

Families on the move in Europe: children's perspectives

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In this article we introduce the on-going (2012-2014) international collaborative project Families on the Move Across Borders: Children's Perspectives on Labour Migration in Europe. First, we present the project and its aims; then, we briefly discuss the current state of migration research on families and children in order to explain how our research can contribute to a fuller inclusion of children in social analysis, not only by challenging the theoretical debates, but also through our empirically rich study. We aim to contribute to the advancement of methodology in childhood and migration studies by studying migration experiences from the child's perspective.

We discuss the challenges inherent in researching children and describe the methods we have found to be most suitable for investigating families and children in a holistic way. We argue that the experiences of children are of paramount importance to understanding the present-day realities of transnational family life and simultaneously endeavour to make sense of the nascent futures of such European families. Finally, we present some preliminary findings from our on-going research and map out the diverse avenues this research is taking.

Keywords: migration, ethnography of children, transnational families, borders, Europe.

Migration within Europe: What about the children?

Children and young people are often at the core of their parents' migration process, either as the main 'rationale' for parental migration (Boehm 2008; Assmuth 1997), or as actors of integration into the new host society (Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000). In the meantime, the children's own perspectives have been a chronically understudied topic in the recent migration research in Europe. It is widely agreed that children everywhere are very much affected by migration, irrespective of whether they

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themselves move across state borders or remain at home while their parents migrate or commute transnationally. There have been recent calls for study across various disciplines to recognize the importance of this topic, urging researchers to provide more empirical data, as well as improve the methodologies for how to research families in a holistic way and how to better understand children's perspectives on their experience in particular (Ni Laoire *et al.* 2011; Huttunen 2010; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Piperno 2011).

Even so, the general tendency in migration scholarship is still to represent and to study incom-

ing migrants as autonomous individuals. However, the long-standing scholarly tradition that considers migration to be an individual pursuit has been contested and criticized, especially by feminist scholars. Such insightful concepts as 'transnational care chains', 'care migrants', 'global care work', and 'long-distance parenting' have been developed by scholars inspired by feminist theories (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Hochschild 2000; Isaksen 2010; Näre 2012). On the other hand, the preoccupation with children remaining in their home countries while their parents migrate is more recent and so far has largely dealt with migration from Mexico and the Philippines to the US (Hochschild 2000; Margold 2004; Parrenas 2005; Boehm 2008).

The role of children in migration processes in Europe and the European Union has rarely been explored and even when it has, the main emphasis has still been on parental decisions and parental agency, or on the capabilities and concerns of the receiving society regarding the welfare of the children they are absorbing (Lewis 2006). Moreover, most studies that deal with migrant children and young people are set in the context of a single nation, ignoring the implications of transnational family life (For welcome exceptions see Haikkola 2012; Ni Laoire *et al.* 2011).

As Flavia Piperno (2007) has rightly emphasized in her studies of Euro-Mediterranean migration, children do take part in, react, and adapt to the (parental) decision to migrate. Children of migrant parents develop cosmopolitan practices where new identities are forged as cultural transmission between generations takes place (Vathi 2013). There are still a limited number of studies about children in the context of the large-scale migration of Eastern Europeans that has taken place during the past two decades.¹ However, Eastern European contexts have largely remained understudied, especially migrants from the Eastern margins and the sending ends of these transnational routes. This is precisely why our research focuses on children's experiences. Our aim is to understand this aspect

¹ For a recent exception see the study of Eastern European children in Ireland by Ni Laoire *et al.* (2011) and for an interesting discussion on the public debate and moral panic on the so-called 'Euro-orphans' in Poland, see Orbanska (2009).

of parent and family cross-border labour migration in Europe, with an emphasis on the eastern fringe of the European Union. Our research began in 2012 and will continue throughout 2014.

The project, discussed below, is led by Professor Laura Assmuth from the University of Eastern Finland and involves researchers with considerable experience and the skills needed for collaborative, in-depth ethnographic research about children. The team includes Marina Hakkarainen, PhD, an ethnologist originating from Russia, who has lived in Finland for many years and is currently studying Russian families in Finland; Pihla Siim, PhD candidate, a bi-lingual folklorist with a Finnish background who is currently living and working in Estonia; Airi Markkanen, PhD, a cultural anthropologist who has twenty years' experience studying the Roma in Finland; Anca Enache, a PhD candidate in social anthropology, who is a native Romanian living in Finland; and Aija Lulle, a PhD candidate in human geography and a native Latvian who has studied emigration from Latvia for the past ten years.

The Context of the Case Studies regarding Transnational Families

New patterns of cross-border migration have emerged within Europe after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the enlargement of the European Union. Contemporary transnational cases related to these developments and studied in detail by our research team take place in the following countries: Estonia/Finland, Russia/Finland, Latvia/Nordic countries and the UK, and Romania/Finland. Some family members regularly commute across borders for work, as in the case of neighbouring EU countries Estonia and Finland. In other cases, migration is seasonal, as when Latvians travel to the UK as agricultural labourers. Each of the cases studied presents interesting particularities, relating for example, to the distance between locations, the labour market position of the parents, or the width of the welfare gap between the countries involved. The focus of our research is on how the children themselves actively make sense of, observe, and

discuss the cross-border mobility practices in which they and their parents are involved.

Finland is an EU country that borders on both Estonia and Russia; it is interesting as a contemporary target country for immigration since not long ago Finland was a country of mass emigration. For example, in the 1960–70s, an estimated 300 000 Finns moved to neighbouring Sweden as labour migrants both with and without family members. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union relatively large numbers of former Soviet citizens, mostly Estonians and Russians, began migrating to Finland. When sorted by country of origin, the largest group of immigrants in Finland at the end of 2011 was citizens of Russia or the former Soviet Union – 67,127 individuals representing 26 percent of all people with foreign origin living in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2012). Presently, there are approximately 40 000 Estonian citizens and 31 000 Russian citizens (including Soviet Union's citizens) living permanently in Finland. They comprise the two largest groups of foreign citizens in the country. Only rough estimates exist about the number of temporary, seasonal, informal or commuting workers from Estonia. The Schengen agreement guarantees Estonians free access to Finland as EU citizens, whereas Russian citizens need a visa to enter.

The largest group of foreign-language speakers in Finland are Russian-speakers. In 2012 approximately 62 000 persons residing in Finland had Russian as their mother tongue. 11 200 such Russian-speaking families for whom Russian is the native language of both parents, or the only parent, were registered in Finland that year; this fact is significant for our research purposes because the language orientation and abilities of different family members play a significant role in decisions regarding permanency of stay in Finland. The second largest group was Estonian-speakers, 38 000 in all. It is important to note that many of the Russian-speakers are citizens of Estonia, and therefore EU-citizens, who are able to move freely to Finland (Rapo 2011; Statistics Finland 2012).

A recent study on the cultural and educational needs of Estonian-speaking migrants in Finland revealed that Estonian-speakers are both able and wanting to integrate successfully into mainstream Finnish society. Consequently, these families stress

the importance of their children learning the local language well and have them attend Finnish schools. The Finnish and Estonian languages are closely related and Estonian-speakers usually experience fewer difficulties with Finnish than Russian-speakers do. Estonian-speaking parents often prefer Finnish schools over Estonian schools and therefore have a greater tendency to become permanent residents in Finland, bringing their families with them (Lagerspetz 2011).

In the case of cross-border families in Finland/Russia, adolescents have primarily been studied through the lens of acculturation (Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000). In Finland, as elsewhere, the focus of sociological studies on second-generation immigrant children and youth has been on their adaptation and integration into the receiving society. Less attention has been paid to their possible transnational identities. However, important recent contributions regarding Finland have been made by Jerman (2011), Haikkola (2012) and Siim (2007).

The circular migration of Roma people from Romania and Bulgaria to Finland is of even more recent origin. It is related to the free movement of Romanian and Bulgarian citizens inside the EU since these countries joined the EU in 2007. The arrival of the Roma, albeit in moderate numbers, has stirred huge controversies, especially in the capital region of Helsinki. Roma migration has been widely discussed in the media and on political stages across Europe, but again, there is a lack of in-depth studies of recent intra-European migration realities, and children have not been studied as an integral part of the families who hit the road to generate income (Markkanen 2012; Enache 2012).

The case of Latvian citizens migrating for work purposes to the Nordic countries and to the UK, especially to the Channel Island of Guernsey, is related to the institutional and structural framework of the European Union. When the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, together with other former socialist states of Eastern Europe, became members of the EU in 2004, many old member states imposed restrictions on the free movement of citizens from the new member states within the EU, fearing uncontrolled waves of unskilled labour migration. Finland and Germany were among the restrictive and cautious states. Britain and Ireland, on the oth-

er hand, opened up their labour markets freely to the ‘newcomers’, assuming perhaps that only small numbers of people would venture that far. In fact, hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans have taken the opportunity to work abroad, most of them as seasonal labourers, but many also as permanent labour migrants. This wave of emigration for a country as small as Latvia with a population of two million has been vastly significant; at least 213 000 people left the country between 2001–2011. The recent migrants are mainly young people, who either have children or plan to establish families soon. The country was hit particularly hard by the 2008 economic crisis, so this was also a reason for many undecided migrants to relocate their entire families abroad in the hope of providing more stable futures for their offspring (Hazans 2011; Apsite-Berina 2013).

Children’s worlds and methodological serendipity

It should be emphasized that researching children is difficult for an adult researcher (e.g. Strandell 2010). The familiar research tools of the social sciences that we take for granted, such as interviews, do not serve well, and meeting the interlocutor/informant once is not enough to make adequate sense of family lives and children’s agency within them (see Oswell 2013 on the agency of children). In all cases the members of the research team have made use of their longstanding local networks in order to establish trusting relationships with their informants, both adult and child. Such a grounded familiarity with the research contexts makes an in-depth approach to studying children’s lived experiences possible. Mainstream qualitative social research is often limited to conducting thematic interviews and such an in-depth approach is rarely taken. Our methodology goes hand in hand with the theoretical aim of the study – to question the individualistic, adult-centred assumptions implicit in current migration research in order to better understand actual and changing patterns of agency of the various family members involved in or affected by migration processes. The novelty and methodological challenge of our approach is that we study both ends of the migration chain.

Each case study includes prolonged periods of ethnographic fieldwork at both ends of the relevant migration chain, sharing everyday life with the respondents and travelling with them between their homes and host locations, when possible. The emphasis of the research continues to be everyday life with its richness of overlapping contexts, where practices and agencies emerge beyond the stiff framework of the interview. We have found this to be particularly important in researching Roma women and children, and the ways in which they go about creating a ‘new nomadism’, adapting the transnational Roma family lifestyle to modern constraints and opportunities. We also draw attention to a less theorized aspect of active geographical mobility across the EU – being geographically mobile at an international scale is no longer a privilege of the upper classes. Increasingly, people from various social backgrounds are physically moving to and through new places on a regular basis.

Another method we use is story-crafting, originally developed by Finnish educational researchers (e.g. Karlsson 2005). In migration research this method has been adapted to help discover how story-making improves children’s language development. This method was used in eleven creative sessions with five-year-old immigrant children (Jaakkola 2009). Story-crafting proved to be a fruitful method in helping to increase a child’s sense of inclusion and self-respect (ibid). In our research, especially in conversations and interview situations with smaller children, story-crafting has proved a useful tool for creating a friendly atmosphere in which children open up for play and talk informally with a researcher. However, the method also involves some challenges. For example, according to descriptions from Lulle’s fieldwork notes in 2012–2013, when a seven-year-old girl was crafting the story in Latvian, the child immediately engaged in story crafting about her travel experience. When the story told was read back to the child, she actively corrected it, paying attention to details and highlighting them, especially emphasizing the correct names and nicknames of the beloved members of her extended family. The successful experience seemed due to the child’s openness and willingness to talk and express her views as well as to the fact that, in this case, the Latvian language was her

mother tongue and she was very fluent in it despite being educated at an English language school.

In another case story-crafting was tried with two four-year-old boys, but in this case the children had stronger English language skills and were more passive in Latvian. Researcher Lulle tried both languages to initiate story-crafting but it was not immediately successful as the children stopped talking, preferring to play outside instead. However, after about an hour of various play activities, one child suddenly started naming things around him in Latvian, smiling proudly. His brother picked up the activity as a game. Later during the day the researcher sang an English song with the children and the story-crafting exercise was transformed into song-crafting, creatively changing the words of the song to include what they saw around them or in their imaginations. That turned out to be a positive experience and children were fully engaged in the activity.

As already mentioned, young children and adolescents often speak using sporadic phrases to express their ideas, then pause for a long time. Because of the need for prolonged thought between ideas it is rare that researchers could obtain interviews that are rich in a narrative sense. Therefore, making observations while taking part in multiple activities is a must when researching children. This makes such research both fascinating and challenging. Another method used by our team is the interpretation of children's drawings. This has proven to be a rich method of data collection among Russian pre- and primary school aged children in Finland. The interpretation of drawings together with the children leads to spontaneous discussions and a visual anthropology methodology can be supplemented with observations and informal conversations (Hakkarainen 2013).

Preliminary findings

This methodology, which includes diverse complementary methods, serves as a roadmap for exploring paths that otherwise might be neglected. It should be reiterated how crucial it is to establish trust in relationships with young informants when observing their everyday activities, while long-standing research experience is essential for research-

ers to be able to properly contextualize the data they compile. Walking, talking, and playing together lead to a gradual understanding of everyday spatial arrangements and specific timings that make a difference in children's lives when their families make plans for travel, crossing borders, and temporary stays in other countries. Such data needs to be contrasted with and complemented by what can be learned from the interviews and discussions in which children and parents often narrate the same events differently. Children tend to open up more in specific settings: while performing motor activities such as walking, through sensory experiences such as smells, and in familiar places such as a visit to grandmother's house. These experiences are anchors that help researchers to enter and understand children's worlds. Everyday observations also lead us to discover the effects of global consumerism and internet-based networking on children. Through consumerism children are both separated from their relatives and friends in other countries due to material inequalities but also bound to them through web-based activities.

When studying the life-course and life transition situations of individuals and families, various overlapping mobilities unfold in particularly interesting ways. Issues of children's education and their knowledge of the parents' language and culture are heatedly debated among migrant families, especially by Russians in Finland, but also by Latvian parents in the UK. In their case, their children's education seems to be the key to a family's decisions regarding the location(s), length, and permanency of any stay abroad, even if the parents themselves would rather return home. In other words, migration decisions, ostensibly made by parents in view of their work prospects, are actually directed towards the future of their children, and the children themselves actively participate in and influence the outcome of such negotiations. Educational choices, such as involving children in extracurricular activities in sports, arts and leisure, are intimately linked with much wider spheres of wellbeing and the prospect of enabling the children to have a better future. 'Living well' as a family and providing 'a good life for the children' is not always seen as staying together in one place, but in the new context of labour migration involves organizing family life in flux.

Decisions to move or to stay put and the timing of possible migrations, unfold in a number of different contexts. For example, children's mobilities are synchronized with their school holidays; grandparents and other relatives are relied upon at both ends of the migration chain so their needs must be considered (Tiainen 2013; Thelen 2005); technological connections are many and widely used – such as telephone conversations and 'skype-parenting' – for the negotiation and management of these vectors (Lulle 2011). Adolescents, who grow up with relatives in the home country, grow up fast, and in some cases join their parents abroad as soon as they come of age, but now as migrant workers themselves. The study of such intertwined geographical and social mobilities allows researchers to trace important lines of intergenerational transmission of values and practices (Lulle 2013).

Some preliminary findings from the case studies related to Roma migration indicate that temporality, circularity, and informality of mobility are the main unifying characteristics. The Romanian Roma in Helsinki travel between their country of origin (Romania) and Finland every two or three months, and sometimes to the neighbouring countries of Sweden and Norway. The Roma are able to come to Finland because of their status as EU citizens, and in most cases never formalize their migrant status in Finland. They consider Romania to be the location of their true homes, while labour migration to Finland (or elsewhere abroad) is seen as a necessary means of gaining income. In most cases, Roma children are left at home in Romania in the care of their mothers or other female relatives. Even so, the children play a crucial and active role during all stages of a family's mobility. Children also actively engage in the decision-making processes at home while their parents are abroad. Parenthood is therefore constantly shared and negotiated between the elderly relatives at home, the children themselves, and the parents who exercise their roles across borders. Children's everyday experiences are simultaneously situated in multiple locations, while the meaning of 'family' is also fluid and flexible. Roma children imagine the places where their parents are calling from, where their parents live and work, and in this way they link an imagined West to their own future. Even young children relate the struggle of working

abroad to improved welfare and greater access to consumer goods, imagining the time when they will be old enough and have a family of their own to care for. In the case of the Roma, a transnational family culture has emerged: mobility has developed from being merely a strategy to ensure income to being practiced as a lifestyle that seems to be perpetuated from one generation to another.

In sum, the research aims to provide not only rich case studies but also a new comparison between contemporary patterns of work-related migration in Europe involving and affecting children. The ethnographic accounts that comprise our data are grounded in detail, sensitive to nuance, and rich in information. The research also has potential regarding applied social policy practices and reforms that concern children's welfare. Non-academic organizations such as NGOs working with migrant and child issues in the respective contexts have been approached as partners and the research results in the various languages used in this project are being disseminated among different public-sector decision makers and stakeholders. However, such societal outcomes and tasks are complementary to the main task of our research: *to provide nuanced and critical insights into the circumstances of and outcomes for children as the subjects and agents of family migration.*

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