

Johanna Hiitola, Kati Turtiainen, Sabine Gruber, Marja Tiilikainen
(eds.), *Family Life in Transition: Borders, Transnational Mobility, and
Welfare Society in Nordic Countries* (London: Routledge, 2020)

The sociology of family represents a growing branch of contemporary sociological knowledge. Investigating the realities pertaining to family life in relation to aspects of transnational mobility, welfare, gender and race, this collective volume succeeds to offer a realistic image of the situation in Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Family life faces new opportunities and obstacles within transitional settings, in terms of citizenship status and welfare.

The editors of the volume are sociologists with various competences and perspectives of investigation, with the experience of various collaborative projects that constituted the preliminary stage of the book: *Social Empowerment in Rural Areas* (Interreg Baltic Sea Region, 2016–2019 at Chydenius) and *Family Separation, Migration Status and Everyday Security: Experiences and Strategies of Vulnerable Migrants* (Academy of Finland, 2018–2021 at the Migration Institute of Finland). In the Introduction the editors approach the transformation of the welfare state generated mainly by the world economic crisis of 2008 and the increase in asylum applications in the Nordic countries since 2015.

The guiding keyword of the analysis is „border” a location of transition and negotiation, bringing people together and separating people, potentially and actually, generating either marginalisation or belonging. Border appears as a reality testing the practices of societies, the legislation and policies alike. The phenomena of deterritorialization of European internal and external borders reveal in relation to the hierarchies of migrants transposed into the chances of access to social welfare, advantageous legal status and work, which in turn has a specific impact on family life. The editors of the volume emphasize an important and intriguing fact: „Thus, borders can also be seen as institutions that produce social relations and hierarchies, far from the actual geographical borders” (p. 2). As well, in the Introduction, in the second chapter, Valtteri Vähä-Savo evaluates the problem of „Decoupling spheres of belonging in the Nordic welfare states” (p. 10) emphasizing the importance of the confluence among nation, citizenship, and population; three crucial spheres of belonging which were at the same time the legitimation base of Nordic welfare states, precisely, via their successful confluence. When decoupled, these spheres of influence start to present deficient functioning and the welfare state become far less efficient.

On the one hand, there is social and economic legitimation of the practices sustaining the welfare state, and there is on the other hand a moral type of legitimation sanctioning the social practices the functioning and the efficiency of the welfare state. When investigating the moral legitimation, there is a degree of change that might be estimated empirically. The specialists assessed empirically the change following the aspects related to the bordering practices of welfare services emphasizing the extent to which they construct in everyday

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environments a series of (newer) norms of parenthood, family, and citizenship. Authors Beret Bråten, Kristina Gustafsson, and Silje Sønsterudbråten, in „Guiding migrant parents in Nordic welfare states - cases from Norway and Sweden”, investigate the empirical data gathered from three parenting programmes in Norway and Sweden for migrant parents. The research questions were why are migrant families targeted, what kind of transitions do the programmes promote, and how are transitions expected to be achieved? The investigators also approach the exercising of governing authority through these programmes, informing and influencing other people’s views of reality, especially their aspirations and motivations, in order to influence their practices, inducing good parental practices. The socialisation of parents via such programmes faces strong and unexamined views about cultural differences (in my opinion, on both sides). The implicit in the operation of such programmes is that migrant parents are not perceived by the states as equal peers to the national parents. However, since the participation in the parenting programmes is voluntary, the governing intervention is legitimate by the mutual interest to avoid the formation of parallel communities and ghettos. This motivation sustains the implementation of other programmes, which are compulsory and more debatable.

In the part two of the volume, investigating the quality of life and the welfare services for the Sámi community outside the Finnish territories called Sámi homeland, Tuuli Miettunen discusses a research based on a community-based, dialogical method, involving the Sámi concept of *gulahallan* (communicating for mutual understanding). The networks Sámi families pass on their culture and language to their children outside their traditional Sámi homeland via specific networks formed to sustain the vitality of their indigenous culture, in Finland. The chapter signed by Sabine Gruber approaches foster families and the placement of children in foster care, with a special attention to the manner in which Swedish values for family life and parenthood and their associated practices are constructed, along with their influence on the procedures for getting assigned as a foster home. The research conducted by Marit Aure and Darius Daukšas brings to the fore the experiences of fear and insecurity faced by the Lithuanian parents living in Norway and having to interact with the Norwegian Child Protective Services (NCWS). This is an experience developed upon the “us” versus “them” thinking, with the consequence of empowering the otherwise invisible borders between the Norwegian services and the Lithuanian migrants. The core of the investigation regards the „out-of-home placements” by the NCWS, contrasting with the official idealistic stand that a social democratic welfare regime (the Norwegian one in this case) “provides extensive and wide-ranging family support” and „enjoys a high level of trust” and in consequence „people do not see as repressive”. This is rather wishful thinking and in fact, many people, even Norwegians oppose and feel anxiety and suspicion in front of the government practice characterized by a high threshold for intervention legitimated by the

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prevention of harm. For the Lithuanian parents these practices recall the Soviet practices they resent. Also, on the top of marginalisation they feel object to “epistemic injustice” (Haga, 2019, quoted by the authors) from the NCWS. Thus the relationship to the Norwegian state is at best one described by mistrust, which is neither beneficial to society at large nor to the children in question.

The second part of the volume includes also a study entitled „Representations of mothering of migrant Finns”, by Minna Zechner and Tiina Tiilikka, a topic approached within the framework of the contrast between a (rather ideal) representation of the (Nordic) welfare state as a normative project of shared moral conceptions, values, and social goals and a reality in which the welfare practices are lacking for the most part precisely these shared conceptions, values and goals. Everyday practices are conveyed in a great variety of materials. The study selects for investigation blog texts authored by Finnish migrant mothers living outside Finland, to emphasize a certain image of mothering as reflected by the notions of good mothering, described by the Finnish “migrant” and “mommy” blogging. The authors conclude that “The discomfort and incompatibility of the differing norms across countries are visible in the blog texts. This is shown in the decision-making processes that were presented in the texts. The bloggers wanted to make their own choices that conformed to the norms of one or the other country, understandable and acceptable to the blog’s readers. Especially, they are able to see, combine, and explain the variation of good parenthood in different cultures and contexts. This is part of the concept of representational mothering, and they make implicit comparisons between the ideology of intensive mothering and the realities of actual mothering in a transnational context. The often ironic style of the blog texts can be seen as a textual style to attract and amuse readers, but this can also be seen as an acceptable way to handle differences and difficulties in a transnational everyday life that takes place across and between two countries and cultures. Despite the egalitarian ethos that the Finnish welfare state emphasizes, the division of labour seems to be traditional, and this was shown when searching for data for this study: blogs written by fathers were not to be found. In their texts, the mother bloggers are not giving fathers central roles in parenting. Thus, the analysed texts represent the ideas of heterosexual intimate relationships and nuclear families, which can be seen as a norm of the ‘ideal family’”. (p. 78)

Part three of the volume investigates the goals and the practises of parenting across state border. In this respect, the care strategies are identified and studied considering the challenges triggered by the practises entertained by the intergenerational networks of migrant parents. The interesting aspects are revealed by approaching the masculine perceptions, practises and strategies of parenting. “The network migration of younger

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relatives, especially sons, gives the older generation a chance to spend more time with them (...) finding a job for a relative can be seen as a masculine caregiving pattern, and even the men in transnational families can be involved in the upbringing of their younger relatives”, thus inducing “the development and maintenance of a traditional male role in the Estonian society” (p. 92), while perpetuating the necessity to commute between two countries in order to achieve a decent lifestyle. At the same time, this strategy of commuting between the countries becomes an aspirational model for the young boys, despite the loneliness and missing family members, perpetuating an imperfect but functional situation.

Charlotte Melander, Oksana Shmulyar Gréen, and Ingrid Höjer investigate the role of trust and reciprocity in relational flows which forces the parents in the mobile families to organize children care transnationally. Transnational children care in Sweden, in the case of migrant parents originating from Central and Eastern Europe is faced with the challenges presented by newer family dynamics drawn by gender issues and intergenerational interactions. Perceiving mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives as the responsible ones for the hands-on care of the children, this is the situation perpetuated in the new contexts brought about by migration. Grandmothers remain essential resources of care and support either in the home country or in the country of adoption, in either situation involving to a significant extent the digital media. The study shows how the perpetuation of these familial relations perpetuates the safety of “care triangles” of love, trust, and reciprocity. (p. 104)

Olga Davydova-Minguet and Pirjo Pöllänen approach the situation of the intergenerational care practices among Russian-born migrants in rural North Karelia in Finland as an example for the social construction of a transnational familyhood. The key is intergenerational interdependency via stories with an inclusive role which maintain as a “reality” the concept of an extended intergenerational family, with shared affectionate care responsibilities, as well as moral and legal obligations. Although this particular lived experience gives substance to a sort of “caring from a distance” it also produces anxieties emphasizing a fragile state of the transnational family life (p. 115).

Approaching the topic of the anxiety generated by the passage of time apart in the case of family separation, Johanna Leinonen and Saara Pellander investigate the case of the refugees in Finland who are longing for the reunion with their families, which becomes a factor organizing their lives and social practise. While refugees were not only passive recipients of administrative decisions, manifesting in their anticipation of the future the will and resourcefulness to actively structure their practices and everyday routines, their agency was limited and their experiences often faced administrative reactions generating more anxiety, increased alienation and more violence in their harsh lives (pp. 126-127).

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The last section gathers research described by the phrase “enacting citizenship and respectable parenthood in racialized minority families”. Marja Tiilikainen studies the respectability of Finnish Somali fathers through an investigation oriented by the changing social-gendered roles between men and women, on the one hand, and the increased unemployment among Somalis in Finland. Within the transnational space recognition for fatherhood comes from achievements such as a having a paid job or meaningful volunteer work, from educational background and skills, from all the sources of respectability that make a father a role model for their children. Fathers engaged in transnational activities may be de facto absent but they are an embodiment of commitment to children within their families. The negotiation of the status of fatherhood is engaging the Finnish values and ideals as well as their traditional values associated to an ideal image of the Somali heritage of values and perceptions (p. 139).

Marta Padovan-Özdemir and Barbara Noel Day study participatory methods and production of shared knowledge within the Danish educational system and show the implications of shared knowledge in empowerment and pro-active citizenship. This community approach to creating shared knowledge brings together parents and educators in a common effort. Within this joint effort the educators are to a certain extent the gate-keepers of the pre-existing order of things and leave very little room for the critical input of the migrant parents, who feel marginalized. The study calls for a larger room for negotiation in the context of school-home collaboration and for diversification of the understanding of the forms of valuable parenting.

“Iranian migrant parents struggling for respectability”, by Zeinab Karimi, discusses the Finnish-Iranian construct of parental respectability, within a situational socio-symbolical approach, considering factors related to gender class and personal understanding of migratory translocation. The author concludes: “The social construction of *khanevadehye mohtaram* (respectable family) among the Iranian families is not only connected to class recognition but also to the ways in which the family maintains solidarity, and children learn to establish themselves as *mohtaram* (respectable) members of the society and their ethnic communities. To be distinguished as a *mohtaram* parent, the participants in this study invested in their children’s achievements. Thus, their parenting and specifically the mothering practices (due to the social construction of mothering) is not only to build respectable selves but also to change the boundaries of respectability for the next generation, and claim their recognition by encouraging children to have class mobility” (p. 162).

Camilla Nordberg investigates the migrant perceptions of the process of becoming a citizen, which is interesting especially in the case of the stay-at-home mothers who are

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newcomers in Finland. In these cases, the “sufficient self” is complemented by negotiations toward approaching paths to citizenship, which emphasizes political mothering and mothering as a citizenship practice (p. 174). The following empirical research conducted by Johanna Hiitola, Kati Turtiainen, and Jaana Vuori analyses the difficult situation of the Afghan families in Finland against the threat of deportation (most of the times, for the father). The subjects of the investigation were mothers and children which arrived in Finland as refugees resettled by UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) without the fathers, who are not granted asylum and find themselves under the threat of deportation. The migrant status was accompanied by several gendered types of suffering and aloneness.

The epilogue signed by Johanna Hiitola emphasizes once more, in a synthetic manner, the contribution of each investigation. Studying the contexts in which the racialized families attempt to pursue their aspirations abroad, borders become a special type of social spheres. They are constructed, negotiated, and organized by the specific interactions between the welfare services and the migrant family members, nuancing in various ways the enactment of citizenship through the agency of racialized families in the Nordic welfare states.

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