

# LIMITED BUT ENDURING TRANSNATIONAL TIES? TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY LIFE AMONG POLISH MIGRANTS IN NORWAY

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This paper explores the transnational family life of Polish migrants in Norway, through the analysis of the nature and extent of transnational practices and transnational identifications. We draw on debates in migration studies on the limits of transnationalism and on transnational parenting, both arguing for greater attention to the actual extent and nature of transnational ties, as a way of securing the analytical value of the term ‘transnational’. The paper builds on interviews and focus groups with 45 research participants in Bergen and Oslo (post-accession migrants, but also earlier migrants, and descendants). It conceptualizes transnational family life as: 1) transnational parenting and care responsibilities; 2) return visits and communication; and 3) changing relationship dynamics. We argue that the extent of ‘transnational’ family life among Polish migrants in Norway in general should not be exaggerated. However, the analysis of migrants’ transnational practices and transnational identifications demonstrates first, a distinction between split households and migrant households, and second of all, how these transnational identifications and practices are, in many cases, mutually constitutive dimensions. We conclude that transnational identifications, and sporadic transnational practices, may appear as weak forms of transnational family life, but that these can also be understood as enduring forms of migrant transnationalism.

**Keywords:** transnational family, migration, practices, identifications

## INTRODUCTION

What constitutes transnational family life? In migration studies the term ‘transnational’ has seen a proliferation of use since its inception in the early 1990s (Glick Schiller et al. 1992), but there are conflicting views of what constitutes transnational family life, and whether this should be limited to split-households, involving transnational parenting, or whether a more inclusive approach is well-founded. In this paper, we approach the theme of transnational family life adopting a critical position, in order to tease out the ways in which Polish migrants in Norway do – and do not – live their family lives transnationally. We ask: to what extent and in what ways are the family lives of Polish migrants in Norway transnational? We apply conceptual frameworks from migration studies, questioning the analytical usefulness of an all-encompassing approach to transnationalism (see e.g. Waldinger 2008), and interrogating what constitutes transnational family life (see e.g. Bryceson, Vuorela 2002; Carling et al. 2012) to a new empirical context of large-scale, intra-European migration, specifically that of Polish migration to Norway. Drawing on existing debates and empirical work, we develop a three-fold conceptualization of transnational family, which seeks to take on board the criticisms of an all-encompassing approach to ‘transnationalism’, while at the same time acknowledging the need to approach and analyze the family lives of migrant research participants in a way that remains true to their interpretative universes, often stretching across transnational social fields.

The population of Polish migrants in Norway numbers 91 000 (SSB 2015), of whom the vast majority are post-EU-accession migrants. Two thirds of this population is male, even as family reunification is increasing, and a decade has passed since post-accession migration commenced. The pattern of transnational family life among Polish migrants across Europe is varied, reflecting the multifaceted nature of post-accession migration flows. While the main concern in Poland in relation to migrants and families are the so-called ‘euro-orphans’ or ‘left-behind children’, among Polish migrants in Norway there are few examples of both parents migrating and leaving children behind. However, cases of one parent, predominantly the father, migrating to Norway for work, leaving behind his wife and children, are common. Among Polish migrants who are settling down with their families in Norway, there are also extensive familial transnational ties with Poland, which in different ways may – or may not be – considered to constitute dimensions of a transnational family life.

In order to tease out the ways in which migrants’ family life is (or is not) transnational, we distinguish between transnational family practices and

transnational family identifications, drawing on the established distinction between ‘ways of doing’ and ‘ways of being’, the former pertaining to tangible cross-border practices, the latter to less tangible, often emotional, processes of negotiating identity and belonging (Levitt, Glick Schiller 2004). Ways of doing, such as sending money, travelling to visit, or talking on Skype, are tangible and quite obviously constitutive of leading a transnational family life (King-O’Riain 2015). Ways of being, such as emotional attachments, identity construction processes, and negotiating belonging, are intangible, yet with regard to transnational family life, we argue, may also be seen as constitutive.

The paper draws inspiration from literature questioning the extent and intensity of transnationalism among the average migrant (see e.g. Al-ali et al. 2001, Waldinger 2008, 2013), and literature on transnational parenting questioning the extent and salience of transnationalism in migrant families specifically (see e.g. Carling et al. 2012). We therefore seek to explore empirically the ways in which the family lives of Polish migrants in Norway may or may not be seen as transnational, either in the sense of ‘doing’ or ‘being’, while also acknowledging the significance of the interplay between different types of transnational ties. Following Al-ali et al. (2001), we understand transnational engagements as the product of the matrix of migrant’s desires and capacities to enact transnationalism, where both are affected by forces of structure and agency, which may play out differently in relation to transnational practices and identifications.

Building on the literature on transnational families, and our own analysis, we conceptualize transnational family life as: 1) transnational parenting and care obligations, 2) return visits and communications, and 3) changing relationship dynamics.

While the split-household is the most intensive form of transnational family life, we argue that there are reasons to explore empirically within and beyond such family constellations how and when ‘transnational’ aspects matter. Across contexts, particular patterns of transnational family life are found in different life-cycle stages, pertaining to one’s own children, aging parents, or other family care obligations (Pareñas 2005; Ryan et al. 2009; Ślusarczyk 2010; Pawlak 2012; Pustułka 2012, Erdal and Ezzati 2015). In our analysis, we draw on the understandings of ‘transnational family’ as these emerge from our research participants’ experiences and reflections, including various forms of kinship, including, among others: a separated nuclear family, new families started abroad, reunited families and relations with the extended kin in the country of origin (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002).

Transnational parenting is a distinct form of transnational family life, where distance across transnational social fields is defining for how the family functions

and lives on an everyday basis (Carling et al. 2012). This is in contrast to families where the household has settled in a country of destination, and transnational ties connect parents, siblings and other family members beyond the nuclear family. Polish migrants in Norway seem to be reflective of trends among Polish migrants more generally, with a mix of transnationally split-households and families who settle abroad together. Out of 1.3 million households in Poland with at least one migrant, nearly half had all members living abroad in 2011 (Slany and Ślusarczyk 2013: 16).

For Polish migrants, transnational care obligations include remittances, but also the responsibility of caring for elderly parents (now or in the future), and the knowledge that a family crisis might at any time overrule individual preferences with regard to migration and settlement (Evergeti, Zontini 2006). Notably, transnational care and help is a two-way process, akin to what is described as ‘reverse remittances’ (Mazzucato 2011).

Return visits and communication across transnational social fields are a second set of ways in which migrants family life can be more or less transnational (see e.g. Tsuda 2004; Andits 2010; Teo 2011). Return visits are often described as important for the maintenance of kin relationships across geographic distance, through physical co-presence, gaining shared experiences and memories. Yet, return visits may also have a double-meaning, as they often also shed new light on settlement and processes of identity construction spanning the transnational social field, leading to a reappraisal of belonging (Teo 2011, Oeppen 2013). Furthermore, return visits can take on many appearances, as holidays, temporary stays, even as testing grounds for more permanent return (Erdal 2014a; 2014b), or a form of ancestral return (Górny, Osipović 2006; King, Christou 2010).

Transnational communication and the significance of new technologies (Vertovec 2001; Wilding 2006; King-O’Riain 2014) are a cliché in the literature on transnationalism, and are a focal point of critiques about overstressing the concept (Al-Ali et al. 2001; Waldinger 2008, 2013). Nevertheless, the significance of communication within families across transnational social fields is unquestionable (Wilding 2006). As argued by Ryan and Mulholland (2014), technology is not ‘just technology’ in relation to migrant transnationalism, as the ways in which migrants approach and appropriate technology is context-dependent. For instance, American migrants were found to use Skype more easily than French migrants in London, arguably as a result of different geographic imaginaries. For Americans, distance was something natural, something to work around, whereas for the French, the relatively lesser distance, meant that physical co-presence was the sought-after solution, rendering technological solutions less valuable.

The nature of changing relationship dynamics are a third set of dimensions of the ways in which Polish migrants' family lives can be more or less transnational. While there has been increasing attention on the emotional dimensions of migrant transnationalism (King-O'Riain 2014; Ho 2009), there has been less focus on the implications for intra-couple dynamics.

Decision-making in transnational families is a topic that has received some attention (Ryan et al. 2009), where children of school age are a key factor, together with personal interconnectivity with family members. In the context of post-accession Polish intra-EU mobility, migration decision-making is often discussed in terms of unplanned migration, resulting in an incomplete migration or 'liquid migration' (Engbersen, Snel 2013). While the unplanned nature of many migration projects is evident, this results in ongoing negotiation processes within families stretched across transnational social fields, or affected by transnational practices and identifications, where decision-making occurs at different points in time.

The following section presents the data and context, before the analysis and discussion, focusing on the three identified sets of dimensions of transnational ties in relation to the family lives of Polish migrants: 1) transnational parenting and caring obligations; 2) return visits and communication; and 3) changing relationship dynamics. Throughout the analysis these are discussed in relation to the nature and extent of transnational ties, as ways of being and ways of doing family life in the context of a transnational social field.

## DATA AND CONTEXT

Notwithstanding the specificity of the vast post-accession emigration from Poland, amounting to about 2 million emigrants (2013), in this paper we have included both pre- and post-accession migrants, and some descendants of earlier migrants from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This resulted from an analysis, where we found parallels in the transnational family practices and identifications between post-2004 migrants and earlier migrants, including their descendants. In Norway there are approximately 91 000 Polish migrants (SSB 2015), of which about 10 000 were living in Norway prior to 2004. As with migration statistics in general, there are some uncertainties, in particular with regard to the number of Polish migrants who are working in Norway on temporary contracts, via Polish contracting companies. Among Polish migrants in Norway, about two-thirds are male, a proportion that has remained stable despite the fact that Poland has been the top country in family-reunification statistics for most of the period since

2006. A diversification of the demographic composition of Polish migrants in Norway has nonetheless happened, with a substantial proportion of couples bringing children from Poland or establishing families in Norway.

The paper builds on interviews and focus groups involving a total of 45 research participants in the two largest cities in Norway, Oslo and Bergen, conducted in 2012. The sample has an emphasis on post-2004 migration, but also includes some previous migrants and descendants, to enable longer temporal perspectives.

Research participants were recruited using multiple gate-keepers and, to a limited extent, snow-ball sampling. As the data was collected as part of a project exploring considerations about settlement, return migration and onward mobility, participants were also recruited with regard to a variation of perspectives on these topics. The sample included roughly half-and-half men and women. The age of research participants varied from early 20s to 60s, with a main emphasis on those between 30–50 years of age. Educational backgrounds among migrants were varied and a degree of de-skilling with regard to employment in Norway vs. education levels from Poland was evident. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed, and have been analysed using a theme-centred approach, drawing out dimensions of relevance to the question of extent and nature of transnational family life among Polish migrants.

## TRANSNATIONAL PARENTING AND CARE OBLIGATIONS

Migration challenges a static view of the family as bounded by physical co-presence and provides diverse configurations of transnational family life both in terms of practices and belonging. Care for ‘left behind’ members of the family in the country of origin requires strategies for overcoming spatial separation by reconfiguring, expanding and sometimes activating previously unused kin networks across national borders (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). Transnational care in this sense includes practical, as well as emotional involvement. In this section, we start by discussing the most intensive form of transnational family life – that of transnational parenting, before discussing other forms of transnational care obligations, including multi-directional flows of transnational care within families.

### TRANSNATIONAL PARENTING

Transnational parenting from a distance is a trait of Polish migration to Norway, with predominantly male construction workers, who often work on contracts in Norway, leaving family behind in Poland. As observed elsewhere,

when the children are young, it is usually expected that the woman should stay in Poland to ‘fulfill her mothering role’ (White 2011: 92). In our study, we had a focus group with male construction workers, where the narratives of family lives across borders became a central feature, with reference to the feeling of missing out on the everyday lives with wives and children. Our participants were simultaneously under cross-pressure from their wives who wanted them to move back to Poland, but also from the family’s desire to retain the current living standard that their migration enabled:

*Robert<sup>1</sup>: I have it all the time [missing his family], but I put it clearly... I have to go back [to Norway] to work.*

*Karol: My wife is telling me that she didn’t marry me to spend the best years of her life sitting by herself in Poland... another important argument is that my daughter is 11 years old and I’ve been away for 7 years out of that. So in the end... it might be silly but one day I wanted to buy her a top and I had to phone my wife to ask her size.*

*Tadek: It’s common- I also don’t know. [...]*

*When I was in England, my son was four or five... then when he was seven I was still buying clothes for a four- five-year old, because, for me, he was still small. This is the pain...*

The discussion about the prosaic fact of forgetting the size of children’s clothes is concluded with a statement about the pain of absence:

*Karol: It’s very hard when the children are small.*

*Robert: Yes.*

*Karol: Three-four-year-olds. Now, when my children are seventeen and eighteen it’s a bit different but when they were three or four and I was going to work in Germany, they were crying on one side, and I was crying on the other side. So I was finishing my contracts and I was going back. Now they are bigger and... [...]*

*It’s worst when they are little.*

*Robert: Yes, the children are growing up and you’re missing it all.*

*Staszek: We don’t like leaving Poland, with tears in our eyes sometimes.*

The observation that as the children get older, they mind less their fathers leaving, might be an effective coping strategy, however, it also appears as

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

a painful realisation of the emotional costs of migration. A common stance on transnational parenting in Poland today, in particular with reference to so-called ‘euro-orphans’ left behind by two migrating parents (or a migrating single-parent), is problem-oriented and highly normative. This should be read within the context of a longstanding history and culture of migration from Poland (Ślusarczyk 2010; Urbańska 2010; Slany and Ślusarczyk 2013). However, with more recent migration, often seen as a temporary, perspectives on migrating to work abroad are more nuanced, and migrants themselves develop their own narratives justifying their parental sacrifice:

*Robert: We explain it to ourselves that when we go back for two or three weeks and we go on holidays, they have a daddy just for themselves... if we were working in Poland, I live 50km outside Warsaw and I would most probably be working in Warsaw. I would have to get up at 5 a.m. and go to Warsaw and I would be back about 8 or 9 pm. How much of a father would they be seeing then?*

*Karol: If you want to earn well you'd have to go to work on a Saturday as well.*

*Tadek: Exactly.*

*Staszek: On a Sunday you'd also have to go somewhere to work extra. We explain to ourselves that the children have less of us in everyday life- so they miss us- but once we go back to Poland...*

*Mirek: We try to take them on a nice holiday...*

As a result of spatial separation from their families, this group of migrants adjusted their roles to intensified parenting practices during their short visits to Poland. They attempted to develop strategies of compensating for the limited opportunities for everyday engagement in both practical (‘ways of doing’) and emotional (‘ways of being’) ways, by concentrating on more intensive, tangible, practical aspects of maintaining their family relations in particular during visits (‘ways of doing’), although these were infrequent.

#### TRANSNATIONAL CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

Transnational care responsibilities are often understood as the responsibilities of migrants toward their elderly parents in the country of origin, yet may also take the shape of other helping practices (Krzyżowski 2013). These may also include ‘reverse’ responsibility flows, akin to those of ‘reverse remittances’ (Mazzucato 2011).

Given the inadequate state provision for the elderly in Poland, the pressure of caring for ageing members of the family often lies within the closest family

circle, most commonly with female members of this circle. Accordingly, there was a common realization among many participants that they might be prompted to return to Poland in the future, due to the ill health of ageing parents, as Aneta reflected on:

*(...) and this is a thing that crosses my mind when my parents have health issues, that I am so far, that... well, on the one hand it's good to have a [good] financial situation here which they don't have in Poland, but to be closer... to help with taking care of them... it's scary that the physical distance... that one day my parents will be gone. When you are so far... it's so...*

One of the possible solutions for Aneta was to bring her parents to live with her in Norway; however, she later concluded that it would be too difficult for them to settle in a new place. Another interviewee, Karolina, decided to return to Poland due to her parents' health problems.

*Now, because my parents got ill, their illness became the most important issue, but of course I would like to have some work arranged [there].*

The deteriorating health of Karolina's parents pushed her to the decision to return, even though she was aware that she might have to live off her savings for some time before she would be able to find a good job in Poland. Such gendered dimensions of transnational care responsibilities were manifested in different ways, with complex gender dynamics within families (brothers-sisters, daughters-sons), spread across transnational social fields (see also Grundy and Henretta 2006). Aneta described helping her closest family in Poland as a response to certain family emergencies, rather than as a regular flow of money:

*I have a flat, so my brother lives there with his family because they are saving for a bigger one (...). The second brother... I was his guarantor for his mortgage because he didn't have a full-time job. Now he took it over from me so I don't have to worry about it... so these are not big things but... I can help financially (...) it definitely makes life easier for them and... I don't even know whose initiative it is... sometimes it's... my mum is the organiser of all of us... including the fact that when my sister needed a babysitter during the holidays, we were co-ordinating our plans to... so my mum co-ordinates this entire circus, including the financial aspect... so she either comes to me telling me that someone needs something... because when I am far away I don't always know about these things or she sends someone to talk to me, tells them that I have money and I will give them some for the children... my niece has a lot of health problems... she has*

*a congenital illness and so far it hasn't been too expensive but physiotherapy, this and that and I don't always know that they need it, so... when it's about the children then my mum... my mum's not shy to ask me for money when there's a need of this kind... (Aneta- Bergen).*

Aneta's mother took the role of the co-ordinator for their network of kin, being the focal point of the distribution of transnational help. Due to the fact that she minds all the grandchildren, she has the most up-to-date information. She then passes the information on to Aneta during their daily Skype conversations. Although Aneta's assistance towards her relatives in Poland took the shape of regular transnational practices pertaining to more tangible 'ways of doing', in her narrative she also referred to her strong emotional ties with the members of her family and her deep sense of belonging ('ways of being'). The interplay of the two was significant for the transnational family life she had led.

#### 'REVERSED' TRANSNATIONAL CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

The stream of transnational assistance does not, however, flow solely in one direction, rather it is reciprocal. Kasia and Marek came to Norway to return the money borrowed from Kasia's mother for finishing their newly built house in Poland. During their stay in Norway, Kasia's mother moved into their house in order to save the cost of renting.

*Kasia: We feel responsible for the fact that we have a house and my mum couldn't maintain it all, so we send money. Sometimes there are situations in which other close people need help and then we try to help as much as we can.*

*Marek: Four years ago we needed help and my mum lent us money... I lost my job in Norway and Kasia also lost hers and we didn't have money to pay rent.*

*Marek: Since the company went bankrupt... from one day to another... there were some social benefits but it was very little... and my mum lent me money for two months and then she told us to keep it.*

The nature and direction of help were the effect of sudden changes in their circumstances rather than a carefully planned strategy of remitting. Teresa, who came to Norway just after her medical studies in 1998, had to rely on practical help from her family with the care of her very young children in the beginning.

*They [the new employer] phoned me and said that they needed someone. I had a small baby, 4 months old, but obviously when you come from Poland, you*

*think that you should move on. I got employed there in paediatrics and it was my first job.*

*Interviewer: How did you manage then?*

*In a Polish way... improvising. You know how it is in Poland, people have to manage somehow, right? Our families helped us a lot. There was always someone from the family helping us out, taking care of the children. It worked somehow.*

Although, at the beginning of the interview Teresa stated that their move to Norway was a carefully planned undertaking, at particular points in time, when their circumstances changed, they needed the help of their closest family to get by in Norway.

The transnational parenting practices of Polish migrants in Norway take a predominantly tangible form, but one where there are significant intangible – particularly emotional – dimensions, which together are constitutive of the nature of this kind of transnational family life. Ways of being and ways of doing are mutually constitutive, where one may compensate for the other. The concrete and tangible practices are themselves embedded within the intangible and emotional. While neither fathers nor wives and children fly back and forth to Poland constantly, nor do they live their lives on Skype, the geographic distance – and thus the transnational social field – within which they live their family life, makes the transnational dimensions distinctive. Transnational care obligations among our research participants were found to be less intensive than transnational parenting, perhaps most significantly because of their often temporary nature, or being a potential possibility rather than a contemporary experience, and because they were intertwined with both material (e.g. money) and immaterial (e.g. emotions) dimensions of family life that are stretched across transnational social fields.

## RETURN VISITS AND COMMUNICATION

### RETURN VISITS

For some migrants, return visits are a tangible manifestation of a persisting connection to Poland, as the physical immediacy with home is gained anew. For others, return visits are a source of realisation, that life carries on and that their anticipation of ‘coming back’, might be an illusion. Teresa, who had returned to Poland, and later re-migrated back to Norway (see also White 2014 on ‘double return’), was particularly explicit about not having too high expectations about a return to Poland:

*We never had such illusions that the return was going to be wonderful and there was a bunch of friends waiting for us there, and that our family was going to greet us with... that they were going to help us. It turned out that it's not like that... that you lose friends after ten years and there's nobody there really, because everyone is busy with their own stuff... with their professional careers, with their social lives and so on. So it's obvious that you get out of that circle after a while. It was obvious that we'd have to build all that structure anew... we were aware of that... but we thought that it was an interesting project.*

For returning migrants, even after a long period of absence, it can nevertheless be possible to thoroughly re-establish positive links with those who have stayed (Andits 2010). Yet there is often a 'price of admission' (Softing 2002: 152 cited in: Stefansson 2004: 61), which needs to be paid, in order to avoid marginalization (Tsuda 2004). Since Polish migrants can travel cheaply back to Poland, increasing the frequency of such travel they are able to gradually confront their own transformation. During physical interaction with those who have stayed, migrants discern the transformation they have gone through abroad (Long and Oxfeld 2004). The extent of transformation in oneself thus becomes exposed to migrants themselves. But as Polish migrants only visit their relatives and friends during their holidays, for a short period of time, their vision of home is to some extent distorted.

Return visits are usually marked by multiple social events and family gatherings. But, paradoxically, many migrants visiting 'back home' in Poland (as in other emigration contexts globally) feel that going home is not a holiday, mainly due to the expectations they feel obliged to fulfil during their stay:

*Monika: Yes, you have to travel around [when going to Poland]*

*Grzegorz: When we go it turns into turmoil.*

*Monika: We live here for a bit, there for a bit...*

*Grzegorz: We go here but we haven't gone there, it's good, it's bad...*

*Monika: Grzegorz's sister lives in the centre of Warsaw, so we also have to visit his sister, so... there's a lot to do in Poland when you go... even if you go for four weeks of holidays... it's all on a high gear.*

Some interviewees explained how they prioritized carefully who they would visit. The strategy of meeting some people, rather than others, is significant as it becomes an informal statement of the recognition of lasting relations. As a result of the manifold social obligations placed on migrants during visits, many interviewees admitted to an inability to gain rest in Poland. Therefore

some had decided to split their limited holiday time between visits to Poland and 'real holidays' as time to relax. Yet, some interviewees stated that using holiday time to go to other places than Poland was perceived as disloyalty by their families. Visits to Poland were seen by family members there as a sign of migrants' loyalty and continued strong ties.

For those who still had houses in Poland, holiday time often involved extended construction work. Ania's family, for example, kept their house outside Warsaw, which meant that during the holidays Ania travelled with her mother and brother around Poland visiting their family, whilst her father would spend that time fixing up the house:

*Two years ago my dad was still working on the house, he was doing insulation, so we were visiting the family in the meantime. We went to Silesia, Ciechanów and Sokocin, then we were going to go to the seaside but there wasn't time. During the coming holiday my dad is probably going to do it again, and next holidays he'd like to go somewhere, to travel around Poland and visit Poland.*

Attitudes towards visiting the country of origin can shift during the life cycle (Erdal and Ezzati 2015). Migrants' children may at some stage stop enjoying visits (Teo 2011) and still, at a later stage of their lives, they might strive to re-discover their connections, as Smith describes in the case of Mexicans in the US: "(s)ome younger children who had not liked returning to Ticuani seven or ten years earlier now embraced its rituals as adolescents, and some who had been adolescents in the early 1990s now participated less" (2006:5). Thus, time is not a solitary factor conveying migrants' orientation; rather temporal dimensions should be included within analyses of migrant transnationalism.

Janusz, who came to Norway in the late 1980s, brought his older daughter to Poland when she was little, to familiarize her with her national heritage:

*When Madzia was little, when she was 12, we were going because I wanted to show her Cracow, Gdansk... it was a holiday trip around Poland but not to see someone in particular or to see the family but rather around Poland to show Wieliczka<sup>2</sup> (...) you don't have access to a salt mine in every country.*

It was important for Janusz to distinguish trips to Poland aimed at embedding his daughter's sense of belonging, from the typical visits to Poland. Thus, Polish migrants in Norway applied their transnational 'ways of being' in different ways depending on their family circumstances. While return visits are tangible

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<sup>2</sup> Salt mine outside Cracow.

transnational practices (ways of doing), they are in different ways articulations of, and at the same time may have implications for, transnational identifications (ways of being).

#### TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Due to advances in communication technologies and ease of travel (Vertovec 2004), Polish migrants in Norway are rarely acutely isolated from their loved ones. Communication technologies are important for most migrants, yet these technologies are facilitators, not creators of transnational ties. Technologies do not generate virtual families, where none existed before (Wilding 2006). The increased technological capacity for communication may, however, generate expectations for more frequent communication, as Aneta reflected on:

*I don't really like Skype. It's enough to be on it for an hour a day with my family... well maybe not every day but... my mum, well, she has to talk to me and check how her child is doing. It's quite time-consuming, but e-mails from time to time.*

The ongoing connection with the place of origin can be a significant constituent of the experience of migration as it enables multiple ties and simultaneous interactions between 'here' and 'there' (Vertovec 2001). Communication with relatives and friends in Poland is mostly focused around familial and local matters, though their conversations may also touch on national affairs, such as about general living conditions in Poland, as in Barbara's case:

*I've always maintained such a close contact with Poland... that it is more connected with... personal experiences of my friends and family at work, for example, or my friend was sacked when she came back after having a baby and, as soon as she got back from maternity leave she got a 'thank you' letter...*

Transnational communication falls under the category of cross-border practices, yet very often transnational communication is more about sustaining emotional ties, about performing the ritual of the daily Skype call (King-O'Riain 2015). As such, communication is an example of when transnational practices ('ways of doing') and transnational identifications ('ways of being') are mutually constitutive. For families stretched across transnational social fields, both visits and communication are salient practices that in their own right confirm togetherness in the transnational family. Simultaneously, both visits and communication gain their meaning in an interaction with a multitude of less tangible transnational identifications, which flow across the transnational social field.

Among our research participants, there was a continuum of experiences, where the extent and nature of being a transnational family (or not) varied hugely, most significantly for those with split-households vs. the rest, but certainly also within both these groups. We furthermore found that an assumed divide between pre-2004 and post-2004 migration flows was less evident with regard to differences in transnational communication and return visits, than what might have been expected (with the exception of split-households among post-2004 migrants). Pre-2004 migrants sustained transnational communication, and travelled to Poland to visit on a regular basis, and most of them reflected on how the frequency of visits – and communication – had increased over time, due to the ease of communication. With regard to visits and communication, ways of doing and ways of being are strongly interconnected and mutually contingent, as relationships are negotiated and re-negotiated with spells of co-presence physically or virtually, which interrupt but also constitute an everyday life dominated by the constant non-presence of either ‘here’ or ‘there’, a defining feature of migrant transnationalism (Smith 2006).

## CHANGING RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

The discourse on the effects of migration on families is very strong in Polish society, and although none of the interviewees had experienced family breakdown as a direct consequence of migration, this narrative was present when describing Polish migration in general, as Monika and Grzegorz noted:

*Monika: it was me who didn't want Grzegorz to go alone for a year leaving me at home in Poland. I said: "No, we either go together or you don't go at all". Because to get separated like this... (...) then you hear that things happen... about broken marriages because one person was here and the other was there.*

This was a consequence of a realisation that despite the vast range of means of maintaining a frequent transnational contact with their loved ones, the lack of physical contact would make their everyday life-worlds diverge. The apprehension of such an effect of separation prompted many couples to migrate together, as Marek describes:

*I set a condition [on the trip], because I came with my cousins... there's probably around 15 of them here, I set a condition that I go with them... they needed someone who spoke English, we didn't speak Norwegian at the time... I agreed*

*to it but I said that I have to go with my wife, that we're going together because we were observing these things in the US, the situation in which a man was going on his own...*

We found that joint migration or a swift reunification in Norway also became a quest for autonomy and the opportunity for young couples to start their own family life, as in Tola and Przemek's case:

*Another thing is the independence – in Poland we couldn't function as a separate family unit. We had to live with my parents in law or with my parents and in Norway we can live by ourselves – this is important for us.*

The migration experience brought about change in people's roles. Migrants' attitudes to relationships and the expectations they perceive, impact on the means by which they maintain these interpersonal relations across the transnational social field at different stages of their lives. For another interviewee, Małgorzata, migration brought about an opportunity to view her marriage anew, which led to change. Her husband had difficulties finding a good job in Poland, which was the main reason why they moved to Norway. The inability to support his family was a source of frustration, resulting in constant rows at home. Małgorzata was hopeful that after he got a job in Norway, their situation would improve, and her husband's behaviour would change. Yet, the situation remained the same after she and the children joined him in Norway, making her realize that there were more profound issues affecting their relationship. Her marriage soon broke down and, at the time of the interview, she was with a new partner. In retrospect, Małgorzata did not blame the failure of her marriage on migration, she noted that it became a chance for her and her husband to start anew, yet despite that chance, they did not manage to stay together.

Other stories of broken relationships recalled by interviewees drew on more generalised observations about Polish migrants. Ania's was one such story, and alluded to the imbalance in the employability or earnings between partners, and the general shift of dependencies with migration:

*The majority [of break-ups] happened when they were both here [in Norway] and they got divorced here. And this is also... there were such situations that he was working and she wasn't, she got a job here, started working, earning her own money, and then they got divorced because she decided that she is independent. She hadn't worked before and he was sending the money, so she couldn't get divorced, but when she suddenly got a job here, she became independent and... goodbye. The majority of divorces looked like that.*

Through migration gender relations are exposed to scrutiny and change, as a consequence of new structural contexts, with specific opportunities and constraints, which can lead to questioning dominant gender ideologies, in both origin and settlement societies (Szczepanikova 2006).

For some of our interviewees the move to Norway was their first episode of going abroad, yet, in their course of narration, few referred to the sole physical act of migration or the moment of landing in an unknown place as an essential change in their biographical identity. Rather it was associated with events occurring prior to the decision to leave Poland, like losing a job, wanting money to finish a house, getting in debt, or a turning-point which occurred after settling in Norway, for example, sending the children to school, learning Norwegian, setting up one's own business. The fact that the move was not implicitly recollected as a symbolic marking in migrants' biographies can be connected with their decision to migrate being a short-term venture, planning to return to Poland or continue moving to other places in the near future. Some interviewees clearly expressed the open-endedness of their migration plans (see also Eade et al. 2007: 34; Erdal 2014a) indicating a lack of intention to settle in one place. This can be understood not as a manifestation of flexibility, which would suggest applying adaptable strategies, but rather in terms of a free-flowing attitude, to 'just try and see what will happen' (Garapich 2009: 50).

Nevertheless, changes in relationship dynamics are often accentuated, if not brought on, by migration, whether migration that creates geographic distance between partners, or when both migrate together, leaving extended families behind. Transnational practices and identifications play very different roles in the contexts of split-household transnational families, and in other cases of transnational family life, with regard to changing relationship dynamics. Our research participants had experience with migration decision-making as a result of actual, experienced, potential or sometimes feared changes in relationship dynamics, either brought on by migration – or indeed by onward movement or return migration.

Changing relationship dynamics are the outcomes of both physically manifested actions, including transnational practices, and of intangible, often emotional dimensions of interpersonal relations, including transnational identifications. Transnational practices and identifications thus interact in terms of changing relationship dynamics, and while these play out differently within transnationally split-households vs. those migrating together, our analyses suggest that both types of relationships are affected by the migration process, and by the ways in which family life is performed transnationally, within the couple itself, as well as beyond, with the extended family. The ways in which origin and

settlement societies are perceived and experienced also matter for the ways in which transnational dimensions, do or do not matter, for instance in the cases of women starting to work in Norway, and experiencing a sense of liberation which at times leads to relationship break-downs. Depending on the migrants' socio-economic and geographic origins within Poland, migration does not have to entail a change though, as many women had pursued professional careers prior to leaving Poland. Thus the implications of migration and a – more or less – transnational family life result in different outcomes, which interact not only with transnational practices and identifications, but also with temporal, spatial and gendered contexts.

## CONCLUSION

We have examined the interplay of corporal and cognitive family practices ('ways of doing') and identifications ('ways of being') in three identified key dimensions of transnational family relations: 1) transnational parenting and care obligations, 2) return visits and communication across transnational social fields, and 3) changes in relation dynamics. We argue that migrants' desires and capacities for transnational engagement cannot be assessed solely through the evidence of actual transnational practices, as this ignores the role of potential, latent and future, transnational practices, which may be contingent on current invisible transnational identifications.

This echoes Mahler and Pessar's (2001) arguments for the need to include both cognitive and corporal actions in studies of migrant transnationalism, with reference to 'ways of being' and 'ways of doing'. In family life – whether stretched across the transnational social field – or within the same physical location – the mutual interdependence and constitution of the cognitive and the corporal is intuitive. For studies of transnational family life this mutual constitution is significant to acknowledge, to find ways of unpacking it, but at the same time of valuing a holistic perspective that takes onboard not just the intermingling of practices and identifications, but also of their changeability across time and space. Working with migrant's own narratives, i.e. their own universes of meaning – and how these map onto transnational social fields, or not – is a further dimensions, where interpretations of family life, should acknowledge the spatial – as well as temporal – units which research participants themselves operate with.

Examining the experiences of transnational parenting among Polish male migrants, the interrelatedness of ways of being and ways of doing in the

transnational social field are underscored. Although transnational practices, such as visits, remittances and gifts are key to sustaining a transnational family life, the less tangible dimensions of knowing your child's age and size at a distance, of longing and a sense of loss, are, in many ways, equally constitutive for the experience of transnational family life. Thus, the extent of cross-border transnational practices in itself, with regard to transnational family life, seems to be indicative of the type of ties, whereas the nature of these ties is better revealed through an exploration of the intangible dimensions.

We argue that the importance and sustainability over time of apparently weaker transnational ties, might be fairly strong among Polish migrants in Norway, drawing on both pre-2004 and post-2004 migration experiences. This leads us to question whether less intensive transnational ties are necessarily more short-lived and weaker than those that are more intensive. The literature on migrant transnationalism includes a number of contributions providing relevant and timely critiques with regard to 'the limits to transnationalism' (Al-Ali et al. 2001; Waldinger 2008, 2013), and underlining the need to operationalize and define the term more consciously. We have followed these arguments with regard to exploring the tangible practices, and the less tangible identifications of Polish migrants, and how they play out as relevant (or not) for migrants' transnational family life.

For some migrants the lack of physical contact with their friends and families puts an immense strain on their relationships. Although the means of maintaining gratifying human interactions appears idiosyncratic, the lack of a full emotional bandwidth yielded by personal, in-the-flesh contact might make some ties wither. While we find that many migrants are less 'transnational' a decade (or less) on from their migration to Norway post-2004, than what might have been assumed, there are clear trends of ancestral return visits among the children of Polish migrants from pre-2004, and other forms of both transnational practices and identifications, resulting in what could be seen as limited but enduring migrant transnationalism.

Studying migrant transnationalism, through a limited view of looking at transnational practices, may mean not seeing the complete picture, more specifically being sensitive to latent or potential transnational practices, that may emerge in life crises, under particular circumstances, or changed life-cycle stage, but which are nurtured by intangible transnational identifications. Openness to the potential and latent can be provided by a pragmatic approach to including transnational identifications, alongside transnational practices in analyses of transnational family life. This allows for attention to be paid to the changing nature of transnational ties, with regard to their nature and extent – back and forth over the life course – and not necessarily unidirectionally from stronger to weaker.

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