Migrant families and intergenerational relationships: cultural challenges, renegotiation practices and social change

Famiglie migranti e relazioni intergenerazionali: sfide culturali, pratiche di rinegoziazione e mutamento sociale

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Abstract

International studies have confirmed the central role played by families in defining migration routes and strategies. Adopting a family perspective to view the migration phenomenon means observing the different relationships between the various components along a multi-generational temporal and relational axis. Migration experiences from one generation to another are very different, and they often underline or exacerbate generational differences. A generational approach could therefore be the leitmotiv of innovative debates in the field of contemporary migration studies. Furthermore, introducing *generation* as a key variable may help to understand migration processes through a broader perspective in this time of multiple crises and transformations. This contribution, which is of a theoretical nature, aims to reflect on state-of-the-art research in the field. Reviewing the most recent literature, it aims to add to the available knowledge by observing how cultural complexity, intergenerational relationships and renegotiation practices within migrant families could be regarded as empirical evidence of ongoing social change.

Keywords: migrant families, intergenerational relationships, cultural complexity, social change, literature review.

Sommario

Gli studi internazionali confermano il ruolo centrale svolto dalle famiglie nella definizione dei percorsi e delle strategie migratorie. Adottare una prospettiva familiare per osservare il fenomeno migratorio significa, in modo peculiare, indagare rete dei legami esistenti tra i vari componenti lungo un asse temporale e relazionale multigenerazionale. Le esperienze migratorie da una generazione all'altra sono difatti molto diverse e spesso possono sottolinearne o esasperarne le differenze. Un approccio generazionale può quindi rappresentare un *leitmotiv* di dibattiti innovativi nel campo degli studi sulle migrazioni contemporanee. Inoltre, nell'attuale periodo di crisi e trasformazioni multiple, l'introduzione della generazione come variabile chiave può aiutare a comprendere i processi migratori attraverso una prospettiva di più ampio respiro. Il contributo proposto di natura teorica, si propone di riflettere sullo stato dell'arte della ricerca incentrata sulle famiglie migranti. Passando in rassegna la letteratura più recente, esso mira ad arricchire le conoscenze disponibili osservando come le relazioni intergenerazionali, le complessità culturali e le pratiche di rinegoziazione possano essere considerate quali prove empiriche del mutamento sociale in corso.

Parole chiave: famiglie migranti, relazioni intergenerazionali, complessità culturale, mutamento sociale, revisione della letteratura.

Introduction

The family is increasingly being perceived as a central actor in the migration project, capable of influencing migration strategies, supporting the migration experience at all stages and shaping the complex transition to settlement (Martin, 2019). Family life supports migrants' efforts to normalise their lives in the new country. It contributes to greater stability and encourages participation in economic, social, cultural and political life. In this sense, it can foster migrant integration and better enable migrants to fully contribute to society (Spitzer, 2018). As underlined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) portrait of family migration, indeed, *with migration comes family* (Chaloff and Poeschel, 2017). Therefore, migration could be

considered and studied as a family-based project, whether it involves the migration of the whole family, the formation of a family post-migration or the financial support of a family in the country of origin (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017). However, academic studies have only recently begun to focus on how changes in family structure, intimate relationships and intergenerational relationships are intertwined with the migration process (Kurti and Sabanova, 2021). The migration experience, which is also considered a stressful event in the lifecycle, could bring about significant changes in family dynamics and intergenerational relationships (Zanfrini, 2021). Therefore, intensifications of migration crises, such as ongoing social crises, continuously contribute to changes in the shape of modern intimacies by redefining and reorganising relational networks and dynamics.

Considering these phenomena and related issues, this work is structured as follows. The first part focuses on the theme of family in migration and discusses the central role it plays in the study of the phenomenon. In the second part, a selective summary of recent research in the field is discussed, highlighting emerging topics. Particular attention will be given to transnational family issues. The third part focuses on the topic of intergenerational relationships, stressing the critical issues and resources that characterise these dynamics from a cultural point of view. Particular attention will be paid here to intergenerational renegotiation practices and educational challenges within migrant families. In the conclusion section, an overview of the topics discussed is provided, outlining critical aspects and opportunities for further research on the dynamics of change in migrant families in relation to generational relationships.

1. Families in migration

The issue of who can be considered family in family migration law is heavily influenced by changing societal norms around family life and the quest for equal rights for all types of families. Family migration remains a dynamic and deeply political form of migration, despite its ever-present relevance. Not only have migrants seen their rights to bring in family members fluctuate in the past decades, but the very meaning of *family* has changed considerably, resulting in legal implications for both nationals and migrants and redefining what falls under the *family migration* category (Kofman, Buhr and Fonseca, 2022).

Reflecting this complexity, *family migration* is a term generally used to refer to people who migrate due to new or established family ties, and it encompasses several sub-categories: reunification with a family member who migrated earlier (a person with subsidiary protection is also entitled to (re)unite with family members), family accompanying a principal migrant, marriage between an immigrant and a citizen, marriage between an immigrant and a foreigner living abroad and international adoptions (IOM – International Organization for Migration, 2022a)[1].

Real life is far more complex, and these scant categories, while necessary, are reductive. For migrants, the family unit often stretches across national borders, with members spread across two or more countries. However, these families manage to maintain a sense of collective welfare, unity and familyhood (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002).

Yet, immigration policies are often slow to recognise such diversity for the purposes of family reunification and family formation or marriage migration (IOM, 2022a). As underlined by Kofman, Buhr and Fonseca (2022), «law often lags behind developments in society, and family migration law is no exception» (p. 137).

Furthermore, the available statistics on these issues are incomplete and not always comparable. Existing national statistical agencies and large-scale population censuses are

biased towards what is happening within nation-state borders and thus do not include information on family members living abroad. Furthermore, classifications differ cross-nationally, so it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of family-class migrants around the world. Although such data are complex to collect, in recent years, research has shown that family is one of the main drivers of migration in OECD countries (Spitzer, 2018). As analysed by the IOM GMDAC – Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (2022): «Partial and preliminary data show that, among OECD countries, family migration (including accompanying family members of migrants) comprised 37 per cent of the total permanent migration flows in 2020». In absolute terms, the number of migrants who moved to OECD countries for family reasons decreased by approximately 36 per cent from 1.9 million in 2019 to 1.2 million in 2020. From 2014 to 2019, family migration increased in the majority of OECD countries (OECD, 2017, 2020, 2021). However, in some OECD countries, family migration flows have declined due to the downsizing of family reunification programmes (OECD, 2019)[2]. The statistics for the European context have also been confirmed, where family reunification is the dominant mode of legal immigration in several states and where immigrant parents have contributed to an important share of new births (Zanfrini, 2021, p. 455). Although labour migration historically may have had a temporal character, many migrants now stay for prolonged periods of time or even indefinitely (Castro Martin, Koops and Vono de Vilhena, 2019).

Given the importance of family migration, especially among those migrants who settle permanently in receiving societies, it is in the common interest to properly understand these dynamics of migration (IOM, 2022a). As explored in *Migrant Families in Europe: Evidence from the Generations & Gender Programme* (Castro Martin, Koops and Vono de Vilhena, 2019), the percentage of non-native populations is rapidly increasing, which is why countries experiencing this phenomenon are increasingly called upon to understand how best to welcome these migrants into their societies, not only economically but also socially and culturally.

2. Trends and studies

Research on migrant families has emerged and grown considerably in recent years[3]. In the past two decades, this topic has attracted the growing interest of researchers, first in North American and Asian Pacific countries and subsequently in Europe, with a shared recognition of the connection between migratory strategies and family projects (Castrèn *et al*., 2021). Most family and migration literature assessed families during the settlement process, after they had arrived together (e.g. Ali, Valade and Dargy, 2019) or once reunited following a period of separation. Over the decades, studies have focused on the family as a key player of migration dynamics and have revealed relevant trends, which will be briefly discussed below.

Political analyses have examined the impact of policy (Kofman, 2018) and legal changes on individuals and families, including their ability to live together (Wray, Agoston and Hutton, 2014). The study of migrant families in this field therefore cuts across the available legal definitions of family and brings to light emerging forms of living together, gender roles, sexualities, kinship ties and caregiving practices. Comparative analyses of family migration policies have become more common, ranging from two-country to EU-wide and OECD-wide comparisons. While earlier research focused on the family reunification of migrants and co-ethnic marriages, more recent research has turned to how family migration policies define acceptable family and permissible intimate relationships (Bonizzoni, 2018a, 2018b). The issue of unions also seems to be particularly relevant to the migration process and to the cultural diversity that

results from it. Just to give a few examples, cross-border marriages between a wider range of nationalities than co-ethnic marriages as a means of migrating legally and acquiring citizenship have begun to receive more attention. Such migrations have raised questions about the regulation of who belongs and who deserves citizenship (Moret, Andrikopoulos and Dahinden, 2021). Another flourishing field of study is concerned with so-called *mixed* partnerships, where the different cultural aspects (ethnic, racial, religious, national and lingual) play an essential role in the understanding of gendered and ethnic dynamics (Kurti and Sabanova, 2021). Few studies in the field have sought to examine the regulation of non-biological parent–child relationships between migrants and their children with common countries of origin (Redmond and Martin, 2021).

Another issue concerns family ties. Yielding positive outcomes for both migrants and the host society, close and supportive family relationships are consistently shown to play an important role in migration experiences. For example, research has shown that relatives who migrate as part of a family unit benefit from mutual emotional and social support as they settle in their new context (Nair *et al*., 2013). In turn, the act of providing support, especially for dependent children, can provide migrants with a sense of purpose (Ali, Valade and Dargy, 2019). Migrating as a family allows for a certain cultural continuity, in contrast to the disruption often experienced by lone migrants. On the contrary, relationships between different generations, for example, parents and children, could also be negatively affected and severely impacted when separation is lengthy or indeterminate (Boccagni, 2013).

Within this research, some scholars have sought to highlight how family members commonly use multimedia or information communication technology (ICT) to stay in contact (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Although these tools may help overcome the effects of family member absence and create a degree of intimacy, they require considerable effort and time investments to be effective (Baldassar *et al*., 2016). Therefore, changes in family functioning go beyond the simple male breadwinner–female homemaker shift. Changes in family structure, decision-making, child dependence and the gendered division of housework (e.g., due to the loss of extended family support) are all possible effects of migration (Ayika *et al*., 2018).

In general, it is important to consider how, while earlier studies focused on destination countries, recent studies have taken a more nuanced and critical view of migratory processes. From a theoretical perspective, studies have adopted a migration systems approach. Furthermore, research is increasingly adopting a multi-sited and transnational lens, in which people, services and cultural and social practices circulate between places (Bélanger and Silvey, 2020).

Transnational families

In recent decades, a particular theoretical trend within migration studies has investigated the family dimension from a transnational perspective. Nowadays, transnational families are receiving more attention due to the general increase in migration flows (IOM, 2022b) and thus in the number of migrants, many of whom are temporary or do not have sufficient regular status or resources to bring other family members with them (Kofman, Buhr and Fonseca, 2022).

A transnational family represents «a family whose members are separated spatially from their significant others and relatives as a result of migration from one country to another» (Kurti and Sabanova, 2021, p. 476). As Bryceson and Vuorella (2002) underlined, despite being separated by distance and over time, members of transnational families maintain a sense of familyhood, thanks to which they continue to feel they belong

to a family, even though they cannot see each other and be present physically (Baldassar and Merla, 2014). Therefore, in transnational families, relationships and roles do not depend only on proximity and physical presence. Shared feelings and mutual obligations remain. Emotionally significant ties are rethought out and recoded through physical absence. Family members who remain in their ancestral homelands become part of social relationships stretched across time and place, even though they might never actually relocate or move at all.

Transnational family studies have focused on how migrant parents experience and organise their transnational family lives. However, because of the small-scale nature of such studies and their lack of a non-transnational comparison group, little is known globally about the exact number of people living in transnational families (IOM, 2022a). Furthermore, it has been unclear the extent to which these experiences could be generalised across different contexts and whether the detected phenomena are particular to transnational parenting or might also be experienced by a wider population (Mazzucato and Dito, 2018). Therefore, much research effort has been devoted to investigating transnational families and their networks or practices (Al-Sharmani, Tiilikainen and Mustasaari, 2017), migratory decisions and transnational parenting (Kurti and Sabanova, 2021). These studies have drawn attention to the different types of transnational families, the impact of migration policies on family reunification and structure and the gender dimension, such as the differences between men and women in transnational parenting. How such families may undergo constant changes as the family life cycle evolves has also been highlighted (Bryceson, 2019; Mazzucato and Dito, 2018).

3. Intergenerational relationships, renegotiations practises and cultural change

Taking a family perspective on the migration phenomenon also means observing the different relationships between the various components along a multi-generational temporal and relational axis (Dubucs, Schmoll and Pfirsch, 2017). Therefore, it is interesting to analyse intergenerational relationships within migrant families and the impact of migration experiences on the different generations. Evidence that has adopted this lens has shown a more complex understanding of migrant families' dynamics (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017). Family has been proven to be a fluid structure of intergenerational adaptation, renegotiation and change capable of supporting the transitional processes undertaken by both parent and new generations. However, at times, the family is also the site of conflict and contestation (Creese, 2011).

Various studies have explored the different causes and consequences of the intergenerational solidarity of migrants. Overall, there are two contrasting views on migration and solidarity (König, Bettina and Szydlik, 2021). One approach, the so-called solidarity thesis, assumes a higher level of cohesion and contact in migrated families because differences in family norms supposedly result in closer connections and stronger dependency. The second approach, instead assumes that relationships in migrant families are weakened by the experience of migration and the subsequent situation in the host country. This is the position supported by the so-called cultural conflict thesis. Migrant families are assumed to be at a greater risk of experiencing intergenerational and intercultural conflicts (Merz et al., 2009).

Recent studies have investigated which factors influence family relationships. As discussed by König, Bettina and Szydlik (2021), although migrants in Europe must bridge greater distances to keep in touch with their families, especially if they originate from outside the EU, their contact frequencies are higher compared to natives. This is not only due to stronger family bonds and obligations, especially for migrants from more family-

oriented countries, but also to cultural differences and economic and linguistic uncertainties. These factors may cause migrants to have a greater need for close family networks in a largely unknown environment.

Intergenerational connections post-migration become highly dependent on the strength of nuclear family ties and continued efforts to pass on the importance and intensive integration of generations at every opportunity. Although intergenerational relationships can be hard to support, migrants can maintain long-term ties with their relatives (Ayika *et al*., 2018). According to other studies (Scocco, 2022), it is relevant to observe how different generations of members of families with migration backgrounds maintain ties and cultural practices across national borders through transnational social spaces.

The issue of intergenerational relationships opens the debate to other relevant dimensions, such as: parent–child relationships, parents' perceptions of their children's behaviours; intergenerational conflicts. The data have revealed that post-migration changes in parent–child relationships are an outcome of incongruences between cultures (e.g., collectivist cultures of origin and individualistic host cultures), as well as different acculturation trajectories between parents and their children and thus different socialisation processes (Ayika *et al*., 2018). As such, migrant parents must learn to adapt their children's cross-cultural perceptions, also accepting their diversity in relation to their own cultural expectations and references.

Although the challenges associated with different socialisation trajectories, migrant families could develop strategies for handling intergenerational conflicts by making compromises, accepting some cultural changes, adapting to new social expectations and recognising that new generations are not inherently culpable for differences in cultural values and behaviours. Therefore, studies have confirmed that there is often a significant change in the family dynamics and intergenerational relationships experienced by migrants.

In this regard several studies have investigated how the education issue is particularly relevant (Li, Wang and Luo, 2020). The most recent studies that have focused on migrant families and children's education in the global pandemic have highlighted the persistence and exacerbation of social inequalities (Oliveira and Segel, 2022). Although im/migrant parents believed in the promise of a better life for their children as they migrated, COVID-19 and remote schooling contributed to a breakdown of this achievement. Educational institutions confirm that they play a crucial role in building real inclusion pathways. But above all, education can also play an important role in shaping the attitudes native populations hold toward immigrants (Borgonovi and Pokropek, 2019).

Several studies have used an intergenerational approach to emphasise the influence of certain factors on the identification processes and the inclusion pathways of new generations, particularly the children of migrants (Zontini and Reynold, 2018). The length of stay, ethnicity, the time and method of arrival in the host country, parents' job placements and the cultural and social capital of the family are all elements that could directly or indirectly influence the construction of identity and socialisation processes (Impicciatore and Pailhé, 2019; Nesteruk, 2022). This is the perspective proposed, for example, by the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP)[4].

From a transnational perspective, Zontini and Reynold (2018) looked at migrant children and young people as members of wider networks that go beyond nuclear ones and suggested that «the real and symbolic transnational engagement are pervasive taken-for-granted aspect of family life. They might vary in intensity from family to family and from time to time, but they remain latent and can be activated or reactivated at various times» (p. 433). Considering the variations and differences in youths' transnational experiences, these generations have a link to their parents' homeland, which is more than

just symbolic. It is real and embodied in the meaning of their maintaining communication across national borders; specifically, they express emotional and material attachment to their parent's homeland.

Particular research has revealed complex processes of renegotiation that take place in migrant families that involve restructuring, contestation, compromise and, in some circumstances, conflict (Scocco, 2020). Data have revealed transnational relationships and practices that have an impact even on those who do not experience any type of mobility because they live in a space permeated by the exchanges and contributions that the mobility of others has produced.

From this perspective, the new generations are one of the focal points of this process of social change in a broader sense, being intimately involved in the cultural and social processes underway but also protagonists of practices of renegotiation that are constantly being defined.

Conclusions

Family migration is a broad form of migration that encompasses various kinds of movement, living arrangements, geographies and rights (Kofman, Buhr and Fonseca, 2022). As discussed, the study of family migration is important, as it can yield insights into many ongoing socio-cultural dynamics. To do this, however, it is necessary to move beyond the narrow economic approaches that were used in previous work on family migration and to examine the changing forms and (re)composition of the family, the diverse strategies deployed in the course of migration, the gendered composition of family migration, the position of specific members of the family (e.g., the children and the elderly) and the implications of policy measures for men and women (Kofman, 2004).

This work aimed to review the most recent contributions concerning the migrant family and the generational approach. This made it possible to grasp some recurring problems and limitations highlighted by the studies considered.

First, the well-documented importance of family for migrants and the diversity of family forms speak to the need for inclusive definitions of family, including more diverse familial and intimate arrangements. From the theoretical definition, this clarification can have a relevant impact from an empirical point of view. In fact, statistics to date are hardly comparable and sometimes incomplete; therefore, this redefinition could help define guidance on how to improve data on family migration. In the absence of comprehensive, internationally comparable data on family migration and given that data are often limited in scope, there is a need to address data gaps on this topic. As far as the research is concerned, in the current scenario, it would be useful to implement a longitudinal and multi-generational research programme.

Although much research has already been carried out, the studies discussed have brought to light new and interesting issues that have yet to be explored. For instance, there is a need to understand the effects of restrictions on family migration across different countries and to identify the strategies that have been developed by family members who are excluded by (new) family reunification provisions. There is a need to examine how the shrinking of the family as a result of migration and impediments to family reunification may be distressing and produce emotional dependency. However, there is also a need to determine whether this shrinking may be considered liberating by some migrants in terms of autonomy, self-expression, gender roles and sexuality (Kofman, Buhr and Fonseca, 2022).

Further investigations into how Europe's recent refugee intake will unfold as families reunify should be carried out. The acculturation paths of migrant families as units versus

as individuals should be elucidated. The roles of the new generations who are members of the societies in which they were born or settled in the profound cultural changes taking place should also be clarified, paying particular attention to educational challenges and renegotiation practices.

In conclusion, the integration of family migrants also impacts the integration outcomes for their children, precisely through the strength of the intergenerational bonds that characterise the family (OECD, 2017). The presence of fellow family members in the receiving country can reduce the risks of abuse, abandonment and exposure to exploitation. Moreover, opportunities for regular and predictable family visits to see temporary migrants may reduce the incidence of overstays or irregular entry. Policies supporting family migrants' integration into the receiving country can also improve migration outcomes. That is why learning about migration through the family is not only interesting but also strategic. This will help to create more engaging and inclusive family programmes or strategies through resettlement services and policies that are focused not only on a person-centred service model but perhaps more importantly on community and family-centred service models.

Note

[1] Beyond the definition provided in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, article 16[3]), no universally accepted definition of the family in international law has been set forth in a legally binding instrument. It is important here to underline how, especially in a society exposed to constant and rapid change, the concept of family is constantly evolving (IOM, 2022a).

[2] It is relevant to consider how these statistics on family migration fit into the broader framework described by the *World Migration Report 2022* (IOM, 2022b). Current estimates are that there are 281 million international migrants globally (or 3.6% of the world's population). While the vast majority of people in the world continue to live in the country in which they were born, more people are migrating to other countries, especially those within their region.

[3] As underlined by Kofman (2004), the main reasons for the scarcity of studies on this topic are the absence of data, the emphasis on the individual as economic actor and the predominance of a view based on the «dichotomy of male producer and female reproducer» (p. 243).

[4] The Generations & Gender Programme (GGP). Research Infrastructure provides scientists and policymakers with high-quality and timely data about families and life course trajectories of individuals to enable researchers to contribute insights and answers to current societal and public policy challenges. The GGP provides users with an open access data source of cross-nationally comparative surveys and contextual data. It currently distributes information on more than 20 countries in Europe and beyond. For more information, visit: https://www.ggp-i.org/about/.

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