Chapter 12

Afterword: Gender Practices in Transnational Families

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12.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, we offer a short synthesis highlighting the changes that have emerged in transnational family research in the course of the last two decades of study within the field. We notice that, through methodological and conceptual repositioning, a gendered perspective has become a priority. After identifying key elements introduced in the second decade of research on transnational families, in this chapter, we briefly discuss research on Romanian transnational families in order to illustrate how these changes in perspective are reflected within these studies, offering specific examples from my research. Then, we illustrate the way in which the chapters published in this volume are connected to the latest trends in the field.

12.2 Beginnings of Transnational Family Research

The 1990s, under the influence of developments in feminist and gender studies, represented a reference point within research addressing the migration of persons due to the fact that women became a primary object of study as drivers of global movements within their own families, as opposed to simply being companions of men (Petraza-Bailey 1991; Morokvasik 1984, 2004, 2007; Sassen 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Tolstokorova 2008). We emphasize the fact that, while women had been active agents within global population movements before the 1990s, research did not take them into account as subjects deserving special attention. Instead, the conclusions obtained in the course of research that

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focused on men involved in the process of migration were automatically applied to them. Although the prompt to make women visible within migration studies came from the wish for gender balance, some of the first concepts developed in this period concerned **transnational motherhood** (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), which focused on the relationship between migrant mothers and their children left at home. This concept brought into the spotlight the burden that departed mothers carried while fulfilling their role as transnational mothers, given that, although they were far away, they were still considered as bearing a primary responsibility towards their children at home, even if, in many cases, the children's fathers stayed in the home country with them. Since then and up to the present, transnational motherhood (Erel 2002; Ryan 2007; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Madianou and Miller 2012; Parreñas 2001; Ducu 2013) has remained one of the most sensitive research fields, offering insights into these women's sacrifice and their pain, as well as their empowerment through the fulfilment of their double role as active migrants and transnational mothers.

Concurrently with the launch of research addressing transnational motherhood, the concept of **transnational families** was also developed (Herrera Lima 2001; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002), generally comprising all types of families whose members manage – through various strategies – to live as a family, even if they are separated by physical distance, but also, very importantly, by national borders, which in turn differentiate the departed members into various categories of relationships with the home country (e.g., free movers, economic migrants, illegal migrants and refugees), deeply influencing their relationships with family members at home as well.

12.3 The Second Decade: Changes in Approach

Almost two decades of transnational family research have especially focused on the analysis of transnational relationships among members of the nuclear family. One line of scholarship has turned its attention to migrant parents and children left at home in the country of departure and involved research topics such as transnational motherhood (Parreñas 2001; Dreby 2007), transnational parenting (Dreby 2006; Moran-Taylor 2008) and transnational fatherhood (Pribilsky 2004; Tolstokorova 2016; Palenga-Möllenberg and Lutz 2016). Meanwhile, other studies have attended to adult migrant children and elderly parents left at home (Baldassar et al. 2007; Hărăguș and Ducu Telegdi-Csetri 2018).

12.3.1 *New Actors and Co-Presence*

From the start, few studies on transnational families have included as subjects children who migrate alongside their parents (Orellana et al. 2001). The appeal made by Mazzucato and Schans in 2011 to consider children as active agents in the context

of transnational family research had the same effect as those calling for a greater visibility of women as active agents of migration at the beginning of the 1990s. In highlighting the increased importance of the presence of children in this domain during the second decade of transnational family research, a number of journal special issue editions has gained value in reference terms (Mazzucato and Schans 2011; White et al. 2011; Gardner 2012; Carling et al. 2012), along with some edited volumes (Spyrou and Christou 2014; Nagasaka and Fresnoza-Flot 2015; Seeberg and Gozdzia 2016).

Another study of reference, reflecting the new trends in transnational family research of the last decade, is the meta-analysis on this body of research published in 2014 by Sørensen and Vammen. The authors used to primarily consider migrant adults as having an active role within these families as main subjects during the first decade, while treating children and the elderly as secondary subjects with a passive role, as dependent family members. Moreover, another characteristic approach of the first decade of transnational family research was the opposing binaries approach, such as women versus men, adults versus children, stayers versus leavers, and staying connected versus breaking relations. For overcoming such dualities within research, the aforementioned authors have recommended us to look at these families as living in a permanent state of co-presence. Studies from the last decade have taken a turn towards children as active members, as shown above, while also analysing the elderly as active agents within transnational families (Hărăguș and Ducu Telegdi-Csetri 2018; Ducu 2018).

12.3.2 Rethinking Care Within Transnational Families

With the same logic of division into decades of transnational family research, one could also emphasize that the very concept of care, still viewed as a key element in the analysis of relationships within these families, has undergone a paradigmatic change when the passage from a binary logic to one of co-presence happened: thus, we depart from the concept of the care chain (Hochschild 2000; Basa et al. 2011), which clearly presupposes a separation between those who have departed and those who remain at home: the migrant women taking over care tasks from women in the destination country, women at home taking over the task of caring for dependent family members at home; in other words, women from poorer countries transfer services to women in richer countries unidirectionally. This concept of care was the central pillar of transnational family research during the first decade (Raijman et al. 2003; Piperno 2007; Bernhard et al. 2009); however, during the second decade, through the introduction of the reference concept of the circulation of care (Baldassar and Merla 2013), the co-relation of care between leavers and stayers has been highlighted.

12.4 New Conceptual and Methodological Approaches

12.4.1 *Family Practices and Transnational Families*

In order to theorize this co-presence among departed and remaining transnational family members, a heuristically fertile approach involves the notion of *doing family*, as developed and refined by David Morgan (2011a, b). Morgan (2011a) shows how such practices unfold, especially in the case of mutual visits of these transnational families, occasions that sometime become an opportunity for some family members belonging to the same family to meet for the first time – as in the case of some children from these families. Nedelcu and Wyss have shown, in their 2016 research, how this concept of family practices ensures virtual co-presence with the help of ICT. Through the practices of doing family, transnational family members create, negotiate and permanently reaffirm their belonging to the family (Kilkey and Palenga-Möllenberg 2016; Telegdi-Csetri and Ducu 2016, 2018), especially since, as with many other non-mainstream types of family (such as lone-parent families or lesbian and gay families), transnational families frequently find themselves questioned and hence often wish to display family (Finch 2007, 2011; Almack 2008; Ducu 2014, 2018). A growing amount of research on such families, with members on the move (see the volume edited by Kilkey and Palenga-Möllenberg 2016, and the Pivot monographs by Ralph 2015 and Ducu 2018) are centred on the concept of *doing family*.

12.4.2 *Methodological Changes*

At the end of the first decade, Mazzucato and Schans (2011) recommended new developments in the methodological approach to this field, as well as developing mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches in cross-country comparisons, which should supplement small-scale research restricted to national or bi-national settings, and “the inclusion of units that are larger than the nuclear family [so as to] study a matched sample of people at *the same time*” (p. 710). When talking about transnational families, the use of the life course perspective (Kilkey and Palenga-Möllenberg 2016; Christensen 2017) is just as important. In recent methodological designs, researchers have tended to include, with growing frequency, the perspective of people we call highly skilled migrants, lifestyle migrants and other respondents, such as experts in situations that transnational family members find themselves in. Enlarging these methodological frameworks has made possible an intense development in the field during the last decade.

12.5 Gender and Mobility: New Approaches to the Analysis of Families on the Move

These changes, during the second decade, overcame unidirectional research by unfolding from the perspective of women or men and using a gendered approach in migration studies (Sherif Trask 2010; Fournon and Glick Schiller 2001; Kofman et al. 2011; Schmalzbauer 2011; Geisen and Parreñas 2013; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014; Schneebaum et al. 2015; Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017; Ala-Mantila and Fleischmann 2017; Marchetti and Salih 2017). Such a focus on gender practices within transnational families brings new ways in which to more deeply understand events involving their members. The gendered approach used as a main or secondary objective of transnational family studies becomes expedient in such studies, especially since, over the years, centring research on the concept of care has allowed the voices of women from these families to be more often heard than those of men.

The tendency is towards uniting what appear to be finely differentiated fields, namely, transnational family studies (Schmalzbauer 2004, 2005, 2008; Zontini 2004, 2010; Skrbiš 2008) and family migration studies (Kofman 2004; Bailey and Boyle 2004; Kilkey 2017). This is a significant challenge and presupposes a new positioning towards the perspectives of analysis. The most straightforward, albeit forced, differentiation between the two would be that the first analyses these families from the perspective of relationships among migrant and non-migrant family members, while the second focuses on the ways of living among migrant family members in the destination countries. On closer analysis, however, these studies are interwoven since transnational relations with family members at home are strongly dependent on the way of life of migrants: the geopolitical context they live in, their legal status, the socio-economic category they belong to and, in particular, the perspective they have on the duration of dwelling in the destination country/ies, hence their self-perception in what concerns their own mobility.

The new ways of approaching transnational families offer the possibility to introduce new actors as subjects to the field: for example, couples, as a unit of study, who depart together to live in another country, or who become a couple abroad, either from among members of the same nationality or different ones (Gaspar 2010, 2012; Sowa-Behtane 2010; Brahic 2013; Ducu and Hossu 2016; Zadkowska and Szlendak 2016; Fresnoza-Flot 2017; Ducu 2018), for the purpose of analysing the relationships between these couples and family members remaining in the home country.

Over the last decade, these elements have led researchers to confront, with increasing clarity, the conceptual challenge of relating to agents situated in the flux of global movements: migrants, immigrants/emigrants, free movers, expats, refugees etc. One of the tendencies is to avoid these conceptual debates and relate to these actors from the perspective of “mobile lives” (Elliott and Urry 2010; Baldassar 2016; Ducu 2018). An entire series of studies has shown that the bonding substance

of these families on the move is transnational communication, i.e., access to increasingly varied ITC options offering unforeseeable opportunities for ‘doing family’ (Madianou and Miller 2012; Madianou 2016a, b; Baldassar et al. 2016).

12.6 Discussion on Romanian Transnational Families

In what follows, we briefly build on the research on Romanian transnational families, in order to exemplify how the changes in the last decade are reflected in these studies.

A short synthesis of studies on Romanian transnational families will show us that the majority of studies focused, at first, on the phenomenon of departed parents and children left at home (Robila 2011; Ducu 2013, 2014; Bezzi 2013; Botezat and Pfeiffer 2014; Sănduleasa and Matei 2015; Popa 2016; Rentea and Rotărescu 2016), and then on children who migrated alongside their parents (Valtolina et al. 2013; Trias et al. 2013; Bratu 2015; Santero and Naldini 2017). We notice that these studies, centred on children, unfolded predominantly after 2011, after the appeal to bring children into the research on transnational families.

Another line of research analyses the impact of migration on the status of women, especially from the perspective of their empowerment (Davidovic 2009; Crisan 2012; Ducu 2013; Aştilean 2016). These studies cover large, general topics and rarely touch on more special themes of analysis, such as transnational communication (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016; Nedelcu 2017), approaches from the perspective of lodging type of these families (Iacob Larionescu 2016), the correlation of studies concerning trafficking in persons with those concerning transnational families (Hilario Pascoal and Schwartz 2016), the relationship on migrant adults and the elderly at home (Földes 2016; Hărăguş and Ducu Telegdi-Csetri 2018) or the return home of these families (Vlase 2013).

The author’s research on transnational families started in the period 2007–2011, when the author carried out her PhD research, obviously on the topic of transnational motherhood. Within this study, in which other transnational family members have also participated, besides the mothers, one of the main conclusions was that other family members also become involved to compensate for the absence of mothers, especially since they wish to display themselves as functional families in a context where these families find themselves under pressure due to accusations made on behalf of Romanian public opinion for allegedly being problematic families. We notice that this research, being situated at the turn of the 2000s and 2010s, contains both the elements of the first decade of this century, i.e., transnational motherhood, and those of the emerging one, i.e., the inclusion of family members at home in the analysis, as well as the concept of displaying families (Finch 2007, 2011) as a key conceptual element in understanding the functioning of these families.

My recent book (Ducu 2018), based on the results of a research project that ran from October 2015 to November 2017, which the author managed, reflects several influences of the paradigm shifts within transnational family research. Firstly, data

were obtained through multisite research in several Romanian towns, as well as abroad (within the EU: UK, Belgium). Besides face-to-face interviews, we used data obtained in the course of virtual fieldwork: online interviews with subjects situated in various countries (US, Canada, Germany, UK, Egypt). We have analysed individual and couple interviews from both types of fieldwork (offline/online). In the UK, we carried out fieldwork within a low-skilled Romanian worker network, whereas, in Belgium, we interviewed high-skilled Romanians. By having various types of subjects (departed/staying/returned; high-skilled/low-skilled; destination country in the EU/not in the EU etc.), we succeeded in understanding the relationships within transnational families in diverse situations.

Second, we placed gender relations within these families at the centre of our analysis, which led to much more innovative results than would have been the case with simple bi-national fieldwork. For example, having both departed young couples and remaining elderly couples as units of analysis, we noticed that, on the one hand, migrant women are those responsible for transnational communication, even in bi-national couples, where the woman is not a Romanian citizen. On the other hand, back at home, by having to confront the challenge of technology, gender roles are overturned, with elderly men becoming responsible for transnational communication. Another example surfaces through the comparative analysis of the high-skilled versus low-skilled categories, or through that of mono-national versus bi-national couples. In the case of low-skilled women, we witnessed a de-skilling process, whereas high-skilled women maintained their social status, namely, in the case of childless couples. When children appeared, however, women from both categories lost their social status. Thus, in the case of low-skilled, mono-national or bi-national couples, we encountered the practice where women declared themselves to be lone mothers, although their partner was beside them, and chose not to marry in order to receive social welfare. In the case of high-skilled women, irrespective of their belonging to mono- or bi-national couples, women gave up their employee status in order to focus on child raising. The parent who was most responsible for their children's education was the mother, while the father intervened especially in nationally mixed couples in order to establish the child's citizenship and religion, and to teach them Romanian. Moreover, in the cases where the children had to be brought to Romania for educational purposes, in order to access a qualitatively superior educational system than what the family could afford abroad, the women were those who were expected to return alongside their children to the home country, even in the case of bi-national couples, if the mother was a Romanian; when the mother was not a Romanian citizen, both parents were expected to return.

In respect of *mobility*, irrespective of the social category, most of our participants who lived abroad lived temporarily suspended in the transnational: they were living in the destination country for an undefined amount of time, without a willingness to integrate (i.e., temporarily), and doing transnational family with members at home, not only for emotional reasons, but also with the intention of returning. At the same time, the relation with the destination community was kept as autonomous as possible, without establishing any form of integration (hence, suspension). If, for adults, a temporarily suspended existence in the transnational is easier to accom-

plish; for those born abroad and especially those who have already entered the educational system, it is much more difficult, and for them a return or *migration* to Romania becomes hard.

The low-skilled have developed a strategy of stealthy living, trying to minimize their visibility as much as possible, non-displaying themselves under the pressure of discrimination (interiorized in most cases), whereas the high-skilled display a strategy of living lavishly. Through our online interviews, we accessed persons who had overcome the state of transnational suspension and entered into a process of integration into the target country, up to the threshold of suspending transnational relations through moving elderly relatives abroad, thus accomplishing family reunification. It was interesting to see that, in these cases, one of the most visible effects that inhibited living transnationally was the cessation of efforts by parents to make their children learn Romanian. Of course, among the key concepts of this research was doing/displaying family.

12.7 Reflection on the New Perspectives in the Present Book

Each chapter in this book adds to the development of new trends within transnational family research. First, we witness children as new actors in transnational families, and as main subjects within the first part of the book. Second, parents – men and women alike – are understood through various understudied stances. We also see the elderly as transnational care recipients alongside children in the first part of the book (**Fan and Parreñas**), but also as active agents in the role of adult migrants' parents (**Hărăguș et al.**; **Wyss and Nedelcu**).

In Chap. 2, **Fresnoza-Flot** uses the concept of “mobile childhoods” to illustrate three situations in which young people in Filipino transnational families find themselves: stay-behind children of migrant parents, migrant children reunited with their parents in their receiving country, and children of ‘mixed’ couples. **Kovács** in Chap. 3 shows us what it means for Chinese children to grow up transnationally and how they are doing transnational family between China and Hungary. In order to illustrate her study, she utilizes the concept of “mobile childhoods” and links specific childcare-related phenomena with the process of integration for second-generation migrants. In Chap. 4, **Hilario Pascoal and Schwartz**, while taking into account the voices of experts and analysing the legislative implications, show us how children left behind may become parts of a group vulnerable to human trafficking. **Hossu**, in Chap. 5, approaches the way in which double (Moldovan/Romanian) citizenship offers young people from the Republic of Moldova a new way of relating to the future, but also how this hybrid identity reflects in doing family when family members remain in their country of origin. How gender relations remain strongly connected to paternalism within transnational families is illustrated by **Fan and**

Parreñas in their comparative study, in Chap. 6, especially through the remarkable degrees of mobility of departed adults. The dynamics of the masculinity of fathers left behind, emerging from their paternity practices, is presented to us by **Tolstokorova** in Chap. 7, where she analyses the situation in Ukraine, a country heavily affected by the migratory flux of women. The role played by ITCs in doing transnational families among Eastern European mothers in Italy is argued by **Monini**, in Chap. 8. **Melander** and **Shmulyar Gréen**, in Chap. 9, also follow the principles of the new paradigm and utilize the life course perspective, in order to analyse caregiving arrangements in the case of the transnational parenting trajectory. The results of a quantitative study carried out by **Hărăguș, Földes and Savu** are presented in Chap. 10, which analyses the relations of co-presence between elderly parents staying in the country of origin and migrant adult children, with an accent on the provision of support. **Wyss and Nedelcu** also focusing on the way in which elderly parents, this time on the move, become active in the relation between solidarity and their adult migrant children in the course of their comparative study, the results of which are presented in Chap. 11.

Besides methodological diversity, in the form of multiple research result analyses (**Fresnoza-Flot; Fan and Parreñas; Tolstokorova**), comparative studies (**Wyss and Nedelcu**), expert perspectives (**Hilario Pascoal and Schwartz**), bi-national studies (**Hossu**), in-depth ethnography (**Kovács; Monini**), the life course method (**Melander and Shmulyar Gréen**) and quantitative approaches (**Hărăguș et al.**), we also observe that terms such as gender, practices and mobility are central to these approaches.

12.8 Final Remarks

This concluding essay has sought to provide a short review of the developments within the field of transnational family research, highlighting key elements of research during the second decade: gender, co-presence illustrated through family practices, and mobility. Through the discussion on the research on Romanian transnational families, during which we paused at the results in my recent book ([Ducu 2018](#)), we tried to show how new methodological and theoretical challenges in the field have led to new ways of understanding what doing/displaying transnational families means.

The aim of this essay's argument was to show how each chapter within this book contributes to developing research within the field.

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