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2 **Child Well-Being and Transnational** 3 **Families**

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7 **Synonyms**

Au1 8 **Astronaut families; Left-behind children; Para-**
9 **chute children**

10 **Definition**

11 Transnational families are families in which one
12 or more members live in another country or
13 region. The term “family members” usually
14 refers to a nuclear family comprising parents
15 and their children. Sometimes, elderly grandpar-
16 ents are also included. A broader array of family
17 members is included in studies that take into
18 account extended family systems prevalent in
19 developing countries.

20 Transnational families have members who
21 live for an extended period of time in different
22 countries. For example, the research discussed
23 here studies families living with members spread
24 between the USA and Mexico, the Philippines
25 and Italy, or Congo and Mali. An increasing
26 body of literature studies internal Chinese
27 ► **migration**. This migratory flow spans large
28 geographic distances and involves administrative

hurdles that make it comparable to other cases
of transnational families and is therefore included
here. 29 30 31

► **Child well-being** is loosely defined in qual-
itative anthropological or sociological studies in
terms of children’s ► **emotions** and responses to
living in a transnational family. Quantitative
family sociology and child psychology studies
define child well-being more narrowly in terms
of emotional, behavioral, and ► **health outcomes**.
Educational and economic outcomes for children
are sometimes included. These latter two
outcomes will be considered in this overview to
the extent that they are included in findings on
emotional, behavioral, or health outcomes. 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43

Description 44

Introduction 45

Increasingly, migration has given rise to transna-
tional families whose members live in different
nation-states and face the challenges of organiz-
ing the care of family members across borders.
Through this process, the roles and relationships
between spouses, parents, children, and elderly
relatives can change. An emerging concern in
both the academic and policy arenas is in the
effects of separation on migrant parents and
their children. In most instances, one or both
parents migrate, leaving one or more children in
the country of origin to be raised by a local care-
giver. In other cases, children migrate as unac-
companied minors, either clandestinely such as 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59

60 through the Mexico-US border or officially in
61 pursuit of educational opportunities as in the
62 case of Chinese children of migrant workers in
63 Australia or the USA (Waters, 2005). Families
64 and children in the latter circumstances are
65 referred to as “astronaut families” or “parachute
66 children.” Most of the studies that focus on the
67 well-being of children center on the more preva-
68 lent phenomenon of “left-behind” children,
69 which is the focus of this essay.

70 Defining a New Field of Research

71 Transnational family studies have emerged since
72 the turn of the twenty-first century and have
73 focused on the consequences of living in transna-
74 tional families for the relationship between
75 children and their parents (Bryceson & Vuorela,
76 2002; Dreby, 2007; Parreñas, 2005;
77 Schmalzbauer, 2004). These studies have
78 focused on Latin America and Asia and are
79 predominantly qualitative in nature. They have
80 addressed questions of how long-distance
81 separations affect the daily life of different-
82 members of transnational families, the types of
83 relationships they produce, and the ways in which
84 gender and intergenerational relationships
85 change as a result of the separation. Some studies
86 focus specifically on the children’s relationships
87 with relevant others, such as the migrant parent,
88 the caregiver at home who takes care of their
89 daily needs, and others involved in the care
90 network, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents.
91 While the initial focus of the studies was on
92 eliciting information from parents, especially
93 mothers, and their experiences with being sepa-
94 rated from their children, later studies have
95 focused on the children’s own accounts (Dreby,
96 2007; Schmalzbauer, 2004). Most studies
97 indicate that there are some negative conse-
98 quences for children and parents, such as con-
99 flicts and depressive symptoms (Dreby, 2007;
100 Fog-Olwig, 1999; Levitt, 2001; Parreñas, 2005)
101 and behavioral problems such as joining gangs
102 (Smith, 2006), loneliness, and feelings of aban-
103 donment (Dreby, 2007; Parreñas, 2005). Younger
104 children are found to have more emotional diffi-
105 culties dealing with separation from their biolog-
106 ical parents than older ones, while the older

107 children tend to show behavioral problems, such
108 as drinking and rebellious behavior. These stud-
109 ies emphasize that how a child feels about living
110 far from one or both biological parents depends
111 on the quality of the relationship with the parent
112 overseas; whether and how often they communi-
113 cate; the quality of the relationship with the local
114 caregiver, which includes how cared for a child
115 feels; the support the child receives from the
116 wider community or ► care network; and
117 whether it is the mother or father who migrated.
118 Virtually, all studies agree that children are worse
119 off in terms of their ► emotional well-being when
120 mothers migrate; however, mothers are found to
121 remit more than fathers. Despite these nuances,
122 this literature tends to emphasize negative
123 outcomes for children when their parents migrate
124 (Yeoh & Lam, 2007).

125 While identifying some general dynamics,
126 these studies focus solely on the phenomenon of
127 transnational families without including control
128 groups (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). The ques-
129 tion therefore remains: to what extent are the
130 observed dynamics particular to transnational
131 families or to what extent are they part of broader
132 dynamics that pertain to other family types?
133 Furthermore, the focus on the migratory status
134 of children’s parents in qualitative studies does
135 not address the extent to which other factors
136 might explain the observed effects on children.
137 Are there characteristics common to transna-
138 tional families other than parental migration that
139 might explain the observed effects on children?

140 More recently, and largely independently of
141 the above qualitative studies, scholars from
142 family sociology and child psychology have
143 turned their attention to the phenomenon of
144 left-behind children. Before these studies, trans-
145 national family situations had been largely
146 ignored in these disciplines. Much of the previous
147 literature addressing parent–child separation is
148 based primarily on clinical data and derives
149 from studies that focus on parental ► divorce,
150 death, or a problematic separation, such as aban-
151 donment. Family sociology and child psychology
152 studies focus less on migrants’ children, and
153 when they did, they focused mainly on those
154 children living with one or both of their parents

155 in the migrant receiving country. The gaps in
156 these disciplines were due to the guiding concept
157 of the family, which emphasizes proximity as
158 a prerequisite for meaningful interaction and
159 exchange within families (Mazzucato & Schans,
160 2011). As a result, transnational family practices
161 were ignored or assumed unfeasible (Baldassar &
162 Baldock, 1999). Recently, however, there
163 has been a shift in attention to transnational fam-
164 ilies, with many studies focusing on China and
165 Latin America.

166 Important Analytical Categories

167 The recent shift in attention by quantitative
168 researchers has led to a narrower definition of
169 child well-being and has focused predominantly
170 on emotional, behavioral, and health outcomes as
171 well as educational and economic outcomes.
172 These studies draw primarily from theories in
173 family studies and child psychology, such as
174 ► attachment theory or social cognitive theory,
175 and they seek to test whether transnational fami-
176 lies result in particular child well-being outcomes
177 as compared to non-transnational families. Such
178 studies are also designed to assess whether
179 factors other than parents' migratory status
180 might explain these outcomes. These studies
181 have different and sometimes conflicting find-
182 ings, depending on what outcome is focused
183 upon, which region of the world is studied, and
184 what variables are included. Here, we present
185 some of the most important findings.

186 Who Migrates

187 Whether the father or mother migrates makes
188 a difference for a child's well-being. In general,
189 studies find that children are worse off when
190 mothers migrate. Battistella and Conaco (1996)
191 find that children in the Philippines with migrant
192 mothers have more educational difficulties,
193 decreased emotional well-being, and health prob-
194 lems. This is corroborated by Parrenas' (2005)
195 qualitative study in the Philippines where this
196 effect is found to be stronger for girls than for
197 boys. Dreby and Stutz (2012) argue that educa-
198 tional ► aspirations are also affected, depending
199 on which parent migrates. They find that when
200 single mothers migrate, children's educational

201 aspirations are higher because they see their
202 mother's migration as a sacrifice and want to
203 reward her through their good educational
204 achievement. The opposite is true when both
205 parents or only fathers migrate. Some of the
206 mechanisms at work are explained by Kandel
207 and Massey (2002), who find that Mexican
208 children aim to join their migrant parents in the
209 USA and perceive their Mexican education as
210 irrelevant in this process, thus lowering their
211 motivation.

While much of the literature focuses on
► mother-child relationships, Nobels (2011)
expressly makes a distinction between absence
due to migration and absence due to divorce.
Mexican migrant fathers are more present in
left-behind children's lives via communication
technologies than divorced fathers. She finds
that the frequency of interaction is correlated
with better schooling outcomes, which attests
not only to the significance of paternal migration
but also to the importance of communication
between the parent and child during the migration
process.

Some of the most recent and interesting stud-
ies come from China. In their study of Chinese
left-behind children, Wen and Lin (2012) make
a distinction between migrating parents. Similar
to the Mexican case, they find that children left
behind by migrant mothers show worse health
behavior and less engagement with school than
those whose fathers migrated. Overall, in these
respects, both types of children are worse off
relative to non-left-behind children.

Few studies define the role of migrant parents
in ways other than their biological relationship to
the child (i.e., mother/father). However, given the
findings from qualitative transnational family lit-
erature that identify the importance of the quality
of the relationship between migrant parents and
their left-behind children, this is an important
area to investigate. Heymann et al. (2009),
for example, look at whether the migrant family
member formerly occupied a primary caregiver
role before migrating, and they find that there
are no negative well-being consequences for
left-behind children if the migrant family mem-
ber was not a primary caregiver. The primary

249 caregiver could be a sibling or an aunt or one of
 250 the biological parents. However, if the migrant
 251 family member was a primary caregiver, then
 252 children were more frequently and chronically
 253 ill and had more emotional and behavioral
 254 problems.

255 The Characteristics of the Caregiver

256 The relationship between a child and a migrant
 257 parent is important as well as the relationship
 258 between a child and a caregiver. This relationship
 259 has been the subject of family and child psychol-
 260 ogy studies, but only as it relates to separated
 261 families living in the West. In the case of trans-
 262 national families, this has recently been explored
 263 and represents a new direction for well-being
 264 studies of left-behind children. Jia and Tian
 265 (2010) find that Chinese children left by their
 266 parents are at higher risk of being lonely and
 267 therefore are at risk for low ► **mental health**
 268 when their caregiver is a grandparent, among
 269 other factors. Fan, Su, Gill, and Birmaher
 270 (2010) compare Chinese left-behind children
 271 and find that there are differences between
 272 children who are cared for by a relative,
 273 a nonrelative, and those who live with their
 274 biological parents after a period of separation.
 275 Children whose caregivers are nonrelatives are
 276 at the greatest risk of showing emotional and
 277 behavioral problems. Qualitative transnational
 278 family studies point to the importance of care-
 279 givers in helping children to experience parental
 280 absence in a positive way. This area of study,
 281 in which distinctions are made in caregiver
 282 types, is a potentially productive area for future
 283 quantitative research.

284 Nonmigratory Characteristics

285 Some of the most recent studies investigate other
 286 potential factors that could contribute to observed
 287 outcomes on child well-being in transnational
 288 families. Wen and Lin (2012) base their study in
 289 social cognitive theory and find that a child's
 290 psychosocial environment, defined by the
 291 family's socioeconomic status, peer and school
 292 ► **support**, and the child's psychological traits
 293 and socializing skills, is more important in
 294 explaining their findings of decreased health

behavior and school engagement among 295
 left-behind children than the parents' migratory 296
 status. Furthermore, they find no evidence of 297
 decreased emotional well-being among 298
 left-behind children. Fan et al. (2010) note that 299
 left-behind children show more psychopatholog- 300
 ical and less pro-social behavior than their 301
 counterparts who live with their biological 302
 parents. Yet, these differences disappear after 303
 controlling for age, ► **education levels**, and the 304
 socioeconomic status of parents and caregivers 305
 and teacher involvement. The authors show that 306
 left-behind children tend to come from poorer 307
 families with older and less-educated caregivers, 308
 and it is these factors, more than the parental 309
 separation, per se, that influence the negative 310
 emotional well-being among left-behind 311
 children. 312

These findings help to provide nuance for 313
 the discussion of left-behind children, which 314
 tends to be negatively framed in ways such that 315
 left-behind children are portrayed as always 316
 being at a disadvantage (Yeoh & Lam, 2007). 317
 These findings show that other factors can be at 318
 least as important, if not more so, than parental 319
 migratory status in influencing the well-being of 320
 left-behind children. In some cases, these other 321
 factors explain the variations in well-being that 322
 have been associated with living in 323
 a transnational family. 324

The Importance of Time 325

For transnational families, time is an important 326
 dimension in various respects. First, the length of 327
 separation between children and their parents and 328
 the age of the child at separation are important in 329
 determining the effects of migration on children. 330
 Studies find more psychopathology and greater 331
 ► **anxiety** and depression levels among children 332
 who experience a longer separation (Fan et al., 333
 2010) and who were separated from their parents 334
 at a younger age (Fan et al., 2010; Liu and Ge 335 ^{Au3}
 2009). Second, mediating factors are affected by 336
 the length of separation between children and 337
 parents. Attachment theory posits that the 338
 psychological well-being of a child is determined 339
 by the level of parent-child bonding; the less 340
 bonding, the worse the psychological well-being 341

342 of children. Smith, Lanlonde, and Johnson (2004)
343 find that migration can disrupt ► **parent–child**
344 **bonding**, and this disruption leads to negative
345 psychological outcomes for children.

346 A third way in which time is important for
347 transnational families is that children’s
348 well-being in the present may be dependent on
349 things that happened before or during the migra-
350 tion of their parents. Indeed, once children are
351 reunited with their parents, such effects can
352 continue to operate or change. Both Smith et al.
353 (2004) and Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie
354 (2002) find that the time after reunion does not
355 necessarily repair parent–child relationships.
356 In fact, Dreby (2007) shows how reunion itself
357 can increase conflicts and tensions between
358 parents and children when children feel torn
359 away from the caregivers with whom they had
360 bonded or are suddenly faced with an authority
361 figure they no longer recognize.

362 The stage of the parent’s migration trajectory
363 can also be of relevance. Donato, Kanaiaupuni,
364 and Stainback (2003) find that Mexican girls’
365 health outcomes become more equal to those of
366 boys when one or both parents are currently on
367 migration. However, when the parent returns to
368 Mexico from the USA, they no longer find this
369 health benefit for girls, suggesting that upon
370 return, girls’ health outcomes worsen. This find-
371 ing is corroborated by Antman (2011) who looks
372 at the division of household resources between
373 girls and boys while their fathers are away on
374 migration. She finds that girls receive a larger
375 share of household resources while fathers are
376 away, but when fathers return, the household
377 resources revert to the boys. Girls’ health
378 outcomes became more equal to those of boys
379 when one or both parents are away on migration;
380 however, they do not find this outcome for
381 children whose parents have returned

382 Cross-Country Comparisons: Policy and 383 Cultural Contexts

384 There are very few studies that compare child
385 well-being across countries. Graham and Jordan
386 (2011) are the only ones to our knowledge who
387 have compared different migrant-sending coun-
388 tries. They compare well-being outcomes for

389 children in four countries in Southeast Asia and
390 find that children of migrant fathers are more
391 likely to have poor psychological well-being in
392 Indonesia and Thailand but not in the Philippines
393 or Vietnam. Possible explanations for these
394 differences are because parental migration in
395 Vietnam is a relatively recent phenomenon,
396 while the issue of left-behind children in the
397 Philippines has been in place long enough to
398 have received attention from government and
399 nongovernmental agencies, resulting in specific
400 programs that address their needs. In some cases,
401 especially as recorded in African contexts,
402 cultural ► **norms** around family and child rearing
403 may lead parents to prefer to leave or send their
404 children back to their countries of origin (Bledsoe
& Sow, 2011; Whitehouse, 2009). These expla-
405 nations attest to the importance of policy and
406 cultural contextual factors and the importance of
407 including them in models of the effects of paren-
408 tal migration on child well-being (Mazzucato &
409 Schans, 2011). In countries where migration is
410 more established and the condition of children
411 living without one or both parents due to migra-
412 tion is more common, there may be no social
413 stigma associated with being a left-behind child
414 and more programs that aim to help caregivers or
415 schools to better address their needs. 416

417 Discussion and Conclusion

418 Important developments have been made in
419 the study of transnational families and child
420 well-being since the inception of transnational
421 family studies at the turn of the twenty-first
422 century. Qualitative studies have drawn the atten-
423 tion of scholars to the increasing phenomenon of
424 families operating across nation-state or regional
425 borders, raising the question what impact this has
426 for different family members. Qualitative
427 accounts of different family members indicate
428 that children tend to suffer from separation from
429 their parents, yet various factors affect the sever-
430 ity of these outcomes, such as the quality of the
431 relationship between children and parent both
432 before and during migration, the quality of the
433 relationship between children and the left-behind
434 caregiver, and the frequency of communication
435 between children and parents. More recently,

436 scholars from family and child psychology stud-
 437 ies have pursued the question of the effects of
 438 migration-induced separation on children using
 439 quantitative approaches. Important elements of
 440 these studies show that the migrant's relationship
 441 to the child (mother vs. father, primary caregiver
 442 vs. non-caregiver) and the characteristics of
 443 the caregiver (grandparent, nonrelative) are
 444 important in determining the effects on child
 445 well-being.

446 Another important development is the inclu-
 447 sion of ► **control groups** of children who live with
 448 both of their parents. Such control groups allow
 449 for the exploration of the degree to which the
 450 negative findings on child well-being in transna-
 451 tional families are due to migration or to other
 452 characteristics. Factors, such as socioeconomic
 453 status and the educational background of parents
 454 and caregivers, are found to be as important if not
 455 more important in explaining child well-being
 456 outcomes. This is an important recent contribu-
 457 tion to the literature as it points to the need to
 458 focus the discussions around left-behind children,
 459 which, until recently, have tended to be framed in
 460 negative terms due to the lack of specific analysis
 461 controlling for various factors. Furthermore, the
 462 findings indicate the need to search for policy
 463 solutions not only directed at migration but also
 464 at helping parents to find optimal caregivers and
 465 to provide adequate support services for those
 466 who stay behind to care for their children.

467 The findings that time is an important dimen-
 468 sion that influences child well-being outcomes
 469 underscore the need for ► **longitudinal studies**.
 470 Currently, all studies on transnational families
 471 and child well-being are cross-sectional. Those
 472 that include time dimensions do so by including
 473 variables such as length of separation and age at
 474 separation or they rely on historical recall.
 475 Longitudinal studies are needed to identify the
 476 conditions of the family before migration to accu-
 477 rately account for possible selection effects and
 478 to obtain measurements over time of child
 479 well-being outcome variables to establish
 480 whether migration does impact child well-being
 481 and what it means for future child development.

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AU1	Please check if identified heading levels are okay.	
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