

Javiera Cienfuegos, Rosa Brandhorst, Deborah Fahy Bryceson (Eds.):
Handbook of Transnational Families Around the World
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Introduction

The Handbook of Transnational Families Around the World, edited by Javiera Cienfuegos, Rosa Brandhorst, and Deborah Fahy Bryceson (Cienfuegos et al., 2023), provides one of the most comprehensive and conceptually rigorous syntheses of contemporary scholarship on transnational family life. It situates transnational family dynamics within the broader transformations of globalization, migration, and care circulation, engaging with critical questions of inequality, belonging, and (im)mobility that have become central to sociological and anthropological inquiry over the last two decades. The volume's overarching theme is the inseparable dynamic by which families generate and maintain social and material ties across borders – an entanglement of care and movement.

The editors' introductory chapter, *Transnational Families: Entangled Inequalities and Emerging Challenges on the Global Scale*, clearly sets the tone for the volume's analytical ambition (Cienfuegos-Illanes & Brandhorst, 2023). Drawing on the notion of entangled inequalities (Randeria, 2002; Boatcă, 2016) and cross-border assemblages (Amelina, 2021), the book calls for a multilayered understanding of how family, gender, and care relations are reconfigured across geopolitical borders and temporal scales.

Conceptual and Theoretical Contributions

The Handbook's first major contribution is conceptual. It revisits and expands core ideas that have shaped transnational family studies since Bryceson and Vuorela's (2002) seminal definition of "transnational familyhood." The editors foreground the notion that transnational families are not only a product of global labor migration but also key sites for negotiating belonging, citizenship, and care across borders. They emphasize the simultaneity of distance and proximity, materiality and affect, mobility and immobilization – dimensions that together define the lived experience of "doing family" (Morgan, 2011) in transnational contexts.

The volume is structured in eight parts, moving from historical precedents (Part II) to issues of communication and digital intimacy (Part III), care and gender (Part IV), ageing and intergenerational ties (Part V), state encounters and reunification (Part VI), and return migration and deportation (Part VII). This architecture reflects the editors' insistence that transnational family research must be historically situated, intersectional, and attentive to multiple

temporalities – life-course, generational, and geopolitical.

Central to the theoretical innovation is the engagement with entangled inequalities. Building on Amelina's (2021) and Faist's (2017) perspectives, Cienfuegos and Brandhorst argue that global power asymmetries – rooted in colonial histories, gender hierarchies, and class divisions – are reproduced within transnational family formations. The family thus becomes both a unit of care and an arena of inequality. This aligns closely with discussions on how the global care chain (Hochschild, 2000) operates, where predominantly female migrants fill care gaps in wealthier nations, simultaneously creating new dynamics of distance, affection, and control over resources in their countries of origin.

Empirical and Regional Scope

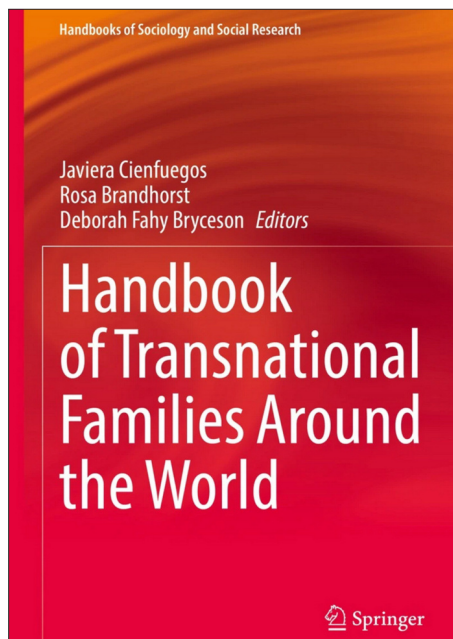
A key strength of the *Handbook* lies in its remarkable geographical diversity, fulfilling its promise to examine families “Around the World.” It includes contributions from Latin America, Africa, Europe, and Asia, allowing for a comparative and truly global perspective. Each chapter offers empirical grounding – often based on ethnographic fieldwork – that illustrates how transnational care practices and family obligations are shaped by specific policy regimes, cultural expectations, and migration histories.

For instance, Ana Lucía Fernández-Fernández examines Central American families headed by single women, exploring how colonial legacies and economic precarity shape maternal subjectivities (Fernández-Fernández, 2023). Similarly, Loreen Chikwira and Roda Madziva's chapter on Zimbabwean women in the UK interrogates the intersection of gender, class, and migration status in care arrangements (Chikwira & Madziva, 2023).

This regional and thematic range reinforces the editors' argument that transnational family dynamics are best understood as assemblages – constellations of actors, institutions, technologies, and discourses that are both fluid and structured. The assemblage lens also allows for sensitivity to new forms of digital co-presence and “virtual intimacy” mediated through ICTs (Wilding, 2006), a topic particularly salient in the post-pandemic world of mobility restrictions and online care.

Methodological Insights and Critical Assessment

The *Handbook* offers valuable methodological reflections. It advocates for a multi-sited, processual approach that combines ethnographic depth with comparative scope – methodologies long championed in European family migration research (Baldassar & Brandhorst, 2021; Merla et al., 2020). The chapters collectively demonstrate how the study of transnational families benefits from tracing care “circulations” (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) rather than one-way transfers, thereby challenging simple provider/receiver dichotomies. Furthermore,



the volume contributes to a more reflexive language, suggesting the adoption of the term “stayers” instead of the often-stigmatizing “left-behind,” a crucial point about the impact of labeling on individuals’ agency.

While the *Handbook*’s breadth is impressive, the diversity of case studies sometimes results in uneven analytical depth. Some chapters prefer descriptive ethnography over theoretical synthesis, and the connections between micro-level family narratives and macro-level political economies could be further elaborated. Nevertheless, the editors’ concluding chapter, *Past, Present and Future Uncertainties Acting on Transnational Familyhood*, successfully re-integrates the empirical diversity into a coherent argument about global care and inequality. Another limitation, inherent to the “Handbook” genre, is its focus on established frameworks. A missed opportunity is the chance to propose new conceptualizations of ‘family’ that more radically reflects ongoing transformations in legislative and social protection systems.

Conclusion and Agenda Setting

The *Handbook of Transnational Families Around the World* represents a milestone in global family research. Its evidence-based, theoretically grounded, and empirically diverse chapters make it an indispensable reference for ethnologists, anthropologists, and social scientists interested in migration, care, and inequality.

Crucially, the book’s robust analytical framework on entangled care and mobility is directly applicable to Central Europe, providing essential tools for studying the region’s economic transformations, labor migration, and family reunification issues.

The editors have succeeded in creating a framework that illuminates the complex connections between mobility, care, and global inequality.

The volume also has a strong **agenda-setting role** for policy implications and informed professional practice, underscoring the need to effectively respond to the multifaceted challenges of people navigating cross-border relationships and mobility (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). For those who study this theme, this *Handbook* provides both a mirror and a guide: a mirror reflecting how deeply care, gender, and inequality are intertwined across borders, and a guide pointing toward future avenues for evidence-based, cross-disciplinary, and globally inclusive research.

LUIS MESQUITA DA FONSECA
(<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2695-5389>),
University of Porto, Portugal

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