Emotional Transnationalism and Family Identities

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If home is where the heart is, and one’s heart is with one’s family, language, and country, what happens when your family, language, and culture occupy two different worlds? This has more or less always been the plight of immigrants. The outcome was often to live with one’s heart divided. Globalization may be constructing a different scenario. Many immigrants are keeping up their economic and emotional ties with relatives “back home” by using technology to stay in touch with their relatives and with the latest news of their countries. There is no place like home, a word usually reserved for the native land. Yet, when immigrants have children in the new country, have jobs, buy property, and develop communities, they acquire another home as well. Because lives and relations are linked across borders, transnationalism offers an attractive, and at times deceiving, imagined possibility of living with two hearts rather than with one divided heart. Furthermore, as Stone and her colleagues (2005) convey, the heart may travel and settle in the new home when one’s own children become psychologically attuned to the old culture and make it their own.

Although the term transnationalism has been around for the last 30 years, it has now fully captured the attention of a wide variety of migration scholars. For family therapists, transnational families are one form of the brave new families of this century that present theoretical and therapeutic challenges and demand a new analytic frame for issues of migration, social location, and acculturation.

Transnational studies have also increasingly turned to inquiries about what happens to the children of immigration. The article that Elizabeth Stone and her colleagues (2005) have artfully produced is a welcome addition to the literature on transnationalism because it extends beyond the immigrant generation, as by and large we hear the voices of the second generation.

At the risk of starting my commentary on an interesting and useful article by pointing out some limitations, it is important to underline that the stories in the article are based on a preselected group of individuals chosen precisely because they exhibited clear transnational affiliation. Because this study is about proving the existence of transnational themes, the questions asked were not open ended. Instead, they were meant to obtain specific evidence of the dimensions of transnationalism that the authors intended to find. For example, because the authors rejected any
respondent who would consider marrying outside his or her own ethnic group, the main character in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* would not have qualified as a subject because she does not speak Greek and she does not have a negative view of exogamy. This happens in spite of her being in a social field of strong transnational practices that ultimately extend Greekhood to her American husband, who becomes fascinated with her culture. But this type of cultural exchange and cross-fertilization are not explored in this study’s definition of transnationalism.

In fact, the possibility of discovering diversity along a continuum ranging from assimilation to cultural maintenance among immigrants or their children is diminished by the study’s assumption that transnationalism is diametrically opposed to assimilation. As therapists, we are curious about the multiple ways in which migrants and their children combine transnational and assimilative practices inside and outside their homes at different stages of their lives, and they use these various combinations to construct their flexible hyphenated identities. Furthermore, gender, race, and social class, along with experiences of discrimination and xenophobia, interact with transnational identities and practices in fundamental ways that create great diversity in family stories. Several of my Mexican women clients, in spite of strong family and cultural retention, are leery of endogamy because they are critical of aspects of Hispanic male socialization that could make men in their cultural group questionable candidates for marriage. At the individual level, what seems to occur is a selective biculturalism that requires exploration.

That the great majority of respondents were women, middle class, and college educated is a reflection of how the sample was obtained, but it probably has many consequences—such as a homogenous and positive interest in transnationalism—perhaps because women have tended to be the carriers of cultural lore and family stories.

Putting aside these constraints in contextual parameters, this article by Stone et al. (2005) can be a starting point for conversations about issues of transnational identity and its application to the theory and practice of family therapy. To focus on its implications for therapists working with immigrants—which, of course, are most of us now—I will offer two large themes for discussion. The first refers to migration as encompassing a very large relationship system that often involves transnational connections. The second refers to the consequences of new acculturation paths and intergenerational transformations.

**1. MIGRATION INVOLVES A VERY LARGE INTERCONNECTED RELATIONSHIP SYSTEM**

Migration is not an experience that belongs solely to those who leave their countries. The protagonists in the migration saga include those who leave, those who stay, and those who come and go for generations to come. Children of transnationals also develop objective and subjective ties to their ancestral homes. Because of fast and accessible communications and frequent contacts, all these players together form a richly interconnected system that continues to evolve over time. The virtual space and virtual time in which these relationships occur include the presence of the here and the there and the real and the imagined.

A family’s migration narrative stimulated by a therapist’s questions must include attention to the past and the current complex interactions among all these players, whether objective or imagined. The evocative flavor of the stories stimulated by
Stone’s questionnaire may inspire therapists to expand the exploration of transnational affiliation to clients from the second generation, even when they may not make reference to immigration per se.

The questions asked in this study could be helpful guides for eliciting stories in therapy and in the training of students working with immigrant families. Answers to questions about the degree of involvement with language, visits to and from the country of origin, and the practice of listening to the country’s news may give a measure of the extent to which clients are involved in transnational social fields. Parenthetically, it would be important to add a question about remittances because this type of transaction is at the core of transnationalism, particularly for lower socioeconomic-level families. The omission in this study may be due to the predominance of the second generation and the middle-class extraction, both of which may make remittances less necessary. Although all this information could help understand conflicts or life cycle decisions based on cultural codes, central for family therapists would be to delve further into the nature of the interactions maintained at long distance.

The Nature of Transnational Connections

Although transnationalism may assuage the pain of separation and longing for loved ones by allowing connection, one might ask if transnationalism creates “real” connections or connections based on memory and imagination. The extent to which transnational relationships provide instrumental and affective support becomes limited to extraordinary or occasional circumstances, as opposed to daily interactions. To understand transnational families demands increasingly more exploration of the differences between relationships maintained at a long distance and relationships in the intimacy of shared family life.

Transnationalism may also incur terrible costs. Such is the case when, because of the possibility of maintaining relationships at long distance, poor immigrants separate from their families, lured by the promise of an eventual better economic future for all. This sacrifice may have grave consequences, such as parents and children who reunite after years of separation, only to find themselves to be strangers to each other.

Relationship dimensions were only indirectly alluded to in these stories, perhaps because they are more intimate and require a more personal and perhaps even a more traumatic level of self-disclosure than would have been desirable. The absence of losses as a central theme may also be due to the focus on the second generation, who are less likely to experience with the same poignancy the physical, social, and emotional uprooting endured by their parents.

The authors of the study are the children and grandchildren of immigrants, and they are also in the field of literature. Their perspective may be in part due to their ecological niches. Novelist Jhumpa Lahiri (2005), who grew up in a small New England town as the child of Indian immigrants and never lived in India, says it best: “I went to Calcutta neither as tourist, nor as a former resident, a valuable position, I think, for a writer . . . that necessary combination of distance and intimacy with a place.” This “border” position, with one foot in and one foot out, may be valuable as a creative site for a writer. The attachment to the ancestral land and culture is not personal, but rather, mediated by the relationship to parents and grandparents, thus based on borrowed memories and imagination.

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Transnationalism as an Intergenerational Family Process

Family therapists would be interested in the family relationships embodied in the stories of this study. Parent-child “memory talk” has been proved to shape children’s subsequent remembering and shaping of values and beliefs (Wang, 2004). Family relationships and ethnic identity are not separate experiences, but they interact with and influence each other in adaptive or reactive ways.

It seems possible that the attachments to country and culture in the children of immigrants are, at least in part, the outcome of either unconscious or purposeful induction on the parents’ part. Parents who have lost language and culture and who are fearful of losing their children to a new culture and language may induct them into a cultural revival that recreates the past in the present. Telling stories to share the past, to create bridges with the present, and to caution against excessive Americanization become part of the rituals of immigrant family life that lend a sense of narrative coherence and family continuity (Falicov, 2003).

Therefore, it is possible to think of children of immigrants as emotional transmigrants (Wolf, 2002) to the extent that their cultural attachments are mediated through the parents’ attachments. The respondents of these interviews appear to be mesmerized by the beauty of the beaches in Cuba or in Greece, although these beaches may be conjured in their imagination only. Why these idealized descriptions? One possibility is that the voices of their parents populate these idealized accounts, perhaps because of the magnetic power of the immigrant story within their families. Exploring the motivations for migration might be helpful here. Refugees or exiled immigrants who cannot return to their countries may experience a state of perpetual mourning and may recruit their children into their idealized or denigrated constructions of their countries and their politics (Falicov, 2002). It is tempting to speculate that it is precisely the long-standing impossibility to return and recharge one’s emotional batteries, so fundamental to a transnational lifestyle, that contributes to Erica’s poetic description of Cuban beaches that she has only seen through her exiled parents’ eyes.

In a rich ethnographic study of Central and South American young people transported to Mexico when very young as political refugees with their parents, Troya and Rosenberg (1999) offer the idea that immigrant parents, as they recreate familiar patterns and perpetuate customs, help instill a sense of connectedness that binds together distant countries, cultures, and generations. Through recreating the psychological presence of absent relatives, they may expand the meaning of family to broader identifications with their country of origin for their children, a finding that suggests deep intergenerational roots to ethnic and national identifications.

Rather than feeling lost in translation like their parents presumably were or the second generation was in the past, the new generations in this study appear to be attempting to find themselves and grow in translation. It is interesting to contrast the positive transnationalism found in this study with the negative experiences of immigrant children who face racism and discrimination in school. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) observed that immigrant children develop a keen eye for the negative reception they suffer based on their ethnicity. They conclude that parents’ positive mirroring of their ethnic group may not fully compensate for the distorted reflections that their children encounter outside the home, which, of course, impacts their own ethnic identity formation.
By stressing identification with the parents’ countries, Stone’s (2005) article offers a curious reversal from the old descriptions of immigrant families; instead of the parents adapting to the new culture, their children embrace the old. Although it is questionable whether this process is simply linearly reversed, this observation coincides with new theories of acculturation.

2. THE NEW SHAPE OF ACCULTURATION AND FAMILY TRANSFORMATIONS

Acculturation theory was based on the idea that there is only one place that one can call “home.” By and large, the assumption has been what Stone (2005) mentions as the prevailing ethos of her parents’ generation: that eventual assimilation by changing their language and culture was a good outcome for immigrants in a pluralistic society. Clinicians interested in cultural values have used acculturation theory to judge how far along immigrants are in a continuum of adaptation to the new society. Vibrant stories of the past, such as the ones told in this study about names, heroes, or enemies, may have been wrongly interpreted by therapists as suggestive of excessive attachment to the cultural past, difficulties in separating or individuating from parents, and consequently, insufficient adaptation to the new culture.

When faced with the common situation of cultural conflict between parents and adolescents, it was justified for a family therapist to become a culture broker, with leanings toward a linear socialization of the parents into greater acceptance of the adolescent’s need to fit in with the dominant culture peer group norms. These assumptions and therapeutic interventions may have been appropriate for the immigrants of the past, but when it comes to the post-1965 transmigrants and their children, linear acculturation theories are becoming outdated.

In reality, the level of acculturation of today’s immigrant family is much less predictable. In most families, continuity and change are happening side by side in creative, nonlinear ways. Some family members may adhere to certain customs, such as home remedies, but the same members or others may oppose the arranged marriages favored in the culture. Some preferences may have remained unchanged, such as insisting on modest attire for a daughter, but other aspects of the same patriarchal ideology may have transformed, such as insisting on higher education to allow her to be economically independent from a domineering man if need be. More than ever, we have to tell ourselves not to stereotype but to ask about values and preferences with respectful curiosity.

Identity of the Second Generation: Generational Conflict or Harmony?

The stories in this article and their tone provide a springboard to speculate about the types of family relationships that may generate, or be made possible by, transnational themes, practices, and identities. The implications of these stories are that today’s children of immigrants have greater interest in and knowledge of their parents’ countries. They have begun to feel pride in their parents’ ethnicities and even defend against discrimination by getting more involved with their cultures rather than denying them or wanting to pass. They seem to underline rather than erase the hyphen in Greek-American or Cuban-American. As the authors point out, this development is made more possible by a college education and a middle-class lifestyle because social acceptance may enhance a sense of affirmation of one’s ethnicity.

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Recent large-scale studies of families that focused on several ethnic groups have revealed a plurality of forms of acculturation that reflect different types of connection between the first and the second generation. Portes and Rumbaut’s (2001) research with several Asian and Latino groups uncovered three patterns of culture change and preservation. In the case of dissonant acculturation, children and parents separate along language and cultural lines and probably enter cultural conflicts. Parents who have maintained transnational connections may be able to access distant family resources to deal with this conflict. A common strategy has been for desperate parents to send a rebellious son to a close relative back in the “home” country to shelter, control, and protect him from bad influences. This solution sometimes works, and it has been supported by therapists. But it can also backfire because the youth may have already acquired a hybrid identity that includes the norms of his ethnic gang subculture. Bringing these new cultural codes to the native towns often creates havoc with the locals. This paradoxical development is facilitated by the glamour of America, made possible precisely by transnational communications. A second type of acculturation found in Rumbaut’s study is consonant acculturation, whereby both parents and children abandon language and culture at about the same pace and become incorporated into mainstream institutions.

But the type of acculturation that seems to be closest to the transnational lens of this study is selective acculturation, in which both parents and children are able to retain the original language and culture to some extent and in several crucial areas of family life. This is more common when a sizeable community of the same ethnicity surrounds the family and slows down assimilation. In this acculturation scenario, the proverbial generational conflict and role reversal of the old-fashioned immigrant parent disempowered by the defiance of the adolescent claiming to be the cultural expert may be being replaced by a bicultural household. In this setting, parents do not get defensive about their culture, and children show more respectful interest in the native culture.

New models of acculturation will call for greater understanding of what leads to intergenerational conflict and harmony. A new study of Hispanic families demonstrates that when parents are able to maintain the parenting practices associated with their cultural values despite their children’s noncompliance or lack of interest, this situation seems to protect youth from behavior problems (Santisteban, Coatsworth, Briones, & Szapocznik, in press). Practitioners may need to become open, for example, to parenting practices that involve higher levels of parental monitoring and involvement than may be desirable by American standards.

Therapists may vary in whether they would consider a prescriptive approach based on the information that children may benefit from a validation of the parents’ culture. For example, I find the idea of inclusion of questions about birth stories and the origin of names that is explored in Stone et al.’s (2005) article relevant as a joining strategy but also helpful in accessing the types of information that may have already been passed on to the next generation. I agree with the authors that nothing will come as close to revealing a transnational motif, and perhaps a bonding between family generations, than this line of questioning.

Home remedies provide another fairly whimsical approach to transnational information that can easily be discussed with families and made particularly relevant for ailments brought forth in therapy even when they are of an emotional nature. Stories of home remedies may be helpful in understanding the degree to which certain
cultural practices have remained alive in the family and may also legitimize culturally syntonic approaches that can complement the mainstream therapy being offered.

**Cultural Preservation and Health**

The preservation of empowering cultural narratives and the continued connection with the place of origin may have powerful protective effects for the second and perhaps the third generation far beyond a romantic or a heroic desire for ethnic re-creation. New research shows that the rapid assimilation advocated in the past appears to correlate with more symptoms of depression and anxiety, less personal satisfaction, and less educational achievement for adults and for children than the maintenance of social and cultural capital and the validation of ethnic identity made possible by transnationalism (Escobar, 1998; Vega, Kolody, & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 2001; Maught McDonnell, 1998).

Psychological disorders (e.g. depression) and physical disorders (e.g., obesity, heart disease) increase the longer immigrants live in America. Significantly, these new studies show that children of immigrant families are at least as healthy as U.S.-born children even though immigrants are more likely to be poor and less likely to have medical care. But their health and school achievement deteriorate the longer they stay in the United States. The mechanisms involved in this phenomenon are still speculative, but it seems possible that the maintenance of cultural and social capital has protective elements.

In conclusion, the article by Stone and her colleagues (2005) lends support to a movement whereby the themes of loss and discontinuity that dominated the clinical literature on immigrants are being enriched by stressing continuities with the old culture through a variety of concrete and subjective means made possible by global communication advances. These means serve not only to join families separated across countries but also immigrants and their children in this country. Thus, transnational practices may provide a sense of narrative coherence that gives meaning to the experience of migration, maintains social and cultural capital, and expands hyphenated cultural identities for future generations.

**REFERENCES**


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