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SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Defining transnational families: A systematic review of conceptual patterns

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

In recent years, the notion of *transnational families* (TNFs) has become central to understanding how kinship, care, belonging and identities are sustained across borders in an increasingly mobile world. This literature review systematically analyses how the concept of TNFs has been applied in academic work published between 2018 and mid-2023. Drawing on nearly 400 peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, Web of Science and ERIC, last searched in spring 2023, it identifies five distinct patterns of conceptual use.

The analysis reveals that the term remains broad and is inconsistently applied, often conflating *transnational*, *long-distance* and *migrant* families. Empirical research remains thematically concentrated on caregiving and ICT-mediated ties within families with underaged children and older parent-adult child dyads, with comparatively little attention to couples, siblings, extended kin, queer families, or forced separations. Moreover, the review uncovers persistent Western-centric and classificatory biases: families from the Global South and Eastern Europe are routinely framed as TNFs, while white, middle-class (Western) Europeans are less visible in this strand of research.

By synthesising the conceptual patterns and dominant foci and identifying less-researched aspects, the review advances a more reflexive and inclusive understanding of TNFs. It calls for future research that pays greater attention to the temporal dimension and integrates structural inequalities, diverse family forms, and intersectional perspectives into the study of transnational family life.

The main limitations of the review relate to the use of a specific keyword search strategy and reliance on selected academic databases. Given its conceptual focus, no formal risk of bias assessment was conducted. The review was not prospectively registered.

Open Peer Review

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Keywords
Translational families, international migration, family, literature review, academic discourse, conceptualisation

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly mobile and globalised world, the concept of transnational families (TNFs) has become central to understanding how familial relationships, obligations and care are sustained across borders, making them transnational (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). Building on foundational work that established TNFs as families separated by geography but connected through a sense of 'familyhood' (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002: 3), and retaining a 'sense of collectivity and kinship' across national borders (Baldassar et al., 2007: 13), the past two decades have seen a proliferation of studies on transnational caregiving, digital communication, intergenerational relations, remittances and related topics. However, despite this growing body of scholarship, the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes a transnational family remain unevenly defined and, in some cases, vague. The term is frequently used without clear analytical intent, at times applied interchangeably to *migrant* or *culturally diverse families* and is inconsistently employed across different regions and research traditions (cf. Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al., 2025).

These ambiguities were particularly evident in early discussions among scholars involved in the COST Action *Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe (TraFaDy)*,[1] which brought together researchers from diverse disciplines and countries. Efforts to establish a shared, multidisciplinary understanding of TNFs revealed divergent – and at times contradictory – interpretations of the concept across regional and disciplinary lines. As a result of this variation, many network members referred to the influential definition of TNFs offered by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002). Building on this shared reference point, the network agreed to define transnational families as those whose members are physically dispersed across at least two countries due to international migration or shifting national borders, yet maintain a sense of 'familyhood' (Čapo, 2023). At the same time, it was acknowledged that specific initiatives within the network would continue to apply distinct conceptual lenses shaped by their thematic focus. For instance, studies on education or social protection concentrate more on the destination-country contexts, with less emphasis on the transnational dimension. This definitional diversity underscored the need for a more systematic examination of how the concept has been used so far.

To understand the different applications of the term and propose a way forward, this article presents the findings from a systematic review of how the concept of TNFs has been applied in recent academic literature. Drawing on almost 400 sources published between 2018 and mid-2023 and indexed in Web of Science (WoS), Scopus and ERIC academic databases, it maps the current state of the field and identifies the main conceptual ambiguities and underlying assumptions that shape how transnational family life is studied. To capture the range of conceptual engagement, we distinguish between studies that *define*, *operationalise*, or simply *use* the term. Some provide explicit *definitions*, while others convey implicit understandings through the way they *operationalise* the term – for example in their research design, case selection, or empirical focus (e.g., on migrant parent–underaged child dyads across borders, on dyads of adult migrant children abroad and their parents remaining in the country of origin). In some cases, the term is *used* without further elaboration or analytical grounding. Recognising these differences allows a more nuanced analysis of how the concept is applied and interpreted across the literature.

This literature review contributes to the field by offering a critical synthesis of recent approaches to the concept of TNFs. It consolidates existing knowledge while interrogating the analytical categories, geographical foci, family forms, and thematic priorities that dominate the literature on TNFs. In doing so, it addresses persistent conceptual ambiguities and argues for a more precise, inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of transnational family life. By tracing definitional patterns, thematic concentrations and implicit exclusions, the review calls for a re-evaluation of how TNFs are conceptualised and of the normative assumptions that continue to shape their study in contemporary migration research.

Apart from synthesising existing approaches, the review offers three specific contributions to the field. First, it systematises recent conceptual patterns and identifies areas where terminological overlap obscures analytical clarity. Second, it draws attention to Western-centric and classificatory asymmetries in the literature. Third, it proposes directions for future research that foreground structural inequalities, diverse family forms, and intersectional perspectives, including greater attention for underexplored directions of mobilities in TNF literature. In doing so, the review consolidates existing knowledge while advancing a more reflexive and inclusive understanding of transnational family life.

The article first outlines the methodology of the review and characteristics of the reviewed studies. It then presents five patterns in the conceptualisation of TNFs, followed by an overview of thematic patterns, including dominant research foci and less researched areas. The concluding section summarises the findings and discusses their implications for future research.

[1]COST TraFaDy (CA1143) is an interdisciplinary network, supported by European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST). For more information visit https://transnational-families.eu/

2. Methodology and characteristics of reviewed studies

2.1 Methodology of the literature review

This article systematically reviews how the concept of TNFs is applied in recent academic literature. Conducted by a team of over 40 scholars from the TraFaDy network, the review follows standardised procedures, including a structured search strategy, a two-stage screening process conducted by independent reviewers, data extraction, and analysis of the selected studies. The process is summarised below and in the accompanying flowchart, alongside an overview of the characteristics of the included studies and the limitations of the review.

While systematic reviews are often designed to synthesise empirical findings to evaluate intervention outcomes or effectiveness (see, e.g., Gough et al., 2012; Peleman et al., 2018; Petticrew & Roberts, 2008), this review pursues a different objective. Its aim is not to synthesise outcomes of individual studies, for which evaluation of methodological rigour is typically required (Peleman et al., 2018: 11), but to map patterns in how the concept of TNFs is used. In other words, the analysis focuses on conceptualisations of TNFs at the level of publications rather than on empirical findings.

Considering this aim, no formal quality appraisal was conducted. Instead, we adopt a conceptual mapping approach, focusing on how the notion of TNFs is applied – *defined*, *operationalised*, and/or *used descriptively* – across a wide range of studies, reflecting varying degrees of conceptual engagement. This approach enables us to clarify the concept's analytical boundaries and patterns of usage.

Information sources and coverage. To implement this approach, the publications reviewed were identified through three major academic bibliographic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC. Together, these databases span a wide range of disciplines and index journals published in multiple languages including English. Given this broad coverage – and because most of the non-English publications include English abstracts and keywords – studies published in languages other than English were included in the review.

Selection criteria. The criteria for including studies were jointly developed by a designated team and included:

- Criterion 1 – Date of publication: studies published between 2018 and mid-2023 were included. The starting point was selected to prioritise recent literature and ensure a manageable scope based on test search results, while the end date corresponds with the beginning of data collection through structured searches in academic databases.

- Criterion 2 – Relevance:

2.1) transnational families are a key focus of the publication;[2]

2.2) an understanding of transnational families in the publication that is in line with the scope of the TraFaDy network: the publication addresses family relations maintained across national borders, broadly defined to include all individuals considered family, with members living in different countries due to international migration or shifting borders;[3]

2.3) empirical findings presented in the publications draw on the analysis of data collected between 2000 and 2023, excluding recently published historical studies;

- Criterion 3 – Type of publication: the review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and PhD theses.[4]

No restrictions were applied regarding geographical focus or research design, resulting in a diverse sample of studies (see below for more details).

[2]"Transnational families" (or related concept) are considered a key focus of the publication if the concept appears in the abstract, title or among key words (for the screening of titles, abstracts and key words) and is clearly identified as a central concept and hence a significant focus of the research question, aim and scope. Publications not referring to "transnational families" (or related concepts like "transnational mothering", "transnational parenting", "transnational care" etc.), were excluded.

[3]Publications were *excluded* if TNFs were mentioned only in passing, without substantial discussion, or if the focus was on non-family domains or domestic family dynamics without a transnational component. Research on work, school, or community relationships was excluded unless explicitly framed as family-like. The publications which focused on reunification of TNF in one country were included, because they concern the "after-effects" of transnational family life.

[4]Conference papers, book reviews, reports, theses below PhD level were excluded.

Search strategy. The keyword 'transnational famil*' was used as the sole search string, reflecting the conceptual focus of this review. Although this limits the breadth of the corpus (see Limitations), it ensures analytical consistency in line with the aim of capturing studies that explicitly engage with the concept. Related terms (e.g., 'transnational households') were not included, as this would shift the focus away from examining the use of TNFs as a concept. Nevertheless, as shown in the Results section, some studies favouring alternative terminology were captured when they also included 'transnational families' as a keyword.

Searching procedure. We started by searching Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) using the term 'transnational famil*'[5], which captures the concept we were interested in. Following initial discussions of the search results in Scopus and WoS and the importance of the ERIC database for some TraFaDy members, we conducted an additional search with the ERIC database using the same keyword search.[6]

Reference management. Bibliographic data were managed using Zotero software. After removing duplicates, 680 records were compiled in May 2023 into an Excel file shared via Teams.

Selection process. The screening process consisted of two stages:

- **Stage 1:** Titles and abstracts were independently screened by two randomly assigned reviewers (intercoder reliability: 65%), with disagreements resolved by a third reviewer. This resulted in 514 records retained and 166 excluded.[7] After removing 31 records without full-text access, 483 publications proceeded to full text screening.

- **Stage 2:** Full texts were independently screened by two randomly assigned reviewers (intercoder reliability: 79%), with disagreements resolved by a third reviewer.[8] Publications in other languages (see section 2.2 for overview of languages of publication) were screened by two independent reviewers fluent in the respective language. Following the exclusion of 79 studies at this stage, the sample comprised 404 publications.[9] A further 10 publications were excluded at the final stage, resulting in a final sample of 394 publications.

In total, 680 records were identified, 514 retained after title and abstract screening, 483 assessed at full-text stage, and 394 included in the final sample (see Figure 1). A list of studies excluded, together with reasons for exclusion, is available in the online repository accompanying this review (see Data Availability statement for details).

Data collection process. During full-text screening, reviewers extracted key information on study objectives, methods and samples using a shared grid developed by a designated team. The unit of analysis was the publication, with particular attention to how each study conceptualised TNFs. Reviewers recorded quotations illustrating how TNFs were explicitly defined or implicitly understood, and provided a brief (one to two sentences) analytical summary of these conceptualisations in the additional coding column. Given the conceptual focus of the review, no outcome measures in the conventional sense were defined. Instead, data extraction focused on how the concept of transnational families is defined, operationalised, and used across studies. This included both quotations with explicit definitions

[5]Scopus search string: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("transnational famil*"); WoS search string: TI = ("transnational famil*") OR AB = ("transnational famil*") OR AK = ("transnational famil*") OR KP = ("transnational famil*"). Filters applied in both cases: publication years 2018–2023. Both searches conducted on 19 April 2023.

[6]In ERIC due to limitations associated with using the asterisk symbol within quotation marks, searches were conducted for keywords "transnational family", "transnational families" or "transnational familyhood" in title, abstract and indexed subject terms: TI("transnational family" OR "transnational families" OR "transnational familyhood") OR AB("transnational family" OR "transnational families" OR "transnational familyhood") OR SU("transnational family" OR "transnational families" OR "transnational familyhood"). Filters applied: publication years 2018–2023. Search conducted on: 12 May 2023. Although the ERIC search was conducted at a later date than the searches in WoS and Scopus, this was not considered to substantially affect the review, as all identified publications had been published before April 2023. Consequently, the searches in the previously consulted databases were not repeated. As of the preparation of this manuscript, the ERIC search interface appears to differ from the version used in 2023, with identical search queries producing different results. However, given the limited number of publications included from this database, the review should be considered as primarily based on WoS and Scopus searches.

[7]When preparing the documentation for submission to the repository, two coding mistakes were noticed: two publications – Cho and Allen (2019) and Ivanova (2022) – should have been included based on the results of abstract screening, but they were mistakenly recorded as "exclude" in the merge file.

[8]For books, two reviewers independently verified whether they were edited volumes and, if so, selected relevant chapters. Disagreements for publications in English were resolved by the first author.

[9]Four publications (one in simplified Mandarin, one in Spanish, one in Turkish, and one in Ukrainian) were not screened at this stage due to the unavailability of at least one reviewer. Their screening was completed at the final stage of the review. In addition to TraFaDy members fluent in these languages, two reviewers outside the TraFaDy network assisted with one publication in simplified Mandarin and one in Ukrainian. All non-English publications, except the publication in simplified Mandarin, were screened by two independent reviewers.

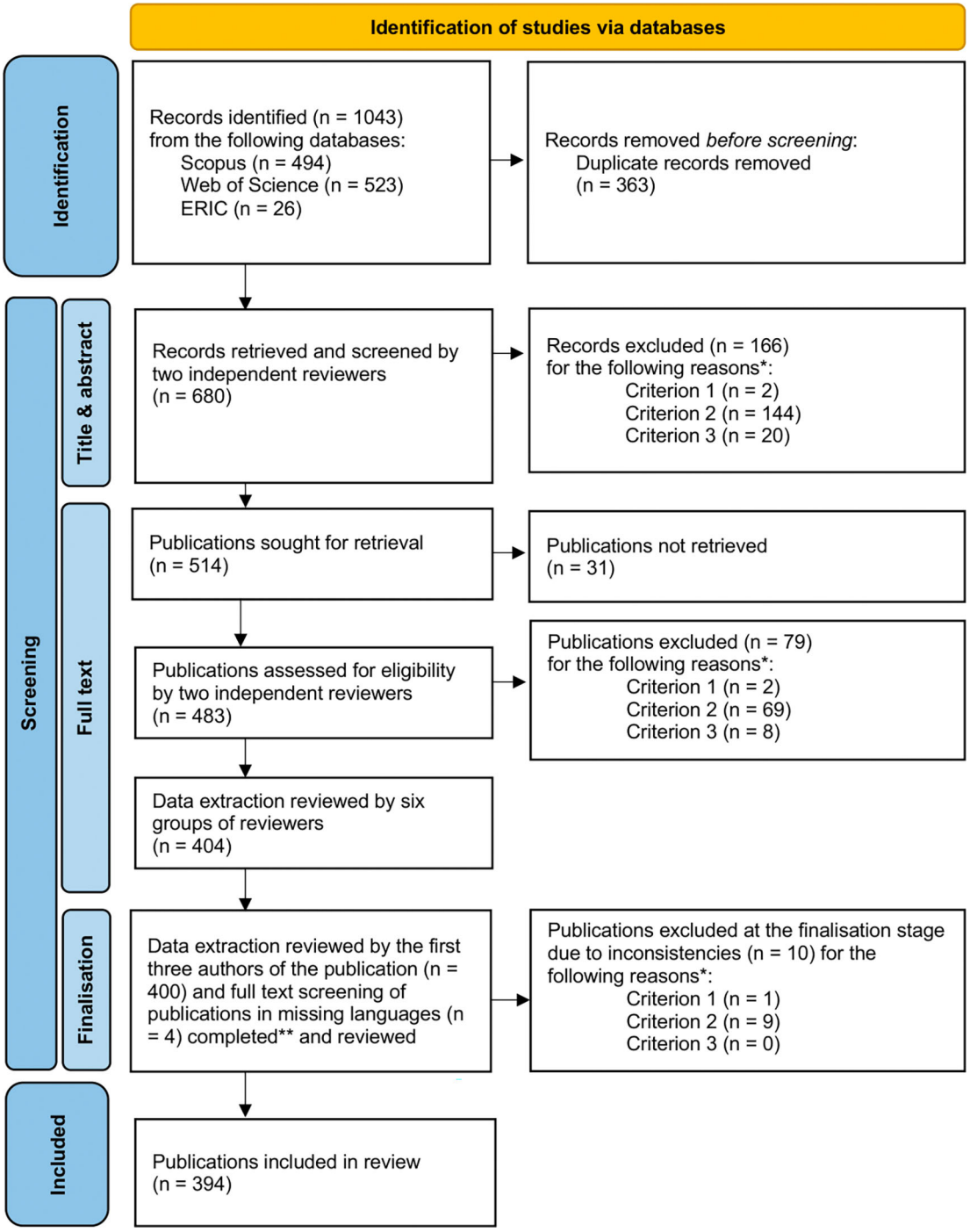


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram showing numbers of publications identified, screened, excluded and included in the analysis. Source: created by the first author, using the template from Page et al. (2021). **Note:** * The references were excluded because they did not align with one of the three criteria for inclusion. Criterion 1 – Publication date; Criterion 2 – Relevance; Criterion 3 – Publication type (for more details, see *Selection criteria* above). ** The screening of four publications (one in simplified Mandarin, one in Spanish, one in Turkish and one in Ukrainian) was not completed at the earlier stage of the screening due to unavailability of at least one reviewer. The screening of these four publications was completed only at the very final stage of the review.

and implicit conceptual uses, alongside study characteristics relevant to interpreting these patterns. Discrepancies in interpretation were resolved by a third reviewer and subsequently reviewed by one of the first three authors during the final phase (see Figure 1 below).

Data analysis and conceptual mapping. In the final phase, contributors were organised into six groups, each comprising scholars from various disciplines and countries, and assigned subsets of studies. The allocation was deliberate (rather than random), ensuring that each group included studies previously reviewed by at least one of its members, thereby balancing familiarity with the research corpus under review. Each group summarised key insights on the use of the TNF concept and proposed a possible structure for the resulting publication. The first three authors synthesised these inputs into a draft outline, which was discussed during a hybrid meeting in Vilnius (25–27 November 2024) and subsequently refined. The first three authors then systematically reviewed all extracted data and categorised studies according to their level of definitional engagement with the TNF concept, enabling comparative analysis (see Section 3 and Table 1 below). Citations reflecting explicit and implicit definitions of TNFs were grouped into initial patterns, which were refined through iterative discussion. This process resulted in a refined set of five conceptual patterns, presented through descriptive summaries (see Section 3) and a visual mapping (see Table 1). The analysis was complemented by an examination of dominant research foci and less researched aspects, interpreted as indicative of how each study approached the phenomenon of TNFs. These dimensions were identified through an iterative, team-based process involving comparison across studies and refinement of categories. Given the qualitative and conceptual nature of the review, formal assessments of heterogeneity, sensitivity, and certainty of evidence were not applicable; instead, the analysis relied on collective interpretation developed by the first three authors and refined through team discussion. The mapping of studies also included a general overview of research designs and methodologies, highlighting uneven distributions across methodological approaches and geographical coverage in recent TNF scholarship. Variation across studies was examined qualitatively, focusing on differences in conceptualisation, research focus, and geographical context; no formal statistical investigation of heterogeneity was conducted.

Referencing. As the main data collection was conducted on 19 April 2023,[10] the review captures all studies published up to that point, including articles available online ahead of print. In cases where the final publication date extends beyond 2023, references used in this publication reflect the year in which the publication was first made available and captured in our dataset.

Limitations. This review covers a relatively short period (2018–mid-2023), which helped maintain a manageable number of studies but limited the ability to capture longer-term patterns. While our search strategy allowed us to capture some studies in diverse languages published in journals indexed in major international databases, it did not cover the broader body of academic literature published in national languages in journals not indexed internationally,[11] thereby narrowing linguistic and regional diversity. To further contain the scope, full monographs were excluded, which would merit separate analysis. The screening stages also presented challenges: lower intercoder reliability in title and abstract screening reflected differing interpretations of TNFs, and a few studies still needed to be excluded and some data extraction had to be corrected at the final stage. This was partly due to different understandings of TNFs, with scholars from linguistic or educational disciplinary backgrounds tending to include studies that used "transnational families" as a synonym for migrant families without addressing transnational dynamics. Most of these studies were excluded when sorting out reviewers' disagreements with respect to the inclusion criteria. These disagreements were also partly spurred by the review's conditions – conducted relying exclusively on voluntary contributions from a large team from TraFaDy network whose membership changed over time – making coordination more difficult and leading to inconsistencies in applying inclusion criteria and data extraction, requiring additional reviews. As a result, this review should be seen as mapping dominant applications of the concept of TNFs in recent, accessible, and largely Anglophone academic literature indexed in main international databases, rather than as an exhaustive account of all scholarship on TNFs.

Reporting bias. Given the conceptual focus of this review, no formal assessment of reporting bias was conducted. However, potential biases may arise from the database selection, keyword-based retrieval, and the predominance of English-language publications in the selected databases, which shape the visibility of particular research traditions and conceptualisations. These limitations are considered in the discussion and limitations sections.

Protocol and registration. The review was not prospectively registered. A retrospective protocol and all supporting materials – including the PRISMA checklist (see also Supplementary File 1), PRISMA flow diagram, search strategy, screening dataset, and coding file – are available in the online repository accompanying this article (see Data Availability statement) to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

[10]Searches in ERIC were carried out on 12 May 2023, but only publications that were published before 19 April 2023 were included.
[11]The extent of this omission can be illustrated by examples from Lithuanian and Portuguese scholarship published in national-language outlets not indexed in major international databases; see Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al. (2025).

Table 1. Patterns in defining TNFs in the reviewed academic literature, 2018–mid-2023.

	Emerging pattern	*Explanation of the pattern*	*Example(s)*
Pattern 1	Explicit use of an already existing definition of 'transnational families' (analytical concept)	Authors explicitly define transnational families by drawing on established, seminal definitions, most commonly those proposed by Bryceson & Vuorela (2002) and related work.	Ahlin (2018) Carella et al. (2022) Popyk & Pustułka (2021)
Pattern 2	Implicit use of the term 'transnational families' without providing a clear definition, but with a clearly conveyed meaning (analytical)[25]	The term is used without an explicit definition; however, its meaning is clearly conveyed through the authors' descriptions of family situations and their analytical focus. Although no formal definition is provided, the concept is sufficiently specified.	Becker (2023) Huang et al. (2022) Martín-Bylund & Stenliden (2022)
Pattern 3	Implicit use of the term 'transnational families', without a clear definition and without a clear specification of its meaning (descriptive)	The term is used without an explicit definition and without clear specification of its meaning. In these cases, "transnational family" functions primarily as a broad label, loosely describing cross-border contexts, migrant backgrounds, cultural difference, or long-distance family arrangements.	Kozminska & Zhu (2021)[26] Purkarthofer et al. (2022) Quah (2018)
Pattern 4	Explicit author-developed definitions of transnational families (analytical concept)	Authors develop and explicitly state their own definitions of transnational families by refining, nuancing or extending existing conceptualisations. These studies differentiate bi- and multi-national families, modify understandings of family and familyhood and/or reinterpret key elements such as separation, distance, and the role of the nation-state.	Guizardi et al. (2018) Herrera & Berg (2023) Palash & Baby-Collin (2021)
Pattern 5	Alternative terminology for similar phenomena (alternative concept)	Studies that examine phenomena commonly associated with transnational families but using alternative terms and concepts. Transnational families are implied rather than explicitly named, with the term appearing only in keywords or references of the reviewed publication. Instead, authors employ concepts such as transnational households or global householding and related conceptualisations.	Oso & Suárez-Grimalt (2018) Yount-André (2018) Zharkevich (2019)

2.2. Key characteristics of the included studies

The majority of included publications are based on empirical studies (n = 341), with qualitative research methods predominating (n = 295). These are most often based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork (see also Kuti et al., *forthcoming*), which have shaped much of the existing knowledge on transnational families to date. The non-empirical publications form the second largest group (n = 53), including introductions to special issues and edited volumes, literature reviews and conceptual contributions that frame and advance key debates on TNFs. Quantitative designs are less common (n = 33), while mixed-methods studies represent the smallest share (n = 13). As reflected in the reviews focusing on quantitative and/or mixed method research, the limited number of such studies reflects persistent structural and methodological challenges, including difficulties in accessing reliable and detailed cross-border migration data, the resource-intensive nature of multi-sited large scale research, sampling and ethical constraints, as well as the inherent limitations of standard instruments in capturing the complexity and fluidity of family arrangements across nation-state borders (see Bennett et al., *forthcoming;* Schiefer et al., *forthcoming*). This scarcity constrains opportunities for generalisation and systematic cross-context comparison, while also limiting the potential to integrate statistical evidence with qualitative depth, as enabled by mixed-methods research designs.

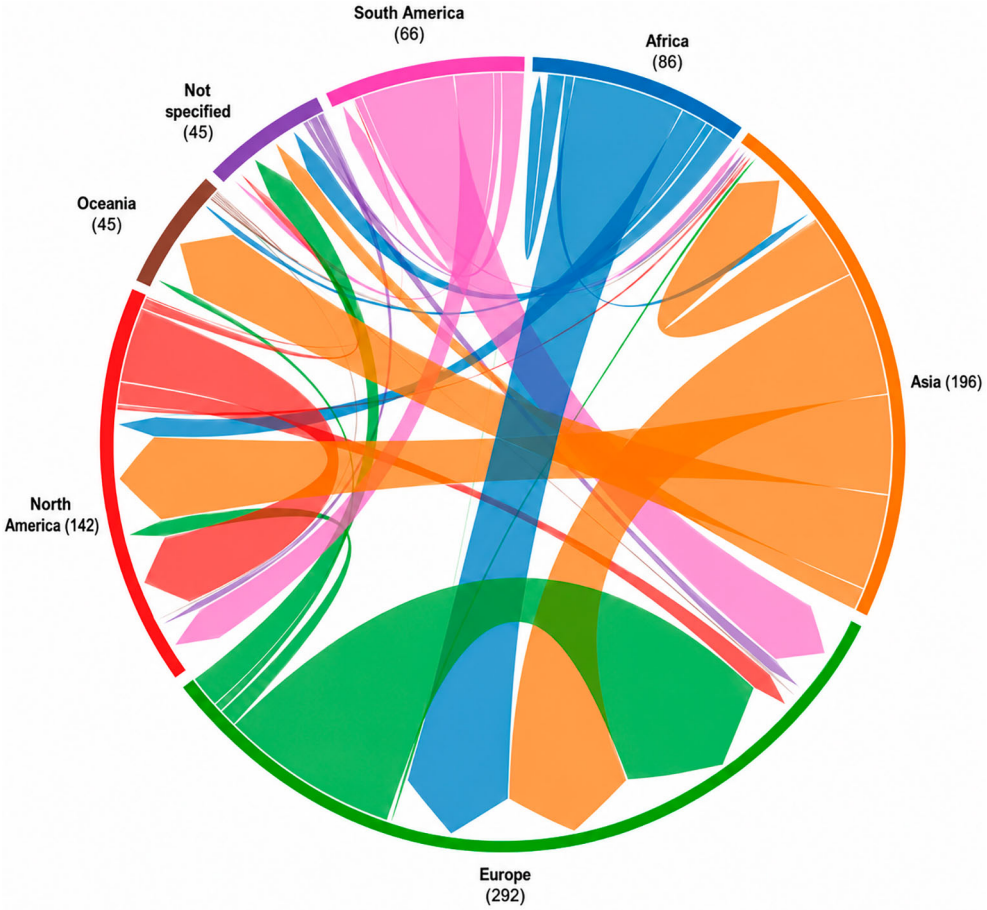


Figure 2. Transnational family ties between world regions observed in the reviewed academic literature, 2018-mid-2023. *Source:* Illustration created using RAWGraphs 2.0 online tool by the first author. *Note*: The numbers represent the total number of publications based on empirical studies referring to flows both from and to the specific continent. If a publication discusses transnational families formed between multiple countries across different continents, it is counted multiple times – once for each country pairing mentioned. Therefore, the total number of links is far greater than the number of publications included in the review. *Additional note:* To make the visualisation possible, countries were grouped by continent, with some regional specificities simplified. For example, Central America was not differentiated within the North American continent in the illustration; however, most of the North America-to-North America flow represents migration from Mexico to the USA. Similarly, European countries were not differentiated by EU or non-EU membership.

Geographically, most empirical studies focus on transnational family life between the so-called Global South and the Global North, with European and North American continents appearing as the most common destination regions (see Figure 2 below). The United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada and several EU countries (mainly Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain) emerge as the most frequent destinations mentioned in the analysed corpus. These studies commonly examine family relations involving migrants from various countries, with transnational family ties created due to migration from Mexico to USA (e.g., Cruz-Manjarrez, 2023; Galvan et al., 2022; Tuñón Pablos & Mena Farrera, 2018), from China to USA (e.g., Liu, 2019; Xu et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2018), Canada (e.g., Wu & Tarc, 2022; Zhu, 2020) and UK (e.g., Chen, 2022; Hu et al., 2022; Tu, 2023), and from Ecuador to Spain (e.g., Dávalos, 2020; Oso & Martínez-Buján, 2022) featuring prominently. Intra-regional mobility – particularly within Europe (e.g., Eastern to Western Europe) and within Asia and between Asia and Oceania is also well represented. In case of the former, transnational family ties resulting from migration from Poland to other EU member states (e.g., Barglowski, 2023; Fiałkowska, 2019; Kędra, 2023; Sokolowska, 2018) receive the most attention. In the case of migration from and within Asia, migration from the Philippines to Singapore (e.g., Acedera & Yeoh, 2019; Amrith, 2023), Australia (e.g., Cabalquinto, 2018, 2020) and Japan (e.g., Celero, 2023; Zulueta, 2023) emerge as the most researched flows.

Fieldwork has been conducted in both receiving-country and sending-country contexts, with the former being more common. Quantitative studies in particular tend to be based on data collected within the receiving country, mainly in North America (e.g., Silver et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2019), Western Europe (e.g., Cela & Bettin, 2018; Eremenko & González-Ferrer, 2018) and Asia (e.g., Chiu et al., 2019; Lai & Fong, 2023),[12] thus reflecting a host-country bias. While single-sited studies remain widespread in qualitative research, there is a growing number of multi-sited studies (e.g., Francisco-Menchavez, 2018) as well as research designs that examine different origin groups across multiple destination countries or compare transnational and non-transnational families (e.g., Caarls et al., 2018).

In terms of family relationships, reviewed research on TNFs is overwhelmingly centred on child–parent relations, with particular attention to underaged child (ren)–migrant parent relational dynamics, usually from the perspective of a parent (e.g., Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022) and older parent–adult migrant child dyads (e.g., Ahlin, 2018; Földes & Savu, 2018; Karpinska & Dykstra, 2019). Multigenerational ties (e.g., Ducu & Telegdi-Csetri, 2023; Juozeliūnienė et al., 2018; Liu & Ran, 2022) and relations with extended kin (e.g., Oso & Martínez-Buján, 2022; Silver et al., 2018) receive less systematic but still notable attention. Couple relationships (e.g., Acedera & Yeoh, 2020; Dito & Vanore, 2023),[13] their separation or breakdown (e.g., Cebotari et al., 2018; Sportel et al., 2019) as well as sibling ties (e.g., Budginaitė-Mačkinė & Juozeliūnienė, 2023) appear only sporadically in the literature, and transnational families including members involved in non-heteronormative relations remain largely understudied, though with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Barglowski et al., 2018; Vuckovic Juros 2022; Zheng, 2023). A few studies investigate international student mobility as embedded in wider family networks (e.g., Zhao, 2019), particularly in the context of COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Fandino & Banerjee, 2022; Hari et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2022).

While most of the reviewed literature focuses on life across borders, some studies examine the relational dynamics that unfold through family reunification and return after living at a distance. In these instances, authors analyse cases where underaged children join their migrant parents (e.g., Eremenko & González-Ferrer, 2018), spouses or partners reunite in the country of destination (e.g., Della Puppa, 2019), or older parents move abroad to join their adult migrant children (e.g., Bolzman, 2021). Other research considers transnational families reuniting in the country of origin after the return of the migrant family members (e.g., Parella & Petroff, 2023), as well as cases involving multiple reunifications across origin and destination countries (e.g., Christ & Etzold, 2022). Special attention is also paid to the challenges and insecurities to reunite faced by refugees and their family members (e.g., Christ & Etzold, 2022; Hiitola et al., 2023).

In terms of research participants, the largest share of studies involves migrants themselves, who may be identified as migrant workers, migrant parents, refugees or older migrants. A substantial number of studies also focus on non-migrants, most often older parents remaining in the country of origin after their adult children's migration. Children who remain in the country of origin (e.g., Chen, 2020; Fresnoza-Flot, 2018), the first and/or 1.5 generation[14] who (initially) reunite with their migrant parent(s) abroad (e.g., Ahrens, 2022; Celero, 2023; Fresnoza-Flot, 2018), children born abroad to migrant parents and defined as a second generation (e.g., Celero, 2023; Fresnoza-Flot, 2018) emerge as important, though less frequently directly researched groups. Carers in the country of origin (e.g., Chen, 2022; DePalma et al., 2022; Fresnoza-Flot, 2023) as well as spouses, partners (e.g., Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Schlobach, 2019) and other family members (e.g., Schlobach, 2019) feature more occasionally as study participants. Finally, a notable strand of research employs multi-sited multi-perspective designs, interviewing both migrants and their non-migrant family members to capture relational dynamics across borders (e.g., Marinho, 2021; Zapata Martínez, 2021).

In terms of language, most studies were published in English (n = 369), reflecting the dominance of Anglophone scholarship in the reviewed databases, the centrality of English in disseminating research on transnational families, and the limitations associated with reliance on major scholarly databases for initial selection of the studies (see also above). A smaller number of studies included in the final sample were in Spanish (n = 13), French (n = 4), Romanian (n = 3) and Russian (n = 2), with individual contributions in simplified Mandarin, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Turkish and Ukrainian (n = 1 each).[15] While this distribution confirms the prevailing prominence of English-language research in the reviewed databases, it also points to a degree of language diversity within the field, albeit with a broader trend of increasingly

[12]Mainly the USA and Canada; the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Sweden; and other major migration hubs such as Australia, Singapore, and Hong Kong.
[13]Although not always the main focus of studies, several studies in the transnational family literature have addressed divorced parents and partners, sometimes as a factor contributing to transnational arrangements – a pattern that aligns with the predominance of Western family models, where such situations are more common.
[14]The "1.5 generation" describes individuals who migrate during childhood or adolescence.
[15]Publication in simplified Mandarin (1) and publication in Turkish (1) were excluded from the final corpus at the final stage (see Methodology section above for more details).

shifting to English as the dominant language of publications in smaller European countries (see also Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al., 2025).

3. Patterns in defining TNFs

Starting with the definition of transnational families, the literature generally shows five different patterns, as elaborated further below.

3.1 Clear and explicit, already existing definitions

As Table 1 above indicates, the studies falling under the **first pattern** provide a clear definition of TNFs. These studies comprise approximately one quarter of the literature under review. Taken together, the definitions usually highlight family ties maintained in the context of geographical and physical distance across national borders. Many focus on the provision and organisation of care, alongside the modes and patterns of communication among family members, framing distance as something to be actively overcome.

Most adopt definitions developed in seminal works, notably by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002: 3), who define TNFs as 'families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely "familyhood", even across national borders'. Similarly, research often draws on studies such as Baldassar et al. (2007), emphasising how everyday practices sustain transnational family life – particularly long-distance caregiving, emotional exchange and mobility. By emphasising the links maintained across borders, these definitions also resonate with earlier conceptualisations of transnational migration developed by Glick Schiller et al. (1992).

This body of research conceptualises TNFs as families that sustain a sense of unity, through practices such as sending (reverse) remittances, arranging long-distance caregiving and intergenerational bonding, often facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and visits (mobility). Such practices enable TNFs to navigate challenges arising from spatial separation and political borders, as well as structural inequalities in access to healthcare and other welfare provisions.

3.2 Implicit but operationalised definitions

About half of the studies use the term 'transnational families' but omit to provide an explicit definition (patterns 2 and 3). Studies discussed in this subsection apply the term in a more analytical way (**pattern 2**), arriving at analytical conclusions without a formal definition but providing sufficient information on how they approach the subject – the families' situation and the authors' analytical focus – to constitute an implicit definition and therefore a clear operationalisation.

The authors whose work falls into this group provide ample indication of the key characteristics informing their understanding of what constitutes a transnational family, with physical distance, crossing of national borders and the sending of remittances emerging as central elements. Terms like 'separation' and 'left behind' are also commonly used to signal the family's transnational character, while a strong focus on patterns of caregiving, maintenance of family life and/or intimacy as well as gendered responsibilities indicates how familyhood is understood in this research strand (e.g., Kędra, 2020; Martín-Bylund & Stenliden, 2022).

3.3 Practical uses of the term

The studies falling under the **third pattern** omit to provide an explicit definition; rather than operationalising the term (as in the case of the second pattern), they use the term in a descriptive or practical way. In many of these articles the term 'transnational' functions primarily as a broad signifier for either 'cross-border', 'migrant background', 'cultural differences'[16] or 'long-distance' settings. In such cases, the research interest does not explicitly engage with how familyhood is maintained when family members live in different countries, or how the transnational dimension – understood as social, economic, political or other connectivity transcending national borders (cf. Bilgili & Bivand Erdal, 2025) shapes family life in the examined cases.

Several analytical ambiguities become apparent, when reviewing studies associated with this pattern. One ambiguity is whether it is the physical separation across different nation-states that shapes family life, including living under different welfare and immigration regimes, or is it simply *long-distance* separation. In other words, does familyhood change because of the separation by national borders, or merely because they live far apart, regardless of national borders? This ambiguity is particularly evident in some of the studies examining care and family bonding practices through ICT, which

[16]The term 'transnational families' in such cases is used as a broad descriptive label when describing people perceived as culturally 'different' due to origins in another country, often one that is considered geographically or socially distant from the country of residence.

raises further questions (or leaves questions unanswered): what exactly constitutes the 'transnational' aspect of media use, and how does caring for family members differ in a transnational long-distance setting compared with a transnational short-distance setting or a long-distance care arrangement within the same national context?

A second issue arises in studies that use the term 'transnational families' as a synonym for *migrant families* (e.g., Kozminska & Zhu, 2021; Purkarthofer et al., 2022). Many studies of this kind were excluded during the screening process, as they did not meet the core inclusion criterion of focusing on the transnational dimension (see Methodology section above). However, insights from a few remaining studies in this review that still touch upon the transnational dimension at least to some extent, along with findings from other reviews on TNFs, show that such work often places little focus on transnational practices and dynamics and instead primarily focuses on the local dynamics of family life in the destination country context (see Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al., 2025).

Finally, some studies use the term TNFs to describe a *cross-cultural* setting (e.g., Quah, 2018), applying it as a broad descriptive synonym for people perceived as culturally 'different' /or with origins in another country – often one at significant actual or perceived distance to the country of residence. This usage may offer some explanation as to why (Western) Europeans who live abroad and come from countries traditionally considered to be destination countries are less often studied through the lens of 'transnational families', with some notable exceptions in the reviewed literature including studies by Alinejad (2019), Baldassar (2023), Bianchera et al. (2019), Brahic (2022), Christensen (2020), Marino (2019), Nedelcu and Wyss (2020), Wyss and Nedelcu (2020), and Zontini and Reynolds (2018).

3.4. Conceptual refinements and new definitions

The **fourth pattern** emerging from our review comprises studies in which some authors offer their own definitions of TNFs, typically refining, nuancing or building upon existing conceptualisations. Such work may specify/modify the concept of the family and familyhood – either broadening or narrowing it – or reframe it by expanding or narrowing the definition of key elements such as separation, distance, and nation-states. Such studies account for roughly one in thirteen publications.

One example is the work by Palash and Baby-Collin (2021), who in their study on social protection in transnational families differentiate between bi-transnational families – whose relations span across two countries – and multi-transnational families, involving connections across more than two countries (see also Bryceson 2019). This differentiation is particularly useful in terms of highlighting how immigration and welfare regimes shape family life and situations of individual family members.

Similarly concerned with *distance* and *location*, Guizardi et al. (2018) challenge the conceptually established link of family relations with separation and distance, inherent in dominant conceptualisations of TNFs (such as the one by Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Studying commuters in border regions (i.e., individuals that live in one country with their family but work short distance across the border in another country), they argue that such families should be recognised as 'transnational families' even though they are not separated in terms of living arrangements.

Others, such as Herrera and Berg (2023), place *separation* at the core of their conceptualisation. They emphasize the importance of distinguishing between different forces that lead to family separation. In this context, they propose the term 'forced separation' to highlight the forced removal of a family member by the authorities from the country of destination to the country of origin (in this case, from the USA to Ecuador). They identify this process as a driver of transnational family formation that disrupts networks and heightens vulnerability through the spatial separation of family members, with some family members remaining in the country of destination, while others are sent back to the country of origin.

While some work attributed to this pattern does not aim to redefine family membership, it offers a conceptual refinement by shifting attention to what it means to *be* a family. Wilding et al. (2020), for example, emphasise the importance of emotions for maintaining the families' sense of familyhood across borders and distance. While acknowledging the crucial role of communication (through ICT, for example), they argue that it is 'not just the act of sending a message or making a phone call that is significant, [but rather] the circulation of affect via digital media that is fundamental to the production and maintenance of the transnational family' (Wilding et al., 2020: 642). This insight draws on earlier work in which they propose the notion of 'digital kinning' (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020), which identifies individuals and family members' engagement with new technologies as key to maintaining supportive family relations/network.

3.5. Alternative terminologies for similar phenomena

The **fifth pattern** comprises studies that examine TNFs as a phenomenon but apply different terms and concepts – TNFs is thus only implied, appearing as a term only in keywords and/or references. This accounts for roughly one out of every

six articles. Rather than explicitly describing the families under study as transnational families, these works use alternative terms such as *transnational households* or *global householding*.

While the analytical focus is still on maintaining family life across distance, different concepts are used to capture this. Examples include Zharkevich's (2019) work on transnational connectivity, Yount-André's (2018) conceptual development of the 'Facebook family', Uy-Tioco and Cabalquinto (2020) on transnational caregiving and dispersed families, Seidel et al. (2022) on unaccompanied minors and their distant families, transnational economic contributions by Gutierrez (2018), transnational householding by Fan (2021), transnational care ethics by Ducu (2020), transnational family solidarity by Baykara-Krumme and Fokkema (2019), transnational family figurations in displacement by Christ and Etzold (2022), or digital communication across borders by Ballaret (2023).

3.6 Reflection on the patterns of conceptualisation of TNFs

Building on the five patterns identified above, it becomes clear that the concept of TNFs is mobilised in diverse ways across the literature. Reflecting on these patterns of conceptualisation, it is possible to distinguish several important aspects.

Firstly, there seems to be a certain Western-centric bias in how the concept of TNFs is applied, inasmuch as the term 'transnational family' is frequently and sometimes exclusively applied to families originating from the Global South as well as Eastern Europe. Families from disadvantaged economic backgrounds are often categorised and researched as TNFs, notably when they migrate to or settle in Western Europe. By contrast, mobility among Western Europeans – within Europe or beyond – is rarely framed under this category, even when their families live across multiple countries. This is reflected in our literature review, where most destination countries are in the so-called Western world, with Western Europe, Australia, Canada and USA appearing prominently. The main countries of origin, in turn, are often in Asia and South America, with the Mexico–USA, China–USA/Canada/UK, and Ecuador–Spain corridors most frequently discussed, alongside Eastern European migration to Western Europe. As a result, the label "transnational families" is more commonly applied to mobility involving the Global South and Eastern Europe[17]. This reflects a broader tendency in migration research to focus on non-Western mobility, which can create a misleading impression that transnational family life primarily or exclusively involves populations from the Global South or Eastern Europe (cf. Dahinden, 2025 on de-migranticising migration research). At the same time, transnational family life linked to migration within the Global South and involving transit countries remains comparatively underexplored.

Secondly, the literature review highlights a related bias regarding race and ethnicity, class and skills which forms another manifestation of Western centrism. The question of 'who is a subject of transnational migration and of a family?' appears to depend not only on geographical origins but also on social markers such as race, ethnicity and class. Individuals with backgrounds that fall outside of the perceived European (and Western) norm are more frequently labelled as 'transnational' and/or 'migrant'. By contrast, white, middle-class (Western) Europeans are often defined primarily by emphasising their professional positions and skills, described as 'expats' or 'mobile professionals' rather than as migrants or members of TNFs (see also Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020; Suter & Åkesson, 2020). To address this imbalance, researchers could adopt more inclusive practices when it comes to naming the families they are researching, such as using 'transnational famil*' as a keyword and analytical category to identify transnational family constellations across diverse social classes and mobility types, rather than giving the impression that they are limited to particular populations.

The third issue relates to conceptual slippage in the use of 'transnational'. As spelled out above, the term 'transnational' is sometimes used as a signifier for long-distance, while the 'transnational' aspect of it, i.e., the practices and relations maintained across two or more different nation-states, is neither explicitly acknowledged nor examined. As will be demonstrated in the subsequent section, this ambiguity is also visible in thematic areas such as language and education, documenting how TNFs navigate heritage language maintenance, language loss, and multilingual educational trajectories. While it is clear that long-distance and/or migrant origin matter for the discussion presented, it remains unclear in what way the embeddedness of family members in two or more different states, and not just two different localities or regions, matter for shaping the families' experiences, practices or strategies. This observation relates to some of the reviewed studies and reflects what Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) call 'methodological nationalism': the tendency to focus on processes within a nation state, taking it as a given analytical frame, even when examining phenomena that transcend national borders.

[17]This Western-centric pattern is also reflected in the thematic focus of the literature, as demonstrated in the subsequent section.

Lastly, although much of the literature contextualises TNFs within broader socio-political frameworks – such as global migration regimes, economic disparities, labour demands, welfare regimes and migration governance – these macro-structural dimensions are seldom examined in depth. This gap is particularly evident in emerging work on TNFs in studies on forced migration where asylum regimes and state immigration policies fundamentally determine family practices and solidarities. These issues are addressed more fully in the subsequent section.

4. Thematic patterns

4.1 Research foci

An analysis of research on transnational families between 2018 and mid-2023 reveals a strong thematic focus on care and ICT-mediated communication, which have become the dominant areas of inquiry. Other topics – such as intergenerational relations, remittances, education, language, wellbeing and gender norms receive comparatively less attention, though they remain represented. This section reviews these dominant research foci, considers how they shape the conceptualisation of transnational families in this research field, and determines which dimensions of family life are treated as most analytically important in recent scholarship.

Within this thematic landscape, **care** has emerged as the single largest focus of research. Studies consistently demonstrate that the care family members provide to each other – an essential form of every individual's overall (transnational) social protection, irrespective of the welfare regime they are located in – does not stop at the borders of the nation-state but extends across two or more nation-states (e.g., Palash & Baby-Collin, 2021). Such studies have thus examined how transnational caregiving is organised and sustained, how care is provided, by whom and why (e.g., Reisenauer, 2018; Shubin, 2022). Taken together, these studies offer key insights into both the opportunities and obstacles of caregiving across national borders, highlighting its embeddedness in family, gender and institutional norms, as well as immigration and welfare regimes. Typically, studies investigate the care flows from the middle generation to children as well as to the older generations, shaped by cultural expectations on how care is given and/or perceived, and disproportionally carried out by adult women (e.g., Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2021; Hsu, 2018; Serra-Mingot, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified scholarly interest in transnational care, as mobility restrictions disrupted care networks, deepened emotional and intergenerational tensions, and at once revived solidarities and reflections on global inequality (Hinkson et al., 2022; Herrera et al., 2022). In this continuously growing body of work, the care for children – and, to a lesser extent, for older parents – remains a priority concern, but relatively little research addresses caregiving for the individuals with illnesses or disabilities, or members of the middle generation such as siblings and kin-like others.

A large number of studies investigate how ICTs sustain care across distance, showing that maintaining familyhood relies heavily on digitally mediated interaction (e.g., Merla et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2023; Gordano Peile, 2018; Popyk & Pustułka, 2021; Schlobach, 2019; Share et al., 2018). Recent research demonstrates that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication became particularly indispensable for sustaining transnational care and family solidarity amid travel restrictions and health risks (Hinkson et al., 2022; Juozeliūnienė et al., 2021). Some studies adopt a critical stance, drawing attention to asymmetries in care roles between migrants and non-migrants (Arnold, 2021) or to the ambivalent nature of 'elastic care work', which intertwines fulfilment with frustration (Cabalquinto, 2020).

The above mentioned body of work connects caregiving practices to the second major focus in the reviewed literature: **ICT-mediated communication** within transnational families. In general, digital technologies are widely studied as central to maintaining family life at a distance, focusing on both modes and substance of such communication. Research shows how ICTs – such as messaging apps, video calls, and social media – help to preserve emotional bonds, support performing everyday family roles, and enable ritualised practices and familial displays. Moving beyond a view of ICTs as neutral tools or simple facilitators of connection, some reviewed recent work emphasises their ambivalent role: digital interactions can foster closeness but also reinforce absence, create an 'illusion of togetherness and belonging' while producing feelings of guilt (e.g., Kędra, 2020), generate intimacy while enabling surveillance (Zhao, 2019), and provide connectivity while simultaneously producing emotional strain (e.g., Wang & Lim, 2021). To capture the complexities of ICT-mediated communication in TNFs, scholars have introduced concepts such as 'digital kinning' (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Wilding et al., 2020; introduced in the section above) and 'digital homing' (Wilding et al., 2022), enabling an analysis of how families use technologies to sustain relations, (re)create belonging, and maintain transnational identities. Importantly, research also highlights the significance of silences and voids in transnational exchanges (e.g., Sampaio, 2020), strategic virtual absence to avoid conflict (e.g., Hsu, 2021), and disconnective practices to resist familial control and surveillance in transnational settings (e.g., Zhao, 2019). Despite these notable examples, the use of digital technologies as a tool of control, conflict or negotiation within transnational family relationships, remain understudied. At the same time, little attention has been given to the structural and technological conditions – such as migration regimes, legal status, or unequal internet access – that shape digital family life when engaging in transnational care.

Communication, central to studies on maintaining familyhood through digital means, is also a key concern in research on transnational families from the perspective of **intergenerational solidarity**. Methodologically, this strand is more balanced than those discussed above, with quantitative studies making up a substantial share (including the typology studies, among others). This body of work mainly shows how emotional, material and practical support continues to circulate between generations across borders, though varying in form, intensity, and over time. Most studies draw on the intergenerational solidarity paradigm (see Bengtson, 2001) and focus on dyads formed by adult children having migrated abroad and older parents having stayed in the country of origin (e.g., Földes & Savu, 2018; Karpinska & Dykstra, 2019).[18] These dyads are usually studied from the perspective of a single member. While some research examines a single dimension of solidarity (e.g., Hărăguș et al., 2018, Popyk & Pustułka, 2021), others address several dimensions (e.g., Hărăguș & Telegdi-Csetri, 2018) or even propose typologies of intergenerational relations (e.g., Baykara-Krumme & Fokkema, 2019; Földes & Savu, 2018; Guo et al., 2018b; Karpinska & Dykstra, 2019). Recent studies show that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted reciprocal intergenerational support (e.g., Maviza & Nzima, 2022) and reshaped digital family interactions, including identity negotiations between queer international students and their parents (e.g., Zheng, 2023). Finally, some important gaps remain: solidarity within a generation is rarely examined (with few exceptions, e.g., Budginaitė-Mačkinė & Juozeliūnienė, 2023); intergenerational ambivalence[19] is addressed but not extensively (with few exceptions e.g., Gallo, 2019); and certain dimensions, such as consensual solidarity[20] (e.g., Gallo, 2019) receive relatively little attention.

Wellbeing and (mental) health have started gaining more attention in recent years, particularly the well-being of underage children and their parents abroad. Studies examine the effects of geographical distance on migrant parents' wellbeing (e.g., Butt, 2018; Lai & Fong, 2023), including undocumented parents (e.g., Galvan et al., 2022), and on the underage children who remain in the country of origin (e.g., Edelblute & Altman, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). Other work considers children who migrate to join their parents (e.g., Ismail, 2019), children later sent back to the extended family in the country of origin (e.g., Bohr et al., 2018), and the long-term effects of parental separation in childhood on wellbeing in adulthood (e.g., Eremenko & Bennett, 2018). While children's health and wellbeing receive increasing attention, measurement instruments do not always address children directly but rely on the assessments of the remaining parent (e.g., Edelblute & Altman, 2018). Some of the literature on intergenerational solidarity also examines its relationship with the wellbeing (e.g., Guo et al., 2018a) and health (e.g., Tezcan, 2018) of older parents who remain in the country of origin after their adult children's migration (e.g., Guo et al., 2018a; Tezcan, 2018). Even if the importance of studying wellbeing from multiple viewpoints is increasingly recognised (e.g., Phoenix, 2019), most research still relies on data collected from a single family member. Recent studies also point to the COVID-19 pandemic as a period that exposed the vulnerabilities of transnational families, with mobility restrictions shaping wellbeing and revealing gendered differences in life satisfaction among migrants living apart from their families (e.g., Gerber & Ravazzini, 2022). Beyond parent-child relationships, some of the studies on transnational families address the **health** outcomes of migration for both migrants and their families (e.g., Gustafsson, 2018; Webb, 2018), the healthcare needs of relatives across borders (e.g., Lafleur & Romero, 2018), and the role of kin in chronic illness contexts (e.g., Lukman & Merry, 2023).

Another important body of research examines how **gender roles and norms** are reproduced, negotiated, or transformed in transnational family life. Women – particularly mothers – are most frequently studied as those who shoulder the emotional and logistical burden of maintaining family ties across borders, coordinating caregiving from afar and engaging in transnational mothering while working abroad. This emphasis reflects not only persistent gendered expectations surrounding caregiving within the studied families and communities, but also potential biases in research that foreground women's roles. At the same time, some studies show that migration can increase women's autonomy and decision-making power, particularly through their financial contributions to the family. By contrast, research on men's roles in transnational families has been relatively limited. When addressed, men are often portrayed primarily as economic providers, with less attention paid to their emotional engagement or caregiving. Nevertheless, emerging research suggests that migration-related disruptions to family arrangements can prompt men remaining in the country of origin to assume roles that are considered non-traditional in their context, including caregiving (e.g., Ballaret & Lanada, 2022). A modest but growing body of research is also beginning to address transnational fatherhood (e.g., Hershberg & Lykes, 2019; Roy & Yumiseva, 2021). Overall, migration can both reinforce and reshape gender norms: it may empower women by strengthening their financial independence and authority within the household, while also creating openings

[18]There is a growing interest in the transnational relations between underage children and their grandparents (e.g., Ducu & Telegri-Csetri 2023, Popyk & Pustułka 2021). Most of the emerging literature is on children of migrants and their grandparents at origin. While indeed there is also research focusing on other relationship configurations, it is very little researched in comparison.

[19]In the study carried out by Galo (2019), intergenerational ambivalence is understood as simultaneous presence of attachment and tension in parent-child relations. For broader conceptual discussion on ambivalence see Connidis (2015).

[20]Consensus solidarity, according to Galo (2019), can be understood as an agreement on values, norms and family expectations. For a definition according to the intergenerational solidarity paradigm, see Bengtson and Robers (1991).

for men to engage more actively in caregiving (e.g., Ballaret & Lanada, 2022). These shifts, however, are highly context-dependent – shaped by class, ethnicity, legal status, and the cultural frameworks of both origin and destination societies – and may either constitute temporary adjustments or lead to more enduring changes (e.g., Tolstokorova, 2018).

Research on remittances, education, and language also falls into the thematic scope of TNF studies, albeit to a lesser extent. **Remittances** are analysed not only as economic transfers but also as expressions of care and family continuity across distance (e.g., Bakuri & Amoabeng, 2023, Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022; Chikwira & Madziva, 2023; Kaur & Kaur, 2022; McCallum, 2022; Palash & Baby-Collin, 2021). The examined studies highlight how remittances sustain family support systems, securing access to education, healthcare and housing for family members who remain in the country of origin. Beyond their material function, they also serve as emotional and symbolic gestures (e.g., Zharkevich, 2019), that reinforce familial bonds and fulfil moral expectations of reciprocity. The COVID-19 pandemic also broadened the notion of remittances to include the exchange of safety norms and coping practices within transnational families living under different regimes of normality (e.g., Galstyan & Galstyan, 2021). Overall, gendered patterns are frequently emphasised, with women's remittances more often tied to caregiving roles and social reproduction and men's more commonly framed as financial provision (e.g., Singh, 2019). Some studies also explore the social cost of remittances, pointing to the emotional burden and precarity migrants experience, especially when these transfers become routinised or expected (e.g., Solari, 2019).

Education and language have been approached as both resources and areas of tension within transnational family life in the reviewed literature. **Education** is most often examined through the lens of mobility – more specifically, as a strategic decision made by migrant families to secure better future opportunities for their children. Research in this area explores parental strategies for managing educational opportunities across borders (including practices of long-distance parenting), as well as children's educational outcomes and the ways these are shaped by the family's transnational circumstances (e.g., Bakaari & Escandell, 2022; Cebotari et al., 2018; Demirsu, 2022). **Language**, often closely tied to education, is studied as both an identity marker and a medium of intergenerational cultural transmission and belonging (e.g., Alasmari, 2023; Cruz-Manjarrez & Baquadano-Lopez, 2020; Hirsch & Lee, 2018; Istanbullu, 2020; Lexander, 2021; Moustaoui Srhir, 2020). Research often explores family language policy, including parents' language ideology, practices and tensions around language practices in transnational families (e.g., Alasmari, 2023). TNFs are shown to navigate multilingual environments, experience language loss, and also maintain their heritage language (i.e., the language spoken in the family and/or country of origin). Similarly, the studies also examine how destination country languages are used in the home setting (e.g., Huang et al., 2022). However, most of this scholarship tends to focus on parents' and caregivers' perspectives, with few studies examining children's agency in shaping educational and linguistic trajectories across borders.

4.2. Less explored areas in transnational families research

Beyond identifying dominant themes, it is also important to consider less explored areas in the reviewed research strand and what they reveal about knowledge production within the field of TNF studies. As demonstrated in the previous section, our analysis of recent TNF studies indexed in major scholarly databases indicates a tendency to privilege certain practices (care), family roles (particularly mothers), and family structures (nuclear heterosexual families), while constraining engagement with intersectional and interdisciplinary analyses of how inequalities shape transnational families' lives. In this section we highlight the less explored areas not because they are entirely absent – there are some studies addressing many of these aspects in TNF research within and beyond the corpus we analysed – but because they warrant greater attention to better capture the diversity of family structures, roles and practices.

Regarding family structures, most studies examine heterosexual, nuclear households – often reflecting Western family norms – while devoting comparatively limited attention to blended and reconstituted families, queer families, or polygamous arrangements. This emphasis yields a partial representation of transnational family life, in which Western-centric normative family models implicitly operate as a default model in TNF research. Additionally, family lives shaped by displacement, deportation or forced separation appear underrepresented within the TNF literature identified for this review, despite the significance of cross-border experiences. Greater attention to both voluntary and forced separations and reunifications across origin, transit and destination contexts would deepen the understanding of how state policies and broader structural constraints (re)shape who is recognized as family across borders.

At the same time, this pattern should not be interpreted as a lack of scholarship on these issues. A substantial body of research beyond the scope of this review examines forced migration, asylum regimes, deportability, and structurally constrained parenting practices, engaging with questions of transnational motherhood and family separation (e.g., Lijnders, 2023). However, this scholarship is typically situated within refugee and forced migration studies and does not necessarily frame these dynamics under the label of "transnational families", instead employing alternative keywords

that were not used to construct the initial corpus for this review. The relative marginality of these aspects in our findings may reflect both the limits of our keyword-based, specific databases-focused search strategy and a partial separation between research strands that address closely related empirical realities without consistently engaging in dialogue with one another.

The visibility of different voices in the reviewed TNF research is similarly uneven. While a significant share of research examines dyads involving migrant parents and underaged children remaining in the country of origin, children are often represented primarily through their parents and are less frequently interviewed directly. As a result, they are still too often portrayed as passive dependents rather than as active participants, and their agency in shaping transnational familyhoods remains less visible. Voices of siblings and extended kin networks – who are often central to sustaining care flows and emotional support across borders, particularly in arrangements involving older adults in the country of origin – are present, but rarely feature prominently in the analyses. Research focusing on transnational family members with disability, chronic illness or long-term dependency remains marginal, despite their significance for everyday family life, further contributing to a partial representation of TNFs. The uneven visibility can be partly shaped by research design and practical constraints, including ethical and logistical difficulties in interviewing children, and the challenges of multi-sited fieldwork needed to capture extended kin across locations. This underrepresentation is further heightened by challenges in accessing members of TNFs, particularly in the 'Global South', as research funding and resources tend to be concentrated in destination countries. The uneven visibility can also partially reflect the strong influence of transnational motherhood and care-oriented scholarship, as well as migration policies that privilege nuclear family categories, thereby reinforcing dyadic and parent–child-centred understandings of transnational family life.

Another limitation lies in the tendency to treat TNFs as static entities defined primarily by geographical separation, rather than as dynamic constellations embedded in relational and cultural contexts. This perspective risks overlooking the temporal dimension of transnational family life and the ways in which family roles and obligations, as well as relationships and intimacy, evolve over time. Longitudinal research designs are crucial for capturing these changing dynamics,[21] including how separation, return and reunion transform emotional relationships, care arrangements and power relations within family units. On the one hand, practical constraints related to longitudinal, multi-sited research help explain the prevalence of cross-sectional designs that capture transnational families at a single moment. On the other hand, a predominant focus on the moment of separation and emphasis on spatial dispersion as defining features of transnationality may unintentionally underplay the possibility of reconfiguration and changes over time. A wider application of longitudinal multi-sited research coupled with a stronger focus on temporality would enable more researchers to examine not only the maintenance of transnational relationships but also on how they are (re)negotiated, strained, reconfigured, or potentially dissolved across the life course and shifting migration trajectories.

The patterns discussed above are also linked to gendered assumptions embedded in TNF research.[22] Much of the reviewed literature focuses on transnational motherhood, frequently depicting migrant women – particularly from the Global South – as archetypal caregivers and primary bearers of emotional and practical responsibilities, often within a 'care drain' framing that implicitly problematises maternal mobility (cf. Dumitru, 2014). Migrant men are still predominantly portrayed as economic providers, with limited attention for their emotional lives and subjective experiences,[23] despite growing evidence that transnational masculinities are deeply shaped by moral obligations, care responsibilities and bureaucratic constraints. This asymmetry not only relates to analytical preferences but also to broader gender norms and migration regimes that often continue to associate women with care and men with breadwinning. While some newer studies do examine men's engagement in care duties in the countries of origin, especially fathering, the broader cultural and institutional frameworks that enable or constrain such involvement are rarely addressed in the studies included in this review. Changes in caregiving patterns are often framed as temporary adaptations to separation, rather than as potentially enduring transformations of gender relations. Beyond parenting, reviewed work also has addressed grandparenthood, typically highlighting grandmothers' provision of childcare, but comparatively less attention is given to care provided by children, by older adults, or by and for siblings and kin-like relations. Virtually none address care in contexts of illness, disability, or long-term dependency, thereby reinforcing a narrowed understanding of care within TNFs.

[21]Such changing dynamics have been captured in recent research going beyond the time scope of the current research. For example, Palash et al. (2025).
[22]For prior critiques of TNF literature's focus on mothers and the 'care drain' framing, see, for example, Dumitru (2014).
[23]For more on this aspect, see also examples from masculinity studies going beyond the scope of the current review (e.g., Näre 2020, Samadov 2024).

The review of dominant research foci confirms a persistent imbalance between *micro* and *macro*-level analyses, already discussed in relation to the conceptualisation of transnational families in the previous section. Research has generated rich insights into how families provide care, communicate and exchange remittances across distance, yet these practices are seldom situated within the broader structural conditions that shape them, including visa regulations, migration and border regimes, and shifting geopolitical dynamics that delimit mobility and family reunification (cf. Christ & Etzold, 2022). ICT studies, for example, show how digital tools facilitate 'digital kinning' and 'digital homing', supporting emotional intimacy and everyday coordination. However, they rarely account for the uneven conditions under which such practices occur, including unequal access to digital infrastructure, restrictive migration regimes, and precarious legal statuses. Similarly, studies of remittances often focus on their symbolic and material significance for sustaining family ties, without embedding them in the political economy of global remittance flows or in the regulatory frameworks that condition their circulation. This relative neglect of structural factors risks portraying TNFs as self-contained units creatively managing distance, rather than as families embedded in global regimes of inequality and migration governance. At the same time, research that focuses exclusively on structure underplays the agency of family members, who adapt, resist, or navigate constraints. Greater use of scale-bridging approaches would help illuminate how structural forces and family agency are mutually constitutive rather than analytically separable.[24]

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored these dynamics in particularly stark ways. Families were caught between border closures, disrupted care chains and prolonged separations, which magnified financial, social and emotional vulnerabilities (see also Végh et al., 2025). Similarly, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, transnational family lives in contexts of forced displacement have received renewed scholarly attention, highlighting how war and geopolitical rupture reshape family configurations across borders (see also Schrooten, 2025). Yet few studies included in the review investigate how states actively construct these vulnerabilities by determining who can cross borders under 'essential' categories, thereby increasing inequalities between different groups of migrants and families. As recent work going beyond this review also shows, even within the same household, family members may experience unequal access to legal rights and mobility opportunities, producing divergent transnational trajectories and forms of belonging (e.g., Van Hook & Glick, 2020). These dynamics highlight the importance of examining TNFs not only as family units negotiating distance but also as subjects of governance, exposed to policy practices that render some families precarious while leaving others exempt. What is needed is a wider use of more dynamic analytical frameworks that capture the interaction between structure and agency, recognising families as both constrained by and actively shaping the socio-political landscapes they inhabit.

5. Conclusions

This review has shown how the concept of transnational families is applied in diverse and often inconsistent ways across analysed academic literature between 2018 and mid-2023. Although many studies refer to TNFs, only a subset engage explicitly with the transnational dimension as a central analytical focus. Five conceptual patterns were identified, ranging from explicit definitions to more descriptive or implicit uses.

Building on these findings, several broader patterns emerge. The notion of TNFs is disproportionately applied to families from the Global South and Eastern Europe, who are often framed as vulnerable. In contrast, Western mobile families – such as families of skilled professionals, mobile international students, or retirees – are seldom included under this label, despite their cross-border practices and networks. The reviewed research also tends to centre on voluntary cross-border mobility for typically lower-skilled work, overlooking experiences shaped by forced migration, including deportation and family separations due to restrictive family reunification policies. Rather than reflecting empirical absence, this asymmetry may indicate how TNF research can (unintentionally) contribute to reproducing hierarchies embedded in the global migration regime, where certain mobilities are normalised while others are problematised. This classificatory asymmetry is tied to nationality, ethnicity, race, class, skill level, and/or legal status, reinforcing inequalities structured by migration governance. At the same time, much of the research foregrounds micro-level practices such as digital communication and long-distance caregiving, but often does so without sufficiently engaging with the broader political, legal and economic conditions that shape these practices. Reviews of research on distance caregiving (Bei et al., 2023; Sethi et al., 2022) and studies of migrant care work (Schaab & Wagner, 2020) highlight how issues such as legal precarity, access to digital infrastructure, and welfare policies remain under-analysed. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored these less researched issues, exposing how selective border closures and reunification policies deepen the precarity of TNFs. As Merla et al. (2021) argue, there is a need to complement the 'mobility turn' in migration studies with closer attention for inequalities in caregiving capacities and access to support across borders.

[24]For examples of approaches going beyond the literature reviewed in this study, see, for example, Christ & Etzold (2022).

Gender and family norms also shape academic research, with particular types of families receiving the most attention. Comparatively less attention is devoted to a range of other family constellations, including extended, blended and queer families. Building on 'classic' transnational family research and acknowledging diversification of family forms, the field would benefit from also moving beyond the nuclear household as the default analytical unit (cf. Hirsch & Lee, 2018; Nelson, 2020) and incorporating more fluid and extended kinship configurations and actors whose relevance to transnational care arrangements shift across the life-course. Despite devoting significant attention to care across borders, voices of children, siblings, older relatives and family members with disabilities remain still relatively underrepresented in analyses, precluding a more comprehensive understanding of transnational families.

Although there has been a significant increase in TNF scholarship, the field remains dominated by smaller-scale qualitative studies. While these generate valuable contextual insights, they limit systematic comparison and the identification of structural patterns across cases. Given the inherently relational, context-dependent, and heterogeneous nature of transnational family life, stronger emphasis on longitudinal, comparative, mixed-method and multi-sited research – such as advocated by Mazzucato (2021) – is needed to trace how family structures, solidarities and inequalities evolve over time and across settings. A life-course perspective is particularly crucial for analysing shifting roles, dependencies, and support configurations at different stages of family trajectories.

Moving forward, TNF research would benefit from greater reflexivity regarding the categories it employs. The term 'transnational family' should be used cautiously, not as a label that inadvertently reproduces global mobility hierarchies, but as an analytical lens applicable across diverse forms of cross-border family life, irrespective of geographic origin or socio-economic status. Introducing TNF more consistently as a keyword for varied constellations – including privileged mobilities and forced displacement contexts alike – could help rebalance current research agendas. At the same time, greater attention to the 'de-migranticization' of transnational family practices is needed (cf. Dahinden, 2025). Many dynamics central to TNF research – such as digital communication, care coordination, and family-making at a distance – are not exclusive to migrant families but also shape non-migrant households (cf. Odasso & Geoffrion, 2023). Recognising these continuities could help decentre migration as the sole defining frame and prevent the over-association of certain family practices with particular social groups. Situating micro-level practices within macro-structural conditions, engaging more systematically with underexplored family forms and geographies, and widening the use of cross-scale analytical frameworks would deepen theoretical coherence.

As geopolitical ruptures and mobility restrictions intensify, understanding how family ties are maintained, disrupted or denied across borders and the implications thereof requires sustained engagement both with lived experiences and structural conditions including migration, welfare and gender regimes. Balancing structural inequalities with family agency and integrating intersectional and comparative approaches will enhance our understanding of the phenomenon and has the potential to inform policies better aimed at supporting transnational families.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

Zenodo. Supplementary Materials for "Defining Transnational Families: A Systematic Review of Conceptual Patterns" https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20116580. (Mačkinė, I. et al. 2026).

The materials deposited in the repository include the following underlying data:

- Data extraction-coding file.xlsx
- Data for Figure 1.docx
- Data for Figure 2.csv
- Figure 1_PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM.png
- Figure 2_TNFs between world regions.png
- PRISMA_2020_checklist.docx

- Protocol (PROSPERO-style).docx
- README – Supplementary Materials Repository.docx
- Screening file.xlsx

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

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✓ **ELEONORE KOFMAN**
Middlesex University London, London, England, UK

This is an excellent critical review of the literature produced on transnational families, not just in English but also in a number of other languages. It outlines the basis on which publications were included for the period 2018-2023 whilst at the same time noting some of the key earlier references for the topic. It identifies the extent to which authors rely on standard definition of transnational families or develop their own and outlines the most common topics addressed, such as care and communications. Most significantly it develops a number of critiques of studies of transnational families, in particular their Western centrism and relatively little weight given to more diverse family forms and types of migration as well as the structural conditions in which transnational arrangements occur. In doing so, suggestions are made on how this analysis could be strengthened.
The article makes a major and very useful contribution to our understanding of how transnational families have been conceptualized and studied.

Are the rationale for, and objectives of, the Systematic Review clearly stated?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results presented in the review?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Gender and migration, especially family and skilled.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 06 August 2026

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Gül Ince Beqo
University of Milan, Milan, Italy

This article presents a systematic review of how the transnational family concept is applied across the academic literature, as well as its main thematic foci, offering a valuable resource for scholars working in the field. It is already a well-organized paper; the following suggestions are offered to strengthen it further.

- At present, the two axes (definitional patterns and thematic focus) are presented side by side, as separate mappings. Analyzing them together, to see where particular definitions and themes coincide, would make the field's underlying assumptions more visible. The combinations that recur most often, and those that are notably absent, would show how the way TNFs are defined shapes what the literature chooses to study and what it tends to overlook.
- The title currently reflects only the "patterns" axis. Since the analysis rests on two axes, it would be worth adding thematic focus to the title as well to capture the full scope of the review.
- Lastly, it would be valuable to reflect on how the contributors' positionality (their national and institutional locations) shapes the conceptualizations of transnational families they analyze. Making this explicit would add a reflexive layer and reinforce the paper's aim of surfacing the field's underlying assumptions.

Are the rationale for, and objectives of, the Systematic Review clearly stated?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results presented in the review?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: family migration migration policy

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.