

Familienforschung

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Transnational Family Relations of German Emigrants

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Familienforschung

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Studying the Family-Migration-Nexus: State of Research, Knowledge Gaps, and Empirical Perspectives

Marcel Erlinghagen and Karsten Hank

Abstract

This introductory chapter begins with a brief outline of key aspects of the current state of research on the family-migration-nexus, subsequently identifying key knowledge gaps. From this, we develop some more general thoughts about the kind of data are needed to fill existing research gaps, and then use the *German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study* (GERPS) as an example to describe a data set that already meets essential requirements for innovative research at the interface of family and migration. Finally, we provide a brief profile of German emigrants and an overview of the six empirical chapters of this volume, which clearly demonstrate the existing potential of the GERPS data for research on transnational family relationships of (German) migrants.

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1 Introduction

Individuals are embedded in social contexts at different levels of aggregation (e.g. social networks, welfare states). The *family* is a social context of a ‘special kind’, characterized by intergenerational role relationships and life-long solidarity between family members. Although specific forms of solidarity in the family context are themselves context-dependent (Davey et al., 2004), and may thus vary over time and space, the family still forms a relatively stable social framework for individuals across their life course. As such, the family also affects integration into social contexts at other levels of aggregation (see, for example, Banfield, 1958). This is also true—and may become particularly relevant—if migration leads to a change between the geographically determined contexts of the society of origin and the host society: the family ‘travels along’ (regardless of the extent of spatial mobility of other family members). The way in which family relationships are shaped by the migration process may thus also affect the integration of migrants in social contexts at various levels.

Migration is therefore often regarded as a ‘family affair’ (Rumbaut, 1997a). This includes not only the influence of the family on migration and integration processes, but also the significance of migration and integration for family relationships and processes. However, to date, the diverse and complex inter-relationship between family and migration is only rudimentarily reflected in sociological research (Adserà & Ferrer, 2015; Kulu & González-Ferrer, 2014; Van Hook & Glick, 2020). There is, for example, a lack of unified *theoretical approaches* allowing a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay of migration and family-related processes. Moreover, *empirical analyses* tend to neglect important aspects of these processes, ignoring, for example, the issue of re-migration and its interrelation with family dynamics. Importantly, previous studies almost exclusively focused on migrants born in the Global South moving to other Southern countries or to the Global North. However, more than one quarter of all international migrants was born in the North and most of these migrants stay in the North (Pison, 2019)—that is, in social contexts characterized by migration patterns and family regimes quite different from those in the South.

The present volume aims to contribute filling at least some of these gaps to some extent. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we begin with a

brief outline of key aspects of the current state of research and then identify key knowledge gaps. From this, we develop some more general thoughts about the kind of data are needed to fill existing re-search gaps, and then use the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS) as an example to describe a data set that already meets essential requirements for innovative research at the interface of family and migration. Finally, we provide a brief profile of German emigrants and an overview of the six empirical chapters of this volume, which clearly demonstrate the existing potential of the GERPS data for research on transnational family relationships of (German) migrants.

2 Current State of Research and Knowledge Gaps

2.1 State of Research

In contemporary research on families and migration, mainly three broad analytical foci can be distinguished (see Baykara-Krumme, 2023): A *first* analytical approach, typical for research at the intersection of family and migration in Germany, focuses on migrants and their families with regard to family relationships and processes in the destination country. Against the background of the biographical event of international migration and a cross-culturally varying context of origin and socialization for one or more family members, research examines, for example, parenting goals and styles (Leyendecker et al., 2014; Nauck & Lotter, 2015), mate choice patterns (Carol, 2016; Schroedter, 2013), fertility behavior (Krapf & Wolf, 2015; Milewski, 2011), attitudes toward abortion or gender preferences (Carol & Hank, 2020; Carol & Milewski, 2018), or intergenerational relationships (Bordone & de Valk, 2016; Steinbach, 2013). Theoretical reference points are usually concepts of assimilation, acculturation, and social inequality. The units of study are individuals or (nuclear) families in the destination country (typically first- and second-generation migrants), which are compared with other migrant families or non-migrant families in the destination context. Despite the importance of this research perspective and its relevance for explaining family specificities, patterns of integration and social participation in the migration context, the state of knowledge in Germany so far remains rudimentary. The reason for this is the very limited data availability, which—at best—allows more detailed quantitative analyses for the largest groups of origin (Baykara-Krumme, 2023; Nauck, 2018; Steinbach, 2018). Mobility patterns and transnational linkages of families are largely ignored.

Developing a transnational research perspective, a *second* analytical approach addresses the functioning of families living across borders and the consequences of transnational parenting (Baldassar et al., 2014; Carling et al., 2012). Bryce-son & Vuorela (2002, p. 18) define transnational families as such “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.” Transnational families are thus not only characterized by the fact that family members live or have lived temporarily or permanently in different countries, but also that the family is actually ‘lived’ across borders (Baldassar et al., 2014). In concrete terms this means that transnational families exhibit cross-border feelings of belonging or convictions of belonging; they engage in cross-border practices that constitute the family as a whole as such and make it ‘visible’ or ‘possible to experience’ and thus clarify who belongs to the family (and who does not). In this context, borders do not refer exclusively or primarily to nation-state borders. Rather, the transnational perspective explicitly opposes an overemphasis on nation-states as a reference context (‘methodological nationalism’; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and emphasizes the importance of social spaces and their borders, which are often not congruent with nation-state borders.

Research on transnational families so far remained primarily qualitative (e.g., Lutz & Amelina, 2017). The relatively few studies following a quantitative approach examined, for example, the living situation of children left behind in their country of origin (Cebotari et al., 2018; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011) or of parents living abroad (Haagsman et al., 2015). Despite recent advances (Mazzucato & Ditto, 2018), our knowledge still remains limited to comparatively few regions of origin and neglects the longitudinal perspective (regarding, for example, the persistence of the described family patterns or changes in transnational families over time).

A *third* research perspective is, finally, concerned with the role of social relationships and social networks (including the family) for the integration process in the destination country. On the one hand, it is argued that the family may serve as an ‘ethnic resource’ that promotes integration and can, for example, cushion experiences of discrimination. On the other hand, however, the family is also viewed critically as a potential obstacle to integration, if, for example, the family impedes the establishment of social contacts in the host society (Rumbaut, 1997b). A more refined examination of the interactions between family and integration processes has yet to be conducted, though, as research has tended to examine the role of ethnic social networks in general, rarely differentiating

between kin and non-kin relationships (Drever & Hoffmeister, 2008; Kalter & Kogan, 2014; Lancee & Hartung, 2012).

2.2 Research Gaps

Against the background of the state of research outlined above, two major research gaps become apparent: There are, first, *conceptual deficits* with regard to the theoretical framing of the interaction between migration and family processes. And there is, second, a widespread *lack of data* that would allow us to assess the interaction between migration and family processes from a life course perspective.

Conceptual and theoretical gaps. In migration-related family research, different perspectives on the family-migration-nexus largely remain disconnected. The family is either viewed as a

- determinant of migration decisions (Abdul-Rida & Baykara-Krumme, 2016; Haug, 2008), or as a
- determinant of immigrants' integration in the host society (e.g., Carol, 2014; Nauck & Schnoor, 2015). Conversely, integration is analyzed as a determinant of family relations (e.g., Kalmijn, 2019; Steinbach, 2013), and
- family processes are examined from a comparative perspective with regard to possible differences between families with and without migration experience.

The missing linkage between these perspectives is likely to result, at least in part, from conceptual deficits in migration research more generally, where migration is only rarely modeled as an (ongoing) process, beginning with the causes triggering specific decisions (potentially) leading to migration and its subsequent consequences (see Erlinghagen, 2021a). Instead, the circumstances of a past migration event have so far often been modeled in a theoretically under-complex way as a structural feature (migrants vs. non-migrants). This simplistic approach of social research to the migration experience prevents a more differentiated view of the connections and interactions between migration and family-related processes (Dahinden, 2016).

At the same time, transnational families are not just “families in which family members live in different nations” (Mazzucato & Dito, 2018, p. 1). Rather, if one takes the concept of transnational social spaces seriously, this implies that members of transnational families may well live in the same country (again), but in terms of their beliefs and practices (‘ways of being and belonging’; Levitt &

Glick Schiller, 2004) may, must, or want to cross borders of social spaces ('cultures'). In this perspective, a (previous) experience of spatial mobility of family members is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the constitution of trans-national families, because socio-spatially transnational beliefs and practices regarding the family have to exist as well. A perspective that understands the event of migration as the result of individual decisions made by rational individuals embedded in superordinate restrictions and opportunities with special consideration of family conditions seems to be helpful. Conversely, family processes should be understood as the result of individual decisions under conditions of migration (or the option to migrate). Transnational family relationships and related processes should thus be viewed from a life course perspective, accounting for interactions between different spheres of life over time as well as for the 'linked' decisions of actors in the complex process of migration ('transnational life course'; Erlinghagen, 2021).

Gaps in existing data sets. In addition to the above-mentioned theoretical and conceptual gaps, lack of data is another major deficit prohibiting more comprehensive studies of family relationships in the context of migration. This is also evident in Germany and has two main causes:

First, family events and family relationships of immigrants are often insufficiently recorded. Even though the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) or the German Family Panel (pairfam), for example, allow to study family processes over longer periods of time, their samples are often too small to allow for specific analyses of immigrant families. Moreover, in the context of these rather general surveys, questions about migration and integration processes reaching beyond citizenship and the time of immigration are hardly ever asked, and important items from the perspective of family sociology concerning the specific situation of migrant families are also missing. Exceptions are supplementary surveys of individuals with migration experiences within the framework of the SOEP or the German Generations and Gender Survey (GGG-I; Naderi et al., 2012), which, however, either do not allow for a longitudinal perspective or have gaps in their content (focusing, for example, on migrants from very few countries of origin only). Studies explicitly focusing on individuals with a migration background (such as the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries, CILS4EU; see Kalter et al., 2019), in turn, concentrate so strongly on the issue of integration (especially with regard to education) that questions about family relationships are not asked at all or merely sporadically. It is even more difficult to find data accounting for transnational aspects of immigrants' lives, even though this corresponds to the everyday reality of many immigrants. One exception is the study "2,000 Families: Migration Histories of

Turks in Europe” (Guveli et al. 2017), which, however, only considers one group of origin and focuses on migration decisions and their consequences for family members, but not on the family relationships as such.

Second, and in addition to the more general data collection issues mentioned above, existing data sets also suffer from considerable selectivity problems. In the German (research) context, which we refer to here as an example, it is very common that migrants from only a few countries of origin are covered, which does not reflect the heterogeneity of immigrants and their descendants in terms of contexts of origin, immigration motives, and immigration conditions. Typically, surveys in Germany mainly cover labor migrants from the 1960s and 1970s, originating from the so-called ‘main countries of recruitment’ (Turkey, Italy, Spain, Greece, or Yugoslavia) as well as ethnic Germans. Even though new immigrant groups (including refugees) have received increasing attention (e.g. in the ENTRA or Trans-FAR projects), the quantitatively relevant ‘internal’ migration from other EU countries (especially from Central and Eastern Europe) has only rarely been considered so far. Immigration from Asia, which has become increasingly relevant in recent years, has not yet been accounted for at all (but see, for example, Butsch, 2020). Another crucial issue in currently available data sets is selectivity resulting from questionnaires, which are often only available in German and therefore exclude immigrants without sufficient German language skills (see Blohm & Diehl, 2001; El-Menouar, 2014). Furthermore, especially for the highly mobile populations addressed in migration-specific analyses, further selectivity problems arise, as selective return or onward migration processes are not or only insufficiently captured by the established (panel) surveys (see Willekens et al., 2016).

3 What Kind of Data Do We Need to Study the Family-Migration-Nexus—and How Does GERPS Contribute to Filling the Gap?

3.1 General Data Requirements for Quantitative Empirical Analyses of Transnational Families

The conceptual and theoretical gaps outlined above and the lack of suitable data for analyzing migration processes and transnational families are closely interrelated issues. Data deficits appear, however, to be the greater challenge. Finding or generating suitable data sets with which existing theoretical concepts on transnational family relationships and family practices as well as their interactions can

be empirically tested thus is a primary task that applies equally to qualitative and quantitative research. With regard to quantitative research on migration processes and transnational families, four central requirements for suitable data sets can be identified:

(1) *Questionnaires* need to adequately capture the specific situation of families in the migration context, including items on migration and integration processes as well as on respondents' transnational family relations. This also requires capturing the decision-making process preceding the migration of family (members): Who is the driving force? Which migration motives are decisive? What is the timing of the spatial shift of family members' spatial center of life?

(2) Even if existing questionnaires are adapted to cater such items, insufficiently small sample sizes of specific migrant groups in general population surveys often remain a challenge limiting opportunities for differentiated analyses of transnational families. A further problem arises from the fact that existing surveys usually represent the population living in a nation state at a given time. This implies that immigrants are only observed after their arrival and emigrants are only followed until they leave the country. As a result, migration trajectories are only recorded in a fragmented manner, often ignoring events and changes upstream of immigration and downstream of emigration. In principle, this deficit could be partially compensated for by retrospective surveys, at least for immigrants. However, this approach is severely limited by commonly employed *sampling strategies*, which are often oriented to-wards the resident population of the host country. While it seems reasonable to ask new im-migrants shortly after their arrival to reconstruct upstream decision-making processes and living conditions retrospectively, the validity of this information is likely to be severely limited for immigrants who have been living in the country for years or even decades. A further complicating factor is that current sampling strategies only cover immigrants living in the target country at the time of the survey. This inevitably means that return migrants or those who moved on cannot be considered. In this respect, corresponding analyses of social integration in the destination country, for example, are always based on positive selection of immigrants and thus run the risk of only being able to analyze the causes and consequences of migration in a distorted or limited way. Overall, however, this means that due to low case numbers, fragmented recording of migration and family trajectories, and selective return and onward migration, data are needed that record new immigrants, emigrants and returnees by means of separate samples to supplement existing surveys (see Décieux & Erlinghagen, 2023).

(3) All of the above points to the need for a *longitudinal survey design*, which accounts theoretically for the fact that—from a life-course perspective—family-

and migration-related decisions and experiences need to be conceptualized as interdependent processes (Kley 2011; Wingens et al. 2011) and allows empirically the identification of underlying causal mechanisms.

(4) For the analysis of transnational families in particular, it would also be desirable to have a database that allows *comparisons from at least three different perspectives*: First, a reference sample of respondents without migration background is needed. Second, sufficiently large samples of immigrants from different contexts of origin are required. And, third, comparisons of migrants with the non-mobile population of their country of origin ('stayers') should be possible. Ultimately, harmonized panel surveys are needed from the outset to enable the analysis of transnational life courses from different comparative perspectives and in the context of different countries (Erlinghagen et al. 2021).

3.2 The German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS)

All empirical chapters in this volume are based on data from the *German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study* (GERPS; www.gerps-project.de). GERPS is a representative, register-based, push-to web (Dillman, 2017) online panel survey of German citizens aged 20 to 70 who have either emigrated from Germany or remigrated to Germany during the period June 2017 and May 2018. In the baseline wave, collected between November 2018 and February 2019, 11,012 completed interviews were conducted, including 4,545 interviews with recent German emigrants in about 130 countries around the world and 6,467 interviews with German remigrants who had recently returned from about 160 foreign destinations. The overall response rate was 33 percent (Ette et al., 2020). Wave 2 was collected about six months after baseline, Wave 3 was conducted between October 2019 and January 2020, and Wave 4 was carried out between October 2020 and January 2021. The final Wave 5 was conducted between October 2021 and January 2022. At first follow-up (that is, in Wave 2), about 64 percent of Wave 1 participants were re-interviewed. The panel stabilized in the following waves, with increasing re-interview rates of 73 percent (Wave 3), 79 percent (Wave 4) and, eventually, 86 percent (Wave 5).

Due to its novel conception, GERPS overcomes at least some the shortcomings of previous surveys described above and thus offers a wide range of possibilities for the analysis of transnational families and. GERPS is based exclusively on recently (re-)migrated German citizens, which allows to assess the circumstances of these moves (motives for moving, living conditions shortly before

migration, decision-making among couples, etc.) by retrospectively interviewing the migrants in the baseline wave. Up to five interviews over a period of three years also make it possible to survey longitudinally central parameters of family life (and changes therein), such as marital/relationship status, household composition, couples' employment constellation, and satisfaction with family life. In addition, further family- and partnership-related items were collected in GERPS' Wave 3 in order to reconstruct partnership and fertility biographies as well as family experiences in the parental home during childhood and adolescence (Witte et al., 2022).

In addition to these extensive opportunities for family-related migration research (or migration-related family research), GERPS overcomes fundamental deficits of previous surveys due to its novel sampling strategy. By drawing samples of recent emigrants and remigrants, not only a sufficient number of cases can be considered, but also the conditions and outcomes of migration can be observed from early on (almost right after the crossing the border) and distortions due to selective return or onward migration can be avoided. At the same time, comparisons with the internationally non-mobile population in Germany become possible, because the GERPS questionnaire is largely compatible with SOEP and pairfam, which serve as central reference data sets (Ette et al. 2020: 32ff; see, for example, Chapter 3.3 in this volume).

4 Transnational Family Relations of German Emigrants—an Overview of the Empirical Studies in This Volume

Before we give an overview of the empirical chapters in this volume, we would like to provide readers with a brief profile of the German emigrants who—over the course of time—often become remigrants and whose (transnational) family relations the studies collected here aim to shed some light on.

4.1 A Brief Profile of German Emigrants

Even though non-German citizens still constitute the majority of migrants from Germany, emigration of German nationals has been on the rise—both in absolute and in relative terms—for several decades. In the 1970s, the average number of emigrants per year was about 50,000. This number peaked in 2008, when 175,000 German citizens emigrated, declining thereafter to 130,000 in 2018.