

## Chapter 2.2.

**PORTRAYING MIGRANT FAMILIES IN ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS: NAMING AND FRAMING***Irena Juozeliūnienė, Indrė Bielevičiūtė and Irma Budginaitė-Mačkinė***Introduction**

There is a large number of publications about institutions portraying migrant families. It is already widely acknowledged that today's mass media is a powerful meaning-making institution that creates, debates and transmits cultural representations through hyperspace. Earlier research on representations of migrant families in the mass media highlighted the spread of 'container categories' (Lewis, 2006) used to depict the 'otherness' of the migrants. The academics view these categories as reflecting the political discourse and playing an important role in sustaining the dominant ideology (Gitlin, 2003).

Academics studying migration demonstrate that in destination countries media-constructs contribute to the creation of the national identity and imaginary of 'we-ness' and/ or 'being European', while symbolic figures such as 'immigrant woman', 'headscarf girl', 'person with a migrant background' are assumed to be a part of the rhetoric illustrating migrants' supposed unwillingness to integrate (Sadowski, 2015). In the origin countries, in contrast to host countries, 'container categories' are used to cast a doubt on the sense of national belonging of compatriots living transnationally and to frame the family life of migrant families as falling short of displays of 'common culture'. The language of family in mass media representations works as an 'institutional regime', because the 'point of reference in everyday language' (Gilding, 2010: 774) rests on the dominant family discourse and follows the guidelines embedded at a macro-level, within the national legislation and policy documents.

Although the impact of media constructs on perceptions of migrant families is widely discussed, their representations in the language used by academic researchers is often overlooked. In the course of doing research and publishing data on the changing lives of migrant families, academics suggest terms, construct narratives and attach labels underpinned by a specific type of family ideology. In so far as they transmit these meanings to the academic audience and beyond, they could be viewed as meaning-

makers in their own right. This makes it imperative to treat their publications as social constructions in need of closer analysis.

In this chapter we set out to examine how Lithuanian academics perceive the change of family boundaries and fluidity of family relations in the context of global migration, which way they present empirical evidence to the processes of ‘relativizing’ (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002) of multi-locational family arrangements, and how these arrangements are named and framed.

We started from the assumption that the term ‘change’ is highly charged with the family ideology and might contain multiple meanings. The previous research studies show, that, although proliferation of transnational family arrangements in real life has enriched the language of academic publications with new meanings, Lithuanian researchers continue to examine family relations in the context of institutionalized discourses and label the shift from the ‘privileged’ type of relationships of close proximity to transnational way of living as ‘broken’ and ‘troubled’. In our research study we aimed to disclose how the meanings of ‘change’ are used within academic publications that have sought to define the changes of migrant family life as ‘troubling’ (Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies, 2013).

### **Research Methodology**

The analysis of academic publications presented in this chapter was carried out from January to March 2018. It formed a sub-study of the research project ‘Global Migration and Lithuanian Family: Family practices, circulation of care, and return strategies’ (2017–2019), funded by the Lithuanian Research Council. We sought to analyze academic publications on migration in Lithuania published from 2004 to 2017, available in Lithuanian and international academic databases, more specifically, in the Lithuanian Academic Electronic Library (eLABa) using the keyword ‘*migr\**’ and those in the international EBSCOhost Research Platform (accessible via the Vilnius University) with the keywords ‘*migr\**’ and ‘*Lithuan\**’. We began our query in the eLABa database. Upon excluding the publications dealing with topics other than the migration of Lithuanian residents – for example, animal migration, cell migration, migraine and so on – we have identified 400 publications and have saved their bibliographic data in the reference management software Zotero<sup>11</sup>. We then ran the query in the EBSCOhost Research Platform. After excluding the duplicates, we

<sup>11</sup> Internet website of reference management software Zotero, which was used for storing and reviewing the information on selected publications: <https://www.zotero.org/>.

have identified 59 additional publications. After reviewing abstracts of the publications, we narrowed down the sample to 82 publications whose titles or abstracts refer to family issues.

We carried out content analysis of the selected publications using MAXQDA software. For each topic, we have defined a code and a sub-code, which were then grouped into categories. The bulk of the selected articles were published between 2008 and 2011 (49%); only 6 publications (7%) were published in the preceding years (earliest in 2005). In terms of subject areas, most of the publications belonged to sociology (42%), educational sciences (35%), and psychology (9%); the rest were split among law, language studies, political science, health and economics (the total of 15%). The absolute majority of the publications focused on migrant children (71%), about a fifth (20%) studied migrating families, and a few papers (6%) examined the lives of emigrants' elderly parents living in Lithuania.

## **Portraying Migrant Families**

### **Naming Migrant Families**

Our analysis of the academic publications referencing Lithuanian families yielded a list of frequent terms used to characterize families in the context of global migration. Accelerated and intensified flows of people around the world lead researchers to invoke terms like 'migrant families', 'families undergoing migration', 'emigrated families', and 'returned families'. The rise of the transnational way of living invites a set of terms focused on different aspects of 'othering' and contrasting new forms to locally fixed family life. On the one hand, the terms 'distanced families' and 'part-family migration' refer to new ways of doing family at a distance, while the terms 'transnational families' and 'families across borders' transcend the view of migration as a bi-directional movement of family members and instead stress how multi-locational and multicultural identities emerging within family settings help to bridge geographical space. These terms focus on different aspects of migrant family life and do not carry meanings of unwelcome change implied in a range of migrant family life. The terms indicate that families are 'primarily relational in nature. They [families] are constituted by relational ties that aim at welfare and mutual support and provide a source of identity' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 7).

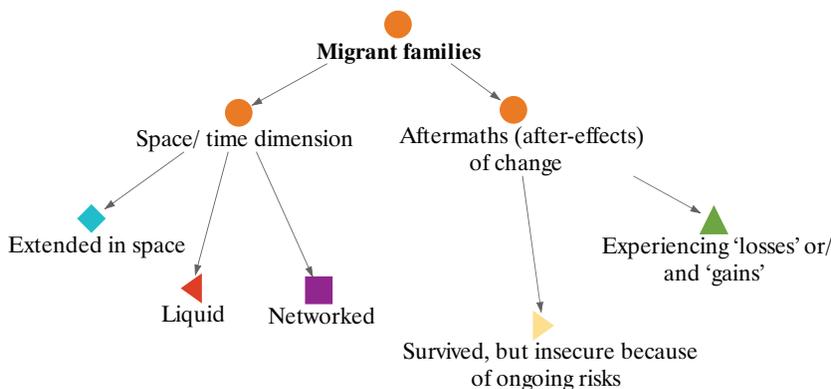
On the other hand, the analysis of the publications identifies a set of terms like 'families separated by migration', 'families experiencing loss' that are used to describe the 'troubling' nature of migrant families. For example, academics interpreting the results of a quantitative survey of

school children define such families as experiencing ‘some kind of loss in the family: whether it’s divorced or deceased parents, unemployment or emigration’<sup>12</sup>. Such family description equates migration of parents to a divorce, unemployment, and even death.

### Framing Migrant Families

We sought to analyze how migrant families are framed by researchers. Carrying out content analysis of the selected publications and their abstracts using MAXQDA 2018 software, we produced 8 codes and 29 sub-codes, which we further grouped into 5 categories representing key scripts used for framing migrant families. Researchers portray migrant families as (1) extended in space, (2) liquid, (3) networked, (4) survived, but insecure because of ongoing risks, (5) experiencing ‘losses’ or/ and ‘gains’. More generally, academic literature on migrant families presents them through the lens of space/ time dimension of family change and through the dimension of aftermaths (after-effects) of change, mainly losses (see Figure 1).

**Space/ time dimension.** Representation of migrant families through the lens of space/ time dimension set up the scripts of family life in migration. Families are portrayed by describing (1) the processes of de-location and extension in space, (2) liquidity in time to indicate that family configurations



**Figure 1.** Key scripts of migrant families’ portraits in publications of the Lithuanian researchers

<sup>12</sup> Butvilas, T. (2007). Emigracija: Palikti vaikai. *Acta humanitarica universitatis Saulensis: mokslo darbai*. Vaikas lietuvių ir pasaulio kultūrose, 5, 379.

and relations are on the move, and (3) changing embeddedness in networks the way migration reshapes belonging to a variety of personal communities.

**Family's de-location and extension in space.** This script indicates that migrant families maintain cross-border social ties and echoes migration literature on the significance of the analysis of two primary dimensions of migrant families – 'spatial dispersion' and 'relational interdependency'. Western researchers show that not all aspects of family relations can be equally well pursued at a distance – some of them do require physical proximity. At the same time a range of publications demonstrate how today's communication channels and easily available modes of transportation enable family and kin members who are physically distant from each other to maintain family connections (see Mason, 2004; Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla and Wilding, 2016). The research studies reveal the ways new technologies can enable even stronger connections than in the past. For example, as empirical studies of Turkish migrants in Germany (Reisenauer, 2018) and representations of transnational mothering in Lithuanian mass media (Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė, 2018) demonstrate, living across borders can also be interpreted in beneficial terms.

Meanwhile, recent analysis of the academic publications of Lithuanian researchers indicates, that they regard de-location and extension of family in space, by and large, as an unwelcome change implicated in a range of family troubles. Some academics state, that 'changes in relations between family members become conspicuous because parents living separately from their children cannot participate in their socialization'<sup>13</sup>; the other authors describe 'spatial dispersion' as 'one of important shifts [in relations] is the changing structure of the family, a reshuffling of functions and roles performed by family members'<sup>14</sup>. In general, failing to theorize transnational family as a contemporary form of family leads the academics to associate physical absence of family members with separation and reduced possibility of maintaining the sense of 'co-presence' (Urry, 2003) and 'family-hood' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002).

Furthermore, the researchers conclude that extending family in space negatively impacts not only the relations between family members but also intergenerational relations. For example, the author states that 'escalating

<sup>13</sup> Kačiniienė, I. and A. Pugevičius (2013). Family with Parents Abroad in the Context of Province, *Rural Development*, the sixth international scientific conference, 28–29, November, 2013, Akademija: proceedings, 168.

<sup>14</sup> Kaniušonytė, G., I. Truskauskaitė and L. Gervinskaitė (2012). *Psichologinės migracijos pasekmės šeimai vaikų emocinių ir elgesio sunkumų prevencija*. Vilnius: Leidykla 'Edukologija', 8.

migration separates generations in space<sup>15</sup> and limits the possibility of caring for elderly parents, particularly those who live in Lithuania.

**Liquidity.** The portrayal of migrant family life as such that cannot remain fixed, because everything changes and almost nothing stays the same, echoes Bauman's (2000) famous metaphor of 'liquidity', whereby typically solid social structures and institutions are described as 'melting' while 'liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty' (Bauman, 2005: 2). Similarly, the Lithuanian researchers write: 'transnational families where one or several family members migrate witness a change in economic, care and childcare, psychological support, procreative, sexual and other functions typically attributable to the family. Some of these functions are entrusted to other family members, relatives, intimate confidantes, while others are temporarily suspended'<sup>16</sup>. Thus, the articles we analyzed provide empirical evidence to illustrating the dynamics and uncertainty of reorganizing family responsibilities and relations as well as documenting overall shifts in the structure of the family institution.

The authors of academic publications give different meanings to the 'liquidity' of migrant family life. One of them cite the constant changes, alongside the declining birth rate, as one of the key reasons explaining the pessimistic forecasts of changing patterns of caring for elderly parents. For example, the author writes: 'increased migration flows coincide with a rapid aging of the Lithuanian population. [...] The declining availability of familial networks to elderly parents is further exacerbated by the low fertility rates which in turn narrow the horizontal network of potential care providers'<sup>17</sup>.

Furthermore, the researchers note the 'troubling' consequences of changes induced by migration, namely, 'melting' of the social institution of the family, in general. As the authors assert: 'such shifts in the family life have long-term effects not only on family members but also on the society: they alter individual socialization patterns, impact the stability of the family institution, affect birth rates and undermine the sense of intergenerational solidarity'<sup>18</sup>.

15 Mikulionienė, S. (2013). „Mes čia – jie ten“. Tarpgeneracinio bendravimo įprasminimas, būdai, vertinimas. *Socialinis darbas*, 12(2), 227.

16 Maslauskaitė, A. and V. Stankūnienė (2007). *Šeima abipus sienų: Lietuvos transnacionalinės šeimos genezė, funkcijos, raidos perspektyvos*. Vilnius: Tarptautinės migracijos organizacijos Vilniaus biuras, 6.

17 Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, M. (2015). Does Adult Children Migration Lower the Level of Intergenerational Solidarity? Evidence from Lithuanian Transnational Families. *Polish Sociological Review*, 47–48.

18 Maslauskaitė and Stankūnienė (2007), 6.

At the same time, 'liquidity' does not always carry the meaning of troubles. Some authors portray migrant family changes as 'a variety of ways in which individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members', as it is described by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002: 14) in their analysis of 'relativizing' processes within transnational families. For example, as some of the analyzed publications note, 'these families find it essential to preserve and reinforce family ties'<sup>19</sup>; 'informants see meetings as significant social practices supporting family integrity'<sup>20</sup>. By portraying migrant family changes this way academics sought to show how transnational family practices are designed to keep family relationships across borders.

***Embeddedness in networks.*** When family researchers focus on what migrant family members 'do' rather than what families 'are', their attention shifts to examining fluidity within social networks. According to Smart (2007: 43), the concept of 'embeddedness' is 'particularly important in its capacity as a counterweight to the concepts of individualism, liquidity or even older 'anomie''. Similarly to Smart (2007), also to Finch (1989), Finch and Mason (1993) and Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry and Silverstein (2002), the Lithuanian researchers rediscover chains of relations extending across generations and beyond to show that individual decisions and life strategies should not be analyzed in isolation from lives of the intimate others. They maintain that decisions related to migrating should not be seen as personal decisions, but rather as something agreed upon by the entire family. As the authors assert: 'an individual with a family does not decide to migrate by himself, it's a decision that reflects the attitude of his/ her immediate social circle and the 'significant others' towards the family situation, potential opportunities, gains and losses'<sup>21</sup>.

The scientists also advise to consider the influence of wider social networks on individual's decision to leave/ return/ live transnationally. While portraying migrant families, academics sought to show, that families are embedded in kin and non-kin networks and their decisions are strongly influenced by close people from diverse social networks. More specifically, the authors of publication assert, that 'a family member's decision to emigrate is influenced not only by family and kinship ties, but also by the influence of a wider social network (colleagues, acquaintances, neighbors, and so on)'<sup>22</sup>. When the researchers come to examine these wider networks,

19 Mikulionienė (2013), 231.

20 Ibid, 227.

21 Maslauskaitė and Stankūnienė (2007), 73.

22 Ibid, 73–74.

they provide the evidence of which way the rise of social networking and the Internet revolution transformed networks between individuals (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), and how these new technologies become the tools of transnational displays.

**The aftermath (after-effects) of change.** The academic publications portray migrant family life using the language that implies that not only the process of mobility is a source for family troubles, rather the new family practices continue to be 'insecure' due to the huge range of risks family face in new social settings. Within this script, the academics transmit the meaning that migrant families have left the culturally and politically safe zone of the society of origin and 'landed' in culturally different and unknown social space. By highlighting the risks inherent in these new social spaces, the researchers conclude that mobile lifestyles are always a sought for family troubles.

**Survived families, but insecure because of ongoing risks.** While the term 'breaking apart' is described to denote a self-evident rupture of family relations and/ or the loss of relatives, the metaphor of 'survival' is used to assert the temporal stability of family relations. The authors of the publications denote that, despite of temporal stability, family members are trapped in making a range of risky decisions, and, as far as potential solutions are neither present nor socially framed, 'the couple must search for private solutions, which – under the options available to them – amount to an internal distribution of risks' (Beck, 1992: 117).

When researchers refer to migrant families as vulnerable, they list the risks families face in their new social and cultural environment. For example, the academic papers point to the risks to ruin the relations with close people, both – family members and relatives, and encourage migrants to strengthen them: 'it is especially important to maintain and reinforce familial ties'<sup>23</sup>; 'preserving the relations with relatives, significant others [...] helps to preserve the relations between generations'<sup>24</sup>. The publications imply that the magnitude of change taking place in migrant families is so big that families are always at risk to 'break apart'. For example, the authors of publications write: 'The experience of emigration often attenuates the risky relations between family members'<sup>25</sup>, 'a family becomes fragile'<sup>26</sup>, and

23 Mikulionienė (2013), 231.

24 Šutinienė, I. (2009). Lietuvių imigrantų požiūriai į lituanistinį vaikų ugdymą. *Filosofija. Sociologija*, 20(4), 314.

25 Vijeikis, J. (2012). Emigracija iš Lietuvos – grėsmė šeimos vertybėms. *Vadybos mokslas ir studijos – kaimo verslų ir jų infrastruktūros plėtrai: mokslo darbai*, 1(30), 180.

26 *Ibid*, 181.

they claim that this instability in the relationship paves a way for a 'possible divorce of the couple'<sup>27</sup>.

The authors of publications examine how visiting/ hosting family members and relatives contribute to preserving the relationships across borders and encourage the imagined audience of migrants to maintain the relationships through the visits because 'family members of different generations within families with parents abroad attribute different meanings to visiting each other, the informants see these encounters as significant social practices, supporting family integrity'<sup>28</sup>.

***Experiencing losses or/ and gaining advantages.*** This script of framing migrant families highlights how family researchers portray migrant families relying on the images of 'how a family should be'. By doing this, they confirm that the 'change' in family life is normatively charged. Our analysis shows that Lithuanian researchers refer to migration-induced family changes as highly challenging and, commonly, consider corresponding experiences of family members as 'troubling' or 'troublesome'.

For example, emigrating to another country is equated with family harm: 'Hence, emigration from Lithuania causes a great harm to families and children'<sup>29</sup>. The migratory experience is labelled as a factor undermining the family: 'It is widely acknowledged that migration contributes significantly to the transformation of the family institution, even to its decay'<sup>30</sup>. The researchers believe that one or both parents emigrating abroad lead to family dysfunction: 'we can make an assumption that one or both parents being absent from the family as a result of their decision to work abroad, is one of the factors causing the dysfunction of the family'<sup>31</sup>. The papers discuss instances where members of migrant families avoid talking about their families and their relations as a way to illustrate deep emotional trauma. The academic publications are peppered with observations that migration 'causes more family conflicts', 'can negatively affect the wellbeing of each family member', weakens the relations with significant others, 'increases the number of psychological issues faced by children and adults'<sup>32</sup>, negatively affects parent-children relations: 'The cases of partial family

27 Ibid, 186.

28 Ibid, 227.

29 Gumuliauskienė, A., T. Butvilas and J. Butvilienė (2008). Tėvų emigraciją patyrusių vaikų globos ir socialinės gerovės užtikrinimas: Ekspertų požiūris. *Jaunųjų mokslininkų darbai*, 4(20), 145.

30 Batuchina, A. (2015). *Vaikų migravimo fenomenologinis tyrimas*. Klaipėda: Klaipėdos universiteto leidykla, 5.

31 Leliūgienė, I., L. Rupšienė and L. Plavinskienė (2005). Tėvų išvykimo dirbti už sienų įtaka vaikų socializacijai. *Specialusis Ugdymas*, 1(12), 37.

32 Batuchina (2015), 6.

emigration reduces the possibilities for communication between children and parents, and maintaining emotional ties<sup>33</sup>. Generally speaking, the language of migrant family narratives could be compared to the ‘crafting’ of troublesome issues, the way changes are described as ‘troublesome to those involved, and troubling to others who may have concerns about harm to those involved – perhaps implicating profound levels of human suffering?’ (Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies, 2013: 8).

In our analysis, we have failed to uncover academic publications championing the narrative of advantages. We have managed to identify a single reference to the positive outcome of migration. The authors discussed how migratory experience of overcoming challenges helped one family forge a stronger sense of solidarity. ‘One of the advantages is a stronger sense of solidarity among the family members forged by the experience of overcoming crises and challenges together<sup>34</sup>. Although it would not be entirely accurate to claim that the Lithuanian academics completely ignore the advantages of migration. When selecting publications for analysis, we omitted our own articles. To demonstrate that Lithuanian academics manage to identify and are willing to examine the ‘gains’ of migration, we want to note that our studies of transnational motherhood yielded the examples of migratory ‘gains’.

For example, drawing on the analysis of 79 articles on transnational families, selected from the national press and Internet media and published in Lithuania between 2004 and 2013, alongside the interviews with transnational mothers, conducted between 2008 and 2014, in our publication we show how transnational mothers respond to discrediting scripts and manage to ‘normalize troubles’ by bringing new meanings to mothering. The interviews revealed how transnational mothers responded to discrediting scripts produced in mass media and ‘normalize troubles’ recounting the ‘gains’ of transnational way of living. The mothers argued that their way of mothering constitutes ‘bread-winning rather than caring for oneself’ and that they are ‘benefiting rather than losing’. Furthermore, they argued that ‘rather than abandoning their children, they are doing modern mothering’, and that they ‘manage to care for oneself and for their children’. Our analysis of emerging transnational practices provides empirical evidence for the assumption that transnational mothers don’t simply ‘follow’ assigned scripts but also actively counter and edit them to create new mothering narratives (Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Giedraitytė, M., T. Lazdauskas and R. Zabarauskaitė (2010). Vaikų poreikių tenkinimas ir psichosocialinis prisitaikymas tėvams išvykus iš Lietuvos. *Visuomenės sveikata*, 2(49), 84.

<sup>34</sup> Maslauskaitė and Stankūnienė (2007), 99.

## Conclusion

We began this chapter with a premise that ‘there is no such thing as ‘the’ transnational family, understood as a uniform family form defined by constant characteristics’ (Baldassar and Merla, 2014: 9). Cognizant of the fact that the term ‘change’ contains different meanings, we sought to examine how Lithuanian researchers perceive and represent the reshaping of family boundaries and family relations ushered by global migration flows. Since the language used to describe migrant families in academic publications may in itself become a source of ‘trouble’ for families, our analysis focused on terms used to name and on scripts used to frame migrant families in publications of Lithuanian researchers.

The analysis has revealed that portraits presented by the researchers are shaped by the family ideology and highly rely on the images of ‘how a family should be’. Some terms manage to avoid signaling the unwelcome change implicated in a range of family troubles, and instead are used to locate families within the global movement of people and refer to new ways of doing families at a distance. Other terms, on the contrary, indicate the troubling nature of migrant families caused by their divergence from the images of locally situated families. The latter terms equate migration with the separation of family members and convey the message that migration inevitably leads to ‘losses’.

Lithuanian researchers portray migrant families as extended in space, liquid, networked, survived, but insecure because of ongoing risks as well as experiencing ‘losses’ or/ and ‘gains’. The ‘extension in space/ time’ refers to a physical absence of family members and is associated with separation, reduced possibilities to maintain the sense of ‘co-presence’. ‘Liquidity’ indicates the ‘melting’ of fixed family orders and spread of the dynamic family configurations and relationships. References to the ‘embeddedness in networks’ denotes that families are relational in nature and show which way the patterns of network ties allocate family resources and provide a source of identity. The researchers define migrant families as ‘survived’, but ‘insecure because of risks’ to indicate that mobile lifestyles are open and fragile. Family changes are referred mainly, as ‘troubling’ or ‘troublesome’, that is the decision of a parent (or both parents) to work abroad is seen as ‘troubling’ due to the threat it poses to the relations with close people, and on sustainability of the family as an institution. In general, the deeply rooted low-mobility discourse-based understanding of family life and insufficient set of analytical tools hinder Lithuanian scholars’ attempts to theorize migrant families as contemporary family forms in their own right.

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