

The Children Left Behind: The Other Side Of Remittances

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Literature Review

- Migration from Nicaragua & El Salvador is on the rise, due to colonial remnants and continued underdevelopment in the globalized economy.
- Despite the increasing Central American diaspora worldwide, accurate information about the number of migrants leaving their children behind is limited (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Vanore, Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015).
- Some scholars have suggested that parenting from afar has become a 'new normal' for children in the Global South (Boccagni, 2012).

Transnational Families

- Transnational families are often understood through two adjunct narratives:
 - Migration for one or more family member(s) for the purposes of economic security for themselves and the remaining members “back home”
 - Second describes the outcomes of migration, which is the [illusive] “better life” for those who have left and those remaining in the country of origin.
- This is known as the “Migration-Development Nexus” (Gammeltoft, 2017)
- Current literature suggests that the positive benefits of remittances extend beyond the economic to increases the social capital of those left behind, enhancing the community and country

Current Conceptualizations of Central American Transnational Families

- Separation is “worth” the economic benefit of remittances
 - Contributions to economic development
 - Children can attend school
 - Left in the care of loved ones
- This type of labour migration is seen as temporary, working toward reunification
- Families are able to (Re) Build strong transnational ties
 - Develop new roles
 - Maintain connections through technology

The Impact On Children

- Research focusing on the separation of families as a unique phenomenon, including perceptions of children left behind, remains in its infancy (Hershberg & Lykes, 2013; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Vanore, Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015)
- What is known has yielded mixed results:
 - Olwig (2007) found that in Caribbean families caregiving was successfully delivered from multiple sources, those at home and abroad.
 - Parreñas (2005a) and Schmalzbauer (2004) suggest that parental migration is a normative structure and successful re-organization of the family has resulted in meeting the emotional and mental wellbeing needs of young people
 - Carling and colleagues (2012) Fouratt (2017) and Pratt (2016) have contended that that there may be another side for those left behind and children are paying a price for remittances

- Cantor (2014) has found that children in Central American countries face a new vulnerability to gang violence and affiliation when one or both of their parents migrate
- Hoang and colleagues (2014) and Pratt (2016) found significant gender differences in parentin from afar—the Mother's absence in more deeply felt in the emotional and daily lives of children

Gaps

- Current literature lacks a full scale gender analysis of the implications of the parents who migrate and who are left behind
- Separated families are becoming a permanent structure (i.e., not working towards reunification due to political realities)
- Transnationalism has been critiqued as a construct created in the Global North, therefore little is known about those left behind- especially children
 - Their perceptions of “family” and their parent who has migrated
 - Understanding of remittances
 - Social, emotional and physical development

Research Questions:

- How does parental migration impact children left behind in El Salvador and Nicaragua?
- How do the children perceive their relationship with those that left?

Research Design

■ Theoretical Framework

- Kin, or relationally based foster-care arrangements (Leinaweaver, 2014)
- Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 2007)
- These theories are useful starting points, but must be advanced to incorporate the experiences of children in Central America, where reunification may never be possible.

■ Qualitative Research

- Individual In-depth interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)
- Focus Groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009)
- Anthropological Observations (Spencer & Davis, 2011)

Sites:

- **Nicaragua** (Estelí, Granada, Managua and León)
- **El Salvador** (Cacaopera, Suchitoto, Nejapa, and Santa Rosa Guachipilín)
- **Four Sets of Participants (N=80)**
 - **Set One: Adolescents (n=21; Age 13–18; 11 females and 10 males);**
 - **Set Two: youth (n=10; Age 19–30; whose parents had migrated when they were children; 6 males and 4 females);**
 - **Set Three: Grandparents and guardians (n=14 12 females and 2 males); Set Four: focus groups of professionals (social workers, nurses, lawyers, and teachers) and community leaders (n=35)**

Data Collection

- Interviews were carried out in a place convenient to the participants (i.e., home, park)
- Focus groups were carried out at place near participants (i.e., church, school)
- Data collection ended when saturation was achieved

Data Analysis

- **Principles of Grounded Theory utilized for data analysis**
(Charmaz, 2005)
- **Emerging categories were developed after three interviews and one focus group**
 - New categories from subsequent transcripts were added.
 - Following the open-coding procedures sensitizing concepts and themes rooted in the data were identified and then compared, contrasted, and grouped (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).
 - Axial coding was also used to construct theoretical representations that reflected the relationships between categories.
 - During this process various categories were dropped, changed, and organized according to the emerging hierarchy of significance (LaRossa, 2005).
 - Constructionist thematic analysis was also used to understand how reality was created in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
 - Latent codes were also searched out in the underlying meanings presented by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
 - Six community consultants (three per country) helped to triangulate the data, ensuring the labeling of themes and categories was rooted in the participants' experiences

Findings: The Intersection of Gender

- Children experienced **Maternal** migration in a more profound sense
 - During my observations, I attended a Mother's Day celebration where children and their caregivers were weeping and sharing stories of the Mother that was now in *El Norte*. Though the migration of either fathers or mothers is a significant loss, the maternal void was noted to be of greater significance
 - "I was seven or eight [years of age] when my mom left. She was very loving...[crying] gave me lots of kisses and hugs. We shared a lot things together. How I wish for her to return...I miss her so much...more so when we celebrate Mother's Day at school. Some of my friends bring their mothers to school...and I...I am alone"
- Absent Fathers a "push" factor for Maternal migration

Findings Cont

- **Parental migration prompted the participants' to question the meaning of a "better life"**

- It's hard sometimes 'cause parents leave to provide a better life for their children, but when I see these kids sort of lost, I asked myself, 'what is a better life?' Yes, they no longer go hungry. There is always food on the table, but their mother is not there...It makes you think....really what is a better life?

- **'Co-location' of overlapping grief in the family system**

"We live in a very small place...so you hear it... It breaks my heart, but she [daughter] left for El Norte to provide for her children...she couldn't do it here...She left me [with emphasis] too. I too miss her a lot [teary eyes]"

- **Abandonment**

- **Mothers were seen not "here", but not "gone"**

- She [mother] calls me every week, but I say it's not the same ... not the same when you are no longer with your mom. In my case, I stayed with my grandmother, but I'd say that is not the same - not alike because you feel that they do not have to worry about you, care for you or love you! Yes, she's my grandma, but is not the same...Sometimes, I start to think that maybe the money she gets is more important than me... Like, would she still care for me, if she didn't get money?

- **Participants noted that relationships became "transactional"**

Loss Of Maternal Figure

- Role confusion for young people
- School drop out
- Acting out
- Young pregnancies
- Drug use
- Gang affiliation

“My youngest brother is the most affected. He is angry all the time. He misbehaves. He is in grade 9 now. I hope he gets better. My youngest brother is in grade 5 now...It has been hard for all of us”

Implications

- Children are encouraged to transfer emotionally, physically and mentally into a new parent-child dyad
- Grief morphs as the reorganizing of the family occurs and caregiving tasks are/are not taken up by another family member.
- Absenteeism of Fathers
 - Contributing to the feminization of labour migration and mobility

Implications for Children

- A new form of emotional, social and physical vulnerability
- Existence in an in between space
- Complex ambiguous Loss
- Uncertain future

Discussion

- **Complex situations, Complex losses**
 - New understandings of co-locations of grief
 - The emotional implications of Mothers leaving and simultaneously remaining, while transferring emotionally to a surrogate
 - How as practitioners in the helping professions do we work with these young people?

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