KINKEEPING WITHIN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES IN A GLOBAL AND DIGITAL ERA (TraFaDy WG1)

Transnational families are families whose members live in different countries but still consider themselves one family.

Families increasingly live across different countries, continents, and digital spaces. Yet living apart does not mean that family ties fade away. Across borders, people engage in kinkeeping – the often invisible work of staying in touch, providing care, coordinating family life, maintaining a sense of belonging, and supporting one another over distance. Research within TraFaDy WG1 explores how these practices help families remain connected in a world shaped by mobility, digital technologies, changes in society, and global crises.

How do we understand transnational families?

Conceptualising transnational family life

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Transnational family life is often much wider than the nuclear family

Public discussions often focus on migrant parents and their children. Yet transnational family life usually extends well beyond nuclear family and includes grandparents, siblings, extended family, and other significant people, who provide care, emotional and financial support, practical assistance, and help sustain family ties and traditions across generations. Though they remain much less visible in research and policy discussions.

Families are often portrayed as either "together" or "separated", but transnational family life is more dynamic. Relationships evolve through migration, reunification, return, ageing, new partnerships, births, crises, and changing care needs. Understanding transnational families therefore means looking not only at geographical distance, but also at how relatioships evolve and are maintained over time.

Transnational family life changes over time

Questions to consider: Who keeps families together when parents, children, and grandparents live in different countries? How do family relationships change after years of living apart – or after finally living together again?

What role do digital technologies play?

ICTs as support for families across borders

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Transnational families are pioneers of mediatization

Transnational families have been maintaining relationships and family practices through communication technologies. These families developed media competencies already in pre-digital eras, adapting to changing technologies to sustain family life across distance. Their experiences offer valuable insights into living in an increasingly digital society.

Transnational families use ICTs for much more than communication

For transnational families, ICTs go far beyond simple communication. ICTs help to sustain everyday family life across borders through shared home routines, care for relatives across generations, parent children at a distance, and nurture emotional bonds. In doing so, families create a genuine sense of "being together" that can come close to physical presence, even if the tension between being apart and feeling close never fully disappears.

Questions to consider: What can we learn from transnational family members who have long used technologies to sustain relationships? What are the digital platforms that transnational families use, and for what purposes?

How do various crises reshape family life?

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on transnational family dynamics

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The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped transnational family life

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted transnational family life. Border closures and travel restrictions created uncertainty and affected communication, care arrangements, psychological well-being, social networks, and everyday routines while exposing and often amplifying existing social inequalities.

Families demonstrated remarkable adaptability

Families relied on digital communication and developed new ways to maintain relationships and provide care across borders. These experiences demonstrate resilience of these families, but also the importance of strong institutional support and crisis-responsive policies that recognise their specific needs.

Questions to consider: What challenges do transnational families face when cross-border mobility is suddenly restricted? Will the kinkeeping practices developed during Covid-19 endure? How can societies and policymakers better support transnational families in future crises?

Impact of wars and conflicts on family separation?

Wars and conflicts require difficult decisions about family life

Wars and conflicts profoundly reshape family life, forcing families to make difficult decisions about migration, caregiving, and maintaining connections across borders. Family members often assume new roles and responsibilities. For example, with children acting as language or cultural mediators and carers of younger siblings. Or older relatives taking up more important roles in care arrangements. Informal support networks become essential, while digital communication helps sustain emotional bonds despite the constraints and risks imposed by war and occupation.

Family separation creates long-term uncertainty but also new forms of care, social support and resilience

Family separation is often prolonged by legal and political constraints. In the context of the Russian full-scale invasion to Ukraine, martial law has prevented many Ukrainian men from leaving the country, while the EU Temporary Protection Directive has provided safety abroad but also prolonged uncertainty about family reunification, return, and long-term belonging. In response, transnational families reconfigure care arrangements and sustain family life across borders by combining institutional, family, and community resources despite ongoing uncertainty.

Questions to consider: How can policies better support families whose caregiving responsibilities and family roles are transformed by forced displacement? How can governments and organisations better support families coping with prolonged uncertainty?

What can transnational family research contribute to practice?

From research to policy and support services

Organisations of different kinds play a crucial role in supporting transnational families

There is a commonly held idea that the maintenance of family ties and care across borders depends on individual efforts or the legal and administrative migration frameworks of the countries involved. However, organisations can play a key role in supporting transnational families. NGO's, migrant associations, employers, and other organisations working directly with migrants often bridge institutional and individual spheres, supporting transnational families in a variety of ways.

Irregularized migrants may face additional challenges in maintaining family ties across borders

The importance of organisations is particularly evident in their work with irregularized migrants. Limited opportunities to cross borders, combined with economic and social restrictions, can make transnational kinkeeping especially challenging. Community-based organizations play a key role in addressing these challenges. However, little research has explored how this support is provided and how it can be strengthened.

Questions to consider: How can different types of organisations support transnational families? What challenges do irregularized migrants face in maintaining family across borders? And how are these challenges being addressed by the different actors and organisations involved?

Across all themes: Kinkeeping matters

Whether through caregiving, (digital) communication, and various forms of support, transnational families actively work to maintain family relationships across borders.

Kinkeeping is not simply about staying connected. It is about creating, sustaining, and negotiating family life in a world shaped by mobility, immobility, crises, technologies, and social change.

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