

The transnational family

Dr Laura Merla of the Catholic University of Louvain outlines the TRANSFAM research programme, which investigates theoretical and empirical knowledge on the inter-relationship between geographic distance, care practices and family relations

With globalisation and the acceleration of migratory flows, an increasing number of people experience family life across geographical borders, for short or longer periods of their lives. There are many examples: students studying abroad; workers who commute across borders between their jobs and their homes; children of divorced families who divide their time between two households located in different countries; migrant mothers and fathers who leave their young children in their home country; and professionals who migrate with their partners and children and maintain long distance relationships with their ageing parents.

Affordable travel and new communication technologies have led to the development of these transnational families – families with members who live in different countries and continue to care for, and about each other, across distance. Today, migrants exchange financial, practical and emotional support with their distant children, siblings and ageing parents, sometimes on a daily basis. Articulating local working lives and transnational family obligations is a major challenge for them. The TRANSFAM 'Transnational family networks' research programme developed by CIRFASE (the Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Families and Sexualities) located at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium aims at better understanding this social phenomenon, and identify key obstacles to the maintenance of transnational family solidarity.

Resources

Just like in any family, transnational kin relationships wax and wane over the family/life cycle and involve routine, as well as crisis, exchanges. If you were living in a different country from your ageing parents, it is likely you would probably phone them and

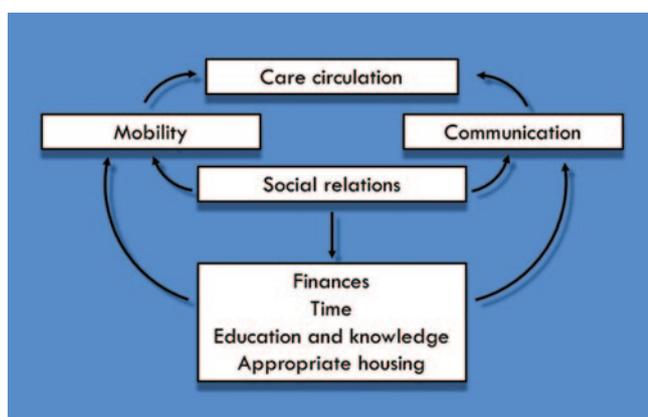
chat with them online on a regular basis to exchange news, advices and comfort. Sending videos and pictures of children is also common, as well as organising Skype meetings so children can interact with their grandparents in 'real' life. Parents may also want to visit and assist with childcare for a while. At some point, your father may become ill, and you may want to help him – send money to cover his health expenses, travel to his home and spend a few days or weeks with him to care for him.

In order to do this, members of transnational families must be able to communicate together and travel when necessary. However, they cannot do this without a series of resources: money is a key issue, but also time (being able to take leave from work), education and knowledge (being able to use communication technologies), and having appropriate housing. They also need social relations, that is, friends, relatives, ethnic associations etc. that can help raise funds when necessary, or look after their children when they travel abroad for a family emergency.

Keeping contact

These resources are in part constituted within the local contexts of both home and host societies. Policies regulating transport, communication and banking are of course highly relevant. Also important are migration policies, which define entry/exit rights and migrants' participation in the labour market; policies governing their access to social security; and work-family balance policies, including access to the right to take time to care in a transnational context. These policies affect the capacity of families to access the resources they need to maintain transnational relations, and create strong inequalities between, and within, transnational families. Depending on their migratory status and position in the labour market, third-country nationals and intra-EU migrants are unequal in their capacity to participate in transnational caring circuits, as are low-qualified, low-paid migrants compared to professionals.

The situation is most problematic for irregular migrants like Yasmina, whom I met in 2010. Yasmina moved to Belgium from El Salvador in 2001, leaving her teenage daughters in the care of her mother. Her Belgium-based aunt financed her journey, provided her initial accommodation, and helped her find an undeclared job as a live-in domestic. However, their relationship became difficult. Yasmina felt she demanded too much in return, in the form of money and domestic work.



Care circulation resources diagram



She remained in regular contact with her daughters and her mother, sending them money and calling them as often as she could; her daughters moved to Belgium two years later. Today, Yasmina is unable to send monthly remittances to her 84-year-old mother, but she is ready to step in if an emergency arises. She deeply regrets not being able to visit her relatives, but she still feels highly responsible for her mother’s wellbeing.

A key reason Yasmina is unable to visit her mother is due to her status as an irregular migrant; she cannot circulate freely between Belgium and El Salvador. Because she works in the informal economy, she does not have access to paid leave and her working conditions do not provide her with sufficient financial means to travel regularly. The only way she is able to contribute to family solidarity is from a distance, via the telephone and the internet. These difficulties could have led to Yasmina’s withdrawal from her transnational family network. Irregular migrants (and refugees in particular) are in a highly vulnerable position in the host country, and simultaneously face heavy demands from their distant relatives. Some refugees actually cease contact with their families precisely because they cannot cope with these tensions and eventually reconnect with them when their own situation improves. These extreme cases should not hide the fact that wealthier middle and upper class migrants enjoying a relatively good situation in their country of residence, also face strong tensions in articulating their local lives with their transnational family obligations.

Recognition and support

The idea that distance automatically disrupts family relationships and relieves migrants from their obligations to care remains extremely powerful. Within the political sphere, there is a widespread lack of acknowledgement of the existence of transnational families, of the continued role that migrants play in the transnational circulation of family solidarity, and of the support they in turn receive from their distant relatives. These

circumstances apply both to migrants moving to, and within the EU, as well as Europeans who migrate outside the EU.

At the European level, several measures facilitate the circulation of family care, such as the portability of pensions that allow European retirees who move to another EU member state to continue to receive their pension benefits abroad. However, in general, European migration policies do not favour the extension of migrants’ social rights. In a context of increasingly restrictive family reunification schemes, it is essential to design national and international policies and regulations that facilitate transnational family connections and respond to the specific needs of kin experiencing distance and separation.

In a context of demographic change and labour shortages, designing national and supranational policies and regulations that facilitate transnational family connections within and outside the EU will not only respond to the specific needs of these families, but also increase EU competitiveness.

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Dr Laura Merla
Catholic University of Louvain

tel: +32 (0)1 047 4210

laura.merla@uclouvain.be
www.uclouvain.be/transfam