



Conceptualisation of transnational families (TNF)

Concept note, March 2023

Author: Jasna Čapo

Working Group in charge: Working Group 1 (Leader: Irma Budginaitė-Mačkinė)

As a consequence of international migration and border crossings, TNF are families whose members are physically dispersed in at least two or more countries, but maintain a sense of familyhood.

Prerequisites to conceptualise TNF: Definitions of the two terms contained in TNF: family + transnational

Definition of the family: a broad definition is needed, which allows for different cultural configurations and notions of who constitutes a family across world cultures and localities:

- Proposition: *Family is made up of individuals who are chosen and considered important, connected or not by blood ties, living or not in the same household, forming networks or configurations that go beyond the Western-centric classical definition* (Widmer 2010, in Nedelcu & Wyss 2020)

What defines a family:

- familyhood, love, rights and obligations, care/support, reciprocity, communication, sharing, „doing family”

Configurations:

- mother and/or father (gender non-specific/homo or hetero-parental) with/without children (nuclear);
- the above nucleus with vertically (over generations) and/or horizontally (within a generation) extended kin and non-kin (culturally specific, such as friends, neighbours, godparents); reconstituted families

Temporal dimension: family dynamism

- The conception has to allow for life-cycle events over time (changes due to marriages, deaths, births, divorce, migration) that result in the changing configurations and caring obligations over time
- Also take account of historically changing family configurations within a locality

Spatial dimension:

- Sharing/not sharing a dwelling/physical location; translocal configurations that may have a transnational outreach
- Perceptions of the proximity/distance of locations in the translocal case

Definition of the concept „transnational“:

Two relevant understandings of the „transnational“ (among six proposed by Vertovec 1999):



1. transborder/cross-border, in the sense of social groups living beyond and stretching across two or more national societies and engaging in practices that connect individuals residing in different societies into a transnational social space (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004); this is a widely accepted understanding of „transnational“, especially in migration scholarship
2. transcultural/cross-cultural, in the sense of cultural reproduction, mixing and hybridizations; „crossing“ is meant in terms of culture, language, religious mixing; mixing may result in a new quality; meaning less explored in migration scholarship

Caveats of the first definition:

Problems arise with:

1. regionally specific conceptualizations of the „nation“, „national“ and „nation-state“: ethno-cultural vs. civic concepts of the nation; in Central and SE Europe, probably also other parts of the world, transnational in the sense of crossing the border is not the first association since the term „national“ implies cultural rather than political content.
2. Although the concept “transnational” goes beyond a particular national focus, it remains contingent on national borders and the national/nation-state world order.

From the above, two different understandings of TNF can be inferred:

1. As a consequence of international migration and border crossings, TNF are *families that live across national borders*; they are families whose members are *physically dispersed* in at least two or more countries but keep together and maintain a sense of familyhood (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002). This is a broadly accepted definition used in migration scholarship.
2. As a consequence of contemporary international migration and border crossings, but not necessarily (as in historical situations of ethnically and culturally mixed regions), TNF in the sense of *bi-national families may arise; they are the outcome of mixed marriages* (partners with different ethnic/cultural/national backgrounds). They do not live physically separated. This is a broadly discussed phenomenon in sociological literature.

We propose to use **the first understanding as** our operational conceptualisation.

The following aspects/characteristics of TNF will be discussed:

- Situated/contextual aspect: TNF are culturally defined (cultural context-dependent) so that they may include varied configurations and notions of who is to be considered family (beyond the nuclear, extended families/large networks in various configurations, kin/non-kin, reconstituted families...). A caveat: overuse of loose criteria for TNF that may blur the concept.
- Relational aspect: TNF are dependent on migration regimes and politics (national, regional/supranational) and migrant and social policies of the receiving societies which impact on social recognition and legal status of individuals and families; the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) is a particular factor



that additionally impacted TNF due to the temporary enforcement of restrictions for crossing borders inaugurated by many countries. An outcome of this aspect is the encounter between family norms and practices in immigration and origin contexts that possibly leads to new family concepts among the TNF members.

- Spatial aspect: TNF live physically *apart* (in different countries) but *together* in other respects (emotional, social, psychological, economic); state-border crossings are constitutive of TNF; document families' and child-rearing arrangements across borders; how is physical co-presence different from virtual/by proxy/imagined co-presence (Nedelcu & Wyss 2020); how do TNF members perceive distance? Historical precedents of spatial separation.
- Binding factors of TNF: belonging and solidarity (familyhood, love, trust) and being (obligations and demands, exchanges, care in various disguises, also tensions and conflicts); family practices (doing and displaying); communication and binding through visits, caring activities, digital technologies; explore the impact of contemporary ICTs on the maintenance of TNF.
- Temporal aspect: TNF are dynamic/fluid entities that are reconfigured over family life-course and cause the members' mobilities between two or more spaces at different stages of individual life-courses; long-term residential separation and striving for/lack of striving for reunification.
- Objective/subjective aspect: culturally defined notions of family and family obligations interact with subjective (individual's, particular family's) notions of who constitutes/belongs to a family and is expected to act in a certain way, with or without regard the family notions in the receiving society; liberating aspect of TNF for certain groups; attention should be paid to intersectionality.
- Migration-type dependency of TNF: we have a spectrum of TNF forming as a result of refugee mobilities (be they political, religious, climate-induced), economic mobilities by class and education (low-class and low-skilled vs. highly-skilled migrants and middle/upper social classes), lifestyle mobilities, etc.; these form a continuum with restrictions on TNF being eased for middle and upper social classes with professional and high skills.
- Effects of TNF studied by migration-type: impacts on migrant/stayer generations' and gendered actors' (grandparents, grandchildren, children, spouses, other kin/non-kin) well-being and physical health, education, social behaviour, security...; upward and downward intergenerational solidarities; balanced/unbalanced reciprocity of any kind; impact on intra-familial relationships; differences in language skills, education, citizenship etc. among TNF members; enhanced mobilities by TNF members and/or restriction on their to and from mobilities; redefining of the family concept and practices in the transnational space; circulation of goods and social remittances (Levitt 1998); unaccompanied minors/inability to reunite in the refugee TNF context; transnational social protection of TNF (Levitt et al 2016).



Key references

- Baldassar, Loretta & Laura Merla. 2014. *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Bryceson, Deborah & Ulla Vuorela. 2002. "Transnational Families in the Twenty-first Century". In: *The Transnational Family. New European Frontiers and Global Networks*. D. Bryceson & U. Vuorela, eds. Oxford, New York: Berg, 3-30.
- Carling, Jørgen et al. 2012. "Central Themes in the Study of Transnational Parenthood". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38/2: 191-217.
- Glick Schiller, Nina et al. 1995. "From Immigrant to Transmigrant. Theorizing Transnational Migration". *Anthropological Quarterly* 68/1: 48-63.
- Levitt, Peggy. 1998. "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion". *The International Migration Review* 32/4: 926-948.
- Levitt, Peggy et al. 2016. "Transnational Social Protection: Setting the Agenda". *Oxford Development Studies*, 1-18.
- Levitt, Peggy & Nina Glick Schiller. 2004. "Conceptualizing Simultaneity. A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society". *International Migration Review* 38/3: 1002-1039
- Mazzucato, V. & Schans, D., 2011. Transnational families and the well-being of children: Conceptual and methodological challenges. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 73(4), 704-712.
- Mazzucato, V. & B. Dito. 2018. Transnational families: Cross-country comparative perspectives. *Population Space and Place* 24(7) Doi: 10.1002/psp.2165.
- Nedelcu, Mihaela & Wyss, Malika. 2020. Transnational grandparenting: an introduction. Special Issue Global Networks, volume 20, issue 2/April 2020.
- Vertovec, Steven. 1999. "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22/2: 447-462.



COST Action CA21143 – TraFaDy

c/o Odisee University of Applied Sciences
Warmoesberg 26, 1000 Brussels

Chair: Prof Mieke Schrooten

Vice-Chair: Sven Iversen

Web: <https://transnational-families.eu>

Email: info@transnational-families.eu

Working Group in charge of the Concept note: Working Group 1

Author Concept note: Jasna Čapo

WG 1 Leader: Irma Budginaitė-Mačkinė

Email WG 1: wg1@transnational-families.eu

Brussels 2023