

Introduction: Contemporary Methodological Challenges to Research on Transnational Families

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Transnational family research has, over the past two decades, evolved from an emerging interest within migration studies influenced by transnationalism into a well-established and dynamic interdisciplinary field. Since the introduction of the influential conceptualisation of transnational families (TNFs) by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002), understood as families whose members live across two or more nation-states while sustaining a sense of familyhood and belonging, the concept has become indispensable to understanding family life in an increasingly mobile and interconnected world (Budginaité-Mačkinė et al., 2026). It has enabled scholars to examine how family relationships span beyond national borders and are reconfigured across space, distance, legal regimes, crises, and institutional contexts (Wall & Bolzman, 2014; Baldassar et al., 2018). Transnational families are, at the same time, multi-layered, dynamic, and often conflictual relational networks. They comprise diverse material, discursive and affective spaces in which roles and responsibilities are continuously negotiated and redefined. Transnational family life is therefore an ongoing site of tension, adaptation, and transformation (Morgan, 1996; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Cienfuegos-Illanes & Brandhorst, 2023). This conceptual perspective enabled scholars

to analyse how family practices, parenthood, intergenerational obligations, kinship ties, care, intimacy, and belonging are produced, negotiated, and sustained across borders (Baldassar, 2007; Madianou, 2016; Merla et al., 2020; Baldassar & Wilding, 2020), including under conditions in which borders may be simultaneously restrictive, porous, and contested not only situations of displacement and forced migration. Consequently, empirical research on transnational families has expanded substantially over time.

The empirical expansion of transnational family studies has thus been accompanied by a diversification of conceptual approaches, heuristic tools, and methodological and epistemic approaches. From a methodological perspective, scholars researching transnational families draw on a diversity of methods. Quantitative methods, albeit less frequently used in TNF contexts, facilitate systematic comparisons and the identification of patterns, which support theoretical advancements and interdisciplinary research on transnational family dynamics. Nevertheless, these approaches frequently encounter data limitations, including the underrepresentation of certain demographic groups in conventional datasets. Mixed-methods research offers substantial opportunities to advance the study of TNFs by addressing their complex, multidimensional characteristics. Although mixed-methods research presents challenges, including the requirement for diverse expertise and epistemological differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches, this methodology establishes a solid framework for examining TNF dynamics (Bennett et al., 2026). Qualitative approaches, including ethnography, multi-sited fieldwork, biographical and life-history methods, auto-ethnography, participatory approaches offer a different way of apprehending the specificities of transnational family life: the spatial dispersion of family practices, the relational complexity of family configurations, the temporal transformation of family relationships, epistemic aspects of knowledge production, along with the broader social, institutional, and political dynamics through which families are made and remade across borders (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Cienfuegos-Illanes & Brandhorst, 2023). Yet precisely because qualitative methods predominate in TNF research and are themselves so diverse, they warrant sustained critical attention: methodologies do not merely record transnational family life but actively shape what becomes visible, central, or marginal within it. It is this constitutive role of methodology, rather than the predominance of qualitative approaches as such, that this special issue places at the centre of critical reflection.

Recent scholarship has also begun to question the epistemic assumptions underpinning transnational family research itself. Categories such as family, proximity, co-presence, home or belonging are not neutral, though they are themselves associated with normative assumptions anchored in proximity-based understandings of family life and therefore require reflexive attention and methodological caution (Amelina & Faist, 2012; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Boccagni, 2017; Gemignani et al., 2024; Gemignani, 2025). These debates have important methodological implications as family life cannot be reduced to a single household or national context. At the same time, they focus attention on methodologies themselves as creating borders between what is rendered visible or invisible, central or marginal, in family life, raising the

question of which ontological assumptions about family different methods may reproduce (Gemignani, 2025).

These challenges are compounded by the field's multifaceted nature. Scholars, including the contributors to this special issue, recurrently ask how to approach and understand family realities and relationships if they are fragmented across time, space, and legal regimes, and how to ensure ethics, rigour and care if research itself becomes emotional due to intimate and morally sensitive spheres, such as care, parenting, and separation. Another concern relates to the ontological specificity of families when the very category of family is destabilised and challenged. By critically engaging with their own positionalities, scholars also increasingly seek to make the field of inquiry more transparent, ethical and decolonised, and more attuned to the complex geographies of power that shape both migration and its study. This also includes critically interrogating issues of epistemic justice and more just academic knowledge production (Fricker, 2007; Evans et al., 2024; Landström & Crawley, 2024). Particular concerns also relate to reflexivity and positionality, which challenge the myth of the detached observer by exposing how knowledge about mobility is co-produced through situated, relational, and unequal encounters, as conceptual bias influences research questions, sampling strategies, and the epistemic hierarchies through which knowledge about mobility is legitimised. Through reflexivity, scholars seek to situate the production of migration knowledge within the power dynamics that render some mobility visible while obscuring other types (Dodevska & Nimer, 2025), challenge the positivist assumptions of neutrality and universality in migration research, and also concerns preferences, biases and conceptual reflexivity in theoretical starting points and interpretative schemes through which we view research findings (D'Angelo & Ryan, 2025). These challenges are intensified by the complexities of the contemporary world, shaped by overlapping crises such as pandemics and war, and by what has been described as an era of multiple, interacting crises which, through their interaction across social, economic, and political systems, produce cumulative disruptions (Lawrence et al., 2024). Such conditions require researchers to continuously adapt their methods, topics, and ethical considerations – shaped not only by participants' needs but also by researchers' own lives, crises, and professional commitments (Günel et al., 2020).

This methodologically oriented special issue addresses selected aspects of these challenges through six contributions that approach transnational family research not only as a field of empirical inquiry, but also as a site of ethical, epistemic, emotional, and relational knowledge production. Furthermore, it highlights how different methods can generate complementary forms of knowledge while also making visible the ethical and epistemic circumstances in which such knowledge is produced. The special issue involves academics who use qualitative or mixed-method methodologies from various disciplines, educational backgrounds, career stages, and national contexts, who are situated in different geographic and epistemic locations while at the same time sharing a keen interest in exploring diverse facets of transnational family life. This publication is based on work developed within the framework of the

COST Action CA21143 – *Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe (TraFaDy)*, supported by COST – European Cooperation in Science and Technology, particularly its working group on research methods. The special issue was also developed in collaboration with the APVV project VV-MVP-24-0203, *RONARO – Family on the Edge: Current Contexts of Vulnerability and Transnational Family Transformations*.

The contributions move from a broad methodological mapping of the field to situated reflections on specific methodological, ethical, and epistemic challenges in transnational family research. The first contribution to this special issue by Simona Kuti, Irma Mačkinè, Anila Sulaj and Faruk Çam (Kuti et al., 2026) seeks a better understanding of the qualitative methods employed in TNF research, together with their respective strengths and limitations, in order to reflect on the potential of qualitative approaches for studying the complex, dynamic, and multi-dimensional relationships within contemporary TNF scholarship. The article reviews 275 qualitative (and mixed-methods) studies on TNFs published between 2018 and mid-2023 in journals indexed in WoS and Scopus, drawing on a broader database of academic publications on transnational families compiled as part of a wider TraFaDy systematic review of how the concept of TNFs has been used in recent scholarship. This study contributes to methodological discussions in TNF research by analysing a variety of studies, identifying the most popular qualitative research techniques and examining the pros and cons of different qualitative approaches. Additionally, it explores uncommon qualitative approaches and identifies gaps. The article presents current instances of creative qualitative approaches that could help TNF researchers gain significant insights in an increasingly evolving world.

While the importance of positionality and reflexivity in transnational family research is increasingly recognised (Shinozaki, 2012; Demirkol Colosio, 2021; McMillan et al., 2023; Tuzi, 2024), these concerns often remain confined to brief methodological statements rather than being integrated into the analytical narrative itself, leaving their implications for interpreting data, field relations, and knowledge hierarchies rarely examined systematically. The contribution of Esra Demirkol Colosio, Jelena Predojević-Despić, and Martina Wilsch (Demirkol Colosio et al., 2026), grounded in scholarly conversation among researchers with backgrounds in demography, sociology, and anthropology, based in Serbia, Turkey, and Slovakia and writing from a position that is neither fully centred nor fully marginal within international scholarly debates, discuss reflexivity and positionality in transnational family research by examining how these issues are negotiated across different empirical, methodological, and geographical settings. They draw their scholarly conversation on three case studies: mixed-method research with Serbian students abroad and international students in Serbia, auto-ethnographic research with mixed-nationality couples in Turkey and ethnographic research with Ukrainian refugee families in Slovakia. The article shows how researcher positionality and reflexivity within transnational family scholarship is shaped, changed and reconfigured across various empirical contexts, depending on the variety of methods employed, the insider–outsider dilemma, and emotional and caring engagements. By analysing

various geographies, target groups, and methodologies, the study illustrates how insider–outsider dynamics, access tactics, and researcher reflexivity influence the research process, including data collection, interactions with research participants, and interpretation of empirical material. The authors argue that critically analysing and reflecting on one’s position in transnational family research, regardless of the methodological approach, increases transparency and encourages critical reflection on one’s own assumptions and biases.

Although migration research has traditionally framed researcher positionality through a binary distinction between “insider” and “outsider” status, this dichotomy has increasingly been criticised as overly static and unable to capture the relational, shifting nature of fieldwork encounters (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Carling et al., 2014). In this context, focusing on Chinese migrants in Portugal, Yaqun Li (Li, 2026) investigates the methodological issues of positionality, reflexivity, and insider–outsider dynamics in the study of transnational families through the practice of filial piety. Drawing on twenty-five semi-structured interviews and field notes, the author examines how her dual positioning as a culturally familiar “insider” sharing language and Confucian values, yet a socially distant “outsider” to specific regional and generational communities, shaped recruitment, rapport-building, interpretation and representation throughout the research process. Within the article, the author reframes her positionality, following Merriam et al. (2001), as negotiated positionality, which she understands as an analytical resource in situations of alignment, tension or ambiguity. Methodologically, this article shows how reflexivity shapes data interpretation and trust-building, particularly when negotiating shared cultural frameworks while maintaining critical distance. The contribution advances a self-reflexive approach to studying cultural values in TNF research, treating positionality as an active component of the knowledge production.

In a related but more individualised contribution, Judit Végh (Végh, 2026) develops the self-reflexivity process of a researcher alongside a conceptual model that explains how reflexivity can be employed at various stages of qualitative research. In a longitudinal study of transnational families before, during and after the pandemic, including the post-publication stage, the author’s reflective journey serves as an example of this concept. The article is grounded in the author’s positionality: she is a researcher, an expatriate, and a member of an expatriate family, and she experienced the same pandemic-related mobility restrictions and impacts as her research participants. The resulting Dynamic Reflexivity Framework, presented in the article, consisting of pre-reflection, data collection, incubation, emotional burden, mutual collaboration, and retrospective processing, was developed iteratively through this shared experience across research conducted in Malaysia, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Reflexivity is viewed here as a continuous, multifaceted, cooperative practice extending across the entire research process and serves as a framework for interpretation, translation and representation, as well as being a methodological instrument. A proactive approach to self-reflexive research is required to ensure rigour and depth, especially when the subject has personal relevance.

The biographical approach (Rosenthal, 1993) to studying transnational families, despite its specific demands on researcher reflexivity, offers transnational family research added value through its capacity to build trust with interview partners, its heuristic potential for capturing change and family dynamics over time, and the depth of narrative material it provides through life-story and life-course contexts. In their contribution, Mimoza Dushi and Erka Çaro (Dushi & Çaro, 2026) discuss the benefits and difficulties of using biographical and ethnographic approaches, closely related but not synonymous methods, to understand the lives of Albanian migrants and their transnational families. Drawing on two qualitative research projects conducted in 2014–2016 and 2023–2024, which employed in-depth life-history interviews supported by visual elicitation, participant observation, and multi-sited fieldwork, the contribution examines how Albanian and Kosovar migrants residing in Greece, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States narrate their experiences, identities, sense of belonging, and care across borders, while reflecting on the methodological possibilities and limits of the biographical approach itself. The biographical approach was, as the authors argue, more than a data-collection technique. It opened a dialogical space between participants and researchers in which trust, emotion, and meaning-making themselves became constitutive of knowledge production, particularly around themes of dual belonging, care, and uncertainty, including during periods of global disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also raises important concerns about power dynamics and researcher positionality, examining how reflexivity, positionality, and dialogical encounters jointly shape what becomes knowable in transnational family research.

While digital technologies in the context of transnational families belong to one of the most dynamically developing streams of inquiry in TNF research, and concepts such as ambient co-presence (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2016) and digital kinning (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Baldassar & Wilding, 2020) are well established for understanding how family practices, care, and support are provided remotely, these approaches require further critical reflection from a methodological point of view. In this context, the contribution of Vasil Baltadzhiev and Rositsa Baltadzhieva (Baltadzhiev & Baltadzhieva, 2026) offers a methodological reflection grounded in fieldwork conducted under conditions of war and forced migration. The authors examine transnational parenting and digitally mediated family practices among Ukrainian families displaced after February 2022 due to armed conflict in Ukraine. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2025 in three Bulgarian locations (Plovdiv, Varna, and the Golden Sands area), the study focuses on refugee mothers navigating parenting while physically separated from partners and family members in Ukraine or elsewhere and maintaining contact through digital means. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the authors investigate how digital platforms, such as Viber, Google Meet, and Messenger, function as both sources of asymmetry and stress in transnational family life and as facilitators of emotional connection. The authors argue that digital technologies function as morally and emotionally charged spaces in which absence, uncertainty, and the asymmetrical distribution of responsibilities become particularly visible, whereas digitally mediated parenting

requires close attention to the contexts in which communication is interrupted, avoided, or deliberately left unarticulated. Methodologically, the contribution's most distinctive argument lies in treating the deliberate refusal to analyse intimate digital artefacts, such as chats, voice messages, and video calls, not as a methodological shortcoming, but as an ethically grounded and analytically productive choice.

Taken together, the contributions collected in this special issue demonstrate that critical methodological reflection on the methods used in TNF research is timely, academically relevant, and important. They point to gaps in methodological approaches and in the research methods themselves, arguing that only a nuanced, critical examination of research methods can deepen our understanding of knowledge as inherently situated and relational (Haraway, 1988; Burkitt, 2016), while also promoting greater transparency in analysis. The critical and scholarly examination highlights the value of biographical and narrative methods in TNF research, which help explore family histories and care practices within broader social and political contexts (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007). Additionally, the authors address innovative methodologies, such as digital ethnography, and discuss the ethics of proximity, thereby helping to better understand the mediated aspects of modern family life, especially in times of crisis. An often-overlooked aspect, emotional labour involved in studying TNFs, is also explored, emphasising the researchers' emotion management as part of methodological rigour (Hochschild, 1983). The need for adaptive research practices in response to evolving TNF realities, especially during crises, is also underlined. A cross-cutting aspect present across contributions is the importance of clear methodological reporting for strengthening credibility and cumulative knowledge (Tracy, 2010) in TNF research. Contributions stress the importance of researchers critically reflecting on their positionality, biases, and emotional engagements. Consequently, the emphasis on reflexivity and positionality in most papers is recurrent, demonstrating that these layers are inseparable from credible and rigorous research (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). Last but not least, the issue highlights the need for further critical methodological reflection in TNF studies, including the use of a wider range of methods, and encourages researchers to try new techniques that better capture the relationships and emotions within TNFs. Consequently, the contributions point out and call for more explicit articulation of analytical procedures, especially regarding reflexivity and positionality, which is crucial for assessing the rigour of studies and the comparability of findings.

The methods, topics, and themes reflected in this special issue are not exhaustive and do not cover the whole variety of approaches, nor do they address all less commonly used qualitative methods, such as visual, participatory, and culturally grounded approaches. This was not the intention of the editors of this special issue. Rather, the objective was to critically reflect on one's own methodological assumptions, epistemic stances, and experiences – a reflection that brings important critical perspectives and contributes to current academic and methodological discussions in TNF scholarship. Ultimately, this special issue argues that methodologies in transnational family research should not be treated as neutral instruments for

capturing already existing family realities, but as epistemic practices that shape how transnational family life becomes visible and interpretable, and under what ethical conditions it can be researched at all.

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