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Dynamics of change in transnational families – Biographical perspectives on family figurations between Spain and Ecuador

Abstract:

This paper explores the figurational process in transnational families through the study of the biographical self-presentations and the life courses of family members who live apart (in Bilbao, Spain and Guayaquil, Ecuador) but remain interdependent. It asks which factors inside and outside the family figuration influence the negotiation of the fragile power balances along gender and generational lines, with what effect for the structure of positions, family norms, mutual expectations and the division of tasks. Special attention is given to the deep financial and economic crisis affecting Spain between 2008 and 2014 and how this sudden change of the context in one national society impacts the transnational family life. Results highlight the importance of the long-term pre-migration family figurational process for the way transnational family life is being shaped. They also show how a variety of influencing factors, observed during the migration period and located in different national societies and the transnational social space, is intertwined with the logic of this long-term process.

Key words: transnational families, migration, biographical research, figurations, processes of change in families, financial and economic crisis in 2008.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the dynamics of change in transnational families through the study of the biographical self-presentations and the life courses of family members who live apart but remain interdependent. The family is understood here as a figuration that is constantly being negotiated, with fragile power balances across gender and generational lines (see Elias/Scotson 1993, Elias 2014). The underlying empirical study focuses on transnational figurational processes with individual family members located in Bilbao, Spain, and in Guayaquil, a small rural coastal community in Ecuador.¹

Starting with the general assumption that change in families always means a back and forth of power balances, the questions arise which factors inside and outside the family

1 The data presented here is part of a larger data set that has been collected in the framework of a PhD project in which, at the date of publication, analysis is still ongoing.

influence the swinging of this pendulum, with what effects, and how is this negotiation process influenced by the migration of family members? In the case of the more recent Ecuadorian migration to Spain it can also be assumed that the deep financial and economic crisis affecting Spain between 2008 and 2014 had a relevant impact on the family members living there and their cross-border family relations. But how does this sudden change of the context in one national society influence the long-term gradual, and at times transnational, figurational process of the family? And what exactly does the interplay between the crisis as a factor external to the family and the interior dynamics look like?

The main conceptual tools that help to distinguish different types of family dynamics, characterized by periods of gradual change and more or less abrupt ruptures, are the concepts of status passages (Glaser/Strauss 1971; Heinz 2009) and (biographical) turning points (Sackmann 2007; Wingens/Reiter 2011; Rosenthal 1995). Both concepts are applied here to individuals in family relationships. During the multi-sited data collection, biographical and ethnographic methods were employed. The analysis followed the principles of biographical case reconstruction (Rosenthal 1995), adapted to the study of families (Delcroix 1995; Bertaux 1995; Dausien 1996; Mummert 2012). In a first step, the challenge consisted in capturing the long-term (pre-migration) family figurational process and to put it in relation to the changes in the power balance within the transnational space of families during migration. In a second step, the interconnection between the transnational space of the family and the biographical courses (e.g. processes of social mobility) of individual family members in the local and national contexts of origin and of arrival have been analysed.

Results highlight the importance of the long-term family figurational process for the way transnational family life is being shaped (e.g. the extent and stability of power differences, the type of means of power that different family members have access to and the dynamics of interaction shaped by mutual dependencies). A variety of influencing factors observed during the migration period and located in different national societies is intertwined with the logic of this long-term process. These factors on the individual biographical level, on the level of interpersonal family relationships and on the level outside of the family are also influencing each other. The importance of the crisis in Spain for the individual family members in both nation-states is mediated by the family *history* and the (transnational) construction of the common family *story*.² Simultaneously it is through the individuals that the family is influenced by a macro-level change like the financial and economic crisis in Spain. The case exemplified here demonstrates how individual social mobility processes outside the households in both national contexts are intertwined with those in the transnational social space of the family.

2 *Story* refers to the collective remembrance and negotiation process that relate to the events that constitute the family *history*. The differentiation between lived *history* and narrated *story* is based on theoretical assumptions in biographical research (see Fischer/Kohli 1987, Rosenthal 1995).