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Introduction

Transnational families and the well-being of children and caregivers who stay in origin countries

Transnational families are a current and widespread phenomenon around the globe. A common form is where one or both parents migrate and children are left in the country of origin to be raised by a caregiver, be it the other parent, an extended family member, or in some cases a non-kin related person. Such arrangements are the result of stringent migration policies in migrant receiving countries, which make it difficult for families to migrate together. In others, they are the preferred choice of family members especially in societies where extended family members continue to play an important role in the raising of children. With a growing awareness of the existence of such families in both academic and policy arenas, there is an emerging concern about the effects of separation on children's well-being in terms of their physical and psychological health outcomes. Moreover, research is just beginning to pay attention to the well-being of those who care for migrants' children. Migration involves over 3 percent of the world's population (United Nations, 2013). In some developing countries, this results in rates of children who stay at origin while a parent migrates to reach as high as 25% of the under 18 years old population (UNICEF, 2006). It is therefore important to consider how migration affects those who stay behind in discussions of the effects of migration on development in origin countries, which have tended to focus on economic gains and on households as a whole, rather than effects on individual family members (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Ratha et al., 2011).

Studies on transnational families only emerged in the early 2000s when in-depth studies of transnational migration turned to the effects of migration for family members who are separated by geographical borders (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Previous to this, the omission of transnational families from the purview of researchers had several sources. Migration research was characterized by methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) in which migration was studied from the perspective of one nation-state: either the migrant origin country, or the destination country. This meant that migrant families were studied as living together in the destination country or only those members that migrated were focused upon; or, conversely, only those household members who remained at origin were the object of study (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). Research on families and child psychology, instead, was largely guided by theories such as attachment (Bowlby, 1973) or object relations (Winnicott, 1958) theories in which children's development is affected by relationships with people in their proximity. Family relationships at great geographical distances thus were considered either as irrelevant or unpractical (Baldassar and Baldock, 1999; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Zontini, 2004).

Transnational family research changed this perspective by arguing that when family members migrate, they remain linked with families and communities in their home country, continuing to engage in family practices and maintain feelings of home and emotional proximity even across great geographical distances (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Research on transnational families, largely stemming from anthropological, feminist, and qualitative sociology scholars, has focused on spousal (Charsley, 2005; Pribilsky, 2001) and parent–child relationships, with a special focus on migrant mothers and the children they leave behind (Bernhard et al., 2009; Dreby, 2007; Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Schmalzbauer, 2004). Separately and more recently, family sociology and child psychology studies have turned to the study of transnational families in the 2010s with studies on Chinese internal migration and Mexican – US migration taking the lead (Donato et al., 2003; Fan et al., 2010; Liu and Ge, 2009; Nobles, 2011). The predominant focus of such studies, largely employing quantitative methodologies, has been on the well-being of the children who stay behind.

These two areas of study have remained largely separate; however, much stands to be gained by bringing them to bear on one another. Furthermore, the focus of both strands has been on migrant parents and their children, whereas the role of the caregiver who stays in the country of origin to care for a migrant's child is almost always missing or peripheral.

This special issue focuses on one form of transnational families: that in which one or both parents migrate internally or internationally and leave one or more children aged 18 or below in the origin country in the care of a caregiver who is either the other parent, a member of the extended family, or, in some instances, a non-kin relation. The papers focus on the psychological well-being and health outcomes of the members of transnational families who remain in the origin country: children and their caregivers. The papers have been selected from among those presented at an international conference, held in Maastricht on March 27–29, 2013. The conference was co-financed by the Dutch Scientific Organisation (NWO), the New Opportunities for Research Funding Co-operation Agency in Europe (NORFACE), and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) at the closing of the Transnational Child Raising Arrangements programs (TCRA and TCRAf-Eu). Two of the papers were added after the conference. The objective of the conference was to bring junior and senior scholars on transnational family research from different disciplinary traditions together to present state-of-the-art research and reflect on what can be gained by bringing different approaches together (http://fasos-research.nl/tcra/tcraf-eu/conference).

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This special issue includes contributions from anthropology, family sociology, child psychology, demography, and social geography, using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. It also includes some of the first cross-country comparative studies on the effects of international migration on transnational families and covers various migration flows: Mexicans to the USA; Africans to Europe; national migration within China; Southeast Asian migration within the region and to the Middle East; and migration from Eastern Europe to Russia and Western Europe.

Extensive and recent overviews on the study of transnational families from different disciplinary perspectives already exist (Glick, 2010; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Mazzucato, 2013, 2014). This introduction will instead focus on identifying some of the key areas where transnational family research can push forward, and it situates the contributions to this special issue within these cutting-edge areas.

1. Parental migration and child outcomes

Most transnational family studies that focus on children's well-being find that children are negatively impacted by their parents' migration. Dreby (2007), while emphasizing the agency that children have in influencing their parents' migration process, highlights that Mexican children feel abandoned. They develop behaviors to 'get back' at their parents such as young children refusing to speak to them on the phone or older children ignoring their authority. This in turn makes parents suffer. Parreñas (2005) emphasizes Filipino children's suffering and loneliness and finds that they fare worse when mothers migrate. While pointing to some factors that can attenuate negative outcomes, the literature clearly emphasizes the negative effects of parental migration on children (Yeoh and Lam, 2007). More recent child psychology and family sociology studies have looked quantitatively at the issue and to some degree confirm these negative outcomes. Jia and Tian (2010) find that Chinese children have a higher risk of poor mental health when their parents migrate. Similar to the Mexican and Filipino studies above, Wen and Lin (2012) and Liu and Ge (2009) find that in China children are worse off when their mothers migrate as compared to when their fathers migrate. Children continue to feel the negative impact of separation on their psychological well-being, even when they are reunited with their parents overseas (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). Yet not all children in transnational families fare worse. Recent studies show that there are both micro and meso-level factors that impinge on how being in a transnational family affects children. It is therefore important for research to identify the characteristics that cause variation between families.

1.1. Important micro and meso-level mediators

Recent scholarship on transnational families identifies characteristics other than parental migration that may impinge on child well-being outcomes that relate to micro-level factors such as child, parent, and caregiver characteristics and meso-level factors that relate to family, school, and community. For example, Wen and Lin (2012) find worse outcomes for children with migrant parents, but also find that the family's socio-economic status, children's peer and school support, and the child's psychological traits and socializing skills mediate the relationship between child well-being and parental migration, and, in fact, are more important in explaining decreased health behavior and lower school engagement among left-behind children than the parents' migratory status. Furthermore, they find no evidence of decreased emotional well-being amongst left-behind children. Fan et al. (2010) note that left-behind children show more psychopathological and less pro-social behavior than their counterparts who live with their biological parents. Yet, these differences disappear after controlling for age, education levels, the socio-economic status of parents and caregivers, and teacher involvement. The authors show that left-behind children tend to come from poorer families with older and less educated caregivers. Concomitantly, qualitative transnational family studies have turned their attention to contextual factors that impinge on the negative relationships between parental migration and child well-being. Fresnoza-Flot (2009) studied undocumented Filipino mothers to show how being undocumented affects their ability to parent from afar, and is reflected in the quality of their relationships with their children. As such, these recent studies help add nuance to findings and show that in certain circumstances other factors can be more important in explaining low levels of well-being amongst children than their parents' migratory status *per se* (Mazzucato, 2014).

A promising area in need of more research is the role of the meso-environment especially as it relates to the family, school, and community networks of support available for children and caregivers in the origin country. As Nobles et al. (2015) note, the effects of parental migration on those who stay behind can differ greatly for rural and urban-based families, and we still know little about these differences and what drives them. In this special issue, various contributions show the importance of the meso-environment in which a child grows up. Wu et al. (2015) find that social capital at the family and community levels mediates the relationship between parental migration and children's well-being. Children whose parents are migrants have lower levels of social capital, which in turn, further increases their levels of depression. Hamilton and Choi's (2015) paper shows that community-level migration characteristics such as out-migration rates, levels of remittance receipts and return migration impact infant health outcomes, albeit in different ways. However, research on the role of intervening factors is at an early stage so it is important for research to continue to scrutinize the role of intervening factors that may be just as important, if not more, in explaining child well-being as parental migration.

1.2. Multiple dimensions of well-being

While well-being has been researched in terms of mental and physical health dimensions for children and caregivers, recent studies look at multiple measures within each dimension to capture the multi-dimensional experiences of people who stay behind. For example, authors consider different components of emotional well-being such as emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, conduct problems, peer problems, and pro-social behavior (Fan et al., 2010; Graham and Jordan, 2011; Vanore et al., 2015) and find differences between components. Accurately and appropriately measuring well-being is an important aspect of transnational family research.

In this special issue, Nobles et al. (2015) include different measures of well-being for non-migrant mother caregivers in Mexico, such as sadness, crying, sleeplessness, and depression. Hamilton and Choi (2015) measure health outcomes by looking at both infant low birthweight and macrosomia (high birthweight). The latter has not been the subject of research until now, but both conditions put children's later healthy development at risk. In these studies, parental migration affects outcomes differently, in some instances showing no differences with non-transnational families. Wen et al. (2015) establish and validate a measure of Positive Youth Development for Chinese adolescent youths, which is a strengths-based conception of youth rather than traditional models where adolescence is viewed in terms of deficit behaviors and emotions. It incorporates latent constructs of competence, confidence,