing their central role in healthy reciprocal familial relations[40]. For example, the concept of co-existence and direct instrumental physical care are encouraged in Surat Al Israa in the word (*Indaka*عندك : with you).

"إِمَّا يَبْلُغَنَّ عِندَكَ ٱلْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَآ أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُل لَّهُمَآ أُفٍّ وَلَا تَنْهَرْهُمَا وَقُل لَّهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا ٢٣ .....۞ "

And honour your parents. If one or both of them reach old age in your care, never say to them 'even' 'ugh,' nor yell at them. Rather, address them respectfully.[41]

This model of traditional care system based on family embeddedness had been further stressed out through co-residency and multigenerational households. The concern for preserving extended familial and kin relations as basic source of care and support at old age was reflected in the distinctive architecture of Old Aleppo[42]. Multi-generational families commonly shared spacious homes centered around an inner courtyard, known as the *'ḥawsh'*, which had flourished in the Mamluki and early Ottoman era, thereby preserving the centrality and social status of the elders within their familial supportive relations over history.

Within this communal living space, authority and responsibilities were distributed hierarchically: the male head of the family, as the primary financial provider and maintainer of the family's traditional profession, held the highest authority, followed by the mother, who managed household affairs, assigned roles, and oversaw domestic order. The eldest son held a position of secondary authority after his father, acting as a second patriarch within the family and enjoying a privileged status. Traditionally, Traditional Aleppian society placed a great value on male children, viewing them as primary breadwinners and a financial safeguard in old age. This is important to know for an accurate assessment of the way theAleppian elders were affected by the consequences of the crisis which had forced male children specifically to leave the country.

[40] Amran Abdul Halim et al., 'Islamic Traditions on Elderly Care', *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 14, no. 5 (12 May 2024): Pages 758-766, doi:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i5/21150.
[41] 'Surah Al-Isra - 1-111', *Quran.Com*, v. 23, accessed 24 February 2025, https://quran.com/al-isra.
[42] Rami Alafandi and Asiah abdul rahim, 'THE LEGACY OF ALEPPINE OTTOMAN HOUSES', 2016, 110–22, doi:10.2495/HA-V1-N3-388-400/012.

Within the traditional cultural context of Syria, growing old did not, habitually, necessitate the diminishing of the moral and economic authority of parents in later life. Family cohesion was not solely maintained for religious concerns but was greatly driven by economic interests and intergenerational reciprocity, which remained essential well into old age. Given Aleppo's long-standing commercial and industrial character—marked by market competition and economic rivalries—family ties played a vital role in securing financial stability, serving as a protective network against external 'market forces'[43]. Moreover, many Aleppian families maintained tight kin relations because of the hereditary system and private property ownership preserved well in the Islamic Sharia Law. Therefore, it becomes evident how the emergence of the modern state, accompanied by war, social fragmentation, and the decline of the Sharia-based legal system, has significantly impacted overall social cohesion [44], and consequently impacted an individual's protective relations and well-being in late life.

Historically speaking, external cultural colonization had also played a role in reshaping the traditional familial support system by material targeting of extended family cultural geographies. With the onset of the French Mandate, Aleppo's was exposed to a rapid shift in demographic and social structures along its architectural features[45], which had deepened features of social inequality and created the seeds for the historically well-preserved *east-west paradox* in the city . The rise of nuclear family households was encouraged by European-style urban expansion, particularly in the western part of the old city, which grew rapidly during this period. Many of Aleppo's most prominent families relocated to these modern residential areas, while traditional Ottoman-style homes were gradually transformed into heritage and tourism sites[46].

The eastern part of Aleppo, primarily expanded by urban migration, was characterized by poverty, neglect, and informal construction, contributing to a stark class divide in the city that dates back to the French mandate era and its exploitative vision that

[43] Erik Ringmar, *Surviving Capitalism: How We Learned to Live with the Market and Remained Almost Human* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Anthem Press, 2005), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ihu/detail.action?docID=840505.
[44] Hallaq, Wael B. *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament.* Translated into Arabic as الدولة المستحيلة: الإسلام، السياسة، ومأزق الحداثة الأخلاقي. Accessed February 25, 2025. https://archive.org/details/bensiham3_gmail/page/n4/mode/1up.
[45] Taline Voskeritchian, 'Aleppo, of Memory…', *Passages Home Blog*, 9 September 2016, https://talinedv.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/aleppo-of-memory/.
[46] Ibid.

fostered social inequality[47]. Despite a gradual weakening in the familial 'structural solidarity' indicators, the extended family model and intergenerational relations were maintained with the elders' valued status fostering alternative dynamics for co-existence and continuity. Typically, Aleppian families in both the eastern and western parts of the city preferred living in relatively approximate geographies and, in some cases, had occupied separate floors within the same building, so that elder parents would maintain a quickly accessed familial care and support, and preserved their revered status in a system of balanced IG reciprocal relation.

This arrangement allowed senior parents to continue receiving direct physical, financial and emotional support from their children, and maintain a sense of familial centrality with relatively stable intergenerational exchange. I remember from my early childhood days, for instance, how Friday family gatherings in the grannies' *'hawsh'* were preserved as a morning ritual by adult children and perceived as an expression of loyalty to parents and grandparents. A tradition that many families maintained until it was disrupted by the increasing influence of modernization and its individualizing impacts. However, the recent Syrian socio-economic crises, exacerbated by large-scale migration, have had the most significant and abrupt disruptive impact on familial cohesion in the city, and consequently had adversely influenced the elder's status and coping potential.

The years of Al-Assad family rule, with its communist background, had further, paradoxically, weekend the role of intergenerational reciprocal and protective relations against 'market forces'[48], leaving individuals to suffer alone in all life stages, and exacerbating negative life conditions in old age. The rule was marked by significant administrative, political, and economic corruption, which deepened the socioeconomic divide between the city's eastern and western sections and exacerbated class disparity and inequality[49]. This division had catalyzed the revolution in Aleppo's more neglected and suffering eastern sector following the Syrian crisis in 2011. During this

[47] Zidan, Raghda D. *The Administrative Divisions of Syria During the French Mandate and Their Impact on Social Cohesion.* Published February 18, 2022. Accessed February 25, 2025. https://mutta7idoon.org/تقسيمات-سورية-الإدارية-أثناء-الانتداب-الفرنسي-وأثرها-على-التماسك-المجتمعي/.
[48] Ringmar, *Surviving Capitalism*, 49.
[49] 'Analysis: Politics of Class and Identity Dividing Aleppo – and Syria', *Syria*, 17 March 2017, https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2017/03/17/analysis-politics-of-class-and-identity-dividing-aleppo-and-syria.html.

turbulent period, Aleppo's families underwent radical transformations in their structure due to migration, displacement, as well as loss of property and family heritage, influencing the elderly's role and status within the family network. This study aims to explore how the elders adapt to these shifts in family dynamics, the diminishing of their traditional roles, and the weakening of intergenerational relationships, using an ethnographic approach with phenomenological sensibility in a compare and contrast style of writing.

2.5.3. Research Samples: The Impact of Social Inequality on Migration Patterns Among the Elders in Aleppo

Social disparities and the divide between eastern and western Aleppo have played a crucial role in shaping migration patterns among the elderly, who are the focus of this research. Based on this geographical and social division, the movement and living conditions of the elderly in the city can be classified into the following categories:

i. The Eastern Sector

a) Category One: Migration to Istanbul

Although Aleppo was not the initial center of the Syrian revolution, it was the city's eastern part that first awakened to the uprising , and subsequently suffered the most severe destruction and targeting by the al-Assad regime during the early years of the war[50]. The eastern sector, —where the predominantly rural demographic and agricultural background reinforces familial cohesion[51]—had witnessed the early waves of family displacement that included many elders who were directly affected.

[50] Ṣabr Darwīsh and Muḥammad Abī Samrā, *Maʾāsī Ḥalab: al-Thawra al-Maghdūra wa-Rasāʾil al-Muḥāṣarīn* (مآسي حلب: الثورة المغدورة ورسائل المحاصرين) (Milan: Manshūrāt al-Mutawassiṭ, 2016), 48-59.
[51] Ringmar, *Surviving Capitalism*, 50–53.

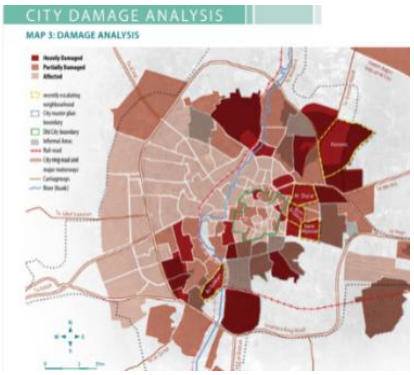


Figure 2.1. The Pattern of Destruction in the Eastern Part

Reference: The UN City Profile of Aleppo.2014[52]

Most of the elderly in this category had lost their children either due to war-related deaths or disappearances. Many also lost their homes entirely, leaving them without a safe place to take refuge within Aleppo. This migration was neither planned nor anticipated but rather a forced response to circumstances. The most common destination was Turkey, due to its geographical and cultural proximity, lower migration costs compared to European countries, and the initial open-border policy that facilitated refugee movement[53]. The elderly individuals I met in Istanbul live with their children, who provide for them financially, sharing housing arrangements. However, they face distinct challenges compared to their counterparts who remained in Aleppo, particularly those who returned to the severely damaged eastern sector after the war ended.

b) Category Two: Staying in Eastern Aleppo

For elderly individuals who could not leave the city—either due to financial constraints that prevented them from affording migration costs or because of health conditions that made travel burdensome—their movement was limited to internal displacement to the western part of Aleppo. Some eventually returned to their homes in the eastern sector, while others resettled in rented accommodations or moved in with one of their children after their original homes were damaged. Meanwhile, those who could afford the cost of living in the western part of the city chose to stay there. All those I

[52] UN-Habitat. *City Profile of Aleppo*. May 2014. Map3, Figure 13: " CITY DAMAGE ANALYSIS." file:///D:/downloads/aleppo_city_profile.pdf.
[53] Ayhan Kaya, 'A Tale of Two Cities: Aleppo and Istanbul', *European Review* 25, no. 3 (July 2017): 365–87, doi:10.1017/S1062798717000084.

interviewed in this category had children who were either internally displaced within Syria or had migrated abroad.

ii. The Western Sector

a) Category One: Migration to Istanbul

Unlike the eastern sector, most of western Aleppo did not experience direct destruction and targeting. Consequently, many elderly individuals from this area were able to retain their properties. In some cases, they moved internally to relatives' homes within western Aleppo, but they did not endure the same level of forced displacement experienced by those in the east. For those who migrated to Istanbul, their departure from Syria was not family-based but rather occurred several years after their children had left. With their relatively higher financial status, the elderly in this group were able to enjoy a comfortable life in Istanbul, settling in separate homes rather than living with their children, despite some of them residing in the same city.

b) Category Two: Staying in Western Aleppo

Others chose to remain in western Aleppo, holding onto hope that the situation would eventually improve. Despite the overall decline in living conditions, some elderly individuals refrained from joining the first waves of migration due to strong family and social ties. Their sense of responsibility extended beyond their direct relationship with their children—many of whom had migrated—toward other relatives who either remained or also left. This group, consisting of both men and women, expressed a strong sense of belonging to the city, despite their dissatisfaction with the deteriorating quality of life.

Conversely, another group (composed exclusively of women) remained due to concerns over losing their properties to theft or the inability to sell or manage them due to the economic crisis. Additionally, Turkey’s shifting migration policies in later years and the increasing complexity of migration also played a role in their decision to stay. These women demonstrated a deep emotional attachment to their migrant children and felt a strong sense of responsibility toward them. Unlike the first group, they expressed a weaker sense of belonging to the city, emphasizing instead their comfort in being wherever their children might be in the future.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study attempts to understand the outcomes of the Syrian crisis and the social changes it has generated, particularly concerning the elders within the traditional Aleppian society, examining how they have managed to accept and cope with this new reality. In this context, the theoretical framework of the study is primarily shaped by the distinctive nature of this peculiar society, whose collective identity is fundamentally built upon intergenerational solidarity and kin relations. Accordingly, the research explores the struggles faced by this group as they seek adaptive strategies rooted within their own social structure, aiming to balance the ambivalences and contradictions that may arise in intergenerational relationships during times of crisis and social transformation.

3.1. A Critical Review of Existing Qualitative Studies with Identification of Research Gaps

3.1.1. The Prevailing Focus is on Vulnerability, not Agency

Qualitative studies on Syrian elders' experiences with migration and displacement predominantly emphasize their psychological and material struggles, highlighting challenges such as inadequate institutional support, legal uncertainties, and social integration barriers[54]. This framing often reduces them to passive victims, overshadowing their capacity for adaptation, resilience, and agency, particularly in the context of displacement to politically and economically unstable neighboring countries. For instance, Syrian elder refugees in nearby countries like Lebanon face

[54] Emrah Apak, Taner Artan, and Dogac Niyazi Ozucelik, 'Evaluation of Bio-Psycho-Social and Socio-Cultural Problems of Syrian Elderly Living in Turkey', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 69, no. 2 (March 2023): 454–66, doi:10.1177/00207640221109165.

multiple layers of vulnerability, often perceived as entirely dependent on their relatives and children. While humanitarian aid systems place them at the lowest priority, the overall deterioration of healthcare services for refugees, drives elderly individuals to adopt poor coping strategies, such as neglecting their own health and prioritizing medical care for their children and grandchildren over their own needs[55].

This kind of available studies often restrict analysis to the macro-micro-intersection level, portraying deteriorating economic and living conditions, along with the sheer state of dependency, as primary drivers of isolation, guilt, depression, and shame among Syrian elders. However, they largely overlook meso-level mediating factors, such as family and social context, which could provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Syrians' lived experiences at this critical stage of life.

3.1.2. Dual Factors of Marginalisation

Moreover, no official studies specifically examine the situation of Syrian elderly individuals who remain in their cities after their children migrate, a gap that stems from double factors concerning elders' situation in social research. First, gerontology remains a relatively emerging field, and older adults have historically been a marginalized group within sociology. Academic interest in this demographic gained momentum in the past half-century, particularly after World War II, when aging was predominantly viewed as a problem to be managed and functionally overcome.[56] Consequently, the field became dominated by scientific and quantitative approaches, while qualitative research, with its diverse methodologies, has only recently started to gain recognition[57]. On the other hand, the neglect also stems from migration studies themselves, which have only recently begun to consider elders. Therefore, research on the intersection of aging and migration only started in the early 2000s, initially

[55] Sarah Hachem et al., '"Older People Tend to Be Invisible": A Qualitative Study Exploring the Needs and Inclusion of Older Syrian Refugees in the Context of Compounding Crises in Host Country, Lebanon', *Conflict and Health* 16, no. 1 (19 November 2022): 61, doi:10.1186/s13031-022-00496-4.
[56] Norella M. Putney, Dawn E. Alley, and Vern L. Bengtson, 'Social Gerontology as Public Sociology in Action', *The American Sociologist* 36, no. 3/4 (2005): 88–104, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27700435.
[57] 'Paper_18.Pdf', accessed 15 January 2024, https://ddceutkal.ac.in/Syllabus/MA_SOCIOLOGY/Paper_18.pdf.

focusing exclusively on migrant elders, while migration studies, in general, have tended to exclude the left-behind—especially elder individuals[58].

The often-unspoken reason for the marginalization of older adults—especially those left behind—in contemporary migration studies lies in the dominance of global policy frameworks that aim to regulate migration and asylum flows primarily to serve the economic interests of host countries. As a result, scholarly attention tends to concentrate on the internal and local dynamics of migration within receiving societies, overlooking the transnational and intergenerational dimensions of displacement.

3.1.3. Not Only Elders but Also Left-Behind: The Marginalizing Western Modern Model of the Family

The unvoiced reason for this marginalization of elders and particularly the left behind in nowadays migration studies is largely due to the dominant global migration policy frameworks to channel migration and asylum movements to serve the economies of host countries[59]. As a result, scholarly attention tends to concentrate on the internal and local dynamics of migration within receiving societies, overlooking the transnational and intergenerational dimensions of displacement. This is evident in the family reunification policies of many European host countries, which predominantly prioritize the nuclear family with limited interest in the migrant's elder parents or alternative family structures[60].

Until recently , the term "transnationals" involved only those newcomers residing in a foreign land, either with or without their small nuclear families.[61] The primary concern of host countries, thus, has been to study their living conditions, patterns of integration into society, and their productive and economic contributions to the host country. The inclusion of the left-behind population in migration studies only began when critical

[58] Russell King et al., 'Unpacking the Ageing-Migration Nexus and Challenging the Vulnerability Trope', 2016.
[59] Xavier Chojnicki, 'The Economic Impact of Immigration for the Host Countries', *Brussels Economic Review* 47 (1 February 2004): 9–28.
[60] 'European Rules Tear Families Apart', *Amnesty International*, 5 October 2018, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/10/european-rules-tear-families-apart/.
[61] Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, 'The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks, Oxford: Berg Publishers, Pp. 3-30.', n.d.

studies started examining the impact of globalization in expanding the concept of transnationalism. From this perspective, geographic separation from blood relatives in the home country no longer necessarily mean the cessation of moral and financial support exchanges; rather, there are increasing means to sustain these familial connections[62]. Thus, renewed interest in the left-behind population has emerged in migration literature, aiming for a deeper and broader understanding of migration dynamics and societal mobility[63].

3.1.4. Challenging the Marginalization in Literature: Russell King and Others

Studying the left-behind elderly, in particular, presents an additional challenge in migration studies, as it confronts the dominance of Western models in defining family and familial relationships[64]. For example, King et al. challenge the dominance of this Western model in sociological migration studies and argue that the *"aging-migration nexus"* should not be limited to migrant elders alone but should also include left-behind elders as well. These individuals represent the forgotten and marginalized third generation, whose presence plays a crucial role in shaping family dynamics, mobility, decision-making, and the overall fate of the family. By emphasizing this perspective, King restores the intergenerational relationship and the elderly to a central position in migration dynamics and coping strategies. Furthermore, King challenges the dominance of the Western model on a micro level of aging-migration intersection, particularly in matters related to coexistence and resistance. He contends that successful adaptation is not solely dependent on the individual agency of the migrant, as suggested by the Western model. Instead, coping and resilience are inherently relational processes, embedded in an individual's social environment and mediated through the family and intergenerational relationships. Accordingly, he argues that the Western model should not be imposed on the study of aging and migration, as the interaction between these two factors varies across different temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts. He emphasizes the need to move beyond the singularly negative perspective that views aging and migration solely as factors that increase human

[62] 'Baldassar_L_Baldock_C_and_Wilding_R_2007', n.d.
[63] Mika Toyota, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, and Liem Nguyen, 'Bringing the "Left behind" Back into View in Asia: A Framework for Understanding the "Migration–Left behind Nexus"', *Population, Space and Place* 13, no. 3 (2007): 157–61, doi:10.1002/psp.433.
[64] King et al., 'Unpacking the Ageing-Migration Nexus and Challenging the Vulnerability Trope'.

vulnerability and permeability. Instead, he calls for a focus on the positive aspects, such as agency and self-reliance, which elderly individuals actively engage in as they navigate these challenges and strive for a dignified aging process[65].

However, a significant gap remains, as King's contributions, like others in this field, are still largely based on evidence from Western societies and migration cases driven by economic motivations in relatively privileged contexts. They do not fully account for migration during times of crisis, which can severely disrupt intergenerational relationships and hinder the role of family mediation in facilitating adaptation and coping for elders.

3.1.5. The Significance of IG Relations Versus Material Support in Coping at Old Age in the Literature on Migration

On the other hand, when examining studies on Eastern societies, where elderly support primarily relies on traditional family structures rather than institutional government aid[66], we find that migration of children in these contexts is overwhelmingly driven by economic motives, with most cases involving internal migration from rural to urban areas. As a result, research on the experiences of elderly individuals left behind after their children's migration oscillates between two key perspectives. With globalization and the advancement in telecommunication, which guaranteed the preservation of multi-faceted intergenerational exchanges, some scholars argue that children's absence does not imply such a negative impact on elders when compared to the benefits parents derive from their children's migration. For instance, Nguyen Thi Thu Hien's study on elderly individuals left behind in rural Vietnam suggests that their children's migration does not create emotional or psychological burdens. Despite geographical separation, intergenerational reciprocity remains intact and, in some cases, even strengthens. Moreover, in certain families, the happiness and overall well-

[65] Ibid.
[66] Prakriti Khanal, Sunita Ra, and Hom Nath Chalise, 'Children's Migration and Its Effect on Elderly People: A Study at Old Age Homes in Kathmandu' 1, no. 1 (2018).

being of elder parents are closely tied to the financial support they receive from their migrant children[67].

This line of research assumes that material support is central to happiness, adaptation, and successful aging. Consequently, it tends to emphasize the benefits of migration for elder parents while significantly downplaying the role of familial mediation and intergenerational bonds. Grandparenting, for instance, is framed in these studies as a burden, while elderly parents are portrayed as taking pride in their children's migration, celebrating their achievements abroad, and valuing the remittances they receive[68]. These remittances serve not only a practical function by improving parents' living standards but also carry emotional significance. Parents perceive them as tangible proof of their children's care and concern, reinforcing their sense of gratitude and contentment. For this reason, many researchers, such as King and others, consider remittances a key coping mechanism for left-behind elders, albeit with caution. While these financial transfers strengthen both functional and emotional intergenerational solidarity, they are not sufficient on their own to eliminate the loneliness and sense of abandonment experienced by elderly individuals in certain contexts, such as that of rural Albanian left-behind elders[69].

Similarly, a study on left-behind elderly individuals in rural China acknowledges the significance of financial remittances from migrant children in compensating for their absence, particularly when supplemented by other forms of support from children who remain nearby. Despite the physical distance, ongoing communication and familial bonds between parents and their migrant children further contribute to their coping at old age and well-being. However, the study also emphasizes that physical instrumental support is just as crucial as financial support. So that, when direct practical assistance which stems from intergenerational reciprocity is considered as a fundamental factor

[67] Nguyen Thi Thu Hien, 'Consequences of Urban Migration of Adult Children for the Elderly Left-behind in Rural Vietnam', preprint (Open Science Framework, 11 September 2023), doi:10.31219/osf.io/zxyf8.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Russell King and Julie Vullnetari, 'Orphan Pensioners and Migrating Grandparents: The Impact of Mass Migration on Older People in Rural Albania', *Ageing and Society* 26, no. 5 (September 2006): 783–816, doi:10.1017/S0144686X06005125; Nina Conkova et al., '"Left Like Stones in the Middle of the Road": Narratives of Aging Alone and Coping Strategies in Rural Albania and Bulgaria', *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 74, no. 8 (4 October 2019): 1492–1500, doi:10.1093/geronb/gby127.

for mental well-being in old age, the prolonged absence of children along with the gradual decline in financial support over time have been linked to increased rates of depression and lower life satisfaction among left-behind elderly parents[70].

On the other hand, some studies overemphasize the negative consequences of children's migration, dismissing the role of remittances in improving the lives of the elderly and helping them cope with their children's absence. For instance, a study on left-behind elderly individuals in Kyrgyzstan argues that financial transfers from migrant children have not significantly changed the reality of aging parents. The author contends that societal perception—particularly within traditional tribal communities—tends to exaggerate the benefits of migration far beyond what is actually experienced. This, Ablezova et al. suggest, is due to the collective mentality that facilitates the spread of the "myth of migration" among families[71]. On the contrary, the researchers observe that empirical reality demonstrates the dissolution of the conditional relationship between the elevated living standards of the elderly and the migration of their children. In fact, the study finds that those whose children did not migrate tend to have better physical and mental well-being than those left behind by migrant children. The latter group, instead of becoming more self-sufficient, often develops a passive dependence on remittances, and their economic and living conditions worsen due to the absence of direct instrumental support from their children.

Beyond financial hardships, migration is also found to have deeper, non-material consequences, particularly through its negative globalizing influence on intergenerational relationships. The study argues that children and grandchildren, captivated by urban life and consumerist values, exhibit weakened ties to their family heritage and traditions. Besides, their frequent visits to their hometowns did not foster intergenerational solidarity, but instead, it spread migration aspirations, which further complicated intergenerational ties[72].

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[70] Man Guo, Maria P. Aranda, and Merril Silverstein, 'The Impact of Out-Migration on the Inter-Generational Support and Psychological Wellbeing of Older Adults in Rural China', *Ageing and Society* 29, no. 7 (October 2009): 1085–1104, doi:10.1017/S0144686X0900871X.

[71] Mehrigul Ablezova, Emil Nasritdinov, and Ruslan Rahimov, *The Impact of Migration on Elderly People: Grandparent-headed Households in Kyrgyzstan* (Bishkek: HelpAge International Central Asia, 2008), 15.

[72] Ablezova, Nasritdinov, and Rahimov, *The Impact of Migration on Elderly People*, 15.

3.1.6. Migration is Behind Cultural Change: Eroding Familial Solidarity as a Coping Resource in Old Age

Similarly, another study examining the condition of elders left behind in rural China highlights how increased migration has influenced the community's local cultural and economic structures, subsequently undermining the traditional familial support system for elderly people. Congzhi He and Jingzhong Ye note that the agricultural economy that once secured the livelihoods of the elders in rural China has significantly declined, and the economic security previously afforded by land ownership has diminished in importance. Meanwhile, familial support from adult children has become monetized rather than instrumental, often insufficient for meeting elders' long-term needs, thus negatively affecting their physical and mental health[73]. They argue that the family unit and intergenerational relationships are no longer the reliable support structures they once were.

Family fragmentation, globalization, modernization, and the commodification of social ties have weakened children's commitment to their familial roles and responsibilities. As a result, many elderly individuals experience neglect and abandonment rather than the relief of burdens that should come with old age. Grandparenting, in this context, has also lost its traditional emotional and familial significance. Instead of being a means to strengthen intergenerational relations and foster coping at old age, caring for grandchildren has become an additional financial and psychological burden for many seniors in these contexts. In this study, resilience factors like agency and adaptation were only mentioned briefly, noting that some elderly individuals have chosen to work and support themselves, while others have relocated to new social networks that provide them with security and assistance. Moreover, digital communication tools have not been sufficient to sustain meaningful intergenerational relationships, contradicting the claims of other studies that emphasize their role in maintaining family bonds. Based on these findings, the authors argue for the necessity of institutional government intervention, advocating for an end

[73] Congzhi He and Jingzhong Ye, 'Lonely Sunsets: Impacts of Rural–Urban Migration on the Left-behind Elderly in Rural China', *Population, Space and Place* 20, no. 4 (May 2014): 352–69, doi:10.1002/psp.1829.

to the romanticized view of the family's role in protecting and supporting elderly individuals in their later years[74].

Thus, literature review from the left-behind perspective reveals that migration affects elderly individuals not only in terms of economic and living conditions but also in terms of a profound 'symbolic loss'—the erosion of their social status and role within intergenerational relationships, particularly their grandparental role within the family. This weakening of their position is not solely due to geographical distance between generations but also stems from broader factors such as cultural shifts and the reverse impact of migration in weakening family ties and traditional social structures that once served as protective mechanisms for the elders. Children and grandchildren who migrate for economic reasons often settle in major urban centers where modernity, capitalism, consumerism, and individualism dominate. As they assimilate into these urban cultures, they adopt new values and experiences, further widening the generational gap. As a result, their attachment to their familial roots diminishes with weakened intergenerational reciprocity and, consequently, this reduces the status and influence of the elders within the family unit along with their coping resources.[75] Studies on rural Albania elders, and those in rural Kyrgyzstan and China, all document similar findings. In these contexts, elderly individuals suffer not only from harsh living conditions but also from deep loneliness and a sense of abandonment. According to these studies, financial remittances from migrant children do little to change their reality or compensate for the loss of family warmth and healthy reciprocal intergenerational relationships[76].

This type of study, which seriously considers the impact of children's absence, aligns most closely with our understanding of the situation of elderly individuals in Aleppo following the migration of their children. This is particularly relevant when taking into account the political similarities between Syria and countries with former communist regimes, such as Kyrgyzstan and Albania, where central socialist governments have historically undermined local cultures built on strong familial ties and kinship bonds.

[74] Ibid.
[75] King and Vullnetari, 'Orphan Pensioners and Migrating Grandparents'; Ablezova, Nasritdinov, and Rahimov, 'The Impact of Migration on Elderly People'.
[76] King and Vullnetari, 'Orphan Pensioners and Migrating Grandparents'.

In these contexts, economically driven rural-to-urban migration has created family dynamics similar to those produced by post-war migration in socialist Syria. Elderly individuals in Aleppo, like those in these former socialist states, experience deep emotional distress—not only due to the absence of their children but also because of the wider social and political pressures tied to migration. Many live in fear for their migrant children, worrying about their exposure to exploitation, discrimination, or political repression in host countries , while others, just like the Syrian case, suffer from the pain of knowing that their children cannot return home; particularly those who were forced into irregular migration. Moreover, the continuous political and economic instability in these contexts adds to the psychological burden of both generations. Consequently, the dynamics of coping and adaptation among left-behind elderly individuals in Aleppo—both in practical and emotional terms—share striking similarities with those observed in Kyrgyzstan, Albania, and China.

3.1.7. Other Suggested Coping Dynamics: Mobility and Conceptual Coping

On a practical level, the more fortunate among Albania's elderly, as highlighted by Conkova et al., cope with their children's migration by following them abroad to fulfill their lost grandparental role and care for their grandchildren, often living in shared households with their children. Meanwhile, those who remain behind and are in good health frequently find themselves compelled to work and earn a living, not only to support themselves but sometimes to assist their migrant children financially. In this context, kinship ties and neighborhood networks—which often prove even more significant than family relationships—play a crucial role in providing both emotional and practical support to left-behind elderly individuals[77].

On an emotional and cognitive level, all elderly individuals in these studies exhibit an ambivalent attitude toward their children's migration, a stance which will be presented as mode of coping *per se* later in this study. While they experience pain, loss, and abandonment, leading to deteriorating mental and physical well-being, they simultaneously acknowledge that migration was the only viable choice for their children. They recognize that poor economic conditions had left their children with no

[77] Conkova et al., '"Left Like Stones in the Middle of the Road"'.

alternative but to leave, and they are convinced that their own situation would be even worse if their children had stayed behind in the same struggling environment.

As a result, their cognitive coping strategies often involve lowering their expectations regarding intergenerational relationships and focusing instead on emotional satisfaction derived from their children's achievements abroad and the support they provide. This suggests that adaptation to migration-induced separation is a complex process, blending both emotional and practical strategies, which are often intertwined and difficult to separate[78].

3.1.8. Coping in Elder Migrants Studies Versus the Left-Behind

However, the reference to resistance and the desire for coping among older individuals as social actors in Conkova et al. appears superficial compared to other studies that delve deeper into the cultural dynamics of resilience acts. It is not surprising, though, that this depth is particularly evident in studies that focus on migrant elders rather than those left behind. This is because migration studies generally target the processes of acculturation and integration practiced by newcomers (who, in this context, are the elders). As a result, they explore the cultural roots and the diverse social and economic contexts that shape the ways in which elderly individuals adapt to the changes imposed by migration, accompanied by old age.

For example, Acharya and Northcott's study demonstrates that senior Indian women frequently draw upon their religious heritage as a central component of their coping strategies through the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. While *Karma* makes them more accepting of fate and the changes that come as part of a continuous sequence of life events, *dharma* dictates their engagement in serving their families and the greater good, encouraging self-transcendence as a means of preserving dignity at old age.

Therefore, terms such as depression and psychological distress are absent from the vocabulary of elderly Indian women in Canada. Their practical coping strategies revolve around staying engaged in household tasks, continuously serving their

[78] Ibid.

families, fulfilling their grandparental roles, performing religious rituals, and attending religious gatherings. These practical practices provide them with a sense of importance, pride, and self-respect, allowing them to maintain their position as a reference within the family.

Moreover, they enable them to adopt emotional and cognitive coping strategies, such as emotional regulation, self-control, mastering positive self-talk, accepting fate, and diverting attention from hardships through constant engagement in activities. Additionally, they practice verbal catharsis while avoiding sharing negative emotions to prevent their amplification. *Dharma*, in this context, transcends being merely a coping mechanism—it becomes a way of life that promotes longevity and well-being. This cultural depth in shaping coping strategies is precisely what we need to understand the realities of elderly Syrians and to closely examine their dynamics of coping. In particular, it is essential to consider the role of the Islamic religious framework in shaping and sustaining intergenerational relationships despite geographical distance and communication challenges.

Another aspect of similarity lies in the ambivalence created by the encounter between the old and the new, the past and the present, and tradition and modernity in refugee and migrant communities at the meso-family level for the elders. One striking coping strategy observed in the study by Acharya, Manju P., and Herbert C. Northcott is the preference among financially privileged elderly women to live independently in separate homes from their children, despite the fact that shared living, mutual dependency, and multi-generational households are integral to their cultural identity and memory. These Indian elderly women perceive living separately as an opportunity to create personal space for reflection, achieve inner peace, and prepare for the end of life. Others view independence from their children as a way to establish their social status and experience a sense of accomplishment, control, and freedom[79].

This observation closely mirrors the experiences of elderly women in Aleppo in my research sample. Many are either physically separated from their children who live in

[79] Manju P. Acharya and Herbert C. Northcott, 'Mental Distress and the Coping Strategies of Elderly Indian Immigrant Women', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 44, no. 4 (1 December 2007): 614–36, doi:10.1177/1363461507083901.

the same city or share a household with them, but long for independence. This highlights an ambivalence experienced by the elders, where intergenerational relationships remain central to their coping mechanisms, as they are physically present with their children, yet they prefer a nuclear family model and an *" intimate but distant* [80]" approach with their married children rather than "*tight-knit co-residency*[81] *"*.

Living separately can thus be seen as a coping strategy in response to this intergenerational ambivalence within the family. However, this ambivalence is itself imposed by a broader structural ambivalence—the cultural and environmental differences between the past and present from the perspective of the elders. Yan et al.'s study on intergenerational relationships as a coping mechanism in old age found that the preference for separate housing within a shared environment is often linked to a relatively high financial status among migrant elders and depends on the degree of material-functional interdependence between generations in migration contexts. Migrant elders who receive strong financial support from their children tend to prefer living separately and maintaining a "*distant intimate"* relationship, characterized by continued material exchange but with lower emotional interaction. In contrast, "*tight-knit"* co-residency is associated with higher emotional exchange between generations, ultimately leading to greater happiness and psychological well-being for the elderly, even in cases where financial support is more limited[82].

3.1.9. The Challenge of Coping in Later Life During Times of Displacement and Crisis: Social Engagement Forms of Coping

From the above, it becomes clear that the realities of war and its aftermath in a context like Syria impose an even greater burden than the context of other elderly populations studied in the available literature. Besides that, studies that comprehensively cover the intersection of migration, aging, and war in non-European societies are very scarce. As an example, a study by Faith Kilpeläinen and Minna Zechner examines the situation

[80] Merril Silverstein and Vern L. Bengtson, 'Intergenerational Solidarity and the Structure of Adult Child-Parent Relationships in American Families', *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997): 429–60, doi:10.1086/231213.
[81] Shiyuan Yan et al., 'A Latent Class Analysis of Intergenerational Relationships Among the Elderly Migrants in Nanjing, China', *Psychology Research and Behavior Management* 16 (17 April 2023): 1221–32, doi:10.2147/PRBM.S404869.
[82] Ibid.

of elder Africans in the context of internal displacement in Nairobi, where war and forced migration emerge as a third dimension shaping elder individuals' coping strategies. A collective reservoir of emotions and negative memories related to displacement, suffering, and family fragmentation forms the foundation for the reconstruction of identity as a collective coping mechanism. Shared affiliations and ethnic and religious gatherings create opportunities for coping on both personal and community levels, allowing elder migrants to experience a sense of continuity in their identity and a connection between their past and present[83].

One intergenerational coping strategy particularly relevant to this discussion is the elder's tendency towards fulfilling the parental role as a way to preserve their sense of importance and centrality within their families. Elder individuals in such contexts perceive themselves as having fully completed their parental duties. As a result, they relinquish the sense of responsibility associated with providing for their children and shift their focus to a more observant and caring parental role rather than an active one. In doing so, they live out their future through their children, embracing a position of parental emotional connection rather than direct instrumental and functional responsibility[84].

Another study examines the experiences of elderly women from Nepal living in the United Kingdom, once again highlighting the significance of ethnic communities for older adults. These communities serve as a means of adaptation, helping them navigate their identities and compensate for the void left by the loss of traditional family roles they were accustomed to in their pre-migration environments. In this context, emotional and psychological coping strategies, such as accepting fate and engaging in personal religious practices, are not sufficient on their own. Rather, the proximity to a familiar social and cultural environment plays a crucial role, especially since language barriers often hinder elder migrants from communicating and integrating into the host society.

[83] Faith Kilpeläinen and Minna Zechner, 'Displaced Selves: Older African Adults in Forced Migration', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35, no. 3 (31 October 2022): 1126–42, doi:10.1093/jrs/feac046.
[84] Ibid.

Notably, the reality of migration and displacement influences the formation of collective ethnic identity as a coping mechanism by elders. For example, class divisions and other social prejudices that were once significant in their homeland as an integral part of their cultural collective identity in their homeland, become less relevant in the migration context. Elder migrants redefine social cohesion, kinship relations, and reciprocal interactions outside of traditional structures, as they seek to cope with the disruptions in their identities and personal histories caused by family fragmentation[85]. This phenomenon can also be observed among senior Aleppian women in Istanbul, where many of the class distinctions that once shaped social interactions in Aleppo, such as the divide between the eastern and western parts of the city, have diminished in importance. Instead, a new flexibility in social relations emerges, where common language and shared religious background become the primary foundations for extra-familial social bonds as a secondary coping mechanism after intergenerational solidarity.

From the above, it becomes evident that coping strategies in the lives of elderly individuals are complex, encompassing both emotional-cognitive dimensions and practical-social aspects, with no clear boundary between the two processes[86]. For instance, religious and social elements often intertwine as coping mechanisms. Religion, for the elders, is not confined to individual practices and beliefs, such as accepting fate, maintaining optimism, self-regulation, and positive self-talk. Rather, these personal religious practices are secondary in importance compared to the role of religion in strengthening social and familial networks and participating in religious gatherings.

Similarly, behavioral and environmental changes are often more effective than cognitive shifts as coping strategies for maintaining social roles and engaging with the community. In fact, some cognitive adaptations—such as accepting reality and avoiding psychological stress—may reduce active social participation, potentially leading to negative long-term effects. Moreover, older individuals who lead socially

[85] Lalita Kumari Sah et al., 'Coping Strategies Employed by Older Nepalese Migrant Women to Manage Their Mental Distress in the UK: A Qualitative Research', *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 12 (12 December 2024): e0310832, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0310832.
[86] Conkova et al., '"Left Like Stones in the Middle of the Road"'.

active and eventful lives—regardless of the nature of those events—are more likely to develop practical coping strategies, which subsequently support the development of psychological resilience[87]. This observation is particularly significant in understanding the coping strategies adopted by elderly Aleppians, especially in cases where intergenerational relationships are characterized by the state of ambivalence. In such contexts, the interplay between maintaining social roles, adapting to new environments, and navigating intergenerational ambivalence plays a crucial role in shaping their overall well-being.

3.2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.2.1. Familial Relations and Elders Community Nexus: An Introductory Sociological Overview

The study of social cohesion, particularly when rooted in kinship relations and the disruptions that may affect such kind of social texture, lies at the heart of sociological inquiry. Originally, the roots of sociological interest in cohesion and solidarity can be traced back to Ibn Khaldun, who, in his *Muqaddimah*, laid the groundwork for the concept of 'asabiyya'—a notion that, at its core, reflects the act of seeking strength and protection through kinship ties[88]. In the light of this view, the intergenerational relations component of 'asabiyya' can be viewed as a basic source of power and resistance in times of crisis, especially at old age.

For Ibn Khaldun, although the concept of 'aging' is associated with decline and loss of power, it actually transcends mere biological perspective and the natural limits of human lifespan. Rather, it is intrinsically linked to the weakening of 'asabiyya' as a form of social cohesion, along with the erosion of its protective and empowering potential. According to Ibn Haldun, the aging process of states is juxtaposed with that of individuals, is accompanied by a societal drift toward complacency, idle luxury, and

[87] Louise Demers et al., 'Coping Strategies and Social Participation in Older Adults', *Gerontology* 55, no. 2 (2009): 233–39, doi:10.1159/000181170.
[88] ʿAlāʾ Zuhayr ʿAbd al-Jawād al-Rawāshidah, *Nazariyyat al-ʿAṣabiyya fī Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn: Qirāʾa muʿāṣira*, *KAN: Majallat KAN li-l-Dirāsāt al-Tārīkhiyya*, no. 11 (March 2011): 17–21. Accessed April 9, 2025. http://www.historicalkan.co.nr

increasing individualization, ultimately resulting in a decline in personal and collective agency[89].

In Western contemporary sociology, the weakening of intergenerational family ties and the rise of individualism have been viewed as key factors contributing to what Durkheim termed a state of 'anomie'. And here, again, intergenerational relations can be viewed as a cornerstone for this 'primitive' or intuitive form of cohesion that Durkheim describes as a 'mechanical solidarity'. In modern societies, individuals respond to this normlessness in social cohesion by developing 'organic solidarity' that is based on the development of individual skills and the functional division of labor[90]. However, Durkheim, as many other contemporary sociologists, did not pay attention to the possible consequences that the rise of individualism and the weakening of family ties may have on the community of elders, who, in many ways, embody the Durkheimian '*collective conscience'* [91]. This concept, which, in light of Durkheim's social theory, is composed of the set of beliefs, norms, and values, the transmission of which is essential for preserving intergenerational relations. This study stems from the assumption that these intergenerational transmission and symbolic exchanges *per se* are captured as the most important factor for healthy aging and coping at old age in the most recent gerontology and family theory[92]. By shifting the Durkheimian timeline to center the elderly community rather than the successive, increasingly individualized generations, this study challenges the modernist assumption of social rupture as an inevitable empirical reality. Instead, it frames rupture as a contested and negotiable process; one that is actively resisted, reinterpreted, and reshaped through various coping strategies and cultural practices.

[89] Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 1:227–231, "Dynasties have a natural life span like individuals, " PDF, https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/37760913/ibn_khaldun-al_muqaddimah-libre.pdf.
[90] Emile, 'The Division Of Labor In Society'.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Merril Silverstein and Vern L. Bengtson, 'Does Intergenerational Social Support Influence the Psychological Well-Being of Older Parents? The Contingencies of Declining Health and Widowhood', *Social Science & Medicine* 38, no. 7 (1994): 943, https://www.academia.edu/15432925/Does_intergenerational_social_support_influence_the_psychological_well_being_of_older_parents_The_contingencies_of_declining_health_and_widowhood.

3.2.2. Charting My Course Through Gerontological Theory

This study is primarily based on classical structural sociological assumptions, which posit that communities spontaneously tend to resist 'anomie' during times of crisis, either by striving to restore old conditions of normalcy or by creating a new sort of equilibrium in which new positions and views are created[93]. The present thesis assumes that traditional societies, represented here by elderly individuals whose well-being and psychological health rely heavily on intergenerational cohesion, will strive—despite real-life challenges—to reproduce this cohesion in various forms, utilizing the very social changes they experience. The logic underlying this thesis research question\s, seeks to link the individual, familial, and societal realities of elder individuals with the broader impacts of the Syrian crisis, using qualitative methodologies makes the 'life-course' perspective particularly suitable in this context. This is especially true considering the emphasis this perspective places on family relationships through the concept of "linked lives"[94], where individuals' destinies are interconnected within the family history. Events affecting one individual's life inevitably influence other family members, particularly in the context of shifting intergenerational relationships and the central position elderly members occupy within their families.

This theoretical approach within gerontology is unique in its attempt to simultaneously integrate a focus on agency and relationality to understand the transformations individuals experience within their families at advanced age, especially concerning their assigned roles and social status[95]. It becomes particularly relevant in contexts shaped by societal changes, such as migration, displacement, and economic deterioration, which can all result in shifting, restricting, or redefining social roles and consequently impacting the mental and physical health of elderly Aleppians. Additionally, this perspective marks a significant shift for social historians, transferring the narrative's focal point from influential figures—traditionally holders

[93] Gëzim Visoka and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'Restoring Normalcy', in *Normalization in World Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2022), 89–118, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.10171116.7.
[94] Elizabeth D Hutchison, 'A Life Course Perspective', n.d., 33.
[95] Monica Johnson, 'The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory', *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*, 1 January 2003, https://www.academia.edu/112961593/The_Emergence_and_Development_of_Life_Course_Theory.

of wealth and power—to ordinary individuals, highlighting their everyday experiences and common struggles[96].

This theory emphasizes multiple, overlapping perspectives on aging—biological age, psychological age, spiritual age, and social age[97]—which together offer a deep and critical understanding of what it means to grow older under exceptional circumstances, particularly within "risk societies"[98]struggling for safety and protection, as exemplified distinctly by the Aleppian society. In alignment with the life course perspective's relational view of individuals, this study is founded on the idea that intergenerational relationships play a crucial role in the lives of elderly people and their ability to cope with different challenges at old age[99]. These relationships act as a double-edged sword: when stable and cohesive, they enable the elderly to cope with their personal sense of alienation; yet, when disrupted or fragmented due to their children's migration and separation, the elderly seek alternative coping mechanisms to compensate for this imbalance. Therefore, two intergenerational theories—solidarity and ambivalence—are particularly useful in comprehending the contrasting conditions experienced today by elderly Aleppians within their families.

3.2.3. A Transnational Perspective on the Nexus of Aging and Intergenerational Relations: A Critical Perspective on Reciprocity and Support Despite Separation

The rapid, macro-structural changes (war and migration) have significantly impacted the structure of family relationships in Aleppian society, consequently altering the position of elder individuals within these relationships. In *Aging and Intergenerational Relations*, Chris Philipson argues that a new form of aging has emerged as family

[96] Tamara K. Hareven, 'The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change', *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 1 (1991): 95, doi:10.2307/2164019.
[97] Elizabeth D. Hutchison, "A Life Course Perspective, " in *Dimensions of Human Behavior: The Changing Life Course*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 1–38, accessed April 4, 2025, https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/36521_CLC_Chapter1.pdf.
[98] 'Risk Society', in *Wikipedia*, 29 September 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Risk_society&oldid=1248350357#CITEREFGiddensPierson1998.
[99] Vern L. Bengtson, 'Beyond the Nuclear Family: The Increasing Importance of Multigenerational Bonds: THE BURGESS AWARD LECTURE*', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, no. 1 (February 2001): 1–16, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00001.x; Pearl A. Dykstra and Vereinte Nationen, eds., *Intergenerational Family Relationships in Ageing Societies*, United Nations Publication (New York, NY: United Nations, 2010).

relationships become dispersed across continents in an era of global migration[100]. Additionally, changes in the social environment for older people, shaped by migration as a defining characteristic of our age, have generated considerable diversity in what aging might mean, giving rise to new forms of intergenerational exchange and support[101]. Accordingly, Baldassar challenges the assumption that a shared geographical space is essential for maintaining healthy family relations, suggesting that this notion, dominant in gerontological studies, reflects the ideology of nation-states clinging to patriarchal and hierarchical family structures. Instead, he proposes that globalization has created new family structures and transnational patterns of exchange capable of sustaining family cohesion and identity[102]. Thus, while numerous studies have extensively addressed intergenerational relations and elderly support within geographically shared spaces, transnational family exchanges remain understudied and relatively hidden within social research[103].

However, the problem with Baldassar's claims lies in the fact that they cannot be verified through rigorous empirical studies. The only available evidence in this field comes from qualitative research, whose findings may conflict due to the diversity of cultural contexts. Furthermore, her vision appears to be somewhat idealistic, as it does not take crises and wars seriously enough. What intergenerational relationships might mean for an elderly person from Aleppo, and what alternative forms of communication can offer him/her in the face of the economic and social challenges faced by Syrians both at home and in the diaspora, cannot be separated from the unique character of Aleppian society. In this context, which holds resemblance to many other eastern traditional communities, the household and family ties on a shared geography represent the primary and essential source of 'social capital'[104] and identity formation.

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[100] Chris Phillipson, "Globalisation, Global Ageing and Intergenerational Change, " in *Ageing and Intergenerational Relations: Family Reciprocity from a Global Perspective*, ed. Misa Izuhara (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2010), 13–28.
[101] Phillipson, "Globalisation, Global Ageing, " 22.
[102] Loretta Baldassar, 'Baldassar, L., Baldock, C., & Wilding, R. (2007) Families Caring Across Borders: Migration, Aging and Transnational Caregiving. London: Palgrave MacMillan.', 2007, https://www.academia.edu/960070/Baldassar_L_Baldock_C_and_Wilding_R_2007_Families_Caring_Across_Borders_Migration_Aging_and_Transnational_Caregiving_London_Palgrave_MacMillan.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Manoj Dakua, Ranjan Karmakar, and Hemkhothang Lhungdim, 'Social Capital and Well-Being of the Elderly "Left-behind" by Their Migrant Children in India', *BMC Public Health* 23, no. 1 (9 November 2023): 2212, doi:10.1186/s12889-023-17012-9.

Finally, the recognition that familial support continues and that forms of transnational exchange diversify despite migration and displacement places equal value on these exchanges across generations. This risks marginalizing elders' role in this exchange and obscuring their specific perspective on this form of transnational reciprocal exchange and '*proxy'* form of co-presence[105].

In another study, *Missing Kin*, Baldassar attempts to address some of these gaps by proposing that emotional transnational exchange through the concept of '*co-presence'* plays a key role in sustaining familial bonds despite the realities of displacement. She argues that different forms of co-presence—virtual, proxy, physical, and imagined—are essential mechanisms in the exchange of transnational support between migrant children and their elderly parents[106].

Through her use of Hochschild's (1983) concept of '*emotional labor'*, Baldassar shows that even emotionally burdensome feelings—such as guilt, intense longing, and a strong sense of responsibility—should not be viewed as merely personal experiences, but rather as playing an important social role in the provision of care and emotional support[107]. This conceptual framing is particularly helpful for comparing the experiences of elderly individuals in Aleppo and Istanbul, as it sheds light on the variations in the forms and possibilities of co-presence available to them within different familial and cultural contexts.

Actually, Baldassar's idea of '*imagined co-presence'*—especially through acts such as praying for one's children—is particularly insightful for studying religion as a coping strategy among elderly people in Aleppo who live apart from their migrant children. According to Baldassar, alternative forms of co-presence can not only compensate for the absence of physical proximity but may also encourage and increase the likelihood of future physical co-presence.

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[105] Loretta Baldassar et al., 'ICT-Based Co-Presence in Transnational Families and Communities: Challenging the Premise of Face-to-Face Proximity in Sustaining Relationships', *Global Networks* 16, no. 2 (2016): 133–44, doi:10.1111/glob.12108.
[106] Loretta Baldassar, 'Missing Kin and Longing to Be Together: Emotions and the Construction of Co-Presence in Transnational Relationships', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (August 2008): 247–66, doi:10.1080/07256860802169196.
[107] Ibid.

Yet once again, we are faced with an idealized view of the mechanisms of emotion and their potential role in sustaining family support. To date, no empirical studies have been able to predict the long-term implications of relying on alternative forms of *co-presence*, especially when the material conditions for sustaining such connections (such as stable electricity or internet access) are fragile or unreliable, and when *physical co-presence* is permanently out of reach. In particular, there remains a lack of focused research on the long-term consequences of this absence for elderly parents, who—unlike their children and grandchildren abroad—may not have the same advantages of time, health, or mobility to overcome the lasting effects of separation and intense longing.

Moreover, this idealized framing of emotional mechanisms often neglects the contradictions inherent in intergenerational relationships[108], especially when these ties become sources of psychological strain. This is most evident when both Aleppian elders and their offspring simultaneously experience feelings of guilt and helplessness. In such cases, elderly parents may find themselves not only deprived of care but also burdened with the responsibility of providing emotional or even material support to their migrant children, who often face precarious living conditions, financial insecurity, and health issues in exile. With few practical means to help, elderly parents are left to accumulate negative emotions and emotional stress with no outlet for relief.

In these cases, virtual co-presence and other alternative forms may function less as spaces of emotional connection and more as tools for concealing emotions on both sides, where communication technology is used not to express or alleviate emotional burdens, but rather to mask them[109].

Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to filling a research gap by examining Aleppian elders' intergenerational communication during times of social transformation and reflecting on how elders dealt with and responded to the absence

[108] Kurt Lüscher, 'Looking at Ambivalences: The Contribution of a "New-Old" View of Intergenerational Relations to the Study of the Life Course', *Advances in Life Course Research*, Towards an Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Life Course, 10 (1 January 2005): 93–128, doi:10.1016/S1040-2608(05)10003-3.

[109] Loretta Baldassar, 'Transnational Families And The Provision Of Moral And Emotional Support: The Relationship Between Truth And Distance', *Identities* 14, no. 4 (15 October 2007): 385–409, doi:10.1080/10702890701578423.

of their children across this complex and multidimensional social context. It seeks to highlight new forms of exchange and communication that have emerged as a result of internal conflict, global migration, and asylum policies, particularly in the Turkish context, and most importantly, how elders reflect on and utilise these new forms of social interaction to alleviate the burden of displacement and family separation. It aims to explore not only what these transnational exchanges can offer in terms of facilitating senior people's adaptation to their realities but also what they fail to provide, especially in contexts shaped by displacement, uncertainty, and limited resources.

3.2.4. The Ideal Model of Intergenerational Relations and Its Significance for Coping at Old Age

i. Solidarity Model to Counterbalance the Shattering Effect of the Modern Nuclear Family

Many scholars believe that detachment from the strict bonds of the family in traditional patterns is an adaptive process that has served—and continues to serve—a functional role for both generations, parents and children alike, in the context of globalization and modern lifestyles[110]. Accordingly, the theory of intergenerational solidarity was developed to counter the pessimistic critical view that sees modernity, progress, and the emergence of the nuclear family as increasingly threatening familial bonds and intergenerational relationships, with elderly parents being the greatest losers in this process. Bengtson argues that multigenerational ties contain within them mechanisms capable of filling the void left by the dissolution of nuclear family bonds, and that intergenerational reciprocal relationships have persisted despite geographical distance[111]. A view that seems very ideal when we turn to problematic contexts like that of the Syrian family and the aged community during war.

[110] Bengtson, 'Beyond the Nuclear Family'.
[111] Merril Silverstein and Vern Bengtson, 'Intergenerational Solidarity and the Structure of Adult Child–Parent Relations in American Families', *American Journal of Sociology - AMER J SOCIOL* 103 (1 September 1997), doi:10.1086/231213.

ii. Solidarity Model to Restore Balance in the Reciprocal Relations at Old Age

Intergenerational relationships and the conditions of elder parents have been examined through the lens of exchange theory in social behaviour. This perspective suggests that the weakening of social ties, or the elders' withdrawal from society, is not merely an individual choice, but rather the result of an imbalance in reciprocal relations[112]. As individuals age, their ability to contribute to society diminishes relative to what they receive in return. Consequently, they become the dependent party in the relationship, leading to a decline in their social status[113]. Accordingly, Bengtson argues that to counter the effects of dependency and the associated feelings of weakness and vulnerability, older adults increasingly engage in a broader range of reciprocal relationships, with emotional exchange taking precedence[114.]

For this reason, Bengtson developed a more comprehensive theoretical framework that encompasses various forms of exchange within intergenerational cohesion, which can be measured through what he terms 'indicators of solidarity'. He identifies six dimensions of solidarity: *affectual* (emotional closeness), *associational* (interaction frequency), *consensual* (shared values), *functional* (support exchange), *normative* (filial obligation), and *structural* (geographic proximity) [115].

Accordingly, gerontological studies that focus on the relational aspects of human life within the family have adopted the theory of familial solidarity as a core component for successful aging. This is achieved through support for physical and mental well-being, as well as fostering a sense of significance and purpose in later life[116]. Undoubtedly, its importance increases for the elders in traumatizing situations such as migration, loss of property, or the death of a spouse or a close relative. For example, in a study by Shiyuan Yan and colleagues, it was found that intergenerational solidarity

[112] Ruth Katz and Ariela Lowenstein, "Theoretical Perspectives on Intergenerational Solidarity, Conflict and Ambivalence, " in *Ageing and Intergenerational Relations: Family Reciprocity from a Global Perspective*, ed. Misa Izuhara (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2010), 32.
[113] Wylie Wan and Toni Antonucci, 'Social Exchange Theory and Aging', 2016, 1–9, doi:10.1007/978-981-287-080-3_285-1.
[114] Ruth Katz and Ariela Lowenstein, "Theoretical Perspectives on Intergenerational Solidarity, " 32.
[115] Vern L. Bengtson and Robert E. L. Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families: An Example of Formal Theory Construction', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53, no. 4 (November 1991): 856, doi:10.2307/352993.
[116] Ruth Katz and Ariela Lowenstein, *"Theoretical Perspectives on Intergenerational Solidarity, "* 36.

among migrant elders had a positive impact on their mental well-being and granted them a greater capacity for adaptation compared to others[117]. This perspective will be quite important when detecting Aleppian elders' various endeavours to restore healthy reciprocal relations within their families and reclaim agency as they do so.

iii. The Solidarity Model in Praxis:

This theoretical framework, offered by the concept of intergenerational solidarity, is valuable not only for the terminological use of its *indicators* but also for observing the variations in the levels of these indicators and their different expressive forms across diverse contexts. For this reason, it will play an essential role in the comparative exploration that this thesis is undertaking of the different living conditions and environments experienced by older adults. This includes examining their reciprocal family relationships and their efforts to adapt to numerous challenges and changing circumstances, particularly in the context of migration.

Undoubtedly, some indicators of solidarity are likely to increase in cases of *co-presence*, as seen among migrant elders living with their families under patterns of collective migration in Istanbul—for instance, functional solidarity, and consequently, affectual solidarity. In contrast, the prolonged reliance on virtual and imagined presence under harsh social conditions—such as those experienced by left-behind elders in Aleppo—may serve as a stronger stimulus for normative solidarity, reflected in an intensified sense of duty and responsibility toward the family, which might overweight affectual or associational indicators. A meaning that was expressed by one of the elders who remained in Aleppo, and feels a great sense of dignity to be able to work and support his family in Istanbul, while suppressing any expression of longing for their presence, and reports a minimum frequency of communication.

This raises the question: what does it mean for normative solidarity—or the sense of familial responsibility—to intensify for both sides of the relationship: aging parents and their children? What does it mean to remain committed to a family bond that has become largely 'imagined', as in the model of the transnational family in the twenty-

[117] Yan et al., 'A Latent Class Analysis of Intergenerational Relationships Among the Elderly Migrants in Nanjing, China'.

first century described by Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela[118]? Especially when oppressive conditions prevent the realization of other forms of solidarity, such as structural solidarity (e.g., living in close geographic proximity), associational solidarity (frequent meetings), and even functional solidarity (the exchange of emotional, practical, and financial support).

iv. Stating Limitations of 'Intergenerational Solidarity': A Critique of the Model's Euro-centricity and a Call for Expansion beyond Familial Exchange

From the above, it becomes clear that, like Baldassar, Bengtson has made a significant contribution to gerontological studies that are grounded in the relational dimensions of human life within family and community. However, these contributions remain largely shaped by the dominant Western model of the contemporary individual, both in their theoretical formulation and practical application. Their theoretical frameworks often take the case of economic migration as the normative model, overlooking other modern forms of migration such as forced displacement, irregular migration, and the cases where hardened borders are becoming increasingly violent in the national modern state regimes[119], which render many forms of intergenerational reciprocity nearly impossible.

Moreover, practical applications of intergenerational solidarity theory have not been immune to cultural bias. For instance, Bengtson and Roberts (1991) had excluded the consensual solidarity when calculating the interdependency of the model's indicators. To their findings, intellectual agreement or ideological alignment was deemed insignificant in fostering empathy and a sense of responsibility toward family members[120]. This conclusion, however, reflects a cultural bias that overlooks the cultural and historical specificity of non-Western communities. For instance, the influence of socio-political contexts such as that of the Syrian Albaath regimes can not be overlooked, as it sought to manipulate the familial cohesion of the Syrian family over decades, elevating '*consensual solidarity'* to an orchestrator position, dominating

[118] Bryceson and Vuorela, 'The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks, Oxford: Berg Publishers, Pp. 3-30.'
[119] Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (London New York: Verso, 2016).
[120] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.

many of the family loyalties and intergenerational exchange dynamics in many contexts. However, Syrian—Aleppian society in particular has developed a kind of antidote to such manipulation of familial cohesion through what might be described as a unifying spiritual ethos. Despite the fragmentation of familial relations brought about by various structural forces, religion and spiritual commitment continue to serve as powerful motivators and sources of cohesion, especially during moments of weakness or detachment. The effect of monotheistic religious belief extends beyond imagined presence; it possesses a binding force that actively links generations together.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Syrian—and specifically Aleppian—context examined in this study necessitates an expansion of intergenerational solidarity indicators beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family to encompass society at large. There is a pressing need to further develop and adapt the existing model in order to better understand how older adults navigate post-crisis living conditions. For instance, when we consider unique forms of reciprocal relationships grounded in empathy where direct profit is neither expected nor sought—such as neighborly relations among the elders themselves or emotionally supportive exchanges with younger generations outside that of one's own children or grandchildren, the explanatory power of solidarity theory becomes limited unless cultural specificities are taken into account. In such contexts, intergenerational ties often extend beyond the nuclear family, and concepts of parenthood and filial relationships diverge from the narrow frameworks established by Western family sociology.

3.2.5. The Realistic View of Intergenerational Relations: The Ambivalence Model

There is no doubt that intergenerational solidarity theory has faced internal criticism for being biased toward the more harmonious aspects of family relationships, often overlooking familial conflict or treating it as an anomaly.[121] This shift only occurred when psychological analysis was introduced as a core component in the study of intergenerational dynamics[122]. However, the study of conflict within intergenerational relationships remains underexplored, particularly in relation to older adults and their

[121] Ruth Katz and Ariela Lowenstein, "Theoretical Perspectives on Intergenerational Solidarity, " 37.
[122] Ibid., 38.

familial relations. This gap is largely due to a tendency within gerontology to assume that conflict naturally diminishes with age, as older individuals increasingly adopt more conciliatory roles in the face of growing dependency, an assumption central to the 'intergenerational stake hypothesis'[123]. Moreover, it is worth noting that most intergenerational conflicts, and the ambivalences that arise from them, are largely the result of economic pressures generated by modern capitalist relations, which leave elders totally dependent on the traditional family system for protection and support. Many of these ambivalences stem from the psychological strain associated with the dynamics of giving and receiving care within the family, particularly across generations[124]. For that, Bengtson expanded the paradigm of solidarity to include conflict, taking into account the disagreements that may arise as a result of too much closeness between family members[125].

However, the oscillation between solidarity and conflict is not sufficient as an explanatory logic to understand more complex cases in which contradiction is a defining feature of family relationships. Today, the multiplicity of roles has become a fundamental characteristic of the modern individual's relationship with their family and society, requiring them to navigate a burden of conflicting emotions generated by the overlap of roles and multiplicity of tasks, which turns out to be the source of *ambivalent* or contradictory feelings towards familial relations[126]**.** Beyond that, intergenerational family relationships are inherently inclined to produce ambivalent emotions, stemming from the accumulation of responsibilities, role conflicts, and the underlying desire to maintain kinship bonds[127]. What concerns us in this study are the ambivalent emotions that arise from the state of vulnerability, need, and dependency that characterizes the condition of older adults, particularly under exceptional circumstances[128], such as those experienced by Aleppian elders. Lüscher and Pillemer

[123] Edward J. Clarke et al., 'Types of Conflicts and Tensions Between Older Parents and Adult Children', *The Gerontologist* 39, no. 3 (1 June 1999): 261–70, doi:10.1093/geront/39.3.261.
[124] Hakime Pashazade et al., 'Coping Strategies of the Sandwich Generation in the Care Process: A Qualitative Study', *BMC Public Health* 24, no. 1 (4 December 2024): 3373, doi:10.1186/s12889-024-20327-w.
[125] Ruth Katz and Ariela Lowenstein, *"Theoretical Perspectives on Intergenerational Solidarity, "* 39.
[126] Ibid., 39-40.
[127] Jessica P. Lendon, Merril Silverstein, and Roseann Giarrusso, 'Ambivalence in Older Parent–Adult Child Relationships: Mixed Feelings, Mixed Measures', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76, no. 2 (April 2014): 272–84, doi:10.1111/jomf.12101.
[128] Ibid.

conceptualize '*ambivalence'* as a form of relational blockage, where the relationship becomes stagnant — a condition they describe as '*irresolvability'*[129].

> We speak of ambivalence in a social science perspective when dilemmas and polarisations of feelings, thoughts, actions and, furthermore, contradictions in social relations and social structures, which are relevant for personal and societal development, are interpreted as being basically irreconcilable[130].

According to them, while the nuclear family may be characterized by cohesion and empathy during childhood, family relationships tend to become more ambivalent and fluctuate over time as family members age. Intergenerational relations, therefore, are nothing but a blend of revealed ambivalence and a continuous effort to manage these contradictions. For this reason, identifying ambivalence in family relationships requires viewing them through a life course perspective, as such ambivalences unfold over time, particularly during key transitional events in the family's history[131].

This model highlights two primary contradictions operating at distinct levels. The first occurs at the meso-level—the social realm—where individuals navigate multiple and often conflicting roles and responsibilities. The second emerges at the micro-level**,** involving internal psychological tension and ambivalent feelings toward fulfilling these roles. Lüscher and Pillemer later extended the model by introducing a macro-level contradiction, emphasizing that socialization processes and broader societal conditions often instill individuals with conflicting norms and values, thereby deepening the experience of ambivalence[132].

Accordingly, the concept of ambivalence takes into account the tension arising from the push and pull between dependence and independence within family relationships, and thus, places a significant emphasis on individual agency[42]. For instance, Ingrid Connidis and Julie McMullin begin from the premise that agency is a fundamental human capacity in social interactions, as understood in anthropology. They argue that

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[129] European Observatory on Family Matters, *Family Issues between Gender and Generations: Seminar Report*, ed. Sylvia Trnka, Employment & Social Affairs Equality between Women and Men (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2000).
[130] Ibid., 16.
[131] Kurt Luescher and Karl Pillemer, 'Intergenerational Ambivalence: A New Approach to the Study of Parent-Child Relations in Later Life', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 60, no. 2 (1998): 413–25, doi:10.2307/353858.
[132] Ibid.

ambivalence emerges when external constraints limit an individual's ability to exercise this agency. Such ambivalence, in turn, can provoke human action that either reproduces the structural system that gave rise to the ambivalence or transforms it[133].

a) Ambivalence as a Driving Force Behind Coping Behaviors at Late Life

It is important to emphasize that this study does not address the ambivalences of family relationships as an outcome of internal structural shifts within the family system itself, as is commonly observed in Western contexts. Instead, it focuses on externally imposed ambivalences aligned with fragmentation as an outcome of war, forced migration, and prolonged hardships, which have inflicted repeated blows on familial cohesion and consequently on the ability of elders to sustain hardships. Yet, as is witnessed in this study, familial relations, drawing upon their own cultural resources, continue to exhibit resilience, and many elders seek to navigate their coping strategies despite all their experienced ambivalences within their families. This study tries to detect places of these contradicting stances, behaviors, or emotions that elder parents hold towards their familial relations, and tries to explain these ambivalences in light of their endeavour to come into terms with their continuously shifting familial reality.

For example, elderly men in Aleppo are well aware that aging entails a decline in earning capacity and an increasing dependency on their children—a condition that Islamic tradition addresses with clarity through legal and ethical injunctions urging care for elderly parents. Nevertheless, this religious and cultural framework does not shield them from feelings of helplessness in the face of their children's hardships in exile, nor from a sense of loss over their diminished roles as providers. These feelings are compounded by an acute awareness of their limited familial influence under conditions of forced separation and ongoing social disruption.

[133] Ingrid Connidis and Julie Mcmullin, 'Sociological Ambivalence and Family Ties: A Critical Perspective', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (1 August 2002): 558–67, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00558.x.

b) A Critical Use of the Ambivalence Model

Lüscher argues that researchers must adopt a postmodern sensibility, challenging idealized notions of intergenerational relationships in order to recognize and respect the diversity of attachments, loyalties, and family forms that now characterize family life globally. This perspective reflects Lüscher's naturalized view of ambivalence, which deliberately moves away from normatively or institutionally biased conceptions of the family[134].

Yet, one may ask: to what extent can a researcher operating from such a framework truly grasp the specificity of familial relationships in Muslim societies—such as in Aleppian culture—and thus comprehend the psychological trauma caused by distance, autonomy, and the severing of family bonds that are sustained by the sacred, enduring nature of religious and moral values?

While there exists a fundamental paradigmatic divergence in how ambivalence is perceived and interpreted, this does not preclude the possibility of borrowing, studying, and applying the concept across different social and historical contexts—at the micro, meso, and macro levels. This is made possible by the flexibility of the model, which Lüscher himself describes as a *heuristic hypothesis* rather than a fixed theory[135].

3.2.6. Conclusion of Chapter III

Building on the foregoing, this study is guided by two central propositions. First, is that intergenerational relationships function as a key coping mechanism through which older adults navigate and adapt to their lived realities. Second, is that these same relationships can also become sources of emotional strain, owing to the latent ambivalence they often entail and the accompanying psychological burden. Consequently, older adults may be compelled to seek alternative coping strategies that extend beyond the immediate boundaries of the nuclear family. Furthermore, as we will see in some cases, adopting some ambivalent positions and feelings by elders will serve as a coping mechanism *per se*, especially when talking about the cognitive and emotional coping mechanisms of elder parents.

[134] European Observatory on Family Matters, *Family Issues between Gender and Generations*, 21–23.
[135] European Observatory on Family Matters, *Family Issues between Gender and Generations*.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN ALEPPIAN ELDERS' INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

This chapter seeks to analyze the intertwined and complementary role of communication technology in the lives of elderly parents in Aleppo and Istanbul, as an integral part of their shifting social reality marked by familial fragmentation caused by displacement and forced migration. Drawing on the *Intergenerational Solidarity Model* and the theory of *Intergenerational Ambivalence*, this chapter considers communication technology as a vital means of investing in familial IG capital, which takes precedence over its broader communicative functions. It also reflects on how meanings and uses of this technology are largely shaped by unequal social and familial structures of these parents.

Results show that the familial dimension not only precedes the technological but fundamentally shapes its meaning and purpose. In contexts where elderly individuals have access to stable material conditions and consistent digital infrastructure, particularly among participants residing in Istanbul, the use of technology to reinforce parental and maternal roles reaches its fullest potential. In these contexts, transnational communication becomes a means for continued emotional, financial, and moral support, allowing senior parents to reclaim a sense of social value and active participation in family life, despite geographical separation.

In contrast, in the more vulnerable settings, such as those experienced by many participants in Aleppo, technology often fails to function as an effective coping mechanism, and a new form of transnational familial solidarity emerges marked by silence and 'uncommunication'. The chapter also reveals gendered dimensions of technological engagement: elder mothers often use communication tools to symbolically stage family interactions, while elder fathers tend to reduce them to functional, material transactions that compensate for their diminished centrality within

the family. Together, these findings open space for deeper inquiry into the hierarchical and complex dynamics between technological mediation and family life, moving beyond simplistic discourses of digital empowerment toward a more grounded understanding of coping amid social fragility and intergenerational separation.

4.1. Integrating the IG Theoretical Framework in Transnational Communication of Eleppian Elders

Social media usage lies at the core of our journey, exploring how older adults in Aleppo navigate their reality and adapt to circumstances that have unfolded over fourteen years of crisis. However, observing and analyzing Aleppan seniors' interactions on social media platforms in general, as well as the dynamics of these interactions in relation to their psychological, physiological, social, and economic conditions as elderly individuals, is an extensive and multifaceted endeavour. In light of this complexity, our research framework, grounded in the study of intergenerational relationships and social cohesion, serves as the guideline for examining both the contributions and limitations of social media in facilitating these intergenerational communication as these kin relationships form the foundation of their psychological and physical well-being.[136]. Within this perspective, coping strategies emerge as mutually interdependent: mastering one strategy facilitates mastery of another.[137] This chapter is, specifically, on how integrating communication technologies into Aleppan older adults' lives has allowed them to strengthen family ties and consequently improve their mental and physical health.

This optimistic perspective on the situation of elderly individuals aligns closely with Intergenerational Solidarity theory, which underpins our investigation of the ways social media can reinforce family relationships for older adults. Yet, bridging the gap between theory and real-life practice reveals certain shortcomings and gaps that social media has not managed to fill. In some cases, rather than enhancing family bonds, digital communication played a negative role when it comes to these relationships vital to the well-being of older adults.[138] That said, the **o**pposite of solidarity is not

[136] Bengtson, 'Beyond the Nuclear Family'.
[137] Demers et al., 'Coping Strategies and Social Participation in Older Adults'.
[138] Azevedo and Ponte, 'Intergenerational Solidarity or Intergenerational Gap?'

necessarily family conflict; rather, it is the ambivalence and vacillation that characterize family relationships over the life course.[139] In this regard, Intergenerational Ambivalence framework prompts us to locate positions where older adults' ambivalent and conflicting emotions regarding their families—and their role within them—intersect with the digital communication landscape. Utilizing these two divergences of the Intergenerational Theory helps us better understand the variety of contradicting perspectives that Aleppian elder parents have expressed regarding their use of social media as a coping strategy.

The first perspective views family relationships as a combination of multiple factors that, when strengthened, enhance family cohesion and, in turn, have a beneficial impact on the elderly's well-being.[140] The second perspective, however, moves beyond this 'positive bias' toward a more comprehensive and balanced approach**,** recognizing family relationships as inherently contradictory and complex—a fusion of sociological and psychological dimensions.[141] From this viewpoint, elderly behavior in later life can be understood as an attempt to manage and minimize these contradictions**.**[142] This, in turn, allows us to examine the negative effects of intergenerational ambivalence on the later stages of life where social media fails to grant that mitigating effect.

4.2. Social Media as a Source of Intergenerational Solidarity

In 1991, Bengtson and others proposed a theory of Intergenerational Solidarity, which draws from interdisciplinary sociological perspectives, viewing family solidarity as a combination of various elements. Each of these elements has specific indicators whose growth signals a higher degree of family cohesion: "affection, association, consensus, resource sharing, the strength of familism norms, and the opportunity structure for parent-child interaction."**[143]** The theory also establishes an interdependent relationship among these elements, so that an increase in one often signals an increase in some others. Accordingly, we can examine what social media offers older adults from

[139] Kurt Lüscher, 'Looking at Ambivalences: The Contribution of a "New-Old" View of Intergenerational Relations to the Study of the Life Course', *Advances in Life Course Research* 10 (2005): 93–128, doi:10.1016/S1040-2608(05)10003-3.
[140] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.
[141] Luescher and Pillemer, 'Intergenerational Ambivalence'.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.

Aleppo in terms of intergenerational family cohesion by monitoring the cohesion indicators outlined in the theory.

4.2.1. Associational Solidarity and the Technology of Communication

This facet of intergenerational solidarity involves measuring the frequency and patterns of communication between generations, such as in-person gatherings, phone calls, emails, and more.[144] It is noteworthy that these communication indicators were initially formulated in 1988; therefore they do not fully reflect the rapid technological changes affecting older adults today in terms of their familial role and participation in intergenerational solidarity.

All interviews conducted in the framework of this thesis confirm prior studies suggesting that WhatsApp and Facebook are the most commonly used platforms among older adults. In particular, WhatsApp—employed to communicate with children and grandchildren—combines auditory, visual, and textual cues in real time, offering intensive communication opportunities. However, this frequency factor relies on optimal circumstances, unaffected by external constraints like inadequate network infrastructure or internal factors such as the health conditions of parents and children, both of which may limit communication. Bengtson refers to these facilitating or restricting factors as the "opportunity structure" for intergenerational cohesion.[145]

Therefore, older adults in the eastern regions, who are considered the most unfortunate and adversely affected in all aspects during the crisis, reported difficulties communicating with their children living abroad. For example, many complained about the high cost of internet packages**,** which they must purchase at their own expense given the complete lack of governmental support for electricity and internet services in those areas. Consequently, the frequency measure of real-time and immediate family communication made possible by digital communication, besides its influence on the family-role-expression by the Aleppian elderly appeared more pronounced in our interviews with those residing in the western part**.**

[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.

4.2.1.1. Implications of Virtual *'Co-Being'* on Elder Parents Relations

The conducted interviews with older adults in the western region revealed that using digital communication tools as a coping mechanism has had a particularly transformative effect on maternal relationships. These platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for mothers to extend and deepen their maternal role well into later life, despite the exceptional challenges of migration, displacement, and hard borders preventing return—realities that Aleppan families have rarely faced before.

One Aleppian grandmother reflected on her daily digital practices and emotional strategies to remain present in her children's lives despite physical separation:

> This is what I do every morning—I wake up and send morning greetings to my children so they don't feel estranged. I tell them, 'Reply to me the way I message you.' I mean, I always want them to stay optimistic, to have hope. To feel like someone cares about them—you know what I mean? It's not necessary for me to talk to them every single day. That's not the condition for me—to ask them daily what they're doing, what they've eaten or drunk. Actually, I've raised my children to be independent. But at the same time, I still ask, 'What did you eat today?' Honestly, you've been on my mind—I was worried you might be craving something. Like, I cooked such-and-such dishes today... Oh, why did I even remind you of that dish?[146]

As this exemplary excerpt of senior mother Najwa shows, this act of daily digital communication serves as a symbolic extension of maternal care and presence, highlighting the use of technology as a coping tool to bridge physical distance. This, with other interviews, highlights that while parent-child ties have largely endured through digital communication, the focus of these relationships has shifted toward emotional exchange and moral support, as the material aspects of parenting have diminished. İn Najwa's case for example, while no direct material support is exchanged, the emotional labor embedded in routine greetings—alongside the evocation of food and feeding as a distinctively maternal gesture of love and care performed in virtual form—reveals how affectual solidarity is sustained across borders.

This dynamic is evident in the fact that all female participants over sixty reported frequent, daily communication with their children, whereas fathers had lower communication frequency. Such findings underscore how mothers, by nature, tend to

[146] "Najwa." Interview by author. Aleppo, November 15, 2024.

express emotions more readily. In this context, WhatsApp platform, in particular, has provided them virtually unlimited scope to fulfill their maternal, nurturing role from a distance. This observation highlights Bladassar's view of transnational dynamics of emotions, where exclusively maternal feelings of longing and missing children are prompting more frequent forms of 'virtual co-presence'[147].

4.2.2. Affectual Solidarity: Aleppian Elder's Transnational 'Emotional Labor' via WhatsApp

Bengtson defines the measure of affectual solidarity in intergenerational relationships as the set of reciprocal 'positive sentiments' that family members hold toward one another[148]. Social media today has allowed for verbal sentimental exchange more than for physical interactive expressions of these positive sentiments. Although intergenerational positive sentimental exchange on WhatsApp would also vary in intensity and pattern according to family dynamics and other cohesion indicators such as 'normative solidarity' or level of commitment to familial roles, Aleppan older adults in general used peculiar verbal expressions talking to and about their children. This became clearly evident through the written and spoken language used on social media when communicating with their children. The first thing that stands out in this emotional discourse is the power of naming and the affectionate nicknames given to children and grandchildren. For instance, one mother, Malak, saves her son's name in her phone as "May God bless him," while a grandfather labels his grandson "Beloved of the Masses, " and another mother calls her son "The One Dear to my Heart and Soul."

The fact that older adults tend to use a warm, endearing and positive style of speech as a coping mechanism to deepen emotional bonds and foster a sense of belonging with their children and family members in later life was further enhanced by the ample space for parental emotional expression that communication technologies allow for. Aleppan elders were peculiar in their digitally positive sentimental expressions as a response to their multi-layered vulnerability caused by the impossibility of physical familial role**.**

[147] Baldassar, 'Missing Kin and Longing to Be Together', August 2008.
[148] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.

Likewise, keeping abreast of the day-to-day details of their children's and grandchildren's lives emerges as another indicator of affectual solidarity expressed by Aleppan seniors. In their conversations, older adults are keen to show how much they know about their children's lives, speaking at length—with clear interest and a tone of pride—about their children's daily routines, habits, and activities. It was striking to see grandparents demonstrate such detailed knowledge of their children's and grandchildren's lives abroad. This very level of detailed knowledge itself created a sort of gratifying sentimental exchange for elder Aleppian parents and grandparents, which is made possible only by today's digital communication technology. Their children, in particular, would receive abrupt, intrusive questions like *"Where do you go? What did you eat? What are you doing?"* at any time.

It was striking also that this detailed knowledge—arising from a constant sense of intangible *virtual* presence via WhatsApp —became a measure of filial devotion and a sign of parental satisfaction with their children. Luna was very satisfied that her migrant children in Istanbul would frequently ask their mother and father about detailed issues in their everyday life. She draws a comparison between her children and others who just send greetings to their elderly parents in Aleppo to conclude that : *"Our children are blessed… They really care about us; 'Where did you go? Where did you come from? What are you cooking today?'"(Luna)*[149].

From a phenomenological perspective, this technologically mediated and heightened IG sensitivity to the mundane reflects a reconstitution of virtual relational presence as a compensatory mechanism for distance, wherein emotional closeness is maintained through the digital circulation of everyday minutiae. Within the Aleppian elders' IG diasporic reality, the ordinary becomes meaningful as a vehicle for emotional connection across distance. These digitally-shared micro-updates serve as affective capital that sustain a sense of lived-togetherness or *'mutual being'* despite spatial separation, a matter which helps elder parents maintain a sense of continuous importance in their children's lives[150]. Viewed as a coping mechanism, these micro

[149] "Luna," interview by author, Aleppo, October 31, 2024.
[150] Raelene Wilding et al., 'Digital Media and the Affective Economies of Transnational Families', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 5 (1 September 2020): 639–55, doi:10.1177/1367877920920278.

exchanges make older parents feel a constant presence, give their familial role new dimensions, and increase their satisfaction with their children.

4.2.2.1. Further Implications: Affectual Solidarity Through Exchange of Silence

However, affectual solidarity through social media does not manifest solely in the daily IG micro-updates shared via WhatsApp, but also in what is kept uncommunicated and hidden as well. Since this form of digitally mediated circulation of family updates is essentially subjective, it becomes more easily manipulated and controlled, especially on the part of aged parents to maintain IG well-being and sense of agency. However, because of the richness of this unique form of transnational IG affectual solidarity, it is further elaborated in a complete sub-section on digital coping through silence[151].

4.2.3. Resilience Through Functional Solidarity via WhatsApp: Reclaiming Agency from the 'Passive Recipient' Identity

Bengtson defines functional solidarity as one dimension of intergenerational cohesion, measured by the extent of reciprocal exchange of resources between generations. This exchange goes beyond purely material support to include any form of assistance where one party depends on the other in some aspect of life[152]. From this perspective, we can observe varieties of reciprocal relationships unfolding on social media across generations. Since this study centers on older adults, the discussion of the findings in this regard focuses solely on instances where older adults act as the support providers and play an active role in these reciprocal dynamics, facilitated by modern technological communication tools.

Being well-informed and continuously updated about their children's lives from afar is by no means a fruitless effort. Elder parents from Aleppo typically go beyond mere transactional exchange of daily life, to being providers of other symbolic and emotional forms of support[153]. Both fieldwork observations and the interviews have

[151] See pp. 69–81.
[152] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.
[153] Wilding et al., 'Digital Media and the Affective Economies of Transnational Families'.

revealed that despite having limited resources, Aleppian elders have found that using WhatsApp to incorporate religious practices provides a way to reinforce their paternal and maternal roles at old age—despite the distance—and to respond to the detailed and, sometimes, disappointing information they receive about their children's lives.

Najwa, for example, mentions that she asks her children several times a day, "What are you doing?" When they tell her, she advises them to recite a specific prayer related to that activity so they won't fall into depression, as she puts it. This interaction has fostered a deep, almost unconscious form of communication between the senior mother and her children, which Baldassar describes as the 'imagined co-presence', grounding motherhood in an enduring spiritual and emotional realm for them. For this aged woman, continuing her maternal role has given her a sense of emotional superiority over her expatriate children: she complains about their talk of depression and repeatedly says, *"What can we say? We have every reason to be depressed, yet we're doing fine."* [154]

Malak and her husband, who uses a wheelchair, both in their seventies, kept their smartphones within reach, always ready for a call or message from their married daughters, who are also migrants living in Jeddah and Dubai. During my visit with them in Esenyurt, I observed how Malak meticulously guided her daughter through a WhatsApp consultation on preparing a traditional Aleppian recipe. Malak spent an hour on a video call, offering step-by-step instructions as if they were cooking together. Throughout the call, she remained attentive to my presence, prepared a light snack, and tended to her husband's needs[155].

All the cooking and meal preparation took place entirely during this video call—both audio and video. Today, WhatsApp enables various forms of copresence[156] and older parents who are physically able to engage in lengthy calls whenever they wish, are engaging in this 'mutuality of being'[157] to reclaim a central role by offering advice and expertise on everyday matters such as household management and child-rearing.

[154] "Najwa," interview by author, Aleppo, November 15, 2024.
[155] Owing to modern communication technology, older adults are increasingly drawn into a world of multitasking.
[156] Baldassar, 'Missing Kin and Longing to Be Together', August 2008.
[157] Wilding et al., 'Digital Media and the Affective Economies of Transnational Families'.

4.3. Intergenerational Ambivalence and Communication Technology in Aleppian Elders' Life

From the above, it appears that social media has played a significant role for elderly Aleppians in strengthening family bonds and maintaining their roles within the family. However, the current thesis findings also show that the dynamics of family relationships in the face of the societal changes affecting Aleppo are more complex than they may seem. This complexity necessitates viewing technology in the lives of older adults through the lens of intergenerational ambivalence theory. The founders of this theory argue that contradictions in family relationships emerge on two levels over time, as children mature and become independent. The first level involves structural, sociological, and institutional contradictions, where (elder) individuals find themselves torn between two conflicting social norms that prescribe opposing roles. The second level consists of psychological and personal contradictions, wherein individuals experience conflicting emotions and thoughts about their own family members.[158]The following sections use the concept of ambivalence to better elucidate the findings on Aleppian elders' intergenerational relations while utilizing communication technology as a means to cope with their challenging circumstances.

4.3.1. Social Media and Self-Affirmation: The Presence of the Smartphone as an Integral Part of Daily Life's Drama

Thinking about the ICT role in later life prompts us to think not only to recall its communicative purposes as it works fine for Intergenerational solidarity, but also to ponder upon the psychosocial atmosphere provoked by the presence of this technology *per se* as a vital actor in intergenerational ambivalences context as well[159]. For instance, WhatsApp, with its ability to store voice and text messages for extended periods, has played a major role in reinforcing participants' sense of importance,

[158] Luescher and Pillemer, 'Intergenerational Ambivalence'.
[159] Yinkai Zhang, Yu Guo, and Xue Bai, 'Internet Use, Intergenerational Ambivalence, and Subjective Well-Being among Chinese Urban Aging Adults: Do Living Arrangements Matter?', *Health & Social Care in the Community* 2024, no. 1 (2024): 1812659, doi:10.1155/2024/1812659.

centrality, agency, and social value for participants who expressed a weak sense of these elements in their current life[160].

Take Raifa, an elderly mother in her eighties, who frequently reviews messages she receives from friends and acquaintances in front of her son, with whom she lives. She believes that his affection for her, or at least his expression of it, has been significantly influenced by his wife, whom she perceives as harsh and abusive, sometimes even resorting to physical violence against her. According to Raifa, her son often asks her to put away her phone and leave quickly before his wife overhears, fearing that her jealousy might spark conflict between them.

Raifa plays her received voice messages, full of warmth, love, and admiration from friends and relatives in front of her son, using them as a way to compensate for her lost sense of significance in her close intergenerational relations. Due to her social circumstances and repeated displacement, she now finds herself living with her son and his family, far from the home where she was once the matriarch. As a result, Raifa feels stripped of the central role she once held within her extended family, a role that was deeply rooted in the intergenerational solidarity encouraged by social codes embedded in the broader cultural fabric of her community.

On the other hand, Raifa takes great pride in her son's family's achievements in Istanbul, often encouraging others to follow her daughter-in-law's Facebook page, where she showcases her artistic work. She speaks extensively about these accomplishments, highlighting them as a source of admiration and validation. During conversations with her, these Facebook highlights—from the daughter-in-law who treated her well in Istanbul—naturally emerge in contrast to WhatsApp interactions of the other, "wicked" daughter-in-law, whom she sees as manipulative. Raifa describes how this daughter-in-law, with whom she lives, uses WhatsApp to sow discord, serve her own opportunistic interests, and emotionally manipulate her husband.

[160] Veronika Hämmerle et al., 'WhatsApp's Influence on Social Relationships of Older Adults:', in *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies for Ageing Well and E-Health* (6th International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies for Ageing Well and e-Health, Prague, Czech Republic: SCITEPRESS - Science and Technology Publications, 2020), 93–98, doi:10.5220/0009470100930098.

Through these comparisons, she unconsciously draws a stark contrast between the two daughters-in-law, reinforcing in the listener's mind the dark reality of the mistreatment she endures. In doing so, she deepens the perception of her marginalization and lost centrality within her son's household, linking it to the emotional and even physical violence she faces. Also, Raifa speaks with great admiration about her grandchildren's achievements in Istanbul, which they eagerly share with her and their uncle—her son—via WhatsApp. She particularly delights in voice messages from her young granddaughter speaking in Turkish, finding it charming and endearing. However, she recalls how her jealous daughter-in-law cannot tolerate seeing her husband listen with admiration and praise these messages. In response, she snatches the phone from his hand and shuts it off. Raifa chuckles sarcastically at this behavior before noting that such incidents often escalate into fits of anger and heated arguments, sometimes culminating in violence.

These examples reveal how social media has become deeply intertwined with the lives of older adults[161], playing an active role in their daily drama, not just by transmitting events, but by shaping them. Raifa, as an octogenarian grandmother, finds herself caught between two ambivalent realities: the central role she once held in the extended family, where generations were emotionally tied to the matriarch, and the fragmented nuclear family of today, shaped by exceptional social circumstances, where she struggles to find her place.

This shifting family dynamic leaves her in a state of constant observation and anticipation, monitoring the evolving family scenarios that determine her fluctuating status within the household. With no tangible means to assert her presence, her mobile phone becomes her lifeline—a tool through which she navigates her reality. Sometimes, she channels her anxieties into it, searching for videos on mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dynamics, explaining that she does so "*to stay vigilant and protect herself*." Within the framework of *intergenerational ambivalence*, Raifa finds herself torn between two conflicting realities[162]. There is, on one hand, her state of dependency

[161] Peter Ractham, Angsana Techatassanasoontorn, and Laddawan Kaewkitipong, 'Old But Not Out: Social Media Use and Older Adults' Life Satisfaction', *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 26 (27 February 2022), doi:10.3127/ajis.v26i0.3269.
[162] Luescher and Pillemer, 'Intergenerational Ambivalence'.

and her rightful expectation for financial and emotional support from her adult children, on the other, her longing for independence and deep nostalgia for her home where she once held the central role as a provider—both materially and emotionally. In this context, social media extends beyond its idealized function as a tool for maintaining family cohesion. Instead, it serves as a coping mechanism for older adults, helping them navigate the uncertainties of shifting intergenerational ties—their moments of closeness, distance, and instability.

4.3.2. Intersection of Social Media and Work as Coping Strategies: Social vs. Material Capital

a) Social Technology and the Restoration of Agency

In an environment fraught with obstacles to technological progress, using social media and digital tools for economic gain often shifts research toward highlighting challenges rather than opportunities. The most pressing of these challenges is the scarcity of electricity and, by extension, unstable internet access, both of which rely almost entirely on individual efforts, as the previous Syrian government under Al-Alassad regime has largely, if not entirely, abdicated its responsibility for providing these essential services[163].

The impact of weak telecommunications infrastructure is particularly pronounced in the eastern part of the city, which has suffered the most neglect and destruction[164]. As a result, most residents (including the elder population) are forced into physically demanding labor as their primary means of livelihood[165] which is commonly referred to as toil or hard labor *(al-kadh)*. This inequality deepens when considering older adults, especially in the eastern areas, where they face disadvantages not only economically but also in health, education, and digital literacy, all significantly lower compared to their peers in the western part of the city. While inequality is often treated

[163] Fuad Alhaj Omar et al., 'The Effect of the Syrian Crisis on Electricity Supply and the Household Life in North-West Syria: A University-Based Study' 3 (1 July 2020).
[164] Mateo Nelson, 'East Aleppo: Years of "Deliberate" Neglect and Poor Services', *Syria Direct*, 31 July 2024, https://syriadirect.org/east-aleppo-years-of-deliberate-neglect-and-poor-services/.
[165] enab10 Ula, 'Elderly Persons Forced to Work Hard Jobs in Syria to Support Themselves or Their Families', *Enab Baladi*, 2 September 2024, https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/09/elderly-persons-forced-to-work-hard-jobs-in-syria-to-support-themselves-or-their-families/.

as a given in gerontological studies, this reality should not prevent us from exploring the potential benefits of economic activity through social media. In particular, we can examine its role in reinforcing the social and familial centrality of older adults, should such opportunities exist.

b) Reducing Technology to the Material vs. Embracing Its Full Potential: Between Avoidance, Selectivity, and Openness

To begin, it is essential to recognize the cultural specificity of the Arab world, with the Aleppo community serving as a case study, particularly in its strong adherence to role specialization within the family. This norm has long reinforced the father's economic centrality within the nuclear family, a role that remains significant even today. Historically, the father's position as the household head and founder of the family's trade or profession was particularly pronounced in the extended family structure. This economic authority guaranteed him lifelong status and influence within the family. However, this reality has changed dramatically as several historical factors have eroded the father's financial dominance, but the most recent and most devastating has been the Syrian crisis and war.

The loss of property, forced migration, displacement, and family fragmentation over the past decade have accelerated the decline of paternal economic influence, often stripping elderly fathers of their financial centrality long before the traditional retirement age. For elderly fathers, , particularly, interviews show that this sudden loss of economic relevance has had severe psychosocial consequences on their well-being. A stark example is Maher, a participant in his seventies who was diagnosed with severe melancholic depression at the onset of the crisis and loss of his property. His condition rapidly deteriorated his physical health, leading him to withdraw completely from social participation.

His self-imposed isolation was not alleviated by the rise of digital communication, despite the widespread use of smartphones, WhatsApp, and other social technologies within his family. Instead, rather than bridging the gap, digital communication seemed to reinforce his detachment , even though three of his four children live abroad , with two unable to return for over eleven years. One of his most striking justifications for

not owning a smartphone was his belief that phones are only for businesspersons. As he put it: *"When I was on my horse saddles, running my factory and private tutoring business, I never needed a mobile phone. Why would I carry one now?"* [166]

It is striking how this elderly Aleppian man has internalized the utilitarian essence of technology[167] , viewing it through the lens of profit and material gain. He applies this perspective even to modern communication tools, believing that when digital technology ceases to serve a practical purpose, its use becomes nothing more than idle distraction. This conviction leads him to reject social media and messaging apps, restricting his smartphone use exclusively to YouTube, where he watches satirical series that provide entertainment, distraction, and an escape from the painful reality of being an aging, ailing father who has completely lost his centrality in his family.

Again, Maher finds himself ambivalently caught between two opposing drives; the inherent dependency of old age while clinging to agency and centrality in his intergenerational relations. Yet, his avoidance of digital communication is not merely a reaction to this ambiguous position —it is also a tactic to reclaim a sense of authority and control in a different way by insisting that if his children wish to contact him, they must make an effort to do so. Instead of maintaining direct communication, he entrusts this responsibility to his youngest and only remaining daughter, *Fatuma* , whom he refers to as '*al-qāʾim bi-l-aʿmāl'* (chargé d'affaires). Anyone wishing to speak with him must wait until Fatuma returns from university and until "Professor Maher" is available at home —a subtle yet deliberate way of reasserting his importance through absence. *"When they want to talk to me, they ask Fatuma—my daughter, the 'chargé d'affaires'—'When is your father coming back?' They wait for me, I speak with them, and that's it."*[168]

The language in this statement alone reveals a deep longing for lost authority, material centrality, and social status. By appointing intermediaries for communication, strategically employing the element of waiting, and making contact with him a

[166] "Maher." Interview by author. Aleppo, October 24, 2024.
[167] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York&London: Garland Pub., 1977).
[168] "Maher." Interview by author. Aleppo, October 24, 2024.

privilege rather than an immediate right, he subtly reasserts a sense of control.[169] It is also notable how this pattern of waiting for children to initiate contact rather than reaching out to them is particularly common among old adult paternal figures who once held strong economic centrality and social standing within the family. This behavior was especially prevalent among those residing in the western part of the city. This finding emerges not only from direct interviews and case studies but also from incidental references in other conversations throughout the research.

On the other hand, the interplay between material value, technology, and avoidance strategies —rooted in a deep-seated distrust of digital communication among elders[170]—takes a more pragmatic form in Adnan, another elderly Aleppian. Unlike Maher, Adnan has opted for a selective engagement with social media, restricting his digital interactions solely to Whatsapp for minimal interaction with friends, relatives, family members abroad. However, his drive to use this app was primarily his administrative work, which relies 90% on WhatsApp as he puts it. "The most devastating feeling for a father in old age is to become a burden on his children, " Adnan often says. Determined to avoid this fate, he continues to financially sustain himself and even provides occasional support to his expatriate children in Istanbul during difficult times—without expecting anything in return. For Adnan, earning a livelihood through WhatsApp has been a key factor in preserving his emotional stability, psychological well-being, and physical health—even though much of his family, including his wife, has been living in Turkey for over nine years , with neither side able to visit the other.

The theme of hiding-to-be-seen is again found in his statement:

"I talk to my children from time to time. I have a habit—I don't like to be the one to call them; I prefer when they reach out to me. Of course, they have their own responsibilities and busy lives. Sometimes, they take a while before calling, while other times, they call me for two or three days in a row. There are also times when a whole

[169] I had to coordinate with Fatuma as well to speak with Maher.

[170] Bran Knowles and Vicki L. Hanson, 'Older Adults' Deployment of "Distrust"', *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 25, no. 4 (31 August 2018): 1–25, doi:10.1145/3196490.

week goes by without a call. Naturally, that's upsetting. How can a parent's own children not check on them? Now, I'm living alone, but what can one do? They have their own circumstances and obligations. In the end, what truly matters? Their happiness and well-being. As long as their lives are going smoothly, that's all that counts. May God ease their path and grant them success. That's all I ask."[171]

Managing to grasp the material and practical aspects in communication technology, Adnan greatly restricts the other leisure activities on his smartphone:

"As for YouTube, I don't use it at all—never. I don't work with YouTube in any way. The only exception is if, by chance, I want to listen to the news or something similar. I might put on my headphones for a bit of news and then close it. But most of my communication happens on WhatsApp. Beyond that, I don't really use anything else."[172]The tense relationship between elderly men from Aleppo and social media, as well as their tendency to define it in terms of its role in accumulating financial capital, is closely linked to the absence of their children. This absence has significantly diminished their sense of importance and centrality within their families. In response, they seek to reclaim this central role in ways that show a clear pattern—favoring the position of the recipient or the passive party rather than that of the active and initiative participant in IG transnational affective exchange.

This perspective is reinforced by the case of Abd al-Salam, a seventy-year-old monitoring participant, whose experience contrasts with many of his peers. Unlike most elderly men in Aleppo, none of his children have migrated, and his household includes multiple generations. While his open-minded approach can be partially attributed to his personal traits and profession as a painter, we must also consider the meso-level social context that has enabled this openness.

Living in western Aleppo, Abd al-Salam enjoys a relatively comfortable financial situation compared to his peers, with fewer caregiving responsibilities toward his five children, some of whom also share in the family income. Since his children are unmarried and have not formed separate family units abroad, he is not burdened by the distress that often comes with generational separation. Instead, he benefits from a healthy intergenerational exchange within

[171] "Adnan," interview by author, Aleppo, November 9, 2024.
[172] "Adnan," interview by author, Aleppo, November 9, 2024.

his household, where he still feels a strong sense of responsibility and centrality. His continued work as an artist also shields him from the anxiety of becoming financially dependent on his children.

Unlike many elderly men in Aleppo, Abd al-Salam actively engages with multiple social media platforms, including Telegram, Instagram, and Messenger. However, given his age, he still finds WhatsApp the most practical and easy to use and is also regularly active on Facebook. Unlike his peers, he expresses no skepticism or concerns about digital technology. On the contrary, he leverages social media extensively to promote his artwork, stimulate discussion, and expand his social capital.

Besides that, unlike other elderly men who maintain a distant relationship with digital spaces, Abd al-Salam embraces social media as a tool for personal and professional growth. He actively cultivates a digital capital of rich of network of friends and followers, engaging with them openly and forming meaningful personal connections, without hesitation or reluctance, expressing a great deal of flexibility, which in turn is reflected in his overall well-being and mental health[173].

These examples highlight the interdependent relationship between the use of technology and the maintenance of healthy intergenerational (IG) relations as coping mechanisms that help elder parents retain a sense of familial and social importance. After the crisis—marked by the migration of family members and the erosion of their social capital—many elders lost their symbolic centrality within the family. As a result, their engagement with technological communication was often marked by distrust and avoidance. In the best cases, however, they embraced digital tools when these technologies enabled them to restore their sense of centrality, agency, and material control within their intergenerational relationships.

[173] Yupeng Cui et al., 'The Impact of Digital Social Capital on the Health of Older Adults: A Moderated Mediation Effect Test', *Digital Health* 10 (9 May 2024): 20552076241253095, doi:10.1177/20552076241253095.

4.4. Coping by Silence: '*Unburdening*' Transnational Intergenerational Solidarity in Times of Crisis

Contemporary gerontology have recently demonstrated a growing interest in the dynamics of transnational IG support exchange in light of globalization and advancements in communication technologies. Loretta Baldassar's pioneering works in this field explore the transformative role of digital media in diversifying forms of transnational *'non-co-present care'*[174] both in its material and emotional dimensions[175]. However, the prevailing conceptualizations of transnationalism remain insufficient for capturing the complexities of politically, socially, and economically marginalized non-Western societies. In such contexts, much of the modernist optimism surrounding the capacity of communication technologies to sustain transnational support networks[176] tends to fade. This optimistic bias is precisely what has led much of the existing literature to emphasize spoken and overt forms of communication as the primary mode of transnational care. On the other hand, less scholarly attention was given to alternative communicative practices such as *silence* and the concealment of emotions or facts, which may constitute equally meaningful forms of transnational care and support responsive to sensitive familial and dynamics under 'immobilizing regimes' and restrictive migration policies[177].

Through this thesis ethnographic fieldwork it became evident that *affectual solidarity*[178] via digital communication is not only expressed through the IG exchange of everyday life details on platforms like WhatsApp, which allows elder parents to feel a sense of continued co-presence and to redefine their familial role, but also through what is deliberately withheld. Notably, all elder participants in Aleppo, whether those living in relatively comfortable conditions in the western districts or in the more

[174] Lynnette Arnold, 'Cross-Border Communication and the Enregisterment of Collective Frameworks for Care', *Medical Anthropology* 39, no. 7 (2 October 2020): 624–37, doi:10.1080/01459740.2020.1717490.
[175] Dora Sampaio, 'Caring by Silence: How (Un)Documented Brazilian Migrants Enact Silence as a Care Practice for Aging Parents', *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 18, no. 3 (2 July 2020): 281–300, doi:10.1080/15350770.2020.1787038.
[176] Loretta Baldassar, 'De-Demonizing Distance in Mobile Family Lives: Co-Presence, Care Circulation and Polymedia as Vibrant Matter', *Global Networks* 16, no. 2 (2016): 145–63, doi:10.1111/glob.12109.
[177] Laura Merla, Majella Kilkey, and Loretta Baldassar, 'Examining Transnational Care Circulation Trajectories within Immobilizing Regimes of Migration: Implications for Proximate Care', *Journal of Family Research* 32, no. 3 (2 December 2020): 514–36, doi:10.20377/jfr-351.
[178] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.

disadvantaged eastern neighborhoods, had expressed a consistently bleak perception of their children's lives abroad. There was a shared belief that their children are already burdened with enough worries and were not in an enviable situation in diaspora, which fairly justifies withholding sensitive information via digital communication. In light of that, there was a near-unanimous agreement among elder participants that they refrain from sharing all their hardships or moments of vulnerability with their children. Instead, they assured their attempt to project an image of well-being and stability. Notably, what remains unspoken in digital communication is not limited to emotional expressions, but extends to the concealment of critical events such as illness or hospital visits, based on their belief that sharing such distressing experiences would cause emotional harm to their migrant children who may feel helpless or guilty. For the elder parents on the other hand, this act of silence reflects their conscious effort to avoid being perceived as a *burden* by their migrant children, as they appear to resist this identity by all possible means[179].

4.4.1. The Silent Solidarity: Meaning and Survival Trade-Off in Socially Unequal Contexts

The in-depth interviews conducted within this thesis generally revolved around similar themes such as investigating IG solidarity indicators from an elder parent's perspective along their expressed modes of resilience. However, according to their unequal socio-economic background, there had emerged structural differences between participants not only in their overall narrative style but also in the types of information they reported both sharing and concealing from their IG transnational communication.

While those from the western districts were more inclined to suppress sharing emotions with their children, such as longing, loneliness, or depression, they did not express reluctance to share big troubles and emergency events with their children. In general, their narrative style revealed an agentic choice through emotional self-management and a strategic denial of vulnerability made evident by enacting

[179] Eileen Cahill et al., '"You Don't Want to Burden Them": Older Adults' Views on Family Involvement in Care', *Journal of Family Nursing* 15, no. 3 (August 2009): 295–317, doi:10.1177/1074840709337247.

embodied forms of coping, as this lonely left-behind elder mother from western district states about her only son abroad:

" Not once did I say to him "I'm falling apart" or "I'm not okay, " or "it's hard without you"... No, not at all. On the contrary, I acted normal. Going out, coming back, living my life, relying on myself. I never said to him "I'm going through a crisis." My life was going on in the end. I am no longer attached to him… Besides, he's already abroad so it's not reasonable to burden him with worries about me."[180]

However, those from the eastern districts, especially in the most vulnerable cases tended to conceal not only emotions, but sometimes major events, such as illness or hospital visits, which can easily be attached to the relative levels of vulnerability among participants. Apparently, elders from eastern parts were acutely aware that disclosing such critical events would likely impose not only an exhaustive load of emotions but also material obligations on their children who are already struggling in exile, and are often unable, even, to support themselves. Explained from a psychosocial angel, the relative material discomfort of the easterners makes their lives in general marked by a more event-heavy, crisis-driven, and survival-oriented rhythm that leaves little room for sophisticated emotional introspection or affective elaboration[181]. This does not suggest that traumatic or ambivalent emotions were less experienced, but rather a different form of subjectivity emerges where self-expression and awareness of emotions are being muted or externalised while necessities of biological endurance are elevated and internalized. The following narratives are of left-behind mothers from eastern districts, and the first of them is in worst case of vulnerability and deterioration.

Ummm Alashra:

"This exile burned our hearts… Back then, on the first day like a prayer duty, my children would gather at my place in Ramadan… The boys on the first day, the girls

[180] "Asya," interview by author, Aleppo, November 27, 2024.
[181] Annette M. Mankus, Matthew Tyler Boden, and Renee J. Thompson, 'Sources of Variation in Emotional Awareness: Age, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status', *Personality and Individual Differences* 89 (1 January 2016): 28–33, doi:10.1016/j.paid.2015.09.043.

on the second day of Eid. We got deprived of that all. Excuse me! Now?! My son—the one in Turkey—had a stroke, and they didn't tell me so I wouldn't get upset. And I had a stroke too, back in Aleppo. I told the girls: don't tell anyone…And then! Oh My dear! They (sons in diaspora) were calling and asking "Why isn't Mom talking to us?!" …May God protect them for me. As they say, 'Bil-ghurba wala bil-turba' (In exile, but not in grave!)." [182]

Najwa:

"So many hardships. No matter how much we talk… but thank God. Thank God, I mean we're trying to… live. I mean, if I tell you luxury!? NO! There's no luxury at all… Thank God for our health and well-being, and that we didn't lose any of our children.That's the most important thing. That's more important than anything! Thank God we're living, thank God. I mean, my kids tell me, "Mama, we swear we're eating and drinking, don't worry about us. That's it, we're eating everything." Now it's all about food and drink? I mean, they have this contentment, you know? There's contentment that that's it—they're eating and drinking. There's contentment that we ate and drank… and we're full, that's it. It does not need to be Kubba or Mahshi! What matters is we're not sleeping hungry, don't worry about us. What matters is that you eat and drink, take care of yourselves. Get him the medicine, for example… for Papa. And we, thank God, give them hope and optimism. Thank God everything's okay, we're alive, nothing's wrong. So they don't feel. And they also, at the same time, try to make us feel that they're eating and drinking. They're not missing anything except seeing you, that's it. So we're equal in this point… But I mean now maybe I'm calming my kids down, giving them hope, giving them optimism, but you're, from the inside, tired. It doesn't mean that really you're not tired, but you don't feel yourself that you're tired, that you're sad or something. Yeah, the doctor told me this abscess is psychological. She told me, "You're always getting abscesses, this is psychological." Not just me, by the way. My neighbors here, all of them are suffering from abscesses. And they're all being told it's psychological. I mean our mental state is in the gutter."[183]

[182] "Um Al Ashra." Interview by author. Aleppo, November 8, 2024.
[183] "Najwa." Interview by author. Aleppo, November 15, 2024.

Clearly, we observe here that this transnational pattern of concealment and silence reflects a collapse of broader life aspirations into a narrow focus on physical survival where deterioration is being normalised. In these contexts, poverty and crisis compress life into the present, limiting emotional expression and reducing coping to bare maintenance of bodily needs paired by emotional suppression of authentic emotions. In Agamben's terms, these participants appear to occupy a space closer to *bare life*, where their intergenerational familial relations *per se* are framed by the maintenance of survival needs, yet, just like their personal reality; their diasporic IG relations are deprived from deeper meaningful and expressive frameworks that define the *qualified life* (*bios politicos*).

Finally, this behavior of concealment is less present in the context of elderly individuals residing in Istanbul with their children. Data from participant observation suggests that the spatially shared domestic settings allowed elder parents a greater ease in emotional awareness and a fluent intergenerational reciprocal relations. Furthermore, the co-residential environment enabled the normalization of communication via digital tools like WhatsApp, without falling into "imagined forms of co-presence" typical of long-distance digital family life. Elder-parents felt freer to discuss their emotional and health-related struggles, while children reciprocated by offering immediate support, setting aside their work, and allocating time to care for their parents. This intimate participatory environment witnessed in extended-family forms of migration in Istanbul, I argue, is the main empowering factor, which eased the burdens of displacement for all family members, allowing for more productivity and broader social engagement for migrants.

4.5. Conclusion of Chapter IV

This chapter sheds light on the interplay between communication technology and intergenerational relationships—not as two separate spheres of coexistence, but as a complementary dynamic that has become indispensable to the lives of older adults amidst familial fragmentation. Drawing on the intergenerational solidarity model and its counterpart, the theory of intergenerational ambivalence, we can view communication technology as a means of investing in familial capital at old age. This use takes precedence over its broader function as a tool for accumulating new forms

of extra-familial social capital, andis largely shaped by structural inequalities and power relations in society. Within this framework, our data findings emphasize that the familial is an irreplaceable dimension which does not only pre-exist technological mediation, but also fundamentally and increasingly informs and shapes its purposes and uses for an elder parent over life-time.

In cases where material resources are more accessible and digital communication is consistently available (particularly for those in Istanbul), the use of technology reaches its fullest potential in reinforcing parental roles and intergenerational bonds. However, the impact of technological mediation on intergenerational relationships remains a vast area for further investigation, especially concerning how it transforms maternal and paternal ties. Technology offers elders the possibility to continue providing functional support to their children, be it financial, emotional or parental guidance despite their geographical separation. This continuity restores a sense of value, relevance, and active engagement in family life, enabling elderly parents to resist the effects of physical decline and the shrinking of their broader social networks due to the crisis.

Conversely, in many of the more impoverished and vulnerable cases, technological mediation fails to serve as an effective coping mechanism to support the psychosocial well-being of the elder parent. Under such conditions, marked by deprivation of electricity and communication infrastructure, older parents become vulnerable to loneliness and consequent deterioration in their well-being. In such contexts, communication with absent children, when possible, turns into uncommunication, marked by silence and concealment of their lived realities.

In other instances, where intergenerational relations become a source of stress rather than comfort, the technological medium takes on a teleological intrinsic value or an end in itself. As witnessed with older women participants, it becomes a means of staging and triggering familial IG interactions, rather than merely transmitting them. With elder fathers, it is reduced to a purely instrumental channel for financial support, compensating for their loss of familial centrality. Taken together, these findings open the door for further, more in-depth studies to explore the hierarchical and intertwined dynamics between technological mediation and family life.

CHAPTER V

RELIGION RESTORES WHAT INTERGENERATIONAL ALIENATION FRACTURES

5.1. Introduction: Stating Intersectionality and Variation

Religious texts, teachings, and rituals are, at their core, adaptive tools for coping with life's various adversities across one's live course[184]. In relation to later life, much of the scholarly literature has emphasized core religious meanings and practices that support older adults coming into terms with the existential reality of mortality[185] along the gradual erosion of their social and economic capital.

However, since this thesis focuses on the significance of familial relations for elder individuals, it is essential to shed light on the points of intersection between religious and intergenerational aspects of coping, particularly how these intersections serve to preserve elders' social value and personal agency in later life. Excavating these properties across interviews, revealed the emotional and practical entanglement of religion with other relationally derived IG coping strategies. It was also evident that the expression and adaptive use of religious practices vary according to gender, social status, and health conditions.

For instance, this thesis findings highlight that despite the fact that ICT was primarily adopted to communicate with absent children, a religious tone had strongly colored how Aleppian elder parents interviewed had engagement with these technologies[186], with women showing greater activity in this realm. Moreover, both fieldwork

[184] Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 21–33, 163–197.
[185] Averie A Zdon, 'An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Older Adults and Subjective Well-Being', n.d.
[186] Samantha L. C. Kang et al., 'Capitalizing and Compensating: Older Adults' Religious and Spiritual Uses of Technology', *Anthropology & Aging* 40, no. 1 (8 February 2019): 14–31, doi:10.5195/aa.2019.194.

observations and interviews show that the level and form of employing technology in the service of religious practice varied noticeably according to the participants' socio-economic status[187]. In addition to this, this thesis findings highlight the formation of personal extra-familial relational capital as a means of coping with the absence of children was in many cases formed over a shared nucleus of religious commitment[188] and was also highly dependent on various structural factors. Similarly, engaging in post-retirement work as a way to restore balance in intergenerational reciprocal exchange[189] under conditions of crisis was often driven by religiously grounded motivations, particularly beliefs about the afterlife and the virtue of continuous striving and giving until one's last breath. However, fieldwork observations as well as interviews reveal that when working and self-reliance as a coping mechanism is impeded by various gendered and structural factors, other religiously derived coping strategies emerge.

Accordingly, studying coping through religion appears to involve multiple layers and intersections. Therefore, this section aims to use the proposed theoretical framework by tracing the intersectionality between family life and religious expressions among elderly parents as they strive to cope with their familial diasporic reality. By linking the perceived loss of centrality, agency, and familial status in IG relations to the strategic employment of religious meanings and practices, this thesis seeks to interrogate where and how religious coping transcends individual spirituality into a socially embedded mechanism for the reconstruction of social identity and reclaiming familial IG significance, in the face of diasporic broken familial solidarity.

[187] Mothers with higher socio-economic status were notably active in circulating religious content and sharing devotional posts via WhatsApp, and they exhibited a stronger inclination toward participating in religious groups mediated through digital technologies.
[188] Mosque companionship for men and companionship through Quran memorization and recitation ICT groups for women.
[189] Min Zhang and Qianyun Cheng, 'Becoming a Self-Reliant Elder: Fading Intergenerational Reciprocity and Pursuing Active Aging among Middle-Class Seniors in Urban China', *SAGE Open* 14, no. 2 (1 April 2024): 21582440241259161, doi:10.1177/21582440241259161.

5.2. The Divine Exchange: Religion as Symbolic Capital in IG Relations: Ra'ifa and Malak

As their physical and social capacities inevitably decline with age, and their IG adaptive relations increasingly decline because of the diasporic reality of their families, elder-parents apparently turn to the investment of religiously grounded symbolic capital to re-enforce parental status, and enhance the relieving '*imagined'* and '*proxy'* co-presence[190] with their children. Senior participants had all shared the belief that their influence over familial IG relations extends beyond physical reciprocity into a form of symbolic, metaphysical exchange, which defies the limits of temporal reality. As a shared coping mechanism, they had a strong belief in the high status granted to them by Islamic teachings as both elders and parents, which according to their narratives, entails them an everlasting influence over their children's future lives despite their separation.

For example, all interviewed mothers expressed the belief that their prayers and satisfaction with their children can directly influence their children's future outcomes and life trajectories. They were convinced that the level and nature of IG familial solidarity, especially their children's affectual and functional support for them, will be tangibly rewarded in future through the Divine mediation. In Istanbul, Malak, the elderly migrant mother in her seventies, affirms that her son's professional success and ability to purchase a home were the result of her prayers and contentment with him. She sees these blessings as a direct reward for his dedication to his elder parents, particularly his willingness to bear their financial burdens and to rent them a separate apartment in Esenyurt in accordance with their wishes. While Ra'ifa, the left-behind widow in her eighties, believes that her children are blessed with sustenance in north Aleppo as a result of her prayers and satisfaction with them. She believes that the blessings of her mere existence as an elder mother has a direct influence on the future of her children and grandchildren. A realization backed up by recalling well-known Islamic cultural resources that leave no justification for experiencing harshness and emotional abandonment during her co-residency with her remaining son's family.

[190] Loretta Baldassar, 'Missing Kin and Longing to Be Together: Emotions and the Construction of Co-Presence in Transnational Relationships', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (1 August 2008): 247–66, doi:10.1080/07256860802169196.

Raifa, who was widowed early in her life, displaced several times during the crisis, and had her own home looted and rendered uninhabitable, is now compelled to share a multigenerational life experience with her remaining son. This situation leaves her in a state of persistent vulnerability, where the revered position and centrality in the traditional familial hierarchy is greatly weakened, as she articulates this through her frequent use of the word *"humiliation"* (*al-dhull*) when describing the nature of her current IG relations in Aleppo. Yet, she draws strength from her symbolic status to cope with her vulnerability and to internally reinforce the legitimacy of receiving material support within an imbalanced intergenerational relations marked by ambivalence and frequent conflicts.

"I'm just sitting here, staying silent... ... But I used to be honored, respected in my own home… 'No one kicks up dust at me'. I was living like a Sultana. But I was forced to come here… I tell them, "Here, I feel humiliated." Honestly, my daughter, I was humiliated when I left and came here. I mean, no offense, but being in your own home is not like being with your daughter-in-law… Now…she is doing all sorts of things to me … She doesn't want me around anymore. Don't they realize? …. Doesn't she realize that I'm praying for my son, and that she and her kids are living off the blessings of my prayers. Isn't that what they say? That 'the one whose prayers used to bring you sustenance now is gone?' (With sadness!) There is a hadith about that…I can't remember exactly. Something like: "The one whose blessings were the source of your provision has passed…." [191] *I swear, I pray for them day and night. But I just say… poor guy, poor thing…..Sometimes I joke with him, I say, "Son, get this or that for me and I'll pay you back." He looks at me and says, "Mama, what are you talking about? Are you in a stranger's house? This is your house and your property." Mmm. Yeah, it drives her crazy…When she hears him say that, she loses it! Isn't there that saying, "You and your wealth belong to your father*[192]*"? Right? Alhamdulillah, my daughter… my son is religious. He never misses prayer time. He even prays tahajjud. Praise be to God… But her…she doesn't even pray!"* [193]

[191] Raifa is referring to a frequently invoked saying, but falsely attributed to the Prophet as hadith: "When the mother passes away, an angel descends from the heavens and proclaims: O child of Adam, she for whose sake We once bestowed honor upon you has departed—now strive in virtue for your own sake, that We may continue to honor you."
[192] She is referring to a Hadeeth Shareef: Anta wa māluka li-abīk.
[193] "Raaifa," interview by author, Aleppo, October 27, 2024.

It is clear how Raifa's narrative reinforces her doubled religious authority, as both a mother and an elder, to transcend all her material, emotional, and social losses. Even as she increasingly assumes the role of a passive recipient of care, and her dependency grows alongside feelings of abandonment and powerlessness, she asserts, in her own words, that she still possesses the sacred blessing of her mere presence and prayers to offer for her children and their children in return. From her perspective, deepening religious commitment reinforces familial cohesion; while the perceived reason for her being 'humiliated' in this multigenerational co-residency is a lack in the religious indicator. In later speech, she further explains that her only grandson who risks his mother's anger to maintain a close relationship with his granny, is the only one who continues to observe ritual prayer. In contrast, his sisters, 'like their mother', do not engage in prayer, which, in her view, accounts for their harsh and unsympathetic treatment of her. It is clearly discerned here how symbolic status derived from a collective 'spiritual capital'[194], renders intergenerational connection possible, despite elders being entirely stripped of traditional tools that once secured their familial centrality and maintained reciprocal exchange through life time.

According to this interpretive logic, the weakening of familial and social solidarity in general, as elder participants describe it, is not solely attributed to the crumbling economic conditions of Aleppian families, but is originated from to the weakening of religious sentiments and bonds as Adnan states:

"I mean friendships….Those kinds of relationships are almost dead! Completely! Even family social relations are dead. I have seven nephews here, but each one is caught up with his own household, his own family, trying to secure a living. No one—no one—is willing to bear the burden, excuse me for saying it that way….No one is thinking about anyone else at all, not at all! And even the religious and moral motivations—they're practically at rock bottom. I mean, from a religious perspective, one shouldn't think this way. But people do, because there's nothing. Even religious motivations aren't right. Yes. They aren't sound. Faith is weak. You see? Commitment is weak. They're

[194] David A. Palmer and Michele Wong, *Clarifying the Concept of Spiritual Capital* (Paper prepared for the Conference on the Social Scientific Study of Religion, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, July 10–13, 2013), unpublished manuscript, accessed April 20, 2025.

not performing religious principles. So from all sides, the situation is difficult. Here. Yes, very difficult."[195]

It is therefore not surprising to find that the older generation places particular importance on instilling religious values and deepening spiritual sentiments in their relationships with their grandchildren. In line with Benston's views, these values embedded in the collective unconscious, are perceived as the guarantors of a strong reciprocal bond between generations. By stressing them, elders are seeking to preserve a central familial role that resists the passage of time and the potential transformations in the nature and structure of intergenerational relations in the future[196]. Najwa, for instance, seeks to strengthen her connection with her maternal grandchildren who remain in Aleppo by intertwining acts of care, such as preparing their favourite foods to attract them and attempting to instill religious values in their minds at same time. This strategy allows her to feel a continued sense of relational value and symbolic authority, despite all the challenges she and her husband are facing as elderly left-behind parents, including financial hardship and debt caused by the forced migration of their sons to Turkey.

"For example, let's say it's Friday—since they usually visit me on Saturdays—I call them and say: 'I've saved some delicious food for you; are you coming tomorrow or not? If you're not coming, you'll miss out!' Then you'll see, it turns into Eid! They get excited, wondering what special dish 'nana' (grandma) has made this time. In addition to that, I try to 'educate' them a bit. Not exactly! Just something, their minds can accept. I tell them simple stories with a moral message, to bring them closer to God. Stories that carry a lesson. I tell them "See? This what you should do"….I tell them the story of Prophet Yusuf, and stories about prophets. Always try to plant something in them. And there are little reminders too. Like if one of them eats with their left hand, I tell them, 'Eat with your right hand, be mindful not to eat from the middle of the plate.' And I remind them: 'Did you say Bismillah?' So I say, 'Come on kids, say

[195] "Adnan." Interview by author. Aleppo, November 9, 2024.
[196] Vern L. Bengtson, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Bismillah and eat.' These little reminders shape our relationship with them. That's why they love us and look forward to coming over."[197]

On the other hand, what enables Aleppian elders to endure such a deteriorating social condition, particularly the absence of their children, is *divine patience* or a deep and intimate relationship with God, especially through the belief in *qada' wa qadar* (divine will and predestination). The effectiveness of this belief lies in its ability to shift the focus of the aging parent from a personal, individualized experience of suffering to a broader collective understanding of traumatizing experiences. In this view, the psych-social hardships imposed by the diasporic reality is seen as something shared by the wider community, which creates a profound sense of solace and psychological readiness to endure these exceptional circumstances.

"At the beginning, it was very painful—truly—but what helps you endure is, first, telling yourself: 'This is God's will and decree.' And you say: 'God willing, they went off to build a better future. They're young, and it's their right to live their lives, to seek a more dignified life.' ... Then you look around and realize that everyone around you is living under the same conditions. Everyone is going through the same suffering. There's hardly a household these days without someone who has migrated. It's very rare today to find anyone who doesn't have one, two, or even three children abroad—or sometimes the whole family is scattered. So in the end, you leave it all to God. And God, in His mercy, grants you comfort. Praise be to God, praise be to God in every circumstance."[198]

5.3. Mapping Intersectionalities

5.3.1. Religious Beliefs, Family Relations, and Working at Old Age

a) A General Overview of Work as a Coping Mechanism

Studies available on the value of work as a means of coping in later life reveal a divergence of perspectives. Some studies suggest that work after retirement

[197] "Najwa." Interview by author. Aleppo, November 15, 2024.
[198] "Zukaa." Interview by author. Aleppo, November 4, 2024.

exacerbates feelings of depression and exhaustion among older adults[199], while others find that it enhances happiness and fosters a sense of self-worth[200]. The most nuanced interpretations suggest that the role of work as a coping mechanism in advanced age is contingent upon other structural factors[201] like health, gender and financial condition[202]. In my interviews, elder parents who sought to work reported motivations beyond mere financial gain, describing work as a means of continuity[203] and social engagement that reinforced their sense of self-importance and restored their intergenerational centrality. However, ideal conditions that make working a voluntary coping-at-late-life choice are generally absent in the socio-economical context of these elderly parents. Therefore contextualizing 'work' as a coping mechanism in the left-behind Aleppian elder's case, makes 'labour' a more proper concept to describe this '*life condition'* in Arendian terms, where a whole community is being subject for the coercion of necessity and are all on survival mode[204]. It became evident through interviews and participant observation that only a very small minority of elderly individuals were fortunate enough to engage in work that allowed them to momentarily transcend their sense of alienation and loneliness. In contrast, those who pursued working among elderly parents did so out of sheer material necessity, while the majority of them were unable to work at all, primarily due to health limitations compounded by the catastrophic circumstances in which even the younger population struggled to secure and maintain a permanent rewarding job in the city.

b) The Triangular Model of Labor , Religion and Familial Solidarity

Building on the foregoing discussion, this section focuses on the intersection of religious concepts with work as a coping strategy framed by familial IG relations, particularly in how these concepts actively help reconstruct the meaning of work and

[199] Lin Xie et al., 'Effect of Working After Retirement on the Mental Health of Older People: Evidence From China', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (28 September 2021): 731378, doi:10.3389/fpsyt.2021.731378.
[200] Will Maimaris, Helen Hogan, and Karen Lock, 'The Impact of Working Beyond Traditional Retirement Ages on Mental Health: Implications for Public Health and Welfare Policy', *Public Health Reviews* 32, no. 2 (December 2010): 532–48, doi:10.1007/BF03391615.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Carla Henry, Federico Fraga, and Tang Yu, 'What Drives Old Age Work in China?', n.d.
[203] R. C. Atchley, 'A Continuity Theory of Normal Aging', *The Gerontologist* 29, no. 2 (April 1989): 183–90, doi:10.1093/geront/29.2.183.
[204] Hannah Arendt, 'Labor, Work, Action', in *Amor Mundi*, ed. S. J. James W. Bernauer (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1987), 29–42, doi:10.1007/978-94-009-3565-5_2.

reclaim its *coping-in-late-life potentiality*. In contexts where structural deterioration has stripped older parents of their familial centrality, religious interpretations often emerge as tools for reconstituting a sense of purpose and belonging rooted in familial relations.

Accordingly, field observations and interviews revealed that religious perceptions intertwined with the elders' desire to reclaim their central familial roles, coalesce into a distinctive notion of *sa'y* (pursuit). This pursuit is not predicated on direct, worldly reciprocity, but is grounded instead in the anticipation of deferred, often spiritual, benefit. Thus, work is phenomenologically reinterpreted not merely as *labor* for survival, but as a continuation of social and moral engagement within the family network, affirming the elder's relevance and agency despite material hardships. In this way, religiously informed perceptions facilitate a lived reorientation toward work, embedding it within a broader moral economy of intergenerational solidarity.

For example, we find this important contribution from a seventy-year-old elderly man who suffers from numerous illnesses, yet insists on serving his remaining family. Radwan had lost much of his financial capital due to the economic crisis and suffered the loss of many of his close elder relatives, while the young ones had left the country including two of his children. Today, he is struggling with mobility difficulties, yet remains determined to stand in the bread lines and buy vegetables for his family while he continues to search for job opportunities despite the apparent futility of his efforts. This religious tone is clearly dominating Radwan's narrative, but what matters here is the religious justification of continuity and productivity.

"When a person grows old, their ambitions may decrease, but as long as they are still breathing and have a soul, and as long as God, Lord of the Worlds, is there and responsible for their sustenance and their family, they continue to live with great hope. Their attachment to the Hereafter increases, as does their fear of accountability… But that doesn't mean they should stop, not change their home, or start a new project like they did when they were young! No, one must proceed and say "Ya Allah!"… I go shopping in my own way. Not like before! But I still walk, run errands, and visit people, even though my joints hurt and I can't walk much. Should one stop? No. He goes and takes whatever cheap transport is available or walks in intervals. If he says, "I've

grown old, let them come to me, " and stops (al-sa'y) striving in life, then he is destroying himself. And no one wants to destroy themselves! One wants to continue in the same rhythm they lived by when they were young…as people say. For example, crowded buses…do they stop him from going to buy bread? No, he goes just as he did when he was young, as they say! The same giving, the same contribution….Nothing changes at all. Unless he gives up and becomes lazy. That is an escape from responsibility and from life. That's when he throws responsibility onto his wife, his children, and his relatives. This causes him to live in a psychological crisis, because the one who brings things for him will later hold it over his head. At a time when he used to fulfill his own needs—and the needs of others, serving people without waiting for them to visit him, instead going out to visit them himself. So if he reverses this image, then he has reached a point of collapse. He would be destroying himself… What is required of him is to continue giving. And the Provider is God, Lord of the Worlds. And no one knows when fate will come to an end. May God grant us a good ending."[205]

From this context, it becomes clear how future uncertainty, including the moment of death, is incorporated into the religious collective consciousness under the concept of *qada' wa qadar* (divine will and predestination), a concept that in itself provides a sense of acceptance and reconciliation with changing realities. A person who has been stripped of their means of resilience, whether through familial relationality or material capacity, feels an increased sense of powerlessness regarding their personal future. As a result, they find comfort in transferring the burden of their individual salvation to a higher power of divine origin.

Moreover, in line with '*linked lives'* concept in life-course theory[206], elderly father's sense of responsibility for the life-trajectory of the entire family as an inseparable part of his personal history makes religion more than a private spiritual experience or a set of abstract beliefs that prepare an elder for the idea of death. Rather, religion implies the capacity to transcend the proximity of death through concrete movement in life, dictated by the religious selective reinterpretation of *sa'y* (pursuit) as a sustained embodied service to kin; a moral and existential obligation that extends across

[205] "Radwan." Interview by author. Aleppo, October 22, 2024.
[206] Glen H. Elder, 'Time, Human Agency, and Social Change: Perspectives on the Life Course', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (1994): 4–15, doi:10.2307/2786971.

generations. In other words, religiously framed perceptions of '*labor*' enables a redefinition of the human effort in late life as an existential movement independent of the individualistic immediate financial gain and oriented towards the service of the '*familial other'*.

This sense of *sa'y* as an altruistic embodied movement, is found to be essential among elderly men from the city of Aleppo. It is therefore not surprising that we find an amplified and, at times, exaggerated dedication to the role of caretaker for close and extended family members who remained behind and did not emigrate, especially among their elderly peers. One unique case was that of a sixty-five-year-old left-behind father who refused to leave the city out of his high sense of responsibility toward his aged relatives. He provided care in his home first for his mother, uncle, and then for his two ailing brothers until they all passed away. The sense of caregiving and familial service was a powerful motivator for him to continue living, until the death of the last elder member of his close family, his wife. This marked the beginning of a deep depression and a sudden, rapid decline in his health.

5.3.2. Religion and Technology: The Investment in Digital Platforms to Restructure Social Capital

5.3.2.1. Women from the Western Region

In examining how religious coping strategies aim to restore familial and intergenerational centrality for elders, it is important to consider the gendered influences that shape these adaptive religious expressions and practices. For instance, the concept of *sa'y* (striving\ pursuing), with its religious roots, is fundamentally a universal notion of *embodied purposive motion in life* applicable to both men and women. However, the gendered division of labor in traditional Aleppian society[207] significantly formulates the religious coping expressions in advanced age. From this perspective, elderly mothers are not expected to *strive* for the material sustenance of their family, and many domestic caregiving tasks are dropped away following the departure or migration of their children. As a result, they often find themselves with

[207] Private domestic sphere designated to women and the public external productive sphere to men.

an excess of time, burdened with an emotional load of pain that is not entirely erased by their daily ritual religious practices. Hence, several elderly Aleppian mother participants, particularly those from the more socioeconomically privileged western neighborhoods (two in Aleppo and one in Istanbul), reported engaging in compensatory virtual reciprocal relationships through digital platforms for religious purposes. Three of them spoke in detail about how virtual Quran recitation and *tajwīd* (elocution) lessons provided them with renewed hope and a way to fill their time after difficult life experiences such as the migration of their children or their own personal displacement. For instance, viewed as a symbolic parallel for intergenerational solidarity, religious platforms in this following narrative are exceeding their solitary spiritual religious purposes into a communal influence, functioning for elder parents as an alternative network of reciprocity. The nature of such experiences, and the influence of virtual daily interactions on these platforms, as expressed by Zukaa, appear to mimic the lost intimate and vivid IG relations and to restore the familial centrality of elder mothers as value transmitters, caretakers, and spiritual anchors.

"…they (children) kept me busy all the time, barely leaving me time for anything else. I could barely keep up with the housework. … In the end, there was a huge void. So they said, "We need to get you on Facebook. You need something to keep you entertained." So it became a necessity, honestly. Through it, I really got engaged... You see, there was also a renewed sense of connection with friends here. You want to make up for your loneliness, you know? Through it, I built social ties, joined groups with my friends, neighbors and our relationships grew stronger…. I joined this one group, and I really, really enjoyed it. It's a group that gives off so much positive energy. You wake up in the morning and find people messaging you. In the evening, they post the day's lesson. Just a few lines, along with explanations and Tajweed rules, recorded by the Sheikh ()... I genuinely enjoyed that group (tone of simplicity and lightness). Yes, really, I enjoyed it a lot. It took up a lot of my time. At one point…they asked me if I'd like to be a moderator, to lead a small circle of students. And honestly, I was so happy. It was really enjoyable and rewarding….trying to teach, as in the hadith: "The best of you are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it." It's a small group, not something huge, but you feel connected. You feel like you're truly in touch….They even give us certificates. You memorize a surah and get a certificate! They're all abroad…I don't know any of them personally, can you imagine?! .It's a

lovely idea, really. You feel you're interacting with others while staying at home, in your own place. And you even find yourself competing with others…like, "Did you listen? Did you attend?" ... That's my beloved group. I'd be lost without it."[208]

The migrant elder Malak in Istanbul, a seventy-one years old mother who lives alone with her handicapped husband in Esenyurt, speaks joyfully and enthusiastically at length about the Qur'anic tajwīd (rules of recitation) lessons she attends through an online platform. She also expresses deep gratitude toward the woman who introduced her to her *beloved* group, which she affectionately refers to as her "*passionate love."* She shares with me numerous details about the lesson times and the various female reciters she follows throughout the day. It was even difficult to schedule an interview with her, as she insists that she is *extremely* busy and has no free time.

Malak justifies her deep religious devotion by referring to her advancing age:
"Alhamdu liLlāh, praise be to God, life is nearing its end! What's left of it anyway? So I want to learn the Qur'an. I know how to read, but not with tajwīd. I make so many mistakes in pronunciation, in elongation…I had lots of errors. But now alḥamdu liLlāh...And the beautiful thing is that you're free, nothing is obligatory. If you want to memorize, memorize. Most of us are elders, you know!"[209]

For these women, the use of digital platforms for religious purposes, and here we mean specifically the intense focus on performative and formal aspects of recitation and pronunciation of Quran, has become a golden opportunity to compensate for the loss of social capital and weakening of their familial IG centrality. This is true both for those who were left-behind in Aleppo and suffer from the migration of their children, and for those who migrated to Istanbul yet decided to live independently, despite having their children around in the same city.

For elder women in this more privileged context, using technology to access tajwīd lessons provided a form of symbolic reciprocal relationship, enabling not only religious engagement but also a strong sense of social value, significance, and

[208] "Zukaa," interview by author, Aleppo, November 4, 2024.
[209] "Malak," interview by author, Istanbul, January 21, 2024.

recognition.These lessons helped compensate for the loss of familial centrality and the disruption of healthy intergenerational dynamics following the children's migration or emotional distancing. Thus, religion as a coping mechanism in this context cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs or private spiritual practices that merely help the elderly accept the proximity of death. Rather, when viewed from the IG solidarity model, these digital religious engagements carry a broader psychosocial compensatory function, helping to restore lost social roles and familial centrality, which are the key pillars in the elder's ability to cope with aging.

This conclusion is further confirmed in the behavior of Mrs. Malak, who actively sought to transcend the symbolic and virtual character of technologically mediated religious reciprocities and the compensatory social status they afford. Demonstrating a deliberate effort to bring these relationships into the tangible world, she enthusiastically recounts how she seized the opportunity to organize a real-life gathering when the husband of a fellow participant from her virtual Qur'an recitation group passed away. With vivid and humorous detail, Malak narrates how the condolence gathering became a moment of personal significance, as it allowed her to meet, for the first time, her virtual companions in person, including teachers, supervisors, and peers. She recalls with pride that the women recognized her immediately, affirming her social visibility beyond the digital realm.

Analyzing the diasporic reality experienced by elder parents from an intergenerational (IG) perspective, particularly their deep sense of lost familial centrality and social significance, makes it less ironic that Malak returns from the condolence visit not with sorrow or grief, but with a profound sense of joy:

"Oh, what a gathering it was! Such a lovely, lovely meeting—I stayed happy and delighted for two whole days afterward. When I arrived there, no one knew me yet. But I went straight in; right to the centre! I figured out that the lady of the house was Umm Alaa. I stood in front of her like this... She looked at me and said, 'Malak?!' She can't walk without a walker… she can't even stand. She told me, 'I'm sorry, I can't stand up.' I told her, 'Don't get up!' And she hugged and kissed me, oh, how she hugged and kissed me! A hundred welcomes! She said, 'Sit here next to me, come sit by me.' I told her, 'So, you recognized me!' She said, 'Yes, I recognized you, I knew

you.' Then I told her 'Introduce me! (half-jokingly)…I went over to another lady—Dr. Najat. She's one of the teachers. Once, she had told me, 'I wish I could meet you someday.' Then suddenly another woman jumped in and said, 'What, is Malak that special!?'"[210]

5.3.2.2. Social Inequality and Religious Coping

The correlation between religious manifestations and economy is always a renewed focus in sociology. In light of this, my fieldwork reveals a strong interdependency between the socio-economic status of participants and the manifestations of their religious coping. It is particularly revealing that intensive engagement with digital religious learning, particularly tajwīd lessons, tends to be more prevalent among elderly women from relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds especially from the western part. This reconstruction of 'social capital'[211] as a personalised pattern of religious coping mediated through digital platforms, is contrasted with the experiences of elder mothers from the less advantaged eastern quarters. In the latter context, structural inequalities, constrained access to infrastructure, and the pressures of multigenerational living already limit digital engagement. As economic hardship and prolonged displacement intensify emotional vulnerabilities associated with aging, elder mothers in such circumstances tend to rely heavily on their extended families as a primary coping mechanism, but not without accompanied forms of 'intergenerational ambivalence'[212]. While intimate co-existence and condensed daily multigenerational interactions reinforce familial solidarity and provide a source of emotional and material support for elders[213], these same dynamics simultaneously restrict more individualised and autonomous forms of coping like use of technology for spiritual growth[214].

[210] "Malak," interview by author, Istanbul, January 21, 2024.
[211] Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt and Nils Aarsæther, 'Coping Strategies, Social Capital and Space', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 9, no. 2 (April 2002): 151–65, doi:10.1177/096977640200900204.
[212] Kurt Lüscher and Andreas Hoff, 'Intergenerational Ambivalence: Beyond Solidarity and Conflict', 2013, 39–64, doi:10.1332/policypress/9781447300984.003.0004.
[213] Bengtson, 'Beyond the Nuclear Family'.
[214] Lathifah Hanum, Newcombe , Peter, and Theresa and Scott, 'A Systematic Review of Intergenerational Co-Residence between Older People and Adult Children', *Journal of Family Studies* 30, no. 6 (November 2024): 968–88, doi:10.1080/13229400.2024.2363785.

This observed paradox reflects what Bengtson and Roberts describe as the oscillation between solidarity and conflict in intergenerational relations, where emotional closeness and obligation may coexist with frustration and unmet individual needs[215]. The tension between personal and family-based forms of coping was made evident during fieldwork, as scheduling interviews with these elders residing with multigenerational households in Istanbul proved significantly difficult. And the excuse was their continuous involvement in family caregiving and obsession with details about major intergenerational family events like weddings, new birth, or hosting visitors from other countries (majorly siblings or other migrant children). When met, they conveyed a deep sense of fulfilment in being embedded within the daily rhythms and relational dynamics of family life, yet, paradoxically, they also voiced a desire for separation and autonomy in some places.

5.3.3. How Does Suffering Shape Religious Coping Potentials?

The instrumental use of religious ties in reinforcing social capital[216] is a pattern most notably observed in economically stable environments, particularly among participants from the western districts. In contrast, for participants from the more economically and socially vulnerable eastern regions, where the impacts of war and poverty are more severe, religious expressions tend to take on a more individualized, personal, and intimate form. An illustrative example is the case of Abu Zakariya, an elderly father suffering from multiple health issues, alongside his wife who has Parkinson's disease. He speaks with deep sorrow about his harsh living conditions and social isolation following the migration of his brothers and son. He now depends entirely on the modest incomes of his two daughters from handicraft work, along with a retirement pension that barely covers the cost of medication.

In his narrative, religious coping relies more on the conceptual framework with a purely spiritual and existential dimension. A complex ambivalence emerges in the consciousness of this abandoned and ailing elder father, who finds himself compelled

[215] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.
[216] Joanna Maselko, Cayce Hughes, and Rose Cheney, 'Religious Social Capital: Its Measurement and Utility in the Study of the Social Determinants of Health', *Social Science & Medicine* 73, no. 5 (1 September 2011): 759–67, doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.06.019.

to accept the role of a passive recipient of support from his daughters, in place of the traditional, comprehensive family care system that once guaranteed healthy intergenerational reciprocity and paternal centrality in the later stages of life[217]. Instead, he is forced to accept financial support from his daughters and share a living space with them where he and his ill wife are cared for. He also feels helpless in the face of his son's hardships in Turkey, where the son endures exploitative labor conditions and economic struggles which renders him incapable of sending remittances as is ideally expected from a male son.

Throughout the interview, a recurring religious refrain emerges: "*None knows our condition but God*"—which he repeats five times in different contexts. Through these statements, his individual self seems dissolved within the collective family identity, and religion becomes a pure means for emotional coping free from social ambitions. In his case, the loss of functional support and social deprivation, as well as the absence of reciprocal and equitable intergenerational ties, is not compensated by practical or social means. Instead, his coping rests on deep religious beliefs shaped by *Zuhd* (asceticism) in this worldly life.

His religious melancholic tone, places hope in a non-individual and shared family salvation in the afterlife, where divine care and mercy symbolically substitute for his lost paternal role:

"We complain only to God. Praise be to God, my daughter, praise be to God... I ask the Almighty, the Lord of the Worlds, to take me while He is pleased with me. Always, praise be to God, in all circumstances. We want nothing from this world but God's pleasure. This world is perishable, my daughter. We were not created for this world, but for what is everlasting. Our true life is in the Hereafter. Our hope in God is that this condition we're living in is a test to elevate our ranks with Him. That is our only hope... Praise be to God. Praise be to God… I place you all in the care of the Lord of

[217] Selim Jahangir et al., 'Understanding Intergenerational Dynamics and Social Support's Impact on Health and Well-Being of Older Adults in South Asia: A Scoping Review', *Systematic Reviews* 14 (11 April 2025): 86, doi:10.1186/s13643-025-02833-z.

the Worlds— you, my children, and all our displaced people. This is your homeland. Go back to your land. There is no god but God."[218]

This account illustrates a qualitative shift in the function of religion as a coping mechanism from serving as a means for accumulating and investing in social capital, typically marked by familial intimacy among women from the upper social classes, to taking on a purely existential role as a spiritual anchor that enables elder parents to endure the burdens of life. In a context of chronic inequality, such as that produced by the crisis, the deep sense of social permeability, loss of status, and isolation experienced by left-behind elders transforms religion into a tool for confronting existential vulnerability through solitary faith. It, thus, becomes clear how religion, like all other forms of coping strategies, is shaped by classed access to social and economic capital.

5.4. Conclusion of Chapter V

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that religion, as a means of coping, is not limited to the spiritual or doctrinal dimension that helps individuals confront the idea of approaching death. Rather, it also serves as a practical coping mechanism intricately linked to the restoration and empowerment of familial capital. This is evident in the religious-cultural repertoire embedded in the collective consciousness of the senior parents' community. They recall it frequently to reinforce their symbolic status and grant the sense of entitlement to familial support, while simultaneously affirming that they too have something to offer, symbolically and emotionally, despite the asymmetry in their intergenerational reciprocity.

In this regard, the transmission of religious heritage by grandparents emerges not merely as a cultural function but as a mechanism for sustaining intergenerational balance, preserving the status of aging parents within the family, and enabling their adaptation to the dependency and diminished authority that accompany old age. However, religion as a coping resource is not immune to the effects of social inequality and power dynamics. Elderly individuals living in relatively stable material conditions

[218] "Zakariya," interview by author, Aleppo, January 22, 2024.

were more able to adapt to dependency, diminished agency, and family dispersion by turning religion into a motivational force to meaningful social engagement, where the 'self' is oriented toward the 'other'.

In doing so, their focus shifts away from individual suffering toward shared experiences of hardship, transforming this shared space into a coping mechanism *per se*. where the 'familial other' becomes the primary axis of movement and purpose. While through orientation toward the 'distant other', which became more possible through digital communication, religious expression becomes a medium to restore elderly parents their sense of lost centrality and social status in the wake of familial fragmentation. By contrast, in more impoverished and fragile contexts, religion tends to take the form of inward withdrawal, characterized by estrangement from the 'other' and a retreat from the collective. The 'I' collapses into the fragmented familial "we".

Ultimately, viewing religion through a familial lens draws the researcher into a more micro-level, intimate understanding of aging, adaptation, and intergenerational negotiation. It invites further philosophical and existential inquiry, and opens the way for more nuanced and specialized research in this field.

CHAPTER VI

CONCEPTUAL FORMS OF COPING: THE INSIDE-OUTSIDE AMBIVALENT PERCEPTIONS OF BELONGING

6.1. Introduction

Psychological studies on coping mechanisms admit that it is impossible to make a clear cut between the world-oriented practical coping strategies and psycho-oriented emotional and cognitive ones[219]. In addition, recent studies tend to view ambivalent emotions and perceptions themselves not as a mere source of stress, but rather as a creative way to cope with stressful events[220]. Similarly, interviews with elderly parents inside Aleppo revealed coping patterns that involved reshaping and reinterpreting their perceptions and understandings of their own local, as well as their children's external circumstances, in a way that provided a sense of comfort with their reality as left-behind parents. However, many of these reinterpretations by elder parents were formulated in ambivalent stances towards their relationship with their social and familial surroundings.

In other words, all participants appear to have internalized negative feelings and perceptions about their children's experience and living conditions abroad, whether in neighboring countries or in Western states. This intensification of negative perceptions about life outside the country, and the internalization of what their children conveyed about the pain of living in exile, had enabled these parents to preserve a sense of centrality and control, and reinforce the idea that their children's happiness and

[219] Krzysztof Stanisławski, 'The Coping Circumplex Model: An Integrative Model of the Structure of Coping With Stress', *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (16 April 2019): 694, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00694.
[220] Shiva Pauer, Bastiaan Rutjens, and Frenk van Harreveld, *Torn Again: Repeated Experiences of Ambivalence Motivate Effortful Problem-Focused Coping*, 2023, doi:10.31234/osf.io/de8qm.

wellbeing could not exist away from them[221]. Even if that happiness lies somewhere in the family's past history of multigenerational co-existence, stripping their children's current lives outside Aleppo of any spiritual contentment makes it easier for elderly parents to imagine personal happiness and reciprocal intergenerational relationships as a constantly imagined future possibility.

Moreover, while dependency, loss, and dissatisfaction are majorly the elder parents' own internalised emotions, however, they endeavour to project them on their children's mental and social experience abroad. This emotional projection of dependency and loss on children's lives as "by-product" of complex internal coping dynamics[222], is a quite resonant theme throughout my open-ended interviews.

6.2. Cultural Insecurities Regarding Familial and Marital Relations Abroad: The Must-Paid 'Cost'

The worsening economic conditions impose not only intergenerational relationships marked by contradictions and ambivalences across society but also shape the values and perceptions individuals hold about familial ties in similarly ambivalent ways. A case in point is Radwan, a retired civil engineer in his early seventies, who once had enjoyed a high social standing and a prestigious career. Following his retirement, declining health, and repeated failed attempts to regain financial stability, Radwan now finds himself embroiled in familial tensions. His wife and the remaining children in Syria attribute their stalled prospects and bleak future outlook to what they see as their father's failure to accumulate sufficient wealth, which might have shielded the family from the upheavals of the ongoing economic crisis. While he views those of his children who left for Germany as financially better privileged than many who stayed inside, he negatively portrays social and familial reality in European countries, referring to it as the *"cost*" that migrants to Europe had to pay to survive. Ironically, in other places, he had expressed a *quixotic* longing to escape his deteriorating family

[221] Roberta L Coles, 'Elderly Narrative Reflections on the Contradictions in Turkish Village Family Life after Migration of Adult Children', *Journal of Aging Studies* 15, no. 4 (December 2001): 383–406, doi:10.1016/S0890-4065(01)00030-5.

[222] Roy F. Baumeister, Karen Dale, and Kristin L. Sommer, 'Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology: Reaction Formation, Projection, Displacement, Undoing, Isolation, Sublimation, and Denial', *Journal of Personality* 66, no. 6 (1998): 1081–1124, doi:10.1111/1467-6494.00043.

and economic situation through dreams of travel and remarrying a foreign woman as a kind of salvational fantasy.

*"People travel, of course—but there is a price to pay. If a person does not marry someone from a familiar background, they are bound to face even greater problems. For example, if a man marries a German woman, differences may arise, and the legal and social conditions in Europe heavily favor the woman in case of divorce. A young man who goes there ends up abandoning his Eastern identity and the status he held in his home country. His inheritance is stripped away, handed over to the wife, and even the son has no say in these matters. This is a source of suffering and loss. We hear about these stories, we feel sorrow, and we can do nothing but pray—unfortunately, there is no other solution. They suffer both physically and emotionally. The cost is immense. And yet, staying here may be even worse. Over there, they endure legal constraints, physical exhaustion, and an unfamiliar cultural environment. Here, a person can visit the cemetery, their sister, their relatives, and acquaintances. People over there are cut off from all that. Their families here feel increasing emotional strain with each passing day. Truly, no one feels at ease except in their homeland. No one wants to remain in exile. One can only find peace when they are finally buried in their own countr*y."[223]

Although Radwan speaks in a calm tone and appears emotionally balanced on the surface, his narrative reveals deep-seated psychological ambivalence[224] as he seeks to reconcile with the intergenerational identity conflict and symbolic loss that war and displacement have imposed upon his familial life. What seems to pain him more than the mere physical distance of his children, paired with the overall weakening of all indicators of solidarity in familial relations[225], is the cultural transformation and the restructuring of symbolic frameworks that once served as a source of value and significance, especially in old age[226].

[223] "Radwan," interview by author, Aleppo, October 22, 2024.
[224] Luescher and Pillemer, 'Intergenerational Ambivalence'.
[225] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.
[226] Sandra Torres and Alistair Hunter, "Migration, Ageing and Intergenerational Relations: Setting the Scene, " in *Handbook on Migration and Ageing*, ed. Sandra Torres and Alistair Hunter (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), abstract, https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781839106774/book-part-9781839106774-35.xml.

Through this exemplary text, it becomes clear that the concept of *consensual solidarity*—a shared loyalty to familial and communal norms and values that ensures the continuity of reciprocal relationships and intergenerational cohesion[227]—appears to be of utmost importance for Aleppian elder parents. Yet it is precisely this form of solidarity, as part of the whole package of cultural identity, which is most threatened[228] when adult children from a traditional Eastern cultural background migrate to modern societies. In contrast, kin relations and psychological ties with one's roots and ancestral belonging can only be achievable within a historically shared geographies, where to be known and recognised by one's own social capital[229], becomes a vital coping mechanism in later life.

Apparently, the importance of this dynamic for elder parents is fully appreciated by younger generations who have migrated to culturally unfamiliar societies. Radwan, like other elder parents, envisions the resolution by conceptualising that the cultural dissonance and lack of belonging experienced in the host country will eventually deepen the psychological struggle of the younger generation[230]. This, in turn, is expected to compel them to cling to their familial and social values, to restore other solidarity formulas, and ultimately restore a sense of importance and recognition to the elder parent. Apparently, coping is a culturally and relationally derived process[231], where memory, imagination, and an inter-subjective-generational negotiation of values and belonging across borders are the basic psychosocial resources for coping at old age.

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[227] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.
[228] DINESH BHUGRA and MATTHEW A BECKER, 'Migration, Cultural Bereavement and Cultural Identity', *World Psychiatry* 4, no. 1 (February 2005): 18–24, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1414713/.
[229] Bærenholdt and Aarsæther, 'Coping Strategies, Social Capital and Space'.
[230] 'Intergenerational Cultural Dissonance in Syrian Refugees during Resettlement', *CAMH*, accessed 16 April 2025, https://www.camh.ca/en/professionals/professionals--projects/immigrant-and-refugee-mental-health-project/webinars/support-and-treatment-considerations/intergenerational-cultural-dissonance-in-syrian-refugees-during-resettlement.
[231] Ben C. H. Kuo, 'Culture's Consequences on Coping: Theories, Evidences, and Dimensionalities', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 6 (August 2011): 1084–1100, doi:10.1177/0022022110381126.

6.3. Ambivalence Towards Extra-Familial IG Social Capital: The Known-Unknown Syndrome

Despite the sense of alienation experienced by elder fathers in the city of Aleppo and their dissatisfaction with the living conditions inside the country—conditions that often compel their children to migrate—they nonetheless perceive the alienation of exile to be even greater. While they paint a bleak picture of their current reality within the city, they also counterbalance it with an equally negative perception of life abroad. The happiness and psychological well-being that stem from a healthy intergenerational relationship grounded in multigenerational co-presence are not only viewed as part of a nostalgic past but also as a potential future[232], whose likelihood increases in proportion to the dark image of the exile experience. This grim perception is backed up by the elders' frequent references to their children's and relatives' actual experiences in diaspora, as well as to their own cultural heritage—such as poetry and popular proverbs—which generally disparage estrangement and affirm rootedness. The shared geography in their view is tied to an inherited symbolic capital[233], encompassing reciprocal intergenerational relationships, both familial and beyond.

The seventy-year-old Maher, for example, a retired history professor and former owner of a factory as well, had his physical and mental health deteriorated following the loss of his property and the emigration of his children due to the Syrian crisis. Through his interview, Maher expresses contradictory feelings and perceptions about place and belonging. As an elder who has lived through a radically different social order, he is experiencing a symbolic loss of the moral world he once recognized and belonged to. He voices disdain for the current social and cultural life in the city, which he believes has become overrun by what he calls "thugs" and swindlers. In addition, he laments that even university graduates now lead what he describes as a "bestial life, " devoid of what he terms "civilized logic" in social interactions. His perceived breakdown in social norms leaves him feeling stripped of his symbolic value as a senior in his society. In response, Maher chooses to impose an additional layer of self-isolation and

[232] Baldassar, 'Missing Kin and Longing to Be Together', August 2008.
[233] Michael Grenfell, ed., *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 1. publ, Key Concepts (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008).

social withdrawal, not only as a defensive form of coping[234], but also as an act of reclaiming agency in the face of an externally imposed marginalization, and an irreconcilable moral landscape**.**

"People have become like animals, but in human form. No one cares about anyone. No one knows what 'ayb' (shame) is, no one knows what ḥarām (forbidden)is. What is permissible and what is not… There's contempt for laws, contempt for values, contempt for norms, contempt for the culture they carry. So now I try to isolate myself from society. Even though I am already isolated, I want to isolate myself even more. Because there is no longer any possibility to talk to humans. You might have in front of you a university graduate. Yes, he's a graduate, but he understands absolutely nothing of what he has read. He lives a beastly life—only carrying a certificate…. Why?! Because they no longer have the ability to interact with civilized logic. You sit with someone and say to him, "You are wrong, why did you do this? This is not acceptable, " and he replies, "Know who you're talking to, I am so-and-so." People now live according to what's called thuggery. Most people are thugs…The narrower your relationships with people, the more health and well-being you'll have. The wider your relationships, the more exhausted you become… Once the circle widens, you no longer know who is stepping into it: this thug, that scoundrel, that lowlife, this swindler, that thief. And we suffer from them….Now no one listens to us, no one understands us, and we don't understand anyone. No one is for anyone anymore."[235]

What stands out about Maher is that, despite his disillusionment in the reality of social relations in the city and his subsequent sense of anonymity, he speaks with conviction in rejecting what he perceives as an even deeper, more degrading form of anonymity experienced by younger generations and peers who have emigrated. His view of "*generational chasm"*[236] within his local community reflected in his statement: *"Now no one listens to us, no one understands us, and we don't understand any one",* appears insignificant when weighed with humiliating labels such as '*refugee'* or '*displaced*

[234] Richard S. Lazarus PhD and Susan Folkman PhD, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* (Springer Publishing Company, 1984), 169.
[235] "Maher." Interview by author. Aleppo, October 24, 2024.
[236] Bojan Macuh, Predrag Ljubotina, Erika D. Ursic, and Andrej Raspor, "Importance of Intergenerational Cooperation for an Ageing Society, " *International Journal for Regional Development* 3 (April 2022): 183–198, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360374168.

‘that, from the perspective of a local elder irreversibly strip away any sense of social dignity.

When asked why he chose not to accompany his children or settle with them abroad, and why he preferred to return after a short stay in the city of Reyhanlı, he explains:

“So that we wouldn’t be a burden on them..... Besides, it’s not our land—we can’t do anything there. We can’t build or establish anything. Don’t forget: “a land that isn’t in your country is neither yours nor your children’s.”[237] *Here, we have rights and responsibilities. We have obligations, but there, we have no rights at all. Here, I am ‘ibn al-balad’ (a son of this country). No one can look down on me and say, ‘You’re a refugee’ or ‘You’re displaced.’ I will remain ibn al-balad here. ‘My country, even if it wrongs me, is dear to me, and my people, even if they withhold from me, are noble.’*[238] *No matter what happens, here we still have our name, our reputation, our place in society. It’s not like over there. There, ‘Who is Fṭīm in the textile market’*[239]*... For example, here I go to the Palace of Justice, and a judge or a lawyer greets me, saying, ‘How are you, Professor?’ I recognize that it’s one of my former students. I feel a sense of joy that there are still people who know me and help me. Whether it's a judge, a lawyer, an officer, an engineer, whoever it may be—they remember me and say, ‘Aren’t you Professor Maher?’ And they help me however they can. Right now, I have a colleague or a former student who brings bread to my home. I don’t go to the bakery or wait in line. As soon as he hears I need something, he says, ‘Just let me know, ’ and the next day he brings me a fresh bundle of bread. That’s something that still remains positive in our country.”*[240]

What first draws our attention in this excerpt is the dominance of the family model in shaping how elder parents in Aleppo relate to geographic space and express their sense of belonging. In their view, the bond between the individual and the land, cultivated in ownership and establishment twins, is incompetent in bringing the endurance aspect

[237] The original Arabic text: الأرض اللي مو في بلدك مو ألك ولا لولدك *“al-arḍ alli mu fī baladak mu ilak wa lā li-waladak”*

[238] The interviewer recites a culturally well-known poetic stanza that says : بلادي وإن جارت علي عزيزة وأهلي وإن ضنّوا علي كرام

[239] Original Arabic: "مين فطيم في سوق الغزل؟", is a colloquial expression used to convey a sense of being utterly insignificant in an unfamiliar environment. Culturally, the name Fṭīm refers to social obscurity.

[240] “Maher.” Interview by author. Aleppo, October 24, 2024.

of familial bonds outside the contours of a locally rooted emotional geography. This imagined bond that transcends the individual's lifetime, and sustains across generations, is poignantly captured in the cultural citation: "The land that isn't in your country is neither yours nor your child's". Additionally, the relationship to land takes on the form of filial-parental ties, marked by continuity and solidarity, mirroring the family bond that resists the passage of time with all its ambivalences and disruptions. Thus, Alppian elders, including Maher, prefer to describe themselves using the colloquial expression *"Ibn al-balad"* (son of the land), deliberately avoiding the more modern national identification *"muwāṭin"* (citizen). The latter suggests a '*pragmatic*'[241] bond, rooted in mutual benefit and legal contract, which implies a potential for ruptures that many diasporic communities embrace, but local consciousness of Aleppan elders tend to resist.

Apparently, these first and second excerpts are charged with conflicting emotional and cognitive stances, oscillating between resentment and contentment, belonging and estrangement, and marked by an intergenerational psychological ambivalence , simultaneously feeling the loss of social significance and holding a grip on it. These ambivalences are understood as emotional survival strategies adopted by elder parents who chose to remain and age in place, rather than to trace their restricted familial intergenerational ties into exile. At one place, the local community seems to be plagued by chaos, and in other, it appears to be rightful where elders still have rights and obligations. Elder parents, apparently, recognize that their reciprocal relationships with younger generations—including their own familial ties—are often characterized by fragmentation, cultural discontinuities, and a perceived decline in the social value[242], which , in extreme forms, manifests in Maher's responsive voluntary social withdrawal. However, they still regard these wider intergenerational ties as a legacy and a form of symbolic capital that remains indispensable, insofar as it sustains their sense of social dignity and worth[243]. While practically speaking, building and

[241] Elizabeth Mavroudi, 'Palestinians and Pragmatic Citizenship: Negotiating Relationships between Citizenship and National Identity in Diaspora', *Geoforum* 39 (31 January 2008): 307–18, doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2007.07.001.
[242] Hamna Baber, "The Effects of Generational Gap on Well-Being of Older Adults, " *Journal of Population Therapeutics and Clinical Pharmacology* 31, no. 5 (2024): 1419–1434, https://jptcp.com/index.php/jptcp/article/view/6353.
[243] Raffaele Vacca and Federico Bianchi, 'Diversity, Integration, and Variability of Intergenerational Relationships in Old Age: New Insights from Personal Network Research', *Social Science Research* 119 (March 2024): 102991, doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2024.102991.

expanding intergenerational relationships beyond the nuclear family, and mobilizing them as a coping mechanism in advanced age appears more feasible within the boundaries of the city to which they belong, than outside. Over there, such relations would not only be limited to a smaller capital of familial ties, but will further intensify their sense of being a '*burden'* as well. The avoidance of being negative receptors of their children's financial and instrumental support, despite the cultural and social expectations of the opposite, is a repetitive theme in the fieldwork. Of course, great deal of these multi-layered social and emotional ambivalences[244] were derived by the exceptional socio-political context that the Syrian community had passed through.

The complex context of layered loss, which encompasses not only the absence of children, but also the loss of property, social status, and material security brought about by war and displacement, invites us to reconceptualise intergenerational ambivalence beyond the confines of the family unit within a broader forms of symbolic social reciprocal interactions. Rather than viewing ambivalence as a state of emotional dilemma of '*polarised*' and '*irreconcilable'* feelings as Lüscher's suggests[245], it can instead be seen in this context as an adaptive space, one that enables older adults to flexibly negotiate their contradictory emotional and cognitive positions that emerged in response to shifts in social and psychological realities of their everyday lives.

6.4. Ambivalence about the Nature of Social Life of Younger Generation: The Here-There Alienation Paradox

The common denominator among the male interviewees was their pessimistic view of the social, psychological, and cultural lives of the younger generation in exile. They articulated a conviction that genuine spiritual fulfilment is attainable only within the boundaries of Aleppo, where intergenerational relations are rooted in reciprocal and cohesive interactions anchored in a shared geographical space. From this perspective, they tend to *dwarf* the achievements of migrant children in their perception and frame them solely in terms of material gain, devoid of any higher moral or symbolic value.

[244] Lüscher and Hoff, 'Intergenerational Ambivalence'.
[245] European Observatory on Family Matters, *Family Issues between Gender and Generations*; Kurt Lüscher, 'Conceptualizing and Uncovering International Ambibalence', in *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*, vol. 4 (Elsevier, 2003), 23–62, doi:10.1016/S1530-3535(03)04002-0.

Adnan, a seventy-three-year-old left-behind elder parent, expresses profound generational anxiety when discussing his views about younger migrants' achievements. Apparently, his perceptions of the migrant personal and family life goes in tone with the classical Marxist view of industrial Europe's alienating and dehumanizing effects[246].For him, young migrant generations are not only threatened by cultural erosion, but their lives there are exploited in mechanical, commercial and consumptive relations, leaving no space for real social life. Adnan's bleak outlook on the cultural, social, and familial future of the younger generation outside the city echoes the insecurities and mistrust expressed by many other elder participants regarding their children's lives away from their homeland. They all tend to believe that autonomy, agency and their saviour IG relations are seriously threatened in Western countries, and this can only be encountered by their return in the near future to reclaim the familial and cultural identity.

However, ironically speaking, all interviewed elder fathers including Adnan, acknowledged that the economic crisis in Aleppo had severely deteriorated levels of social cohesion and familial solidarity in many ways that threatened their own sense of belonging and well-being:

"The younger generation—may God help them… Those who are abroad, yes, they've entered into a very difficult social life. A person has to become nothing more than a machine just to survive, getting caught up in all these things without even realizing it. It's rare to find someone actually achieving what they truly want—very rare. Most of them are just machines, working just to eat and drink. That's how I see it. Life abroad is unbearable. Yes, financially they may be comfortable, but in every other aspect, certainly not. There's absolutely nothing—no joy, no fulfillment in their lives at all. Over there, they're just machines. Europe needs them; it allowed them to migrate so it can use them like machines, just to extract their labor, because Europe is an aging continent. And this war, one of its purposes was precisely to force young Syrians to leave. That was one of the intended outcomes of the war: to displace Syrian youth. And that's exactly what happened. If someone ends up staying in Europe, it means he's

[246] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm

destroyed his entire future. His lineage—completely gone. And that's a great tragedy. Very few young people are aware of this. Sure, right now they may be earning money, happy, living well and so on… but what about the future? His children—what will happen to them? The moment a person really thinks about this, he'll realize he needs to return to his country, or at least to any Muslim country, after he's saved up a bit of money to start a small business and build a life there."[247]

However, Adnan contradicts his idealized view of family and social life in another instance, where he describes the impact of economic deterioration on the micro-social relations and the religious cultural identity of Aleppians. The economic collapse drags social interactions into a mechanical existence revolving around individual survival, depriving people of the spiritual meanings that come with healthy familial and reciprocal relationships, as he says:

"If we run into each other by chance on the street, that's it… I mean, friendships are almost dead—completely. Even family social relationships are dead. I mean, I have seven nephews here. But each one is preoccupied with his own home, his own family, trying to make ends meet. No one is willing—no one is willing to bear the burden. I mean, excuse my words, but if, for example, I'm talking about my nephew taking in his uncle—he has to calculate that I'm his uncle, that I'll be eating at his place, for example. This is just an example. He himself is barely getting by. So even if it's not planned, subconsciously, he's not ready. He's not ready to invite his uncle over, not ready to say, "Come to our place." You see what I mean? The reasons are economic. Yes. We are now at rock bottom."[248]

Apparently, the narratives of elder fathers in general reflect a deep ambivalence in the perceptual stance toward both life abroad and in homeland. While they denounce migrant life as spiritually hollow and exploitative, they also recognize that Aleppo's economic collapse has eroded much of familial aspects of solidarity and social cohesion. Their idealized vision of intergenerational life on shared geographies is thus challenged by the reality of widespread disconnection and rupture, both abroad and at home. Accordingly, a reunion is reimagined not as a practical solution, but as a

[247] "Adnan," interview by author, Aleppo, November 9, 2024.
[248] "Adnan," interview by author, Aleppo, November 9, 2024.

symbolic act to reclaim cultural and familial identity. This longing reveals an emotional and conceptual coping strategy rooted in a sense of romanticized cultural past, rather than being based on actual social connectedness, which underscores elder parents' struggle to find meaning and agency in a fractured world.

6.5. The Emotional Ambivalence of Letting-Go: *De-sentimental Using* External Geographies

Ambivalence in perceptions of family relationships and the external world is not exclusive to male participants, but it is equally present among elderly left-behind mothers. In a similar context, we encounter the left-behind elder mother Zukaa within a typical transnational family, struggling to digest the trauma of her four children's migration after completing their university education during the crisis. For her, it was the most abhorred scenario for the family future, especially after having experienced exile herself in her youth. In her emotionally charged and lengthy narration, one can sense her attempts at emotional survival through her ambivalent psychological positions regarding the absence of her children, who, as she put it, *"flew away like birds."*

Despite the relative material comfort her privileged family had attained in the luxurious western Aleppo[249], and the impression that her sons had actually followed a trend or *a wave* of *migration* as a personal choice to accompany their friends in Germany, her narrative emphasizes the *coercive* nature of their departure. In her effort to legitimise this unwanted destiny, she stresses out the blocked future of youths after graduation inside Aleppo.

However, for Zukaa, the family home, as a symbol of home city Aleppo, remains the rightful place for her children, their natural anchor out of which they are but *'lost'*. Yet she mitigate her sense of loss, by visualising that they are forced to endure a depressive *'hard'* experience abroad, full of 'suffering'[250] as she describes it:

[249] Her children were able to pay the military exemption fee, thus securing freedom from compulsory service and retaining the ability to return home at will

[250] The word *Sa'bah (hard)* was mentioned 48 times, mu'anah *(suffering) 11 times*, in the 1:45 minute interview with Zukaa.

""Mother", she told me: "Their society is very strange, very difficult. Very!". I mean, like… she wears the hijab too, so she told me, "I feel like they look at me like… something… like strange."" Yeah, she didn't enjoy it and until now she still doesn't like Europe. Yeah… it's very hard, really. Even though, there are social media and communication tools, and they talk to you daily, like once or twice a day if she wants, she calls. But yeah, like, she's really really suffering in exile. When they used to send me their photos, I used to feel like they're strangers over there. Like…what are they doing there? That's not their place. Mm. You know? Mm. Even though there are buildings and trees and streets and greenery—I still feel like no, that's not their place. They looked kinda lost. Mm. I don't know, that's the feeling I get, that they're lost (forced laugh). I don't know. Yeah, really. Mm. I don't know—may God bring relief. That's the best thing (crying).The other one came last year for vacation, even though he lives in Europe, like in a social city, I mean… a touristy, lively city with a lot of people and it's famous, not deserted. Mm. He came to Aleppo, to his hometown. He told me, "Mom, We're not really living." He said, "When I went back to Europe, I stayed depressed for a month. We go out—it's dark. We come back—it's dark. We're not seeing anything of our lives. When I came here, I was happy. I saw my aunt, my uncle, my relatives, my friends. I saw my old neighbors' kids. Mm. I saw my family." (crying intensifies).He sees a much better social life here. Even though he has friends there, and he knows people there, and has his wife with him, and his job, and so on. But he told me, "I felt like I stayed depressed for a month. I kept telling myself: Is this the place they talk about, that it is a beautiful city?! Where… where is it?! I find it like …like gloomy." Like This. Then, of course, God gives patience. He has to adjust and go back to his job—whether he likes it or not. But of course, he also told me that he thought more than once: If I return, and I want to work here, how much would I have to work just to live? I mean, the first and last motivation is financial. Like, there's no work, there are no jobs". They also got used to the situation over there! It became their life, and they made their own space, and each one adapted to their own life."[251]

The grim and unbearable portrayal she offers of her children's experiences in Europe, narrated through their own words, seems to reflect an inner voice that rejects the normalization of migration, given its regressive impact on family relations and

[251] "Zukaa," interview by author, Aleppo, November 4, 2024.

consequently adaptation at old age. While projecting her own unresolved emotions onto her children's experiences narratively[252], the voices of the mother and her children merge into one homogenous discursive entity. Its purpose is to reclaim narrative and emotional authority[253] and to reaffirm maternal intergenerational status as senior left behind mother, but only within a space of '*imagined*' '*(co)presence*'[254] that has become the only viable option for elderly parents in Aleppo to adapt.

Meanwhile, '*physical co-presence*'[255] on a shared geographical ground where all indicators of familial solidarity[256] were fully once saturated , appearing as an ideal, not only in a nostalgic narrative, but also through stark, melancholic comparisons with the current reality of familial and social fracture her children are experiencing in Europe. Hence, like many other elderly parents left behind, she resorts to what I like to describe as *de-sentimentalizing* the European geography, where no spiritual life seems possible without the restoration of intergenerational bonds and kinship ties on a shared physical terrain. Her words reveal a deep oscillation between justifying her children's decision to migrate by criticizing the living conditions in Aleppo on one hand, and expressing her depressive grief over their absence on the other. This is coupled with her ambivalence in portraying her children's spiritual suffering, social isolation, and lack of adaptation in Europe, while complacently admitting their adaptation and privileged position at the end. Shockingly, her wish for her fourth son to remain abroad, despite the material possibility of his return, can only be understood in light of her experienced emotional ambivalence, and the effectiveness of that ambivalence as a psychological coping mechanism[257] under extraordinary external conditions imposed by the reality of familial dispersion in Aleppo.

"*Yeah, I just hope he finds a job and stays. I mean... yeah. In the end, he's already been through a lot. He lived through all those hardships from the very first moment he*

[252] Sylvia Salow, '5 Examples of How Psychological Projections Shape Our Reality', *Thrive Global*, 5 December 2018, https://medium.com/thrive-global/5-examples-of-how-psychological-projections-shape-our-reality-c47a06d4c370.
[253] Keyana Camacho, 'Reclaiming Your Narrative — The Power of Owning Your Story', *Medium*, 7 February 2025, https://medium.com/@keywiththekeyzzz/reclaiming-your-narrative-the-power-of-owning-your-story-60bc03d55797.
[254] Baldassar, 'Missing Kin and Longing to Be Together', August 2008.
[255] Ibid.
[256] Bengtson and Roberts, 'Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families'.
[257] 'Embracing the Power of Ambivalence', *Harvard Business Review*, accessed 17 April 2025, https://hbr.org/2021/09/embracing-the-power-of-ambivalence.

went abroad, that early period of struggling alone, away from his family…But… I don't know, it's just that coming back would mean going back to the same situation, the same suffering, the same… you know, people are struggling economically. You get me? The entire surrounding situation… I don't know, it's like everything's stagnant. If it's a job, the salary won't be enough… you know what I mean? Yesterday he told me, 'Oh Lord, all I wish for—I don't crave money, I don't crave women, I just long to sleep in my own bed.' [a slight laughter] of course… I mean we suffered, we suffered, and it cost us a lot… and now I just hope he finds a job opportunity… yeah…The first two or three weeks after he left this room… I closed its door. I couldn't even look at it. Three young men left from here. Can you imagine?" [crying][258]

6.6. The Resolution Through Nostalgic Narratives: Expanding Timeline of IG Relations and the Exalting Belonging

Elder parent's deliberate impoverishment of their children's life abroad is also observed in the narrative of Najwa, a sixty-year-old mother who lives with fewer material means than Zukaa. Her *de-sentimentalization* of external geographies is also framed by a wider ambivalent psychological stance towards social and familial reciprocal relations both inside the city and outside it in the diaspora. Through her words, we observe a consistent tendency to portray life in the "near abroad", which for Najwa includes places such as Erbil in Iraq and Gaziantep in Turkey, in a manner almost identical to Zukaa's depiction of distant geographies like the cities of Germany. Najwa is aware, for instance, that life in another country offers a certain degree of safety and comfort, where, as her children tell her, "*people play with money*, " and enjoy luxuries such as expensive cars. However, she rather tends to selectively internalizes, or rather '*inroject*'[259] the negative inputs about their lives abroad, reinforcing in her mind a bleak image shaped by exploitation, fatigue, and hardships endured by her children. This deliberate alienating imagination and selective overemphasis on the gloomy aspects of social relations outside the elder parent's locality is a recurrent theme that most of participants tend to share in their effort to envisualize reunion as a near future possibility.

[258] "Zukaa," interview by author, Aleppo, November 4, 2024.
[259] 'Introjection', *GoodTherapy.Org Therapy Blog*, accessed 17 April 2025, https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/introjection/.

"My son who's in Turkey told me, "Mom, even the Turks are racist." He said they make people work really hard, you know what I mean? The work is long, exhausting. Yes, they give them a meal, but it's draining too much. Even the Syrians… there's no comfort. He worked with Syrians too, and he told me, "Even though they're from Aleppo like us, they treat us the same way." I don't know…That's why I'm telling you—may God bring them back to their homes, to their country. A person lives with dignity in their own land. Truly. You still feel honored, because you're in your own country, your own governorate….. They left, they got fed up, and yes, they went to a safer country where everything is available. Call it comfort, call it luxury—my son in Turkey, or even in Erbil, tells me: "Mama, come and see, they have everything—money, everything you could imagine." And yes, they tell us: "Come join us!" But no… my husband and I—no. For us, our country is our home. Even if it's been damaged, like that verse says…how does it go? "Even if it turns against me…"[260] *I don't remember the rest, but what matters is, we can't leave. The homeland is priceless."*[261]

Looking from the solidarity-ambivalence model of the familial-relational belonging, we can touch the embedded meaning that exposure to harshness, racism, and exploitation abroad are experienced as authentic vulnerability caused by one's distance from their own 'affective geographies'[262], and familial symbolic capital[263]. While the children complain of mistreatment, even by fellow Syrians abroad, the mother expresses a seemingly paradoxical belief that the restoration of social dignity can only be achieved by returning to the maternal homeland, Syria. This paradox is only resolved if we observe the implicit belief that familial ties, kinship bonds, and intergenerational cohesion constitute both the primary form of social capital and the essential shield of resilience throughout a person's life time[264]. However, these resources are only truly activated where extended multi-generational ties co-exist

[260] She is referring to the same cultural source that Maher mentioned, encouraging locality and belonging which is to the collective Aleppian conscience, is firmly rooted to familial bonds.
[261] "Najwa," interview by author, Aleppo, November 15, 2024.
[262] Naomi Greyser, "Introduction: Race, Gender, and Affective Geographies, " in *On Sympathetic Grounds: Race, Gender, and Affective Geographies in Nineteenth-Century North America*, ed. Naomi Greyser (Oxford University Press, 2017), abstract only, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190460983.003.0001.
[263] Geoffrey Mead, 'Proper Recognition: Personhood and Symbolic Capital in Contemporary Sociology', *Current Sociology* 69, no. 1 (1 January 2021): 24–40, doi:10.1177/0011392120932943.
[264] Dakua, Karmakar, and Lhungdim, 'Social Capital and Well-Being of the Elderly "Left-behind" by Their Migrant Children in India'.

physically on a shared geography, which guarantees maintenance of familial solidarity relations[265].

The resolution for this elder-left-behind mother is, thus, to exalt above her ambivalences by constructing a strong emotional and sensory bond rooted in the continuity of her personal history since her early childhood in the city[266]. Despite losing her home and possessions, being forcibly displaced, and enduring first-hand the traumas of shelling, war, and fear, which forced her to resettle in a rented apartment, a single visit to the old quarters of Aleppo, where she spent her childhood, was enough to anchor her emotionally and restore a sense of rootedness. This affectual coping dynamic compels her to reject the idea of relocation and settlement abroad with her children, despite her longing for them and their persistent efforts to bring her over. In other words, her memory-based nostalgic connection becomes her means for emotional coping that allows her to maintain attachment and resilience in the face of both physical and symbolic distance that migration of her sons had imposed.

"Aleppo is in my blood, in my veins, in everything. There's something in me. I just can't stay away. Even if this isn't really my house, it doesn't matter. I don't know. Maybe it's because I spent my childhood in the old neighborhoods. I remember, the moment we first heard that war in Aleppo was over, I turned to my husband and said; "I want to go ...I want to walk through these streets again, see the houses, the old buildings, the shops." *We started from Bab Al-Hadid and I walked all the way up to the Citadel, past Jub Al-Qubba. As I walked, I felt something…I don't know…A kind of spirituality! A presence! Do you understand what I mean? I've lived most of my life in Al-Jabriya, and to this day, whenever I go back there, I tell people: this is my neighborhood. That spirit, that feeling…It's different in the old quarters. I loved those places. My mother used to take us there when we were little to buy cheese or whatever she needed. And even now, when I visit those areas, I feel something from the past. When I go, I just want to sit and watch... The buildings, people walking by…Not like now…not like 'Al-Sabeel' or 'Niles Street'. No, no, not at all. Those places don't make*

[265] Baldassar, 'Missing Kin and Longing to Be Together', August 2008.
[266] Lebrusán, Irene, and M. Victoria Gómez. 2022. "The Importance of Place Attachment in the Understanding of Ageing in Place: "The Stones Know Me"" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 24: 17052. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192417052

you feel anything. There's no spirit, no soul. But there…in the old quarters you feel it. Even the mosque, even the call to prayer. When the adhan echoes, it feels different, like it's rising from the heart. It enters your soul. Even the food…Some women, though, they say, "I don't want my sisters, I don't want anyone, I just want my children, " and they chase after their kids abroad. But me—I can't. I don't know why. I want them to come here. This is their country. I hope things get better one day so they can come back. I don't want them to stay away."[267]

By virtue of this emotional survival competence, she appears to be more reconciled with the absence of her children than other interviewed elder-mothers are. In her narrative, the significance of place transcends its potential as a shared geography for accumulating social capital from Bourdieu's[268] pragmatic sense described by Maher. It expands rather into an affective bond embedded in the *pure geography* itself, which is potentially evocative of sensual memories and cultural meanings in the minds of senior residents. Theoretically speaking, familial intergenerational relations as a coping mechanism in later life seems to expand backward both temporally and symbolically to embrace the imagined co-presence of not only one's children and grandchildren, but also their own ancestral intergenerational extended familial relations**.**

6.7. Conclusion of Chapter VI

By focusing mainly on left-behind elder parents, who constitute the majority of the research sample, this chapter highlighted the psycho-social motivational dynamics that lead these elder parents not only to endure the absence of their children but also to legitimize their own rootedness in place. This attachment can by no means be strictly understood as a matter of pure freedom or mere personal choice; but rather a great deal of it was an externally imposed reality by structural conditions shaped by the crisis and its aftermath. Nevertheless, the narratives offered by these elder fathers emphasize the selective nature of their locality, by framing their underlying motives as deeply embedded in their sense of belonging and the intergenerational ties that are still available to them within the city.

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[267] "Najwa," interview by author, Aleppo, November 15, 2024.
[268] Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*.

However, their narratives mirror a great deal of conflicting feelings and thoughts concerning the quality of life and the nature and future of intergenerational relations both inside and outside the city. Although elder fathers occasionally acknowledge their children's achievements in exile, the dominant negative perceptions they hold about life outside the city and the nature of social relations there, allow them to sustain the hope of an inevitable intergenerational reunion and reassures their centrality in solid familial relationships that defies all kinds of temporal pressures.Ultimately, the chapter reframes ambivalent emotions and worldviews not as a tension to be resolved, but as a flexible space through which elder parents can maneuver and maintain a sense of agency, cultural identity, and psychological equilibrium in the face of irreversible socio-familial transformations. Furthermore, it opens the door to more in-depth socio-psychological studies on the relationship between individuals and geography through the lens of intergenerational relations, particularly, under extreme conditions that simultaneously deplete the material and spatial capacities of these geographies and erode familial bonds and their coping potential.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that the Syrian revolution and the subsequent waves of migration, loss, and economic crisis have radically reshaped the geography of family life in a city like Aleppo. One of the most notable demographic shifts caused by the war has been the significant increase in the proportion of elderly people and women[269]. As the majority of young generations, particularly men, fled the country to escape conscription and economic despair, elder parents were left behind to endure deteriorating life conditions caused by international economic sanctions[270]. Left alone, the hope of reunion with children abroad, who had migrated to confront uncertain futures abroad, would bring any change in their circumstances had faded. Despite that, they were resiliently struggling to recreate meaning and reshape their social and spiritual lives in ways that would align with a dramatically changing reality. By contrast, based on my initial observations, older adults in my immediate surroundings in Istanbul, particularly within multigenerational Syrian migrant households, appeared to navigate life's challenges with relatively minimal losses. These households exhibited key elements of resilience, marked by strong indicators of familial solidarity and well-being.

This thesis was born from a deeply personal space, rooted in my lived experience of separation from my aging parents in Aleppo. Through a combination of personal reflection and academic inquiry, I sought to explore how left-behind elderly parents in Aleppo, as well as their migrant counterparts in Istanbul, cope with the psychological and social consequences of the diasporic reality.

[269] Jadaliyya, "هل ستصبح سوريا بلد المسنين؟" *Jadaliyya*, accessed May 31, 2025, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45356.
[270] 'International Sanctions against Syria', in *Wikipedia*, 27 May 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=International_sanctions_against_Syria&oldid=1292501017

Initially, my understanding of coping mechanisms backed by basic review of literature and fragmented observations was focusing on religion, work, extra-familial social ties, familial relationships, and digital technologies as tools for resilience at old age. However, as I engaged more deeply with fieldwork, the historical and social specificity of my participants' contexts began to shape the form and content of my interview discussions and analytical process. These, in turn, came to revolve around themes such as the pain of separation from their children, the subsequent everyday challenges they faced, and the subtle changes in daily life that brought them moments of relief and comfort.

I had realized early on that the cornerstone of all coping strategies stemmed from a shared pain: the loss of children and the fragmentation of family life. For that, my personal unconscious emotional bias shaped by my own experience, aligned with a conscious bias stemming from the research trajectory itself, had all led me toward the theory of *intergenerational relations* as a unifying axis through which to organize and interpret how elderly parents make sense of life in old age.

Gradually, the focus of this study shifted from drawing a strict comparison between the two settings—Aleppo and Istanbul—to merely alluding to the alternative reality in Istanbul, which, despite all its shortcomings, appears relatively ideal in contrast to the lived experiences of elder parents in Aleppo where my thesis was majorly centered. The contrasting narratives that elder parents shared about their sense of place opened up compelling avenues for psychological and sociological inquiry, particularly regarding the effects of aging on identity and belonging. After a life spent building and serving their families, elders now found themselves torn between their geographic rootedness and their familial belonging, where much of which had become imaginary and emotional in the wake of displacement, and, thus, they were compelled to adapt by all possible means.

Consequently, religious, technological, and conceptual forms of coping came to dominate the scene through my participants' narratives. To cope with their reality, these elderly parents had resorted heavily to communication technology to compensate for lost familial bonds. They lived spiritual and religious experiences as bridges between spatially defined geographical belonging and temporally and symbolically

defined family intergenerational belonging. This was accompanied by a reconfiguration of their perceptions of place and belonging to legitimize the difficult choice they had taken; between either remaining and aging in place despite the collapse of local resources, or joining their children in exile — a decision that was largely shaped by overwhelming material and structural constraints.

Theoretically speaking, this study was guided by two theoretical propositions: first, that intergenerational relationships are vital coping mechanisms for elderly individuals which enables them to maintain a sense of agency and continuity; and second, that these relationships are often infused with emotional ambivalence, particularly in late life and in times of economic and social crisis. Accordingly, the research adopted a qualitative methodology, informed by ethnographic practice and phenomenological sensitivity, to analyze the multi-dimensional experiences of Aleppian elders at both the meso and micro levels.

The findings from the three analytical chapters—on technology, religion, and conceptual coping—demonstrate how elder parents creatively and selectively mobilize coping strategies to maintain emotional and social stability and intergenerational connectedness. The chapter on technology revealed that digital communication is not merely a tool for maintaining family contact, but a symbolic and functional mechanism for restoring parental centrality within the family. In Istanbul, where material conditions and digital infrastructure are more favorable, technology enabled elders to continue providing emotional, financial, and moral support to their children. This helped them resist the marginalization that often accompanies aging and family dispersion. In more impoverished and politically constrained settings, however, such as that in Eastern Aleppo, the effectiveness of technology as a coping tool diminishes. Communication often transforms into "uncommunication"—marked by silence that, paradoxically, may itself serve as a form of familial solidarity rather than a sign of resignation or disconnection. The findings also highlight the gendered dimensions of digital coping: older mothers used technology to simulate family life, while older fathers employed it for instrumental purposes. Yet, in both cases, the intergenerational relationship framework remains the central force shaping elderly engagement with digital mediums.

The chapter on religion illustrated how faith functions as a complex social and cultural coping mechanism in the context of intergenerational separation. Religion goes beyond spiritual comfort to serve as a channel for asserting symbolic authority, seeking support, and transmitting identity across generations. Among those in relatively stable material conditions, religion fostered outward social engagement and transformed suffering into a shared, collective experience. In contrast, within more fragile contexts, religious coping took an inward turn—manifesting as a withdrawal from the social sphere and a retreat into a fragmented sense of familial self. This duality of outward versus inward religious coping reflects the broader structural inequalities shaping access to meaningful intergenerational roles and psychological resilience.

The final chapter on conceptual coping explored the narratives of left-behind elderly parents in Aleppo, showing how their attachment to place was a result of a deliberate emotional and cultural act. While they expressed ambivalence about migration and the social realities both within and beyond the city, they constructed hopeful narratives that affirmed their continued centrality in the imagined future of the family. This ambivalence is reframed not as a problem to be solved, but as a coping mechanism in itself—enabling elders to maneuver within constrained realities while retaining cultural identity and symbolic agency. These narratives open critical space for understanding the intersections between aging, geography, and familial imagination in times of crisis.

Based on the preceding analyses and findings, this thesis may have contributed to filling a notable research gap by shedding light on a socially and academically marginalized group. The elderly, as a distinct target population, remain underexplored within sociological inquiry, particularly in the context of forced migration. On the other hand, while migration studies often focus extensively on migrants themselves, far fewer studies address those left-behind senior parents. Moreover, research at the intersection of gerontology and migration tends to be idealized, frequently situated in stable contexts that fail to account for the meta-structural realities of social rupture, political insecurity, forced displacement, economic despair. While the limited body of literature that does engage with the experiences of older Syrians in such contexts has largely adopted a positivist, quantitative orientation, emphasizing survival statistics and objective indicators , often neglecting the subjective dimensions of agency,

resilience, and meaning-making. In contrast, this qualitative study has sought to humanize this population by moving beyond their physical and material existence, toward exploring the relational, spiritual, and affective aspects of resilience, and well-being at old age during times of crisis.

In uniting these findings, this thesis demonstrates that the coping strategies of elderly Aleppians unfold at the confluence of structural conditions, symbolic frameworks, and the embodied experiences of lived reality. Intergenerational relationships, whether supportive or ambivalent, physically present or digitally mediated, remain central to their coping processes. As such, this study calls for a deeper, more integrated exploration of aging and adaptation to familial fragmentation, where emotional resilience, cultural belonging, and structural constraint are constantly being negotiated but never fully resolved.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Full Name:

Dima Faress

Education:

2005 – 2009	BA in English Literature from Aleppo University
2010 – 2012	MA in Translation and Arabization from Aleppo University

Work Experience:

2009–2012	Worked as a main English teacher in Shams Al Asil private school in Syria.
2012–2013	Worked as an English teacher in a governmental school in Syria.
2015–2016	Worked as an Arabic teacher for foreigners at Okur-Der institution in Istanbul.
2019-2021	Worked as an Arabic teacher for foreigners in the Al-Madina Institute online programme.
2021-2023	Worked as an English Teacher at Alnoor International School in Istanbul.
2022–2024	Worked as an Arabic teacher for American elders aged 60 and above in the Midad Institute Summer Program.