



## Travel, Goods and Virtual Spaces: The Connection between Three Generations in Transnational Families



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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this article is to look more closely into the movement of people, goods and information generated by transnational families. The article looks at the family per se, and it questions just how much transnational activity a family generates just by being a family.*

*This article is based on four interviews done in the years 2012 and 2015. Three out of the four interviewees were married to a Finn.*

*The article highlights the time, effort and emotional and financial support given to the second and third generation by grandparents in the country of origin. Because the grandparents are middle-class people living in countries on an economic par with Finland, the economic flow is reversed. The grandparents help the young family out, not vice versa. The European patchwork of small countries puts us in a theoretical position where we speak of transnationalism, even when distances are relatively small. The transnational goods in immigrants' homes do not primarily carry an ethnic symbolic value. The value in these objects very much lies in who they are from and what it means to receive them. Over the past few decades, huge improvements have been made in communication technology. Still, it is important not to become lost in the technological maze when grabbing with the fact that the basic dynamics of what families actually do have not changed. Nonetheless, it is clear that the nature of how family members communicate has changed tremendously.*

### Introduction

A friend of mine posted a picture on Facebook just before Easter. It displayed an open cardboard box, sent via United States Postal Service Priority Mail, with Cadbury eggs and presents wrapped in colourful paper. It was strikingly similar to the box my children had just received a couple of days earlier from their grandmother in the United States. The thought occurred to me: there must be hundreds if not thousands of American grandmothers<sup>1</sup> who had lovingly packed Easter candy in boxes and sent them across the ocean to their grandchildren that year. And there may have been hundreds if not thousands of Facebook

postings thanking grandparents for the precious gifts. And how about grandmothers and grandfathers in other countries? Every festive season no doubt creates a global network of goods crossing borders and thank you notes being sent back, now more and more in electronic form.

Transnationalism has transformed the everyday social worlds of individuals and families in both the countries of origin and in the immigrant receiving countries (Vertovec 2004, 974). Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004, 1002) point out that immigrants' transnational ties and their assimilation within the host country are neither incompatible nor binary opposites.<sup>2</sup> Even 'extreme assimilationists', a term coined by

Sam Scott and Kim Cartledge (2009) to describe a person who marries a fellow EU citizen and integrates into the spouse's social networks within a few years, keep up transnational contacts with their family members in the country of origin. The strength in employing a transnational point of reference is that it takes into account the *social field*, which may transcend national borders, as a factor in the everyday lives of many immigrants. Though the transnational perspective does not apply to all immigrants everywhere, certainly a small but significant number of immigrants engage in either regular or occasional transnational activities. The merit of a transnationalist viewpoint is that it does not automatically assume that nation-state boundaries can be equated with social boundaries. (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1003–1007 *passim*.)

Steven Vertovec (2004, 973) points out that we should 'observe transnationalism as it occurs within, and has [an] impact upon, the daily lives of individuals'. A large number of individuals, in fact, live their daily lives as part of a family. While families may have become multi-local, multi-sited and even multinational, they may have both an imagined and real unity (Vuorela 2002, 68, 79). Loretta Baldassar, Cora Vellekoop Baldock & Raelene Wilding (2007, 118) have found that even though migration disrupts or momentarily fractures the family network, the families they studied put great effort into repairing the fractures and maintaining connections, even across multiple generations. The purpose of this article is to look more closely into the movement of people, goods and information generated by transnational families. My goal is to look at the family per se and address the following question: How much of frequent transnational activity does the family generate just by being a family? How does the first generation<sup>3</sup> in the country of origin interact with second and third generations in the country of residence? How frequent is the interaction and what forms does it take? How does distance across longitudes and latitudes affect grandparenting? Therefore, the article is directed at both family and migration research (see Glick 2010, 507; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002).

## The Movement of People, Goods and Information in a Transnational Family Setting

For the purpose of this article, I define transnationalism as a term that refers to agency and to networks that extend beyond national borders and that are not formal, in other words, initiated by states. There are three levels of transnationalism and, for the purposes of this article, the lowest, micro-level is the most meaningful object of study. It deals with individuals and families that span national borders. (Martikainen, Sintonen & Pitkänen 2006, 24–25.)

One basic form of transnational activity is transnational contact. Eric Fong, Xingshan Cao and Elic Chan, in their large-scale quantitative study, noted that transnational contact can be divided into three subcategories. The first type is face-to-face contact, which requires physical presence and is therefore strongly affected by the income level of immigrants. The second type of contact is mediated contact, which employs communication technologies and is easier for immigrants from all income levels to access. The third type of contact is quasi-mediated transnational contact, which includes, for example, following online newspapers and news sites in another country and does not involve personal interaction. (Fong et al. 2010, 431–432.) For the purposes of this article, I will address the first two types of contact. The article will also look at the exchange of goods, which is not mentioned by Fong et al. as a form of contact.

One of many purposes for a visit can be transnational care. The term transnational care (or caregiving) refers to the mutual caring actions of family members, which by necessity cross national borders (Baldassar et al. 2007, 14–15). The sociologist Minna Zechner (2010, 46–48) has identified two main branches of global care research. The first has focused on the global care chain, while the second, which Zechner describes as consisting of a small but growing number of researchers, focuses more on immigrants who help and care for family members – primarily ageing parents (see for example Baldassar et al 2007<sup>4</sup>; Leinonen 2013, 95 ff.; Zechner 2006; 2010) –

across national borders. This represents the idea of transnational care that I employ in this article. But, in this case, I demonstrate that the care can be reversed: its direction can be from the country of origin to the country of residence. There is a moment in the regeneration of a family where grandparents have traditionally played a role as active agents: the birth and early childhood of a grandchild (Baldassar et al. 2007, 51–52, 139).

Another purpose for a visit can be to strengthen family ties and traditions. The sociologist Lotta Haikkola suggests that visiting the country of origin, interacting with extended family and experiencing a sense of place first hand are all crucial for the maintenance of transnational ties with family. (Haikkola 2012, 18.) In particular, shorter visits with grandparents fall more in the category of strengthening cultural traditions (Şenyürekli & Detzner 2008, 463; Scott & Cartledge 2009, 77) rather than providing transnational care, but naturally these two categories overlap.

Even when people do not move around so much, there are still other ways of staying in contact. The exchange of goods, including the seasonal care packages mentioned at the beginning of the article, is one form of transnational contact, but it is also a form of transnational activity that falls into the economic category. The remittances that immigrants send back to their families in the country of origin have received a great deal of attention as a form of transnational activity, not least because of the direct economic impact that such remittances have in the immigrant-sending societies (see, e.g. Guarnizo 2003; Vertovec 2004; Glick 2010, 507; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1005; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, 134). However, what the statistics do not show, and what researchers previously failed to focus enough attention on, are the gifts that are exchanged between two or more first-world countries. They typically have no economic impact at a higher level. Still, I suggest this is a large-scale phenomenon. The objects and the place they find in immigrant homes may well have a dual meaning of communicating both a sense of belonging and a sense of transnational existence (Povrzanović Frykman & Humbracht 2013; Povrzanović Frykman in this volume).

Another way that transnational families keep in touch is through the means of communication technology. On the one hand, we should not get too carried away with emphasising the importance of recent advances in technology. Baldassar et al. (2007, 109) point out that ‘new technologies are incorporated into long histories of families using all available means to keep in touch with their kin overseas’. However, it is true that migrants can now maintain connections more intensively than ever before. It is worth asking whether the sheer intensity of such contact has an effect on how such relations are maintained, the spheres of life in which it is done, and the extent to which these changes are deep and long lasting. (Vertovec 2004, 971.)

## Method

According to Levitt and Glick Schiller, ‘we need to focus on the intersection between the networks of those who have migrated and those who have stayed in place’. They continue by recommending participant observation and ethnographic interviews as the best methodology for studying the creation and durability of transnational social fields. (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1012–1013.)

This article is based on four interviews done in the years 2012 and 2015.<sup>5</sup> The interviews were done in English, which is the first language for three of the interviewees. The questions were qualitative, open-ended questions that required lengthy answers from the respondent. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. I met with the interviewees in a café in three cases and in a room at the University of Turku for the last case. All of the interviewees were mothers with children ranging in age from early childhood to the first few years of school. This naturally has an impact on the perspective of this article. The views presented are those of the mothers. Participants were recruited for the study through play groups and activities attended by my own bi-cultural and bilingual children. Even though I was born and raised in Finland, my interviewees knew in advance that my family is bicultural and that my in-laws live in another country. In that

way, they knew that I was familiar with their everyday experiences. The families are all first-world families in which the second and third generations live in Finland and the first generation, at least on the side of one of the parents, live in another western country. All the parents who were interviewed had a relatively conflict-free childhood and reported being on good terms with their own parents and in-laws. All were college graduates in terms of their educational background. My motivation in this article is not to look at these individuals as representatives of a particular ethnic or diasporic group, but to see them as individuals who are in a certain phase of their life and living between two (or more) countries (see also Povrzanović Frykman & Humbracht 2013, 47; on methodological nationalism, see Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1007). One of the interviewees was from North America, two from Western Europe and one from Central Europe.

Three out of four of my interviewees were married to a Finn. The fourth has a spouse from the same home country, and they both immigrated to Finland for reasons of work and study. The first three immigrants, therefore, fall into a category that Scott and Cartledge (2009) would label as 'extreme assimilationists', meaning that they have access to the spouse's kinship and social networks in the new country, which sets them apart from other immigrants. Whether coming from another European country or from North America, this group has had to cross very shallow 'identity frontiers' (*ibid.*). One of my interviewees in fact made this very point: 'I guess that by many Finns' standards, I come from the right kind of country, and that is reflected in how welcome I feel and how my kids' two cultures are actually seen as a good thing. [...] I think I am in a very privileged migrant position' (D). The Central European couple is part of this same privileged group since they, too, only had to cross relatively shallow 'identity frontiers' and rather easily integrated into Finnish working life. My interviewee also had a PhD from a Finnish university and was close to fluent in her Finnish. Scott and Cartledge (2009, 80) report that 'extreme assimilationists' do not willingly seek the company of their fellow countrymen. Similarly, three out

of the four interviewees (A, C, D) reported that they have no desire to join mono-national clubs. Even the fourth interviewee (B) reported mainly having the desire to seek out the company of fellow English speakers, not so much of the same nationality though. But similarly as reported in Scott and Cartledge's (2009, 77) study – despite the writers' emphasis on the assimilationist point of view – these well-embedded immigrants still valued the 'intergenerational transfer of linguistic/cultural capital', which involved grandparents in the country of origin.

My original interviews with the parents had a wider scope beyond the purposes of this one article (Hieta 2014). They contained, for example, questions about the parent's childhood memories, his/her favourite childhood hobbies and her/his level of involvement in the expatriate community. In this article, I will only focus on the role played by transnational grandparents. The data was analysed by setting apart all passages in the interviews where the interviewee's parents and children were mentioned, after which I performed a close-up thematic reading of these passages (see Uotinen 2008, 142–146).

## Support Network and Parental Input

One of the first questions faced by any young family has to do with their support network. As Minna Zechner has pointed out (2006, 83), it is possible to keep in touch and send both emotional and economic support from far away (see also Baldassar et al. 2007, 87, 92), but that does not help with such everyday needs as bodily care, cooking and cleaning. How does transnational care play out when grandparents are in one country and their grandchildren are in another country? The classic sociological study on grandparenthood by Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenberg (1992, 117) shows that, by far, the most important factor influencing grandparent-grandchild contact is distance.

I asked my interviewees how they tackle the question maintaining a support network. It quickly became evident that those persons in mixed marriages have an advantage when one

set of grandparents lives close by. Some families downplayed the role of grandparents and relied on friends.

My interviewee from Central Europe with a spouse from the same country noted that they do not have a very good support network. But, at the same time, she reportedly thought that things would not necessarily be any better in the country of origin either.

But we also think that if we lived in [the country of origin], we would also live quite far from our parents, mine at least. And my mother-in-law is still working, so she could not come over every time [we needed her]. (C)

Relying on friends can mean that the family receives only a bare minimum of help in meeting their childcare needs. One cannot necessarily assume that friends, who might theoretically come and help, would wind up doing so out of a sense of obligation or sheer enjoyment in performing the task as such.

If we needed anything, it would mean calling our friends. ... and we haven't called on people unless we really needed to. (B)

One of my interviewees compared her relatively good position (having one grandparent who was readily available) to the possible situation at her country of origin, where she has a remarkably large extended family close by, and reported that she still feels she is missing the ideal network.

If we have somewhere we need to go and we need somebody to watch the children, my husband's mother lives quite close to us now, but if she's busy or out of town for some reason, we don't have really anybody we can call on a regular basis to watch the children. And when I think how that would be in [...] where I am from, there would always be somebody you could call to come and help out. (A)

On the other hand, one of my interviewees reported feeling that she is in a good position with parents-in-law less than an hour away.

[The husband's] parents are very good in doing what they can to help us with the kids, and just knowing that they are less than an hour away is somehow reassuring. (D)

The above proves the point that there is variation between each individual family whether they have been able to recreate their social networks to such depth that they work on a practical everyday level.

Even though grandparents were mainly absent in day-to-day situations, they still had influence and input in childcare. One of the influences was the generational continuum in child-rearing. We easily copy our parenting styles from our parents.

Of course they have input, because I remember how they raised me. (C)

I am probably a similar kind of mother as my mother. From that point of view, my mom was quite strict, not overly strict. You know, she was about the rules and he was about the fun. And that's how we are as well. (B)

One of my interviewees was also from a bilingual home, with her parents being both British and Dutch. She had grown up speaking both Dutch and English. In her present situation, she is raising children in a bilingual setting with English and Finnish.

Now I am raising my children bilingual, having been raised bilingual myself. So that is already a familiar setting for me, because that was normal in our home as well. (D)

One of my interviewees also recognised what she termed a national method in upbringing.

Obviously, because I grew up in England, my methodology is English. (B)

Satisfying the nutritional needs of the first newborn baby had been a special stumbling block for one of my informants. Her mother had had an issue with the Finnish health care system's re-

commendations to feed the infant potato as her/his first solid food.

That was not an argument, but something I had to discuss with my mom. She did not like the fact that we were going to start the children on potato because that's what the *neuvola* [nurse's office] has told us to do. For her, the idea of starting a child on potato was absurd. (A)

One of my interviewees outright said that she felt much more comfortable about asking her friends on the Internet for baby care advice. Her mother would have given her some advice if she had asked for it, but she felt that that advice was out-of-date. (C)

One of my interviewees pointed out that the advice her mother could give did not fit well with Finnish culture and legislation. Generally speaking, her parents did not interfere, but when asked for disciplinary advice the grandparent admitted that she had no ideas.

My mom will not interfere and my dad is so laid-back. [...] She won't interfere, but if I ask, she will answer. I asked: What would you do, honestly, because I need help? She asked: You're not allowed to smack in Finland, are you? – No. – Okay, that's it. That's all she had to offer. [laughs] Thanks, mom! (B)

## International Travel

The movement of people is multidirectional. On one hand, family members in the country of origin can visit the new country. On the other hand, immigrants continue to visit the old country. The visits can be either short or long in duration and their purpose can vary. Baldassar et al (2007, 139) identify the following types of visits: routine, crisis, duty and ritual, special purpose, and tourist visits.

In our interviews, international travel had three dimensions. On the one hand, families visited the country of origin. It was almost without exception that the visits to the country of origin entailed a visit to the grandparents (see also Siim

in this volume). On the other hand, the grandparents visited the country of residence of the interviewees. The third dimension to this phenomenon has to do with the kinds of activities embedded in these visits – are they touristy in nature or do they pertain more to everyday life?

The families I interviewed tried to visit the country of origin once a year or once every 18 months. The reasons for not visiting quite so often were, without exception, financial.

We try to go there at least once a year. (C)

We try to do it summer one year, Christmas the next year, roughly. [...] That's a financial thing. (B)

Since we have had children, we have been going back almost every summer. This summer we are not going back to [the country of origin] for financial reasons. (A)

As a family, we go once a year. I have also gone alone as a little extra long week end. As a family, more than once a year gets a bit too expensive. (D)

As regards the movement of people, Maja Povrzanović Frykman and Michael Humbracht (2013, 61) write that 'affluent people may well be able to be transnational in more intense ways than those whose transnational practices demand economic sacrifices'. Also, Fong et al (2010, 441) have been able to clearly demonstrate that 'income is positively and significantly related to home country visits'. My findings are in accordance to this.

The tendency to show the children some glimpses of the parent's own childhood was apparent in some of the answers about the content of the visits. As Haikkola (2012, 18) has pointed out, the sense of belonging cannot be inherited per se from the parent's generation, visits are a necessity. It is important to remember that children themselves play active roles in a family's acculturation and assimilation process (Glick 2010, 505). Longitudinal, large-scale research in the United States has shown that so-called selective acculturation, in which children are fluently bilingual and retain some ties with their parents'

traditions, is a predominantly successful assimilation strategy, whereas full, second-generation assimilation creates a harmful generational gap within families (Portes & Rumbaut 2006, 350). Furthermore, research shows that middle-class and professional migrants are better able to selectively assimilate various elements from their country of origin and from the host country (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, 139). One of the interviewees made a point about how she wanted her children to experience the atmosphere of the Advent season in the place where she is from. Therefore, for her the visit to the grandparents was also tied to returning home during the Christmas season.

Without them, we would not go that often to [the country of origin]. [...] Usually we go to the place where we are from and where we can meet the grandparents. [...] We try to go every second or third year before Christmas, actually, to show the children how it is. (C)

One of my interviewees felt that her children gained some experiences they would never get in Finland via the resources her parents have to offer, such as boating and camping in different settings.

And also when we visited in the summer, she's taken many opportunities to teach them about science or nature or [...] whatever happens to be around at the moment. [...] My father has also created activities for them, letting them ride on his tractor [...] and taking us on their boat and [in the] camper. (A)

The grandparents also help financially by paying for more expensive experiences, which, too, were part of growing up in the area and which the children would have missed out on by living entirely in another country.

When we go visit them, they help us financially by paying for lots of things for us to do, special experiences, like the sea-life museum or a trip to the beach. (A)

International research demonstrates that grandparents will often go to great pains to make

short visits or visits ranging from several months to six months, or they will even immigrate themselves in order to care for the third generation in a distant country (e.g. Nesteruk & Marks 2009; Treas & Mazumdar 2004; Treas 2008; Şenyürekli and Detzner 2008, 463; see also Baldassar et al. 2007, 139 ff). According to Judith Treas and Shamba Mazumdar (2004, 113), 'caring for younger family members is laden with strong feelings of responsibility, concern, and affection'.

When it comes to grandparents visiting Finland, it became obvious that the European grandparents had an advantage. They can visit more freely than the North American grandparents. Especially for parents who live close to an airport, it is not such a huge effort to visit Finland regularly.

My mother-in-law comes quite often because it is easier for her. She lives close to an airport. [...] she comes like three, four times a year. [...] she does not stay that long then. My parents come once a year and we go once there. So we see each other twice a year. (C)

My dad generally comes over for December, because [my daughter's] birthday is in December. He comes over for a couple of weeks from the beginning to the middle of December. (B)

Because they are retired, they can afford the time to come twice [a year] and stay for two weeks at a time. (D)

During the visits to the families' country of residence, the grandparents give a lot of attention to the grandchildren. In fact, without even formulating my interview question in particular about grandchildren, the answers reflected the grandparent–grandchild relationship. However, it depended on the family whether the visit was more tourist oriented in nature or whether the grandparents predominantly took part in everyday-life activities. For one of my interviewees (C), the children could suggest what they wanted to do with the grandparents. In addition to that, they made short weekend trips, which they do as a family anyway whether with the grandparents or not.

Playing with the kids a lot, just doing what the kids suggest to do. (C)

For one of my interviewees, the daily routines were broken when the grandparents were in the house; they then did exceptional things.

When they're here, it is all about being spoiled. They don't over-spoil them, they don't go crazy, but it is all about having fun, having a holiday, doing things we normally would not do. (B)

In one family, the emphasis was predominantly on everyday life. The grandparents, who visit twice a year, spend time with the grandchildren by putting them to bed and taking them to school. They do some outings too, but the interviewee felt that the everyday experiences are far more important. In a way, she felt that the generations were knit together more tightly because of these visits.

It means that one month in the year they are in our home involved with all the everyday stuff with the kids. And they are absolutely hands-on that whole time, which is just great. They want to be involved in going with [my daughter] to school and to see where they are, and help with getting them ready for bed and help me with doing the normal grocery shopping. So we do those special touristy things together, but they're also very much involved with our daily life, which I really love, I really appreciate. I almost feel that's something I actually gain more from having moved away from them. Because you don't come and stay two weeks in each other's house when you live an hour and a half away. So that side of sharing my life with them is somehow like much more, which I really appreciate. (D)

This last example fits into the category of the first generation traveling for the sole purpose of taking care of the third generation (see Nesteruk & Marks 2009; Treas & Mazumdar 2004; Treas 2008), but most examples could fall into the category of 'providing cultural continuity' (Şenyürekli & Detzner 2008, 463) or the 'intergenerational transfer of linguistic/cultural capital' (Scott & Cartledge 2009, 77).

## Transnational Movement of Goods

As Maja Povrzanović Frykman and Michael Humberchardt have demonstrated (2013, 48 ff.), objects in and of themselves can establish palpable connections between people and places. Objects reconfirm social ties across space and time. Furthermore, the ethnological study of everyday objects should not necessarily emphasise the possible (ethnic) identity marker quality of the object, but rather the object's role as something that sustains the transnational continuity of an individual's everyday life (ibid.). This became obvious with my interviews. None of my interviewees brought up the idea that the goods they receive from grandparents hold ethnic or national symbolic value. Many similar things are already available in Finland. But, for the most part, they evoke a sense of homeliness, a special holiday, belonging to a family, or simply life going on as before from a practical point of view.

Some of my interviewees brought up the issue of asking for or being sent goods, decorative elements in particular, that are related to celebrating a particular holiday. In this way, the goods very much contribute to the idea of transmitting one's own childhood memories to the children. One interviewee reported being particularly fond of candle holders that come in a certain style that she likes. She had brought her own candle holder with her to Finland and had also asked her parents to send her more of the same kind.

We have all this stuff in our house that I brought with me and that I still get from my parents. [...] I usually say [...] I would like to have one of those, if you want to give me something special for Christmas, so that would be it. (C)

One interviewee told that she receives something from her mother almost every significant holiday on a yearly basis. Partly the things are for the family in general to enjoy, such as decorative elements, but some are directed more at the children, such as Halloween stickers, which have very little interest for grownups.

A few years ago, my mother sent little salt and pepper shakers that were in the form of Pilgrims. And



for Christmas, she always sends some kind of towels or oven mittens that are in a Christmas theme. And Halloween, which I think is the main time when she sends some kind of decorations or stickers or something. And also, Easter. (A)

Most of the goods that are sent between the countries are, however, of a practical nature. For one of my interviewees, the exchange of presents and practical aspects is intertwined. On the one hand, her mother-in-law sends them things that they ask for as Christmas presents. On the other hand, the family can also order things online for themselves throughout the year and trust that the grandmother will forward the parcels, which are shipped to Central Europe, to the family in Finland.

My mother-in-law is very happy because she is not very good at figuring out what she could give the children or us for presents. She says she [would] rather give us money; then she is always willing to send us parcels. So we just tell her that we want to have something special to eat from [the country of origin], and then she puts it in a parcel and sends it; and if we order something online and it's cheaper to ship to [the country of origin], then we send it to her and she forwards it to us. ... It's less personal, but it is nice to have her ... she doesn't care; she says, yeah, just send it to me and I will forward it to you. (C)

Sometimes the goods are limited solely to practicality. One of my interviewees told me that the family in the country of origin sends 'normal Christmas presents' – in other words, presents that would be exchanged anyway whether in Finland or in the country of origin – and in addition to that, textbook-style English books are sent to the children throughout the year. The motivation for sending books is keeping the children's language skills alive.

They do send stuff for the kids, they send books. English books, colouring books and language stuff. (B)

One of my interviewees said that she has a special list of foods and cooking condiments

that she always asks to be brought or sent to her. Many such items are now available in Finland as well, but at so much higher a price that she feels it is smarter to have them sent straight from the country of origin. The 'British tea' that she mentioned in the interview, in my opinion, is not an ethnic or symbolic reference; on the contrary, it is a reference to an acquired taste<sup>6</sup> and general cost (see also Povrzanovic Frykman & Humbracht 2013, 56; Povrzanovic Frykman in this volume).

I have a certain little list of things that I often ask for of some particular foods. Although, even in these five years, there are certain things that weren't available here that now are. So that list has gotten smaller. But still, I like to get some oatcakes and cheeses and some cooking condiments. And then, I guess one of the biggest things they bring for me is tea, British tea. Real tea. [laughs] [...] You can get that here too, but a small bag for a lot of money, so they bring me a giant bag for not very much money, and that keeps me happy. (D)

The transnational care aspect is also reflected in the movement of goods. One of my interviewees recognised the financial benefit of the grandmother buying and sending high-quality clothes from the country of origin.

They send us lots of packages throughout the year when we are not with them, and that does help. For example, we're going to two weddings later this year and my mom is buying them nice clothes in the [country of origin] and sending them here. So it is not an expense I'm going to have to pay for. [...] and it also is nice that they get something a little different looking than other children here. (A)

On the other hand, for her, not only new clothes but also her own old clothes that her mother had kept for future use bore qualities related to transnational care in the emotional sense. She reported feeling that the clothes she had worn as a child in the country of origin have a tangible, palpable connection to the family in the country of origin.

My mother has saved a lot of my childhood clothes, and I get a big thrill out of dressing my daughter in my old clothes. [...] I'm strengthening my connection to home through my daughter. (A)

As we can see in the cases of festive children's wear from North America and Internet orders that the grandmother redirects from Central Europe, the transnational movement of goods is a genuine transnational economic activity connecting the generations. Unlike in the well-studied North-South remittances I discussed above (Guarnizo 2003; Vertovec 2004; Glick 2010, 507; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1005; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, 134), in these cases the immigrant does not bear the brunt of the economic burden. The immigrants are not better-off than their parents by the virtue of moving to Finland; on the contrary, they are in need of economic help as young parents.

## The Internet and Virtual Space

We have now seen how grandparents in the country of origin can have an input in the lives of families in their current country of residence. There are elements, such as sending packages and visiting once a year, which probably have not changed much in transnational lives since the 20th century. However, recent changes in communication technology deserve special analysis. Over the past decades, there have been huge improvements in communication technology. Letters have been replaced by fax machines, then e-mail, now social media and, finally, smartphones. Baldassar et al. (2007, 109) point out that new technologies are just that, technologies, being used by families who have been communicating with one another across distances for centuries. It is therefore important as a researcher not to become lost in the technological maze when the basic dynamics of what families actually do have not changed. We can look at the computer and smartphone as material facilitators of transnational connections (Povrzanović Frykman, & Humbracht 2013, 49), but the connections were in place first.

As mentioned earlier, transnational travel as a family is still limited because of financial reasons.

However, over the past few years communication technology has both improved and become more affordable. In contrast to previous decades, there has been a real change in people's ability to be connected over long distances (Baldassar et al. 2007, 121). Johanna Leinonen (2013, 97) reports that in the 1960s, transnational families were able to telephone their family members only on special occasions because it was so expensive; and even in the 1970s, international calls still had to be pre-ordered (see also Baldassar et al. 2007, 111–112). Has the new era of information technology led to better or different forms of communication between the transnational generations? What does this entail? In my interviews, the main communication channel for transnational families is the Internet video conference service Skype. Ayşem Şenyürekli and Daniel Detzner (2008, 462) mention in their study of transnational Turkish families that web cameras are particularly useful for families with young children because they allow the extended family to see the development of the children. The emphasis on Skype can be at least partially due to the young age of my interviewees' children. One of the interviewees also told me about the WhatsApp application, which requires a smartphone. Another interviewee mentioned Facebook and Twitter instant messaging as her channels of choice for keeping in contact with her transnational family.

There was variation between the interviewees regarding their usage of web video conferencing. Typically, the interviewees claimed that they speak with the grandparents on Skype once or twice a month, but one family said they speak once a week. Typically the conversations are rather long, an hour to an hour and a half, when they occur.

It is important to recognise that not everyone has jumped onto the technology bandwagon (see also Zechner 2006, 100; Baldassar 2007, 109; see Siim in this volume). One interviewee's father did not want to have anything to do with the Internet. So, for them, it was not possible to Skype with the father.

That should be very important, but my parents are just too old. My father refused the whole computer

and Internet thing, although he was working with computers all his life. My parents don't have Internet and it's a pity. My mother would like to have [it], but she thinks she's too stupid for it. [...] Which is a pity, because Skype would be so nice. (C)

An older person may also suffer from anxiety when needing to use a computer and a particular application. For that reason, the conversation does not flow naturally with respect to social media.

She is always very excited, but she does not know how to do it properly, so it is not very natural if we talk via Skype with her [...] But we do this with her [...] and the kids like it. (C)

But for other grandparents, the use of Skype has been more natural. They have been able to read books, for instance, which I think means that they have learned to appreciate the visual aspect of Skype, as it transmits both voice and image, not just voice like a telephone.

And my mother especially has read books to the children on Skype. [...] I think it's been really good for their language, for one. (A)

On the other hand, for the children who grow up with Skype, it is something as normal as any other everyday life activity. One of my interviewees described her children's activity when using Skype as consisting mostly of 'giggling'. In addition to grandparents, they have a special bond with their cousin in the country of origin thanks to web cameras.

They definitely have a relationship with their English grandparents. And also with their cousin. My sister has a little girl who is same age as [my son]. So Skype to them is normal. Talking on the computer is normal. They giggle with Millie. (B)

Another interviewee described her children's reaction when using a web camera as 'jumping around and laughing'. The children do not view the situation in the same way as a phone conversation, and so they move about in the room naturally, just as in everyday life.

I think they like it a lot. And I just realise how normal this is for them. When I was in a conference in Helsinki and they were Skyping with me and, instead of just [talking to] me, they were just jumping around and laughing and singing me songs. It was like our everyday life. [...] and I think it is the same when we talk with their grandmother. (C)

Even though video conferencing gives a more 'natural' feeling to the conversation than the more old-fashioned telephone receiver, it is still subject to technical difficulties. One of my interviewees wondered whether this vulnerability had affected her children's relationship with their grandparents.

They can be talking with their grandparents and all of the sudden there can be some technical interruption. [...] so this technology, although it makes it possible to keep in touch, it kind of forms this relationship that is very sketchy in a way and very easily broken in a way. [...] I hope it is not negatively affecting their relationship to their grandparents, but I don't know. (A)

The Internet connection is one of the vulnerabilities in Skype conversations, with the other being the computer hardware, such as the microphone and camera. Also, the amount of available space in front of the camera sets its own limitations on the conversation. One of the interviewees reported feeling that video conferences with the children are rather stressful.

I find a bit stressful to have kids on Skype; they don't seem to focus really well and will fiddle with the microphone and start to push each other off the chair to be more in the camera and all these kind of things, but yes, we do try to have them at least for some of those conversations, at least for a part of it. But it's certainly much more relaxed without them. (D)

Even though the families in question appreciate having the option of a web camera, it is important that the children see their grandparents in real life, too. There is a chance that the grandparents otherwise become two-dimensional screen characters, mere 'talking heads'.

The first couple of years of my children's lives [...] they kind of thought my parents were just talking heads. So when we saw them after a long period of not seeing them, I remember them looking at their legs [...] they have whole bodies, this is something new. (A)

Sharing the small details of everyday life is important for constructing a shared social space between physically distant kin (Baldassar et al. 2007, 123). The interviewee who uses the WhatsApp smartphone application referred to just this need when she described the messages she receives as a continuous 'trickle' of information.

We have a family group on WhatsApp. [...] I guess we WhatsApp most days. Or at least somebody from the five of us is communicating something most days, so that feels like a little on-going trickle that is really nice. (D)

What she enjoys about the application is its instantaneous nature. If she feels like sharing something, like a photo of one of her children, for example, with her mother, she could do it right there and then.

And I love being able to send a little message with a photo, so an impromptu thing which just comes to your mind, I'll share this with my mom right now [...] that [gives] us a sense of sharing our lives more. (D)

## **Conclusion: 'They Definitely Have a Relationship with Their Grandparents'**

The goal for this article was to look more closely into the movement of people, goods and information generated by transnational families. I wanted to see whether a family, by just being a family, causes transnational activity. For that purpose, I looked into the forms of interaction between the generations in different countries and how the distance affects grandparenting.

One approach to studying the movement of people, goods and information was through the concept of transnational caregiving. The time, effort as well as emotional and financial support given to the

second and third generation by grandparents in the country of origin is an important aspect of transnational caregiving. Even though caring for an aging parent of an immigrant has recently been given more attention by researchers, the phase of time in which the first generation in the country of origin helps and cares for the third generation is also an important period in the existence of a family. It regenerates a sense of kinship and mutual obligation. My article, albeit tentative due to the small size of the dataset, contributes to our knowledge about this fleeting phase in the regeneration of a family. The fact that the grandparents are middle-class people living in countries on an economic par with Finland also reverses the economic flow. In the light of my interviews, it is the grandparents who are helping the young family out, not the immigrant sending remittances to the country of origin.

Economic standing plays a role in the ways people can be transnational (Povrzanovic Frykman & Humbracht 2013, 61; Fong et al. 2010, 441). In my interviews, international travel was limited due to economic reasons. But, for example, visa regulations did not pose any challenges to such travel. This stands in contrast to families in diaspora between a Third World country and the West, where it may be downright impossible for grandparents to arrange a visit to the country of residence (Zechner 2007, 57). As a side note, it is important to look at the family with grandparents in North America. For them, the economic sacrifice is much more tangible than the families who can easily take a plane from one EU country to another, or even drive their cars if they have more time.

Does transnational care differ from other long-distance care? The European patchwork of small countries puts us in a theoretical position where we speak of transnationalism, even when distances are still relatively short. In contrast, a grandparent in the US or Russian Federation, for example, who might need to fly six to ten hours across an entire continent to care for a grandchild, would still not fit into the theoretical framework of transnational care, even though his or her intentions as well as economic and emotional investment would be identical. Therefore, it is worthwhile to ask whether the term transnational care is comprehensive enough. It only seems to indicate

that there is a national border separating family members. What other parameters and variables might such a term take into account? It is a very useful term from the standpoint of migration studies, since it indicates that while one member of a family might be an immigrant, another is not; likewise, it indicates that the border and the different laws on both sides of it may pose some particular challenges that the researchers have to address. For family research, I would argue that distance (Cherlin & Furstenberg 1992, 117) is still the key factor, not national borders – especially borders with no visa regulations (cf. Baldassar et al. 2007, 15). This naturally only applies to people like my interviewees and their families, who are privileged in the way that they can travel without constraints. To exhaustively answer this question would certainly require more research.

It is important in this context to also assess ethnic identity markers and methodological nationalism. Judging from the interviews, my evidence supports Povrzanović Frykman and Humbracht's rationale that the transnational goods in immigrants' homes do not, at least primarily, carry an ethnic symbolic value. None of the goods mentioned in my interviews were mentioned because they have a specific ethnic component. It is likely that most things – apart from food and the aforementioned candle holders – that were sent from the country of origin to the country of residence were, in fact, not manufactured in the country of origin. The value in these objects very much lay in *who* they were from and what were the outcomes of *receiving* them. They were a part of transnational contact and economic activity. It is therefore important to note as a researcher that our research questions *per se* inform our findings.

How do transnational families facilitate the movement of information? Researchers have been able to demonstrate that social ties were in

place first, prior to the more recent technological improvements (see Baldassar et al. 2007, 109; Povrzanović Frykman & Humbracht 2013, 49). However, it is clear from my interviews that the nature of *how* the family members can communicate has changed tremendously. First of all, we can now see each other across thousands of kilometres, show our family members exactly how we live, read books to each other, giggle with our cousins, sing and dance in each other's virtual presence. Second, we can find ourselves caught up in a daily trickle of small pieces of information from family members scattered around the globe. Photographs, thoughts for the day, greetings and so on will reach us within seconds of when they were sent. The ability of the smartphone application to send the same piece of information to all group members simultaneously creates a sense of 'us'. This stands in contrast to the letters or even faxes sent from one individual to another in the past.

For the grandchildren, the virtual presence of the grandparents serves to foster a sense of belonging to a family and a chain of generations. My interviews seem to hint at the fact that on-line grand-parenting also strengthens the children's language skills. Furthermore, the children, who have grown up with the virtual connection described above, will already know their grandparents better on the occasion of visiting the parent's country of origin. I would assume that the time needed to 'break the ice' is minimised thanks to the time spent in the virtual transnational space.

My tentative findings point to the fact that all generations put a great deal of effort in being available to each other through all available means. What remains to be solved is whether the second and third generations will be able to maintain transnational ties after the first generation in the country of origin has passed away. This would require longitudinal research.

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## NOTES

1 According to Statistics Finland, 112 Finnish women and 47 men married a citizen of the United States in 2015. For women, this was second only to Turkey in terms of international marriages. (Tilastokeskus 2016.)

2 Theoretically, transnationalism has time and again been seen as standing in opposition to the assimilationist view on migration. Assimilationists assume that immigrants lose ties with their countries of origin and create

full, meaningful lives and social networks in the host country over time. (See, e.g. Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, 130–134; Fong et al. 2010, 428–429.)

- 3 By 'generations' I mean biological generations in a family (Martikainen and Haikkola 2010, 11; Teräs et al. 2010, 93). Immigration research typically marks the immigrant generation as the first generation and their children as the second generation. Probably due to the original assimilationist point of view, little attention has been paid to different generations in the country of origin. The sociologist Rubén Rumbaut (2007, 346–359) has proposed a system of generations that divides the first and second generations into subcategories based on the age of the immigrant at the time of entry into the host country. Three out of four of my interviewees were married to a Finn and, therefore, their children would represent generation 2.5 in Rumbaut's system. Rumbaut's system is based on large-scale sociological surveys, and it is not advisable to apply it to individuals. In this article, first generation refers to grandparents in the country of origin, while second generation refers to the parents (the interviewee), and third generation to the

children. This is to emphasise the fact that the generational chain is by no means disrupted by immigration.

- 4 In Zechner's (2010) view, the most important large-scale study on transnational caregiving is *Families Caring across Borders. Migration, Ageing and Transnational Caregiving* by Baldassar et al. (2007). I use its findings as my theoretical starting point with respect to the questions pertaining to transnational caregiving posed in this article.
- 5 These interviews are pilot interviews for the author's and Dr. Maria Elo's joint-project, Cultural Heritage, Generation Change and Transfer of Informal Institutions: Narratives from Finnish Diaspora networks in the USA and Non-Finnish Diaspora Networks in Finland. All results presented here are based on such a narrow dataset that they are only tentative.
- 6 I had a similar experience when my Finnish cousin, who lives in Scotland, asked me to bring her a Finnish brand of instant oatmeal. Of all places, Scotland is not short of oatmeal. Therefore, it was a question of acquired taste: only the Finnish brand had particular dried berries mixed into it.

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Interviews A–D in the possession of the author.

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## KEYWORDS

Families, Generations, Goods, Grandparenthood, Information Technology, Objects, Transnationalism, Transnational Contact, Transnational Care, Travel