IMAGINED FAMILIES IN MOBILE WORLDS
An Introduction

Karen Körber and Ina Merkel

Families "on the move", "Euro-orphans", and "transnational mothers" – more than ever before, talk about the family is permeated with the opportunities and challenges currently presented by an increasing, border-crossing mobility.[1] A glance at European press and media coverage shows that the family has recently become an object of public attention, and one that seems to indicate primarily a state of crisis. For several years now, newspaper articles and TV documentaries have been reporting on women who take on housework and caring tasks in Western European dual-earner households, precariously employed as nannies and maids while their children are left behind in the depleted villages of Poland, Ukraine, and Moldavia as the "silent" victims of westward labour migration. This seems to continue, in a kind of distorting mirror, the trend diagnosed by US sociologist Richard Sennett as early as the 1990s. Sennett saw a new capitalism generating the values of a flexible society, whose most important dictum – "keep moving, don't commit yourself, and don't sacrifice" (1998: 25) – placed massive pressure on the institution of the family. These representations of feminized labour migration from East to West, South to North, reveal a new dimension of social inequality in global capitalism, but they also document a transformation in the gender order, at the symbolic heart of which stand contested images and discourses about "the" family.

The hypothesis of a crisis of the family has been refuted in past years primarily by numerous migration researchers, investigating the family within the domain that has been chiefly blamed for its decline (Lima 2001; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Sørensen & Guarnizo 2007). The global increase in migratory movements and altered or newly emerging patterns of migration and mobility have resulted in radical change to the perspectives of migration studies itself. Such research no longer revolves around the notion of linear, one-off, and completed migration processes from a society of origin to a receiving society; instead, the focus is on the complex, often largely stable and long-lived, "transnational" relationships between people, networks, and organizations across the borders of the nation state (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc 1994; Pries 2001; Vertovec 2009). In this context, the rise of the "transnational family" enhances the importance of a form of life that at first sight seems to embody a paradox: despite geographical distance and the experience of dispersal, the very social group whose core elements include spatial proximity and direct community is capable of sustaining the family virtually as its principal point of orientation and reference. As such, it is proving both resistant and creative in the face of the new demands of globalized societies.

This special issue critically addresses not only the prophecies of the end of the family, but also the apparent paradox inherent to the new models of familiarity under conditions of increased mobility. While working from very different angles, all the contributions join in querying a concept of fam-

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ily that makes the autochthonous family, located within national boundaries, the yardstick for all others. The Euro-American definition of family as a nuclear family characterized by settledness and geographically proximal relationships is here regarded as an articulation of "methodological nationalism" (Beck 2003) that obscures the cross-border practices constitutive for many different mobile and transnational family forms both past and present. Tracing the challenges, the creative potential, the cultural practices, and equally the constraints, of multi-locality for the meaning of family, our approach begins from a question that was raised in an earlier special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea*, "Double Homes, Double Lives?" (Bendix & Löfgren 2007): How do identity and feelings of belonging change under the conditions of dual location? Like that special issue, the present collection also pursues European ethnology's concern to address mobility and migration processes through both biographically oriented, ethnographic studies and the analysis of cultural, symbolic, and discursive practices. However, the authors of these five contributions do not attempt to reach a single position on the notion of the family; rather, by interlocking ethnographic and discourse-analytical methods and combining them with gender theory, they share a focus on the technologies, genealogies, policies, and regulations that participate crucially in the construction of family, gender, and bodies.

Imagined Family – How Family Is Made

In the organization of social interaction and the constitution of individuals, family and kinship are of prime significance across all cultures and epochs. That does not appear to have changed fundamentally in the socially differentiated, mobile, and globalized societies of late modernity. As the key orders of the social, and those with the greatest impact in everyday life, family and kinship constitute more than a formal classificatory system of social relationships and an order-endowing structure in the world's cultures: in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, they are "structuring structures", in other words "principles of the generation and structuring" of representations, practices, identities, and social forms (Bourdieu 1977: 72).

Against this background, our title, "Imagined Families", follows authors such as Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (2002) in transposing Benedict Anderson's thesis of nationalism as imagined community (1983) onto the family, and thus directing attention to the ways that family is *made*: how it is negotiated, symbolically generated, and affirmed through everyday practice, but also how it is changed, for example through altered legal frameworks. In Euro-American societies, the order of the family has always been conceived of as something dual, both biological and social (König 1974: 61), and as centred on filiation and heterosexuality. The past few decades have seen numerous challenges to this understanding of family and kinship, which legitimizes and privileges consanguinity over other forms of long-term bonds and care and naturalizes the distinction between "natural" and "other" kinship. More recent thinking in kinship ethnology also reflects social transformations – especially altered gender relations, pluralized family formations, and the cultural consequences of migration and globalization, but also biotechnological developments such as reproductive medicine. Thus, current models of kinship emphasize the ways that family relationships are produced, revised, and lived within actual social processes (Carsten 2000; Faubion 2001). In her work on adoption practices, Signe Howell (2001) introduces the notion of "kinning", thus giving linguistic form to the processual and active character of "making kin". Similarly, the studies published by Beck et al. (2007) use the examples of transnational adoption and assisted reproductive technologies to show that the opposition between "natural" and "made" kin relationships is inexistent: instead, kinship is always and everywhere produced as a social form.

That "kin relationships are something that people make, and with which they do something" (Bourdieu 1990: 167) is also among the principal assumptions informing the contributions by Karen Körber, Gertrud Hüwelmeier, and Elisabeth Timm. All three authors are concerned, in differing ways,

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with present-day and historical dimensions of transnational familiarity; it is in this setting that they examine the constrictions and pitfalls of a Euro-American notion of family. Körber and Hüwelmeier pick up on current discussions around the relationship of gender, transnationalism, and family. On the one hand, they pursue an analytical perspective set out by Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar, focusing on a "gendered geography of power" (2001: 441) that aims to open up our awareness that "gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (e.g. the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains" (ibid.: 445). On the other, they draw on studies that concentrate less on the material ties of reciprocal obligation in transnational families than on the cultural practices within and by means of which family attachments are experienced and moulded across time and space (Vuorela 2002; Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007). Thus, Mary Chamberlain and Selma Leydesdorff (2004: 227–228) trace the special significance accorded to "memories and narratives" in diasporically dispersed families, as ways of enabling a shared understanding of family in circumstances of separation. Describing women's attempts to keep families living in separation physically and emotionally intact, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila refer to transnational "circuits of affection, caring, and financial support" (1997: 550) – thereby naming the key dimensions addressed by numerous studies in recent years. All these investigations concur in relating the question of new forms and practices of familiarity to that of reconfigured gender relations in transnational families. Bridget Anderson (2001) and Aihwa Ong (1999), for example, both stress that an analysis of transnational social spaces cannot be restricted to the practices of the state, but must also address the politics of the body, the regulation of the private sphere and of family circumstances, and culturally hegemonic gender norms and discourses in both the sending and the receiving country (see also Hess and Radkowska-Walkowicz in this issue).

Karen Körber's contribution picks up on these debates. Through family biography interviews, she shows how transnational families use new communication technologies to produce familiarity across great distances and long periods of time. Two selected case studies of families, taken from European labour migrations of the 1960s and post-1990, reveal how the transformation of time-space organizational patterns can create a virtual proximity at a distance, enabling geographically fragmented families to forge new practices and forms of everyday togetherness that may endure for many years. This highlights the limits of a notion of family founded on spatial proximity and direct community, while also demonstrating that access to and use of new technologies is not something neutral, but is structured by relations of social inequality that unfold their specific effects in the context of migration regimes. In the European order of migration, an increasing feminization of migratory movements can be observed, the routes and practices of which are being progressively illegalized. This restrictive European policy has far-reaching consequences for the relationship between gender and family in transnational family configurations.

Giving a voice not only to the agents of migration themselves, but also to the "immobile" family members left behind, Körber's study identifies how both sides actively participate in sustaining transnational social and symbolic ties in the course of familial exchange processes. Transnational familiarity, the article shows, encompasses not only the relationship between adolescents and their parents, but more widely the lifelong relationship between people of different generations, which changes and redefines itself across the family's lifetime.

This observation connects Körber's study to Gertrud Hüwelmeier's. Hüwelmeier addresses the currently much-debated concept of transnational motherhood, but casts interesting new light on it from a historical and anthropological viewpoint: she investigates not biologically generated families, but kinship that is grounded in ritual in the framework of transnational women's congregations. Using multi-sited fieldwork, she traces the transformation of these relationships over time and space, showing that familial relations transcending national borders are not something new – in the past, without today's

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technological resources, it was already possible to maintain emotional presence and participation at a distance. In line with other historical studies of gender-specific practices of migration (Harasser 1996; Harzig 1997; Henkes 1998), Hüwelmeier's paper indicates that nuns, those "pioneers of female migration", were moving along transnational routes in the nineteenth century. Her research on the relationships of mother superiors to their daughters or "sisters" also refers to ethnographic studies of co-parenting. As well as revealing the ethnocentric narrowness of the Euro-American concept of family, this comparison underlines once more the inherently constructed character of "kinship" as a social form.

If Körber and Hüwelmeier query the notion of family as a biologically grounded and proximate social group, Elisabeth Timm tracks a further implicit norm of the Euro-American family. Her historically based study of popular genealogies, using the example of Austria, investigates a "cultural norm of settledness" (Merkel 2002: 233) that she finds inscribed in the genealogical practice of searching for, and constructing, family. Working from a micro perspective, she analyses the production of settledness through the case of Austrian parish registers, the *Matriken*. A focus on three moments, reaching from the Reformation via the interwar period into the digital present, shows how the fact of migration and mobility is negated across time and how the identification of "being *kin*" with "being *there*" has to be continually produced afresh. Timm traces how the process of grounding the family as the nucleus of the state and society has gone hand in hand with the process of localizing it and making it settled; against this, she posits the relational complementarity of mobility and immobility. As in Hüwelmeier's contribution, it again becomes obvious that transnationality is not a new phenomenon in historical terms. Timm's study contributes to a debate also found, in a different form, in Körber's: whether the opposition between mobile and immobile actors and ways of life does not itself obey an artificial binarism incapable of standing up to empirical examination.

Mobility, Gender, and Family – Policies, Regulations, and Technologies

The assumption of a settled, biologically grounded family based on experiences of intimacy and care is inextricable from notions of family and gender. Recent scholarship has often asked how far present-day transnational mobilities are changing family configurations in a gender-specific way. The gender significance of this question has also grown in that the narrative of mobility no longer takes concrete shape in the figure of the male breadwinner: women are now the ones on the move. Although women's migration is no historical innovation, as Hüwelmeier's contribution shows, the feminization of migration has attained new explosive force since the end of the twentieth century. This applies not only to the worldwide increase in the number of mobile women, but also to the global processes of economic restructuring, along with state and supra-state mobility regimes, that have resulted in feminized patterns and practices of migration (Anthias & Lazaridis 2000; Sassen 2000). Since the early 1990s, gender researchers have been observing this trend in the European area as well, noting that – particularly in the wake of the Europeanization of migration policy – migratory movements are experiencing a feminization of which the illegalization of migrant women is a crucial feature (Kofman & Sales 1998; see also Körber in this issue).

Sabine Hess starts from these debates in her study of the shift to governmentality in the European Union's migration regime. Using ethnographic and discourse-analytical methods, the author investigates the "anti-trafficking" dispositif – that is, the images and discourses of trafficking in women and forced prostitution that have made a major contribution to implementing, and now further refining, the political and legal constitution of the European border regime. As a participant observer over a substantial period, Hess took part in various EU round table disscussions in the field of migration policy, where participants in recent years have included not only politically nominated representatives and staff of the relevant regulatory bodies, but also members of NGOs, such as feminist activists. Hess draws on

her many years of experience in the gender-sensitive research of border regimes to analyse the ambivalent effects of these new political practices. Underpinned by feminist discursive positions, they target the victimization of female migrants – with the result that ultimately even more restrictive controls of migration are legitimized. On the one hand, this case indicates how deeply the category of gender is inscribed in the procedures, technologies, articulations, and rationalities of the new European politics of migration; on the other, a degree of compatibility becomes evident between certain feminist positions and an increasingly rigid border-control policy, saying much about some approaches within feminist migration studies.

Hess shows that the Europeanization of migration policy can itself be understood as a transnationalization of politics. Her critical analysis of the anti-trafficking dispositif points to a structural dilemma of "Fortress Europe": migrating women can only be represented through the figure of the victim, so that their transnational practices and spatial mobilities are negated. The victimization of women invokes as its Other the image of the settled woman, tied to the home, who must stay at her husband's side if she is to venture into the public space or across the national frontier.

To this extent, female migrants disrupt the symbolic order of gender and the family and become the object of technologized and networked knowledge practices, deemed to require documentation and control. Control over women and their bodies is also the theme of the contribution by Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowicz, who, in a different nationally coded field of knowledge, discusses how biotechnological change in reproductive medicine is casting doubt on traditional conceptions of family and evoking highly contested images of familiarity.

Radkowska-Walkowicz investigates the Polish debate on in-vitro fertilization. Through discourse analysis, she evaluates statements by representatives of the Catholic Church, who oppose the right to extracorporeal fertilization to great media and public effect, and commentaries by women affected, who use an Internet platform to share their experiences of assisted reproductive technologies. The author reaches the apparently paradoxical conclusion that while public allegiance to the Catholic Church is still relatively intact in Poland, large parts of the population are in favour of the use of reproductive technologies. She argues that the seeming contradiction in fact dissolves once the shared core of the argument is identified: both sides are propounding the normative ideal of the heterosexual nuclear family. Whereas for the women affected, this ideal is realized only with the birth of a child (even one that has been artificially conceived), the Church defends the ideal per se, in the shape of the marriage vow, to curb potential transformations of the family that would also permit other familial forms.

In their contributions, Hess and Radkowska-Walkowicz come to rather similar conclusions. Both authors, though working in different fields of research, ask how bodies and gender are constructed with the help of policies, regulations, and technologies. In the case both of transnational European migration policy and of national discourse around the use of reproductive medicine, the political actors are confronted with developments that seem to entail the "danger" of lost boundaries and of the unconfined – developments, then, that seem to escape control. In one case it is the circulation of people, information, images, ideas, and products that crosscuts the state's attempts to reterritorialize, in the other biotechnology, enabling the separation of reproduction from heterosexual marriage, triggers a massive discursive campaign by the Catholic Church. At stake in both cases is the order of gender and the family, at the core of which is control over the female body, its spatial and corporeal circumscription.

Conclusions

The studies collected in this special issue approach the object of the family from various different directions. Through both historical and contemporary cases, they point out the restrictiveness of an ethnocentric concept of family, at the same time indicating the great adaptability of a social form whose downfall has been predicted so many times. The variety of approaches contributes to an under-

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standing of family that may be both less normative and less crisis-ridden, instead directing our attention to cultural and symbolic practices by which and within which families are "made", experienced daily, lived, and transformed. At the same time, as a pivotal representation of social order with great impact in everyday life, the family is also the place where the gender order is negotiated and renegotiated. In the course of transnationalizing processes, therefore, the family is "the primary unit of regulation and the vehicle of state power" (Ong 1999: 71); it is the target of state and supra-state policies, the object of legal regulations, and firmly embedded in public discourses whose gendered images play a key part in the construction of family. In the context of the increasing transnationalization not only of family relationships, but also of political forms, this field of tension will continue to gain in importance for future research.

Note

1 The article was translated by Kate Sturge.

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