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Distant Relationships in Transnational Families and Kinship Networks: The Case of Turkish Migrants in Germany

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Introduction

As a result of migration from one nation state to another, migrants are separated from the family members and relatives whom they leave behind in the emigration country. Some of these separations last for only a limited period of time until national borders are crossed again in one direction or the other, as, for example, in the case of family reunification in the immigration country or of reverse migration to the emigration country. In other cases, however, migrants who have emigrated may spend the rest of their lives in a country other than that of their significant others. Regardless of whether the separation between migrants in the immigration country and their families in the emigration country is temporary or permanent,[1] migration processes can involve both mobility and immobility, proximity and distance, and presence and absence.

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Therefore, migration contexts provide an ideal framework for analyzing distant relationships. Transnational studies in migration research[2] show quite clearly that migration processes have resulted in new socio-spatial formations, such as 'transnational families' (see Bryceson and Vuorela 2002a; Baldassar and Merla 2014c). With the recognition of transnational families, the concept of kinship ties as characterized by the crossing of national borders became a matter of interest. The spatial distribution of family members does not necessarily lead to the break-up of family relations; rather, families separated by migration have to bridge national borders by organizing their common lives. Thus, transnationality constitutes a characteristic of the respective family members and of the family as a whole. '"Transnational families" are defined here 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' (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002b: 3). The persistence of family intimacy over geographical distances and across national borders can be attributed to the fact that family responsibilities do not disappear in the face of migration.[3] As shown in studies of transnational families, the continuation of family responsibilities is reflected in two kinds of cross-border practices in particular: financial remittances (Guarnizo 2003: 671) and transnational assistance and care (see Baldassar and Merla 2014c). However, family and kinship relationships and practices must be modified according to transnational circumstances.[4]

While transnationally oriented research on migration processes has provided evidence of transnational families, the specific role of spatial distance in family and kinship relationships has rarely been analyzed. The goal here is to take a closer look at the interconnectedness of sociality and spatiality within transnational families and kinship networks. In the section that follows ('Evidence of Distant Relationships'), I discuss in general terms the model of the unilocal nuclear family as it is conceptualized in the traditional sociological view of the family. By including the alternative living arrangements found in transnational contexts, I argue that migration processes break up the unit of social and spatial proximity. This conclusion is based on insights gained from narrative interviews that were conducted with Turkish migrants in Germany as part of the

TRANS-NET project (see section 'Researching Spatial Distance in Family and Kinship Relationships'). I use the collected empirical material to explore the spatial dimension of transnational families and kinship networks further, and I show that the physical presence and absence of family members and relatives have a particular impact on relationship management (section 'Presence and Absence of Family and Kinship Members'). In the concluding section ('Conclusion'), I present my findings regarding the interconnectedness of sociality and spatiality under conditions of migration.

Evidence of Distant Relationships

Drawing from the influential work of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, family theorists and researchers have argued that the unilocal nuclear family represents the main family type in modern society. According to this premise, the family construct is based on two conditions: (1) the nuclear family is composed of two generations—at most, parents and their dependent children; and (2) the members of the nuclear family share the same household. Even if this construct of the unilocal nuclear family still exists in mainstream sociological theory and research, the presence of both these elements is increasingly being questioned in light of new approaches to the study of families, with a particular emphasis on the contingent manifestations of the family in migration contexts (see Landolt and Da 2005: 647; Kofman et al. 2011: 33; Baldassar and Merla 2014a: 9).

One argument against the narrow focus on the nuclear family within the field of family sociology is based on evidence of other manifestations of partnership and familial arrangements. In addition to the conjugal couple with children, alternative family structures have been identified, such as non-marital family situations, single-parent families, patchwork families, and homosexual parenting partners. Besides the nuclear family, the extended family also continues to play a significant role in such arrangements. Relationships between parents and their adult children, grandparents and their grandchildren, and siblings continue to be relevant today, but there has been an obvious increase in the diversity of

living arrangements. Nevertheless, the key studies in transnational research are concerned with parent–child relationships, mainly between mothers and their children (see, e.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001) and increasingly between fathers and their children (Nobles 2011; Fresnoza-Flot 2014). In addition, other types of relationships are brought into focus, such as those between adult children and their left-behind aging parents (Baldassar and Baldock 2000; Zechner 2008) or between grandparents and their grandchildren living abroad (Vullnetari and King 2008). However, there is still need to further extend the research on transnational personal relationships (see Reisenauer 2016),[5] such as the cross-border relationships between same-sex parents, adult siblings, or cousins. Not only does such an extension enrich transnational research by including the entire spectrum of migrant life forms (Baldassar and Merla 2014a), but it also offers an opportunity to compare different types of relationships in terms of the respective social practices maintained across national borders.

Criticism has also been levelled at the tradition of defining the nuclear family on the basis of domestic cohabitation, something that is of particular interest for my purposes. In sociology, the general orientation towards conditions of proximity for characterizing 'the social' (Schroer 2006: 26), among other things, becomes evident in studies of the family. The equation of family and household is characteristic of this view, as can be seen, for example, in the overview provided by Liz Steel, Warren Kidd, and Anne Brown: 'The *nuclear* family comprises mother, father and children […] living together in the same household' (Steel et al. 2012: 19; emphasis in original). According to this understanding, the family unit is defined not only in terms of specific family members but also by the fact that they live under one roof.[6] Consequently, the physical mobility of family and kinship members is assumed to lead to a breaking off of existing relationships. 'A family's network will become more loose-knit if either the family or the other members of the network move away physically […] so that contact is decreased and new relations are established' (Bott 1971: 106). Even if there is some evidence for the fragility of distant relationships owing to the costs involved (see van der Poel 1993: 31–32), the simplified representation of the connection between social and physical distance has been increasingly questioned.

Family constellations under conditions of spatial distance have increasingly attracted the attention of researchers in the area of family sociology. In considering 'long-distance relationships' (Schneider 2009), 'multilocal multi-generation families' (Bertram 2002), and 'world families' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2011), relationship patterns characterized by neither a joint household nor settlement in the immediate proximity have become the focus of interest. But even when family relationships are widely dispersed geographically, especially in the face of globalization processes, they are characterized by a certain stability. Empirical research on distant relationships points to the continued importance of family ties and responsibilities. As shown earlier, this is also the case for transnational families, where exchange between family members is provided 'across and despite the distance that separates them' (Baldassar and Merla 2014a: 6). In the following section, I discuss some insights gained from research on transnational families to explore the interconnectedness of sociality and spatiality in a transnational migration context, with a special focus on Turkish migrants in Germany.

Researching Spatial Distance in Family and Kinship Relationships

The findings presented in this chapter draw on narrative interviews that were conducted with Turkish migrants and their descendants in Germany as part of the German TRANS-NET survey. The research project, entitled 'Transnationalization, Migration and Transformation: Multi-Level Analysis of Migrant Transnationalism',[7] was carried out from 2008 through 2011 and involved partners from eight countries, which were grouped into four pairs: Estonia–Finland, India–United Kingdom, Morocco–France and Turkey–Germany. The project's primary research question was, how do cross-border practices of migrants emerge, function, and change? (see Pitkänen 2012: 5). The focus of the German survey was to investigate the transnational practices of migrants from Turkey and their descendants living in Germany (see Gerdes et al. 2012). A total of 73 qualitative interviews were conducted with former guest-worker

migrants, marriage migrants, family-based migrants, German-born children of Turkish migrants, asylum seekers, international students, and high-skilled labour migrants.[8]

The Turkish–German migration context offers a good opportunity to investigate transnational families and kinship networks, because the course of this migration history has revealed various types of distant relationships. First, within the framework of the guest-worker migration to Germany that began in the 1960s, Turkish workers generally migrated alone and were therefore separated from their left-behind family members, such as spouses, children, and parents. Second, since the end of the 1970s, family-related migration has become a significant mode of entry into Germany, with spouses and children in particular arriving to join the primary migrants. Even though such movements made it possible for previously separated partners and families to be reunited in Germany, the new migrants continue to be spatially disconnected from significant others (e.g. siblings or uncles) who are left behind in Turkey. Third, after living and working in Germany for several years, a proportion of the former Turkish labour migrants return to Turkey upon their retirement yet their children and grandchildren have often become settled and remain in Germany, resulting in another type of geographical separation between family members.[9]

This brief summation of the Turkish–German migration processes that have taken place since the 1960s illustrates that spatial separations of family and kinship members between these two countries involve a variety of social relationships. Moreover, the family and kinship constellations that are created across borders are manifest in different and changing ways. In considering the lived experiences of families and relatives across national borders, this investigation was able to examine the spatial distance in transnational families and kinship networks and its role for the Turkish migrants who were interviewed.

Within the framework of the TRANS-NET project, the processes of transnationalization in the political, economic, socio-cultural, and educational spheres were analyzed more generally (Pitkänen et al. 2012). An evaluation of the data from the German study indicates that the intensity of transnational practices varies considerably from sphere to sphere (Gerdes et al. 2012), which makes evident the particular relevance of

family and personal life across national borders. Nearly all the respondents in this study maintained personal relationships with significant others in Turkey.[10] These connections were at first described as marginal, despite the fact that family and kinship members abroad were mentioned in almost every narrative; the respondents would provide greater details only when requested to do so by the interviewers. At first the interviewers assumed that the Turkish migrants were simply reluctant to discuss their personal lives,[11] but it soon became apparent that these relationships were such a routine part of their daily lives that they considered them commonplace and inconsequential (Reisenauer 2016: 103 ff.). With encouragement from the researchers, the interviewees became quite eager to provide detailed descriptions of even their most personal relationships.

The following section reviews the main findings of the German survey with regard to the distant relationships of Turkish migrants.

Presence and Absence of Family and Kinship Members

From the integration and assimilation perspective, cross-border social ties are regarded as transitory phenomena, ending with the length of stay in the immigration country or because of integration processes. In contrast, the interviews conducted with Turkish migrants in Germany indicated that previously existing orientations, relations, and practices with respect to the emigration country do not necessarily become any less important as a result of migration processes. Family and kinship relationships in particular maintain a certain stability in the individual life courses of Turkish migrants and over the course of generations.[12] Although transnational families are not a new phenomenon,[13] transformations in transportation and communication technologies have increased connectivity within families and between relatives who are physically distant from one another. Nevertheless, these advances have not rendered spatiality irrelevant for personal relationships; rather, the fact that family and kinship are located in two or more countries plays a crucial role in the social life of Turkish migrants. This arrangement raises questions about the influence

of physical presence and absence on personal relationships. As formulated by Jennifer Mason, one must ask 'which elements of kinship require people physically to get together by travelling *across distances*, and which can be conducted *at a distance* (for example over the phone, email, text messaging, internet, and by proxy as with internet shipping, and so on)' (Mason 2004: 422; emphasis in original).

Although research on transnational families has provided evidence that migrants maintain long-distance and cross-border relationships, the aspect of spatial distance itself needs to be elaborated on further. For this purpose, in this section, the respective relevance of spatial distance is identified for different kinds of relationship maintenance within transnational families and kinships.[14] It is now possible to demonstrate that various elements of relationships cannot be pursued equally across geographical distance and national borders (see also Reisenauer 2016: 146 ff.)—that is, (1) the management of certain relationships requires physical proximity, and (2) other elements of relationships can be maintained in the same way while the parties are living apart, such as by means of communication technology. Although these two aspects have already been suggested in previous transnational studies, the available empirical material on Turkish migrants reveals a third aspect: the requirement of physical absence. Geographical distance is not a hurdle for all kinds of relationship maintenance; rather, the physical location of family members and relatives in two or more countries goes hand in hand with specific benefits within relationships.

Requirement of Physical Presence For the Turkish migrants from Germany, a temporary presence in Turkey, mainly during their annual leave, offers the only possibility to be in physical proximity to their family members and relatives who live apart. Accordingly, their stays abroad are perceived as intensive periods of being together. For example, Sinan meets his extended family in Turkey every year:

> In my home village, the whole family comes together on holiday, which is just nice. […] We've a house in Turkey—well, the house of my parents. In the same street, my grandfather lives in a house, next to him my uncle, and

> opposite live a few other uncles. During school vacations, all of them return home. […] Then everything is done together, eating together, having a barbecue together, celebrating and talking until late into the night. (Sinan, No. 29, lines 76 ff.)[15]

As this passage illustrates, migrants' place of origin in Turkey serves as a meeting point where the whole family comes together, spends time together, and shares everyday routines, such as eating together. Moreover, their shared presence offers an opportunity for meaningful events, such as the common celebration of baptisms, weddings, and funerals.[16] Being in the same place enables family members to organize their time and their common activities, and this option would be much less likely to present itself if they were physically distant from one another.

The requirement of physical presence becomes even more urgent when it comes to household and caregiving services within families. Even if certain individual demands can be met from a distance, such as emotional and material support (see later), the need for practical assistance on a daily basis might have to be addressed. For example, child care and care of the sick and the elderly involve activities that require physical presence.[17] Şengül became aware of this when a family member in Turkey became ill:

> But in the end, one is here and can't be there. And it's impossible to intensify the relationship completely; in physical terms, one is not there for the other person and vice versa. (Şengül, No. 20, line 32)

The interviewees frequently emphasized what it means to be unable to provide reliable support for their family members in Turkey. In order to meet the needs of their significant others abroad, Turkish migrants must either travel if necessary or delegate the responsibility of practical help to people on site.[18] In conclusion, for certain elements of relationships, physical presence is essential (Baldassar and Merla 2014b: 48). Thus, Turkish migrants who live far from their family and kinship face restrictions when it comes to participating in family events and meeting the specific requirements of social support.[19]

Substitution for Physical Presence Not all types of relationship maintenance require spatial availability; rather, certain elements of relationships can also be identified that are characterized by independence from a specific location.[20] In particular, communication technologies have increased the scope of reachability, so that reciprocal physical attendance is not a necessary condition for relationships.[21] Many of the interviewees are in close contact with various generations within their transnational family and kinship through telephone calls, e-mail or Skype. These exchanges contribute to the establishment of strong emotional bonds among geographically separated family members and relatives. In addition to conversations about the weather, personal matters, mutual acquaintances, and events in the respective countries, critical life events are a reason for such contact under conditions of physical absence, as can be seen in the following narrative by İnan:

> My uncle was seriously ill, so you call and ask for details; you call a few times—more often than you've done before. He is in Turkey, so of course one can't visit him, but you can call frequently. When my father died, they also called us, and my uncle came from Berlin. In such situations, the family holds together, that's for sure, naturally. We call one another; one comforts and consoles those in need, tries to give mutual support in suffering. (İnan, No. 46, line 69)

Even if it is not possible for family members and relatives to be physically present in specific life situations, they are at least emotionally there for one another.[22] Thus, distant communication contributes to the well-being of those involved. Similar to emotional support, material remittances in the form of money and goods can also easily be provided from a distance (see Guarnizo 2003). Especially during the guest-worker migration from Turkey to Germany, financial remittances contributed to the maintenance of the families left behind (see Faist 2000: 214–218). One of the interviewees who provided this kind of family support is Ogün, a former labour migrant:

> I've sent a great deal of money to Turkey, you know? Yes, 300 or 500 Deutschmarks every month, you know? For example, when my daughter wrote to me, 'Baba, I want to go to school and need 500 Marks for that', I sent more money. (Ogün, No. 44, line 70)

Since the end of the guest-worker programme, the practice of transferring income earned in Germany has decreased over time. Nevertheless, the distribution of money within transnational families still plays an important role, especially when underage children and elderly parents live abroad. Moreover, goods continue to be transferred to family members and relatives in Turkey, including food, clothes, everyday things, and medical aid. Such emotional and material support shows that distant relationships can be maintained not only through the mobility of individuals but also through communication and the transfer of money and goods across the border (see, e.g., Baldassar and Merla 2014c).

Requirement of Physical Absence The descriptions above highlight the separating effect of geographical distance, which can be overcome by physical mobility or mediatized communication. However, the interview narratives showed that specific relationship management is also based on the existence of spatial distance between closely related individuals. This is particularly true if social capital (Levitt 2001: 62 f.) provides access to resources in the respective other country. In this context, research has addressed the importance of cross-border social networks for chain migration (see Faist 2000). However, relationships with family members and relatives in the respective other country are beneficial not only for migration processes and to resolve geographical distance. A permanent spatial distribution can also promote, among other things, transnational entrepreneurship between Germany and Turkey. This is especially true in the case of Özlem (see also Faist et al. 2013: 35 ff.). Depending on her country of residence during her life, she has maintained business relations with the respective other country. Currently living in Germany, Özlem sells evening and wedding dresses produced in Turkey. Since it is not always possible for her to travel to Turkey to conduct business on site, she describes her relationships there as follows:

> I have my stepfather there [in Turkey], and he brings the cheques there. […] One enlists all people. Or he has two people, or my partner has his people, and we ask, 'Can you quickly go to the airport? Someone is bringing samples.' Or, 'Can you quickly go to the airport? You have to send that.' That's how it works. One has to [be ready], and we have enough people. (Özlem, No. 49, line 89)

In addition to supporting transnational occupational and entrepreneurial activities, social capital located abroad is also useful with regard to immovable property in Turkey. Because migrants themselves do not live in the houses and apartments they own in Turkey, it is a common practice to rent the property to family members and relatives, sometimes even free of charge. This form of support is possible only because the migrated homeowners are physically absent. In other cases, the houses and apartments they own in Turkey are not inhabited by others but are used by the migrants themselves as holiday residences. However, with the owners being absent, continuous cleaning and maintenance work are necessary, which requires the physical availability of others on site. Thus, migrants fall back on the support of family members and relatives in Turkey for a variety of chores, such as gardening or ensuring that the houses are ventilated. The following passage from the interview with Çiçek illustrates how this works:

> During the renovation of our building, pipes were cracked. We received the information immediately and my grandmother was frantic. But they had already told us, 'Don't worry, we'll do that the next day.' If we are in Germany, we can't just fly to Turkey to do that. Therefore, help is given to us. (Çiçek, No. 69, line 230)

Taken together, these examples of transnational entrepreneurship and homeownership show that the geographical location of the family and of kinship networks in different countries means diverse support that would not be available under conditions of cohabitation. In particular, if the migrants cannot physically travel to manage their affairs abroad, family members and relatives living in Turkey will be present to replace them. Thus, it is not that only spatial proximity provides special benefits for transnational families and kinship networks, but distance and the related physical absence in relationships do as well.

Conclusion

In considering the contingent manifestations of transnational families and kinship networks and the associated spectrum of transnational relationship management, the previous investigations offer a complex picture

of the interconnectedness of sociality and spatiality under conditions of migration. Driven by the insights offered by transnational family studies, I questioned the sweeping assumption made by traditional family sociology and migration researchers that spatial distance necessarily presents an obstacle to social proximity, or at least a hurdle. By distinguishing three patterns of transnational relationship management, I sought to highlight that not all elements of relationships can be provided equally over geographical distance and across national borders. Although the requirement of and substitution for physical presence are aspects that have already been stressed in studies of transnational families, less attention has been given to the third aspect: the requirement of physical absence for special kinds of relationship maintenance.

The empirical findings regarding the physical separation of family members and relatives between Germany and Turkey indicate that both these phenomena exist in migration contexts: social proximity *despite* spatial distance, but also social proximity *due to* spatial distance. This suggests that, when focusing on the reorganization of family and kinship relationships over long distances and across national borders, the positive aspects provided by spatial distance should also be considered. As a consequence, transnational families and kinship networks do not necessarily appear as incomplete and fragile, but can also be regarded as relationships that offer new opportunities under conditions of physical absence. In this sense, transnational families and kinship networks can be characterized as the 'togetherness of the spatially separated' (Simmel 1992: 717; my translation, E. R.).

Notes

1. As to relationships between migrating mothers and their left-behind children, some geographical separations have been shown to occur in discontinuous periods, each lasting as long as several years. In a study of female Filipino migrants, separations usually last for more than 2 years and in some cases up to 16 years (Parreñas 2001: 367, 370). Results from a study of mothers from Latin America indicate that more than 10 years may pass before they are reunited with their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997: 549).

2. For an overview, see Faist et al. (2013).
3. In contrast, family members may migrate to fulfil family obligations. In this sense, spatial dispersion as a migration strategy must be regarded as 'a rational family decision to preserve the family, a resourceful and resilient way of strengthening it: families split in order to be together translocally' (Chan 1997: 195).
4. 'In the migration process, the family undergoes changes because it must continue to meet the same set of needs within a dramatically changed context' (Landolt and Da 2005: 627–628).
5. In addition to the nuclear family, the extended family and wider kinship, 'personal relationships' include friendships and acquaintances (Lenz and Nestmann 2009). Even if it is important to bear in mind that those diverse types of relationships are significant in the transnational context as well, the considerations that follow are limited to family and kinship relationships.
6. On physical proximity as a Western normative ideal, see Baldassar and Merla (2014a: 12).
7. This work was supported by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2008–2011) under Grant 217226.
8. For the sake of conciseness, all these categories will be subsumed under the term 'Turkish migrants'.
9. Since their adult children and grandchildren have remained in Germany, many of the Turkish retirement migrants have chosen a transnational lifestyle (see Baykara-Krumme 2013). In these cases of circular migrations between Germany and Turkey, elderly migrants continually alternate spatial proximity and distance with respect to their family members.
10. The number of contacts in Turkey varied widely, ranging from one or two to a large and complex network (Fauser and Reisenauer 2013: 179).
11. On the methodological accessibility of ordinary families, see also Bott (1971: 6).
12. On transnational lifeworlds of Turkish migrant children in Germany, see Reisenauer (2015).
13. For a historical overview on transregional and transnational families from the Middle Ages until the present, see Johnson et al. (2011).
14. The practices discussed in this section correspond to the five types of support identified by the care circulation framework (Baldassar and Merla 2014b: 48 ff.).

15. All the interview passages cited in this chapter are taken from the German TRANS-NET survey. For each, the pseudonym of the interviewee, the participant number and the line number in the interview transcript are provided in parentheses. The passages have been translated by the author.
16. On the role that participation in local events, such as weddings, plays for transnational family networks, see Fog Olwig (2002).
17. On problems in caregiving across national borders with regard to Estonian migrants in Finland and their left-behind elderly parents, see also the illustrative examples in Zechner (2008: 36 f.).
18. Such support may be provided by members of the core (or wider) family living in Turkey or by paid caregivers. (On the situation in Latin America, see Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997: 559.)
19. On the emotional consequences of the absence of mothers in transnational families, see Parreñas (2001).
20. This is reflected in the term 'portability of care' (Baldassar and Merla 2014a: 25).
21. On the impact of information and communication technologies on family relationships see, in particular, Baldassar et al. (2016).
22. This aspect is emphasized by Loretta Baldassar and Cora V. Baldock with regard to migrants in Australia who provide care to their left-behind elderly parents. 'Not being in close proximity, they cared about, rather than cared for, their parents', which leads to 'intimacy at a distance' (Baldassar and Baldock 2000: 83).

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