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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Collaborating with transnational families: Learning from the experiences of family caretakers, educators, psychologists, and spiritual leaders in Honduras

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Abstract

This manuscript centers on the experiences of caretakers of minors in Honduran transnational families (TNFs) in which one or both parents emigrated, and of the schoolteachers, professional psychologists, and spiritual leaders working with these families. We report on the participants' knowledge and learned lessons, which we place in dialog with the interdisciplinary literature on TNFs in sociology, psychology, gender studies, and cultural studies. Through a participatory methodology, we collaborated with the participants to develop a series of guidelines based on their experiences. We have structured this manuscript in four intersecting themes: (1) Affectivity related to parental migration and its consequences; (2) Community dimensions and actors; (3) Family arrangements and agreements; and (4) Family communication at a distance. These guidelines and insights may prove helpful to current, prospective, and past TNFs who may see their experiences reflected in this manuscript, and to professionals working with TNFs. The participants' knowledges and suggestions can be instrumental in understanding and professionally supporting these families' well-being, care, and unity.

KEYWORDS

care, caretakers, family transnationality, migrants, migration, parenting

Highlights

- The experiences of caretakers and frontline professionals in the home country can be instrumental in informing care practices in the emerging field of family transnationality.
- The guidelines proposed in this manuscript may help family members and professionals in the country of origin and destination to address the challenges posed by geographical distance.
- TNFs are not broken or defective families. They are emerging family configurations that defy traditional concepts and experiences of presence, affectivity, and being with and for each other. Members of transnational families share a migration project in which affectivities and roles constantly evolve.

INTRODUCTION

Transnational families (hereafter, TNFs) are those in which their members are in different countries and, despite the geographical distance, still maintain family practices of care, responsibility, and unity (Baldassar et al., 2007). The number of TNFs is rising significantly due to the general growth in international migration (International Organization for Migration, 2024) and as a consequence of the global trend toward increasingly

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restrictive policies on migratory movements and family reunifications (Redmond & Martin, 2021). Especially for irregular migrants, toughening migration policies entails more dangerous journeys and the impracticality of visiting family members in the home country and of families traveling together or reunifying in the destination country.

Our research centers on the challenges and opportunities that Honduran caretakers of minors in TNFs (i.e., the persons—usually family members—who are responsible for the care of children in the home country, following the emigration of their mother, father, or both), psychologists, schoolteachers, and religious leaders working with TNF members face in their role. We also focused on the knowledge and wisdom that the participants developed over time through their work with or in TNFs. The aim of this article is to learn how TNF members, educators, psychologists, and spiritual leaders in Honduras navigate and respond to the challenges posed by geographic separation. Working collaboratively with the participants, we crafted a set of 10 guidelines based on their experiences, wisdoms, and learned lessons. The overall manuscript and the guidelines may prove helpful to both families and professionals engaged in transnational care.

Although linked to the social and political circumstances of Honduras, the knowledges, processes, representations, and recommendations in the guidelines may also be practical for professionals, caretakers, and, in general, current and future TNFs in other geographical and cultural contexts. In addition, past TNFs may find this article helpful to reflect on their experiences. These guidelines are not intended to be used in dogmatic or absolute terms without considering each family's unique circumstances and context. For each theme, we provide numerous references to the literature in case readers want to delve further into the subject or phenomenon. An initial version of these recommendations was published in an open-access booklet in Spanish, which appeared in paper and electronic versions (Hernández-Albújar et al., 2024). This booklet was presented and distributed to participants, NGOs, and governmental organizations, including schools, family-care services, and child services in Honduras, El Salvador, and Spain.

The article is organized into five main sections. It begins with the (1) introduction and (2) presentation of the research framework and methodology. We then present the (3) findings and their discussion, which are organized in four intersecting themes: affectivity related to parental migration and its consequences, community dimensions and actors, family arrangements and agreements, and family communication at a distance. Each theme results in one or more guidelines. A discussion of the (4) study's limitations is followed by the (5) conclusions, which present the main insights and implications of this research, offering practical recommendations for the promotion of care and wellbeing in TNFs.

RESEARCH CONTEXT, FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This inquiry was part of an international cooperation project in North-West Honduras, financed from Grant 2021UI003 from the Andalusian Agency for International Cooperation and Development, on TNFs and migration patterns. In this area, emigration touches almost everyone's life, whether directly or indirectly. For instance, 54% of the Honduras population expresses the intention to emigrate (Lupu et al., 2021). The impact of emigration inevitably falls on families: Of those who moved from the Northern Triangle region—where Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador meet—to the United States, 47% reported having children, half of whom (54%) remained in their home country (Abuelafia et al., 2019).

We adopted a collaborative epistemological framework (Kral, 2014; Watkins & Shulman, 2008) based on the assumption that reality and its representations are always relationally constructed within evolving social relationships and cultural contexts (Gergen, 2009; Hall, 1997). Following a social constructionist epistemology, we were interested in the pragmatics of interpreting, situating, and narrating the realities of TNFs from the perspectives of those who belong to and work with them. We interpreted the participants' representations of their experiences as evolving constructions of knowledge, which resulted relationally from our agentic interactions with the participants (Gemignani et al., 2023; Gergen, 2014). We were not, in other words, mere observers or collectors of data but active agents in the process of co-constructing relational spaces of reflection and becoming between researcher and researched (Gemignani, 2011, 2025). Similarly, the participants were not mere objects of the researchers' gaze (Thurairajah, 2019).

We considered the participants as experts and, to the extent possible, approached the field with a credulous and not-knowing attitude (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Gergen, 2009) to learn from their experiences and accompany their reflections, lowering the risk of reproducing hierarchies of knowledge based on the assumed superiority of our epistemologies and positions (Held, 2020), for instance, as Western researchers. The risk of silencing, judging, or marginalizing the participants' knowledges was especially relevant given that the research team and financial support came from this region's former colonizer. When contradicting findings and narratives were present, we explored implicit tensions and dichotomies through dialog and collaboration with the participants, recognizing differences and shifts without necessarily resolving them (Gemignani et al., 2023; Gemignani, 2011).

In the process of analyzing the data and drafting recommendations, we primarily focused on the participants' constructions of practices of care, roles, positions, and gendered expectations in relation to family transnationality. We adopted a multidisciplinary methodological framework that intersected scholarship, research, and practices of care from the fields of family therapy, community psychology, sociology of family, and cultural communication. We understood care as a social, relational, and political process that involves material, emotional, and symbolic actions aimed at sustaining vulnerable life (Tronto, 1993). As such, we saw the processes of initiating, delivering, and receiving practices of care as developing along relational dynamics of power and ethics, such as power-based constructions of gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity.

Participants

The study involved a total of 81 individuals: 34 caretakers of children with one or both parents residing abroad, 15 schoolteachers, 15 psychologists, and 17 religious leaders. All participants were based in or around Santa Rosa de Copán, Honduras, which is an area characterized by high rates of international migration. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with the objective of capturing a diverse range of experiences and perspectives related to transnational family dynamics in Honduras.

Recruitment was conducted in collaboration with two local non-governmental organizations—Fundación ETEA and Asociación PILARH—which are active in the field of social development and served as strategic partners in the research project. These organizations facilitated access to family caretakers and community-based participants who were actively involved with TNF members in middle schools, health centers, religious congregations, and family protection services.

From the overall sample of participants, a subgroup was purposively selected to participate in focus group discussions (see Table 1). Selection criteria were based on the extent to which individuals were directly involved in providing support to members of transnational families, especially children and their caretakers. Participants who, in individual interviews, showed high engagement and expertise in addressing the psychosocial, educational, or spiritual needs of TNFs were prioritized. This approach was intended to ensure that the focus group discussions would be informed by in-depth and experiential knowledge of family transnationality.

Although the recruitment process did not differentiate by gender, male participation was largely limited to teachers and religious leaders. Male psychologists were notably absent—a pattern consistent with our 3 years of fieldwork, during which we encountered only one male psychologist. This broader professional imbalance likely influenced the gender distribution of participants. Among family caretakers, three men participated in interviews but declined to join the focus groups, which may reflect tensions between public discussion of caretaking and local masculine norms (Gemignani, 2025), according to which caregiving responsibilities in transnational families are most often assumed by women (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024).

TABLE 1 Participants in the study.

Population group	Gender	Data collection Individual interviews	Focus groups
Caretakers	F	31	16
	M	3	0
Psychologists	F	15	7
	M	0	0
Teachers	F	10	15
	M	5	1
Spiritual leaders	F	5	7
	M	12	2
Total number of participants		81	48

Note: For gender, M = male; F = female. Gender was self-attributed. The participants did not provide other gender identifications. In the focus groups, the 16 caretakers were: 8 grandmothers, 1 adult older sister, 2 aunts, and 5 mothers. All focus-group participants took part in the individual-interview phase of the data collection.

Data collection

The data collection was developed in three steps: First, we conducted 81 individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews on the psychosocial experiences, challenges, and opportunities of being a caretaker in TNFs or a professional working with them. Individual interviews were designed as interactive spaces in which participants constructed and shared meanings associated with transnational care and caretaking, migration, and family life. Caretakers were asked about their day-to-day responsibilities, emotional and logistical challenges, and constructions of parenting practices and roles across borders. Professionals were invited to reflect on their work with transnational families, the specific needs they observed among children and caretakers, and the role of institutions—whether their own or others'—in the care of TNFs. The interview recordings were complemented with field notes based on observations that were not or could not be included in the interviews, for example, information the participants shared after the interview ended.

Second, six focus groups were conducted, each lasting 2 h and composed of 6–10 participants, totaling 46 participants, all recruited from the individual interviews. Two focus groups were conducted with caretakers, one with teachers, one with psychologists, one with religious leaders, and a final group with mixed professionals to promote the exchange of knowledge across areas of experience.

In the groups, we informed the participants about our main observations and doubts from the individual interviews, which were shared anonymously. We invited the participants to collaboratively discuss them to further explore and elaborate on the core ideas and concepts. To encourage participation, we invited each participant to share a word or short phrase they felt represented their experience with a specific challenge or learned lesson. We collaboratively explored both common grounds or agreements and contrasting perspectives. The latter strategy proved very useful for encouraging reflection on ambiguities and tensions related to their role, work, and self-perception. The group setting also allowed addressing of sensitive and, often, silenced issues, such as anxiety, tensions with the emigrated partner, and the burden of social stigma surrounding TNFs and transnational caretaking. The focus groups also provided additional insights into participants' experiences and learned lessons.

Following this initial discussion, we began collaborating with the participants to develop draft guidelines and suggestions for prospective TNFs. Participants were asked to offer advice for hypothetical peers—future caretakers or professionals—facing similar situations. This activity generated rich discussions on the evolution of practical strategies, personal growth, and lessons learned over time. Because this phase followed the initial reflections on commonalities and differences in dominant narratives of care in TNFs, the advice-giving activity encompassed an array of perspectives grounded in personal and social constructions.

Once we had tentatively drafted a potential guideline, we asked the participants to fine-tune its wording and content to make it relevant to their life or work circumstances and hypothetical peers. This process was lengthy, but also enriching and empowering for the participants, who could see their voices and experiences translated into guidelines that could help others.

A third data-collection strategy took place online. Of the original 81 participants, 26 (four caretakers, nine teachers, eight psychologists, and five spiritual leaders) attended three online meetings. This last phase furthered collaboration with the participants, first to analyze the primary emerging constructs, processes, and dynamics of TNF caretaking. Second, we collaboratively revised the guidelines, which generated more debate in the focus groups.

Data analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to identify, craft, and interpret the main themes and patterns from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). First, we coded the interview transcripts to create semantic and experiential clusters of meanings and phenomena, which were analyzed in their interaction (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Then, we actively sought participants' input on the initial themes. This dialogical collaboration with the participants was especially constructive for analyzing disagreements among them, clarifying interpretative doubts, and understanding the differences between their experiences and those discussed in the scholarly literature on TNFs. These dialogs and variances were instrumental in drafting the guidelines in more nuanced and contextual ways, thereby increasing their utility and the overall methodological integrity of the research (Levitt et al., 2017). Participants progressively became our collaborators in the process of understanding, representing, and learning from family transnationality (Wyatt et al., 2018).

This ongoing comparison of ideas and interpretations allowed us to maintain a reflexive and critical analysis (Gemignani, 2017). For the reflexive dimension of the thematic analysis, we critically questioned our dominant expectations and taken-for-granted views on family life and wellbeing, which assumed the desirability of the nuclear family structure in which the family unit lives together in a single household. For instance, based on our assumption that participants would consider family members' physical proximity more desirable than their remoteness, we expected that the departure of one or both parents would be painful and negatively affect the family's stability and functioning. We realized, however, that this expectation risked imposing a preconceived family structure and a sense of desirability or "goodness," which would have limited our ability to consider alternative family configurations and to work with the participants and the data without judging them.

This critical, reflexive approach helped us move beyond coding as simple data categorization to identify themes and patterns. As Braun and Clarke (2021b) underscore, a thematic analysis is both an inductive and deductive process, as data do not speak for themselves and themes do not emerge spontaneously. Especially during the interviews, we became critically aware that we were co-constructing the data with the participants, rather than just observing it. We therefore strove to maximize the diversity of the interpretations within the research team—including our local partners in Honduras—and through collaborative dialogs with participants to relationally construct "the data." In addition, we began asking deconstructive questions about the nature of the phenomena participants discussed, such as the embodied experiences of being a TNF member and the consequences of prevalent discourses that construct TNFs as problematic or defective. For instance, when a female caretaker said, "We play both the mother's and the father's role. We have to handle it all," we asked what being a mother meant to her and what being a father entailed. We also inquired and problematized our assumptions concerning the meanings and implications of these gender constructions and roles. Furthermore, we opened ourselves to the idea that presence can take multiple forms, which may not entail the primacy of touch (Ratcliffe, 2018), and that family agencies (e.g., playing both the mother's and the father's roles) are constructed relationally and contextually, rather than individually (Telve, 2019).

OBSERVATIONS, FINDINGS AND GUIDELINES

We structured the participants' constructions, learning, and concerns about what works and what can be improved in TNF care practices in four interrelated themes, for each of which we identified the main subthemes and issued one or more recommendations. These guidelines are based on the dialogs and collaborations with the participants and on the existing scholarly literature. The four themes and their respective subthemes (heading level 3, in italic, in the text) are:

1) Affectivity related to parental migration and its consequences
   - Taking the Decision to Migrate, Preparing to Leave, and Saying "Goodbye"
   - Migratory Grief and Mourning
   - The Threat of Losing One's Role

2) Community dimensions and actors
   - Psychologists
   - Spiritual Leaders and Teachers

3) Family arrangements and agreements
   - The (In)Formality of Agreements and Arrangements
   - Trust, Promises and Expectations
   - Agreeing on the Management of Remittances
   - Family Reunification Narratives

4) Family communication at a distance.

Affectivity related to parental migration and its consequences

The departure of one or both parents impacts not only the person(s) who leave(s) but also those who remain in their home country. This event affects the structure of a family and the modes of relating within it, including how family members relationally and pragmatically think of themselves within the family context, for instance, as mother, daughter, or grandfather, but also, depending on the cultural context, as neighbor or community member (Belford & Lahiri-Roy, 2019; Carling et al., 2012; Parke & Cookston, 2021).

Significant changes in a role entail new identity developments, which manifest themselves through emotional processes (Epting, 1984; Kelly, 1955). Rather than considering affects as individual, internal, and static responses to the environment, they can be thought of as relational, contextual, and embodied interpretations and practices of sensing and constructing the world (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). From this perspective, the affects involved in becoming transnational can be linked to specific social environments and practices of mattering (Lara et al., 2017). For instance, a child's sadness for her mother's departure can be considered an enabling and, from the child's perspective, "ethical" statement about the care and importance of family (Montes, 2013). In this sense, these affects are "trans-individual" practices of ethical power that allow for some constructions to occur and specific concerns to be lived and, therefore, acted upon (Gemignani, 2025). In the previous example, the child's sadness does not simply result from the mother's migration. Instead, it both affects and is affected by it: the child's affect can be seen as a demonstration and practice of power that simultaneously allows and constrains this child's being and becoming within her TNF (Braidotti, 2013). In other words, affects are deeply linked to ontological and epistemological practices that relationally create specific ethics, actions, and realities for the family members.

Taking the decision to migrate, preparing to leave, and saying "goodbye"

According to our participants, family members would like to be involved in the decision-making process about migration. This involvement allows them to share the inevitable doubts, concerns, and anxieties that the separation entails, especially about the care of the emigrated parent(s)'s children. The parent(s)' decision to emigrate is likely to be the source of psychosocial concern and pain for all parties, including the prospective migrants. At this point, migration has already started: not geographically, but affectively and relationally.

Outside the family context, religious leaders said that when parents inform them of their departure, the community often helps by offering practical advice and information on migration routes and by keeping an eye on the kids who stay in their home country. Nevertheless, understandably, migrant parents are hesitant about sharing a decision—or even just an intention—that they know will impact their children and significant others, whose reactions and concerns may then affect the parents' determination to leave. On the one hand, parents often consider emigration as the ultimate option to improve their and their family's futures (Sternberg & Barry, 2011). On the other hand, the hopes linked to migration do not exempt migrants from doubts, misgivings, fears, and guilt about leaving their families, communities, and cultures (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Baldassar, 2015).

Moreover, those who migrate without administrative authorization are likely to be concerned about their migration's legal and social repercussions, such as increased precariousness and vulnerability in the host country, and feeling ashamed if they are deported back to their home country. At times, their worries are so intense that, as some participants reported, fathers and mothers leave without informing their children. Upon waking up in the morning, children do not find their parent(s) at home, and the caretakers are responsible for telling them that their parents have gone abroad (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024).

To counter viewing migration and its decision as personal endeavors, prospective migrant parents may prepare for their departure by anticipating the process of saying and hearing "goodbyes" from various family and community members. Farewells are incredibly meaningful moments for a family. As such, enough time, space, and commitment should be dedicated to them. A good farewell entails understanding and communicating the reasons behind this decision, as this will be instrumental in how family members process and live the separation. Meaningful and sincere farewells may partially prevent feelings of loss, anger, sadness, and guilt in both those who leave and those who stay (Baldassar, 2015; Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024). Rather than hiding or neglecting feelings of hurt, these affects should be processed both individually and within the family, both before and after the departure of a significant other.

By doing this, migration transforms from an individual action to a part of the family's relating and planning. Although this sharing would not solve issues or erase hard feelings, it may create a shared space for dialog and understanding, conveying that the family's care and unity will continue despite geographical distance. Recognizing and empathically listening to one's own and others' feelings will contribute to mourning the loss and to generating the intimacy and care that people fear losing because of transnationality. Even if the separation from their parent (s) is usually harsh on minors, those who understand why their mother and/or father left are less likely to feel responsible for the departure. Instead, they tend to see it as inherent to the socioeconomic context and the family's well-being and future (Hernández-Albújar et al., 2024; Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024). Even more significant for the family's well-being is locating the parental departure within a migration project that belongs to the whole family and is part of the shared path toward a better family future (Dito et al., 2017).

Communications of this kind, in other words, convey the critical message that the family remains united and caring despite geographical distance. The participants noted that these dialogs are not intended to prevent or counter parental departure. Instead, they aim at understanding and acknowledging each member's thoughts and feelings about this migration, including its reasons, hopes, and concerns. A trusted community figure, educator, counselor, or psychologist could help facilitate this exchange among family members to further their mutual comprehension and the sharing of complex emotions, such as fear and guilt.

Guideline 1. Caretakers, family members and significant others who will be affected by the departure of one or both parents may aspire to be included in the decision-making process as early as possible. Parents might therefore avoid considering their departure as an individual event. Although their decision to leave may be challenging to communicate and likely to trigger strong emotional reactions, treating it as a collective, shared process helps convey a message of family unity and care. This process may assist those in the process of leaving deal with their feelings of loneliness and the burden of guilt and responsibility. In addition, being informed in advance about the migration may allow family members in the home country to prepare better psychologically, socially, materially, and logistically.

Migratory grief and mourning

Almost all the participants reported that the departure of one or both parents was a source of rage and anger, which were often associated with growing uncertainty and sadness in life. Grief and the sense of loss in TNFs are understudied topics in migration studies, and yet those who leave and those who stay typically fear an imminent change in their lives and identities. Migration-related losses are simultaneously internal, relational, and social, for example, in relation to social status and habits.

In our study, as a form of self-protection, caretakers promptly rationalized their grief by talking about the pride and heightened sense of agency and efficacy that come with the increased social status of having a relative in a rich country of the Global North. For example, caretakers valued the possibility that the children might be able to move, work, or study abroad. The sense of pride was often communicated by constructing the migrant as a sort of hero who has accomplished a major endeavor and has sacrificed themselves for the family's well-being (Liu & Erwin, 2015).

The mourning process is complex and varies according to the idiosyncrasies of each family, community, culture, and ethnicity. Therefore, each family will need to find and negotiate ways to express its bonds through specific care practices, such as regular phone or video get-togethers and keeping family traditions. Beyond searching for solutions or copying strategies, the participants asserted the usefulness of anticipating and processing the separation and its implications. In this regard, a psychologist told us of a case "in which we prepared the family for the mother's departure, explaining to them that they would face a grieving process. We worked with them until the moment arrived, which was still painful and difficult, although more controlled and collaborative."

Guideline 2. Feelings of loss and grief associated with a family member's departure can be seen as a family and shared experience, rather than a personal and private one. Acknowledging the sense of loss as an act of care can help us to see migration-related grief as a meaningful and relational process, located in the family rather than just in the individual. This reinterpretation reinforces mutual commitments and attachments. It also acknowledges the determination of those who have left.

The threat of losing one's role

In the context of transnationality, family members often feel anxious about being unable to anticipate how their lives will evolve (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024). A common yet significant sense of disorientation arises from changes and reconstructions of roles and identities within the family, as traditional roles tend to shift with the departure of one or both parents. For instance, people usually need to pick up the tasks and responsibilities left by those who migrate. This identity process is not always easy and requires dealing with the pressure of social norms, orders, and expectations, which are typically gendered (Dreby & Adkins, 2010; Dreby, 2006; Fuller-Iglesias, 2015). For instance, fathers may be socially derided for adopting traditionally female roles (Apatinga et al., 2022). On the other hand, these reconstructions of gendered roles may encourage new understandings and ways of being male, female, or other gender identities (Parreñas, 2005). For instance, following the departure of their female partner, fathers may have to look after their young children and, therefore, reconstruct their masculinity in light of these new roles assigned to them (Parella Rubio, 2012).

In addition, to be effective, TNF reconfigurations require challenging social norms about parenting and the family imaginary. For instance, a grandmother called to become a “mother again” might feel insecure and unprepared to face the demands of contemporary society (Pérez Gañán & Neira Molina, 2017). She might feel guilty because she anticipates her failure and the threat of being invalidated in her role and identity as a caretaker (Kelly, 1955). Guilt and the fear of losing one's role are also common among parent(s) abroad, who often feel vulnerable, anxious, and impotent toward the possibility of caring for their children as effectively as if they were at home (Baldassar, 2015; Boccagni, 2012).

Guideline 3. The departure of one or both parents often entails a crisis linked to the concrete and imagined changes to family referents and anchors (Bauman, 2011). In response to this crisis, family members may benefit first from being reassured about the continuity of family unity and second from narratively constructing their shifting roles in the transnational family. All involved agents are likely to feel supported by meaningful acts of care aimed at maintaining or creating shared family habits and co-presence, communicating experiences and emotions, and engaging in critical reflections on shifting imaginaries of family structures and functioning. In addition, family members and caretakers can benefit from opportunities to explore the pressures associated with social norms and to differentiate these from their own personal or family goals.

Community dimensions and actors

Schoolteachers, psychologists, and spiritual leaders can be instrumental to the well-being of TNFs in community and institutional settings. These participants underscored that parents in TNFs are not alone in the complex parenting process from afar and, in general, in maintaining a united family. In different ways and while attending to different needs and goals, all the professionals we interviewed pointed out their potential role as mediators in the children, caretakers, and emigrated parent(s) triangle.

In general, the teachers, spiritual leaders, and psychologists who participated in this research conveyed feeling ill-equipped to work with children in TNFs. They underscored that if they had received specialized training(s) to work with TNFs, they would feel more able to support these families in sympathetic and effective ways. In some cases, participants' self-perception of being unprepared and incompetent in working with TNFs threatened their professional roles and functions, leading to a sense of frustration and anger toward migrant parent(s) who were then blamed for abandoning their kids and families. This moral opinion on parental emigration and its impact on the family, especially on the children, was a major focus of discussion and disagreement in the focus groups and in online collaborative meetings with participants. To us, it became progressively clearer that blaming the emigrant parents concerned the professionals' frustration and role-threat (Kelly, 1955) much more than the parents' behavior.

Psychologists

Based on their clinical and community experience, the professional psychologists who participated in the study tended to have a negative outlook on the impact of parental migration on children and other family members. However, they also believed that families could maintain strong ties and meaningful relationships in transnationality. To this goal, they saw their primary role as helping families improve their internal communication style and content, for instance, to counter the tendency of having progressively shallower conversations because, as an act of care toward the listener, family members tend to avoid talking about issues and painful feelings (Boccagni, 2012).

The psychologists who participated in the research argued that both those who stayed and those who left would benefit from understanding and dealing with the sensations of injustice, unfairness, victimhood, loss, and anger that accompany the departure of one or both parents. In addition, the psychologists noted that TNF members often feel they lack agency and efficacy, partly because they were affected by a situation and decision beyond their control. Children may feel especially vulnerable and alone when constructing and sharing their thoughts and emotions. Professional counselors can also be instrumental in helping a family with the reintegration of a member who has returned home, especially following a long separation. Despite the benefits that psychological services may bring, access to professional psychotherapy in Honduras is limited, due to the scant resources of most families, communities and the health-care system, and to social stigma associated with seeking psychological support.

Viewing TNFs as potentially as at least as functional and caring as traditional families, or possibly more so, and understanding separation within the context of a wider family project, can serve as productive interpretive lenses when working with TNFs (Dito et al., 2017). TNF members typically feel tensions between what a family (or a parent, a caregiver, a home, a son/daughter) is and what they should be. Empathically recognizing this tension and focusing on what is present and how the family is becoming, rather than on what is absent or lost, can serve as constructive strategies to support TFNs.

Spiritual leaders and teachers

The migration process often represents a profound change in how migrants and their relatives understand their own positions and aims in the world, including their roles and hopes for their family's future. TNF members often feel they have limited control over what marks their current and future lives, and this situation deepens the implicit uncertainties and anxiety of migration. Especially in these moments, religion and spirituality can provide comfort, emotional support and compassionate care (Vasquez, 2010). Moreover, religious congregations can provide tangible assistance to those in need. For instance, thanks to religious communities, members of TNFs, including those who migrate, can find community-based networks of care and support. Similarly, the spiritual leaders who participated in the research discussed helping migrants find shelters along the migratory route and engaging with faith communities in the destination country. The latter can be instrumental in securing jobs and economic stability.

Teachers play a valuable role in the community and, on a daily basis, in caring for those children whose parents have emigrated. In the interviews, the teachers told us that families rarely shared their plans to emigrate with them. However, if they did, the teachers found they could accompany the children through the grieving and separation process: "Teachers become like parents. Children come to you for hugs and support […] For both us and them, it would be helpful to have a preparation period; but migration here happens overnight—a coyote says: 'We leave tomorrow,' and that's it."

For both teachers and spiritual leaders, a primary concern was to prevent family rupture and the neglect of minors. They therefore highlighted the importance of accompanying parents, children, and caretakers in the process of caring for each other throughout the different stages of the migration process. Instead of assuming that families can manage their transnationality, teachers and religious leaders underscored their potential role to enhance family communication. Spiritual leaders told us that they, at times, mediate in specific issues, such as family disputes, the management of remittances, or access to basic material needs. Religious communities, in other words, positioned themselves within a transnational care system that spans borders, both symbolically and materially, as in the case of cross-national churches and congregations.

The 17 religious leaders who participated in the project were affiliated with Evangelical (13) and Catholic (4) churches. Most of them frequently visited isolated rural villages, especially when there were specific needs, such as bringing medicines to these communities. During their travels, many gained knowledge of transnational families in different geographical locations and with a variety of needs, challenges, and structural limitations. Considering that, in rural Honduras, family members might be more likely to seek support within their religious community than in professional or institutional settings, religious or spiritual leaders are often at the forefront of identifying TNFs' needs and issues. Moreover, religious leaders are instrumental in providing informal, non-governmental support to TNFs who might otherwise have no access to institutional support or care.

Guideline 4. Psychologists, religious leaders, and teachers may act as key allies for transnational families facing emotional, relational, and identity-related challenges. By adopting a family-centered approach tailored to each family's circumstances, these professionals can foster cross-border and intergenerational communication, supporting the redefinition of family roles and identities. Religious and other community leaders might act as initial points of contact with TNFs, offering essential emotional, material, and spiritual support. In general, professionals' knowledge of and involvement in broader networks of support or care can be instrumental in helping TNFs access and use institutional and governmental resources.

Family arrangements and agreements

All participants agreed on the importance of clear arrangements within TNFs, as family changes linked to becoming transnational require ongoing negotiations to stabilize the family system, especially regarding responsibilities and expectations. This is also a significant subject of the TNF literature (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024; López Montaño, 2011; Parella, 2007; Peng & Wong, 2016). Whether they migrate or stay, in most societies, women are traditionally considered responsible for these family arrangements (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Peng & Wong, 2016), which impact all TNF members, both in the home country and abroad (Bonizzoni, 2015).

The (In)Formality of agreements and arrangements

The at-home caretakers pointed out that family arrangements are often too informal, despite their importance to proper family functioning. A female caretaker, for instance, explained to us that her son, a single father of two, just told her, "I am going to the States. You will look after the kids, won't you? I will send you money." She was surprised and upset, feeling powerless and confused. Clear and evolving agreements about the scope and limits of the caretaker's responsibility help avoid misunderstandings and tensions and facilitate trust between the abroad parent(s) and caretakers. When trust is present, the experience of both emigrated parents and at-home caretakers improves significantly (López Montaño, 2011; Parella, 2007).

Whenever appropriate, the children—who are often the primary concern of TNFs—could be involved in dialogs and negotiations about internal arrangements, not only to make the kids aware of their own concerns but also allow them to express their opinions and expectations. The caretakers told us that if parents involved and informed their children about the family arrangements, expectations, roles, and responsibilities, the children would have a clearer picture of the distribution of power in the house. Therefore, minors would be less likely to challenge the caretakers' authority, which the caretakers reported as a common problem in their TNFs.

Similarly, the professionals who participated in the study strongly agreed on the need to be transparent and explicit about the responsibilities and range of action of the children's caretakers. In addition, the professionals underscored that when no parent or legal guardian is present in the country or able to adopt this role, legal instruments to formalize the caretaker's custody of the minors become fundamental. Agreements are not just practical but also convey a strong psychological and relational message of care, in contrast to the potential neglect of being unconcerned and of not thinking thoroughly about family functionality in transnationality.

Collaboratively constructing and sharing family agreements enables family members to move from the passive position of reacting and coping with the departure of one or both parents to a more agentic participation toward family well-being. To this end, migration is a shared, plural project that involves family members, communities, cultures, and institutions participating.

Guideline 5. TNFs can consider developing clear, flexible, and inclusive agreements regarding children's care and the modes of collaboration between emigrated parent(s) and caretakers, for instance, on how to deal with specific family issues. These arrangements can be more effective when they acknowledge and reflect the voices of all involved agents, including children, when their involvement is culturally and relationally appropriate. Recognizing that arrangements and agreements that are implicit or based on "common-sense" assumptions tend to be a source of misunderstandings, adult family members may find it helpful to develop agreements and arrangements that are clear yet flexible enough to adapt to new or evolving family circumstances and interpretative frames. Rather than imposing rigid rules, creating space for open dialogs and mutual understandings within families can build trust and adaptability. It is the process of reaching an agreement, rather than the agreement's content, that can make a family stronger and more functional.

Guideline 6. In the case of the planned emigration of a minor's parents, or of only one parent, or of the legal guardian, consulting with legal professionals about granting temporary custody or guardianship to a trusted third party, such as a reliable relative, would be advisable. In this case, it is important to pay attention to the affective and psychological implications of these agreements as well. Community support could also play a crucial role in sustaining these arrangements.

Trust, promises and expectations

Trust is crucial to developing a relational sense of agency (Barad, 2007) within TNFs. Agency here does not refer to being in control and able to act but to being responsible for creating relational realities, concerns, and practices in the family. For example, because care is not a fixed concept but a fluid and relational construction, TNF members can benefit from reflections and agreements on what care-needing and caregiving are and can be, mean, and create. For instance, sending and receiving remittances are not just material acts. Instead, they are entangled with processes of care, guilt, power, memory, hope, and so forth (Serra Mingot, 2020). The participants underscored that, eventually, trust concerns the distribution of social power (who should, is charged with, or is expected to provide caregiving) and ethics (who can do something in accordance with shared possibilities and standards of goodness). In any case, trustworthy arrangements are care practices whose value lies not only in the content of the agreement but also in the relational and affective process of reaching it.

At-home caretakers mentioned the role of promises made by family members to each other, especially between emigrated parent(s) and their children. Promises create expectations that affect how each party constructs its own and the others' roles and identities. In other words, promises are loaded with meanings and affects that are located relationally in the present and the future. They talk about how people currently desire their own and others' behaviors, interpretations, and experiences to be in the future. For instance, if an emigrated mother promises to send a gift or to call every so often, she is implicitly saying that she cares about those who will receive the gift, can engage with this symbolic object and future practices related to it (i.e., gaining enough money and security to be able to buy and send it), will dedicate time and effort to achieve this (e.g., selecting a meaningful object, shopping, packing, and mailing), and so forth.

The participants recognized that promises are not necessarily meant to be kept literally but to foster imaginations and constructions about the family's future. As such, promises have a material and a narrative dimension, and play a relational role in shaping the expectations and roles that underpin family dynamics and functioning. For example, a teacher shared, “A student told me that his father was looking for ways to save money so that he could also emigrate and join his father. I could see the joy and hope in his eyes when he was telling me this.”

Promises and expectations contribute to assert family care, responsibility, and unity in transnationality. They therefore counter one of the caretakers' and children's biggest fears: that the emigrated parent(s) may forget or neglect them and may stop caring about the family. Ongoing demonstrations of care, as simple as expecting and receiving regular phone messages, can be instrumental in maintaining a sense of unity within a TNF.

Guideline 7. Promises craft expectations that help assert and confirm family roles and care practices. As such, promises benefit from being handled transparently and earnestly by emigrated parent(s). When circumstances prevent a promise's fulfillment, parents can communicate the obstacles and discuss the meanings associated with the promise to support ongoing understanding, regardless of whether the promise was kept. For example, sending and receiving gifts or having regular communications are significant practices. As such, it may be convenient for family members to make the meanings and effects of these practices explicit.

Agreeing on the management of remittances

Given the personal, family, and social prominence attributed to remittances in the context of TNFs (Best, 2014), their practical management by the receiving party often develops along fine lines of power, control, and ethics (Serra Mingot, 2020), for instance, on whether the money is used for the children's and, in general, the family's possibilities and well-being. For this, transparency is key.

The participants pointed out that sending and receiving remittances requires trust that they will be managed appropriately, especially in the long run. In general, parents abroad and their family members in the home country may want to agree on the priorities for the money, such as creating savings for future needs or projects. Family caretakers underscored the issue of emergencies and unexpected costs, often related to health care and the structural needs of the family home. The latter is a pressing issue in Honduras due to the increasing occurrence of natural disasters linked to climate change (Sánchez-Carrasco & Hernández-Albújar, 2025).

The participants emphasized that remittances and gifts should not be used to compensate for the parent(s)' absence. They also problematized the common practice of using remittances as an instrument of power to control family members' behavior in the home country, for example, rewarding or punishing a child for their school performance by changing the monetary amount of the remittances (López Montaño, 2011).

Guideline 8. Given that remittances are often a foundational aspect and outcome of the migration process, it may be beneficial for family members to make explicit the personal and relational meanings and expectations related to sending, receiving, and managing them. For both senders and receivers, remittances can reproduce complex and affective processes and balances of care and power.

Family reunification narratives

For both emigrated parent(s)' and those who remained in the home country, narratives on family reunification are key to anticipating and constructing their family futures. Although commonly seen as the long-term goal, family reunification in the host country will depend on immigration policies and the logistics and realities of the migration journey. All this can make the actual reunion difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, the children's desire to reunite with their parents abroad may face resistance from these parents (e.g., if they have started a new family in the host society) (López Montaño, 2011) and from relatives in the home country. For example, caretakers who have mothered or fathered the children of migrant parent(s) may fear missing the affective and material dimensions of their role, such as the remittances parents sent home and the children's companionship and help with house duties and, at times, with looking after the caretakers themselves (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Pérez Gañán & Neira Molina, 2017; Schapiro et al., 2013).

The other direction of family reunification, i.e., the return of emigrated parents to the country of origin, may also be hindered by the perspective that remittances will stop (Fouratt, 2018), by the pessimistic long-term outlook on the family's social well-being and economic opportunities in the home country, and by the global care chain that bounds the migrant parents to their role and responsibilities as caretakers in the host country. For instance, two caretakers pointed out that their daughters in Spain felt so responsible for the older person they were looking after that they could not abandon them. It often occurs that multiple allegiances complicate the caretaking processes in TNF families (Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

In any case, whether in the home or the host country, family reunification does not entail the end of family transnationality. For instance, if the reunification occurs in the host country, the family can still be partially separated, as some members did not migrate. Alternatively, if reunification is by the return to the home country, the returnee's migration experiences and personal and cultural changes may have significantly impacted his or her values, relational practices, and identities (Boccagni, 2012; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Peng & Wong, 2016), therefore representing another form of distance and separation from the past “home” (Ahmed, 1999).

Guideline 9. Reunification is a powerful and frequent narrative about the family's future. As reunification involves a significant change for the TNF, family members may find it helpful to carefully plan and discuss it to anticipate possible disappointments and foster care, trust, and unity across differences. Similarly, changes in reunification plans or narratives ought to be openly discussed and explained to all family members. Last, whether the reunification occurs in the home or the host country, a reunified transnational family's care, bonding, and functionality should not be taken for granted.

Family communication at a distance

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) enables easy, affordable, and frequent contact between family members in the home and the host country. This transnational communication is a practice of care that fosters emotional proximity and co-presence, allowing the abroad parents to maintain their affective and parental roles despite the physical distance (Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012; Telve, 2019). The participants underscored that communication quality is more important than its frequency. According to them, a good exchange is:

- Planned and carried out: It is important to be able to anticipate when a call will take place, especially in precarious situations. For instance, the irregular status of migrants and toughening migration policies are sources of anxiety for family members in the home country. For this, regular and predictable calls have a reassuring, soothing, almost ritualistic effect on TNF members.
- Sincere: Conversations based on intimacy in which people feel free to talk about their feelings, especially about tough situations or challenges, convey a sense of family care and unity. Often, TNF members avoid discussing problems and embellish their lives to reassure those on the other side. This thoughtful act of care is to protect family members who, given the distance, may feel impotent when addressing issues. However, the downside of this communicative choice is that conversations tend to become increasingly superficial and material or factual, moving away from affects, meanings, and lived experiences.
- Unrushed: Words and feelings do not always come easily. Occasionally, it takes time to talk, listen, and process information. People want to be heard, and their experiences to be acknowledged. It is, therefore, important to take time to be with the interlocutor on the other end of the call and avoid minimizing or trivializing their emotions and experiences.

Caretakers' mediation in communication between children and their parents abroad is often key to maintaining strong family ties. As with any communication, fostering readiness to talk and to listen is crucial. Caretakers and spiritual leaders have observed that children often need to learn how to communicate with their parents at a distance, as good communication entails awareness not only of the content—i.e., what is told and heard—but also of the affective and relational aspects of thinking and feeling during the processes of telling and hearing. Especially in relation to the affective processes of communication, professional psychologists suggested that some of their most significant work is on the TNF members' emotional awareness, readiness, and abilities to tell and listen in the “here-and-now,” whether on-site or online (Bonizzoni, 2015).

Becoming accustomed to ICT-based relationships can allow for the restructuring of traditional concepts of family presence and space beyond physicality. As a result, professionals or counselors may collaborate with TNF members to process the sense and experience of “being with” and “being here” (Telve, 2019). For instance, some caretakers had regular dinners with their overseas daughters, who were present at the table digitally through cellphones.

Guideline 10. To enhance communication among transnational family members, interlocutors might want to listen attentively and speak sincerely about their feelings and experiences. Even if problems cannot always be solved, it is beneficial to avoid belittling the other person's experience: what might seem trivial to one person can be significant to another. Showing some vulnerability rather than wearing a mask of perfection and strength is critical for establishing close relationships. Instead of neglecting concerns and tensions or embellishing life, transnational family members could consider that people usually like to feel heard and understood, especially by significant others.

LIMITATIONS

Given the vast and growing scholarly literature on TNFs, we could not possibly present and discuss the multiple contexts and realities of this complex psychosocial and cultural phenomenon. The observations and recommendations in this manuscript derive from TNFs in which one or both parents emigrate, leaving their children under the care of a relative or, if present, the other parent in the home country. However, different concerns and priorities may emerge under different scenarios of family transnationality, such as when the parents are separated, caretakers are not family members, or cultural models of care extend beyond the nuclear family (Kufakurinani et al., 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2013).

Similarly, we did not consider family dynamics and structures linked to multiple mobilities, such as "astronaut parents" who return to their home country, leaving their children in the country to which the family migrated (Ho & Bedford, 2008); families that move together to a new country and then the parents go to a third country to work; or families in which the figure of the biological and legal parent do not match. We also omitted the numerous cases of families in which one or more children or parents move internally within a country.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Whether the roles and structure of a transnational family need to go hand in hand with how they have been traditionally lived, described, and desired as part of the social imaginary of a family is a significant source of tensions and critical reflection for family members and community agents that work with TNFs (Veale & Andres, 2020). For our participants, a broader cultural and historical shift was at the core of their lived experience, on the goodness of traditional family models and, conversely, on the possibility of other modes of being a family (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024).

As both this research's findings and the literature in the field report, when a family becomes transnational, it undergoes significant changes in care practices and in the personal and social constructions of its members' roles and responsibilities. Based on participants' experiences and knowledge, the guidelines, findings, and reflections in this manuscript may help TNFs and professionals working with them to maintain care and unity across transnationality. This research counters popular beliefs that see transnationality as a prophecy that families will become unstructured or broken. Social representations that frame transnational families as incomplete or defective reproduce a normative ideal of family and care, often blaming parents, especially mothers, for having "abandoned" their children or for "forgetting they are mothers" (Boccagni, 2012, p. 266). These discourses ignore the fact that migration can itself be an act of care and responsibility (Dreby, 2006, 2015; Hershberg & Lykes, 2019), and that physical absence does not preclude emotional presence or parental commitment. The participants' experiences and testimonies call into question normative social constructions that tend to pathologize TNFs and often extend into the professional and academic fields. Moreover, such stigmatizing constructions impose a moral and emotional burden on transnational mothers (Boccagni, 2012; McCallum, 2019).

Although the psychosocial adjustments required for TNF members are affectively intense and often painful, almost all the participants in our research asserted that their family roles and identities are processes of becoming and belonging that evolve through experiences, constructions, and affectivities. All these evolve in time and space, shaped by closeness and distances while simultaneously transcending traditional understanding of spatial dimensions and geopolitical separations (Bonizzoni, 2015; Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024; Telve, 2019). For instance, digital presence should not be interpreted as necessarily less or deficient when compared to physical presence. Instead, it is a different way of "being with" the other (Telve, 2019; Yeoh et al., 2023). While current cultural constructions of family typically see members' proximity as desirable, this is no guarantee of good family functioning and, as TNFs demonstrate, it is not necessary to it (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Hernández-Albújar et al., 2026). As shown in the research participants' narratives, TNFs challenge traditional imaginaries of family normality and defy the implicit assumption that, for a family to be caring, its members must reside under the same roof.

The number of TNFs is likely to keep growing due to the ongoing increase in global migration and the toughening of immigration and family-reunification policies in many regions worldwide. TNFs represent a possible model and structure for a functioning, caring family, which, although different, is not necessarily better or worse than traditional families. As such, migration scholars and professionals working with transnationality and mobilities should problematize imaginaries and discourses that might, first, consider TNF as defective or deficient in comparison to traditional families and, second, to blame emigrant parents for children's and families' issues (Ambrosini, 2015; Kufakurinani et al., 2014; Phoenix, 2011; Villamizar Puyana & Moreno Rojas, 2011).

The guidelines and discussions that have been presented in this manuscript may serve as a toolbox for psychologists and other professionals who work with TNFs by indicating specific areas of concern, by allowing them to anticipate challenges in and evolutions of family dynamics, and by providing suggestions that derive directly from the participants' experiences and learned lessons. In addition, this study's findings and guidelines encourage adopting a critical perspective on dominant discourses that tend to look for deficits in TNFs and to act as self-fulfilling prophecies (Gergen, 2014; Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024; Phoenix, 2011).

Dialog, transparency, trust, and collaboration emerge in the guidelines as key practices of care among TNF members and caretakers who face the challenges and possibilities that transnationality provides. The guidelines convey that all family members and caretakers—including this study's educators, psychologists, and spiritual leaders—participate in the construction and mattering of their family's transnationality as a relational project of care and responsibility. The key question is not so much about TNFs' issues and needs as about what they and their members can become.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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