

# Transnational Family Work in Refugee Migration

## Social Work with Unaccompanied Minors and their Physically Absent Parents

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### Introduction

In the age of globalization, family relations are increasingly spanning several places, regions and nation states. As a consequence, transnational families have become a subject of intensive research in the past twenty years (e.g., Baldassar et al. 2014). Transnational studies examine how family life is shaped across great distances and how family bonds are modified. Under the catchword “global care chains” (Hochschild 2000), researchers discuss how parents migrate to wealthier countries for the purpose of working and how they fulfill their duties as parents by sending money and establishing caring rituals with the help of digital media. Their children stay behind and rely on kin care (Parreñas 2005). While research on transnational families has expanded in the context of care migration, there are still few findings on transnational families with experiences of flight living separated from each other (Robertson/Wilding/Gifford 2016: 221). Although a great deal of research has been carried out since the “long summer of migration” in 2015, especially studying the group of unaccompanied minors, its focus lies primarily on individual experiences and less on the young people’s transnational family system in its entirety (Westphal/Motzek-Öz/Aden 2019). Individual studies highlight the burdens unaccompanied minors suffer when they have to find their way in a new place without their parents at their side (Sierau et al. 2019). One desideratum that needs to be explored further is studies focusing on how intergenerational relationships are transformed by experiences of flight, and whether and how these transformations are taken into account

by social workers who are confronted with individual family members in the destination country.

This article sheds light on this research gap. It provides an insight into the state of research on transnational families and transnational family work. On the basis of a qualitative interview study, and taking into account the sensitizing concepts of 'doing and displaying family', it explores how social workers perceive not only unaccompanied minors in residential child and youth welfare facilities, but also their whole family network and how they constitute or do not constitute pedagogical family work across nation-state borders. In the light of three case descriptions, the paper develops starting points for transnational family work. So far, transnational family work has rarely been an issue of interest in social work research and practice. It is central not only to refugee migration, but for all families that do not live in a shared local area.

## **Transnational families and transnational family work**

Transnational families are defined as "familial groups with members living some or most of the time separated from each other, while nonetheless feeling a sense of collective welfare, unity and familyhood across national borders" (Bryceson 2019: 3043). Transnational families are not a new phenomenon, but are becoming increasingly widespread in times of globalization and digitalization. If flight and migration are not just understood simplistically as processes undergone by isolated individuals, the family's agency and strategies come into view, including the accumulation of family capital that makes individual members' mobility possible.

Although a broad view of families is highly relevant in flight migration research, current studies tend to view migration and flight mainly from the perspective of individual actors and overlook intergenerational relationships (ibid.). One potential means of overcoming this basic perspective lies in bringing debates from family studies and flight and migration research into a systematic dialogue.

In family research, an increasing number of perspectives focus on the 'doing of family', e.g., on family practices, the family's emotional bonds, their networks and knowledge processes. Seen from this angle, family is not perceived as being a fixed entity, but as a relational process of its own

production and negotiation. The analytical focus is thus on how people refer to each other as being a family in everyday interactions and biographical orientations and how family is permanently reconstructed as a communal, meaningful whole (Jurczyk 2020). Finch (2007) even goes one step further, expanding this idea by including the concept of “displaying family”. She defines “displaying” as the process by which family members not only convey to each other in terms of family constructions, but also “to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute ‘doing family things’ and thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships” (ibid: 67). By this means, Finch places an emphasis on “social interaction” (ibid: 73) and clarifies that processes of “displaying family” involve “the conveying of meanings through social interaction and the acknowledgement of this by relevant others” (ibid: 77).

The combined perspective of “doing” and “displaying” families hence focuses on family practices and relationships in its interwovenness with the way families refer to others, are addressed by others, and refer to specific perceptions and norms being negotiated and made relevant in this relational space. This analytical view may capture how families define and experience themselves, how they are ‘read’ by relevant actors, and how those actors are involved in them.

One instance that ‘reads’ and engages in processes of “doing and displaying of family” is social workers. In the case of transnational families, it is highly relevant to them to perceive and reflect upon the doing and displaying of family across national borders and to move away from an individualistic view examining only selected family members within a national context. In the German-speaking context, for example, Westphal and colleagues (2019) call for a transnational view on families with experience of flight, as empirical studies clearly demonstrate that there is close contact between family members who have fled and those who have stayed behind.

Surprisingly, there has so far been little research into the transnational family relationships of unaccompanied minor refugees and into the way in which pedagogical professionals deal with physically separated families, although there has been research indicating that such professionals are confronted with the parents of unaccompanied minors in their work. One study demonstrating this is by Findenig, Buchner and Klinger (2019). The authors conducted 161 quantitative questionnaires with unaccompanied minors in Austrian residential care. Their results support the thesis that contact with

their family is the most important aspect to the young people alongside their educational aspirations. The researchers consequently argue for a transnational opening of family work and the creation of common social spaces for the young people, their families and the social workers. Due to the primarily national orientation of social work in countries of the Global North and the high demands in terms of time, resources and engagement, the growing relevance and normality of transnational families is only slowly being accompanied by changes and developments in social work practice. This gap needs to be fulfilled due to social work's mandate: In Austria, Germany and other countries, social workers are required to work in partnership with the parents of children and adolescents. This task is discussed under the umbrella term "parental work". Cooperation is more difficult when parents are not physically present. However, Breithecker (2018) discusses the idea that families should not be overlooked since they are highly present for unaccompanied minors in digital space and in their thoughts and actions. She thus requires social workers to actively contact families, discuss decisions with distant parents, seek their consent, and consider their wishes (*ibid.*, 304–307). A pioneering study focussing on these tasks has been carried out by Krefß and Kutscher (2019). The authors explored how social workers can digitally involve parents in the support relationship. Together with unaccompanied minors, contact was made with their parents. Then, media-based meetings via video chat, telephone and messenger services were organized. The meetings enabled the pedagogues to include the parents' educational ideas in the support planning. The researchers highlight the potential ways in which digital media can strengthen parents' participation. At the same time, they point to new challenges such as data security and the question of what power parents should have in decision-making when personal custody has already been transferred to a guardian (*ibid.*: 73–75).

## Methodology

The following analysis builds on the work highlighted in the description of the state of the research. Its premise is that social workers are a relevant nodal point in the doing and displaying of families with experiences of flight. Thus, the analysis aims to give an insight into social workers' perspectives on the families of unaccompanied minors and their pedagogical work with

them. The material taken for this article is part of my larger habilitation study which was interested in

1. young refugees' experiences of inclusion and exclusion and their support relationships in and beyond Germany, and
2. how social workers are involved in these support relationships and their perspectives on their own work in the field of refugee migration.

The project is entitled "Inclusion and Refugee Migration. New Narratives for Social Work" (2016–2021) and was financed by the research fund of the Institute of Education at Mainz University. In spring 2016, I conducted thirteen open guided interviews (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2010: 138–145) with pedagogues and ten interviews with young people that had been forced to flee. The pedagogues were asked to talk about their everyday professional life. Their interviews have been typologized elsewhere (Schmitt 2019, 2021) in terms of the perspectives taken on young refugees and their distant parents. The perspectives range from recognition to othering and point to the relevance of an inclusive, anti-racist habitus in social work practice. This paper now provides a dense insight into the perspectives of three selected cases. The three cases were condensed into case descriptions (Laging 2009) which are particularly suitable for tracing the social workers' experiences and possibilities for action, but also the limitations from their own point of view. From the main body of interviews, contrasting cases were chosen in terms of the closeness/distance of the social workers' relationship with the young people and their families and how national or transnational their work orientation was.

## Results

This chapter provides insights into the social workers' views and work orientation with regard to the transnational families of unaccompanied minors.

### Michelle Müller: recognition of family members and striving for family reunion

Michelle Müller is 24 years old and works as a full-time social worker in a clearing center (*Clearingeinrichtung*) for unaccompanied minors in Germany. The clearing center is where the clearing phase takes place, i.e., where family members are searched for and the young person's support needs are explored. After that, the young people are transferred to a follow-up placement (*Folgeunterbringung*). Ms. Müller has a bachelor's degree in education and started working with young refugees immediately after her studies. She has little professional experience so far and is part of a team consisting of full-time and part-time employees. During her studies, she already dealt intensively with the living situation of unaccompanied minors and is very familiar with asylum law. She shares this knowledge with her colleagues, who greatly appreciate it. There is a good atmosphere in the team and regular discussion between the employees and about the guidance. Michelle Müller appreciates the young people, their socialization, knowledge, values and the way their absent parents brought them up:

“The young people do not leave their parental home [...] because it is unstable, but because the situation in the country is unstable [...] many come from a very stable parental home”, she explains (lines 604–607). They are “brought up well” (line 609).

In Michelle Müller's view, it is not the family system but the dangers and war situation in the countries of origin that come up as the problem. She sees herself as a supportive hub in a transnationalized family network that has been torn apart by flight but is fundamentally intact. In consequence, Ms. Müller defines her task as exhausting all possibilities for family reunification and making herself superfluous. Her work is carried out under conditions of broad-based networking and great understanding for the young people's pain. First of all, it is important to her to offer them a space to calm down and to talk about their feelings, worries and hopes:

“they leave this escape mode and then begin to feel pain [...] everything that their body repressed during their flight because there was no room for sickness [...] they must have a lot of medical clarification [...] and we make sure

that the young people are cared for [...] give them the feeling that [...] they are supported and that they are told that you are safe here, we will take care of you and we are happy that you are here” (lines 173–182).

Tirelessly, Michelle Müller also uses the possibilities of digital media and reaches out to find family members and friends. To do this, she uses police tracing registers and the Red Cross international tracing service “Trace the Face” (<https://familylinks.icrc.org>): “a digital platform which was created so that family members can find each other throughout Europe” (lines 255–257). Together with the young people, she searches for relatives on media channels such as Facebook:

“We always say to the young people, if you are looking for relatives, why don’t you try Facebook and enter all the possible names on Facebook [...] someone [...] who is perhaps a friend of your parents” (lines 296–346).

Although the search does not always yield immediate results, Michelle Müller does report cases of success and points to the effectiveness of her efforts:

“we had [...] the lucky case that we [...] were able to reunite a young person with his family [...]. After about a month, he found them on Facebook through a friend who was still [...] in Syria [...] and [...] was able to find out where his parents were housed [...] and then, of course, we contacted the youth welfare office, so we were able to bring the young person to [name of city]” (lines 233–302).

Ms. Müller’s scope of action is transnational. Her professional habitus is characterized by high reflexivity and recognition of her addressees.

### **Marianne Bauer: empathizing with family members and balancing expectations in transnational family networks**

Marianne Bauer is a 54-year-old qualified pedagogue with more than 20 years of professional experience working with young people. She now works in a youth facility which also functions as a follow-up facility for unaccompanied minors. These facilities take in young refugees after they have completed the clearing phase. In addition to young people with refugee experi-

ence, the facilities house young people without experience of flight; they live together and require different forms of professional support. Ms. Bauer has been given the particular task of looking after the young refugees. She has a high level of understanding for the young people's concerns and wants to support them wherever she can. She empathetically perceives their specific situations and "worries about what is happening at home" (line 578). Being close to the minors, she empathizes with them, e.g., when the young people receive information about attacks that is transferred to them through digital tools:

"they know about every attack in Afghanistan before we do [...] they have their news in their language [...] they are very well informed [...] they also take part in it (4) and if there are still relatives there" (lines 579–584).

Ms. Bauer's empathy inspires confidence among the young people. This basis of trust enables her to delve deeply into the family structures and learn about areas of tension. The young people confide in the social worker and report that they want to send money home and quickly get a job: "They are under a lot of pressure, including from their parents" (line 576). The pedagogue perceives the young people's burdens, but at the same time can empathize with their parents' expectations. She identifies the young people's flight as a family strategy and understands the significance it has for those family members left behind:

"he was at the Gymnasium [higher-level secondary school] at home and then he comes here [...] to the Hauptschule [lower-level secondary school] [...] the parents [...] are illiterate, he is the oldest child of seven [...] the parents sent him to school and he was so good that the teachers said he should continue at the Gymnasium [...] without IS he [...] could have done a high school diploma in Iraq [...] parents often have very high expectations [...] they gave the children the mission [...] to [...] provide for the family from Germany" (lines 337–360).

Ms. Bauer works at the interface between the young people and their parents and understands her role as a mediator. She is not in contact with the parents herself, but is involved by the young people in the family negotiation processes: "the parents call their children and I get to hear what they say or

when I notice that they have money problems, then I ask” (lines 430–433). The social worker sees her task as being in balancing the ideas of the adolescents and their parents:

“I understand the adolescents, but I still try to make it clear to them that they have to tell their parents: ‘listen, there is no money because I don’t earn any’ [...] but I know [...] it’s difficult, it’s also difficult for me because I know how important it is to them [...] and (4) because there’s no one-size-fits-all solution” (lines 394–417).

Despite the challenging balance, Ms. Bauer repeatedly succeeds in showing the young people ways that take into account their position in the families and at the same time enable them to pursue their educational paths in Germany:

“the best thing you can do is really the education, because if you then have a regular income, then you can also put something aside [...] and then transfer the money to your parents” (lines 438–442).

If there is no balance, Ms. Bauer is under a lot of pressure and still wants to find a solution by any means—even privately:

“He had transferred money and then I just gave him some of mine and I said: ‘come on, it’s okay, put it aside’ [...] because I just wanted to help him. But of course, that doesn’t work with large amounts” (lines 418–421).

Her goal is to achieve role satisfaction for all family members. To this end, she draws on private resources when her professional options come to a standstill. Her scope of action is transnational since she empathizes with all family members, even those at a distance.

### **Emilia Mandel: perceiving transnational families as a ‘problem’, aiming for ‘assimilation’ and limiting support**

Emilia Mandel is 27 years old and has a bachelor’s degree in education. She works as a social worker in a child and youth welfare facility where young people with and without refugee experience are housed together. The team

has only recently gained experience in working with refugee children and young people. Ms. Mandel describes her work with young refugees as exhausting and articulates that her understanding is limited. She perceives their parents as an authority with unrealistic expectations of the children's life in Germany and as a problem for her own work. Ms. Mandel describes the young people as having been brought up in constant and exaggerated motherly care:

“the boys or young men [...] with a refugee background [...] have often somehow grown up in families where they are also very mothered [...] they come here with a completely different status” (lines 420–424).

Her aim is to change this ‘cultural script’ so that the addressees ‘fit’ into the new living environment in Germany:

“not [...] to continue mothering [...] but [...] to try to get them [...] to cook independently [...] for example [...] because I often see that [...] the mothering [...] goes on [...] that is just a mistake [...] it is important, that one [...] can live alone” (lines 432–441).

Ms. Mandel's understanding of her role is characterized by the exertion of a pressure to assimilate. If the young people do not meet her goals, she reacts with rejection and articulates her incomprehension:

“we were shopping and then he shows me his full shopping cart and says, uh, maybe thirty euros and I said, yes, pf perhaps [...] I just didn't count the whole time [...] and in the end it cost fifty euros and then he was just mad at me [...] because I should have looked [...] I mean, he is actually also able” (lines 215–221).

Ms. Mandel experiences both the young people and their families as opponents in her everyday work. This does not allow for an understanding of the complexities of a transnational family system. Instead, Emilia Mandel's idea is that the young people should discard their parents' upbringing and the family connection. She sees the young people as lacking independence and been too strongly rooted in the family structure, a situation she wants to replace with the idea of an ‘independent life’ in a loose family unit. Her

actions are oriented locally and nationally. Involving the family is not part of her program since she already experiences the local work on the ground as stressful. Emilia Mandel sees the reason for the workload in the young people themselves:

“because you always have to take them by the hand a bit [...] and say this is how it works” (lines 105–107).

The social worker denies young refugees any understanding of the everyday routines in Germany (“no idea at all”, line 109) and sees them as completely incapable (“he just starts from scratch with everything”, lines 230–231). The attributed need for ‘round-the-clock care’ leads to her experiencing the young people as “exhausting” (line 197). In consequence, Ms. Mandel limits her support. Boundaries are strictly articulated. Her professional activity ends with her working hours:

“It was difficult at the beginning to explain to him my limits [...] that I have my office hours and when I go home [...] I am actually no longer at work [...]. I have [...] my work cell phone for emergencies [...] there was some situation where he wrote to me [...] ‘can you get me an umbrella?’ [...] where I had to say [...] it’s not my job [...] he’s just [...] like a small child” (lines 74–94).

Ms. Mandel perceives the young people and their family as a ‘problem’. The relationship is characterized by a high degree of distance.

## Recognition, empathy, distance

The three cases illustrate that the parents of unaccompanied minors are relevant in all working relationships. However, the social workers take different perspectives on the minors’ parents and express different ideas of family work. Ms. Müller takes an appreciative view of the parental roles in the transnational family network and considers the minors’ socialization in their families as a resource. She strives to reunite the family members and to deal with the parental absence in close interactions, giving the adolescents room for emotions by offering them a space to talk about their worries and burdens. Ms. Bauer similarly has a high level of understanding for the situ-

ation of both the parents and the adolescents. She is empathetic and allows a basis of trust to develop in interaction with the young people. Her own entanglement in the complex transnational family network can be seen as a particular challenge if the goal of the work is understood as wanting to meet the needs of all family members. On the one hand, Ms. Bauer establishes a productive closeness to the family's wishes; on the other hand, confronted by this maelstrom of different expectations, she threatens to reach the limits of her own capacity.

Taking the cases of Ms. Müller and Ms. Bauer together, both pedagogues are particularly interested in intensive contact with the young people and their families. They aim to understand the perspectives of all family members and explore biographical paths with them: 'reading' the families' bonds and interconnections and coming to understand why they have certain expectations and wishes are great resources for both social workers and the result of a high degree of reflexivity. Due to their close engagement in family work, they align their professional roles transnationally. Both social workers use and reflect upon digital media and try to support the young people whenever challenging developments in the home countries and wishes of family members are transferred to the local working relationship. The cases show that the professionals also need a framework to talk about their worries, feelings and orientations in dealing with families in a transnational space.

Of the three cases, Ms. Mandel feels the greatest distance to the minors and their families. She perceives the parents as counterparts to an assimilationist understanding of her work with the young people and takes a deficit-oriented perspective towards the family system. This is why Ms. Mandel aims to assimilate the young people into her own ideas of family and youth and to detach them from their family network. Hence, a transnational understanding of her own work does not arise. One challenge that becomes visible is that Ms. Mandel feels overloaded with her work, while lacking any space for reflection. The case descriptions thus point to the importance of supportive work surroundings, time for exchange with colleagues and education.

## Conclusion. Towards a transnational social work mandate

If we conceive of families not as static units, but as a process of production, those who identify as and construct a family come into view in terms of their agency, as do those instances which categorize, appraise, react to and influence the family's ways of doing and being. The analytical perspective of 'doing and displaying family' is of fundamental relevance for social work with any kind of families. After all, in pedagogical work, it is the social workers who 'read' the family and, for example, recognize it or classify it as 'deviating from the norm'. Taking these perspectives as a starting point, transnational family work with families who have experienced flight is not seen as a special or marginal topic. Rather, it brings into focus the very basic need for a professional pedagogical habitus characterized by reflexivity, resource orientation, appreciation, cooperation and participation (Heiner 2004: 42). It is not just the case of Ms. Mandel that points to the urgent need to conceptualize social work as an anti-racist and (self-)reflexive profession and discipline (Dominelli 2018). Social work is fundamentally embedded in power inequalities and must constantly subject itself to critical questioning (e.g., Kessl/Maurer 2021). This paper refers to an understanding of social work as a human rights profession (UN 1994) and to social workers working together with its addressees on an equal footing, addressing social inequalities with the aim of creating more inclusive, socially just landscapes. This understanding of social work demands unconditional solidarity with those who are disadvantaged and excluded (Wendt 2022), as transnational refugee families might be.

As one of the case studies shows, this solidarity cannot be taken for granted. In two of the three cases presented, social workers deal with the families of unaccompanied refugees following the inclusive social work mandate and acknowledge their practices, knowledge and relationships. In sum, the social workers' perceptions range from an appreciative viewpoint to one focusing on supposed deficits. Pedagogues who view families with experiences of migration and flight as deficient are not a new phenomenon. In the field of early years education, for example, Westphal, Motzek-Öz and Otyakmaz (2017) reconstructed how pedagogues considered parents with international biographies spanning Turkey and Germany as 'families at risk' and as incapable of competently raising the own children. Bringing this finding into dialogue with the cases presented, what is needed is a self-reflective openness

to family understandings that may differ from their own, an appreciation of the families' skills and knowledge, and commitment to understanding the family network. The case descriptions featuring Ms. Müller and Ms. Bauer reveal that a resource-orientated professional habitus favors forms of transnational family work.

On the level of education and training, is important for a transnational, inclusive habitus to be developed together with (prospective) social workers. The focus of professional support is then to appreciate families' resources and needs. This also means overcoming the assumption that 'sedentary families' are the norm and developing a sensitivity for transnational family constellations not as a special case, but as normality (Hill 2020: 170). Families are in motion. They are becoming increasingly pluri-local and transcending the borders of nation states, not only in the case of refugee families, but every time family members live in another city or region, not in a shared local area (Reisenauer 2020).

The case descriptions illustrate that social workers themselves also need forms of professional support—for example, when they act as mediators with a high degree of empathy in family relationships, or when they develop negative feelings towards their addressees. The widely underexplored issue of emotions in social work (Blumenthal 2018) needs further exploration, since emotions can range from recognition to rejection. The social workers' emotions need space and must be dealt with carefully in order not to burden the addressees with the social workers' own powerful feelings. Phenomenological vignette research can provide an important impetus, as it is rooted in research on schools and learning (Peterlini/Cennamo/Donlic 2020). With the help of vignettes illustrating specific situations, pedagogues can reflect upon their field of action by explicitly taken a sensitive, experience-based look at their professional role, and their own and other people's emotions and perceptions. In the context of pedagogical professionalization, vignettes could thus function as a subject of learning.

Though reflexivity and education are at the center of transnational family work, that work cannot be reduced to the social worker's habitus and its relationship with family members alone: the organizational environment, social guidelines and political actions strongly interact with the pedagogues' practice as well. Teamwork, discussion and working conditions that support transnational family work are cornerstones if transnational family work is not just to depend on the engagement of individual professionals. That is

why a transnational mandate and its fundamental and sustainable implementation in the structures of social services and in social laws are of great importance. It is the social laws which still significantly define what pedagogical action can and cannot be taken and financed. Embedding a transnational mandate in the heart of social work's professional code would actively support not only transnational family work, but a transnational opening of social services with a sustainable, appropriate infrastructures (time, money, digital tools, the creation of safe communication spaces and networks, space for reflection).

As the family is considered worthy of protection in international and in national law (Jastram/Newland 2003), it is the task of social work to demand this right for transnational families, marginalized families and families with experience of refugeeism whenever their rights are threatened. Transnational family work is then understood as a multipronged approach comprising pedagogical work with families across national borders, the aim of family reunification, the transnational opening up of organizational cultures, political advocacy and active engagement in giving social work a transnational mandate in an unequal, globalized world.

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