

Digital Technologies, Disrupted Parenthood, and Ethical Challenges: Methodological Reflections from Research with Ukrainian Refugee Mothers in Bulgaria

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Abstract: This article examines the methodological and ethical challenges of researching parenthood in contexts of war, forced mobility, and digital mediation, drawing on material from an online study with Ukrainian mothers displaced to Bulgaria after February 2022. The text advances the argument that digital connectivity does not merely maintain family relations at a distance, but produces specific forms of proximity and tension that transform both the practice and study of parenthood. The analytical focus is placed on the ethics of proximity, emotional labour, and the limits of access to intimate digital spaces, as well as on uneven rhythms of communication, periods of silence, and interruptions as social and emotional phenomena. The discussion draws on five semi-structured online interviews conducted with Ukrainian refugee mothers residing in Bulgaria in 2025 and reflects on the opportunities and limitations of digitally mediated qualitative research. The article contributes to ongoing methodological debates on researching transnational family life in situations of war and forced displacement by foregrounding the ethical significance of absence, silence, and participants' moral boundaries.

Keywords: digital technologies, transnational parenthood, Ukrainian refugees, forced mobility, war, digital ethnography, ethics of proximity, research ethics

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Research on family life in contexts of war, forced mobility, and digital mediation in recent years has brought significant methodological and ethical challenges to the social sciences. The very possibilities for studying parenthood, care, and family relations under conditions of physical separation, uncertainty, and limited access to intimate spaces of communication have become deeply transformed. These research challenges are at the core of this article.

In this context, the war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, led to large-scale internal and cross-border displacement. Millions of Ukrainian citizens were forced to leave their homes in the first days following the full-scale Russian invasion, seeking refuge in both Western European countries and neighbouring states, such as Poland, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, and Slovakia (Markova & Stanchev, 2022, p. 72). Part of this migration flow also reached Bulgaria.

Although Bulgaria has served primarily as a transit stop for some groups on the way to other European destinations, a number of authors have noted that, even before the war, the country was gradually transforming from a country of origin and transit into a receiving state. Immigration has been increasing at a slow but steady pace, although Bulgaria remains in a transitional phase between these two roles (Angelov et al., 2010, p. 178; Erolova et al., 2017, p. 21; Staykova & Trifonova, 2010, p. 87). The wave of Ukrainian refugees after 2022 further reinforced this trend and turned Bulgaria into a place of temporary or longer-term settlement for a significant number of Ukrainian citizens.

Due to its geographical location, Bulgaria functions as both a transit country and final destination for flows of refugees and migrants from various regions of origin, including individuals entering the country through irregular routes. The country represents one of the main entry points to Europe for migrants and has, simultaneously, become a destination for people fleeing the war in Ukraine (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 5).

Increased forced migration in the wartime situation and under conditions of uncertainty can be observed, resulting in the formation of families whose members live separately across different countries. These dynamics create a particularly challenging environment for researching family life, care, and parenthood, as physical separation and digital mediation become defining features of everyday practices.

This, in turn, confronts researchers with specific methodological and ethical challenges. These challenges do not arise solely from issues of access to data, but are directly related to the family configurations produced by war and forced displacement. Conducting interviews with mothers who often experience uncertainty, emotional distress, separation from family members, and conditions of everyday survival requires a particularly sensitive research approach. These circumstances shape not only the types of questions that can be asked but also the way interviews are conducted. Researchers must build trust during communication and respond carefully to moments of vulnerability, silence, or emotional discomfort.

We observed moments of intense emotional tension in almost all of the interviews conducted, expressed through crying, sadness, and the sharing of painful experiences

that can hardly be fully understood by an external observer. Such situations require patience, active listening, and the demonstration of empathy, so that respondents feel heard and understood. In a number of cases, this required changing the direction of the conversation or temporarily moving away from particularly sensitive topics in order to avoid intensifying participants' emotional distress. Thus, the family configurations examined in this article are inseparable from the methodological and ethical considerations that emerge throughout the entire research process. War and migration themselves are not new social phenomena, nor are transnationalism and transnational family ties. They have long been the subject of scholarly interest in studies of mobility, migration, and family life, and have been analysed by numerous researchers, including Nina Glick Schiller and colleagues (Fouon & Glick Schiller, 2001; Glick Schiller et al., 1992) and Steven Vertovec (2009), among others who have contributed to the establishment of the transnational perspective. Historical and contemporary research has repeatedly shown how separation, absence, and care at a distance shape family relations in contexts of labour migration, refugee movements, and forced displacement. What distinguishes the present situation is the extent to which digital technologies have become a central and significant communicative factor in family life, enabling the maintenance and, to a large degree, the preservation of ties with relatives who remain in the country of origin. Baldassar and Merla (2014, pp. 21–22) argue that care should be understood as something that “circulates among family members” across households, countries, and continents, rather than flowing in a single direction. In this sense, digital communication has become one of the principal means through which such transnational circulation of care is enacted. This, in turn, generates the need for the application of hybrid research methods.

The present article does not aim to provide an exhaustive empirical analysis of digital family communication among displaced Ukrainian mothers. Instead, it offers a methodological reflection on researching transnational parenthood in contexts of war and forced mobility, with a particular focus on the role of digital technologies, the ethics of proximity¹, and the emotional labour involved in both practicing and researching parenthood at a distance. In this article, the concept of ethics of proximity is used to describe the ethical challenges that arise when researching highly intimate, emotionally charged, and digitally mediated family relationships, particularly in contexts of war, forced displacement, and vulnerability (Ellis, 2007; Levine & Manderson, 2021). Through this approach, the article seeks to contribute to broader debates on qualitative and digital research practices in the study of family life in crisis contexts.

1 By ethics of proximity, we refer to the ethical challenges that arise when researching highly intimate, emotionally charged, and digitally mediated family relationships, particularly in contexts of war, displacement, and vulnerability.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Research on transnational families has consistently shown that parenthood cannot be reduced to physical co-residence, but is, instead, enacted through practices of care, control, and emotional engagement that are distributed across time and space. In contexts of forced mobility, such as those experienced by families displaced by the war in Ukraine, these practices are increasingly carried out through digitally mediated forms of communication. Digital technologies do not merely sustain connections between family members; rather, they become one of the primary mechanisms through which parenthood is exercised.

We first turn to authors who have examined how digital technologies shape migration, transnational family life, and the maintenance of relationships across distance. This literature is important for the present study because it shows that digital communication technologies are not simply neutral channels for maintaining contact, but are embedded in the everyday organisation of family life. Wilding's work on "virtual intimacies" is important in this respect, because it shows that the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs)² in transnational families depends on not only access, cost, or infrastructure but also the social and cultural contexts of family life, which make certain technologies more appropriate at particular moments. Letters, telephone calls, emails, and, later, mobile communications are incorporated into existing family practices in different ways, depending on the situation, the relationship, and the kind of communication required (Wilding, 2006, pp. 130–132). At the same time, Wilding cautions against treating ICTs as a simple remedy for separation. The ICTs may increase the frequency of contact and create a stronger sense of connection with everyday life elsewhere, but they do not remove physical absence and, especially in moments of crisis, may even make distance more visible and emotionally difficult (Ibid., pp. 138–139). This is very helpful for the present study, because the narratives of displaced Ukrainian mothers show precisely this ambivalence of digital communication. Baldassar and colleagues develop this issue through the concept of ICT-based co-presence, which they use to describe the ways in which family members separated across distance maintain a sense of "being there" for one another through digital media (Baldassar et al., 2016, p. 134). For these authors, the spread of the internet, smartphones, and social media challenges the assumption that strong family relationships necessarily depend on face-to-face interaction. At the same time, they stress that such forms of connection do not produce care and support in an even or uncomplicated way. Transnational family support remains shaped by asymmetrical exchanges, obligations, and different expectations of emotional presence (Ibid., p. 134). This helps us to understand why, in the case of Ukrainian mothers displaced to Bulgaria, digital platforms have allowed family members to remain emotionally connected, but also made visible the uneven

2 These include digital and mobile technologies used for communication across distance, such as messaging applications, video calls, social media, smartphones, and internet-based platforms.

distribution of parental responsibility, especially when fathers remained in Ukraine. At the same time, this ordinary character of digital co-presence does not make it emotionally simple. Nedelcu and Wyss stress that such routines may create well-being and emotional comfort, but could also generate expectations of solidarity, pressure to communicate, and feelings of constraint (2016, pp. 213–216). This ambivalence is also visible in our interviews: digital contact reassured mothers and children that absent family members were still present in some way, but interruptions, delayed responses, or the absence of expected calls often made separation even more tangible. Similarly, Madianou and Miller remind us that although ICTs do not solve the problem of separation within families, they transform the experience of migration and parenting, while frequent contact may also generate rupture and conflict rather than only closeness (2012, p. 2).

Vertovec observes that the speed and intensity of communication between home and away have created forms of “normative transnationalism” (2009, p. 15) in which migrants remain closely involved in everyday developments across distance, while digital technologies have also transformed the ways in which care circulates within transnational families, reshaping both the direction of care exchanges and the maintenance of family relationships (Reynolds & Zontini, 2014, p. 261). The empirical discussion presented below draws on five semi-structured online interviews conducted with Ukrainian refugee mothers in 2025, all mothers of children of different ages, residing in in Plovdiv, Varna, and the Golden Sands area. All participants had been displaced following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and were living separately from close family members who had remained in Ukraine. Interviews, ranging from approximately 30 to 70 minutes, were conducted via Viber, Messenger, and Google Meet, making digital communication not only the object of analysis but also the principal medium through which the research itself was carried out.

Within our research, digital communication between forcibly displaced mothers in Bulgaria and absent family members in Ukraine (with a particular focus on fathers) does not appear as a continuous or evenly distributed flow of interaction. Instead, it takes the form of a fluctuating combination of intense moments of contact and periods of silence or interruption. It is precisely this unevenness that makes the concept of *ambient co-presence* analytically useful. Madianou defines this form of presence as “the increased awareness of the everyday lives and activities of significant others through the background presence of ubiquitous media environments” (2016, p. 184). Such “background” awareness in our empirical material manifests in the routine monitoring of online statuses, brief messages without an explicit purpose, or shared everyday photographs that create a sense of closeness without necessarily involving direct conversation. At the same time, our fieldwork revealed that, in many cases, digital communication gradually decreased over time, while physical separation became increasingly palpable. These forms of digital co-presence, therefore, do not eliminate the tensions associated with physical absence. On the contrary, in the narratives of the participants, digital connectivity often intensified the awareness of absence, particularly in situations of interrupted communication, delayed responses,

or an inability to establish contact due to military or infrastructural constraints. In this sense, uneven rhythms of communication should not be treated as a lack of data but rather analysed as social and emotional phenomena that are constitutive of parenthood at a distance.

Ethical issues were not approached as a set of fixed rules established in advance at the stage of topic selection in the analysis of the fieldwork material, but more as situated decisions emerging during the research itself. Thus, the study follows the understanding that ethical dilemmas arise in what Guillemin and Gillam describe as “ethically important moments” (2004, p. 262), which require reflexive judgement on the part of the researcher. Such moments emerged both during the conduct of the interviews and in decisions concerning access to, and the deliberate refusal to analyse, intimate digital materials.

Our empirical material further demonstrates that digital technologies do not function as a means of “compensating” for structural and relational problems but rather tend to render them more visible. Madianou notes that communication technologies “accentuate what already exists but are unable to correct what are ultimately social problems” (2016, p. 199). In our case, this becomes evident in the uneven distribution of parental responsibilities, whereby mothers who are physically present with the children assume not only everyday care but also the role of primary mediators of family relationships, and are often the sole figures responsible for disciplinary practices.

This also supports our approach to digital media as part of everyday family practices, rather than separate technological tools. Hine emphasises that the digital should be approached as embedded, embodied, and part of everyday practices (2015). In the analysis of transnational parenthood, this entails shifting attention away from the platforms themselves and towards the ways in which they are woven into routines of care, the experience of significant life events and celebrations, child-rearing, and family organisation under conditions of prolonged uncertainty. In our interviews, this uncertainty was frequently associated with concerns for the safety of fathers remaining in Ukraine, especially when they were serving at the front. One respondent explained that communication often depended on the circumstances and could range from several calls over consecutive days to more than a week without any contact: *“When there is an opportunity, he may call us for two days in a row, but sometimes a week and a half passes without us hearing from him.”*

Ethics of Proximity and Researching Intimacy

Researching digitally mediated family practices in contexts of war and displacement inevitably raises questions about the boundaries of research proximity and the ethical responsibility towards vulnerable participants. Levine and Manderson introduce the concept of an ethics of proximity to describe forms of care that emerge under conditions of physical distancing, arguing for a shift “from an ethics of intimacy to an ethics of

proximity” (Levine & Manderson, 2021, p. 392). They further note that new forms of care become “predicated on physical distance” (Ibid., p. 392). While their discussion is situated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the present study extends this concept into the methodological domain. Ethics of proximity refers here to not only the distance maintained between people but also the researcher’s reflexive judgement regarding how close one should come to participants’ intimate digital lives. These issues emerged with particular intensity in our study, as digital communication between family members often contained highly emotionally charged content related to fear, guilt, care, and uncertainty, and, in some of the cases we observed, even the fragmentation of family units. Traditional strategies for protecting personal data, based on anonymisation or the concealment of identities, prove insufficient in such digital contexts. Markham notes that “traditional methods for protecting privacy by hiding or anonymizing data no longer suffice” in situations where research is conducted in public, archivable, and traceable digital spaces (2012, p. 336). Moreover, the analysis of personal messages and family conversations conducted through these platforms would cross moral boundaries that, in our view, researchers should not transgress. For this reason, the present study deliberately refrains from the direct analysis of actual digital artefacts, such as chat histories, voice messages, or video recordings.

Instead, the methodological approach is based on reflexive narratives through which the participants describe their own digital practices, experiences, and emotional responses. This choice is ethically motivated. Markham proposes *fabrication* as an established strategy for data representation in contexts characterised by shifting boundaries between the public and the private, defining it as “a sensible and ethically grounded solution for protecting privacy in arenas of shifting public/private contexts” (Ibid., p. 341). In our case, this entails working with synthesised and interpretative narratives that preserve the context and meaning of digital communication without exposing the participants and their families to the risks associated with sharing sensitive information.

This approach corresponds with the understanding of digital ethnography as an inquiry into social relations and processes. Pink and colleagues note that digital ethnography does not aim to study “the digital in itself”, but rather to understand how technologies are embedded in people’s everyday lives and practices (2016, p. 2). Focusing on narratives of digital practices allows for an analysis of experienced closeness and distance without violating the participants’ privacy.

Finally, the theoretical framework of the study is complemented by anthropological analyses of violence and everyday life. Das emphasises that “the descent of violence into the ordinary” refers to the embedding of violence in routine relationships and everyday gestures rather than its confinement to extraordinary events (2007, p. 1). In the context of war and displacement, digitally mediated parenthood unfolds precisely within these routine practices of care, which often remain unnoticed but are crucial for sustaining family closeness. A methodological focus on narratives makes it possible to capture these processes in an ethically sensitive manner, without requiring direct access to intimate digital materials.

This dynamic calls into question the methodological assumption that digital communication in transnational families is stable, continuous, and readily accessible for research. In our case, the absence of communication, delayed responses, and periods of complete digital silence proved to be central to understanding lived experiences of parenthood, while, at the same time, remaining difficult to grasp through conventional digital ethnographic approaches.

Research Trajectories and the Conditions of Access

The present study emerged at the intersection of different yet complementary research trajectories pursued by the authors. Research on digital anthropology and the methodological challenges associated with studying social practices in online environments constitutes a long-term focus of Vasil Baltadzhiev's work. At the same time, Rositsa Baltadzhieva's research focuses on Ukrainian migration and transnational families. She has established sustained research relationships with Ukrainian women displaced to Bulgaria through previous fieldwork. The collaboration between these two research approaches made it possible to conceptualise digitally mediated transnational parenthood not as an abstract research problem, but as an empirically and methodologically grounded question emerging from the internal logic of the field itself. In this sense, digital platforms did not function as a substitute for the field but rather as its continuation, building upon already established research relationships. A key methodological resource was the trust previously developed between Rositsa Baltadzhieva and some of the respondents through earlier research involving face-to-face encounters. This enabled the conduct of follow-up and secondary conversations with participants. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative social research.

Conducting the interviews entirely online also opened up space for reflection on the comfort and emotional safety of the participants. Based on our experience during the research process, respondents in online settings often demonstrated a higher degree of openness and were more willing to share experiences and emotions that might not always be articulated in face-to-face interviews. This observation challenges hierarchical assumptions about what constitutes an authentic field and draws attention to the potential of online interviews as an ethically less intrusive and emotionally safer research format. The interviews were conducted primarily in Russian, with occasional mixing of Bulgarian. The respondents' preference for Russian was not incidental, but followed a broader linguistic strategy observed in Rositsa Baltadzhieva's previous research. Russian is often perceived by Ukrainian migrants as a communicative resource in Bulgaria due to its relative familiarity among parts of the local population, unlike other research contexts such as Greece, where she has also conducted fieldwork on the topic. This linguistic dimension further highlights the transnational and situational character of everyday adaptation strategies.

Moral and Methodological Dilemmas of Researching Disrupted Parenthood

The online interviews, combined with already established relationships of trust, not only facilitated access to the participants but also brought to the fore a number of moral and methodological dilemmas. During the interviews, parenthood emerged as not merely transnational but a deeply fragmented and morally charged experience, structured by absence, uncertainty, and the prolonged context of war. Digital communication did not appear as a neutral channel for maintaining family ties, but as a space in which responsibilities, emotional boundaries, and moral expectations are constantly negotiated.

This became particularly evident in narratives involving fathers absent due to active participation in the war. In such cases, the father figure remains emotionally present, but is significantly limited in its involvement in everyday disciplining practices. Most mothers shared that although fathers maintain regular contact with their children via Viber or video calls, they consciously avoid participating in the enforcement of rules or sanctions, striving instead to keep communication positive and emotionally supportive. As one of the mothers explained:

“Because she is a teenager, sometimes boundaries need to be set regarding her behaviour or in other situations [...] he tends to spoil her instead, perhaps because he is afraid to get involved in that respect. After the war began, all of this became even more pronounced. Even her father is sometimes afraid to restrict her or upset her in any way. He is afraid that all of it will start again.”

This tendency can be understood in relation to the fathers' fears and anxieties about what kind of memory they might leave for their children should *they not survive the next day*. The fear of potential death prompts fathers, who, prior to the war, often occupied a central authoritative and disciplinary role, to transfer this responsibility to the mothers. In doing so, they attempt to use their limited time with their children in a way that creates pleasant interactions and preserves positive memories of the paternal figure, should it no longer be present in the child's future life.

As a result, remote communication is used primarily for brief conversations, greetings, and the maintenance of emotional closeness, rather than for the exercise of parental authority. This places mothers in the position of being both the emotional and disciplining centre of the family, while the digital connection with the father does not compensate for this imbalance and, in many cases, further accentuates it.

In other narratives, the physical absence of the partner takes on even more drastic dimensions as a result of loss during the war or the definitive breakdown of partner relationships. In such situations, digital communication ceases to function as a means of maintaining family cohesion and, instead, becomes a channel for coping with grief, guilt, or feelings of abandonment. Notably, it was precisely in these cases that

respondents often avoided discussing the concrete content of their digital conversations, preferring instead to speak about their emotional consequences. This should not be interpreted as a lack of data, but rather as clearly articulated moral boundaries that the participants themselves set in relation to the researcher's gaze.

In one case, a respondent shared that following the breakdown of the relationship triggered by frequent interruptions in communication with her partner who remained in Ukraine, as well as by a deficit of parental responsibility, both emotional and financial, the situation ultimately led to a divorce, once again carried out through digital platforms. Although communication continued, it became increasingly limited to routine exchanges and practical concerns, reflecting a gradual transformation of the relationship:

"We have become almost like strangers. 'How are you? Are you okay? Are you taking care of your health? How is your health?' Those are the kinds of conversations we have."

This example illustrates how communication, although not entirely interrupted, gradually loses its emotional depth and relational significance. Over time, interactions become reduced to basic exchanges concerning health and everyday well-being, reflecting the erosion of intimacy and the transformation of the marital relationship into a largely functional connection.

Accounts of *hybrid holidays* were also particularly analytically productive for our research. In one interview, a respondent described hybrid celebrations of Christmas and other holidays conducted through video calls:

"For example, at Christmas, my daughter came with her boyfriend, whom she now lives with, and we had dinner together. Their father joined us on a video call from Ukraine. He was having dinner there, while we were having dinner here. Yet we were all together."

In these narratives, it is not the digital video interactions themselves that are of primary importance but rather the effort to sustain a sense of normality through ritual practices preparing festive food, turning on the camera, and synchronising moments across distance. These practices simultaneously create a sense of closeness and painfully underscore the impossibility of physical togetherness. It is precisely this duality between comfort and pain that reveals the limitations of approaches which treat digital communication merely as a set of analysable objects.

This confronted us with a deliberate choice methodologically: not to treat digital artefacts as data, but rather as morally charged objects, access to which would require a different form of consent and could place participants in a vulnerable position. Family chats, messages, and voice communications contain highly intimate forms of interaction that were created for private communication rather than for public visibility or research access. Instead, focusing on reflexive narratives made it possible to analyse the meanings that the respondents themselves attribute to digital commu-

nication, including silences and absences. In this way, the absence of digital artefacts from the analysis should not be understood as a methodological shortcoming but as the result of an ethically grounded decision.

In this sense, we argue that digitally mediated parenthood in conditions of war and forced mobility cannot be adequately understood solely through the analysis of communicative traces. It is precisely through narratives about when, how, and why communication does or does not take place that it becomes possible to grasp lived parenthood as a moral, emotional, and relational effort experienced as it actually is, rather than merely as something technologically mediated.

Online Divorce, Suspended Parenthood, and the Ethics of Non-intrusion

The account of an *online divorce*, unfolding against the backdrop of prolonged war, severe bodily injury, and institutional insecurity, is particularly illustrative of the moral and methodological boundaries of the research. In this case, the partner relationship does not collapse as a single, clearly delimited event. Rather, the respondent shared a strong sense that their relationship was “*completely suspended*”, accompanied by feelings of powerlessness in relation to military and judicial institutions that simultaneously detain and threaten her husband with redeployment to the front despite his serious health condition caused by military service. The way that digital technologies do not function as a means of resolving the crisis but as a mechanism for its prolongation is methodologically significant in this narrative. The online divorce hearing – “*the last hearing was online; he wanted it that way*” – does not produce a sense of closure or clarity. Instead, it underscores the gradual disintegration of the relationship under conditions of ongoing uncertainty. Although the divorce takes place at a distance, its consequences remain deeply embedded in the respondent’s everyday life through continued communication and unresolved emotional ties.

The way the interlocutor describes the transformation of fatherhood following the divorce and the prolonged physical separation is equally important. When asked about the father’s involvement in raising the children, she responds unequivocally: “*out of 100 percent [...] I can tell you, about 10 percent*”, explicitly stressing that this is not a matter of unwillingness but of distance and circumstance. This statement should not be read literally but rather as a moral assessment of the gradual weakening of the paternal role, which becomes reduced primarily to emotional gestures: “*he says that he loves him [...] he is daddy’s peach, daddy’s sunshine*”.

In this context, digital communication does not compensate for absence, but rather marks its duration. The moment in which the interlocutor describes how the child gradually becomes accustomed to the father’s absence is particularly revealing: “*Now I tell him: ‘Call your dad?’ He says: ‘Yes, right away’ [...] and then: ‘Did you call your dad?’ — ‘Oh, I forgot.’*” Forgetting here is not an act of refusal but a symptom of the

normalisation of absence, in which digital contact ceases to be anticipated and becomes something closer to an obligation. The parental relationship continues to exist, but it no longer structures the child's everyday life in the same way. The child's integration into various institutions, such as school, further normalises everyday routines, while communication with the father is maintained in a reduced and largely symbolic form.

From a methodological perspective, it is precisely this process of gradual fading that sets a clear boundary for research intervention. The analysis of specific chats or video calls would capture only the surface of communication but not its diminishing social significance. As the interlocutor's account demonstrates, what is decisive is not the content of the conversations but the fact that they can increasingly fail to take place at all. From an ethical point of view, this case clearly illustrates why insisting on access to digital artefacts would be problematic. Platforms, such as WhatsApp, carry highly sensitive information related to war, health, legal uncertainty, and the disintegration of family relationships. Such dynamics can be more adequately analysed through participants' narrative accounts of communication rather than through direct access to digital traces.

Methodological Limits, Ethical Refusals, and the Question of Absent Fathers

A significant methodological limitation of the present study is the absence of direct interviews with fathers who remained in Ukraine or were involved in military actions. This absence can undoubtedly be interpreted as a shortcoming, insofar as it restricts the possibility of a symmetrical analysis of parental roles within the transnational family context. At the same time, however, this limitation should not be understood solely as the result of practical difficulties but rather as a consequence of conscious ethical and methodological considerations.

During the course of the fieldwork, we ourselves raised the question with two of the mothers as to whether it would be possible to conduct brief online conversations with their partners as well. This question, however, remained without response, which was largely anticipated by us as researchers. Accordingly, we deliberately refrained from further attempts to establish contact, interpreting this silence as a meaningful ethical signal rather than as a lack of cooperation. Moreover, in the context of already strained family relationships, insisting on direct contact with absent fathers could have disrupted fragile communicative balances, intensified feelings of guilt or moral pressure, and placed the participants in an even more vulnerable position. As a result, the figure of the father appears in the study primarily through the narratives of the mothers, allowing us to highlight the ways in which absence is experienced within the family.

This indirect mode of access and non-access shifts analytical attention away from the "voice" of the fathers themselves and towards the moral and emotional labour performed by mothers under conditions of asymmetrically distributed parental responsibilities.

At the same time, the fieldwork called into question one of our initial research hypotheses. We assumed at the early stage of the study that digital technologies largely compensate for physical separation and enable the maintenance of relatively stable parenting practices despite spatial distance. This hypothesis was largely challenged by the empirical material. Rather than functioning as a full substitute for physical presence, digital communication practices often revealed their own limitations, intensifying feelings of absence and unevenly distributed parental responsibilities.

The narratives of the interlocutors showed that digital connectivity does not eliminate tensions arising from absence; in some cases, it even makes them more visible. The decreasing frequency of contact, the avoidance of certain topics, and the refusal to participate in the disciplining of children delineate boundaries beyond which digital technologies fail to compensate for physical absence. It is precisely in these moments that it becomes clear that parenting under conditions of war and forced mobility cannot be understood as something that is merely “technically sustained” but rather as a morally and emotionally demanding effort.

The absence of fathers from the study itself, together with the partial refutation of our initial research expectations, should, therefore, not be seen as weaknesses but as analytically productive outcomes. They reveal the limits of digital mediation and underscore the need for methodological approaches that consider not only what can be accessed and analysed but also what remains inaccessible for ethically significant reasons.

Conclusion: Methodological Implications and Contributions

This study focuses on transnational parenting and digitally mediated family practices, offering a methodological reflection grounded in fieldwork conducted under conditions of war and forced mobility. Rather than approaching digital technologies as auxiliary tools that compensate for absence and separation within families, the article demonstrates that they function as morally and emotionally charged spaces in which absence, uncertainty, and the asymmetrical distribution of responsibilities become particularly visible. In this sense, digitally mediated parenting cannot be adequately understood through the analysis of communication traces alone but requires close attention to the contexts in which communication is interrupted, avoided, or deliberately left unarticulated.

The initial research assumption that digital technologies might largely compensate for physical separation between parents and children was challenged by the empirical material collected in this study. The fieldwork revealed uneven rhythms of communication, periods of silence, and morally laden refusals to engage in certain parenting practices, particularly in cases involving absent fathers participating in military activities. These findings direct attention to the need to analyse digital technologies not as solutions to the challenges of separation but as environments in which social tensions are intensified and redistributed.

The article also contributes to methodological debates in digital ethnography by advancing an argued position in favour of an ethically motivated refusal to engage in the direct analysis of digital artefacts. In contexts involving vulnerable participants and highly intimate forms of communication, insistence on access to chats, voice messages, or video calls risks crossing moral boundaries and placing additional emotional burden on participants. Instead, a focus on reflexive narratives allows for the analysis of the meanings that participants themselves attribute to digital communication. In this way, the absence of digital artefacts is transformed from an assumed methodological deficit into an analytically productive choice. More broadly, the article argues for the need for methodological approaches that take into account not only what is accessible to research but also what remains inaccessible for ethically significant reasons. Silences, interruptions, and refusals often prove crucial for understanding lived social processes in contexts of war, forced mobility, and family fragmentation. The study proposes an ethically sensitive and analytically productive model for researching digitally mediated family practices in crisis situations through careful engagement with narratives and a deliberate refusal to analyse intimate digital materials.

In conclusion, the article demonstrates that digital parenting in conditions of war should not be understood as technologically sustained but rather as a moral and emotional effort unfolding under conditions of uncertainty and prolonged absence. It is precisely through methodological attention to the limits of proximity and the ethics of research access that a deeper understanding of family life in contemporary crisis contexts becomes possible.

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