The Emotional (Un)making of the Family in Cross-European Parent–Child Relations

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Abstract

This essay examines the emotions that make and unmake transnational families, drawing on interviews with migrant parents living in Scotland and separated from their children abroad. First, it explores the meaning of distance and its role in stimulating emotional connections and disconnections between family members. It emphasises the significance of separation for emotional well-being and the necessity of absences in stimulating different intensities of transnational emotional labour. Second, the essay broadens the conceptualisation of the 'emotional' to include emotional work and emotional worklessness. It highlights emotions of 'longing' and 'hope' that unwork the structures of intentionality and reveal passivity at the heart of familial relations. Emotional lives of transnational families are permeated by the imaginaries of co-presence and potential future. Exploring the simultaneous production and fragmentation of emotional connections, the essay suggests the reworking of the contestable family idea(l)s and attending to intimate practices beyond utility and familial normativities.

1 Family in Migration and in Space: Together Apart

The impact of global migration has contributed to diversifying family configurations and dynamics. To reflect changing relations, embodiments and practices in a globalised world, many migration scholars use the definition of a transnational family as one whose members 'live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely "familyhood", even across national borders'.[1] The transnational family demands researchers to pay greater attention to different dimensions of relationality and togetherness which go beyond the idea of family as a restricted entity and unity. Rather than recognising the family as a clearly defined and bounded unit, geographers and sociologists have called for an understanding of the family as a dynamic process which accounts for fluidity and change.[2]

The experiences of migrant and transnational families have challenged ideal and simplistic accounts of a family as a coherent unit.[3] The idea(l) of a 'traditional' family sharing one 'home' and of care in the parent–child relationship is related to a certain wholesomeness and co-presence, while absence is conveyed in terms of loss, deficiency, fragmentation.[4] As a result, the language that conveys ideas about the transnational family is often emotionally charged, especially when parents and children are living in different locations. Terms that are used to describe children living apart from their parents as 'displaced across borders' or 'left behind' express ideas about abandonment, neglect 'outside' the family and the emotional toll of displacement on families.[5] As Ong argues, 'the family' is

[1] Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, 'Transnational Families in the Twenty-first Century,' in *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, ed. Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (London: Routledge, 2020), 3–30 (18).
[2] David Morgan, 'Family Practices in Time and Space,' *Gender, Place & Culture* 27, no. 5 (2020): 733–43.
[3] Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla, eds, *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life* (London: Routledge, 2014).
[4] Loretta Baldassar, 'De-demonizing Distance in Mobile Family Lives: Co-presence, Care Circulation and Polymedia as Vibrant Matter,' *Global Networks* 16, no. 2 (2016): 145–63.
[5] Sergei Shubin and Melinda Lemke, 'Children Displaced across Borders: Charting New Directions for Research from Interdisciplinary Perspectives,' *Children's Geographies* 18, no. 5 (2020): 505–15 (506); Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot, 'Beyond Migration Patterns – Understanding Family Reunion Decisions of Filipino

discursively produced within a set of intimate and societal relations that draw on specific localised and idealised norms on how family should be done, 'the collective and unconscious images of family order that underlie public politics'.[6] This essay explores the potency of emotions to cross the boundaries of interiority and exteriority, where a possibility of bringing family members 'close' to each other unravels in an unstable field of international migration with its constantly changing markers of 'near' and 'far'. It considers emotional work as well as *worklessness* in making and unmaking of families, highlighting emotions that simultaneously create and interrupt transnational 'family' through intentional and unwilled readjustments, indecision and hopeful anticipation. The essay first introduces the context of this study, framing it in relation to the meanings of intimacy and practices of transnational family lives in Scotland. Then it moves to explore the ways transnational families negotiate distance in migration and unsettle the logic of unity and co-presence. Drawing on interviews with migrants, the essay considers emotions of 'longing' and 'hope' that unwork the structures of intentionality and reveal passivity at the heart of familial relations. It concludes by questioning the accepted forms of productive and unproductive emotional labour and understandings of intimate familial practices.

2 Context

Due to the relative flexibility of cross-border movements before Brexit, intra-European migration produced specific understandings of family, distance and temporal separation.[7] Unlike families of migrant workers from Latin America in the USA or from the Philippines

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Labour and Thai Marriage Migrants in Global Reproductive Systems,' *Migration Studies* 6, no. 2 (2018): 205–24.

[6] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 143.

[7] Sergei Shubin and David McCollum, 'Migrant Subjectivities and Temporal Flexibility of East-Central European Labour Migration to the United Kingdom,' *Population, Space and Place* 27, no. 8 (2021): e2508, https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2508.

in Europe,[8] Eastern Europeans in Scotland had more possibilities for closer and more frequent contact with family members across the continent, due to their regular migration status, closer physical distances and limited risks involved in travelling back and forward between different homes. At the same time, shorter physical distances between parents and children and assumed ease of travel across Europe created high expectations about family support and additional pressures on family coherence.[9] As a result, many studies on intra-EU workers settling in the UK have focused on family reunification in migration, while often prolonged parent–child separation cases have been overlooked. In this context, Moskal and Tyrrell argued that 'separation was a possible and manageable part' of the process of re-making the family as a coherent unit in migration, often geared towards 'some kind of family reunion in Scotland'.[10] However, intra-European migration also leads to the re-invention of 'the family' as a set of ruptures and disconnections between unstable and heterogeneous familial subjects, complicated by inequalities in access to family resources, power imbalances in Scotland and Eastern Europe and different socio-legal contexts, which stretch the emotional bonds, test family resilience, transform care expectations and create tensions about family migration/staying aspirations.[11]

This essay considers these issues, drawing on the examples of the ESRC-funded study on 'Experiences of Social Security and Prospects for Long Term Settlement in Scotland amongst Migrants from Central Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union' (SSAMIS). While this long-term (2013–2018) study collected 207 in-depth interviews with migrants living across Scotland for more than one and less than twenty-five years, the essay predominantly

[8] Joanna Dreby and Timothy Adkins, 'Inequalities in Transnational Families,' *Sociology Compass* 4 (2010): 673–89; Fresnoza-Flot, 'Beyond Migration Patterns,' 206.
[9] Marta Moskal and Naomi Tyrrell, 'Family Migration Decision-making, Stepmigration and Separation: Children's Experiences in European Migrant Worker Families,' *Children's Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2016): 453–67.
[10] Moskal and Tyrrell, 'Family Migration Decision-making,' 459.
[11] Daniela Sime and Rachel Fox, 'Home Abroad: Eastern European Children's Family and Peer Relationships after Migration,' *Childhood* 22, no. 3 (2015): 377–93.

uses a selection of nine interviews conducted in Aberdeen city and rural Aberdeenshire.

These specific regions have witnessed some of the highest levels of post-2004 migration,

largely from Poland but also including sizeable groups of Russian-speaking migrants from

the Baltic countries often overlooked in the official statistics. Selected interview data, first,

reflect the diversity of familial practices and emotional connections across different European

countries of origins, particularly highlighting the voices of migrants from smaller countries

largely obscured within the perceived 'Polish' migrant majority.[12] Second, the interviews

highlight migrant experiences across different ages and different periods of arrivals in

Scotland, when they used different practices to maintain links and reconfigure their families.

Third, the selected data shows how migrants employed in a range of unskilled and semi-

skilled positions question their expectations of parenthood and emotions in the migratory

process that shape families. These interviews were conducted in the migrants' native

languages by two researchers who resided in the above locations for more than a year. The

interviews were later transcribed, translated into English and analysed using Nvivo 12.

3 The Emotional (Un)working of Families in Migration

International mobilities transform families and create new emotional responses such as a

feeling of freedom from parental pressures or conflict in the unmaking of intimate

relationships.[13] The affective changes brought by migrations exceed the biopolitical

(pressures to get married) and economic (commodification of love) transformations of

coherent 'functions' often associated with the 'idealised' family life.[14] As a result, scholars

have criticised the view of transnational families as deficient, dysfunctional and 'less than

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[12] Louise Ryan, 'Transnational Relations: Family Migration among Recent Polish Migrants in London,' *International Migration* 49 (2011): 80–103.

[13] Clare Holdsworth, *Family and Intimate Mobilities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[14] Christopher Harker and Lauren Martin, 'Familial Relations: Spaces, Subjects, and Politics,' *Environment and Planning A* 44 (2012): 768–75.

ideal or somehow inadequate', focusing instead on the analysis of new forms of intimacies in migrations.[15] As Gill Valentine explains, being a family implies both maintaining separation and creating connections not just through rational mechanisms of financial support, but also through important ways of 'loving' that involve parenting, caring and affective relations with dislocated family members.[16] In an increasingly mobile world, familial intimacies and emotions play an important role in families that live 'together apart' and reconfiguring the notions of proximity and presence, which I consider later.[17]

The process of maintaining intra-familial intimacies has often been described as an *emotional 'work'* involving the suppression of drives and dealing with other people's feelings that largely happen in the context of the nuclear family.[18] Similarly, broader discussions on the family have referenced 'sentimental work' or 'emotion work' as a part of social exchange and routine management of everyday family life.[19] Such productive emotional work is often seen as an integral part of caring relations carried out either by the family or by care professionals, particularly in an inter-cultural context.[20] As Deirdre McKay stresses, family intimacy is not inherent in human interactions, but needs to be remade through 'the work of connecting, sharing, telling stories, listening, responding'.[21] In migration, both emotional labour and care are increasingly commodified, framed in terms of the logic of investment and exchange and associated with the familial sphere.[22]

[15] Baldassar, 'De-demonizing,' 146; Baldassar and Merla, *Transnational Families.*
[16] Gill Valentine, 'The Ties that Bind: Towards Geographies of Intimacy,' *Geography Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 2097–2110.
[17] Irene Levin, 'Living Apart Together: A New Family Form,' *Current Sociology* 52, no. 2 (2004): 223–40.
[18] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol. 1 (New York: Urizen Books, 1978).
[19] Arlie Hochschild, 'Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure,' *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551–75 (559).
[20] Nicky James, 'Emotional Labour: Skill and Work in the Social Regulation of Feelings,' *Sociological Review* 37, no. 1 (1989): 15–42.
[21] Deirdre McKay, '"Sending dollars shows feeling" – Emotions and Economies in Filipino Migration,' *Mobilities* 2, no. 2 (2007): 175–94 (179).
[22] Baldassar and Merla, *Transnational Families.*

However, such narrow framing of feelings and emotions solely in terms of 'labour' sits uneasily within the scholarship in cultural geography that considers 'emotions as ways of knowing, being and doing, in the broadest sense'.[23] Migration studies stress the relational character of emotions 'inhabiting the interface between the individual and the collective' and therefore not limited to individualised experiences.[24] Emotions exceed transnational families, since they derive from multiple connections (between people and things), locations (at once at home and away) and cultures.[25] Such interpersonal emotions cannot be fully expressed in terms of capital, labour, work or considered secondary to the material realities of tangible economic lives; they are mobile and disrupt the economic logic of production and exchange.[26]

At the same time, the interpersonal nature of transnational emotions eclipses a specific position ascribed to the familial. Emotions deprive the family of a stable foundation normally associated with the space of 'home' (since home is dispersed), undermining the appearance of family unity and contributing to its fragmentation. Importantly, the primary focus on intentional or auto-affective action in the theorisation of emotions tends to overlook the domain of the sensual in family life that lies beyond purpose, capacity or intention.[27] It is important to consider in the analysis of family interactions in migrations the sensuous and emotional states that are created as much through activity as through passivity, patience and withdrawal.[28]

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[23] Kay Anderson and Susan Smith, 'Emotional Geographies,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26 (2001): 7–10 (8).

[24] Shirlena Huang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, 'Emotional Labour and Transnational Domestic Work: The Moving Geographies of 'Maid Abuse' in Singapore,' *Mobilities* 2, no. 2 (2007): 195–217 (196).

[25] David Conradson and Deirdre McKay, 'Translocal Subjectivities: Mobility, Connection, Emotion,' *Mobilities* 2, no. 2 (2007): 167–74.

[26] Steve Pile, 'Emotions and Affect in Recent Human Geography,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35, no. 1 (2010): 5–20.

[27] Paul Harrison, 'Corporeal Remains: Vulnerability, Proximity, and Living On after the End of the World,' *Environment and Planning A* 40, no. 2 (2008): 423–45.

[28] Sergei Shubin, '"Mind the gap": Responding to the Indeterminable in Migration,' *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11, no. 1 (2021): 64–68.

In arguing against the narrow vision of emotions, Paul Harrison speaks strongly

against 'making emotion into a set of strategies, conjectures, and judgments by other means

and so removing the aspects of exposure and nonintentional affection which … mark out the

origins of "the emotional" as such'.[29] Inspired by this broader approach, this essay goes

beyond the analysis of emotional work in transnational families and considers emotional

practices that cannot be chosen, cultivated, made intelligible or represented. It draws on what

Maurice Blanchot terms 'worklessness' to express the difference, the remainder that reflects

inherent incompatibility and discord within any (transnational) family and that cannot be

mediated or reconciled in the process of emotional work.[30] Such *emotional worklessness*

marks the interruption, uneventfulness that exceeds the attempts to organise separate

emotions, fragmented members and objects into a totality of 'the family'. In the next section I

consider how the forces of emotional work and worklessness fold onto each other,

simultaneously bring together and disrupt families, changing the meaning of distance in

migration.

4 Families Negotiating Distance in Migration

The processes of emotional making and unmaking of the family in migration can be better

understood in relation to the key spatio-temporal concepts of distance and presence. Recent

migration scholarship problematises the idea of a family as a self-identical union based on

presence and expectations about directionality (from parents to children) of emotional

support within transnational families.[31] Moving family across borders also implies that

distance is not necessarily associated with closeness: the family is always haunted by the

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[29] Harrison, 'Corporeal Remains,' 442.

[30] Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Station Hill, 1981).

[31] Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham, 'Transnational Affect and Emotion in Migration Research,'
International Journal of Sociology 47, no. 2 (2017): 116–30.

uncertainty of being near and far, appearing and disappearing. Re-negotiation of distance in

the (unmaking) of transnational families tends to take different forms, which, as Loretta

Baldassar stresses, produce longing and hope as two key emotional responses.[32]

On the one hand, *longing for the 'good' family and 're-emplacement' promises the*

overcoming of distance created in migration, keeping a sense of familyhood across borders

and maintaining family's consistency across space and time. Cross-border mobilities produce

changes within each individual making up a family, create a sense of rupture and aspiration to

bridge the socio-temporal gap by reproducing what John Gillis termed 'the families we live

by'.[33] In spatial terms, a migrant becomes dis-stanced, separated from herself: 'I is another',

as Rimbaud famously expressed it.[34] This sense of distance puts pressure on family members

to come near and 'complete' oneself and the family unit, so longing promises to reaffirm

family ties altered with physical separation.[35] In temporal terms, in line with the dominant

metaphysics of presence, proximity and fusion are seen as a foundation of family's identity

(presence of the family as substance, sameness), while distance is expressed in negative terms

(as non-identity, being different, without a family).[36] Attempts to create 'me time' of

independence and distance are often considered less important than family get-togethers,

which focus on embodied co-presence and shared passing of time.[37] In both spatial and

temporal terms, longing for co-presence is born out of separation, is guided by migrants'

imaginary and can be more intense that the actual experience of co-presence.[38] In this

[32] Baldassar, 'De-demonizing,' 150.

[33] John Gillis, 'Making Time for Family: The Invention of Family Time(s) and the Reinvention of Family History,' *Journal of Family History* 21, no. 1 (1996), 4-Y 21, https://doi.org/10.1177/036319909602100102.

[34] Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and Illuminations*, trans. Wyatt Mason (London: Penguin, 2005), 371.

[35] Morgan, 'Family Practices.'

[36] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

[37] Janet Finch, 'Displaying Families,' *Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2007): 65–81.

[38] Zlatko Skrbiš, 'Transnational Families: Theorising Migration, Emotions and Belonging,' *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2008): 231–46.

situation, imagination becomes an essential part of familyhood as it (re)creates a form of togetherness and underpins the emotional structure of family.

On the other hand, *hope for family life is oriented to something distant yet indeterminate* and resonates with the notion of the 'emotional worklessness' in migration developed earlier in this essay. While hope produces a promise of a possibility, it is not an active managing and controlling force, since it is part of the everyday experiences of the unwilled and of not-being-able.[39] Hope draws on the sense of distance as the most necessary and most pronounced condition in maintaining family intimacies, where separation from other family members can offer freedom and ability to 'escape' to somewhere else or to become someone else, particularly for single women.[40] In this case, love and friendship are born of individual isolation, sense of being separated and cut off, 'an unshareable experience [that is] nevertheless shared'.[41] Frances Pine describes 'migration as hope', where this interpersonal emotion moves between different (family) bodies, open to possibilities for harmony and joy as well as sadness and hazardous ill-being.[42] In migration, hope is often simultaneously dampened by suffering, depression and the unmaking of the family.[43] The cherished co-presence does not necessarily guarantee a transnational family's harmony, which makes the assumed correlation between distance and a family's 'dysfunction' problematic.[44] Hope is oriented towards more-to-come and 'a radical refusal to reckon possibilities', thus keeping the process of family-making in suspense, blurring conventional

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[39] Harrison, 'Corporeal Remains,' 425.
[40] Kamalini Ramdas, 'Women in Waiting?: Singlehood, Marriage, and Family in Singapore,' *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 4 (2012): 832–48.
[41] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 699.
[42] Frances Pine, 'Migration as Hope: Space, Time, and Imagining the Future,' *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 9 (2014): S95–S104 (S95).
[43] Sharon McGuire and Kate Martin, 'Fractured Migrant Families,' *Family & Community Health* 30, no. 3 (2007): 178–88.
[44] Baldassar, 'De-demonizing.'

understandings of relationality (family members can be simultaneously more and less distant) or negation (reconsidering the importance of being with and without family).[45]

Such reworking of distance challenges assumptions that intimacy is impossible without physical co-presence and highlights diverse emotional connections, shared affective states and disclosure of emotional states, desires as complex practices that make long-distance relations intimate.[46] Aiming to address feelings of separation in migration, these emotional connections draw on a system of moral obligations and cultural interpretations of family and intimacy, which are valorised differently across various cultures. Understanding the creation and maintenance of long-distance intimacies in migration requires an examination of shifting meanings of family, separation and presence, as well as different forms of emotional 'showing' and 'sharing' feelings that extends through material and non-material connections.[47] It is to the analysis of these emotional practices in transnational families that I now turn.

5 (Un)making of Transnational Families in Scotland

5.1 *Maintaining Distance for Emotional Connection*

Transnational parenting involves dealing with the moments and the intensities of the parent–child relationship and redefining intimacies.[48] When transnational lives unsettle the meaning of a bounded and coherent 'family', some parents feel very strongly about co-presence being the bedrock of their relationship with their children.[49] Isaak is a 28-year-old man from

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[45] Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (London: Collins, 1965), 86.
[46] McKay, 'Sending,' 181.
[47] McKay, 'Sending,' 180.
[48] Baldassar, 'De-demonizing.'
[49] Anna Tarrant and Sarah Marie Hall, 'Everyday Geographies of Family: Feminist Approaches and Interdisciplinary Conversations,' *Gender, Place & Culture* 27, no. 5 (2020): 613–23.

Poland, who moved to Scotland in 2015 but struggled to settle (tried different supermarket jobs, was 'emotionally unsettled') due to separation from his family. As Justyna Bell and Paula Pustułka note, for Polish fathers 'enactment of mobile masculinity can equal an emotionally straining experience', particularly when family separation is compounded by the pressures to achieve economic independence and express authority associated with the dominant masculinity stereotypes.[50] Isaak portrays his presumed weakness in running away from family in Poland as an opportunity for self-reflection and breaking away from the masculinity norms performed by older generations:

> I have a family in Poland, an ex-wife and a daughter, but I did not use to speak with them too much. Too much alcohol, problems. I ran, actually – I ran away. I hate alcohol. My parents drink all the time, and they are stuck. Coming here [to Scotland] was creating a distance. … It was like finding peace, finding myself. I was not angry, I was just hurting, but I realised I still love them and want to support them.[51]

Consistent with findings from previous research, this quote shows how separation in migration that contradicts the logic of a coherent family unit can help men re-imagine the importance of familial links and get in touch with their emotions.[52] Isaak speaks about migration as an attempt to 'repair' the relationship with his family through creating physical distance. He notes that such separation helped him to create a sense of autonomy and independence ('finding myself'), as well as dealing with painful memories and emotions

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[50] Justyna Bell and Paula Pustułka, 'Multiple Masculinities of Polish Migrant Men,' *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 12 (2017): 127–43.
[51] Isaak, 28, from Poland, community worker.
[52] Veronica Montes, 'Guatemalan Migrant Men, Transnational Migration, and Family Relations,' *Gender & Society* 27, no. 4 (2013): 469–90.

('finding peace'). Distance brought the opportunity for Isaak to rekindle love, re-establish

communication (he speaks to them now) and emotional connection.

In this study, some transnational parents believe that maintaining distance while

developing their independent lives, negotiating commitments and supporting their children's

choices would also cultivate family intimacy. Alexei moved to Scotland in 2010, while his

daughter wanted to stay and develop her career in Ukraine. Going against the cultural

expectations for family co-presence, he sees maintenance of distance as a way to show the

sentiment of respect and affirm commitment to his daughter:[53]

> My older daughter is a little bit difficult, she's not easy-going. But we seem to have a
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> good relationship with her because of the distance, because we live far away. She
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> needs her own space, it keeps her sane. … We communicate regularly by messages,
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> send reassurances and love. She knows that she can get comfort and support when in
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> need.[54]

In this case, maintenance of distance helps the father to stay in contact and offer emotional

security despite the lack of physical presence. As Alexei explains, focusing on personal

fulfilment does not necessarily create an 'emotional void', but maintains an emotional

connection, helps him to share fatherly love from a distance.[55] Regular messaging strengthens

family bonds, offers reassurances and creates important emotional resonances. In this case,

being emotionally open and honest when living far away from each other positively impacts

the emotional and psychological health of parents and children and helps them to adhere to

mutual concern. Emotions contribute to the re-making of the transnational families and re-

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[53] Sime and Fox, 'Home,' 378.
[54] Alexei, 47, from Ukraine, healthcare worker.
[55] McKay, 'Sending,' 177.

negotiation of the meanings of 'nearness' and co-presence that are often expected to hold families together.

5.2 *Overcoming Distance for Familial Closeness*

At the same time, as established by Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla, constructing the family and maintaining a parent–child relationship across borders often builds on the hopes of overcoming the distance and the incompleteness it causes.[56] Maintaining the separation and creating connections is not always a straightforward process and can cause considerable distress, particularly for parents struggling to balance connection and separation. Many migrant parents must contend with the feelings of loss they experience when they 'live together apart' with their children. In Latvia and other Eastern European countries, traditional family expectations emphasise intergenerational solidarity and put particular pressure on mothers to maintain co-presence with children, express affection and provide emotional support.[57] Zoya speaks about living in Scotland (since 2014) away from her family in Latvia, which made her torn, dis-stanced and incomplete:

> I think we care about each other a lot more now. It's because we lived separately for one and a half years. I arrived in Scotland first, they continued to live in Russia. … It was a real pain, I felt I was losing myself without my husband and two daughters. It made a hole in my heart that had to be filled.[58]

As this quote suggests, transnational family life necessarily involves separation and a sense of loneliness which creates sadness, alienation from herself ('losing myself') for the wife

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[56] Baldassar and Merla, *Transnational Families*, 37.
[57] Signe Dobelniece and Nadežda Kuļigina, 'Intergenerational Functional Solidarity in the Family: The Case of Latvia,' *Filosofija & Sociologija* 32, no. 4 (2021): 367–76.
[58] Zoya, 47, from Latvia, fish factory worker.

longing for her husband and children. Separation from family produces distance, difference within oneself, reflected in a sense of discomfort and anxiety that one wants to overcome ('hole … to be filled'), often by imagining a possibility and hoping for a complete family.

Some migrant parents in this study attempt to address separation by varying the intensities of emotional relations with their children, aspiring to become more involved in the life of the child at a particular life-course stage. Erikas speaks about what it meant to be apart from his children:

> When I left Latvia in 1997, they were 4 and 7. Now as adults they moved [to Scotland] to stay close to me and benefit from my experience. I've made the start of life abroad easier for them. … There was mutual will to make up for all those years of separation, and this brought up unexpected changes in me. I remembered my children from that time in the past and when I started to see them again it was difficult to adapt to the fact that they had moved on so much. My son at the age of 25 tried to walk the street holding my hand. My daughter, a 28-year-old woman, was fondling me while having a conversation, she was running away and coming back, she was upset with me, then angry, then she was ditching me.[59]

Erikas regrets living apart from his family, but believes that separation was necessary for him to fulfil career aspirations, and gain experience and resources that he could later share with his children. In this case, maintaining distance by a parent from their children can be a sign of love rather than the symbol of abandonment or disinterest. Similar to the findings from earlier research on families across borders, such separation comes at a significant emotional cost,

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[59] Erikas, 52, from Latvia, oil and gas engineer.

highlighting the sense of loss and weakening of intimate family ties.[60] Erikas points to the challenge of reconciling contrasting 'positive' (love, adoration) and 'negative' (anger) emotions. This emotional struggle introduces heteronomous times ('child-like' expressions) that fracture his sense of self and hamper intra-family emotional understanding. The construction of the family beyond borders thus requires dealing with the unfamiliar pace and sequencing of emotional interactions as well as overcoming the spatial distance. Reunification requires family members to learn how to re-stablish emotional relations and help fathers develop different emotional expressiveness, which in Eastern Europe is not necessarily associated with masculine identities.[61]

As this section suggests, transnational parents in Scotland and children that live away from them develop different ways of negotiating distance and relating to each other, thus transforming the very meaning of the 'family' from a coherent entity into a changeable practice. In the re-making of families, both spatial and temporal distance between its members become the most intimate, creating difference *within* individuals and enabling emotional connection to take place at all. Familial intimacy is given by the opening and separation which its members simultaneously attempt to bridge, often drawing on emotional labour.

6 Emotional Work(lessness) in Transnational Families in Scotland

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[60] Alexis Silver, 'Families across Borders: The Emotional Impacts of Migration on Origin Families,' *International Migration* 52 (2014): 194–220.
[61] Bell and Pustułka, 'Multiple Masculinities,' 127.

6.1 *Longing*

Emotional labour is an important part of constructing the family across borders, and bonds and connections between migrant parents and their children are constantly shaped across space and time.[62] Many transnational emotional experiences, particularly those of Eastern European families, are guided by efforts to overcome absence and longing, and not by synchronised co-presence.[63] György (42) moved to Scotland in 2012, while his wife and 14-year-old daughter stayed in Hungary. For him love and longing were important emotions that reproduced family in migration and supported the needs of spatially separated family members:

> It is painful that my family does not live here with me … But I send home a lot of things, clothes, even trainers to show that I care. […] My daughter has a look at different shops online and she says: dad, please buy this or that, so I learn more about their wants, loves and needs. I know what she liked when she was young, and what she likes now. Next time I go back to Eger, we will be shopping together and share stories about time passed.[64]

In this quote, practices of shared shopping and sending gifts are not limited to the financial sphere and the logic of exchange, but show the migrant father's engagement with the details of his daughter's everyday life, her desires and emotions. The sending of gifts conjures up sentiments that promise to bridge both spatial and temporal distance (present/past preferences) and rekindles longing for closer involvement and familiarity.[65] As McKay

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[62] Sarah Dyer, Linda McDowell, and Adina Batnitzky, 'Emotional Labour/Body Work: The Caring Labours of Migrants in the UK's National Health Service,' *Geoforum* 39, no. 6 (2008): 2030–2038.
[63] Skrbiš, 'Transnational Families.'
[64] György, 42, from Hungary, hospitality worker. Unbracketed ellipsis in original.
[65] Clement Camposano, 'Balikbayan Boxes and the Performance of Intimacy by Filipino Migrant Women in Hong Kong,' *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 21 (2012): 83–103.

explains, sharing money and material gifts in a transnational context are important practices maintaining intimacies, performing care and reproducing multiple forms of affection within families.[66] When parents long for their next reunion with their children, in which they shop or share a holiday, symbolic family-making requires efforts of planning, commitment and expectation with positive emotional connotations. Sending gifts also physically reconnects family through active remembering and creates prompts for emotions such as longing that exceed investment-return relations.

While emotional work is not always visible and can be unrecognised, it opens new possibilities for circulating intimacies in transnational families. In this study, living apart from her son for three years, Katya (32) maintains an emotional circulation and keeps her son in mind even though she cannot return to Russia due to her unresolved migrant status and political situation:

> My son, family, they are back in Russia, but I am not allowed to return. One day I am happy, another day I am in despair. I am stuck. It is hard, painful, but I am thinking about my son and will be ready to support him, I am so looking forward to being with him. But what if I lose connection with him after all this time apart?[67]

In Katya's case, longing is accompanied by a feeling of being 'stuck' in a present. Her situation is conditioned by political uncertainty and insecurity in Russia, which prompted her to escape to Scotland. While she cannot resolve this situation, she is going through hardship and sacrifice in order to be able to share her love and affection through personal contact in the future. To explain such emotional longing, Vlad Glaveanu and Gail Womersley speak

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[66] McKay, 'Sending.'
[67] Katya, 32, from Russia, unemployed.

about possibility-enhancing emotional states that allow migrant families to move between different identity positions, opening to the certain undecidability (family as strangeness) and non-coincidence (family as separation).[68] In case of migrant parents, longing is emotionally rewarding and exciting, as it introduces a sense of wonder and a possibility of a different family life.

Transnational parents recreate the presence of their distanced children through imagined narratives, where longing colours varied family orientations and accompanies changes in their physical and symbolic positions. The simultaneous openness to possibilities offered by new life in Scotland and the impossibility of immediate physical contact with family members produces diverse emotional states oscillating between happiness and sadness, joy and pain. As a result, many migrant parents find themselves in a situation of waiting for a resolution and certainty, in the emotional state of passivity and helplessness, which cannot be fully reconciled through emotional work.

6.2 *Hope*

The transnational family is only imagined as a continuous entity, but in reality it is always changing and its coherence is promised in the future, through the work of longing and the sense of impending being-together.[69] Similarly, hope also emerges in the process of separation during migration as a result of a play between positive possibilities and diminished negative contingencies.[70] As hope involves some acceptance of present desperation and prompts positive anticipation, it is not limited to the present and the reproduction of co-presence in family life. Importantly, such emotional transformation involves a sense of

[68] Vlad Glaveanu and Gail Womersley, 'Affective Mobilities: Migration, Emotion and (Im)possibility,' *Mobilities* 16, no. 4 (2021): 628–42.
[69] Sergei Shubin and Allan Findlay, 'Imaginaries of the Ideal Migrant Worker: A Lacanian Interpretation,' *Environment and Planning D* 32, no. 3 (2014): 466–83.
[70] Pine, 'Migration.'

passivity and 'being open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel'.[71] Transnational parents in this study express this sense of passivity, indicating the suspension of power to choose and decide, accompanied only by a hopeful fantasy about time to be spent together as a 'family' in the future:

> My daughter wanted to be on her own, and then somehow learned from her mum she wasn't really a planned child and so on, so this complicates family relations even more. … She's growing up, she won't listen, our relationship has become too loose to, so I hope something changes and we can be together again. Let's hope for the best.[72]

> My son, he does not want to move somewhere else. He's bought a flat and he lives with his girlfriend in the flat, starting to live together in Lithuania, not much time for me. I hope one day he can join me [in Scotland].[73]

In the above examples, parents imagine a better future and a possibility of change that often eludes expression ('hope for the best'). Despite strained relationships, families chart emotional trajectories into the future, spurred by a promise of forthcoming migration and imagined unity. Flavia Cangià and Tania Zittoun argue that such imaginations are an integral part of mobility processes, and that mobility triggers imagination (and vice-versa) oriented around consistency and maintenance of a 'family'.[74]

During migration, hope enables imaginations that bridge temporal and spatial distance within transnational families with a promise of potential else-what and else-when, *what* could

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[71] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 30.
[72] Mariusz, 37, from Poland, office worker.
[73] Danute, 47, from Lithuania, fish factory worker.
[74] Flavia Cangià and Tania Zittoun, 'Exploring the Interplay between (Im)mobility and Imagination,' *Culture and Psychology* 26, no. 4 (2020): 641–53.

be or *when* it is to come. Hope contains the promise for the destruction of present pain and the beginning of new emotional relationship, as Vasylyna explains:

> I came to Scotland in 2009 on my own. My daughters' father would not allow them to see me more than once a year, it is in our agreement. He said I could go, but the children must stay with him. I felt guilty leaving my daughters. … They are now finishing school; I hope one day we can be together.[75]

As Paolo Boccagni and Loretta Baldassar explain, hope for family reunion is often accompanied by guilt and anxiety related to the expectations of being a good parent.[76] Vasylyna's story speaks to hope not for more emotional intensity, but for a different kind of intimacy where present guilt is replaced with a sense of comfort of being together. She is holding on to the potentiality of the future to 'change' the situation, yet this change is uncertain and hesitant, threatened with potential ruination. This account emphasises the importance of passivity and patience in waiting for a different family life, not limited to intentional emotional work.

The combination of emotional work and worklessness in migration unsettles the distinctions between 'active' and 'passive', 'success' and 'failure' often used to describe transnational intimate relations. Longing and hope produce possibilities for an alternative imagined 'family' to emerge in migration, which can efface the separation between here and there, now and yet-to-come.

7 Conclusion

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[75] Vasylyna, 38, from Estonia, farm worker.
[76] Paolo Boccagni and Loretta Baldassar, 'Emotions on the Move: Mapping the Emergent Field of Emotion and Migration,' *Emotion, Space and Society* 16 (2015): 73–80.

The experiences of transnational families discussed in this essay disrupt normative ideas about the family that draw on narrow interpretations of distance, presence, unity and proximity. Transnational lives involve movement beyond the limits of identity by living 'together apart', unhinge space and time and question assumptions about the need for physical co-presence to maintain familial relations across borders.[77] In the analysis of familial (dis)connections between parents and children, I have explored the processes of negotiation of distance in migration that reshape family intimacies. The use of an emotion-focused approach can help to broaden the understanding of familyhood across borders and lead to new conceptualisations of distance beyond co-presence (more or less distant) and narrow negative views.

First, the essay questioned the meaning of distance as a negative feature of familial relations and its assumed opposition to proximity. Challenging the logic of unity and physical co-presence, re-making of some families in this study relies on temporal and spatial separation between their members. Contrary to dominant expectations about the need to maintain family coherence across borders, some transnational parents highlighted the importance of individual autonomy for positive emotional relations with their children to develop. Spatial and temporal solitude (me-space and me-time), *being alone together*, was often seen as important for transnational family's intimacies as being together alone (as a family unit). These findings contribute to previous research on uneven emotional flows and 'de-demonising distance' by emphasising the significance of separation for emotional well-being of transnational families.[78]

At the same time, some transnational families in this study attempted to bridge such distance with their children, by deploying emotional labour of different intensities that

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[77] Levin, 'Living Apart Together.'
[78] Baldassar, 'De-demonising,' 145.

induced positive emotional relations. As the essay's findings suggest, such emotional work and familial intimacies were dependent on the very conditions of alienation, anxiety and separation that such labour attempted to address or overcome. In that sense, this essay contributes to the broader work on transnational family intimacy that stresses the key role of silences, omissions and absences in producing the 'distance' necessary for relationship to flourish.[79] This study shows that intimacies in transnational families are simultaneously produced and fragmented under the contradictory forces of distancing and coming together, often reflected in the feelings of guilt and hope.

Second, the essay broadened the conceptualisation of the 'emotional' to include both emotional work, well publicised in migration literatures,[80] and the often overlooked non-intentional affection that I called *emotional workslessness*.[81] At the same time, migrants described the importance of emotional labour that maintains family intimacies by means of sharing of objects, money and gifts and exceeds the logic of exchange. By expressing longing as counterintuitive, contingent and invisible emotional disposition, the essay speaks to the recent literature that unsettles the restricted economy of meaning in the analysis of migrants' emotional labour.[82]

Furthermore, some transnational parents stressed the importance of hope in maintaining emotional connections and family's sense of togetherness. The essay's findings reveal that hope creates possibilities for alternative futures (else-when) and relations (else-what), while also enabling trust and the co-existence of contradictory, hopeful and hopeless, emotional forces. The concurrent making and un-making of the family raises questions about the accepted forms and times of intimate familial association, as well as active/passive,

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[79] Sergei Shubin, 'Evaluating the Process of Cross-European Migration: Beyond Cultural Capital,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45, no. 4 (2020): 802–16.
[80] Hochschild, 'Emotion Work.'
[81] Blanchot, *The Gaze*.
[82] Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins, 'Aspiration, Desire and Drivers of Migration,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 (2018): 909–26.

success/failure binaries which permeate the interdisciplinary discussions about transnational lives. In addition to the examination of productive and reproductive labour in the family, scholars engaged with these themes can also usefully develop the analysis of the un-productive labour to refigure the notion of familial intimacy and contestable family ideal. The broadening of the understanding of intimate family practices to include passivity, unintentional exposure and 'unmeaningful stratum of life' can also help to attend to the emotions that escape attempts to manipulate them (as capital, labour) and bring them into knowledge.[83] Engaging with passivity and intimate worklessness can help future research on transnational families to express silent and often invisible emotions of grief, pain and suffering beyond meaning, utility and familial normativities. An emotion-focused approach can reveal the ruptures that are often smoothed over in migration research, and better reflect the simultaneous and contested fragmentation of a transnational family and its recreation as a future possibility.

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[83] Chris Philo, 'Squeezing, Bleaching, and the Victims' Fate: Wounds, Geography, Poetry, Micrology,' *GeoHumanities* 3, no. 1 (2017): 20–40 (30).