Families, Relationships and Societies • vol 14 • no 1 • 26–43 • © Authors 2025
Print ISSN 2046-7435 • Online ISSN 2046-7443 • https://doi.org/10.1332/20467435Y2024D000000047
Accepted for publication 03 December 2024 • First published online 09 January 2025

SPECIAL ISSUE: Living apart together: growing up in transnational families

research article

Voices, imaginaries and agency of Ukrainian and Moldovan transnational children

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Situated at the intersection of transnational family studies and the sociology of childhood, the article gives a voice to children in Moldovan and Ukrainian labour migrants' families, viewing their imaginary and practices in reconstructing their transnational world as displays of their agency. Based on data from 88 interviews with children, our findings show how children's indirect transnational experience and their imaginary lead to accomplishments, such as normalising their situation through same-status peer groups; overcoming a sense of victimisation and assuming more responsibilities; and investing in extracurricular activities to create meaning, make good use of their time, and build self-image in a socially mediated manner. Children maintain an openness to study abroad as an important goal and an opportunity for future success, correlated with children's studies as a rationale for parental migration. Personal migration plans are nonetheless equivocal given both a familiarity with the 'abroad' and a heightened importance of family and homeland.

Keywords transnational families • child agency • home and abroad • transnational imaginary • child peer groups

To cite this article: Telegdi-Csetri, Á., Ducu, V. and Hărăguș, M. (2025) Voices, imaginaries and agency of Ukrainian and Moldovan transnational children, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 14(1): 26–43, DOI: 10.1332/20467435Y2024D000000047

Introduction

'While revolutionaries commit themselves to a radical transformation of the world without, the migrant undertakes a comparable transformation of the world within, albeit by moving to another place' (Jackson, 2023: 196). This quotation refers to the imaginary 'world' of the individual migrant. It has been argued, however, that migration is almost always a family issue (Bryceson, 2019), one that is needed, planned and decided collectively and which also affects the family in its entirety – especially its dependent members, such as the children who stay behind. Therefore, we turn

the question towards the stay-behind children: do they create a 'world' of their own that extends beyond the physical proximity of their direct, bodily experience? How do they imagine, represent and conceptualise the transnational world of their family?

Attempting to answer these questions, this study is situated at the intersection between transnational family studies and children left behind as part of the sociology of migration, and the sociology of childhood. In transnational family studies, besides research on the negative psychological impact on children, much research has been done on intra-family practices that enhance children's lives (familyhood, communication, remittances, education, social protection) (Diaconu-Gherasim et al, 2023); however, children's voices as emphasised in childhood studies have been relatively silent, especially concerning the personal, subjective and value aspect of their lives in the transnational space (Baraldi, 2024). Intersecting the two fields as suggested by Guo and Spyrou (2024) is therefore important: to understand children's (future) decisions, and their stances on transnational family functionality and self-image ('Why is it better here [abroad]? What makes it better?' [Jackson, 2023: 198]). Such a capacity to make sense of one's environment is also essential in initiating change and making choices, hence in agency (Kuczynski, 2003: 9). In understanding children's stances on migration, we aim to grasp the specificities of children's views as an imagined but nonetheless lived experience.

Hence, our research question is: *What is the specific perspective of stay-behind children on migration and transnational family life*? We draw on qualitative data from the CASTLE project (Children Left Behind by Labour Migration: Supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU), using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with participants who are child transnational family members, all having at least one parent who has legally migrated for work within the EU. Respondents come from the target countries of the project, Moldova and Ukraine – countries with a common Communist past, a recent bid to join the EU and a strong and legalised EU-bound labour migration flow that amplified after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. The broad action research project aimed to complement the little knowledge about and the minimal support the families of these migrants receive, with a special focus on left-behind children.

In our analysis, we focus on how children represent their migrant parents, together with the foreign spaces they embody; on their awareness of coping strategies as instances of agency; and on their projected futures as displays of their imaginary 'world'.

In what follows, we offer a theoretical background, methodological overview, data analysis (broken down into three parts), and finally discussions and conclusions.

Theoretical background

As mentioned, we rely on transnational family studies as the primary background of our research. As an already well-established field within migration studies, this field has produced a large number of studies focusing on important aspects of transnational family lives: the transfer of care (Baldassar et al, 2016; Ducu, 2018), the 'doing' transnational family (Morgan, 2011; Ducu, 2018), the 'displaying' transnational family (Seymour and Walsh, 2013; Ducu, 2020), technology-mediated communication, indeed co-presence (Madianou, 2016; Ducu, 2018) and so on. These studies aim at countering the general perception of such families as at-risk or dysfunctional, while the negative impact of migration on dependent family members has also been probed (Diaconu-Gherasim et al, 2023). However, the voice and agency of children have still been lacking, a point that the sociology of childhood – our secondary theoretical pillar – has pioneered both in methods and results (Ducu et al, 2023)

As a primary focus of this intersection between transnational family practices and child voice and agency, we propose to look at the transnational imaginary of children as a strategy of both coping and self-reconstruction, looking at theoretical perspectives from different areas that touch on the subject.

Children's complex imaginary of migration

Migrants' imaginary of their transnational world comes from the experience of a socially dismembered self (Jackson, 2023: 218) as the agentic solution for the dire need of creating coherence: 'the migrant is obliged to re-member himself, assembling, like a bricoleur, from the various aspects of his past and present selves, a new *assemblage*' (Jackson, 2023: 218). This reconstruction of a socially constructed self (Mead, 2002 [1932]) is inherently relational, primarily to family and kin, then to a close or broad network of peers. Indeed, the very temporal construction of migration (Cojocaru, 2016) – its length, rhythm and finality – also essentially involves such an imaginary.

In the case of (stay-behind) children, for self-obvious reasons, this 're-membering' is temporally not yet fully possible; spatially, however, their constructive practice is already at work. Therein, they reconstruct 'home' as a set of interrelations and connections, and the concrete site of social relations and practices, material objects and daily routines where their 'self' may find its meaning (Moskal, 2015). Given that mobility is a 'mental process' (Wentzell Winther, 2015: 215), in the case of stay-behind children, who may dream migrant dreams while never having migrated (Coe, 2012), the imaginary affects the agency of children in transnational families through their affective construal of distant and proximate places (Ducu and Telegdi-Csetri, 2018: 25).

As the primary relational space of children's self-reconstruction, the family brings its own imaginary as a 'means of presencing a relationship that is experienced as existing in a non-proximate and non-physical form' (Robertson et al, 2016: 226–7). While children contribute to and draw from this collective imaginary, it is also differentiated by the 'juxtaposition of immobility of the children with the mobility of their parents' (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015: 193), leading to an imaginary that is both differentiated and hybridised.

Indeed, while children sensitively absorb details of distant parents' environments, they only experience it through virtual co-presence or short visits. In time, both migrants as well as their children increasingly draw on secondary sources of information for the construction of migration and its places – media, gossip, hearsay and so on – something they complement by using their imaginations (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015). This creates a second relational space of their imaginary beside the primary space of the family: the horizontal space of the locale – community, school, peer groups and so forth – where heteronomous factors also start to play a role. In this space, negative external representations – from the media, political discourse and even research – of stay-behind children as a vulnerable group appear, by tacit reference to the ideal group of co-local families (Guo and Spyrou, 2024).

In contrast, research has shown that wherever there is 'a culture of migration' the imaginary of parent-child separation is not negative (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015). Indeed, with parental migration as a normal part of their life, children develop a sense of normalcy about it (Nazridod et al, 2021), as to something temporary and a potential developmental opportunity.

All these impact the imaginaries of the young people involved, informing their conception of migrancy, transnationality, selfhood and future. Indeed, these could even lead to quite 'patriotic' attitudes in children – such as idealising the homeland and glorifying those who make sacrifices for it through migration (Tymczuk, 2013).

Children's agency in the context of migration in the family

Parental migration brings changes to children's daily life circumstances. Children who remain in their home country need to make sense of the environment in the absence of parents and adapt to it by initiating change and making choices – instances of children's agentic capabilities (Kuczynski, 2003). Self-determination and self-preservation, the motivation to attain a sense of personal control over the environment and to preserve the self from an external determination by others (Kuczynski, 2003: 9), or the autonomy dimension of the agency (Kuczynski, 2003; Deng et al, 2022), is important for individuals' feeling of competence and wellbeing, all the more so for children confronting parental absence and sudden new circumstances of their daily life. Children's capacity to make sense of their new experiences and to create new meanings from their interactions with their (new) environments – through the imaginary – is addressed by the author as construction, or the cognitive dimension of agency, while its behavioural dimension manifests through their actions (Kuczynski, 2003). Both dimensions of agency become manifest on the background of decisions relevant to their (new) daily lives: socialising times and friendship groups, responses to care arrangements through resilience, reworking and resistance, initiating communication with migrant parents, as well as obtaining, disclosing or hiding information (Deng et al, 2022).

Children's behavioural agency in transnational families does not manifest in major ways; rather, it is an ongoing process. While children have minimal influence over their parents' migration decisions, they instead learn to navigate the new context of the transnational family, shifting from passivity to increasingly active agents within their families, having a say in their care arrangements or their education trajectory (Lam and Yeoh, 2019). In the process, they show resilience and adapt to the new challenge of parental absence, developing different coping strategies, including spending time with peers or focusing on education (Nazridod et al, 2021).

Making use of representations of familiar surroundings of their place, as well as of imagined representations of parents' migration circumstances, stay-behind children struggle to make sense of the parents' migration decision, engaging reflectively with the circumstances and consequences of their parents' migration (Yarris, 2014: 295). Their attitudes and behaviours reflect their imaginings of parental migration and their response to it (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015).

In this process, the temporalities embedded in their agency become visible. The past is embedded in an iteration of routines and known patterns of thought and action, the present is embedded in a practical evaluation and negotiation of the present alternatives, and the future is embedded in the projection of possible trajectories of action (Bazzani, 2023). Children navigate the temporalities of transnational life, adapting the representations of parents as found in their familiar surroundings and past routines to the new circumstances of parental absence, making use of imagined representations of parents' migration circumstances and new environment as well as their own, and of their own future trajectories against the background of parental migration.

Methodology

This article draws on fieldwork conducted collaboratively by academic partners from Romania, Moldova and Ukraine as part of the 30-month CASTLE action research project. The research focused on Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families, specifically on children's experiences: family practices, support, communication, wellbeing and more. The co-researcher-informed qualitative approach provided extensive insights, with children's voices in particular, highlighting their views on migration.

The field research involved semi-structured interviews with experts as well as interviews and focus groups with transnational families from Moldova and Ukraine, where at least one parent had been a recent labour migrant in the EU. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and later the war in Ukraine, most interviews and focus groups were conducted online. The project collected 24 expert interviews, 126 family member interviews and 12 focus groups. For this article, data from 29 child interviewees and 16 focus-group participants from Moldova and 14 child interviewees and 29 focus-group participants from Ukraine were used, totalling 88 child participants (43 Ukrainians and 45 Moldovans), aged 11 to 18.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in the language of the respondents (Romanian for Moldovans, and Ukrainian for Ukrainians). Transcripts were done in the language of the interview or focus group and translated into English. Where a translation was unclear, a second opinion by a native-speaker researcher was requested. Using a common core for interview guides, we adapted these to the specificity of each country after consultation with co-researchers and national team members and updated them after the first phase, based on initial findings.

Ethical approvals were obtained according to national standards, and participating children signed agreements with one parent. Interviewers received specialised training in research with minors (László et al, 2023). A common interview guide was adapted for each country and updated based on initial findings, initially covering migration, care, legislation, transnational relationships, environment and community; updated and adapted to children concerning migration, relationships, care, impact, pandemic and future plans.

Some questions relevant to the study at hand are: What was the reason for migration in your family? Was this discussed? Does your migrant parent discuss his/her work with you? Have you felt responsibility through the migration event? What have you gained or lost through migration? Do you take part in extracurricular activities (instead of family time)? Do you have a peer group of similar individuals (from families with migrants)? Do you have an interest in education abroad? What is your profession of choice, your view of the future? Do you plan to migrate too?

To examine the data, we employed a compare-and-contrast approach (Cabalquinto, 2020) while also relying on inductive-deductive thematic analysis (Proudfoot, 2023). The data analysis was done using a thematic coding technique with the help of the MAXQDA 2022 software, assigning 55 codes across 7 groups to a total of 10,741 coded segments. Two of the authors of the present article participated in coding the interview and focus group discussion transcripts, later corroborating the findings. We have selected the following codes relevant to the three main themes in the data analysis section below: perceptions of home and abroad; child and migration; teenager issues; transnational meetings; belonging, self-image and capacities; leisure; peers' role

for left-behind children; community perception; cultural perception; identity, home; education; extracurricular activities, self-support and capacities; support community; future plans; being informed, choice, empowerment and voice.

While the general context of each respondent's case was a parent's labour migration, variation in their stances naturally occurred according to individual situations such as country, locale, social status, gender, age, family structure, migrant's destination country, as well as exceptional situations such as COVID-19 or the active phase of the war in Ukraine (in a late point of fieldwork) (for a more specific analysis of this children's situation in family crises see Ducu et al, 2024). While we are aware of the relevance of such factors for children's individual situations, we cannot include them in the present study due to its limitations. We have indicated the country for each respondent to show the similarity in their answers. Similarly, we perceive the data to be on a continuum, with a natural coherence and fair consistency among variants.

Findings

Respondents in our sample belong to working-class families in Moldova and Ukraine, post-Soviet countries characterised by widespread poverty and large informal sectors marked by low wages and job insecurity. Previous analyses of adult respondents in our project (Ducu et al, 2024) showed that working abroad was driven by necessity rather than choice, with economic hardship as a common motivator. Many of them were in a precarious situation before migration, such as living in areas or belonging to social strata with limited job opportunities and low wages, unable to ensure a decent standard of living. This precarity sometimes accompanies their employment abroad, with short-term contracts or periods of irregular labour, as most often women are employed in senior home care, and men in low-skilled labour such as construction (Ducu et al, 2024).

Parents interviewed in our sample migrate to supplement household finances and provide a better life for their children (Hossu et al, 2023), resulting in long-term or indefinite transnational family arrangements. Most children in our study are over 14 and have lived in such arrangements for over three years. When both parents are away, more common among our sample for Moldova, children are usually cared for by a family member, such as a grandmother. When one parent migrates, the other remains as the primary caregiver.

In what follows, we shall follow the ways children confront the reality of migration in their own peculiar, fundamentally agentic manner through perceiving, imagining and reconstructing their transnational worlds in a novel *assemblage*. First, we cover the manner in which they represent migration, focusing on the migrant parents themselves and the space of the 'abroad'; second, their perceptions, practices and strategies towards their own physical and social environment; and third, their projections of a future in this situation.

Representations of the absent parent and the transnational world

Although virtual communication with migrant parents may create a sense of co-presence, children rely on concrete items from their physical surroundings as material traces of the parent's absent body in actively interpreting their environment:

'I remember I would come across one of my mother's items of clothing that she wore when she was at home and I used to cry so much, Grandma used to take all the clothes to hide them, I couldn't see them' (Moldova).

Representing their parents mainly through virtual communication is very difficult. Children may be very young at the moment of the parents' departure and rebuilding the parents' image as the focus of their *assemblage* through years of solely virtual communication is a difficult task and may lead to difficulties even in recognising their parents when meeting them:

> When he came home and opened the gate, I said, 'Who are you?' and I ran to my mother and said, 'Look, a gentleman came to the gate.' And my father got scared, he had his *sumci* [bags] in his hands and suddenly, as soon as he heard me, he put them down. I had this reaction because I hadn't seen him for a very long time, and I hadn't seen him on the phone because I was very young and I didn't really talk to him on the phone because I was playing. And when he came in he had a beard and I didn't know him at all. Then he took out a pack of Raffaello, they were my and my brother's favourite chocolates. We made up very easily. (Moldova)

This highlights the essentially age-related social capacities of children who have difficulties relating virtually to absent bodies. We can observe how the past 'presence' of the migrant parent is reconstructed in a later narrative. With the parent's presence also comes a narrative concerning the past self that explains the strangeness in the first narrative. Both are clearly fragmentary: the parent's image pops up at a certain moment in time and disappears again, and the purportedly careless past self is presumably introduced for reasons of this explanation only. Nevertheless, these fragments enter a specifically transnational *assemblage* that is more an illustration than an act of remembering; its role is rather to narrate the self and its past world instead of presencing something 'real'.

In some cases, in turn, representing the migrant in his or her environment abroad may be easy for some, to the point where the space of the 'abroad' becomes fully appropriated: 'After that, we went there every summer holiday, and we also went in the autumn. I've been to Germany about eight times. When I come here, it's like my second home. I don't feel that barrier' (Moldova).

However, most cannot visit their family members due to the constraints of their living conditions abroad, hence resorting to hearsay to fill the gaps in their representation of the 'abroad':

> It depends on the parents' choice. We can't really go to them; they live in a house provided by the factory where they work, and children are not allowed there. Conditions are not favourable for that. Even visiting is not possible, only at my aunt's, but even there ... she has a very strict landlord who doesn't allow pets or visitors for an extended period. If we can, we will go to Italy this summer because our cousin can't wait to see us; she has already planned it. (Moldova)

Given such difficulties, children attempt to connect with their parents' life in the new location and make the 'abroad' more familiar by connecting with certain details

of the respective environment encountered through electronic communication or adult recounting. This strategy of *assemblage*, which also combines abstract concepts such as 'better-paid jobs', often leads to an exaggerated familiarity and attractiveness of remoteness, a notion of how these distant spaces are more beautiful and lovable compared with the home country, in an ecological or historical sense:

> My dad showed me that deer come to some villages, and people don't harm them. Here, if you see a deer, we immediately hunt it. Where my dad worked, there was an old, historic building. (Moldova)

… or a technological sense:

> Honestly, I haven't thought about such things very much yet, but in Poland, I like it very much ... I don't know, even because, in general, the architecture is very nice, the buildings, these skyscrapers in Warsaw, the economy is better. … if we even refer to transport, in Ukraine there is not much, there are a lot of people, and in Poland, it is always on the chart, special buttons to close the door. (Ukraine)

Children's representation of the migrant world involves a complex interplay of material objects, virtual communication and imaginative reconstruction. Some children adapt to their parents' foreign environments through visits, while others rely on second-hand accounts, leading to idealised perceptions of distant places.

Representations of one's surroundings and reconstruction of selves

Within the effort to make sense of their life circumstances by giving meaning to the 'abroad', children importantly also reconstruct the space of 'home' – of what is essentially familiar. This cognitive performance of children's agency (Kuczynski, 2003) also helps them find anchorage in the social space of home – highlighted by family and friends – that is expressed in the familiarity of their home surroundings:

> It's comfortable here, it's convenient here ... at least everyone is friendly. Yes, and the village too – I probably would not even move to Kharkiv, to the centre somewhere. It's convenient here in the village – everyone knows each other. [Here there are] more forests, rivers, lakes – in other words, [we are] closer to nature. (Ukraine)

> [I am] from the city of Lviv, I think everyone knows how delightful it is. I really like walking the streets, looking for inspiration. The architectural structures are impressive, [I am] very happy to have been born in such a city. (Ukraine)

This familiarity is also well aligned with the dynamics of the social group, given that in some areas of Moldova and Ukraine where we conducted our research, migration as a strategy was generally seen as a normal step in a family's pursuit of a better future. From interviews with teenagers in our project, the idea of the normality of being a child of migrant parents surfaced, with many peers who even socialise on these grounds:

> [...] I don't know precisely if there are any pupils with both parents at home. Out of 20 students, there are maybe one or two who don't have parents away. (Moldova)

> Each of the classmates has the same situation. When your father comes, they ask, 'What will he bring you? Where does he work? How many months did it take?' (Ukraine)

This taken-for-granted approach, even on the part of the children, deems explanations and discussions beyond the generic 'better-paid jobs', 'for a better living', and 'for a better future' to be unnecessary.

> [It is something] normal, we haven't even discussed the topic, that some parents leave. For us, these generations, we thought that it was normal that parents leave, that a parent goes abroad to bring money into the house was not even a topic of discussion at all. (Moldova)

> Everybody understands that it is better there than in our country, that the European Union has a better economy: Ukraine 'does not shine'. (Ukraine)

Migration being such a culturally self-evident step, children are simply informed of their parents' decision, leaving them with the task of making sense of this decision and developing a coping strategy using the information they have at hand. This is also seen as a collective issue.

> If the question is to consult … then nobody is consulted here … parents understand that they need to go abroad, and there is nothing you can do. I can advise peers that what is important to understand is that it is not forever. Take it as a certain stage where you can learn to be more independent in life. Understand that it will pass and parents will return anyway. (Ukraine)

The common experience makes these children perceive themselves as belonging to the reference group where they can even receive support, rather than feeling excluded or marginalised.

> I talk to my colleagues about my mother leaving, because they also have parents who have gone abroad. We try to help and encourage each other, to support each other and help with the needs, because we understand how hard it is without parents by our side. (Moldova)

The peer group with parents working abroad often becomes a second family for these children (as with other teenage peer groups). But the mental replacement of family by the peer group is not connected with some conflict between parents and teenagers (Gennings et al, 2021), but with the fact that it fills a gap – the physical absence of family.

> Besides talking to friends all day long, we communicate at school. We don't stop talking, even when we are at home, we even ask each other about

> homework, we help each other, we talk some more, and we joke some more. At school, we refer to each other as a second family. We always stick together and trust each other. (Moldova)

Our research data confirm that these children have increased daily responsibilities (Pantea, 2011), since, in the absence of one or both parents, they have to take over household activities; their free time is restructured.

> It's harder to get up in the morning when we're on our own. The alarm goes off, we get ready, we go to school. I come home from school and start tidying up the house, even outside. I live in the village and I have to take care of it inside and out. I light the fire in the wintertime; I start doing lessons at home. And by phone, when it's getting close to 9–10 pm, I contact my mother, talk to her, tell her how I spent the day. It goes like this. Plus, food. I've been teaching myself to cook for a year now. (Moldova)

> School almost all day, I come home – literally in an hour or two (and sometimes I come home from school after seven classes) and it's already dark. Well, it's still winter now, it won't always be like this. In general, the day goes like this: school, on Friday I go to the music school. After school, about two hours pass, that is, somewhere around five in the evening I go to the music room, I study there, I come home, I do my homework, probably … (Ukraine)

Instead of feeling victimised, these children present this situation as though the others – children with parents at home – have a spoilt lifestyle, and that their lives are very easy.

> Yes, I would say there is a difference. Children who have parents at home are sometimes more difficult in character, they're spoiled, in a way they seem too tame; and those who have a parent away understand that life is not so nice. That's a personal opinion. (Moldova)

When not burdened with household tasks, children with parents away engage in various activities and hobbies to fill the void created by their parents' absence, as staying busy and involved leaves less time for sadness and grief.

> [...] if I focused on a certain thing [negative about parents leaving], I would get ideas ... If I had something to think about, the sadness disappeared immediately and I didn't think about anything else [bad]. (Moldova)

> I have a hobby – dancing. I have been attending dances for almost four years. Here in the village, we have a teacher [...] I like her very much, [...] I can say that through dancing I calm down, I find myself in this. (Moldova)

Choosing how to spend free time is an instance of children's agency: instead of passively waiting for their parents to come back with no control over their decisions, they channel their concerns to actions that they can control, leading to the sense of their own success.

> I have noticed that children who have parents who have gone abroad are children who are involved in everything, they are the kind of children who are always first in school, in sports. (Moldova)

> [...] at school I used to go to different competitions [...] they helped me to prepare for them and to concentrate on those subjects: Romanian, mathematics, English and German. I attend dances twice a week, and I sometimes get carried away doing dances. In the evenings when I got home, I would go for a walk with my friends from the village, then somehow I felt different. (Moldova)

To a certain extent, this focus on an activity that they can perform well (learning, competitions) explains how in certain situations, especially in countries with overall poor school performance, such as Romania, children left behind have better learning results than others (Botezat and Pfeiffer, 2020; Udrea and Guiu, 2022; Diaconu-Gherasim et al, 2023). Besides school, hobbies and sports activities are also important outlets for their daily concerns. Peer groups involved in these extracurricular activities play an important role in teenagers' personal development in general, but for these children, it becomes a way to relax and define themselves in the absence of a warm environment created by the family.

Children of migrant parents in Moldova and Ukraine cope by finding comfort in familiar surroundings, peer support, and activities like hobbies, sports and studying. They view migration as a normal step toward a better future, and these activities help fill the void left by their parents, fostering resilience, personal agency, and often better academic performance, leading to personal growth despite the challenges they face.

Projections of a future on the background of migration

However, the same logic of aesthetic familiarity that makes 'home' self-understood and may draw teenagers to stay in the country sometimes also drives them to leave. There are no tangible reasons, just unexplained feelings, something that displays a sense of contingency.

> Yes, to be honest, I do not want to live in Ukraine at all. I do not know why. I'm more attracted to abroad; it's more beautiful there. I don't know why. (Ukraine)

> To travel, possibly. To California, I forgot [why], I have a list, many things I want to do. (Moldova)

Yet, most of all, they are attracted to the projection of a higher level of social maturity in Western countries, where, according to the Eastern teenagers' imagination, there is less discrimination.

> Yes, from childhood, we had a dream to go somewhere when we grew up, as far away as possible. I wouldn't want to come back to Moldova. My dream

> is to go to Spain because people there are better, and they don't judge you based on how you're dressed. (Moldova)

One thing all teenagers with parents working abroad have learned is that they can project a future in a foreign country without family close by, if necessary since they have learned to cope with the physical absence of their loved one(s) – a deeply agentic capacity.

> To me, it seems that it's just a matter of time because so much time has passed, and I realise that it's normal, but on the one hand, I understand that it's better for me. When I grow up, I can go to another country without worrying much about leaving my parents. I've already gotten used to being by myself. (Moldova)

Of the possibilities they may aspire to, one obvious goal is obtaining the legal status of EU citizenship. Even though there is talk about Moldova and Ukraine joining the EU, it seems that migration is easier to imagine than a promising future in these countries – both the political situation and their own opinion are seen as being very fleeting and temporary.

> Yes, I probably want to [obtain foreign citizenship] because I don't see any sense in staying in Ukraine. But this is my opinion at the age of 14; maybe in two years, it will change. (Ukraine)

> In over ten years, I see myself in Spain, as I mentioned, but if times change, maybe I'll go somewhere else. Perhaps Moldova will join Europe and become just like Europe, and I'll return to Moldova. But I absolutely don't believe that. (Moldova)

Another common goal is education abroad, which is a strongly mobilising perspective, especially since they imagine education systems that are better than the ones they currently have access to. The argument based on better education for their children is widely present in parents' discourse regarding the reasons for their decision to migrate. Children have interiorised it and made it part of the *better future* associated with their parents' migration goal: 'I believe that education is still better in the European Union than in Ukraine, and you can find a job with a better salary than in Ukraine.'

They mention the power of a university degree in a particular country as a pull factor for their future migration plans, but at the same time, they are also confused by the issue of degrees from their country not always being recognised in some EU countries. The 'better education' presented by the parents, therefore, largely remains an abstract notion for children whose lives are anchored in concrete, familiar surroundings, so their perspective may be equivocal, even in a self-reflexive manner.

> For our wellbeing, as they told us, and also for them to have a better job, better salaries; but above all, education, because if here in Moldova, we receive diplomas, they are not accepted in Europe. That's why it's better to get them in Germany, to have a better future. (Moldova)

> I want to study in Portugal, but I know that if I study there, I will not be able to work in Ukraine. And if I study in Ukraine, I can't work with a Ukrainian diploma in Portugal. So I thought I could study in the Czech Republic; I have a friend there, so we [me and my friend] thought I could. But my mother is against it because he [my friend] has no parents there. And in Portugal, I have a grandmother there, an uncle. I think I will study in Ukraine and work in Ukraine. (Ukraine)

Studying abroad is a decision where they could exert their agency, in contrast with the transnationality of their own family, which was not their decision. Still, the abstractness of adults' perspectives and the remoteness of the 'abroad' here once again conflicts with the familiarity and concreteness of their home space, nonetheless fitting into a fragmented assemblage that intrinsically displays a sense of fleetingness.

> 'You will study there, there are good schools; the Polish language is very similar to Ukrainian, to Russian, so you will learn it and study it' [my parents used to say]. Well, I don't know, I myself don't really want to go to Poland, simply because Kharkiv is Kharkiv. (Ukraine)

> It's better [abroad], a different education, it's better for us, but I didn't want to stay there at all because here are my friends and education; everything is here. And I decided to stay, and my brother also had a hard time staying there. (Moldova)

The debate below among four children participating in a focus group regarding plans to study abroad is illustrative of the tension between leaving or staying in the home country: R3 studies in Italy but is in love with Ukraine; R1 and R2 want to study abroad but plan to return as well; R4 is in favour of Ukraine but open to other experiences, while R5 does not want to leave at all.

> (R1) No, I want to live in Ukraine. If you think so, I want to try living in America. This is my life plan.

> (R2, raises hand) Yes, there are such plans because I think there are more opportunities. There are many English-speaking universities. As if I wanted to go but not for long. But in the beginning, I felt a lot of patriotism and realised how good we have it here. I want to come here and live here. I want to travel around the world and return home to Ukraine.

> (R3 raised their hand) I lived in Italy. I thought it was better there than in Ukraine. But when I went home, I thought, how beautiful Ukraine is. It's true.

> (R4) I want to be in Ukraine because I am more comfortable here. But I am, of course, interested in what other countries have. How are the schools? That is, it was interesting to see how it is there, and I would not like to study or live there permanently.

> (R.5) Well, I definitely don't want to study abroad. I want to live in Ukraine. It is simply possible to go to another country for a month or two and then return. That is, you can travel but still live in Ukraine. (Ukraine)

Teenagers in Moldova and Ukraine exhibit a duality in their future aspirations, torn between the familiarity of home and the allure of migration. They have grown accustomed to their parents' absence, which has fostered a sense of independence and the ability to imagine a future without family close by. While they value the comfort and familiarity of their home, many are drawn to Western countries, seeing them as more modern and less discriminatory. We can indeed sense a conflict between a wish for –'patriotic' – conservatism and a fleeting sense of nomadic – 'cosmopolitan' – freedom, both in a temporal assemblage of opportunities and preferences.

Discussion: child imaginary and agency in transnational families

As an answer to our research question, child respondents in migrants' families were well aware of their situation as young people involved in distant relationships; they acutely felt and expressed the difficulties involved, emotionally, pragmatically and existentially, and they negotiated their self-image and practices in a social, primarily peer-group context. All along, they displayed strong personal agency, something they were also highly aware of. Indeed, in their construal, being part of a community where migration is the norm makes them part of the reference group instead of being marginal or excluded.

When describing migration as a strategy for improving the family's prospects (Ducu et al, 2024), parents almost always refer to their children's better future as motivating their decision. However, children mostly have no say in the decision itself; rather, they are passive recipients of their parents' decisions. Instead, they manifest their 'agency, resilience and creativity in navigating parental migration' (Lam and Yeoh, 2019: 3085) through 'engaging in local, everyday struggles that help them create meaning and foster continuity in their lives' (Yarris, 2014: 306). In this sense, they are 'similarly and simultaneously powerful and powerless' (Lam and Yeoh, 2019: 3099). Our findings confirmed this contradictory nature of child agency, in that it moved largely at secondary levels compared with the family's primary decision to send a parent abroad; however, on this plane, children's perspectives and practices were different from those of adults, showing a significant degree of autonomy.

The accelerated development of communication technologies has generated various forms of virtual co-presence, facilitating family practices from a distance (for example, Baldassar et al, 2016; Madianou, 2016; Ducu et al, 2023). Children in our findings, however, tend more to anchor themselves in palpable, concrete elements of the environment, and this only marginally happens through online communication. At an imaginary level, this results in a paradoxical familiarity both with the parents' distant environment and a mediated relationship with their own home space. They put together pieces in the puzzle of their parents' migration and life abroad and their environment, complementing concrete images with abstract notions such as a 'better future'. This *assemblage*, in turn, impacts their practices to make good use of their time, their self-reconstruction (Jackson, 2023) within quasi-familial peer groups, and their aspirations (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015). The continuity of their lives (Yarris, 2014) is thus created through avoiding the anxiety of absence towards an imagined endpoint

('it is not forever') while meaning is furnished through school and extracurricular performance. Children thus perform a past-future continuum (Cojocaru, 2016) woven into past patterns, present negotiations and future projections (Bazzani, 2022): they reassemble their family's transnational life patterns, negotiate practices of coping and sharing among peers and organising free time, and project an open, but transnationally informed future. Therein, they reproduce the temporary transnational suspension of parents' lives (Ducu, 2018); however in children's perspective on such a transnationally suspended temporality, the additional dimension of self-reflexivity appears in addition to adults' unreflected suspension. Namely, children are conscious about the temporariness of their very attitudes, and they include this awareness in their self-reconstruction.

Conclusions

In our article, we have proposed to give children in Moldovan and Ukrainian labour migrants' families a voice concerning migration at an intersection of childhood sociology and transnational family studies. We expected to find new aspects in their perspectives that have not been previously probed in these fields, despite extensive research into intra-family dynamics in the context of migration. Specifically, we aimed to follow autonomous cognitive and practical approaches – agency – in their imaginary and practices when reconstructing their transnational world.

Our findings show that since children's visits abroad are practically and financially difficult, children's reconstruction of the transnational world is largely grounded in indirect experience and moves at an imaginary level. This indeed extends to the 'home' component of this world, which itself becomes re-presented in a similarly aesthetical manner. Socially, the exceptionality of being a transnational family member is decisively normalised through membership in peer groups of the same status. Hence, children do not feel they are victims of migration and they take over responsibilities in their family irrespective of gender. On these grounds, they represent their social group and self as more mature and less 'spoiled' than non-transnational children. In practice, besides chores and study, they invest in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, hobbies or group activities as a form of coping that creates meaning, fills time, and builds self-esteem in a socially mediated context. They maintain an openness to leave based on an idealised image of 'the abroad' that is considered economically but also socially more attractive. Migration is not considered a burden given previous, indirect, experience. Studying abroad is an important goal – echoing parents' frequent mention of children's studies as a rationale for migration – and an opportunity for future success. Personal migration plans are, however, equivocal based on both a familiarity with the 'abroad' and a heightened importance placed on family and homeland, with a transnational imaginary at work.

Funding

This work has been supported by the European Union (Grant ICMPD/2021/MPF-357-004) contracted by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) through the Migration Partnership Facility. The contents of this article are the sole responsibility of the authors at the Babeș-Bolyai University and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union or ICMPD.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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