Transnational Families (2007)

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Basic Concepts and Definitions

Globalization of production and labor flows have increased the frequency of transnational family forms, which are now common among both the professional global elites as well as among poor migrant workers. Their primary characteristic is having members spread out across nation states but still maintaining a sense of collective welfare and unity (Bryceson & Vorela, 2002). Their kinship networks cross at ‘residential nodes’ in two or several countries (Bjeren 1997: 237). The composition of these nodes may vary, not only periodically, as a result of the coming and goings of new immigrants and returnees, but also cyclically as a result of the working and living arrangements of family members (Zontini, 2002). Conventionally, households are defined as ‘a group of people who share the same residence and participate collectively, if not always co-operatively, in the basic tasks of reproduction and consumption’ (Chant & McIlwaine, 1995: 4). But in transnational households one parent, both parents or adult children may be producing income abroad while other family members carry out the functions of reproduction, socialization, and consumption in the country of origin (Parreñas, 2001). Thus, transnationalism forces us to reconsider our understanding of households and families based on the idea of co-residency and physical unity, and to take into account the possibility of spatial separation.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Although global elites are affected by transnational family living, this entry focuses on migrant workers, the largest and less privileged group of transnational subjects. This family form is not entirely new and has characterized migrant workforces since the early 20th century when male workers migrated to the US and Latin America from countries such as Poland, Italy, Ireland and China, leaving their wives and children behind. For contemporary migrant workers, the emergence of transnational families can be seen as closely linked to the growing demand in care-taking jobs for first world families, who increasingly tend to be filled by third world women. Western women’s participation in the labor market is increasingly relying on the support offered by cheap and flexible workers (usually migrant women) who take up some of their domestic tasks, such as cleaning, cooking and looking after both children and the elderly (Anderson, 2000). Due to the nature of their job (which is often live-in) and restrictive entry policies, these migrant
women commonly have to leave their own families behind. This phenomenon has been talked about in terms of global care chains (Hochschild, 2003) or the international transfer of caretaking (Parreñas, 2001). In these arrangements, under-valued and under-paid caring jobs are passed on from western women to migrant women, and the migrant women in turn employ poorer non-migrant women to look after the family members they have left behind.

A focus on transnational families draws attention to the complex social linkages shaped by the care arrangements Western working families utilize, and how their strategies are shaped by governmental work-family, immigration, and labor policies. It also offers insights on the ways work-family strains experienced by migrants (usually women) can occur as a by product of performing care work needed by dual-earner Western families. A focus on transnational families is also important since the work and family life of racialized minority groups have tended to be overlooked in mainstream accounts in both the US and Britain (Glenn, 1994; Reynolds, 2005). Within feminist migration studies, several scholars are documenting how migrants (especially women) are involved in both productive and reproductive work, which help to maintain transnational families. Alicea (1997), for instance, draws on Di Leonardo’s (1992) work to show the crucial importance of women’s kin and care work for sustaining their transnational families. Their economic role as main providers for their distant families is also being documented (Anderson, 2000; Gambaurd, 2000; Parreñas 2001).

State of the Body of Knowledge

Although the study of transnational families was neglected until the late 1990s, in recent years, a rich literature has begun to develop, focusing explicitly on functioning and daily practices. Work on transnational motherhood (Erel, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; LARG, 2005; Parreñas, 2001), transnational childhood (Parreñas, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, 2001) and, recently, transnational fatherhood (Pribilsky, 2004) has brought attention to the separations that occur within the household when migrants (now increasingly mothers) leave their children behind to work abroad in care work, as well as in occupations such as cleaners. Attention is also starting to be paid to transnational partnering, looking at the implications of transnationalism for couples who now have to learn to adapt their families to lives lived apart (Pribilsky, 2004, see also Gambaurd, 2000; Sorensen, 2005).

This literature shows that the task of parenting becomes particularly difficult for ‘transnational mothers’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997); those mothers who, due to their work commitments in immigration countries, have to leave their children behind to be cared for by relatives in their countries of origin. These mothers have to learn to cope with the pain of family separations and the feelings of helplessness and loneliness that they engender (Parreñas, 2001). In many societies, dominant ideologies of the family stress the importance of the mother-child dyad. Those mothers who live separated from their children often feel guilty about being ‘bad mothers’ and suffer as a consequence (LARG, 2005; Parreñas, 2001).
For example, Erel (2001) reports how Turkish mothers in this situation suffer due to the peer pressure of ‘good mothering’. Not all women, however, internalize an image of the ‘bad’ migrant mother and several actively struggle to reconceptualize the idea of mothering, for instance by including breadwinning and economic support for children (Erel, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2001; Reynolds 2005).

Recent studies have shown that families’ separations are particularly difficult for children (LARG, 2005; Parreñas, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Suarez-Orozco et al. (2001) conclude that separation due to migration is a painful process for children who long for missing parents. From a child’s perspective, family reunification may be experienced as one of gain and loss, as it can result in losing a relationship with the caregiver who assumed parental duties during their parents’ absence. According to Parrenas, children of transnational migrants seem to suffer more in mother-away rather than father-away families. This is because, in her view, children ‘struggle to accept the reconstitution of mothers as more of an economic provider and less of a caretaker of the home’ (Parreñas, 2005: 164).

Transnationalism • living within social fields encompassing two or several countries (Bjeren, 1997) • also affects partnering, although it seems, in a gendered way. As is the case in mother-away families, couples seem to be under more strain when the wife is the migrant. One study of Ecuadorian men who migrated to the US indicated that couples’ relationships improved following migration and that they adapted with redefined roles and arrangements (Pribilsky, 2004). However Gambaurd (2000) observed the difficult and often painful nature of the negotiations surrounding changing gender roles and family structures brought about by female migration from Sri Lanka. Sorensen’s (2005) and my own work (Zontini, 2002) also point to the fact that transnationalism may reduce strain for couples and can be used as an exit strategy by women in unsatisfactory and abusive relationships.

The literature on global care chains highlights some of the problems inherent in the development of transnational families (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Hochschild, 2003). These authors draw attention to the global transfer of care work, which is moving from poor countries to rich ones, as women leave their families to work as nannies, cleaners and elderly caregivers in the affluent homes of the West. They argue that the global transfer of emotional resources is leaving poor countries in a situation of ‘care drain’ and that primary victims of these global arrangements are the traumatized children left behind. Although very important, this analysis may run the risk of stigmatizing transnational families generally and migrant women in particular (Parreñas, 2005; Sorensen, 2005). In countries such as the Philippines, migrant families are talked about in terms of ‘broken’ families and migrant parents and (especially mothers) are held responsible for their children’s behavioral and educational problems. Parreñas (2005), however, identifies the impossibility of a return to the nuclear family given the dependence of many families on the work of migrant women abroad. Children of transnational parents are not ‘abandoned’ since mothers continue to provide emotional support through regular phone calls, letters, parcels as well as remittances.
These children also often have the love and care of their extended family who assume parental responsibilities in the migrants’ absences. Those who have researched transnational families believe that, in order to minimise suffering for those involved, these arrangements have to be supported (through policies) (see final section) rather than stigmatized (LARG, 2005; Parreñas, 2005; Sorensen, 2005).

Whereas the work on global care chains highlights the negative side of transnational family life, other research has drawn attention to their more positive functions, showing family resilience and the ways this adaptive strategy enables emotional and financial support for members. This research focuses on how transnational families are maintained and reproduced in spite of geographical separation (Baldassar, 2001; Bryceson & Vourela, 2002; Burholt, 2004; Mason, 2004; Wilding, 2006; Reynolds, 2006; Zontini, 2004a, 2006a) and the kind of resources that circulate within them (Reynolds & Zontini, 2006; Zontini, 2006a). Special attention has been given to the importance of kin and caring work circulating in these families. The very existence of transnational families rests on kin ties being kept alive and maintained, in spite of great distances and prolonged separations. Bryceson and Vourela (2002) have recently highlighted this kin-keeping, and advanced two concepts to study transnational family making, namely ‘frontieri ng’ and ‘relativizing’. The first refers to ‘the ways and means transnational family members use to create familial space and network ties in a terrain where affinal connections are relatively sparse’ (Bryceson & Vourela, 2002: 11). The second refers to the ways ‘individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members’ (Bryceson & Vourela, 2002: 14). In their study of transnational Caribbean families, Goulbourne and Chamberlain (2001: 42) have found that ‘geographical distance is no barrier to being a “close” family and informants stressed the importance of [transnational links], the “tightness” of the emotional bonds, and the level of “trust” expected and experienced between family members.

Authors have also noted that geographical distance does not mean the cessation of caring, in spite of the difficulties involved in having ‘to monitor and meet the physical and emotional needs of individuals in more than one household [in more than one country]’ (Alicea, 1997: 318). A new scholarship on ‘transnational care-giving’ is emerging documenting how caring practices are achieved in spite of geographical distance (Baldassar & Baldock, 2000; Goulbourne & Chamberlain, 2001; Reynolds & Zontini, 2006; Zontini, 2006a). These authors focus on the experiences of established migrant groups such as Italians in Australia and the United Kingdom (Baldassar & Baldock, 2000; Zontini, 2006a) Caribbeans in Britain (Goulbourne & Chamberlain, 2001; Reynolds, 2005) and Europeans across the European Union (Ackers & Stalford, 2004), showing that transnational family living does not affect only recently arrived migrants but extends to subsequent generations as well (Zontini, 2006a). The focus has been on caring work that occurs both intergenerationally (e.g. between adult children and ageing parents or grandparents and grandchildren) as well as intragenerationally (e.g. among siblings).
Implications for research and practice

Although there is increasing attention in the literature to transnational families, a number of areas remain under researched. First of all, in spite of some exceptions (the literature on transnational care giving; (Sorensen, 2006; Zontini, 2004b)), the majority of studies still tend to have a North American focus, even though transnational families can be found across the globe. Secondly, the experiences of elderly migrants and those of the so-called ‘second generation’ have yet to receive adequate attention. As far as elderly migrants are concerned, we know little about their subjective experiences, their choices and dilemmas about where to spend old age and their ways of making sense of changes occurring in both ‘host’ and ‘home’ communities. We also know little about their access to and participation in networks of care both locally and transnationally (Zontini, 2006b). Waters and Levitt (2002) have started exploring how far the second generation is involved in transnational practices, but there are still few studies documenting the ways in which those born in the country of immigration continue to be involved in transnational family living (Reynolds, 2006; Christou, 2006). Also, within the literature on global care chains, attention has been primarily given to transnational child care whereas the issue of transnational elder care has received less attention (see Escriva’, 2004; Ibarra, 2002). Finally, new research is needed on ‘mixed families’, especially on how transnational arrangements and relationships are maintained and negotiated when partners originate from different countries.

The study of transnational families has important implications for policy makers and volunteer organizations. One area where attention is needed is the support of children inside and outside of schools. This refers to children who are ‘left behind’ as well as to those who are reunited with one or both of their parents after a long period of separation. The support of working immigrant parents in accessing services is also very important since good provisions, especially in child care, may allow them to reunite their families. The support of elderly migrants in accessing services at both ends of the transnational social field is also an area that needs to be considered. Other measures directed at alleviating the difficulties of migrant workers and their families could include work policies that make transnational family life easier to sustain (e.g. paid and extended trips ‘home’) but above all, a simplification and relaxation of immigration laws that at present prevent, or make extremely difficult, family reunification. Policy makers should also review the impact of immigration policies that are often contributing to the formation of transnational families (for instance, the establishment of guest-worker programmes). In addition to the above measures, policy makers should also consider the ways in which care is organized in Western countries and the wider implications of their reliance on cheap and flexible workers from the South.
References


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...](#)).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network

Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between
specific factors or clusters of factors.

**Process**

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. **Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves.** Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. **It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal.** Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

Work-Family Experiences: The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

Antecedents: Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
• Workplace Antecedents
• Community Antecedents
• Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

• Individual Covariates
• Family Covariates
• Workplace Covariates
• Community Covariates
• Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

• Individual Decision and Responses
• Family Decisions and Responses
• Workplace Decisions and Responses
• Community Decisions and Responses
• Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

• Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
• Outcomes & Impacts on Families
• Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
• Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
• Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives</th>
<th>Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain C: Covariates</th>
<th>Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Antecedents</td>
<td>Individual Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Individual Covariates</td>
<td>Individual Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Individual Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Antecedents</td>
<td>Family Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Family Covariates</td>
<td>Family Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Family Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workplace Antecedents</td>
<td>Workplace Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Workplace Covariates</td>
<td>Workplace Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Workplace Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
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<td>Community Antecedents</td>
<td>Community Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
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<td>Societal Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains