A Family of Strangers: Transnational Parenting and the Consequences of Family Separation due to Undocumented Migration

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“What kind of life is it when, in order to feed your children, you are forced to leave them; when, in order to ‘fill’ your house, you start by deserting it, when you are the first to abandon your [land] in order to work it? ... Their country is back there, their house is back there, their wives and children are back there, everything is back there, only their bodies are here..., and you call that ‘living’... Who are these people? Men, but men without women: their wives are without men, but they’re not widows because their husbands are alive; their children are without fathers, orphans even though their fathers are alive...” Algerian male working in France (quoted in Sayad, 2004, p.59)

“It does not matter how many thousands of dollars you make here if you cannot feel the caresses from your son or daughter or see love in the eyes of your wife.” Mexican worker in the United States

Much of the migration literature focuses on the effects that immigrants have in their new places of residence, the structural causes of migration, the policies enacted in an attempt to manage migration flows, the attitudes that locals have towards immigrant populations, and the frequent neglect of immigrants’ human rights. This chapter discusses a phenomenon that affects almost every migrant and yet is rarely considered when studying migration: family separation. It also touches on some of the implications of family separation including its effects on mental health. This chapter takes an ethnographic and clinical approach in representing the experiences of individuals daily life as part of a family divided across borders.

Most migrants have to leave loved ones behind —extended family such as grandparents but often also immediate family members such as spouses and children. Because many individuals emphasize strong ties and meaningful social and emotional connections with extended family, moving away from kin and friends can represent a considerable loss of social
capital, as well as material and emotional support (Falicov, 2007). The move is most often understood as temporary, even though the migrant’s return date is uncertain.

We define transnational households as nuclear and multigenerational households that are physically separated and often divided by patrolled political borders (Castañeda & Buck, 2011). Many migrants leave their families when they become young adults, and this a phenomenon that can be seen as part of the normal life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999), but it is common for unmarried young adults to consider themselves as part of the household of origin and to send remittances to help support parents and siblings (Massey et al. 1987). Yet in the majority of cases labor migrants may face the difficult choice of having to move away from their newlywed spouses or pregnant wives, or from their babies and young children. In a typical example, a young mother or father lives abroad while her/his partner and children stay in the place of origin. Despite the distance between them and their families, migrants most often continue to fulfill their familial obligations such as providing financially, staying loyal and loving, and continuing to see themselves as part of the same household (Tilly, 2007; Zelizer & Tilly, 2006). The members of a transnational household share plans, aspirations, and economic resources; they remain a virtual household even though they are physically split into two domiciles in different countries.

Remittances are the money and gifts that migrants send back across long distances to family members, friends, and loved ones, who typically stay in the place of origin. Remittances offer not only tangible material support, but also evidence of continued commitment to the transnational household (Tilly, 2007). Remittances can be considered as a “product of love” because they are made possible by the sacrifices and physical separation that migrants must endure for the sake of family members’ economic wellbeing (Gil Martínez de Escobar, 2006).

The sum of remittances received by migrant-sending nations world-wide adds up to billions of dollars per year (World Bank, 2012), creating a growing interest in the phenomenon by development experts and the media, and bringing attention to the transnational families that make these large and consistent financial flows possible (Castañeda, forthcoming). Much of the literature assumes that given their magnitude, remittances must bring upward social mobility and economic development to migrant-sending communities. However, a large inflow of remittances to a locality implies that family separation has become widespread. While this money often increases the total income of the transnational family, it also signifies an inevitable increase in household expenditures due to the necessity of sustaining two living quarters, (e.g. a house in
Guerrero and an apartment in New York City) with the corresponding expenses (Castañeda, 2013). In the literature the negative implications of remittances are often under-reported and overshadowed by their perceived positive effects (Castañeda, forthcoming).

The literature on migration and development also often ignores the human drama and the social and psychological effects that family separation has on the members of transnational households. Development theorists often develop a cost/benefit analysis of family unity and economic improvement brought by migration, often concluding *a priori* that the possibility of increased income outweighs the possible negative consequences of family separation. However, the existing evidence forces us to take a skeptical view of this one-sided evaluation, since the long term economic benefits of remittances depend largely on the local political, economic, and social circumstances of the migrant’s community of origin (Castañeda, 2013). At the same time, the emotional and mental health aspects of family separation cannot be neglected since they affect the overall well-being of migrants and their family members, and thus have consequences for both human and economic development. For example, if the partner of a migrant is depressed as a result of a separation due to emigration, he or she is unlikely to be able to use remittances to become a successful entrepreneur, or if a returning migrant suffers significant negative psychological effects from his migration experience, he is unlikely to start a business. If children are withdrawn and isolated because of a parent’s departure, they are less likely to succeed in school and aspire to higher education, no matter how much financial benefit they receive from remittances.

Parent-child relationships within a transnational family fall far outside of what is considered the social norm, and play an important role in any discussion of the emotional and psychological effects of migration. Migrant parents who are members of a transnational household have to engage in teleparenting (Castañeda & Buck, 2011), defined by the authors as parenting across long distances, or parenting by proxy. Since the mother, father, or both are not physically present in the everyday lives of their children, they have to show affection, receive reports, and provide instructions and advice via the telephone, letters, the internet and through caregivers. Parenting is always a challenge, and the chances for successful parenting by proxy via long distance communication are clearly low. This form of disjointed parenting through the early, formative years of a child left behind can be very disruptive and have lifelong consequences for their self-efficacy and confidence (Webster-Stratton 2006).
Boy plays in arcade in the Mixteca Region of Guerrero, Mexico. Notice the American flag on his jeans. He is able to play for long hours at the arcade because he receives remittances from his parents in New York City. Castañeda © 2005.

Methods and Data

We take an ethnographic and clinical approach to representing the experiences of individuals who were part of a transnational family. Our insights come from in-depth interviews, surveys, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author, Ernesto Castañeda, in the United States, Mexico, Algeria, Morocco, Spain, France and Switzerland between 2003 and 2013. This information is expanded by data from the clinical work of the second author, Lesley Buck, a psychotherapist who has worked with immigrants and the children of immigrants in New York City and El Paso, Texas, two major immigrant-receiving cities in the United States. To secure the anonymity of the interviewees and to protect this vulnerable population, records kept contain no identifying data and all names provided are aliases.
Given how little has been written on this topic, we purposely concentrate on cases demonstrating negative consequences. Our data offers new evidence of the long-term emotional consequences of migration and family separation on the children left behind. It also demonstrates that remittances do not always compensate for the absence of parents in the lives of children of transnational families. We do not mean to say that all migrations or all temporary family separations will result in irreparable emotional damage. People are resilient and temporary family separation can strengthen the family and leave it in a better financial situation. However, in some cases the consequences are grave. Below are some accounts that illustrate common dilemmas faced by those who experience separation from a primary caregiver due to migration.

Case Studies

1. Living across the Border: the Familial Costs of Illegality

   My cousin Estela decided to illegally migrate with her husband to El Paso, Texas and left her son behind. Both my cousin and her husband were in their mid-twenties when they migrated. They had to send remittances to Ciudad Juarez since their baby son had stayed behind with his grandmother. Phone calls were not enough to develop a parent-son relationship. The family is separated by only a few miles and a river but this short distance has been enough to erode family ties... Estela and her husband later had two more children born in El Paso, and the expenses of raising them resulted in a decrease in the amount of remittances sent to Juarez. The family tried to reunify by bringing their eldest son to El Paso when he was 6 years of age, but he refused to migrate and leave his grandmother behind because he saw her as his “real mother.” He therefore grew up without knowing his siblings. Today, technology has allowed the siblings to virtually reunite and remain in touch through social networking sites. Now that they are in their teens, the American children have also traveled to Juarez, and have fortunately had the opportunity to meet their brother and grandmother. Yet the “abandonment” felt by the eldest son resulted in a deep grudge with his parents which that deepened when his grandmother passed away years later because Estela was not able to attend her mother’s funeral because of her illegal status... The grudge he holds towards my cousin and her husband is so strong that he does not talk to them and even less dares address them as “mother” or “father.” While he did have great clothes, shoes, and toys bought with money from remittances which they sent, he does not understand the sacrifice his parents invested in order for him to have these items. He has graduated from high school but does not have plans to pursue further education.... Estela has also been suffering because of the separation from her son and because of the constant struggle to find a job due to the strict employment and immigration laws. She is in constant fear of deportation and the thought of being separated from her two younger children lingers in her mind. Her
husband is also fearful, but they do not want to leave El Paso because they know their younger, teenage sons have better opportunities in the United States than in Mexico. Neither Estela nor her husband have been able to acquire legal status. They have therefore not been able to visit their respective families and have only kept contact through phone calls. It is evident that not only have their children been affected emotionally and psychologically, but that [Estella and her husband] have been as well. The feelings of regret and fear follow them everywhere they go. Even though their son and extended family live just across the border, their desire to provide a better future for their children kept them from returning. The distance that separated them might be short, but the burden of this separation is immense (Juanita, 21, El Paso, TX).

This case demonstrates how a family separation of even a few miles can be very significant when there is a policed political border in between. It also demonstrates how children can become so attached to their primary caregivers that they may later refuse to move in with their biological parents. Even after the death of the primary caregiver, the grandmother, the child left behind refused to join his biological parents and U.S.-born siblings. Juanita also reported that the extended family was very judgmental of Estela’s decision to leave her son behind. In this case the feelings of estrangement and abandonment have lasted through the years and there are few signs that it will diminish. We also see in this case that, the son left behind in Mexico is not planning to pursue higher education despite the common goals and dreams of migrating parents. It seems that the isolation caused by the parental separation may be linked to this decision.

2. Reuniting with Father Abroad

It may have been 1980 when my father left to the U.S. My sister and I were about two and three years old. Therefore, growing up without a father was almost normal. My mother chose not to tell us why our father had left and why he was in the U.S., but stories would be heard from aunts and uncles about how he abandoned us. These stories made us curious as to who our father was and why he was not there with us. My sister and I knew my father only by phone calls… In these occasions my father would tell us to behave and listen to our mother or else. As a young boy who thought he knew it all, I knew those were just words that would never come true. His role as a parent from afar was lost. After all it had been years since we had seen him.

You can’t miss something you never had: this is how I felt about my father. My father consistently sent us remittances which in turn kept us fed, clothed and housed, but that is all it did. His remittances did not fill the void that was left by his absence… His absence was definitely felt when other children would mention their father or were doing fun activities with their father. I did not despise him,
but this was because I did not know him enough to. I believe the only person that was greatly affected was my mother because not only did they have children together, she still loved him and was destroyed by his abandonment.

I grew up with uncles, aunts, cousins and my mother’s parents (my grandparents). We were a very tight family. At times we would eat dinner at each other’s house and sometimes I would sleep and spend time at my grandparents while my mother was working. My grandparents provided the help and the support my mother needed as a single mother. My aunts and uncles became my family while my mother was away [working] and my father was in the U.S. Without meaning to, my grandfather filled the role of father, and filled that void that was left by my father. Until this day, I remember how much of a male role model he was to me. I can definitely say he helped me be the man I am today.

I finally met my father at the age of seven. I still remember that day and what I said when I first saw him. I remember whispering to my grandmother, “who is that man?” Like the [common] stories about how the men came back home with fancy trucks and fancy clothes, my father was no exception. He was a tall, muscular very well dressed man showing signs as if he had struck it rich in the U.S. Not only did he come bearing lavish gifts, he also came bearing a new wife and new child. I was too overwhelmed by the gifts to even notice him, his new child and new wife. I thought, this man was rich! The next few weeks were spent vacationing. We spent days traveling, partying and building sandcastles on beaches. It was bliss! I would sometimes ask myself, “Is he real? Why after so many years of being absent, has he come back?” My father had another agenda for his visit. He came back to tell my mother that he wanted to take us with him to the U.S.

My mother broke the news about her agreement to let us migrate to the U.S. With the help of remittances, my mother was the sole provider for my sister and me. She was all we knew and cared for. For her to agree to let us go with a man we barely knew was devastating. We did not want to leave our mother, cousins, aunts uncles or grandparents. We would tell my mom that we did not want to leave. I remember crying and begging her not to let us go. I even went as far as telling her “it is because you don’t want us anymore.” We did not want to leave the only family we knew. Words could not express the disappointment, hurt and emptiness we felt.

My mother agreed to let us go with him to the U.S. because she knew we had better opportunities to advance than in Colombia. My father returned to the U.S. to start the immigration document process and four years later at the ages of 11 and 12, my sister and I found ourselves in the U.S. From this moment forward, our lives were going to change.

When we got to the U.S. it did not feel like those vacation days when my father came to Colombia, it was far from it. Besides the sadness, we felt as if we did not fit in or belong in this country. To make things worse, the language barrier only added to the fear and sadness. “We were just not meant to be here” I would tell
my sister. There was very much adjusting we had to go through. A new school where English was the only language spoken by the teachers, a new stepmother and brother. We wanted nothing more desperately than to go back to our mother and our family. The feeling of emptiness, fear and not belonging would not go away very easily, not until years later.

Although I did not want to come to the United States, I am glad my father insisted and my mother allowed it. It took many years to adjust and finally realize that we came here for a good reason. As an immigrant that did not have much growing up, I can say that with the aid of my mother and the vision of my father I am where I am today. My father ended up being a great role model to me and is a great role model to my children. Because of the opportunities that are offered in the U.S., I was able to become a citizen and an officer in the United States Army. I do not take for granted what freedoms and privileges have been given to me and my family. My hope is to help my children understand that this land is full of opportunities and all they have to do is make an effort to reach them (Juan, age 38, El Paso, TX)

This case illustrates the effects of being left by one’s father, only to later reunite with him abroad while having to leave one’s mother behind. It also demonstrates how grandparents can act as role models and fill the role of a missing parent. Although this story has a happy ending, it illustrates the roller-coaster of feelings that children of migrants experience in the process. It also shows the resilience that many migrants and their family members have. Their resilience allows them to survive and even thrive despite the difficulties of the migration process.

3. Grief and unambiguous loss

My shoes and clothes were the best among my friends in Mexico. My best friend would always try to wear my clothes, shoes, or caps because no one else had nice stuff like that. I would get a pair of shoes every four to five months compared to my friend who would get only a pair a year sometimes. I was very young at that moment to appreciate what my dad was doing for me by migrating to the United States for a better future. But I would definitively trade all that I got as a child for the simple joy to have my father in my life. After my father migrated, my mother had to assume the role of my father but was unsuccessful at some things such as talking to me about courting a girl. She had so much stress and depression from my father’s departure that she hardly had time to focus on my personal life…

After only two weeks and just a kiss, I experienced my first break up. My first girlfriend had got tired of me avoiding her and decided to forget about me. I tried to imitate my dad by hoping that this girl was going to be with me no matter what, and that she would do the same as my mother was doing. I was obviously immature and was hoping that she would wait for me to see her again just like my mother was doing for my dad. I had no idea of what I was doing and no clue that I was indeed doing the wrong thing by thinking like that.
Among the many unintended consequences that I have experienced due to my father leaving to another country for a better future was the inability to connect with people. I became really shy and have kept most of my problems inside my mind. After eleven years, I eventually moved to the United States to be reunited with my father. My mother and I finally came to live with him but this was very stressful for both of us. I was uncomfortable giving my father a good night hug and my mother had trouble sleeping with him on the same bed. It was like strangers forced to live as a family.

After only four months living in El Paso, my father was killed in Ciudad Juarez. The violence in Juarez was escalating at that moment and was getting worse with time. The day that I found that my father had been killed was very unemotional for me. I was confused because I knew that I had to be sad but was not feeling sad at all. The day of the burial was like another day for me. I was approached by several family members because they thought that I was holding my feelings inside because they did not see me cry. I felt nothing because the departure of my father when I was a little boy was the real funeral to me in my mind. I felt respect for what my father did but still wish he had stayed in Mexico living with us as a normal close family. The separation and the distance away from my father prepared me for his death. I do not know how I will react when my mother dies but I know it will not be the same because I have a closer relationship with my mother because we have always lived together. (Felix, age 22, El Paso, TX)

As this testimony demonstrates, for many children parental migration may be as drastic as death, and remittances are not enough to compensate for the distance and the lack of cohabitation they experience. They may become used to parental absence, to the point of not missing them at all. This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated in this case; Felix hardly grieved his father’s death, because his long absence had already created complete emotional separation.

4. Deportation and family separation

Ever since I could remember, seeing a police car meant feeling fear even if there was nothing to hide, nothing that I would consider illegal. Yet my parents are seen as illegal immigrants... Along with my four siblings, I was given the best gift they could've given us, the opportunity to live in a country where an education is important…This meant sacrifices for my parents… The first sacrifice was risking their lives as they crossed into this so promising country. That was only the beginning of many other risks they would need to take to live here. Every day my dad had to go to work was not just another workday it was another day of worrying and praying for him… I would ask a higher power to protect them from the police and from the border patrol. Every single night and morning since, I have been praying for such things, not the ideal worrying a 6 year old should be carrying with her. I would check the driveway everyday around 5:30 pm which was the time my dad would arrive from work, and would often look out the
window to see if my dad's green van would drive up, fearing that was the day he would be deported. But our biggest fear would soon become our reality.

One Friday afternoon… my father had been at the wrong place at the wrong time, he was at a gas station and there were police officers looking for some individuals who had shoplifted and asked everyone who was outside for identification. We drove to where they had my father. It took about 15 minutes until the Border Patrol officer showed up and took him. As we stood there, all we could do was stare at the back of the police vehicle where my dad was handcuffed like a criminal. He stared at us with tears in his eyes and apologized at least 50 times. My father would end up in jail for I don't know how long and he would eventually get sent back to Mexico.

My life would change and my siblings would suffer along with my mother. Since my father was the only one working, my two older siblings and I immediately moved back to the house to take over the bills and be a helping hand for my mother. We went from helping our parents with some of their bills to taking over all the bills including the mortgage payment and everything the two little ones needed, plus my father's needs in jail, the cost of a lawyer, and traveling three hours every weekend to visit him.

How do you explain to the two little ones ages 7 and 13 that their father is now in jail because he is not allowed to live in the country they were born in? These two little boys were honor roll kids since they were in kindergarten, but; they were now struggling with staying focused and my 13 year-old brother was having behavioral problems and was about to get expelled from his middle school. They had to see my mother miserable and terrified, always preoccupied with what is going to happen next…

After serving 14 months in jail, my father was deported to Mexico with a recorded felony for entering the United States without permission… My mother eventually followed him and moved to Mexico after living for 25 years in El Paso more than she had lived in Mexico. After my dad’s deportation she is not the same person anymore. She had always been so involved with our school and extracurricular activities. She will no longer be able to be a part of any of that, since she’s back in Mexico. We were fortunate to have them in all our events, but my two little brothers will not. My sister's marriage was ruined; she was only married for a year, but her ex-husband couldn't live his life with her because she was no longer only preoccupied with their life as a married couple but she was financially and emotionally involved and drained in my parents’ and younger siblings’ lives and problems. We became parents to them from one day to the other.

As for myself, I was always making my parents proud with my great grades and volunteer work. But there is only so much I can do when I have been faced with working more than one full-time job since I was 16. My grades started dropping
the moment I picked up a full time job along with a work-study job when I was a sophomore in high school. Since then, I have been working more than 60 hours a week and attending school full time… I will never live a normal college life because even though I have the opportunity to leave and accomplish my dreams I have my family to worry about and my two little brothers who still need all our love and support along with our presence to attend their events as well as to be here when they are ill or simply in need of a doctor's checkup. Our lives from the youngest to the oldest, we have been affected emotionally, psychologically, and economically, and I wouldn't even consider us having a social life since our jobs and school do not allow us to. All of this to live the American Dream my parents had in mind. They are not living that dream but thanks to them, eventually and hopefully, we will. (Angela, age 23, El Paso, TX)

This case provides a typical presentation of the social and emotional sequelae following a deportation or extended family separation. The younger siblings needed someone who would make them their top priority, attend their school and sporting events, help with homework and provide food, clothing and shelter, along with constant, consistent supervision, the tasks completed by primary caregivers. And the older siblings who were completing the psychological tasks involved at the young adulthood stage of life, such as finding spouses, completing higher education and finding jobs, had to put some of these plans on hold to complete the parenting tasks for their younger siblings. Upon deportation of her father and migration of her mother, the older married sibling immediately assumed the role of co-parent for her younger siblings and in doing so ruined her marriage, as she de-invested time and attention from that relationship to the one with her siblings.

Faced with the loss of their primary caregivers, the two younger children in this family demonstrate withdrawal of interest in school and activities and behavioral problems, two classic symptoms of depression in children, and rumination or excessive worry. It is appropriate for a 13 year old to worry about academic or sporting performances but worry about the family’s survival and about the future of the family is beyond the normal expectations for this life stage. In a follow up interview, “Angela” spoke of her 13 year old brother, “The separation from his parents have transformed a well-behaved top student full of energy and an amazing athlete to an individual we hardly recognize. He is now faced with being detained in the 8th grade since he has tried passing the reading STAAR [The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness] Test but continues to fall short. His behavior is not helping the situation since he is now a very ‘angry’ child, or so at least that’s the word his teacher’s use to describe him. But in reality, he is not an angry child, he is the perfect example of the negative impact these Immigration laws have on children, innocent human beings. This ‘anger’ people see in him is his way of crying for help”. She is correct in interpreting this young person’s anger as a sign he needs help in coping with the enormous changes that have taken place in his life. Faced with threats to one’s emotional, social or psychological safety, a child’s only tools for response are depression, anxiety, anger and behavioral problems.
British psychologist John Bowlby is best known for his work with juvenile delinquents and with homeless and orphaned children in post-World War II Europe, including children involved in the Kindertransport, the evacuation of Jewish refugee children from Nazi Germany to Great Britain in order to save their lives. It was through his extensive work with children separated from their parents, and his own separations from his mother (whom he saw for one hour a day), his nanny (his primary caregiver who left the family with Bowlby was four years old, a separation he experienced as devastating) and his household (he was sent to boarding school at age 7), that led him to develop Attachment Theory. This theory says that the bonds children form with their primary caregivers in the early years of their development have a tremendous impact on their emotional and social lives that continues long after childhood is over. Attachment refers to the feelings of intense connectedness among people. The main function of attachment is survival; the caregiver provides care that ensures the survival of the young and the young feels extreme feelings of longing for and love for their caregivers to ensure they stay close to the caregivers. As we have seen in these cases, removal of the caregivers or separations from the caregivers are experienced as a psychological crisis in the life of the young person.

**Types and Stages of Family Separation**

As the accounts above illustrate, there are different types of transnational families (Smith, Castaneda et al. 2004). Some common arrangements are:

**Type I.** One parent abroad, one parent takes care of the household.

**Type II.** Parent(s) abroad and children live with relatives or friends.

**Type III.** Parents depend on the remittances from their offspring abroad.

**Type IV.** Parent disappears (abandons the household, i.e. no longer remits and/or starts a new family or dies in the migration attempt or at the destination).

**Type V.** Family reunion happens either in Mexico or the U.S. with extended family or new families on the opposite side of the border.

**Type VI.** U.S. born children and some family members stay in the U.S. while one or both undocumented parents are deported to their country of origin.

These typologies are not exhaustive but they indicate different patterns, each with specific characteristics and consequences. These typologies could also indicate a possible chronology,
since remittances may be a stage in family chain migration, sometimes called “split migration” or “delayed family migration” (Balán et al. 1973; Browning and Feindt 1971 and Banerjee 1983; MacDonald & MacDonald 1964 all cited in Wilson 1993:111).

Types IV and V indicate a steep decline or an end to remittances. When the family reunites abroad the transnational family becomes a “traditional” immigrant household that lives together under the same roof. Family reunification abroad means an end or a significant reduction in remittances, which, unless new migration streams appear, can affect the inflow of remittances at the national level (Cortina & De la Garza, 2004).

At the same time, under appropriate conditions, choosing to settle abroad permanently opens up the possibility of adaptation, assimilation and upward mobility in the host society, ending symbolic residency in limbo and opening ways for empowering transnational activities. But deportations by migration authorities may also eventually divide the migrant families in terrible ways (Type VI). The situation is especially difficult for mixed-status families that are composed of children or a spouse who are citizens and other family members who are undocumented and who are therefore always at risk of deportation and may continuously live in fear and legal liminality (Menjívar, 2006). Another extreme case is when parents are deported and their children are left behind without their parents for days or years, as occurred in the case of Angela. Recently, some hospital managers have also started extralegal deportations in order to not have to face the costs incurred by an immigrant patient without health insurance (Sontag 2008).

For members of transnational families many aspects of social life are “on hold,” as they wait for the moment the migrant will return, or for the time the family or children will migrate to join them. An innate instability often defines the experience of transnational households since they may end up on either side of the border due to economic and political conditions beyond the control of the household.
The collective nature of the migration decision, along with the incomplete information and changing circumstances surrounding it, make the planning of a life trajectory that involves migration very difficult (Castañeda, 2013). The perceived imminent return to communities of origin may hinder the migrant’s integration and adaptation to the economic, social and political systems in their destination countries. It is also important to note that while social networks facilitate immigration they do not always help in assimilating or advancing economically once in the U.S. since in some cases earlier-arrived immigrants prey on and make a living off those newly-arrived immigrants, overcharging for rent, charging for favors navigating U.S. institutions, or exploiting their labor (Mahler 1995; Menjívar 2000, 2006).
Causes of Migration and Family Separation

Most commonly, people move out of their places of birth due to 1) economic reasons: in search of better jobs, education, and opportunities; 2) political reasons such as religious, ethnic, or political persecution because of belonging to a despised out-group and therefore causing them to become refugees, wherein migration is forced and in which situation return is impossible, at least in the short term; 3) widespread violence in the country of origin; 4) the search of new cultural experiences and opportunities; as well as 5) family reunification. Economic motives as described above are the most common reason for migration and this in turn often leads to family reunification migration.

For over a century many Mexican migrants from the countryside have taken temporary agricultural jobs in the United States (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). Initially, Mexicans left their lands after the continued offers and insistence of U.S. employers and their agents, who offered extraordinary working conditions and pay. This is what is known in the literature as the *enganche* or “hooking” period of labor recruitment (Durand, 2007). These temporary transnational labor agreements by adult male sojourners became institutionalized in the bi-national *Bracero Program* which lasted from 1942 to 1964. Germany, Switzerland, and France also actively recruited male guest workers after World War II. These workers were given papers documenting their employment, as well as legal permission to work and reside in their host country. Implicit in guest worker programs was the provision that only young, healthy men could move north, that they be unaccompanied by family members, and that they would return home when their visa expired. Yet, contrary to these stipulations, what was initially a temporary legal stay became a permanent move for some individuals.

Temporary work is sometimes actively encouraged and allowed by the state, while at other times it is sanctioned. Yet after guest worker programs have been implemented for years, working abroad in order to send remittances can become a tradition in many communities. Thus migration flows persisted after the end of the Bracero Program and other similar guest worker programs, driven by social networks, knowledge of labor markets abroad, and employers themselves (Massey et al., 1987). The end of formal guest worker agreements between the U.S. and Mexico meant moving from a legal to an illegal agricultural workforce that made labor cheaper, more flexible, faster to obtain, and also easier to abuse and discard when no longer
needed. An illegal workforce also eliminates the need for an employer to contribute to the health care or retirement accounts of his employees.

Undocumented migration also strengthens the premise among migrants themselves that their migration is temporary, that their foundational purpose is to earn foreign currency to remit, and that they will rejoin their nuclear family as soon as they reach their target-savings goal (Piore, 1979). Yet, in practice, migration has proven to be much more complicated. For example, as we have seen in the case of migration to France, many Algerian immigrants participated in guest worker programs and believed their stay to be temporary. Yet their “provisional status” would often last for decades with their families remaining divided, until they would finally be reunited on one side of the Mediterranean or the other (Sayad, 2006). This has certainly also been the case for Mexican migrants to the U.S., especially after the increased difficulty in crossing the border since the 1990s (Massey et al. 2002) and more recently since the continued militarization of the border after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

Discussion of the Literature on Transnational Families

Traditionally, the literature on immigration and ethnic communities focuses on the experiences of workers and families who have moved into the global North and disregards their connections to the sending community. While it is methodologically more difficult to study those families who are divided across borders, in the last decade a number of scholars have taken on this task, a movement partly inspired by the turn to transnationalism in immigration studies (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994). However, transnationalism studies have largely understood divided households to be a necessary ill and have placed relatively little emphasis on the emotional effect that this has on migrants.

In countries that have guest worker programs, or a large undocumented labor force an important proportion of immigrants are those in their prime working-age who leave children and elder parents in their place or origin. Transnational household economies raise issues concerning the division of labor across borders— that is, child rearing and retirement occur in developing countries, while productive working years are spent in developed countries (Parreñas, 2005; Wilson, 1993). In remittance economies, labor and social reproduction are divided geographically. The migrant host nation reaps the benefits of a migrant workforce raised abroad
(the host nation does not have to pay for its education, care, and healthcare costs of raising a worker), while the migrant-sending country exports workers in exchange for a remitted portion of the immigrants wages which families most often use to support children and elderly people left behind.

This international division of labor could be analyzed through a Marxist lens, as an extreme split between labor maintenance and labor reproduction (Burawoy, 1976), or it could be understood from a neo-classical perspective as a development strategy (World Bank, 2006). In any case, transnational parenting externalizes the cost of labor reproduction to the migrant sending communities (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997, p. 568). This creates distorted demographics, as towns are left predominantly with populations predominantly composed of children and elderly, rendering both groups vulnerable as the result of what Arlie Hochschild calls a “care-drain” (Hochschild, 2000; Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012), meaning that many of the people whose most important function was to provide care have now left these communities.

The nuclear family model is often an ideal or typical conception that cannot be applied across every culture since, as Suárez-Orozco et al. (2002:627) recall, “…in communities where child fostering is widely practiced, no stigma is attached to its occurrence.” For example, in Latin America it is not uncommon for grandmothers or the eldest daughter to care for children in large families, even in non-transnational contexts (Gill 1994 as cited in Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997:557). Transnational mothering roles also do not align with traditional gender roles in which biological mothers are expected to personally raise their own young children (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997:557). It is interesting to note that even within the non-migrant populations, this traditional ideal is broken at both extremes of the class spectrum of both Latin America and Western nations. Poor mothers must work and leave child care to kin and neighbors, while wealthy or professional women delegate child care to nannies (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2005). This creates a paradoxical phenomenon in which live-in nannies must leave their own children at home to care for the children of others (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2005).

Spatially and temporarily separated families are not without historical precedent; for example they were common among Polish, Jewish and Italian immigrants to the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century (Dreby, 2006; Foner, 2000; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). As Parreñas
(2005:162) mentions, ‘illiberal’ regimes in Asia and the Persian Gulf region have guest-worker program agreements with, for example, the Philippines, that encourage family separation. Similar agreements are enacted in ‘liberal’ regimes, as exemplified by the Bracero Program (1942-1964) between the U.S. and Mexico, which mandated divided families, since it provided men with temporary visas for agricultural work without any provisions for family unity (Dreby, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Nonetheless, by migrating with temporary visas, Braceros could live with their families for a number of months each year, avoiding prolonged family separations. On the other hand, in the case of Puerto Rico, migrant workers could bring their children with them more easily because they and their children are legal U.S. citizens from an offshore territory. In the case of internal migration, exemplified by Mayans working in Cancun, Mexico, remittances can represent an increase in family income without taking such a drastic toll on social relations and parenting due to the ease of travel and frequent visits by family members during weekends (Castellanos, 2007). However, the effects of these short distance or temporary migrations cannot be generalized to international migration, especially for undocumented workers who cannot easily move back and forth across borders.

Distance does not necessarily erase contact, membership, and affection among family members, although the inability to gather physically often does make a difference. For example, immigrants often send clothes intended for a child which are either too small or little, this happens since they have not physically seen or carried the child in question and they find it hard to keep up with their rate of growth in their imagination (Dreby 2010).Falico' (2002) argues that transnational families remain virtually the same as traditional families since the absent members are always present in the memories, stories, and conversations of the family unit. Because family members keep in contact, especially by phone, they know the important aspects of what goes on in each other’s lives (Falico', 2002). This can help ease the feeling of separation and make it less acute, depending on the particular individual. However, one cannot argue that “keeping in touch” is the same as cohabitation, especially for young children who recognize their primary care giver as the person who feeds them, helps them get dressed, holds them, hugs them, and looks them in the eye.

Some of most compelling data concerning the widespread incidence of family separation due to international migration comes from ethnographic studies in the Philippines and Mexico. Sociologist Rhacel Salazar Parreñas has written widely on the topic, focusing on the women who
leave the Philippines to work in the United States, Japan, Europe, and the Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf. She documents the reality of family separation for both family members who stay in the Philippines and emigrant women themselves, a separation which in most of her case studies lasts for over ten years (Parreñas, 2005). She analyzes the different standards that fathers and mothers face in regards to parenting and remitting, finding that while both fathers and mothers are expected to call and send gifts and remittances to family members, mothers face much higher expectations from their children regarding emotional support.

Due to its roots in agricultural guest worker programs that hired more men than women, Mexican migration was initially mostly male. However, as time abroad lengthened, many male workers brought their wives and children with them. More recently, as emigration has become more widespread, many women and children migrate on their own. Family life, role expectations, and family members’ input shapes who migrates and when (Massey, Alarcon, Durand, & González, 1987) given that gender and age clearly affect the avenues and experience of migration (Boehm, 2012; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

Anthropologist Deborah A. Boehm describes in detail a number of transnational households located in Albuquerque, New Mexico as well as in a “rancho” or small community in the state of San Luis Potosí in central Mexico. She corroborates the central role that family and community life play in migration and in the formation of transnational communities. She also describes how something as intimate as family life and cohabitation is deeply shaped by state policies that permit or ban certain types of migration. Boehm points to the paradox of the current immigration legal system’s prioritization of the family reunification of adult U.S. citizens, while emphasizing the deportation of undocumented people, which often divides mixed-status families (those formed by U.S. citizen children by virtue of being born in the U.S. territory and undocumented parents who cannot regularize their status based on the citizenship of their minor children (Boehm, 2012). Because of these laws, it is easier for undocumented workers to find work in the U.S than it is for them to be able to safely bring family members to join them, creating one of the foundational reasons for the development of transnational families.

In her superb ethnography of transnational families, Joanna Dreby takes a child-centered approach in discussing how children experience and frame parental emigration and family separation (Dreby, 2006, 2007, 2010). She asks “How do migrant parents and children manage living apart? What are the costs of such a sacrifice?” (Dreby 2010:3). She uses interviews with
children to show us how children frame this separation. She includes a poignant transcript of an interview with 10 year old Michael whose mother and father both migrated separately. Although there may be many particular circumstances involved in each and every case of family separation, in this one, Michael states that he loves him mom “a little;” and when asked if he feels that his mother loves him, he says “That, I don’t know” (Dreby, 2010:104). While some of her cases support the thesis of this paper— the often negative consequence of family separation on mental health— Dreby stops short of explicitly making this point explicitly.

Salazar Parreñas scrutinizes much of the public discourse that openly judges emigrant mothers. She discusses how talk shows, billboards, and churches —self-proclaimed moral authorities —harshly and without any empathy judge women who leave their children for the opportunity to make money to support them, without giving them any empathy, and she calls for her readers and the sending societies not to condemn these emigrant mothers. A similar popular condemnation of migrating mothers occurs in Poland and Ukraine (Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012). Catholic Priests in sending communities in Latin America can also be very vocal about their opposition to emigration, often citing family disintegration (Castañeda, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2009).

The authors discussed above are correct in countering critiques of the morality of migrating women. Contrary to the attitudes expressed in public discourse, interviews with actual migrants show that migrant parents are not unloving. In-depth interviews conducted with migrant women and men by the authors of this chapter show that the rationale of migrating in order to send remittances home is most often founded on the love of their family and a desire for their well-being. As journalist Jason DeParle (2007) notes, “the one who leaves is the one who cares,” meaning that the mothers who leave their children in the Philippines are viewed as the ones who really care about the future and material wellbeing of their children. Or as Boehm writes, people migrate “por lo niños”— for and because of their children. However, it is crucial to note that while this rationale is cited again and again by the migrants that the authors interviewed, this does not mean that children are able to cognitively understand this reasoning or have the emotional tools to deal with what, in their eyes and as described clearly in the case studies presented, appears to be a type of abandonment and/or experienced as a lack of love on the part of their parents. Most authors, in their desire to protect, justify, and not judge emigrating parents,
have neglected to objectively study the consequences that migration may have on the mental health of migrant parents and their non-migrating children.

Heather Rae-Espinoza conducted ethnographic work in a small village in the Ecuadorian Andes that sends many emigrants to Italy. Her research question addressed the meanings that children and parents give to family separation due to migration (Rae-Espinoza, 2006). Despite describing many cases where separation led to feelings of loss, sadness, depression and distress, she dismisses attachment theory in explaining the psychological effects of family separation. Rae-Espinoza incorrectly claims that attachment theory is ethnocentric since it values specific family formations and practices. In reality, attachment theory states that disruptions and instability between children and their primary care giver(s) may result in difficulty forming new attachments with friends, partners and children later in life (Castañeda & Buck, 2011) and does not presuppose a specific type of family or parenting style. Attachment theory applies to the children of migrants whether they live in Latin America, or North Africa.

Family, parenting, and attachment configurations are always context specific and shaped by local culture. Rae-Espinoza also argues that in communities where there is a culture of emigration, members do not see parental migration as abandonment but as part of parental sacrifice and providing for their children. While this is true for most adults, children do not necessarily have the cognitive and emotional capacity to understand this, as has already been stated. Furthermore, Rae-Espinoza herself documents schoolmates without migrating parents making fun of students whose parents have migrated, calling them “orphans” and the like. In her fieldwork, Rae-Espinoza finds that the adults who stay behind highlight gifts and remittances sent by migrant parents to the children under their care, while they strongly avoid and actively stop conversations about sadness and disappointment due to parental absence. While children therefore learn not to talk about their feelings in relation to family separation due to migration, this repression of emotions does not mean that these children are coping well with the situation.

The case studies presented at the beginning of this chapter clearly point to how parental migration affected the then children left behind, often keeping them from forming close, trusting relationships in their adult lives. As one of our interviewees stated, “To this day I still have the symptoms of abandonment because I do not or will never let anyone too close into my life… I know that they won’t [always] be around so I won’t let myself worry about whether or not they
will come back home or when I will see them again. It’s just not worth it to me, at least from my perspective.”

[Insert Figure 3 around here]. Figure 3 Local teachers are often the ones who bear witness to the consequences of the repressed and painful emotions of children concerning familial separation. Public school in Huamuxtitlan, Guerrero, Mexico. Castañeda © 2004.

Not all scholars are silent about the extremely difficult choice that prospective emigrant parents face, and the results of that choice. For example, sociologist of transnationalism Peggy Levitt told interviewers, "Mothers are making a deal with the devil… They're able to support their kids, buy medicine and food and education they couldn't otherwise afford, but there's an emotional cost" (Bhatia & Braine, 2005). Leah Schmalzbauer, who studied the stresses borne by Honduran women who left their children to work abroad, states, "The burden is even larger for a mother who has left young children behind and the kids don't understand why she left… The worst case is when they stop remembering who their mothers are" (Bhatia & Braine, 2005). According to Ellen Calmus, who works in a non-profit for children left behind in Malinalco,
outside of Mexico City, “These children see themselves as an economic burden… Their grades plummet immediately after the parent leaves, tempting them to leave school and go to work. Their lives are on hold because they don’t know whether their parent will come back or if they’ll be asked to make the dangerous journey north themselves. The lack of family support has also led to the beginning of gang activity in recent years” (Bhatia & Braine, 2005). Furthermore, family separation when one parent is abroad puts much stress on the couple, and it allows for the creation of many stigmas, myths, and suspicions about increased drug use, alcoholism, infidelity, etc. (Valodya, 2013). These stressors for the parents left behind can further impact the quality of their parenting and thus negatively affect the children.

A few authors with experience in mental health and psychotherapy have written about the psychological effects of family separation due to migration based on their clinical samples. Artico (2003) explores the experiences, perceptions and memories of Latino adolescents and young adults reunited with their biological parents after prolonged separation during childhood because of piecemeal immigration patterns. Some reported feeling that the loss could never be repaired, feeling distant or disconnected from others; and doubtful about their own ability to feel love for others (Artico, 2003).

Clinical psychologist and immigration researcher Marcela Suarez-Orozco’s research shows that there are observable negative effects that accompany family separation that may persist even after the family reunites in either country, and that catching up in terms of family time together is possible only when the family is conscious about this and is able to stop everything else to strengthen family relations. Unfortunately, most emigrants work long hours and thus can hardly afford themselves this opportunity. Carola Suárez-Orozco et al. (2002) show that the children left behind have increased incidence of depressive symptoms; in this way, the parent’s departure turns them into relatively good providers of economic resources but relatively bad providers of emotional resources from the point of view of the children. The remitting parents see themselves as providing care and economic resources but the children tend to dismiss the importance of remittances and may overlook the suffering that the parents also undergo due to the separation. This is partly due to the parents’ conscious desire to appear as strong, in order to provide comfort and strength to their children. Given the competing claims between increased financial support and cohabitation potential, the hope of procuring positive long-term outcomes
in both of these arenas seems doomed from the outset; – parents are “damned if they leave, and damned if they stay.”

[Insert Figure 4 around here] Figure 4. Children whose parents migrate may be forced to mature faster than those whose parents stay in the same household. Custañeda © 2004.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed how labor migration often creates transnational households, separating family members across long distances. Stress and fear related to migration is especially acute for families with undocumented individuals. Once abroad, the undocumented migrant cannot be sure how long he or she will be able to stay in there before facing deportation, or how long it will take to save enough money to be able to go back. Transnational families with undocumented members are in limbo, living in a state of fear and
great anxiety that causes malaise and emotional stress in both adults and children. Unlike the emotional finality of death, children left behind often cannot grieve for missing parents since the migrant parent is not dead. However, because their return date is often unknown, feelings of loss can be provoked in the children. The social life of the transnational households thus created may be largely suspended, as family members wait to be reunited on either side of the border. Furthermore, if and once they do reunite, they may feel as if they are living in a family of strangers.

Our data demonstrate that remittances do not always compensate for the absence of parents in the lives of children of transnational families. The blame for separation and emotional stress is structural rather than individual. In the cases described it is poverty and immigration laws that put families under stress, not lack of parental care. We have discussed some of the negative effects of a transnational family structure that under certain circumstances and in certain contexts may create emotional trauma, attachment issues, and have other negative effects on mental health among both those who migrate and those who are left behind. We do not mean to imply that mental illness is the normal or even frequent outcome of migration, but it does occur and thus needs to be addressed in the immigration literature. Social scientists should be concerned with the emotional and psychological costs to migrants and their children. Moreover, mental health professionals and service providers interacting with migrants and their children can have a larger positive effect on their mental health if they are aware of the issues raised in this chapter (Kennedy 2013). It is our hope that a more nuanced understanding of migration and its unintended consequences will only increase the attention, concern and benevolence extended to migrants and their families. Our intention is not to point fingers, criminalize, or judge the good intentions and love that migrant parents feel for their children, but instead to discuss sociologically the unintended consequences that family separation can sometimes have and why this can be the case despite the best intentions of those involved.

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