

Parenting across borders : effects of transnational parenting on the lives of Angolan and Nigerian migrant parents in The Netherlands

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Valorisation addendum

This dissertation tried to advance our understanding of the effects transnational parent-child separation has on migrant parents' lives. As discussed in the introduction and conclusion, one thing that various studies, including my own, have shown is that transnational families do not exist in a vacuum. They are affected by conditions in the origin and host country; conditions that are shaped by policies and society as a whole. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to understand how these policies shape the lives of these migrants and their family members in the country of origin. Yet not only is it important to look at the effects the conditions in both host and origin countries have on these families, but also at the implications the functioning of these families have for the host and origin country. For example, migrants that have good emotional health and perform well at their jobs contribute more to the economies of the host societies than those who feel emotionally instable. This chapter addresses some of these issues and has as its aim to direct policy makers and other authorities to important factors affecting the functioning of transnational families and give recommendations for policy development. The second part of this chapter summarizes how the project tried to disseminate the results of our research to policy makers, respondents and society as a whole.

1 Policy implications

First, as already mentioned in the conclusion, research in The Netherlands is predominantly focused on the 'traditional' migrant groups, even though the number of migrants from the 'new' immigrant groups is steadily increasing (Grillo & Mazzucato, 2008; Wijk van, 2007). Yet, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the conditions these 'new' migrant groups face upon entry and the receiving context are different than for the 'traditional' migrant groups. Therefore it is important to pay particular attention to these new immigrant groups in policy development. For example, the reception by the Dutch government and Dutch society has become more hostile. Consequently, the migration and family reunification policies have become much stricter since the 1970s, which has affected the family life of these 'new' immigrant groups. As this dissertation has shown, one of the challenges that these 'new' immigrant groups face is how to live transnational family life. While in the 'old' migrant groups transnational families were also existent, many of the families had the ability to reunite in The Netherlands through family reunification and formation. Yet, the migration policies in place make this much more difficult for the 'new' immigrant groups. Hence, future policies should be based on the needs and issues that the 'new' immigrant groups face and not only on migrant groups who migrated to The Netherlands three generations ago because these groups face different challenges (Mazzucato, 2008).

Second, in this dissertation I have argued that when studying migrants it is important to take a transnational approach. As discussed in the conclusion, this has some implications for policy development. Governments in the North have regarded transna-

tional activities as synonymous with limited loyalty to the new country of residence or as a threat to national unity (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). It is argued that, if time and interests were invested in the host country, this would greatly help immigrants incorporate into the new society (Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller, 2003; Levitt, 2003). Yet, transnationalism does not necessarily hinder integration. The two are not mutually exclusive (Guarnizo et al., 2003; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Mazzucato, 2008; Portes et al., 1999; Snel, Engbersen, & Leerkes, 2006). This dissertation has shown that these transnational activities are of importance for the lives of migrants in the host country.

For instance, what my research has shown is that, for transnational parents, contact with family in the country of origin is key for maintenance of good transnational parent-child relationships and is also of importance for parents' job outcomes in the host country. In addition, good parent-child relationships are found to be consistently associated with improved subjective well-being. In other words, the findings imply that maintaining transnational ties is of crucial importance for the well-being of the parent in the host country. Furthermore, these transnational activities are not only necessary to maintain active family bonds and for improving the well-being of the migrants themselves but are also of vital importance for the emotional and financial well-being of the family members back home. Although not included in this study, research indicates that visits and face-to-face contact are crucial in maintaining affective family bonds. However, strict host country migration policies often prohibit the visits of family members. In conclusion, many migrants will remain engaged both 'here' and 'there', especially where family life is concerned. Therefore, migration and integration policies should not stand in the way of these double engagements, especially because they can better the lives of migrants and their families.

Third, authorities in both the origin and host country should be pointed to the existence of transnational families and the impacts this can have on the well-being of parents and children. However, while various family forms are now recognized in research and policy, such as same-sex marriages, adoption and single parenthood, transnational families have often been neglected. This is exemplified in the *feitelijke gezinsband* (effective family bond) the Dutch introduced in 1986. Although this policy has been abolished for over 10 years it does signify how the Dutch long thought about the family as a unit. In short, as explained in chapter 2, the *feitelijke gezinsband* prescribed that parents who had been separated from their children for an extended period of time lost their right to family reunification. Also, if others besides the parents cared for the child and did not financially support the child, family ties were considered to be broken (Bonjour, 2009). Yet, as this study has shown, physical proximity is not a precondition for family life. Parents actively keep parenting across borders and are therefore an important form of family life. In addition, some parents migrate with the intention to reunite with the family once settled in the host country. However, often-

times economic and administrative hurdles migrants have to overcome elongate separations, consequently losing their right to family reunification if the *feitelijke gezinsband* would be in place. Moreover, restrictive policies of family reunification have not advanced integration (Strik, De Hart, & Nissen, 2013). Although, by ruling of the European court, the *feitelijke gezinsband* was abolished in 2006, we should guard that similar policies are not implemented.

Fourth, although transnational family separation is not necessarily problematic this dissertation has also proven that family separation can impede well-being and integration if transnational child raising arrangements do not work well. Policy is crucial here. For example, in the empirical chapters it was established that contact with the children in the country of origin is not only of importance for the maintenance of a good parent-child relationship, but that this can impact emotional well-being and job instability of migrant parents as well and hence the functioning of the migrant in the host society. Although not taken up in the analyses of this dissertation, results of the TCRA projects have shown that visits are of key importance for the well-being of all members of the family and for parent-child relations. European visa policy should allow for easier border crossings of these families, for instance by allowing circular migration through for example temporary work visas or by allowing children to visit their parents through special visas. At present, it is very costly and time consuming to get a visa for these children to visit.

A final lesson to be drawn is the importance of the context of migration. Because of their migration trajectory Nigerians are more often found in a precarious position in The Netherlands, with a large share of undocumented migrants and migrants of low socio-economic status. While for documented parents visits are costly and can be difficult, for many undocumented parents visits are impossible. These parents have nor the resources nor the required papers to cross borders or let their children visit them. In addition, as for parents with low socio-economic status, undocumented parents are not eligible for family reunification leading to elongated separations. Furthermore, these poor and undocumented parents often have difficulty to meet the needs of their families in the country of origin. Therefore, socio-economic and undocumented status stand out in explaining some of the differences found between the well-being of transnational and non-transnational parents. European governments should be aware that their migration policies have these adverse effects not only for migrants but also the family members back home. In addition, it seems that the post-conflict setting in Angola has intensified the effect transnational family separation has on the well-being of these parents. Authorities, such as health workers, should pay special attention to these precarious groups. They should recognize that low socio-economic and undocumented status and trauma from war can interact with other factors and can have a significant impact on the functioning of these families.

2 Dissemination of results

To make my research available to a larger and non-scientific audience, the results of my dissertation have been translated in various forms. This PhD is based in a larger project in which multiple actions have been undertaken to reach a non-scientific audience. First, the TCRAf-Eu project has its own website¹⁴ which is aimed at academics, policy makers and the respondents who were part of our research. Academics can find information on our project and links to our publications. In addition, policy makers can find policy briefs. Respondents have their own section which contains important information on the project and some findings. The website further contains information on the researchers, program leaflets with important information, writings of students who participated in a writing workshop, a TV and radio broadcast in which Ghanaian transnational parents were interviewed, and photos and videos that were taken during the course of our project. Also, the site contains an option to contact the project's researchers. Finally, the site contains the questionnaires used and a codebook and researchers can request the dataset through the website.

Second, at the closing conference we have held a policy roundtable in which NGOs, government bodies and media discussed the findings and implications of our project. For this policy round table a document was created to report our main findings. Third, we have written two policy briefs¹⁵ to communicate our results to policy makers. Fourth, a piece was written by the Principle Investigator for the *Internationale Spectator*, a magazine for international politics and international relations (Mazzucato, 2013)¹⁶. Fourth, a newspaper article appeared in the *Volkskrant* reflecting some of our findings (Bolwijn, 2013)¹⁷. Finally, I have written two pieces to share my findings with a larger and non-scientific audience. One piece for *versvak.nl*, a Dutch platform to make science accessible for a non-academic audience (Haagsman, 2014b)¹⁸, and one piece for *NORFACE Compact series* (Haagsman, 2014a)¹⁹, the research programme on migration that funded our project. All these written pieces are available on Internet and through the project website.

¹⁴ See www.tcra.nl

¹⁵ See http://fasos-research.nl/tcra/files/2013/05/TCRA-POLICY-BRIEF_def.pdf

¹⁶ See http://fasos-research.nl/tcra/files/2013/05/20130300_internat-spectator_art_mazzucato.pdf

¹⁷ See <http://fasos-research.nl/tcra/files/2013/07/Artikel-Marjon-Bolwijn1.pdf>

¹⁸ See <http://www.versvak.nl/karlijnh/>

¹⁹ See http://issuu.com/creamucl/docs/norface2014_migration-paths_of_expl/15?e=4447956/8272800