

Between Data and Dialogue: A Biographical Approach to Researching Transnational Families

MIMOZA DUSHI, ERKA ÇARO



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Mimoza Dushi, University of Prishtina, Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Department of Geography, Prishtina, Kosovo; email: mimoza.dushi@uni-pr.edu
Erka Çaro, University of Tirana, Department of Geography, Tirana, Albania; email: erkacaro@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper reflects on both the possibilities and the limits of using biographical research to study transnational families as dynamic and relational social formations. The analysis is grounded in two qualitative research projects conducted among Albanian migrants from Albania and Kosovo living in Greece, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States between 2014–2016 and 2023–2024. Drawing on their life stories, it examines how Albanian migrants narrate family relations, care practices, and sense of belonging across time and space. Methodologically, the research combines in-depth life-history interviews with visual elicitation, participant observation, and multi-sited fieldwork. This design makes it possible to follow family trajectories across national contexts and different life phases, and to capture the spatial and temporal dynamics that characterise transnational family life.

More than just a data-collection technique, the biographical approach opened a dialogical research space between researchers and participants, particularly around topics such as transnational care, family separation, uncertainty, and dual belonging. The paper also reflects on how global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, political tensions, and mobility restrictions, shaped research conditions and raised ethical challenges related to power relations, emotional vulnerability, and researcher–participant proximity. By foregrounding these methodological and ethical issues, the paper contributes to ongoing methodological debates in transnational family research.

Keywords: biographical methods, transnational families, migration, reflexivity, multi-sited fieldwork, research ethics

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1. Introduction

Transnational families have become a defining social form of contemporary migration, challenging long-standing assumptions about family life as territorially bounded, co-resident, and temporally stable (Wickramasekara, 2009). Increasingly, family relationships are lived and sustained across national borders and are shaped by mobility regimes, communication technologies, labour markets, and shifting political and social contexts (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Vertovec, 2009; Merla et al., 2021). Under such conditions, family life cannot be understood solely through moments of departure or settlement. Rather, it unfolds through ongoing connections, negotiations, and adjustments over time. Capturing these processes requires qualitative methodologies that are sensitive not only to movement but also to relational endurance across time and space. By relational endurance, we refer to the ways family ties, obligations, emotional attachments, and care responsibilities are maintained despite geographical separation and changing life circumstances.

These methodological challenges become particularly visible when researchers seek to understand how family relationships persist and change over time. While migration studies have long relied on qualitative approaches to understand migrant experiences, the study of transnational families raises distinct methodological challenges. Family life unfolds relationally and unevenly, linking multiple biographies, places, and temporalities (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Decisions about work, care, separation, and return are rarely individual choices; instead, they are embedded in family histories, gendered expectations, and intergenerational obligations. Methodologically, this points to the need for approaches that allow participants to situate their present experiences within longer life trajectories and within the relational contexts that give meaning to mobility.

This paper extends methodological discussions on biographical research by examining its application to the study of transnational families. Building on our earlier research on Albanian migration and industrial citizenship (Çaro, Xhaho, & Dushi, 2017), it shifts the analytical focus from migration trajectories and labour experiences to family practices, care arrangements, and emotional ties maintained across borders. Yet comparatively less attention has been paid to how biographical methods can be systematically adapted to capture family practices, care arrangements, and emotional ties sustained across borders and life phases.

Conceptualizing transnational families as relational, processual, and temporally layered formations, this paper argues that biographical research is especially well suited to studying family life beyond co-presence (Bernardi, 2011). Life-story interviews allow participants to narrate how family roles, obligations, and senses of belonging are continuously negotiated over the life course, rather than fixed at the moment of migration (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993; Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007). When combined with visual elicitation, participant observation, and multi-sited fieldwork, biographical methods make visible how family relations are reworked across different national contexts and historical moments (Dreby, 2007; Schmalzbauer, 2008; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011).

Empirically, the paper draws on two qualitative research projects we conducted with Albanian migrants from Albania and Kosovo living in the European Union (2014–2016) and the United States (2023–2024). The inclusion of both European and US migration contexts allows for a broader reflection on how different migration regimes and welfare environments shape transnational family practices. These projects span periods marked by economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and heightened mobility restrictions, contexts that profoundly shaped both transnational family practices and research conditions. Conducting biographical interviews during and after such crises brought to the surface ethical and methodological questions related to emotional vulnerability, care at a distance, interrupted family trajectories, and the positionality of researchers who share the same linguistic or cultural backgrounds with participants.

This paper addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) How can biographical methods be adapted to study transnational families as relational and processual social formations? (2) What methodological opportunities and limitations emerge when researching family life across borders through life-history narratives? (3) How do reflexivity, positionality, and dialogical encounters shape knowledge production in transnational family research? The paper proceeds by discussing the strengths and limitations of biographical approaches, outlining the research design and data, then examining reflexivity, dialogue, and methodological implications for future research.

By foregrounding dialogue, reflexivity, and relational ethics, this paper contributes to methodological debates on qualitative research with transnational families. It argues that biographical approaches not only generate rich empirical material, they also create a research space in which trust, emotion, and meaning-making become integral to knowledge production. In doing so, the paper responds to calls for methodological innovation that remains attentive to spatiality, temporality, and the lived complexities of transnational family life in times of global change. In this way, the paper situates biographical research more firmly within contemporary transnational family studies.

2. The advantages of the ethnographic and biographical approach

To contextualise migration trajectories and gender dynamics within transnational families, it is necessary to move beyond isolated individual experiences and to reconstruct the interconnected life histories of family members across time and space (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Elder et al., 2003). Migration decisions, labour trajectories, and care arrangements are rarely individual acts. Rather, they are embedded in family histories, intergenerational expectations, and gendered responsibilities that unfold across multiple locations (Kofman, 2004; Baldassar, 2007; Dreby, 2010). In this respect, the biographical approach is particularly well suited to capturing relational dynamics, as it enables the reconstruction of migration histories not only of individuals but also of linked family lives (Chamberlayne, 2004; Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007).

While biographical and ethnographic approaches are closely related, they are not synonymous. Ethnography provides a broader framework for understanding social life through sustained engagement, observation, and contextual interpretation, whereas biographical interviewing focuses on eliciting life histories and personal narratives. In this study, the two approaches complemented one another. Biographical interviews constituted the primary method of data generation, while participant observation, field notes, visual elicitation techniques, and engagement with migrants' everyday social environments provided ethnographic context that enriched the interpretation of transnational family experiences. Combining these approaches enabled a deeper understanding of how migration trajectories, family relations, and care practices are embedded in broader social and cultural contexts.

Through life-history interviews and, where available, follow-up encounters, biographical research allows researchers to trace how family roles, obligations, and power relations evolve over time and across national contexts (Thomson & Holland, 2003; Kōu & Bailey, 2014). Repeated interviews make it possible to capture change as it unfolds with factors such as family reunification, prolonged separation, return migration, or shifts in care responsibilities, thereby revealing how transnational family practices are continuously negotiated rather than fixed (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Patton, 2014). During later interviews, family decisions were often narrated differently than in earlier accounts, suggesting an ongoing process of reinterpretation over the life course. This longitudinal sensitivity provides insight into social, economic, and cultural integration processes at both ends of the migration experience, while also illuminating the inequalities that shape family life across borders.

The biographical approach rests on the assumption that the meaning of migration, family belonging, and identity are constructed over the life course (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993). It therefore relies on the collection and analysis of detailed life narratives, typically generated through in-depth and repeated interviews (Miller & Brewer, 2003). By linking personal perceptions and family experiences to broader societal and institutional contexts, biographical research connects micro-level narratives to public discourses, policies, and structural constraints that govern migrants' lives (Findlay & Li, 1997; Chamberlayne, 2004). This perspective highlights migrants and their families as heterogeneous and socially embedded actors who shape structures, and they are shaped by them, often simultaneously.

Importantly, biographical methods enable participants to reflect not only on lived experiences but also on how they interpret and make sense of these experiences over time (Kōu & Bailey, 2014). Such reflections shed light on how transnational families cope with structural barriers, including restrictive migration regimes, labour market segmentation, or limited access to welfare systems. In doing so, they make visible the links between micro-level family practices and macro-level social structures (Chamberlayne, 2004). For example, processes of labour market integration may enhance economic stability while simultaneously reshaping family strategies related to childcare, education, and welfare access across borders (Danaj & Çaro, 2017).

Moreover, biographical interviews are particularly effective in capturing the transformational character of migration and family life (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007). Following migrants and their families across time and space offers a unique opportunity to examine how mobility trajectories, legal statuses, and family configurations evolve over the life course (Mulder, 2007). By situating individual biographies within broader policy and institutional frameworks, the biographical approach also enables analysis of how migration regimes and welfare systems shape family possibilities, constraints, and future aspirations (Ho, 2010). In this sense, ethnographic and biographical methods provide a powerful methodological framework for understanding transnational families as dynamic, relational, and historically situated social formations. At the same time, these methodological strengths are accompanied by a number of practical, analytical, and ethical challenges, which are discussed in the following section.

3. The challenges of the biographical approach in researching transnational families

While biographical and ethnographic approaches offer significant advantages for studying transnational families, they also raise a range of methodological, ethical, and emotional challenges. Asking individuals to narrate their life histories, often marked by separation, uncertainty, and interrupted family trajectories, is a demanding process for both participants and researchers. Biographical interviews are typically lengthy and emotionally intensive, sometimes lasting several hours, and they require a high degree of trust, comfort, and sustained engagement (Mack et al., 2005).

One of the central challenges concerns access and participation. Convincing individuals to commit to long, in-depth interviews can be difficult, particularly when the research addresses sensitive aspects of transnational family life such as irregular migration, prolonged separation from children or spouses, informal employment, or legal insecurity (Schmalzbauer, 2008; Dreby, 2010). In these contexts, trust-building becomes a key methodological task. Community intermediaries and gatekeepers often play an important role in facilitating access; at the same time, their involvement may shape narratives and influence what participants feel able, or willing, to disclose (Rankin & McFayden, 2016).

Researcher positionality represents another critical challenge. Gender, age, nationality, language, and shared migratory or cultural backgrounds can significantly affect both access to participants and the content of the narratives produced (Nowicka & Ryan, 2015). In research on transnational families, linguistic or cultural proximity may facilitate trust and emotional openness, but it may also generate implicit expectations, silences, or taken-for-granted assumptions that remain unspoken. Power asymmetries between researchers and participants related to education, legal status, or professional position may further shape what is narrated and how experiences are framed (Tshuma, 2021).

The biographical approach also raises methodological challenges related to narrative coherence and control. Life stories rarely unfold in linear ways; they are shaped by memory, emotion, and retrospective interpretation. Participants may digress, return repeatedly to emotionally charged events, or selectively emphasise certain family moments while omitting others (Riessman, 2008). For researchers, this requires a careful balance between allowing narrative freedom and gently guiding the conversation toward themes relevant to transnational family practices, such as care arrangements, mobility decisions, or intergenerational relations, without imposing analytical categories too early in the interview process.

The emotional dimension of biographical interviews is particularly pronounced in research on transnational families. Narratives often involve feelings of loss, guilt, responsibility, and longing related to family separation and care at a distance (Baldassar, 2008). Interviews may become moments of emotional release or catharsis, raising ethical questions about emotional labour, boundaries, and researcher responsibility (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). These challenges have become even more visible in periods of global disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when mobility restrictions intensified family separation and limited opportunities for in-person fieldwork, thereby reshaping both research conditions and participants' lived experiences (Ryan, 2023; Kloc-Nowak & Ryan, 2024).

Finally, biographical research with transnational families demands continuous reflexivity. Researchers must remain attentive to how their own biographies, values, and emotional responses enter the research process and shape interpretation (Finlay, 2002). Rather than viewing these challenges as methodological weaknesses, this paper treats them as integral to qualitative inquiry. Reflexivity, emotional awareness, and ethical sensitivity are not obstacles to rigorous research but essential components of a biographical approach that seeks to understand transnational families as lived, relational, and evolving social realities.

4. The biographical interview: capturing transnational family lives

Biographical–narrative interviews were conducted using a life-history–oriented methodological framework designed to capture migration and family trajectories across time and space. Drawing on Wengraf's (2001) biographical–narrative interview approach and Mrozowicki's (2011) three-phase interview structure, the interview design was adapted to foreground transnational family relations, care practices, and linked lives, rather than focusing solely on individual migration experiences. This adaptation reflects an understanding of migration biographies as relationally embedded processes that unfold within family networks extending across national borders (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

This framework guided interviews conducted with Albanian migrants from Albania and Kosovo residing in Greece, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. The interviews explored migration trajectories, family relations, care arrangements,

gendered responsibilities, and experiences of belonging across the life course. Adapting the biographical–narrative approach to the study of transnational families made it possible to examine how family practices and obligations were negotiated across national borders and changing life circumstances.

The first phase of the interview consisted of a single open-ended question aimed at inducing a narrative, inviting participants to recount their life story in their own terms. Participants were encouraged to begin at a point they considered meaningful, often prior to migration, and to narrate their experiences up to the present. This narrative space enabled participants to situate migration decisions within broader family histories, childhood experiences, and intergenerational relationships, revealing how family obligations, expectations, and emotional ties shaped mobility trajectories over the life course (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993; Elder et al., 2003).

In the second phase, the interviewer followed up on themes raised by the participant, seeking clarification and depth while maintaining the narrative flow. Particular attention was paid to family-related transitions such as marriage, parenthood, family reunification, prolonged separation, or return migration. This phase allowed for a closer examination of how care responsibilities were negotiated across borders and how family roles evolved in response to changing legal, economic, and social conditions (Dreby, 2010; Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

The third phase introduced topics that had not emerged spontaneously in the narrative but were central to the research focus, including transnational care arrangements, communication practices, gendered divisions of labour, and experiences with welfare, education, and labour market institutions. Theory-informed questions were used cautiously and reflexively, with the aim of enriching the narrative rather than directing it or imposing predefined analytical categories (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007; Riessman, 2008).

Biographical interviews were complemented by visual elicitation techniques, participant observation, and field notes, which added contextual depth and supported reflection on family relationships and everyday practices. Interviews took place in settings chosen by participants, such as homes, cafés, or workplaces, contributing to a sense of comfort and familiarity. Recruitment relied primarily on personal networks and snowball sampling, an approach that proved particularly effective in accessing transnational families with diverse migration histories and experiences (Mack et al., 2005).

By allowing participants to position themselves as central actors within their family and mobility trajectories (Passerini et al., 2007), the biographical interview created a dialogical space in which personal experiences, emotions, and reflections could emerge. This methodological approach proved especially valuable for capturing the complexity of transnational family life, where biographies are interwoven, mobility is ongoing, and family belonging is continuously renegotiated across time and space.

5. Biographical data and analysis

This paper draws on qualitative data from two research projects examining international migration and the industrial citizenship experiences of labour migrants from the Western Balkans in the European Union and the United States. The first project, “Industrial Citizenship and Migration from Western Balkans. Case studies from Albania and Kosovo migration towards Greece, Germany and Switzerland” (2014–2016), was supported by the Regional Research Promotion Programme (RRPP) and included 140 biographical interviews with Albanian migrants from Albania and Kosovo living in Greece, Germany, and Switzerland. Among migrants from Albania, 55 interviews were conducted among migrants with migration experience in Greece (including 15 who had returned to Albania), 17 in Germany, and 15 in Switzerland, while among migrants from Kosovo, 27 interviews were conducted in Germany and 26 in Switzerland. The second project, “Industrial Citizenship and Migration from Western Balkans. Case studies from Kosovo migration towards U.S.” (2023–2024), was conducted during a Fulbright Visiting Scholarship at George Washington University and involved 35 biographical interviews with Kosovo Albanian migrants residing in the United States. Taken together, these projects provide a longitudinal and multi-sited perspective on migration trajectories and transnational family lives across different institutional and historical contexts.¹

Participants included both women and men of different migration generations and socio-economic backgrounds. In the European sample ($n = 140$), men constituted 79.2% of participants and women 20.8%. Educational backgrounds ranged from primary and vocational education to university degrees, while participants were employed across a variety of sectors, including services and administration, manufacturing, construction, horticulture, and private businesses, with some participants retired or unemployed at the time of the interview. In the US sample ($n = 35$), women represented 60% of participants and men 40%. Compared to the European sample, participants in the United States were more highly educated, with nearly two-thirds holding university degrees, many of which had been obtained from US educational institutions. Interviewees in both datasets varied in age, family circumstances, and migration trajectories and originated from both urban and rural areas of Albania and Kosovo. This diversity enabled the study to capture a broad range of transnational family arrangements, experiences of care and belonging, and migration trajectories across different migration contexts.

The dataset generated through the Regional Research Promotion Programme project, particularly the material collected in Greece, includes both original and follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews were conducted with a smaller number of participants selected from the original sample, allowing the research to trace

1 All participants provided informed consent prior to participation in the study. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process in accordance with established ethical principles for qualitative social research.

changes in migration trajectories, family arrangements, and care practices as they unfolded over time. Through these follow-up encounters, it was possible to capture how participants revisited earlier decisions and reinterpreted family responsibilities in light of later life events, legal transitions, or shifting socio-economic conditions. The European dataset was collected between 2014 and 2016 in Greece, Germany, and Switzerland, while the US dataset was generated between 2023 and 2024, providing insights into transnational family experiences across different migration contexts and periods.

Biographical and semi-structured interviews were used to elicit life histories, with particular attention to migration decisions, family relations, care practices, education, work trajectories, and experiences with legal and welfare regimes. Fieldwork was conducted both in destination countries and, in some cases, during migrants' visits to their countries of origin. In the US context, interviews were carried out through a combination of face-to-face meetings and online platforms, reflecting the geographically dispersed nature of the migrant population. Participants were primarily recruited through social networks and snowball sampling, which facilitated access to diverse migration and family experiences.

All interviews were transcribed in their original languages and analysed using MAXQDA (initially version 14 and later version 24). The analysis followed a thematic approach informed by grounded theory and involved multiple coding cycles, moving from descriptive coding to more focused and interpretive analysis. This process enabled the identification of key themes related to transnational family practices, gendered responsibilities, care arrangements, and the negotiation of belonging across time and space. Particular attention was paid to changes across life phases and to how family trajectories were shaped by institutional contexts and broader socio-political conditions.

6. Reflexivity, positionality, and fieldwork encounters

Biographical research with transnational families inevitably involves close engagement with participants' personal histories, emotions, and moral worlds. As such, reflexivity and positionality are therefore not peripheral considerations but central methodological dimensions of the research process. In this study, reflexivity emerged not only as an analytical stance adopted after data collection but as an ongoing practice shaped by interactions in the field, by emotional responses during interviews, and by the relational nature of transnational family narratives (Finlay, 2002). Over the course of fieldwork, it became evident that participants' narratives of family responsibility were often shaped by events that occurred long after migration itself.

Researching transnational families frequently places researchers in complex insider–outsider positions. Shared linguistic, cultural, or migratory backgrounds may facilitate access and foster trust, particularly when participants perceive researchers as “understanding” their experiences of migration, separation, and care at a distance

(Nowicka & Ryan, 2015). In several interviews, participants referred explicitly to shared cultural references or assumed familiarity with family norms, which helped create a conversational atmosphere and encouraged openness. At the same time, this proximity also generated unspoken expectations, silences, or selective storytelling. Certain experiences – particularly those related to family conflict, gendered power relations, or ambivalent feelings toward both home and host societies – were sometimes only partially articulated, presumed to be already known or implicitly understood.

Power asymmetries further complicated these interactions. Differences in education, legal status, or professional positioning occasionally shaped the interview dynamic, influencing how participants framed their life stories and family trajectories. In some cases, participants emphasised narratives of success, resilience, or moral responsibility toward family members abroad, while downplaying vulnerability or uncertainty. Rather than viewing these narrative strategies as distortions, they are understood here as meaningful expressions of dignity, self-presentation, and moral positioning within transnational family contexts.

Reflexivity was also required in relation to the emotional dimensions of biographical interviews. Narratives of transnational family life frequently involved emotionally charged themes, including prolonged separation from children or parents, feelings of guilt related to care at a distance, and anxiety over uncertain futures. Interviews sometimes became moments of emotional release, particularly when participants reflected on missed life events or unresolved family obligations. For researchers, this raised ethical questions concerning emotional labour, boundaries, and responsibility within the research encounter (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). While the interview space offered participants an opportunity to articulate experiences rarely voiced elsewhere, it also required careful attention to participants' well-being and to the limits of the research relationship.

These challenges became particularly visible during periods of global disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, reshaped both transnational family practices and research conditions (Ryan, 2023). Mobility restrictions intensified family separation, disrupted care arrangements, and heightened uncertainty, while also limiting opportunities for in-person fieldwork. Conducting interviews online or by telephone altered the dynamics of biographical narration, at times facilitating participation across distances but also constraining emotional expression and non-verbal communication. Reflexive awareness of these shifting conditions was essential in interpreting narratives produced under crisis circumstances. What became clear only retrospectively was how strongly uncertainty shaped participants' accounts of care at a distance.

Throughout the research process, reflexivity extended beyond individual interviews to encompass broader methodological decisions. Choices regarding interview settings, the use of recording devices, and the pacing of biographical narration all shaped the type of data produced. Allowing participants to control the rhythm and direction of their narratives often resulted in richer and more nuanced accounts of family life, even when these narratives diverged from the researcher's initial analytical focus

(Wengraf, 2001; Riessman, 2008). Rather than treating such moments as methodological challenges to be corrected, they were approached as analytically productive, revealing what participants themselves considered meaningful within their transnational family lives.

An interview conducted with Milaim, a 56-year-old migrant employed in the construction sector in Switzerland, illustrates how reflexivity emerged during the research process. Although the interview initially focused on migration trajectories and employment experiences, the participant gradually shifted the discussion toward the emotional consequences of long-term family separation. Reflecting on his experiences abroad, he remarked: *"I could support my family financially, but I could not be there when they needed me most"*. Similar reflections emerged in another participant. Ymer, a 69-year-old employed in the construction sector in Germany, explained: *"I worked every day and sometimes several jobs, but I missed seeing my children grow up"*. While discussing family separation and care responsibilities, both participants became visibly emotional. Rather than redirecting the conversation toward the interview guide, the researcher allowed participants to determine the pace and direction of the discussion. Such moments demonstrated how biographical interviews often move beyond predefined thematic boundaries and reveal dimensions of transnational family life that might remain hidden in more structured forms of data collection.

In this sense, reflexivity is understood not as a post-hoc methodological add-on but as an integral component of biographical research with transnational families. Attending to positionality, emotional engagement, and relational dynamics enables a more nuanced understanding of how family life is lived, narrated, and negotiated across borders. Far from undermining analytical rigour, reflexive practice strengthens the methodological transparency and ethical grounding, particularly in research contexts marked by mobility, inequality, and global uncertainty.

7. Biographical interviews as dialogical encounters

Biographical interviews are not neutral instruments for extracting information but dialogical encounters in which meaning is co-produced through interaction between researcher and participant. In research on transnational families, this dialogical dimension becomes particularly pronounced, as interviews often involve emotionally charged experiences of separation, care at a distance, and moral responsibility toward family members across borders. Rather than unfolding as linear accounts, these narratives emerge through pauses, repetitions, silences, and moments of hesitation, all of which are analytically meaningful (Riessman, 2008).

Allowing participants to "tell their story" in their own terms requires methodological patience and restraint. In several interviews, participants needed time to situate their migration experiences within broader family histories, often moving back and forth between past and present, origin and destination, and between individual

aspirations and collective obligations. Through this process, we became aware of how participants revisited earlier family decisions in light of later experiences. As Afrim, a 46-year-old migrant employed as a consultant in a post office in Germany remarked, “*Family decisions only make sense when you look back later*”. In several cases, participants returned to earlier moments in their family histories, reinterpreting them considering later separations, reunifications, or changes in legal status. From a biographical perspective, such narrative movement should not be treated as digression, but as an expression of how transnational family life is lived and remembered – as fragmented, layered, and fundamentally relational (Wengraf, 2001; Chamberlayne, 2004).

At the same time, biographical interviews are shaped by moments of resistance and selective narration. Participants sometimes avoided discussing sensitive family issues, such as conflict between spouses, unequal care arrangements, or ambivalent feelings toward children left behind. In other cases, responses were carefully framed to emphasise moral responsibility, resilience, or success, particularly when discussing family obligations or remittance practices. These narrative strategies can be understood as forms of self-positioning within transnational moral economies, rather than as simple omissions or inaccuracies (Baldassar, 2008; Dreby, 2010).

The presence of recording devices and the formal setting of an interview also influenced the dialogical space. Some participants appeared cautious when discussing legal status, employment conditions, or family vulnerabilities, becoming more reflective only as the interview progressed and trust was gradually established. This underscores the importance of viewing biographical interviews as evolving interactions rather than fixed moments of data collection. What is narrated, how it is narrated, and when it is narrated are all shaped by the relational dynamics of the interview encounter (Riessman, 2008).

Dialogical complexity increased further when other family members were present or indirectly referenced during interviews. Even when interviews were conducted with a single participant, spouses, children, or parents often appeared as implicit voices within the narrative, shaping how experiences were framed, and justified, or contested. In some cases, family members intervened directly, offering alternative perspectives or correcting details. Such moments revealed underlying gendered power relations and negotiation processes within transnational families, providing insights that might not have emerged in strictly individualised interview settings (Boccagni, 2012; Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

Conducting biographical interviews during periods of crisis, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, further intensified the dialogical and emotional dimensions of the research encounter. Narratives were shaped by uncertainty, interrupted mobility, and heightened concern for family members across borders. Online interviews, while enabling continued contact with participants, altered the texture of dialogue, limiting non-verbal cues and, at times, constraining emotional expression. These conditions required heightened reflexive awareness and methodological flexibility in interpreting narratives produced under exceptional circumstances (Ryan, 2023).

Understanding biographical interviews as dialogical encounters has important methodological implications for research on transnational families. It calls for an approach that values silence as much as speech, recognises resistance as meaningful, and treats narrative non-linearity as an analytical resource rather than a limitation. By attending to the relational dynamics of the interview process, researchers can gain deeper insight into how transnational family lives are narrated, negotiated, and made sense of across time and space.

8. Methodological implications and researching transnational families

The reflections presented in this paper point to several important methodological implications for qualitative research on transnational families. First, they underscore the value of biographical approaches for capturing family life as a relational and processual phenomenon that unfolds across time, space, and institutional contexts. By situating migration experiences within life histories, biographical research makes visible how family roles, obligations, and care practices are continuously negotiated rather than fixed at the moment of departure or reunification (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993; Elder et al., 2003).

Second, biographical methods are particularly effective in revealing the spatial and temporal complexity of transnational family life. Life-story interviews allow researchers to trace how family trajectories extend across multiple locations and how past experiences continue to shape present decisions and future aspirations. This longitudinal sensitivity is crucial for understanding how transnational families respond to changing migration regimes, labour market conditions, and welfare systems, as well as to moments of crisis and disruption (Corden & Millar, 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

At the same time, the analysis highlights important methodological limits. Biographical narratives are always partial and situated; they reflect what participants are willing or able to articulate at a given moment and within a specific relational context. Experiences of conflict, ambivalence, or unequal power relations within families may remain silenced or only indirectly expressed. This requires researchers to approach biographical data with interpretive caution and to resist the temptation to treat life stories as complete or internally coherent representations of transnational family life (Riessman, 2008).

The dialogical nature of biographical interviews further shapes the process of data interpretation. As meaning is co-produced through interaction, researchers must attend not only to what is said but also to how narratives are shaped by the interview encounter itself. Silence, hesitation, repetition, and narrative shifts should be treated as analytically meaningful rather than as methodological shortcomings (Wengraf, 2001; Chamberlayne, 2004). This perspective encourages a reflexive mode of analysis that foregrounds the relational dynamics of knowledge production.

The dialogical character of biographical interviews also raises important ethical considerations. Discussions of family separation, care responsibilities, conflict, and loss occasionally generated emotionally demanding situations for both participants and researchers. In such moments, maintaining a balance between empathic engagement and professional boundaries became particularly important. Participants were reminded that they could pause or discontinue the interview at any time, while careful attention was paid to issues of confidentiality and informed consent. These experiences highlighted that biographical research is not only a process of data collection but also a relational and ethical encounter shaped by mutual trust and responsibility.

Research conducted during periods of heightened uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, also underscores the need for methodological flexibility. Remote interviewing, disrupted field access, and rapidly changing family circumstances require adaptive research designs and heightened ethical sensitivity. While such conditions may limit certain forms of observation, they also reveal new dimensions of transnational family life, particularly in relation to care at a distance, digital communication, and emotional resilience (Ryan, 2023; Kloc-Nowak & Ryan, 2024).

The post pandemic period also raises new methodological questions regarding the role of digital methods in transnational family research. Online interviews, digital communication platforms, and forms of digital ethnography increasingly offer opportunities to study family intersections across distance. While such methods cannot fully replace in-person engagement, they provide valuable tools for examining transnational care, communication practices, and family relationships in geographically dispersed contexts.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that biographical research offers a powerful, though demanding, methodological framework for studying transnational families. Its strength lies not in producing generalisable typologies but in illuminating the lived complexity of family life across borders. Future research would benefit from combining biographical approaches with comparative and longitudinal designs, as well as from continued methodological reflection on ethics, positionality, and emotional labour. In this way, biographical methods can continue to contribute meaningfully to qualitative innovation in the study of transnational families.

9. Conclusion

This paper builds on and extends earlier methodological work published in 2017 by situating biographical research within contemporary transnational family studies. In doing so, it demonstrates how biographical approaches remain both analytically and ethically relevant for researching transnational families under conditions of intensified mobility and global uncertainty.

Drawing on two qualitative research projects conducted in Europe and the United States, this paper has reflected on the methodological potential and challenges of using biographical research to study transnational families. It has shown how

biographical approaches enable a nuanced understanding of family life as relational, processual, and temporally layered, moving beyond territorially bounded and static notions of family and migration.

The analysis highlights that biographical methods are particularly well suited to capturing the complexities of transnational family practices, including care at a distance, gendered responsibilities, and shifting senses of belonging across life phases and national contexts. Through life-history interviews, researchers can trace how family trajectories unfold over time, how past experiences shape present decisions, and how institutional and socio-political conditions shape family possibilities and constraints. In this sense, biographical research offers more than a technique for data collection; it provides a framework for understanding migration as lived, narrated, and continuously negotiated within family relations.

At the same time, the paper has emphasised that biographical research with transnational families is methodologically demanding. Issues of access, positionality, emotional labour, and narrative selectivity require sustained reflexive engagement throughout the research process. Rather than treating these challenges as limitations, the paper has argued that they are an integral part of qualitative inquiry. Attending to the dialogical nature of interviews, the ethical dimensions of emotional engagement, and the situated character of narratives strengthens both methodological transparency and analytical depth.

The experience of conducting research during periods of crisis, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, further underscores the importance of methodological flexibility and ethical sensitivity. Changing fieldwork conditions not only shape research practices but also influence the narratives produced, revealing how transnational families adapt to uncertainty, separation, and disruption. These contexts highlight the need for qualitative approaches that remain responsive to shifting realities while maintaining analytical rigour.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on qualitative innovation by demonstrating the continued relevance of biographical research for the study of transnational families. Its contribution lies not in offering universal models but in foregrounding relationality, temporality, and reflexivity as central methodological principles. As transnational family life becomes an increasingly common yet unevenly experienced social reality, biographical approaches provide a valuable lens through which to understand the lived complexities of migration and family across borders.

Future research should continue to explore how biographical, ethnographic, and digital approaches can be combined to better understand the evolving realities of transnational families in an increasingly interconnected world.

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Data Availability

Due to the qualitative and sensitive nature of the data, and in order to protect participants' confidentiality, the interview material generated and analysed during this study is not publicly available.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

MIMOZA DUSHI (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1853-6829>) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, University of Pristina, Kosovo. She holds a PhD in Geography with a specialization in Demography from the University of Pristina. Her research focuses on migration, transnational families, labour mobility, diaspora engagement, and brain flow. She has extensive experience in qualitative and biographical research methods and has served as Principal Investigator of the ICM-RRPP project, which examined the migration experiences of Kosovo Albanians in Germany and Switzerland. She was also a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at George Washington University (2023–2024), where she conducted research on Kosovo Albanian migrants in the United States. Her work has been published in international journals and edited volumes, contributing to scholarly debates on migration, transnational family life, and diaspora studies.

ERKA ÇARO (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9183-9642>) holds the position of Associate Professor at the University of Tirana and serves concurrently as the Head of Quality

Assurance and Learning at Swisscontact Eastern Europe. Drawing upon a robust background in migration studies and policy, skills development, action research, and expertise in the Western Balkans region, Erka brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to her professional pursuits. She received her PhD in Population Studies from the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, in 2011. Since then, she has made substantial contributions to her field through various roles as a researcher and lecturer across esteemed European universities. Her research has been published in reputable academic journals, reflecting her strong expertise and contribution to the field.