

**The Experience of Transnational Migration in Post-Soviet Countries: The Effects
of
Separation on Individuals and Families**

Final Report

Submitted to International Association of Schools of Social Work

May 25, 2017

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Contents

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
Background	5
Completed Activities	6
Outcomes.....	9
Project Challenges.....	9
Conclusions	10
References	10
Appendix A: Questionnaire - Family Member	11
Appendix B: Questionnaire – Person Who Has Migrated.....	14

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Executive Summary

Together with partners from the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia and ultimately from Kyrgyzstan, we developed this study to explore what it means for individuals and families that are experiencing separation, documenting issues that arise at the intersection of migration and family life.

The need to migrate has contributed to a growing number of ‘transnational’ families who live apart (even across national borders) but who create and retain a sense of collective welfare and “familyhood” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). These families may encounter better economic opportunities but simultaneously face a number of challenges at the family level (Robila, 2010; IOM, 2014).

Migration is increasingly common around the globe, a consequence of global economies and increasing mobility that is complicated by restrictive migration policies. While families may encounter better economic opportunities, they simultaneously face a number of challenges at the family level (Robila, 2010; IOM, 2014), and the challenges of organizing care of family members transnationally have been well documented (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011)

Our aim was to raise awareness and inform the development of higher education curriculum modules in Eastern Europe and the US. The project consisted of outreach to local communities for the purpose of recruitment and, and in-depth interviews with individuals affected by transnational migration. A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted, translated and transcribed.

Outcomes include two manuscripts in process, one slated for submission in a Russian language journal, a presentation at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work’s Buffalo Center for Social Research “Grand Rounds”, a presentation accepted at the 2017 Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, and an educational video focused on the issues confronting the families in our study was also developed.

The project team has plans to pursue a second line of inquiry that will focus on the impact of migration on children.

Background

Rationale and Purpose

This project aimed to address the current lack of knowledge related to transnational migration. The impact on family relations and structure was explored from multiple perspectives, including fathers, mothers, spouses and adult children who are living in different nations due to the migration of a family member. Increased understanding of the benefits and challenges could lead to improved policies and interventions that better support families.

Migration is a truly global issue, and one of the most complex and least understood social problems, especially concerning its impact on family relations. Robila (2010) discusses this complexity of migration in relation to post-Soviet countries. Immigration policies limit the ability for families to migrate together, creating an increasing number of “transnational” or “temporarily disintegrated” families. The existing literature is largely focused on Latin America and ignores increasing trends in transnational families in other migrant-sending areas such as post-Soviet nations (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011).

Description of Implementation

The research team developed the study protocol, which included consent forms, in-person verbal procedures, a script for the verbal announcement of the study, and a verbal consent information sheet for distance participants. The protocol also included text for a website posting used to advertise the study, recruitment flyers, and a form letter to community agencies requesting posting. The team received formal approval from the University at Buffalo’s Institutional Review Board on June 8th, 2014.

A Sharepoint site, hosted by the University at Buffalo, was created as a means of sharing confidential data across our multiple sites. Sharepoint is a web application that allows secure sharing of study documents among team members, and storage of confidential study data.

Participants were recruited through outreach to immigrant serving organizations, community centers, and schools. Flyers, which described the study, its purpose and criterion for inclusion, were distributed. Those who expressed interest in participating were asked to refer other potential participants. All participants must have either been a migrant themselves or a relative of someone that was currently a migrant.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-two individuals from Kyrgyzstan, two from Moldova, one from Ukraine, one from Belarus, and one from Russia. An interview protocol consisting of semi-structured and open-ended questions was used to help structure the interviews, i.e. what was your motivation for leaving your country? How did you come to make this decision? How long have you been separated from your family? How do you stay connected to them? How has this affected you? Your spouse/partner/children? Connection to family? What are the challenges faced in your host/new country? What are their hopes? What are your hopes for the future? Appendix A provides a list of the questions that were asked of individual that were migrants. Appendix B provides a list of question asked of participants that

were relatives of individuals that migrated. As interviews, progressed, new questions were posed relative to the interview content.

Research procedures entailed either a face-to-face meeting with participants in a location of their choosing, or a phone interview with a member of the research team. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences as a migrant or as a member of a family of a migrant. Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to 90 minutes. Because experiences of family conflict or migration difficulties may cause psychological distress, participants were not asked any questions about immigration status.

All respondents were interviewed in the language that afforded the greatest comfort level for discussing complex issues. Members of the research team were multilingual and spoke all of the languages likely to be spoken by participants. Consent forms and interview protocols were translated into the native language of each participant.

Following the guidelines for consensual qualitative analysis, interview data were initially coded into core domains by a team of four researchers. The researchers then came together to discuss these domains, and then data were compared across cases. The team discussed disagreements, and members openly conveyed their own beliefs and feelings about the meaning of the data. In this way, a consensus developed over time regarding major themes. Results are discussed further in the Outcomes section below.

Completed Activities

The project consisted of the following activities: 1) outreach to local communities either directly or through non-governmental organizations, community centers, churches, etc., as well as via web-based tools; 2) the collection of qualitative data via in-depth interviews; 3) the transcription and translation of data; and 4) educational materials, including scholarly presentations based on research findings, were developed.

The project team recruited twenty-five participants. Of these, nineteen were women and six were men. Participants ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-eight years old. Nine of the individuals interviewed were migrants, while fourteen were family members of individuals that were currently abroad. Two of the latter group had once been migrants themselves. See Table One for demographic information about participants.

Table One: Participant Demographics

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	19	80
Male	6	20
Age		
18 to 24 years	5	15
25 to 34 years	9	30
35 to 44 years	5	25
45 to 54 years	2	10
55 to 64 years	1	5
Age 65 or older	3	15
Place of living		
Urban	14	45
Rural	11	55
Status		
Migrant	9	45
Relative	14	70
Both	2	10
Education		
Secondary education	12	50
Higher education	11	25
Technical	2	15
Marital Status		
Single (never married)	10	20
Married	13	70
Widowed	1	5
Divorced	1	5
Number of Household		
1	2	10
2	5	5
3	2	10
4	7	30
5+	9	45
Employment		
Retired	4	15
Housewife	2	10
Employed	15	50
Unemployed	4	25

A larger number of participants, twenty of the twenty-five, were from Kyrgyzstan. Of the remaining participants, two were from Moldova, one was from Ukraine, one was from Belarus, and one was from Russia. Table Two provides a breakdown of participants' countries of origin, and indicates where participants are currently residing.

Table 2: Countries of Origin and Destination Countries for Migrant Participants

Participant Status	Country of Origin	Country of Residence
Migrant	Moldova (2)	United States (2)
Migrant	Ukraine (1)	United States (1)
Migrant	Belarus (1)	United States (1)
Migrant	Russia (1)	United States (1)
Migrant	Kyrgyzstan (4)	Russia (3) Europe (1)
Migrant as reported by relative	Kyrgyzstan (16)	Russia (15) Europe (1) Kazakhstan (1)

Outcomes

This study helped to uncover the circumstances that lead to migration in post-Soviet countries, and illuminated the challenges faced by the individuals who migrate, and by their family members left behind.

Findings suggest that economic factors are driving the decision to migrate. Faced with high unemployment as well as fewer social safety nets, people are willing to endure hardships associated with migration in order to attain a standard of living that even one generation ago was within their reach (Ryazantsev, 2016).

The additional income earned abroad, however, inevitably means that a number of sacrifices must be made. Individuals who migrate often leave behind professional positions to work in construction or in the service industry. They experience overcrowded living circumstances and difficult working conditions. They also worry about their families, and describe missing traditional family celebrations.

Family members describe always being concerned about the person who migrated, and children whose parents are abroad often need consoling. When children are left behind, other family members must assume responsibility for caregiving. This creates financial and time burdens for the family members. Adult responsibilities can fall to young children.

Outcomes include two manuscripts in process, one slated for submission in a Russian language journal, a presentation to the University at Buffalo School of Social Work Buffalo Center for Social Research's "Grand Round", a presentation accepted at the 2017 Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting. The project team has plans to pursue a second line of inquiry that will focus on the impact of migration on children.

A short educational video was developed which provides an overview of the trade-offs confronted by Kyrgyzstan and Moldovan participants. The video can be accessed by clicking on the following link: <https://spark.adobe.com/video/uEdtveeycd0bQ>

This project has laid the groundwork for future work. The team hopes to collect additional data, which will allow for comparisons between the countries.

Project Challenges

Our project proceeded slowly due to a number of unexpected circumstances. Shortly after receiving word of project funding, our Principle Investigator, Dr. Filomena Critelli, received a prestigious fellowship award, which allowed her to return to Pakistan to continue her research on domestic violence and micro finance in Pakistan. In her absence, the Project Coordinator undertook the process of coordinating team meetings and preparing our submission to the University at Buffalo's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Having partners with multiple university affiliations complicated the Institutional Review Board process and took time to resolve.

The most significant challenges occurred when it became necessary for three of our research partners to return to their home countries and to withdraw from the project. We were fortunate to add a new faculty partner in August 2015. However, this major change in the composition of our research team shifted the focus of our project to Kyrgyzstan, another post-Soviet country. Nevertheless, we were able to successfully recruit and interview our target number of respondents that fit our inclusion criteria and have obtained rich data that will produce valuable scholarship

Conclusions

The project team experienced a number of challenges related to cross-national research. We lost touch, for example, with several team members.

Technology in the form of Skype and Google Hangouts and Google Drive presented an effective means for project planning. The creation of a Sharepoint site enabled the group to store data securely.

This approach to cross-national research could easily be transferred to other settings. In our case, members of the project team all spoke English, which likely contributed to our success. Differences in language could potentially be overcome, however, with tools like Skype that provide translation.

References

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Appendix A: Questionnaire - Family Member

The Experience of Transnational Migration: The Effects of Separation on Individuals and Families

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Questions for Respondents With Family Member That Has Migrated Transnationally

First, can we learn a little bit about you?

Demographic Background

How old are you? _____

Country of Residence _____

Destination country of family member _____

Relationship to person who migrated _____

Marital Status

(1) _____ Single

(2) _____ Married

(4) _____ Widowed

(5) _____ Separated

(6) _____ Divorced

Family Living arrangements Nuclear _____ Joint Family _____

Family size _____ Number of Adults _____ Number of children _____

What is the highest grade of schooling or level of education you have completed?

Are you employed? _____ Type of employment _____

How long has the family been separated due to migration? _____

Questions

What motivated the decision to have your family member migrate (can insert family relation such as husband, father, mother) to another country?

How did you come to make this decision for this family member to migrate?

Did they leave alone?

What family members remained in the home country?

Can you tell us about the experience of having a family member who migrated?

Would you care to elaborate on some of the challenges involved in your migration experience?
(In term of questions, maybe we should also ask some questions (may be sensitive) about the challenges of getting to the destination country- how they were able to do it.)

How do you stay connected as a family?

How would you say that this circumstance has affected you?

Your spouse/partner/children?

What is the frequency of communication with your family member (husband, wife, father, mother etc.)?

How do you stay connected? What are the barriers?

What are the challenges do you face now that your family member is abroad?

What are your ways of coping with this issue? i.e. issue of separation?

Is there an experience that stands out in your mind that you would like to share?

What would you want others to know about your experience?

What would you prefer to be different in your experience of being far away from your family?

What (if any) have been some positive aspects or benefits of having your family member migrate abroad?

How your family life changed after a member went abroad to work?

	Much better	better	The same	Worse	Much worse
Finances					
Access to health care					
Access to education					
Psychological climate					

In your opinion, are there any ways that the absence of your family member has an impact on the children's health? (psychological health, physical health)

What is the influence of parent's absence on the child's education (moral education, school education?)

Would you say that children with parents abroad have a better chance to succeed?

What are your hopes for the future?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you for sharing thoughts on these important issues!

Appendix B: Questionnaire – Person Who Has Migrated

The Experience of Transnational Migration: The Effects of Separation on Individuals and Families

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Questions for Respondents Who Have Migrated Transnationally

First, can we learn a little bit about you?

Demographic Background

How old are you? _____

Country of origin _____

Country of Destination _____

What is the highest grade of schooling or level of education you have completed?

Relationship to person

Marital Status

(1) _____ Single

(2) _____ Married

(4) _____ Widowed

(5) _____ Separated

(6) _____ Divorced

Family Living arrangements Nuclear _____ Joint Family _____

Family size _____ Number of Adults _____ Number of children _____

Are you employed? _____ Type of employment _____

How long have you been living apart from your family due to migration?

Questions

1) What was your motivation for leaving your country?

2) How did you come to make this decision? How long have you been separated from your family?

3) Did you leave alone?

4) What family members remained in the home country?

Can you tell us about the experience of migrating? What were the circumstances?

Would you care to elaborate further on some of the challenges involved in your migration experience? *(In term of questions, maybe we should also ask some questions (may be sensitive) about the challenges of getting to the destination country- how they were able to do it.)*

5) How do you stay connected to your family back home?

6) What is the frequency of communication with your family member (husband, wife, father, mother etc.)?

How do you stay connected? What are the barriers?

7) How would you say that this (living so far from family) has affected you?

Your spouse/partner/children?

8) What are the challenges you face in your host/new country?

Where there are challenges / issues identified: What are your ways of coping with this issue? i.e. issue of separation?

9) Is there an experience that stands out in your mind that you would like to share?

10) What would you want others to know about your experience?

11) What would you prefer to be different in your experience of being far away from your family?

12) What (if any) have been some positive aspects or benefits of your migration experience?

What are the positive aspects for working abroad?

13) How your family life changed after a member did went abroad to work?

	Much better	better	The same	Worse	Much worse
Finances					
Access to health care					
Access to education					
Psychological climate					

14) In your opinion, are there any ways that the absence of your family member has an impact on the children's health? (psychological health, physical health)

15) What is the influence of parent's absence on the child's education (moral education, school education)?

16) Would you say that children with parents abroad have a better chance to succeed?

17) What are your hopes for the future?

Thank you for sharing thoughts on these important issues!