

Qualitative Methods in Transnational Family Research: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Over the past several decades, research on migrant transnationalism and transnational families (TNFs) has expanded considerably, with qualitative approaches playing a central role. These methods are particularly suited to capturing complex, dynamic and multidimensional relationships among family members across national boundaries, offering rich, contextualised accounts of lived experiences and giving study participants a voice. This paper presents a literature review of 275 qualitative studies on TNFs published between 2018 and mid-2023 in journals indexed in Scopus, WoS and ERIC databases. Drawing on the systematic review database and targeted screening, the paper identifies dominant qualitative methods, examines how they are applied across different migration and family contexts, and reviews the strengths and limitations of various qualitative approaches reported by authors. It also highlights less commonly used methods, methodological gaps, underreported analytical strategies, and emerging innovations in qualitative TNF research. By mapping these patterns, the paper contributes to ongoing methodological discussions on multi-sited, digital, and reflexive approaches to studying transnational family life in a changing world.

Keywords: qualitative research methods, transnational families, limitations, innovative methods, literature review

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, migration scholarship has increasingly shifted from a focus on individual migrants to the relational and familial dimensions of cross-border mobility.¹ Within this broader turn, the concept of transnational families (TNFs) has become a key analytical lens for understanding how family life is organised, maintained and negotiated across the borders of two or more nation-states (Mazzucato, 2014). TNFs are commonly understood as families whose members live apart for significant periods while maintaining active emotional, economic and social relationships across borders through communication, various forms of support and visits (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Baldassar et al., 2018).

Qualitative research has played a central role in TNF research as it enables scholars to capture the complexity, fluidity, and lived realities of family relationships across borders (Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al., 2026). In-depth interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, life histories and narrative approaches have been particularly valuable for examining how people experience separation, maintain care relationships, and negotiate belonging, identity and responsibility across multiple social and institutional contexts (Bianchera et al., 2019; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). By foregrounding the perspectives of geographically dispersed family members, qualitative research has generated in-depth insights into how transnational family life is lived, negotiated, and reconfigured over time in ways that would be difficult to capture through quantitative designs alone (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011).

In recent years, TNF research has expanded both thematically and methodologically. While recent studies remain strongly centred on transnational care and digitally mediated communication, with particular attention to transnational parenting, intergenerational solidarity and care, such themes as remittances, wellbeing, education, language and gender norms are also increasingly represented (Mačkinė et al., 2026a). Methodological diversification has also increased, with scholars adopting multi-sited ethnography, virtual and digital methods, participatory approaches, and mixed-method designs to address the challenges of studying families across space and time (Madianou, 2016; Fresnoza-Flot, 2023). These developments intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when restricted mobility and heightened vulnerability required new forms of data collection and ethical considerations (Végh et al., 2025).

Despite this growth, systematic methodological reflection remains relatively limited. While qualitative methods dominate TNF research, fewer studies critically engage with their methodological implications, strengths (e.g. Dallemagne, 2018), limitations (e.g. Chávez et al., 2023; de Souza Lobo, 2020), and the challenges associated with specific methodological choices. A clearer understanding of recent TNF research can be achieved by analysing its thematic focus, sampling strategies, regional coverage, and methodological choices, thereby contributing to broader

1 This article is based on work from COST Action “Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe”, CA21143 (TraFaDy), supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

methodological discussions in the field on multi-sited and digitally mediated fieldwork, uneven reporting of methodological choices, and the challenges of researching spatially dispersed family members.

This paper addresses this gap through a literature review of 275 qualitative studies on TNFs published between 2018 and mid-2023, in journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science (WoS) and ERIC. The main research questions guiding this literature review were:

1. What qualitative research methods are most commonly used in recent studies on TNFs, and how are they applied across different family relationships and migration contexts?
2. What strengths and limitations do authors associate with these qualitative methods in capturing the complexity, multi-locality, and relational dynamics of TNF life?
3. What methodological challenges, gaps and innovations have emerged from recent qualitative research on TNFs?

By mapping dominant methodological trends, underutilised qualitative approaches and emerging methodological innovations, this paper contributes to methodological debates within TNF studies by highlighting patterns of methodological diversification, underreported analytical practices, and the growing importance of reflexivity, analytical transparency, and transnational fieldwork in family migration research.

2. Methodology of the Literature Review

This article builds on a database of academic publications on TNFs, developed as part of a systematic literature review examining the concept's use in recent scholarship (Mačkiné et al., 2026a). Conducted within the TraFaDy network, the review covered peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and PhD theses published between 2018 and mid-2023. Searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC using the term “transnational famil*” resulted, after two rounds of double screening and data validation, in a corpus of 396 publications. Based on research design, studies were classified as empirical ($n = 342$) and non-empirical ($n = 54$). Among the empirical studies, qualitative research predominated ($n = 295$), followed by quantitative ($n = 34$) and mixed-methods ($n = 13$) studies.

For the present review, we retained information on research design, publication language, and countries of immigration and emigration from the original database (Mačkiné et al., 2026b). Qualitative studies published in languages other than English ($n = 18$) were excluded to ensure equal access among co-authors. Mixed-methods studies were also excluded, as they are examined in separate TraFaDy reviews (e.g. Bennett, Cukut Krilić, Despić et al., *forthcoming*). This resulted in a final sample of 275 qualitative studies.

The present study adopts a scoping-oriented qualitative review approach with elements of narrative synthesis, focusing on mapping methodological patterns rather than evaluating substantive findings. Data extraction used a shared coding grid, adapted to the aims of this study and this special issue. To establish a common analytical framework, four co-authors jointly analysed a subset of publications and piloted the coding framework before dividing the remaining corpus. Each author then reviewed approximately one quarter of the selected qualitative studies and extracted additional data into a shared table. This included the fieldwork locations, whether studies were single- or multi-sited, sample characteristics, sampling procedures, participant types (e.g. migrants, non-migrants, returnees), main and supplementary methods, additional data sources, duration of data collection, reported effects of COVID-19, and reported study limitations. Methodological innovations were also documented. Given the qualitative nature of this review and the fact that many studies combined multiple methods, sampling strategies and fieldwork sites, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and combinations rather than quantifying individual methodological choices in isolation.

Each author prepared summaries of methodological patterns from their assigned studies. These summaries, together with the shared dataset, facilitated comparison across studies. Through online discussions, the authors refined interpretations and developed the manuscript's overall structure. Writing was then divided among the co-authors in a shared document, allowing ongoing alignment of interpretations.

This study has several limitations.² First, each publication was coded by a single reviewer, and some categories (e.g. main methods, additional methods, and additional data sources) proved difficult to distinguish consistently and were later regrouped by method type. Second, the uneven reporting of researcher positionality and reflexivity across the reviewed studies meant that these aspects were not explicitly extracted, limiting our ability to assess how these shaped access and interpretation. Finally, no formal quality assessment was conducted, as this review aimed to map methodological patterns in line with scoping review logic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), rather than synthesising research findings for which methodological appraisal would be more important.

3. Main Findings

3.1. *Qualitative Methods in TNF Research*

This section examines data collection and data analysis practices, although the reviewed studies provide substantially more detail on the former than on the latter. Across the reviewed studies, **interview-based** research predominates among the data collection techniques. Most studies rely on semi-structured or in-depth interviews

2 For the limitations of initial study, see Mačkinė et al., 2026 a.

with migrants and, less frequently, non-migrant family members. Interviews are sometimes conducted across multiple countries, capturing multiple perspectives across generations (e.g. Liu & Ran, 2021; McCallum, 2022). Several studies also include a longitudinal dimension through follow-up interviews, with material collected over extended or repeated periods of ethnographic work (e.g. Baldassar, 2023; Waruwu, 2023) or during different phases of migration (e.g. Sokolowska, 2018), particularly in research focusing on migration trajectories or life-course transitions.

Building on this dominant approach, some studies adopt more specialised interview formats, often using distinct labels for closely related research practices. These include **life history** or **life story interviews** (e.g. Lim, 2021), alongside **biographical and narrative approaches**, such as biographical interviews (e.g. Xhaho et al., 2022), biographical narrative interviews (e.g. Christensen, 2020) and narrative inquiry (e.g. Liu, 2019) among others. Some studies also explicitly frame their interviews as **phenomenological** (e.g. Ferreira & Carbonatto, 2023). Across these studies, interviews typically take the form of extended, open-ended narratives, retrospectively tracing family relations and migration trajectories over time. Despite their different labels and theoretical traditions, these approaches share similar methodological features.

Interviews were often embedded in broader ethnographic engagements rather than treated as one-off encounters. Building on this orientation, a second major methodological strand consists of **ethnographic approaches**, including multi-sited ethnography and prolonged engagement in family or community settings. Participant observation, a core component of this strand, commonly involves repeated participation in social gatherings, community events, workplaces, religious spaces, and in some cases, observation of family routines in homes across sites of origin and/or destination (e.g. Istanbulu, 2021). In ethnographic designs, interviews are systematically combined with observations as complementary sources of data, reinforcing their role within ongoing relational fieldwork rather than as isolated data-collection instances. This orientation is evident in studies that combine participant observation with in-depth (e.g. Ahlin & Sen, 2020) or life history interviews (e.g. Gu, 2018), and biographical, biographical-narrative or narrative interviews (e.g. Berg & Herrera, 2022).

Some studies extend their analysis beyond interviews and observations by incorporating **recorded interactions, digital communications, and online group content** (e.g. Mantilla, 2022). These materials are collected as part of digital ethnography (e.g. Marlowe & Bruns, 2021), video ethnography (e.g. Martin-Bylund & Stenliden, 2022), observation of mediated family interactions (e.g. Zharkevich, 2019), and participant-generated recordings (e.g. Yount-Andre, 2018). Such approaches capture relational practices increasingly shaped by digital communication technologies.

Fieldnotes and informal interactions are the most common **supplements to both interview-based and ethnographic research**, serving as analytical resources for documenting context, emotions, and interaction dynamics (e.g. Kędra, 2021). Beyond primary empirical materials, some studies also draw on legal documents (e.g.

Pellander, 2018), official statistics (e.g. Berg & Herrera, 2022), official reports (e.g. Critelli et al., 2021), policy documents (e.g. Gustafsson, 2022) and media sources (e.g. Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018), while a smaller number incorporate archival (e.g. Valenzuela, 2022) or other historical sources (e.g. Sandberg, 2018) to situate family practices within specific migration, welfare, temporal or legal contexts. Informal conversations and online follow-ups are frequently noted as additional sources for interpreting family practices and relationships over time (e.g. McKay, 2018). Some studies also draw on larger projects or datasets (e.g. surveys, panel data, doctoral research, or multi-year programmes) and long-term ethnographic work (e.g. Waruwu, 2023), either as contextual background or as a broader empirical base from which the analysed material is derived (e.g. Merla et al., 2020).

Another strand of research combines several methods and includes forms of **group-based data collection**, most commonly focus or discussion groups, to capture both personal narratives and collectively negotiated shared meanings. These designs include interviews conducted alongside focus groups (e.g. Ballaret & Lanada, 2022), repeat interviews complemented by focus group discussions to trace change over time (e.g. Chikwira & Madziva, 2023), and in-depth interviews and discussion groups to situate family practices within broader normative and community contexts (e.g. Moustauoui Srrhir, 2020). In some cases, participant observation is also integrated, allowing researchers to connect observed everyday practices with participants' collective reflections (e.g. Tiilikainen, 2019).

A further subset of studies extends interviewing through **visual, material and creative** elicitation techniques. These include collages (e.g. Kędra, 2021), photo elicitation (e.g. Hari et al., 2023), photo-voice (e.g. Ciborowski et al., 2022) and social media scroll-back interviews (e.g. Zheng, 2023), drawings (e.g. Hershberg & Brinton Lykes, 2019), visual mapping (e.g. Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018), lifelines (e.g. Shmulyar Gréen & Melander, 2018), network and mobility mapping (e.g. Drotbohm, 2020), and genograms to illustrate family relationships (e.g. Dallemagne, 2018). In some cases, mapping is done using objects such as wooden blocks to represent family members and relationships (e.g. Jerves et al., 2018). Other studies complement interviewing techniques with the use of diaries, journals or written stories (e.g. Simola et al., 2023), as well as creative workshops and arts-based activities (e.g. Zontini & Reynolds, 2018). These approaches are most common in research on relational dynamics, care practices, or children's experiences within TNFs, helping to elicit relational perspectives and temporal dimensions less accessible through standard interviews.

A small number of studies also employ alternative interactional formats that reshape how qualitative "talk" is produced during the research encounter. These include **culturally embedded conversational practices**, such as *kuwentuhan*, a Filipino collective storytelling approach used in focus group settings to facilitate relational exchange (Francisco-Menchavez, 2018), and *talanoa*, a Pacific storytelling-based approach centred on open dialogue and oral exchange that has been used in research with children and families (Freeman et al., 2022). Other studies adapt the **spatial or**

relational organisation of interviews through go-along interviews conducted while accompanying participants in everyday settings, or through conversations that encourage reflexivity and metaphor-based sense-making (Hari et al., 2023). Although rare, these approaches foreground situated interaction, cultural context and relational dynamics, enabling forms of expression less readily articulated in standard interview settings.

Finally, a small number of studies depart from dominant interview- and ethnography-centred designs by **incorporating the researcher's own experiences as empirical material**. These include autoethnographic approaches that systematically draw on lived experience related to migration or TNF life (e.g. Alasmari, 2023) or integrate autoethnographic reflections within broader ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Cojocaru, 2021). Related contributions take the form of autobiographical case studies, using personal trajectories to examine transnational caregiving, loss, or family relations across distance (e.g. Hinkson et al., 2022). In a few cases, researchers also draw on their personal experience or long-term engagement in the field as an interpretive resource (e.g. Fiałkowska, 2019). Although rare, these approaches foreground reflexivity and researcher positionality in the production and interpretation of qualitative data.

While methodological innovation is most visible in data collection, innovations in data analysis remain comparatively rare and often insufficiently documented. The reviewed studies can be grouped into three broad categories based on the degree of explicitness of the analytical procedures. About one fourth clearly describe how the material was analysed. This includes studies that explicitly refer to various thematic (e.g. Hershberg & Brinton Lykes, 2019) or content analysis approaches (e.g. Alenius, 2018), analysis inspired by the grounded theory approach (e.g. Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Sanchez et al., 2021), narrative (e.g. Jung & Wang, 2018) and discourse analysis (e.g. Purkarthofer et al., 2022). Some also use composite cases and vignettes as explicit analytic strategies (e.g. Merla et al., 2020). A further third do not specify a distinct analytical framework but mention practices such as coding transcripts, identifying themes or patterns, triangulating sources, or using visual and network mapping as part of the analytical process, without explicitly labelling these practices as a particular form of analysis. The remaining studies do not specify analysis procedures, leaving the interpretation process of empirical material largely unaddressed.

3.2. Sampling Procedures and Participants' Characteristics

The concept of transnational family has been variously defined, understood and interpreted in academic literature as well as in social and political contexts. This multiplicity is also reflected in the reviewed studies, which include a wide variety of participant groups and sampling procedures. The following discussion distinguishes between recruitment strategies and participants' characteristics in order to clarify how studies operationalise access to and representation of transnational families.

As expected in qualitative research regarding **participant recruitment**, most studies use non-probability sampling, most commonly snowball, purposive or theoretical sampling. They often rely on gatekeepers to reach participants, including some “hard to reach” or “hidden” groups like refugees, irregular migrants or LGBTIQ+ individuals. Sampling procedures were described as “word of mouth”, “friends”, “referrals” or simply “snowball sampling” (e.g. Chávez et al., 2023; Martín-Bylund & Stenliden, 2022).

Participant recruitment is also shaped by technological developments. Reliance on traditional offline recruitment methods like flyers and brochures is shifting towards online tools, as these are often more cost-effective and efficient, and can reach a wider audience. Accordingly, recruitment via online platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) has become more common (e.g. Brahic, 2022; Dallemagne, 2018). The review also identified the recruitment of participants through both mainstream and alternative social platforms³, alongside hybrid recruitment strategies combining offline and online approaches (e.g. Aziz, 2022).

Regarding **participants’ characteristics**, the reviewed articles draw on a broad range of ethnic, gender and age groups, formal or legal statuses/categories, as well as cultural backgrounds, reflecting the considerable diversity within the studied populations. Participants span different stages of the life course, including children and minors (e.g. Bakaari & Escandell, 2022), and older adults (e.g. de Andrade et al., 2022; Wilding et al., 2022). Research participants can also be grouped according to their position within the transnational field. Most studies focus on migrants moving between countries of origin and destination. While migration motivations vary, labour migration is among the most frequently researched forms of migration in TNF studies, whereas educational and forced migration (e.g. Fresnoza-Flot, 2018) receive considerably less attention.

In addition to migrants, many studies include non-migrating family members who remain in the country of origin, most commonly children and older family members, who often do not qualify for migration due to legal restrictions. Spouses remaining in the country of origin are also included in some of the studies as research participants, including both husbands and wives (e.g. Reisenauer, 2018). Lastly, a smaller number of studies extend their focus to return migrants and second-generation family members, capturing post-migration trajectories and intergenerational dynamics (e.g. Gallo, 2019; Gotehus, 2023).

Although socioeconomic and legal characteristics are not always systematically defined in the reviewed studies, many focus on participants who could broadly be described as labour migrants. At the same time, some studies examine other groups in more precarious positions, including undocumented or irregular migrants, and asylum seekers. Their situations are often marked by legal insecurity, family separation and constrained mobility, with irregular or undocumented statuses shaping their

3 Some social media platforms are more popular in certain regions and lead the way to participants. For example, WeChat and Weibo are extensively used to recruit participants from South East and East Asia (e.g. Lamas-Abraira, 2021; Wilding et al., 2022).

migration trajectories and family lives (e.g. Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2019). By contrast, a smaller body of studies focuses on more socioeconomically privileged groups, who are typically engaged in highly skilled or professional employment, and occupy more secure legal and socioeconomic positions (e.g. Uy-Tioco & Cabalquinto, 2020; for more detail, see Mačkinė et al., 2026a).

Finally, the composition of research participants reveals a gendered pattern. Migrant mothers, transnational grandmothers, wives who remain in the country of origin and female domestic workers feature more prominently across the reviewed studies than their male counterparts, reflecting both gendered migration regimes and the centrality of women in transnational care and family practices (e.g. Chen, 2022; Zhu, 2020; see also Mačkinė et al., 2026a).

3.3. Regional Focus of TNF Studies

The regional focus of the studies is summarised in Table 1, revealing a geographical configuration that largely reflects global migration hierarchies. Across the reviewed studies, countries of destination are predominantly located in the Global North, particularly Western Europe, North America and Australia, while some Asian countries are increasingly emerging as destination contexts, particularly in intra-Asian migration. This concentration mirrors broader migration patterns and indicates a strong destination orientation in the qualitative TNF literature (e.g. Brandhorst, 2023; Christensen, 2020), as in migration studies more generally.

In contrast to destination countries, countries of origin are geographically more diverse and predominantly located in East and South Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The Philippines, China, Poland, Romania, Mexico and Ecuador are among the most frequently studied sending countries, reflecting their incorporation into global labour migration systems (e.g. Baldassar, 2023). However, these origin contexts are not always the sites of empirical fieldwork. Transnational family relations are often examined indirectly through narratives collected in destination settings, rather than through sustained fieldwork in the countries of origin (e.g. Fan, 2021; DePalma et al., 2022). This asymmetry may limit the extent to which studies capture the perspectives and everyday realities of family members who remain in origin contexts.

Patterns of empirical fieldwork also vary across regions. Research on Sub-Saharan African and Middle Eastern TNFs relies on single-sited qualitative fieldwork conducted exclusively in destination countries, even when research questions explicitly address cross-border family dynamics (e.g. Farshbaf Shaker, 2018). Research conducted in both sending and receiving contexts is more common in studies on Latin American and Asian TNFs, particularly those examining care circulation, parenting across distance, and remittance practices (e.g. Valenzuela, 2022; Waruwu, 2023). These regional differences may suggest that the spatial organisation of TNF research is shaped not only by family geographies but also by practical, financial and political constraints on fieldwork access.

Table 1. Regional focus of TNF studies

Region of focus	Destination countries	Countries of origin	Fieldwork countries
East and Southeast Asia	UK, Italy, USA, Canada, Australia	Philippines, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand	Mostly destination countries, some transnational fieldwork (origin + destination)
Central and Eastern Europe	Germany, UK, Italy, Spain, Switzerland	Poland, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine	Predominantly destination countries
Latin America	USA, Spain, Italy	Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Brazil	Destination countries and transnational fieldwork (origin + destination)
Sub-Saharan Africa	Italy, UK, France, Netherlands	Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Somalia, Eritrea	Mostly destination countries
Middle East and North	Germany, Sweden, Italy, Canada	Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Morocco, Egypt	Destination countries, some origin countries (single-sited research)
South Asia	USA, UK, Australia, Canada	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh	Mostly destination countries

Note: for a more detailed overview of geographical patterns in TNF research, see Mačkinè et al., 2026a.

These geographical patterns are closely linked to the spatial organisation of research itself. Around two thirds of the reviewed studies adopted a multi-sited approach (either nationally or, more often, transnationally), while about a third employed a single-sited design. Given the financial costs and temporal constraints of conducting multi-sited transnational research, one might expect single-sited research to prevail, but our findings show otherwise.

While most multi-sited studies connect localities of origin and destination in two-country settings, a few studies report on fieldwork conducted in multiple countries (e.g. Istanbulu, 2021; Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2019), enabling researchers to grasp the extent and intensity of TNF networks and relations more fully. However, multi-sited transnational research spanning three or more national contexts remains rare. This suggests that, despite the research field's transnational orientation, much TNF research remains structured around relatively bounded origin–destination dyads.

3.4. Limitations and Challenges in Qualitative Research on TNFs

While qualitative approaches are widely valued for capturing the relational depth and contextual complexity of TNF life, less than half of the reviewed studies report on research limitations, even though some journals require such reflection as part of the manuscript structure. Authors who do so most commonly refer to limitations grouped into four broad areas: limitations of sampling and representation, limitations of data collection methods and tools, limitations related to the setting (including language) and to temporal scope.

Authors often mention **small sample size** as a perceived limitation of their research (e.g. Bilecen, 2021; Capistrano & Bernardo, 2018). In many studies, authors acknowledge that they focus on particular places, communities or social groups, such as middle-class families (e.g. Hsu, 2018), urban adolescents (e.g. Jerves et al., 2018), highly educated migrants, or students (e.g. Simola et al., 2023). They are careful to note that their findings apply to specific national/local, social or cultural contexts, and cannot be generalised. Several authors also point out that some groups – e.g. rural populations, persons with lower levels of education, men, or other family members – are underrepresented or not included in their respective studies (e.g. Della Puppa, 2019; Jerves et al., 2018). Several authors note difficulties in reaching **diversity within small samples** as well. Differences related to gender, generation, legal status, or migration history are often observed but cannot be fully explored or compared (e.g. Hari et al., 2023; Jerves et al., 2018). This often limits comparative analysis across these dimensions. As a result, authors suggest the need for larger, more diverse samples or comparative research designs in future studies.

Some authors also address issues such as **self-selection** of research participants (e.g. Christensen, 2020; Vuckovic Juros, 2022), which may bias the findings because individuals with a more pronounced (e.g. cultural, ethnic or gender) identity or feelings of belonging might be more motivated to participate in research. This would limit the generalisability of the findings to the target group. Other authors report that snowball sampling based solely on participants' referrals may have caused early data saturation.

When it comes to limitations of methods used, many authors reflect on the **limits of interviews**, including those conducted remotely/online. They note that interviews often show how participants describe their practices, not what they do. Interviews generally rely on self-reports, making them prone to social desirability bias and thus forming a less reliable method for researching sensitive, private and intimate issues such as migration status, family conflicts, finances or marital infidelity (e.g. Acedera & Yeoh, 2018), which are often relevant in TNF research. Some of the authors also note that interviews rely on retrospective accounts and participants' memories, sometimes of events that occurred years ago (e.g. Dziekońska, 2023), which can influence participants' objectivity. In addition, studies using online interviews indicate that it can be difficult to capture the bodily, emotional and sensory aspects of family life through digital means (e.g. Ślusarczyk, 2023).

Limitations related to the **research setting** primarily concern specific “ecological” factors that influence the research process. Some authors describe specific circumstances that led to interview interruptions (e.g. Brahic, 2022; Estrada & Ruth, 2021), particularly in research settings involving participants with younger siblings or children. When it comes to the language used in the research process, some authors point out the inability of potential participants to take part in the study due to their limited knowledge of a (foreign) language, as well as the inability of the authors to communicate with them in their native language (e.g. Devenney, 2020). Researchers who relied on translators note that “some cultural insights might have been lost in translation” (Badiei & Popkova, 2021: 2297).

Authors also report on temporal limitations, namely the relatively **short time span** of many studies. Data are often collected through one-off meetings (e.g. Freeman et al., 2022) or over a limited period, not capturing long-term dynamics (e.g. Hershberg & Brinton Lykes, 2019) and therefore providing only a snapshot of TNF life. Authors accordingly note that it is difficult to fully grasp how family relationships, care arrangements or gender roles develop, and call for longer-term or follow-up research, especially to understand longer-lasting effects of migration, family separation, return, deportation, or specific events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine.

While most of the limitations mentioned by the authors concern qualitative research designs and methods in general, some are more **specific to TNF research**. Some authors note the challenges of researching transnational families whose everyday lives largely unfold in private spaces, making it difficult for researchers to fully grasp TNF practices and dynamics (e.g. Chávez et al., 2023; Share et al., 2018) using conventional research methods while adhering to ethical standards. A few authors also mention the one-sidedness of their research as a limitation, as they focus on just one side of the transnational family in either the country of immigration or emigration (migrants or non-migrants). They acknowledge that this may fail to capture multiple perspectives on TNF relations and practices in a particular case (e.g. Quah, 2018).

Some of the studies also deal with sensitive groups such as irregular or undocumented migrants, unaccompanied minors or (in some contexts) LGBTQ+ migrants, raising issues with accessibility in researching “hidden populations”. The sensitive nature of certain research subtopics, specifically those involving irregular or undocumented migrants, creates a substantial access barrier, making it difficult for researchers to recruit and engage with these populations and, consequently, potentially limiting the depth and richness of the collected data.

Finally, although the study selection timeframe (between 2018 and mid-2023) included the years of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, only a minority of the reviewed studies report that the pandemic (negatively) influenced their planned research design. This is partly because most studies published during the selected period relied on previously collected data, and partly because the long publication lag in most high-ranking journals delays publication. A minority of studies that mentioned the

pandemic recognised it as an obstacle to comprehensive data collection on TNF practices (e.g. Ducu et al., 2023).

3.5. Innovative Qualitative Approaches in TNF Research

Although most of the studies included in the review use standard qualitative methods (primarily various types of interviews or ethnography), the following examples illustrate some of methodological innovation in TNF research.

In her research on unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK and their family social networks, Devenney (2020, p. 6) used **interviews with visual elements** “to understand the social networks of unaccompanied young people as they transition to adulthood”. Participants were asked to create a “time tree” to represent the past, present and future with different parts of a tree (roots, trunk and branches). They were also asked to create social network diagrams, as well as social maps representing their most visited spaces and places (Ibid., p. 6). Such an approach gave participants greater control over the interview process and allowed narratives to emerge more organically, which is particularly important when addressing sensitive family issues (Ibid., p. 6).

Freeman et al. (2022) used innovative **participatory and culturally grounded techniques** in their research on Pacific children’s perspectives on TNFs in Samoa and New Zealand. In order to “ensure that children’s voices are heard and that children feel comfortable [within] what can be an unfamiliar process” (Freeman et al., 2022, p. 616), the authors used *talanoa*, a traditional form of storytelling dialogue, also incorporating drawings, interviews and photos. “Children were asked to draw a map of their neighbourhood showing people and places that were important to them. The drawings were used as discussion points for the children to help make them comfortable and as prompts during the interviews” (Ibid., p. 617). After one-to-one interviews, children were asked to take up to twenty photos of their home and places that are important to them. Although the photo data was not included in their publication, the authors noted that “it was important in providing a fun, child-centred activity, enabling children to feel comfortable as they were keen to talk (*talanoa*-shared encounters) about their photos” (Ibid., p. 618).

Focusing on “remote fatherhood and visiting husbands” in the case of male seasonal migrants from Poland to Germany, Fiałkowska (2019, p. 1) conducted **long-term (immersive) multi-sited ethnographic research** in several locations in both countries. According to Fiałkowska (Ibid., p. 7), this research design enabled “following the migrants and meeting them in various locations in the community of origin, as well as in Germany, at their workplace, often meeting their families and friends, visiting their houses on various occasions, attending family ceremonies or being invited to casual gatherings during weekends”. Her research included multiple methods of data collection: “overt and covert participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photo-ethnography, and focus groups” (Ibid., p. 7), providing in-depth insights into various aspects of everyday life of TNFs. Although multi-sited

ethnography is not a new method *per se*, this study stands out for its combination of multiple sites, diverse data collection methods, and long-term researcher engagement.

Kędra(2021) explored how TNFs are performed through mobile apps in a case study of Polish migrant mothers in Finland and their digitally mediated communication with family members back home. The author developed an **interactive collage** as a participant-driven visual elicitation technique, to be used during interviews (Kędra, 2021). Research participants were asked to visually represent their family constellations using cards of different colours featuring male and female silhouettes and mobile app icons. Kędra (Ibid., p. 2882) referred to this technique as interactive collage, “because it enables the study participants to create and modify visualisations of family constellations throughout an interview. The collage acts as a visual prompt to elicit specific thematic data in an engaging manner”. Cards showing mobile app icons, on the other hand, facilitated mapping digital communication practices involving different family members. The use of interactive collages enabled the author to “reveal complexities in digitally mediated familyhood, performed in the polymedia environment and determined by technological affordances” (Ibid, p. 2877).

Finally, it is important to note that this review of TNF studies using innovative qualitative methods is not exhaustive and is limited by the timeframe of our study selection, as well as the word limit of this article. Although some of the methods have been developed previously, they have rarely been used in TNF research and represent important contributions to the field.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has presented a comprehensive review of 275 qualitative studies on TNFs, published between 2018 and mid-2023 in journals indexed in Scopus, WoS and ERIC. Rather than reviewing substantive findings, the analysis focused on how TNF life is methodologically studied, what type of knowledge these approaches produce, and where their limitations lie. By mapping dominant approaches and emerging methodological developments, this paper offers a structured overview of how transnational family life is empirically studied and analytically approached in qualitative research.

Across the reviewed qualitative studies, interview-based research – particularly semi-structured and in-depth interviews – alongside ethnographic approaches predominate. These methods are widely regarded as well-suited to researching the phenomenon and their predominance suggests that narrated experience remains the primary pathway to understanding TNF dynamics. In studies where interviews constitute the primary data collection method, data are frequently collected at a single point in time and often rely on the account of one family member rather than incorporating multiple perspectives across the family network. While such accounts provide valuable insights into lived experiences, they may privilege articulated

narratives over everyday practices and interactions, rendering embodied, routinised and relational dimensions of transnational family life less visible. This points to an ongoing tension between analytical depth and relational breadth in TNF research.

Ethnographic approaches – especially long-term, multi-sited designs – may mitigate some of these limitations by embedding interview accounts within observed social contexts and enabling a more processual and relational understanding of family practices. However, ethnographic research in transnational settings faces constraints, including the difficulty of sustaining comparable access and levels of engagement across multiple sites, and the possibility that the researcher's presence shapes what can be observed. While a significant share of the reviewed studies used multi-sited designs, engagement across contexts is sometimes uneven, posing challenges in capturing reciprocal dynamics of TNF life. This suggests that transnational family life is not always matched by equally transnational research practices.

Beyond the dominant interview-based and ethnographic approaches, the reviewed literature draws on a growing range of methods such as digital ethnography, analysis of mediated communication, visual elicitation techniques, participatory approaches, and culturally grounded dialogical formats. This diversification reflects how TNF life is increasingly technologically mediated, affectively negotiated, and performed across different platforms. These approaches broaden the methodological possibilities for capturing the relational, sensory, and embodied dimensions of family life that are often less visible in standard interview-based designs. Group-based methods, particularly focus groups combined with individual interviews, further extend these methodological possibilities by capturing both personal narratives and collectively negotiated meanings, situating family practices within broader social and normative contexts. At the same time, their relatively limited uptake suggests that methodological diversification, while evident, has not yet substantially displaced the interview-centred core of qualitative TNF research.

Although the authors of the reviewed studies commonly report on data collection methods, they devote far less attention to detailing the data analysis methods. While approximately two thirds of the studies provide some information on their analysis procedures, only about one quarter explicitly name their analytical approach, and a substantial portion offer little to no detail on the processes of analysis and interpretation. This lack of clarity about analytical procedures is one of the main methodological weaknesses identified in the review. When authors do not clearly explain how they analysed their data, it becomes difficult to assess the rigour of the study, compare findings across research, or build cumulative knowledge. Greater transparency about analysis procedures and interpretation frameworks would strengthen the credibility and comparability of qualitative TNF research.

When discussing study limitations, many authors of the reviewed studies refer to constraints related to sampling, access, language, or the timeframe of the research, often noting the difficulty of capturing long-term processes or accessing dispersed and hard-to-reach populations. Notably, fewer than half of the reviewed studies explicitly address the research limitations, indicating that reflection on methodological

constraints remains uneven and suggesting that methodological reflexivity is not yet systematically embedded across the field. Researcher positionality is even less frequently discussed, despite its relevance for shaping access, interpretation, and ethical negotiation.

Overall, qualitative studies on TNFs represent a very diverse and rapidly expanding field of research. The reviewed studies encompass various migrant and non-migrant groups, diverse research locations, and a wide range of topics. Although this review focused on qualitative approaches, the variety and richness of the methods employed provide insights and inspiration for further methodological advancements in TNF research. At the same time, the findings highlight the need for stronger longitudinal engagement, a clearer articulation of analytical procedures, and more systematic reflexivity on research limitations.

Taken together, the findings point to several broader methodological tendencies in TNF research. These include the expansion of multi-sited and digitally mediated research in response to technological developments and changing family practices. At the same time, analytical procedures remain inconsistently reported, particularly for data analysis methods, limiting transparency and reproducibility. While reflexivity and researcher positionality remain underexplored in this review due to the design limitations, future reviews could systematically examine how positionality statements and reflexive practices are reported and how they shape methodological choices in TNF research. Overall, these patterns suggest the need for greater methodological reflexivity, more transparent analytical reporting, and clearer reporting standards in future TNF research.

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