# *Families and Intergenerational Relations in Migration: Challenges and Opportunities*

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**Abstrcat**

In a worldwide context of growing migration processes, international research confirms the central role that families play in the migration plans and strategies of individuals, including the decision to emigrate and which family members must or can do so. The family also takes on considerable importance in defining subsequent modifications, such as the length and development of migratory projects. The "migrant family" is located in a social system where roles and relationships can be partially or completely different. The settlement of individuals in the receiving country, and their changing migration plans and strategies follow multiple pathways. The experience of migration, with its cultural and emotional break-ups can redefine and reorganise networks and relational dynamics, particularly between men and women, parents, grandparents and children. In particular, transnational families designate family networks composed of members who live in two or more countries, but maintain a sense of 'familyhood' across distance, time, and exchange, to various degrees, care and support. Relevant are the various ways in which they maintain family ties and connections across national borders and across generations and the pressures and transformations that may arise within and across the generations because of their embeddedness in different socio-cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** family migration, transnational families, intergenerational relations

## Introduction

In last decades, the issue of international migration is very topical and relevant in the global public debate, where the countries bordering the Mediterranean area are often protagonists, as places of departure, transit and destination of the migration flows. In particular, many scholars Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017) addressed the transnational experience of families and conceptualized international migrants and their kin as transnational families with increased mobility and improvements in both travel and communication technologies, more and more people are in fact experiencing transnational family lives.

The analysis of specific intergenerational relationships within these family is important to look for different strategies that people use to keep and develop a cultural identity that is in the middle of at least two different cultures. Examples of these are values and family traditions, food and language and so on, the could be very different from the country of destination. Another important issue is the differences among generations (first, second third and so on) in the migration flow. What about those who firstly migrate and those born in the new country? Is there the same perception of family's ties with those living in the country of origin? Which are the main features in maintaining family relationships across space and time?

The main purpose of this paper (and of this part) is to provide an overview of different standpoints on the relationships between migration processes and the ties among generations in migrant families. More specifically, this special issue offers innovative perspectives on how these specific relations are maintained, changed, reconstructed across time and space in the experiences of generations in migration.

## 1. Family relations and migration processes

Although the family dimension is a privileged object of study for the sociology of migration, the migrant family as such has been theorized in Europe only in the last decades Ambrosini (2019, 2020). For years, the family belonging of migrant people, which instead constitutes a central element of their identity and plays a fundamental role in the migration process, remained in the background.

In a global context where migration processes are growing, Italian and international researches confirm the centrality of the family in the migration plans and strategies of individuals (Gozzoli and Regalia, 2005; Ambrosini, 2011; Kofman-Fraler and Schmoll, 2011; Zanfrini, 2012; Crespi, Meda and Merla, 2018), i.e. the decision to emigrate and which family members must or can do so.

Therefore, assuming a family perspective on the migration phenomenon means, in a peculiar way, to widen the gaze and consider the relevance and strength of the links between the different components along a multigenerational temporal and relational axis (Baldassar and Merla, 2014;

Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017), considering that transnational dynamics, circular mobility processes and the financial-economic crisis have contributed to make the relationships between families, countries of origin and immigration countries even more articulated.

In recent decades, migratory phenomena have taken on such proportions in Europe that they have become of major political, economic and demographic importance. In the context of increased international mobility, the role of the family in migration is a particularly interesting subject of study. In fact, most of the time, it is within the family that one decides to migrate, organises migration, progressively implements integration processes in the new environment and later makes the choice to return to one's own country or to settle permanently in the host country.

The family proves to be a real protagonist of migration dynamics, in defining strategies of survival and integration, protection and sustenance (Ambrosini, 2011) and three are the main reasons that make it necessary to put the family subject at the centre of the migration scene.

The first, more evident, concerns the goals and purposes of migration. Most migratory movements develop for family reasons: not only in Italy family reunifications are constantly increasing, but also in other countries the percentage of foreign immigrants moving for family reasons is very high, even if the figures may differ significantly between countries, depending on the migration policies decided by national governments.

Secondly, the centrality of the family in migration concerns every phase of the migration process: the decision to migrate, its developments and many related problematic aspects cannot be understood without taking into account family strategies for survival and/or affirmation. It is the family that often designates which member can or should be a candidate for departure, that identifies migration or accommodation opportunities in a given country, that finances the migration project. It is always the family that establishes a series of mutual obligations between the migrants and the family remaining in the country of origin. It is within the family that the choice to return to the country of origin or to settle permanently in the host country is often made later. The family investiture of the migrant foresees, therefore, a series of ethical aspects, which confirm his identity and protect him or, vice versa, can expose him to uprooting.

A third reason to focus on the family as a real subject of migration is that such a perspective can allow to articulate the problems and consequences

related to immigration in a foreign country in an enlarged time perspective, not flattened on the present. Every real migration crisis, when it occurs, always concerns family issues and dynamics and occurs in periods that often escape the eye of those who are attentive to the period immediately following their arrival in a foreign land. They are also crises in which the difficulty that the family manifests in creating adequate forms of cultural mediation between its own system of internalised meanings and the new cultural practices offered by the host society, is highlighted.

In migration processes, a series of changes in family life can produce new and original configurations of social relationships and emotional ties, as well as economic and cultural exchanges. The family also takes on considerable importance in the definition of subsequent changes, such as the duration and development of the migration plan; moreover, these pathways and their configuration could change marriage and couple patterns, ways and forms of cohabitation (Ambrosini and Abbatecola, 2010; Ambrosini, 2019).

The migrant family finds itself inserted in a social system where roles and relationships could be partially or completely different and family relationships are able both to act as a bridge between migrants, the country of origin and their new context; but also to create a network of closed relationships in self-referential and poorly integrated communities (Kofman, 2004; Kraler *et al.*, 2010; Novara, Romano and Petralia, 2011). The relationships, roles and individual identities within the family end up being redefined. The integration of individuals in the host country and migration strategies follow multiple paths: family reunification, mixed marriages, mail-order marriages, small or large families, couples without children.

If in the family dimension, migration takes on the meaning of a "choice" in order to be able to offer their relatives and in particular future generations better life prospects, the voluntariness of this "choice" is neither taken for granted, in a tension, latent or explicit, between the well-being of those who emigrate and the needs and expectations of the left behind family, nor is it exhausted when migrants have rebuilt their family nucleus in the land of immigration. This demonstrates that migration is part of a larger family history that also marks relations between genders and generations (Zanfrini, 2012; Crespi, Santoni and Zanier, 2017).

The challenge for migrant families is to find the "right balance", to keep the parts, the generations, the differences and rework the meanings. The family dimension is the place where traditional practices are imported, new lifestyles learned, cultural aspects and subjective choices meet and clash, giving rise to a multiplicity of expressions (Lagomarsino, 2010; Naldini, Caponio and Ricucci, 2019). It is the space in which educational processes are imbued with the ambivalence between the maintenance of traditional cultural codes and the desire for integration, for social rise in the context of the host society, between the desire to control the choices and behaviour of children and confrontation with society that emphasizes the values of emancipation, equality between men and women, personal autonomy.

## 2. Transnational families: distance and time in intergenerational relations

In this essay we intend to deepen a particular theoretical challenge, which especially in the last decades has investigated migration with reference to the transnational experience of families and the aspect of relations between generations (Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2001; Goulbourne *et al.* 2010; Mazzuccato and Schans, 2011; Carling *et al*, 2012; Mazzuccato, 2013; Baldassar and Merla, 2014).

The phenomenon of transnational families is not new - over time there have been many different forms of human mobility and family separation - the concept of transnational family (Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding, 2007; Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002) has provided, since the beginning of the last decade, a convincing interpretation of the complex intersection between family and migration. Bryceson and Vuorela define transnational families as families "whose members live partly or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective well-being and unity, that is, of familiarity, even beyond national borders" (2002, p. 3). This classic definition indicates the difficulty and opportunities to hold together emotional ties and caring responsibilities while operating in different cultural and geographical worlds.

It is therefore despite distance, that people in the same family maintain a sense of familyhood (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002), of intimacy (facilitated by new technologies and the development of communications in general) that makes physical distance and therefore physical absence not only an obstacle to the bond, but an opportunity to redefine it (Regalia, 2012).

With the transnational families approach the focus of the analysis shifts from the individual to the family. While this approach themes and addresses family ties, meanings, roles and identities across national borders and takes into account complex relational processes and scenarios, "it also values other social actors at different levels, such as civil society and the state, and the various ways in which all these actors articulate and influence each other in the migration paths of families" (Baldassar, 2008). In fact, as recalled by Mazzuccato (2013), it must be considered that in some cases transnational family agreements are the compulsory result of migration policies in the host countries.

In many studies the expression is used precisely to evoke the awareness of how the links woven through the migratory experience of one or more of its members, but also the links (economic, political, cultural, religious) maintained with the community of origin, have an impact on family and intergenerational dynamics (Zanfrini, 2012). Particularly interesting is the reflection proposed by Boccagni and Lagomarsino (2011) in pointing out that at least a part of the transnational links depend on the phase of the migrants' life course, and on the phase of their family life cycle, before other variables more often emphasized; for example, the human, social and economic capital of migrants, or the structure of opportunities they face.

Transnational households are sometimes referred to as "multi-local" or "multi-situated" (Schier, 2016) or as families living separated on a spatial-geographical level, thus giving prominence to the experience of the spatial and physical dimension of closeness and distance. Although family studies have emphasized geographical proximity as a prerequisite for interaction and exchange with families, thus hiding family ties that cross national borders, the main research of the last decade (Carling *et al.*, 2012; Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Mazzuccato *et al*. 2015; Mazzucato and Dito 2018) have shown that individuals' migration choices are not only related to the needs of their families but also that migration affects the migrants' countries of origin.

Several studies on transnational families highlight the fact that intergenerational care is organised and negotiated at a distance and that family obligation and mutual relations continue after migration (Mazzuccato and Schans, 2011; Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Zontini and Reynold, 2018).

The perspective of transnational families intersects migration, the family and migration and social policies (Baldassar *et al.*, 2014). It takes into account the interactions between migration flows and policies in migrants' host countries, and as such, its approach goes beyond the study of migration itself, so as to include both those who move and those who do not, and the way they relate to each other in a broader relational and political-economic context. Transnational are all families who lead a transnational life, including those who are generally not seen as migrants, such as elites working in multinational corporations and highly qualified people moving in Europe to institutional, academic or professional positions in the EU, expats etc.

Moreover, the notion of transnational families also draws attention to the temporal dimension, because the emotional and material needs of a person are strongly linked to phases of the individual life cycle, even if individuals vary in the intensity with which they live and express these needs. Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding (2007) and Baldassar and Merla (2014) dealt in particular with the concepts of transnational care and care circulation. Care, in this perspective, is seen as one of the central processes (practices and services) that maintain and support family relationships and identity, and that circulate mutually - albeit unevenly - between family members over time and at a distance. Time also influences the decision-making process of transnational families: often the choice to move (or not) is linked to a particular threshold or stage of life, such as the completion of the schooling of children, the care of elderly parents or career planning. Therefore, the life cycle of the family heavily influences any decision taken by an individual or a mobile group (Suàrez-Orozco, Todorova and Louie, 2002; Regalia, 2012). Even after an individual or a group of family members has moved, one wonders whether and how family ties between those who have moved and those who have been left behind will be maintained.

Likewise, as pointed out by several authors (Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Naldini, Caponio and Ricucci, 2019), with time - and in particular with the passage from the first to the second generation and then to the following

ones - transnational contacts weaken substantially producing profound changes. This may be partly due to the lack of daily physical interaction, but also to the progressive cultural distance between generations and the language barriers that may arise over time.

Living apart and maintaining a sense of unity is one of the challenges facing transnational families. Some of these processes take place within the symbolic boundaries of the family, on what we can call the "inner front", while others occur outside these symbolic boundaries, on the "outer front" with society. Maintaining this distinction as an analytical framework for the study of transnational families can help to shed light on some specific features of the phenomenon. The concept of transnational social field (Levitt, Glick Schiller, 2004) indicates that the subjective identities and the negotiations to build them take place within a space that contains values and practices belonging both to one's own nationality and to the host country. When two or more different cultural and normative models are compared, as is the case with transnational families, the possible results are multiple and very nuanced in terms of identity management and cultural practices: some families are probably influenced by the habits and values of the receiving society, while others may be less subject to cultural influences, up to a total closure. In this process it is also important to recognise the role played by different social actors, including those outside the family - such as the state, the receiving society, etc. - in this process.

The expression "transnational families" also means the persistence of family ties in time and space that migrants manage to maintain throughout their lives. Therefore, besides families temporarily separated by migration, the definition of transnational family can also apply to all those whose existence is however marked by the experience of migration (Zanfrini, 2012). As observed by Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding (2007, p. 13) "the resulting idea of the transnational family is intended to capture the growing awareness that members of families retain their sense of collectivity and kinship in spite of being spread across multiple nations". In transnational families, therefore, relationships and roles do not depend only on proximity, physical cohabitation is reduced, shared feelings and mutual obligations remain. In the face of an experience of impoverishment of contacts with family members, the need arises to explain why and how some of the distant relatives are nevertheless part of one's own family.

Emotionally significant ties are reconsidered and recoded (Ambrosini, 2019).


## 3. *Families and generations in the migratory experience: some considerations for research*


If the study of relations between generations is present in migration studies (Valtolina and Marazzi, 2006; Scabini and Rossi, 2008; Kofman *et al.*, 2011), observing the migration phenomenon through the family, the fundamental core of the process of adaptation to the host society, makes it possible to rethink intergenerational trajectories and, above all, to recognize how the effects related to migration can continue to manifest themselves over time, becoming independent from the experience of geographical mobility.

Therefore, investigating the migration phenomenon in the family dimension, also means using an intergenerational approach, based on the idea that it stages more bloodlines, more generations. It means hypothesizing that costs and benefits of migration transition are visible only in the passing of time and in family history (Ambrosini, 2011); it means looking at the weave of bonds that, like invisible but solid fibres, hold together or separate the paths of those who make up the family (Zanfrini, 2012).

These considerations are linked to a particular perspective of analysis on the relationship between family and migration, the generational one of particular interest for the proposed issue in this part. This perspective gives an account of the diversity of expectations and expectations that accompany the different generations involved in family migration projects, shedding light on the related aspects of vulnerability.

Often it is only starting from the appearance of the second/third generation and now also the following generations in some contexts that it is really possible to connect and re-elaborate past and future, the needs of the family culture to which they belong and the needs of the new social environment, thus overcoming the reasons of the symbolic and real division that often unites the history of the first generations of immigrants. It is like saying that the decisive game for a possible integration of foreign people is played along a "time axis that unravels over several generations",

in which the themes of justice between generations (the sacrifice of parents, the loyalty of children) and the recognition/appreciation of the inheritance that the adult generation leaves to the next one acquire particular significance (Kraler et al., 2010; Crespi, Santoni and Zanier, 2017:

In particular, being able to establish a bridge and a connection with the values of one's own culture of origin and at the same time keeping the exchange with the cultural context of welcome open and alive is the most appropriate way to experience positive levels of well-being (Regalia 2012). With respect to the risk of fragmentation that the migratory event introduces into personal and relational life, knowing how to integrate and therefore make the different souls and the different parts of one's life experience dialogue and live together seems to be a crucial resource for the younger generations. The sometimes dramatic experience of the younger generations of migrants in building a solid identity structure highlights the importance of distinguishing between different levels of adaptation within a sufficiently articulated time span. An initial insertion without problems, or with manageable difficulties, is often only a phase of a longer path, studded by crises and regressive phases, that can characterize the life of every migrant, especially of the younger ones.

The care of the bond with the children and with the following generations refers, therefore, to the possibility of allowing the new generation access to the sense that the origins have had and will have in the family history. The well-being and the construction of a stable identity for the youngest members of the family will pass through the possibility given to them to keep in touch with their family history, to grasp its meaning in the inevitable alternation of interweaving, continuity and transformation compared to the past. The not easy task for the adult generations concerns the selection of their own "priorities" in terms of cultural norms and reference values, putting them in dialogue with the needs and desires of their children so that they can combine them with those of the new context. This also implies that the adult generation is able to accept the "foreign" part of its children, i.e. it is able to accept that the same children are partly different from what it had imagined them to be.

While researching on these themes it is therefore fundamental to make explicit and follow a perspective that brings out "the intergenerational depth" of the stories and events that unravel from migration. Looking at migration from an intergenerational point of view means accepting the idea

that it involves several generations, several genders and their intertwining; it means assuming that costs and gains are visible only in the passing of time and in family history; it means looking at the weave of bonds that, like invisible but solid fibres, hold together or separate the paths of those who make up the family; again, it means dealing with success or failure to stay in the dimension of mutual exchange.

*Conclusions*

In migration processes, the family is the environment in which internal solidarity is reorganized and priorities are redefined according to available resources. Every (migrant) family is a world of its own, a microcosm made up of bonds and stories, roles and resources, affections and events. Due to its expected function as a bridge between the individual and society, and between generations, the family can facilitate the integration of its members in the host country or sometimes make the process of inclusion difficult in an attempt to maintain the culture of origin and ties.

Finally, the extent to which migrants and their families could be included into the world of work, social fabric, welfare systems and participation structures reveals the level of openness of society to change and innovation, testing the nationalistic social principles (linguistic, ethnic, territorial equality), which provided the basis for the construction of modern Western states, and which still constitute for part of Western societies a source of pride and social claim, but above all a source of difficulties in the conception of a multicultural society. Territoriality is no longer the only, nor the main, organisational basis of social, political and cultural life. Ethnic, gender and generational differences configure circumstances and orientations that lead to the integration or to social distance of the family that has experienced migration paths, but in any case lead the whole society to question its own principles of social belonging, rights and duties, and its organization of collective life.

The essays presented in this volume deal with several aspects that can be outlined back to some of the above mentioned themes and in particular to the relationship between generations and the transmission of culture and identity (Marta Scocco and Francesco Chiaricato) and the relationship between generations in long-distance/transnational family relationships and in the destination society after migration (Dhëmbo and Santagati).

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