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Introduction to the Special Issue on “Family migration processes in a comparative perspective”

Abstract
This paper provides an introduction to this Special Issue on “Family migration processes in a comparative perspective”. Following an introduction to the topic, we provide summaries of the papers in this Special Issue and discuss afterwards some overarching theoretical perspectives. This Special Issue contains papers that explore how family lives and intimate relationships are constituted and re-constituted under conditions of transnationality. The authors of the contributing papers, although they have followed very different theoretical and methodological paths, underscore the effect of conducting and facilitating family life and couple relationships during or after an international migration process. They show that the couples and multigenerational families in transnational contexts are constantly undergoing processes of constitution, negotiation, and reconstitution. We conclude that future research should shift from focusing solely on the individual to examining couples and families, and it should adopt dynamic, rather than static perspectives when studying family migration.

1. Preface

Two years ago, in 2017, we received the generous offer to edit a Special Issue combining the research fields of family and migration. This was at a point in time when the word “Familienzusammenführung” (family reunion) was used – and also misused – in an inflationary manner in political and public discourses not only in our country, Germany, but also in other European states. By that time, nearly two years had passed since the large refugee influx from the Middle East and Northern Africa in 2015. In the meantime, we had witnessed how the question of family members who potentially might follow those who already had arrived in the country affected public debates about which and how many refugees under subsidiary protection are actually entitled to stay. Those debates undermine the premise that an individual who is subject to persecution is entitled to protection. Gender stereotyping featured prominently in the discourses on refugees, fuelled by the sexual assaults that occurred during New Year’s Eve 2015/2016 in and around the central train station in the city of Cologne. A discourse analysis of reports published in two big news outlets in Germany (Süddeutsche Zeitung and Spiegel) in the years 2013 to
2018 on refugees revealed that the keywords “male” and “young” were disproportionately mentioned together with the term “criminality” (Achterberg 2018). By contrast, “women” were mainly featured as potentially following family migrants with the primary role of ensuring that the male pioneer migrant can focus his attention on his successful integration into the host society. By successful integration, politicians mainly had in mind labour market participation – thus ignoring that asylum migration and labour demands in ageing Western societies may not perfectly match. The idea of the protection of the family as such appeared as a rather subordinated goal in public and political discourses. This illustrates the conflict area that arises when policies that target different goals interfere with each other. On the one hand, the family enjoys protection; on the other hand, immigration policies target individuals. By crossing international borders, the family is no longer only an institution in the private realm, but becomes a subject for controversial political debates (Bonjour/Kraler 2016).

Against this backdrop, we organized in October 2018 a workshop on family migration processes in Berlin. We wanted to establish a dialogue with and among those scholars who worked on topics related to family migration and could present results based on recent empirical observations. In this workshop, we also wanted to overcome typical compartmentalisation present in the academic world. We aimed to bring together scholars who come from various disciplines and countries, adopt different methodological perspectives, and focus on different “target groups”.

Now, more than a year later, immigration to Europe continues, albeit on a smaller numerical level. New empirical studies have produced up-to-date datasets, and first results are available. We present five studies that fulfil our criteria of the initial idea of bridging different perspectives, methods, disciplines and – most importantly – research areas. Our main research interest is directed at the dynamics of family and couple life in a transnational context: We want to know how crossing international borders affects individuals as members of families or as partners, and how it affects families and couples as a whole, including those who stay behind.

Research on migration has come a long way in the past decades (Cooke 2008). Initially, the focus was on who moves and why. The (economic) research has mainly looked at the male migrant as the one initiating the international move, whereas another strand of research looked at the “trailing wife”. Today we know that international migration involves not only individuals and couples, but also multi-generational households. Moreover, migration is a process that occurs over time (as in the case of refugees), includes much uncertainty and can consist of several moves; it need not be a single event that occurs over a short time span. Still, the majority of studies in this area are concerned with the questions of who moves and which determinants affect this move.

This Special Issue contains papers that explore how family lives and intimate relationships are constituted and reconstituted under conditions of transnational migration. The papers underscore the effects of conducting and facilitating family life and couple relationships during or after having experienced an international migration process. Within this scope, issues relating to integration or accommodation processes of immigrants and the problems they might have been confronted with on an individual level in their new homes do not make up the primary focus of these papers. This is partly due to the circumstance, highlighted also by Glick-Schiller (2010) and Levitt et al. (2003), that conditions