Siblings by Telephone: Experiences of Mexican Children in Long-Distance Childrearing Arrangements

Gail Mummert

As the proportion of children involved in migrant flows of Mexicans headed north to the United States and the number of youngsters left behind by migrant parents have increased during the 1990s and the start of the twenty-first century, a new phenomenon has emerged that merits the attention of family specialists: siblings separated by international borders who do not live together on a daily basis. In fact, as our title suggests, some of these siblings “know” each other only through technological means—photographs, videos, or telephone. The youngsters have been left behind in home villages, towns, and cities in Mexico, or sent back to their parents’ homeland, because the parents consider that move to be in the children’s best interest. Lacking daily face-to-face contact and shared experiences, these siblings find themselves “trapped” on opposite sides of an international border. From these different locations and understandings of their place in the world, they tend to forge dissimilar life trajectories in terms of educational, work, and residential choices. In some cases, the siblings face additional linguistic and cultural barriers to communication, having been raised by one or both biological parents or alternate caregivers in radically different family settings. When this occurs, feelings of alienation, personal sacrifice for the common good, parental favoritism, envy, and outright resentment may surface, distancing the siblings even more.

Unlike most literature on children and migration, which basically concerns those who travel alongside their families as supposedly passive followers of their parents, this article focuses on the viewpoints and life experiences of a little-studied subgroup of children involved in the migratory phenomenon: those separated from their brothers and sisters by the U.S.–Mexican border (as a result of separation from

Gail Mummert is professor and researcher at El Colegio de Michoacán, Zamora, Michoacán.

father or mother or both). It deals with children belonging to transnational families whose members are geographically dispersed across the territories of two nation-states due to their participation in migratory processes; it includes both migrants themselves and others who have remained behind and never migrated. These children are being raised in long-distance arrangements based upon patterns of reorganization of productive and reproductive tasks across international borders and among several family members.2

Our anthropological gaze on the life experiences of siblings in long-distance relationships is through a transnational and gendered lens. Emerging around 1990, the burgeoning field of transnational studies posits the notion of a geographically discontinuous social field in which migrants, their families, and neighbors live out their lives.3 While simultaneously constrained and enabled by the power structures of two (or more) nation-states, members of transnational families establish social relationships and networks, set goals, make decisions, and attempt to prosper.

The specific child-rearing practices to be studied here are judged and justified within gendered and ideological parameters which social actors dispute in the same transnational social field. We understand the family to be a unit that is hierarchically organized along gendered and generational lines; that is to say, access to resources and participation in decision-making processes is different for men versus women, young versus old, and is therefore constantly being negotiated. We draw on Stack and Burton’s (1994: 33) concept of kinscripts as “a framework for examining how individuals and families as multigenerational collectives work out family responsibilities” and in particular “how work and responsibility concerning the care of children is delegated.” Thus, we will be concerned with how kinship and gender ideologies are interwoven and inform the behavior of family members involved in child care over time.

In order to analyze the experiences of the children themselves, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 1999, 2005, and 2006 with eight transnational families hailing from an agricultural valley nestled in the central-western Mexican state of Michoacán (see table 1).4 During multiple visits to their homes, we listened to the children’s voices and collected narratives from six boys and five girls whose siblings lived far away in the United States. In all eight families an effort was made to gather and document the (sometimes conflicting) viewpoints of other members; whenever possible we spoke to caregivers and other relatives involved more marginally in the child-rearing arrangement.5
Table 1. Case Study Children in Transnational Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>Primary Substitute Caregiver</th>
<th>Marital Status of Biological Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana and her four</td>
<td>Eldest sister (Ana)</td>
<td>Married, illegal U.S. residents younger siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José and María</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Divorced; father’s allegations of mother’s neglect of the children prompted him to send the children to Mexico to be cared for by his mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalia</td>
<td>Unmarried maternal aunt</td>
<td>Separated due to father’s ongoing problems with alcoholism  Mother working illegally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel and Leonardo</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Married, both parents working in the United States Grandmother cares for grandchildren along with her own daughter of roughly same age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario and Celia</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td>Abandoned by her migrant husband, the mother went to the United States. She later sent her children to Mexico in order to be able to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrián</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td>Single mother has made a new life in the United States and partnered with a man with whom she has two other children. Oldest child refuses to live with her or to recognize her as his mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damián</td>
<td>Maternal aunt and uncle</td>
<td>Single mother accepted legal adoption of her son by her sister and brother-in-law when child was eight. He lives with them and visits his mother on weekends and vacations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia and her four sisters</td>
<td>Paternal grandparents</td>
<td>Divorced; allegations of child neglect and abuse by mother led to a court case in which custody of all five daughters was awarded to the father. The older girls live with their father in Chicago, while the younger ones visit there during summer vacations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to this fieldwork, in an attempt to understand the experiences of these eight families as part of a global phenomenon, we reviewed a body of sociological and anthropological literature dealing with transnational parenting around the world. This scholarship includes several pathbreaking studies on transnational maternity (e.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila 1997 in Los Angeles) and paternity (Dreby 2006) among Mexican migrants. In general, extant studies tend to focus only on the viewpoints of either mothers from poor, third world countries who migrate to global cities where there is a demand for cheap female labor for housework and caregiving to children and the elderly, or fathers who “naturally” left their children in the wife’s care. The children living in long-distance child-rearing arrangements range from infants to teenagers, yet unfortunately, their complex life experiences and viewpoints have been largely neglected.

By combining ethnographic and bibliographic sources, we are able to identify certain mechanisms of global political economy that have fostered an increase in the numbers of Mexican children—as well as children of other nationalities—who experience long-term physical separation from siblings and one or both parents. Canadian researchers Barndt (2002) and Preibisch (2000), as well as the U.S.–based Smith-Nonini (2002) and the Mexican research team of Vidal et al. (2002) detail specific programs and practices of female Mexican labor recruitment that actually enforce the separation of mothers from their children across borders during the term of a temporary work permit.

Building upon the literature that has placed the plight of transnational working-class families in the public eye, this article pursues a twofold objective. First, we document the life experiences of children in transnational families separated from their siblings and explore the future implications of a family dynamic without coresidence. We show how transnational families frequently must cope with complications due to the mixed legal status of family members: U.S. or Mexican national, and legal or illegal resident alien—categories assigned to them by two nation-states. We summarize four paradigmatic cases and include particularly revealing statements made by the children themselves in order to illustrate dilemmas that arise in long-distance child rearing as seen through their eyes and those of their caregivers and parents. Second, we discuss certain aspects of the transnational lives of non-coresident siblings that have been insufficiently studied, especially from a gendered and transnational viewpoint, and propose a research agenda.
A preliminary disclaimer is in order given the highly politicized nature of this phenomenon dealing with a cornerstone of the social order: the adequate rearing of future generations of citizens. When long-distance child rearing in transnational families is portrayed in the media, in film, and even by academics, one typically finds two opposing positions. One view expresses little criticism of the parents who place their offspring with alternate caregivers, since the close relatives who agree to take on the parenting responsibility temporarily are assumed to act in the children’s best interest. More frequently, however, family separation is framed in terms of the abandonment of defenseless youngsters by neglectful third world parents who are misguided in their priorities and blinded by their pursuit of higher wages in the first world. In this article, we avoid judging the practices of transnational parenthood that give rise to “siblings by telephone”; rather, we hope to contribute to an understanding of such practices as alternate forms of organizing child rearing, in principle as valid as the model of intensive maternity that has prevailed not only as the apparent norm but also as an ideal. We show that these practices are the outcome of tenuous understandings and negotiations among parents, children, substitute caregivers, and other relatives. In the midst of tense and often heartbreaking decisions, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, sons and daughters, and grandchildren find themselves caught up in a maelstrom of emotions, responsibilities, and reciprocities intertwined with gendered and generational hierarchies and ideologies. We now turn to four issues that surfaced repeatedly in the eight transnational families studied: siblings of mixed legal status; half-siblings and stepparents; barriers to communication between siblings; and adoption.

**Siblings of Mixed Legal Status**

Amelia is a spinster aunt who has developed a close relationship with her niece, Dalia, since the girl was born in the Ecuandureo Valley of Michoacán in 1994. Given that emotional bond, the biological mother chose her sister Amelia as caregiver for Dalia and a younger infant sister when she and her husband decided to migrate illegally together to the United States in 1999. In fact, over time she has come to recognize Amelia as “Dalia’s real mother.” The maternal grandfather, a remarried widower in his sixties and seasonal migrant to Chicago, has supported Dalia and Amelia
economically because remittances from the girl’s parents have not been steady or reliable. The grandfather has openly criticized his daughter and son-in-law for their irresponsibility as Dalia’s parents. Since the grandfather is a U.S. legal resident, at one point he explored the possibility of adopting his granddaughter, a solution that might have led to a reunification of the girl with her biological parents, but this fell through. (The second daughter was reunited with the parents through the use of borrowed documents to cross the border when she was a few years old.)

When Dalia’s parents, who were residing in Chicago, separated in 2005 as a result of the father’s ongoing problems with alcoholism, her mother invited Amelia to come to live in Chicago with Dalia (then a preadolescent). There, she said, Amelia could care for the three nieces (Dalia, her younger reunited sister, and a sister born in the United States whom Dalia has never met) while the biological mother worked. Amelia faced a difficult decision: she preferred living in Mexico, but felt torn by her very close sisterly relationship and desire to come to her sister’s aid by being nanny to her nieces. Yet, neither she nor Dalia could enter the United States legally, which would make the journey across the border a dangerous and costly affair. If, on the other hand (as Amelia suggested to Dalia), the three sisters were reunited in Mexico and cared for by their aunt there, the two younger U.S.-raised sisters would miss their biological mother and their lives in Chicago. Amelia finally declined her sister’s invitation and continues to care for her niece Dalia in Michoacán, as if she were her own daughter. Dalia continues to call her aunt by her first name (rather than using “aunt”), to interact with her sisters and parents by telephone and through letters, and to dream of being a flight attendant (ever since the day she saw one in the airport when her baby sister was sent to the United States).

This transnational family of mixed legal status lives a heart-wrenching drama in which family reunification looms unattainable, complicated by the father’s irresponsibility. As the physical separation has become long-term, the three sisters are moving along life trajectories that differ greatly in terms of Spanish and English language acquisition, schooling opportunities, medical attention, government support, and of course, caregiving arrangements. Dalia’s case starkly illustrates the complexity of decision-making processes in transnational families in which relatives criticize or praise loyalties and mobilize resources for their kin in need of assistance by invoking moral norms. As Dalia’s grandfather explained his support: “How could I not help my family?”
HALF-SIBLINGS AND STEPPARENTS

In following the lives of eight transnational families over an eight-year period, we have become aware of the contingent and volatile nature of transnational motherhood and fatherhood, often the product of rifts in conjugal relationships. Among migrant couples, separation, divorce, or abandonment may lead to the formation of new unions (that may or may not be formalized in marriage) and eventually to the birth of step-siblings. These half-brothers and half-sisters may also become “siblings by telephone” who have never lived together and feel separated by a physical and emotional gulf.

When one of the biological parents forms a new relationship, the child may feel left out and his or her extended family may be concerned about possible mistreatment by a stepparent. The story of Adrián is a case in point. The child of an adolescent single mother, Adrián was raised from infancy by his maternal grandmother, whom he addresses as “Mama Luisa”; she is the only caretaker he has known on a regular basis. The boy has adamantly refused to recognize his biological mother, who is currently living in Chicago with a Mexican man, with whom she has two other children. An attempt by Mama Luisa to reunite Adrián and his mother in Chicago failed miserably. The grandmother cum mother is reluctant to turn Adrián over to her daughter anyway, since she has personally witnessed the physical punishment her “son-in-law” perpetrates on his own children, Adrián’s half-siblings. The grandmother fears that Adrián—who already suffers from emotional problems—might easily bear the brunt of the stepfather’s physical abuse.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION AMONG SIBLINGS

The physical separation of siblings on opposite sides of the U.S.–Mexican border tends to place them on heterogeneous life paths since their upbringing, schooling and job opportunities are radically different. One of the most obvious markers of differential trajectories is language acquisition at school and in the home. Among “siblings by telephone,” lack of language mastery often becomes a formidable obstacle to communication, already hampered by the physical distance separating them. This has been the case with Ana and her siblings. When she finished the ninth grade at the age of fifteen, Ana planned to continue her studies
by attending the senior high school located in the county seat several miles down the highway from her home village. But her fate was changed when her mother made a pivotal decision to join the migrant father in Chicago with the goal of building a bigger house for the family of seven. The mother left with only her youngest son, Roberto (then age seven), leaving Ana in charge of herself and the other three children (then ages fourteen, thirteen, and ten)—all of them students. The paternal grandmother, who lives next door, had adamantly expressed her disapproval of her daughter-in-law’s decision to “abandon her offspring” and refused to take on the responsibility of caring for her grandchildren. Therefore, an unmarried paternal aunt (living with the grandparents next door) was designated the children’s tutor, in charge of the remittances and school matters, while Ana was expected to feed her two younger brothers and one sister, as well as organize household chores. These responsibilities precluded school attendance for Ana.

Although Ana recounts that she did not oppose her mother’s decision because she understood the family’s economic needs, it is clear from her discourse that she immediately faced enormous challenges as a sister-mother; in hindsight she views these years as a sacrifice that she made to the family. In fact, Ana feels that she was subtly forced by her mother to sacrifice three years of her life to rear her siblings. One by one, the two teenage boys migrated illegally to Chicago, where they live and work with their parents. When the youngest sister entered senior high school, Ana did too; both girls completed their twelve years of study and eventually migrated to the United States to join the family.

During the six years Ana and her sister were separated from their parents, communication with Roberto, the youngest sibling who from the viewpoint of the others lived a privileged life in Chicago, became difficult since he preferred to speak in English: “He hardly speaks like us, only English,” reports the grandmother. When the parents in Chicago encouraged Roberto to talk to his siblings in Michoacán, he confessed that he hardly remembered them. The elder sisters are well aware of the different lifestyle that Roberto has in comparison to the rest who were raised in Mexico: while watching a home video of the boy at a soccer match, they pointed out that he has material possessions and opportunities that they lacked, and most important, their parents’ undivided attention. In their narratives, one can detect resentment at the parents’ apparent favoritism and a sense of being treated unfairly. These feelings are clearly expressed by Ana who, ironically, cared for Roberto as an
infant while their mother sold cosmetics door-to-door in the village. The young Roberto used to call his sister “Mama” and the next-door aunts liked to tease Ana when she asked them for advice on diapering or milk formulas: “Why did you go and get married?”

Although Ana benefited from the support of her extended family on her father’s side (given their residential proximity) to lighten her load, she and the other children faced their paternal grandmother’s constant criticism of their biological mother for not loving them. Undeniably, Ana faced adult family and financial responsibilities at a very early age and experienced difficult situations (including sexual harassment at high school) while her parents were far away.

Adoption

As we have seen in the life experiences of these children in transnational families, long-distance child-rearing practices are fluid and contingent, tending to become faits accomplis when they drag on indefinitely. Since many family members are involved as substitute caregivers or tutors, sometimes against their will (as in the case of Ana’s paternal grandmother), disputes arise among them as to what is best for the youngsters. In view of the fact that transnational families are often composed of members with different legal statuses and nationalities, having legitimate documents becomes a resource that can be leveraged (offered, lent) or not (denied) to a relative (usually a son or daughter) in order to “solve” their predicament, or at least improve the situation. When these transactions occur between blood relatives, the resource is placed at the needy relative’s disposal; when they take place between acquaintances, the resource is commodified and a price tag is attached to the documents. Though risky, the lending of valid documents is a ruse commonly used for transporting very young children (whose photographic appearance changes quickly and dramatically) across the border.

The ultimate “sharing” of migratory statuses among family members is legal adoption of a nonbiological child. Within the eight transnational families we followed, this option had been discussed in two cases and carried out in a third. Damián, like Adrián, is the son of a single mother from a small village in the Ecuandureo Valley who never knew his father. At the age of eight, Damián was legally adopted by his uncle (his mother’s sister’s husband) who has legal U.S. residency, where he...
lives with his wife and three daughters. Damián entered this household as a brother to his cousins; he calls his uncle “father,” his aunt “aunt,” and his biological mother “mother.” He visits his mother, an illegal immigrant living several hours away in the United States, on weekends and during summer vacation; she partially supports him. Damián’s extended family considers this to be a win-win solution since—a long with a new surname—it opened up a pathway of opportunities for Damián: legal residency in the United States, the chance to learn both English and Spanish (a future employment asset), and a sense of belonging in two nuclear families.

Adrián’s case is a long-term informal adoption by his maternal grandparents—a situation accepted by his biological mother since his birth, but less so by other family members, who continue to take sides in the protracted matter. Several think that the burden on the grandmother is too great and that the biological mother should belatedly assume her responsibilities. One of Adrián’s maternal uncles and his wife (who reside legally in California) have offered to legally adopt him on one condition: that neither the grandparents nor the biological mother make any future claims on the boy. The other aunts and uncles consider this condition unfair, believing that the grandmother has acquired certain rights through her many years of caregiving. Although the youngster spent several months living with this aunt and uncle and attending school in Los Angeles prior to entering adolescence, he is most accustomed to living with his grandparents in Mexico and they are very emotionally attached to him. When asked where he would like to live, Adrián answered: “with Mama Luisa and Papa Lalo”—the grandparents. Hence, at least during the grandparents’ lifetime, it would appear that Adrián will remain with them; alternative options involving a transfer of parental rights have been put on hold. Yet since both grandparents are in their seventies, Adrián is well aware that they may die before he reaches the age of eighteen (legal adulthood in Mexico); imagining that scenario, he adds despondently: “Then we’ll see who wants me.”

**In the Child’s Best Interest: Discussion**

This study of “siblings by telephone” has attempted to understand the emergence of long-distance childrearing and its increasing frequency among transnational families hailing from Mexico as part of global labor
recruitment practices and transnational ties. We have avoided judging these practices, rather framing them within a paradox that a growing number of parents in Mexico and around the globe face: feeling trapped by the perceived need to physically distance themselves from one, some, or all of their children in order to assure a better future for them. The biological parents make the difficult choice of which child or children (if any) they are able to take along, and which are best left behind or sent back to the homeland to be looked after by alternate caregivers. This paradox creates family relationships without coresidence for some siblings; and as we have argued, understanding how families experience this paradox requires listening to a polyphony of voices.

We have explored some of the life experiences and dilemmas of siblings separated, either temporarily or indefinitely, by the U.S.–Mexican border: juggling the advantages and disadvantages of being a mixed-status transnational family; handling relationships with half-siblings and step-parents; dealing with differential impacts of long-distance child rearing on language and learning opportunities as well as future work; and debating over possible “resolutions” such as adoption. While the children studied have not been abandoned by their biological parents, many clearly face complex psychological problems and feelings of estrangement from their siblings, whom they may view as enjoying better living conditions and care. It would appear that the future of some siblings is assured, while others live adrift in uncertainty.

We have shown how—in response to parental absence—kin relationships are reinvented and resources are channeled toward relatives. Hybrid figures such as grandmother/mother, sister/mother, aunt/mother, uncle/father, and cousin/sister emerge. Such dual roles may in the long run become confusing to the child and difficult to maintain indefinitely. As the extended family knits a safety net around the youngster separated from his or her parent(s), one individual’s legal migratory status may be transformed into a family resource to be requested from, offered to, or denied to the others. The cases of informal or formal adoption by a close relative dramatically illustrate this type of pooling of valuable social capital in the interests of changing the child’s destiny for the better. Adoptions may be experienced by the child and his or her relatives as simply paperwork in a win-win situation (as in the case of Damián) or, in other cases, polarize the entire kin group when its members cannot agree on what is in the child’s best interest (as in the case of Adrián).
Directions for Future Research

This exploratory study suggests a vast research agenda that will require the collaboration of experts willing to avail themselves of insights from a number of fields (such as family history, psychology, anthropology, demography, family sociology, and law) and to close the gap among these disciplines. It will also test the theoretical legitimacy and methodological creativity of family specialists as they crack open the black box of interpersonal relationships in transnational families living out their existence in transnational social fields.

We must better understand the implications of increasing numbers of mixed-status transnational families for kinship ties and household dynamics. We need to delve into the particularities and emotional challenges of relationships between half-siblings and stepparents. We must reflect upon the considerable hurdles to effective communication and to the forging of emotional ties between siblings who are separated by international borders, even as communication technologies multiply. Attention should be given to the safety net constructed by caregivers as they specialize in specific child-rearing tasks, e.g., relatives designated as tutors for children attending school far from their parents. It is also essential to gauge the potential consequences of children assuming family responsibilities at an early age, well before their peers do.

It is important to further probe the gendered nature of caregiving in different cultural contexts. In our study region and in Mexico as a whole, the physical care and nurturing of human beings in sickness and in health is normalized as being a traditionally female terrain. Accordingly, substitute mothers are preferably sought out within the maternal kin group. Yet, as we have seen in this case study, male figures are not completely absent; rather they appear as emergency or substitute providers and as candidates for sharing legal documents, since they (more often than women) have acquired legal status to live and work in the United States.

Finally, there is a pressing need to conduct comparative historical and cross-cultural research on long-distance child-rearing arrangements. As massive migrations mobilize hundreds of millions of persons worldwide, the phenomenon of parent-child separation is definitely on the rise around the globe and has only begun to be documented on various continents and regions as diverse as the Americas, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East. While it may have similar causes rooted in political economy, its meanings and lived experiences vary in different contexts.
By examining who cares for the children in the (temporary or protracted) absence of their biological parents in a cross-cultural perspective, we can begin to scratch the surface of a complex family matter deeply rooted in political economy. If, as Bras and van Tilburg (2007: 297) suggest, “the idea of the inherent quality or naturalness of kinship” is in fact under siege, then the study of sibling relationships should be a vital part of probing “how kinship, or better relatedness, is constructed and functions in various contexts.” We can profitably do so from a gendered and transnational stance. For example, how is kin solidarity generated? How do men and women participate in it in different ways? How are commitments enforced or overlooked? Which legitimizing discourses are (or are not) invoked when material resources or kin-work are mobilized? How are alternate caregivers selected and recruited? Why do we find that women (preferably a maternal grandmother, a spinster aunt, or an elder sister) are the first choices among Mexicans and certain other ethnic or national groups? Why are transnational paternity and maternity valued differently?

This article has illustrated how persons immersed in transnational lives, who face continuing challenges to their social reproduction, are extremely resilient; they close ranks, take risks, pool resources, and seem to strengthen their resolve in the face of common danger and formidable obstacles. They act in what they consider to be the children’s best interests—though that in itself is a disputed terrain. In doing so, parents, children, and other relatives fashion new understandings of kin and kin-work by questioning and reworking shared schemas and interpretive frameworks. Thus, they reshape the family.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, we have no reliable figures on the number of child migrants nor those who stay behind, since both groups go largely undetected in surveys and censuses. Rather we must draw upon partial evidence from a variety of sources that point to a surge in this young population. With regard to the first group, migration specialist Rodolfo Tuirán (2006: 24) recently estimated that of more than 6.5 million undocumented Mexicans in the United Status, one million are under the age of eighteen. A 2003 study conducted by the Mexican government agency DIF (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) and UNICEF confirmed that the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service was annually detaining and deporting thousands of children attempting to cross the border, some of them accompanied but an increasing number unaccompanied by family members.
Using data generated by the Mexican agency Instituto Nacional de Migración for 2003–2006, García, Molina, and López (2007: 13) reported that the annual number of child deportation cases reached the 40,000 to 50,000 range. López and Díaz (2003: 150–52), analyzing data on return migrants from a national demographic survey (ENADID) conducted in 1992 and again in 1997, reported that the 0–17-year age group was the fastest growing one. With regard to the second group of youngsters, those left behind by parents, their teachers and alternate caretakers are the principal informants interviewed in ethnographic research. See, for example, the methodological discussion in Mummert (2006) and Triano’s (2006) study of “donut households” in rural Mexico composed of grandparents and grandchildren while the “missing” intermediate generation migrated to work elsewhere.

2. Wilson (2000) makes a cogent case for interpreting the current nativist upsurge in the United States as an attempt to enforce anew a separation of production and reproduction among Mexican immigrants, leaving the labor force “unencumbered” by family responsibilities and therefore able to be over-exploited.

Some researchers have referred to this pattern of family reproduction across borders as split or divided households (see López 1986; Kanaiaupuni 2000: 1–2), while others have stressed the importance of women-centered networks in kinwork and caring work across the transnational social field. (Also see Alicea 1997 for the case of Puerto Rican women moving between the home island and the continental United States.)

3. Nina Glick Schiller, one of the pioneer proponents of a transnational framework for studying contemporary migrants, specifies that this field has “examined transnational flows of culture, idea, capital and people.” She goes on to distinguish between globalization and transnational studies: “Transnational Studies highlight processes and connections across specific state borders. State actors and institutions are understood to be important participants in shaping but not limiting the social, cultural, economic, and political linkages of people” (2005: 439–40).

4. The eight transnational families we followed longitudinally are presented in table 1. One child with siblings in the United States was identified at school, but the others were identified in the course of interviews conducted as part of a larger study dealing with transformations in rural families in migratory settings. This study began in 1991 and has involved multi-site fieldwork with Mexican migrant and nonmigrant families in the Ecuandureo Valley of northwestern Michoacán, California’s Central Valley, and suburban Chicago by a team of researchers headed by the primary author. Data were collected by means of household surveys, archival searches, and hundreds of in-depth and open-ended interviews with men and women of different generations (see Mummert 1999). We acknowledge the vital contribution made by the following research assistants in the interviews, transcriptions of taped interviews and field notes, and data processing: Alejandra Camarena Ortiz, Alberto Flores Hernández, and Eduardo Santiago Nabor.
5. We embrace the position of Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007: 242) in their recent introduction to an overview of childhood studies in anthropology: “rather than privileging children’s voices above all others, it is more productive to integrate children into a more multivocal, multiperspective view of culture and society.”

6. For example, Hagan (1994: xv) reports on Mayan parents in Houston sending a newborn baby with friends to be raised in the Mayan tradition by grandparents in Guatemala, while Levitt (2001) observed many cases of adolescents sent back to the Dominican Republic from Boston to stay with relatives there.

7. In all cases pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of the families who shared their life stories.

8. A notable exception to these two extremes is the prize-winning film *Al otro lado* directed by Gustavo Loza in 2005. This Mexican filmmaker portrays the odysseys of three children—a Mexican boy from the Lake Zirahuen region of Michoacán, a Moroccan girl from a rural village, and a Cuban youngster from Havana—as they search for their migrant fathers. Each child attempts to make sense of the ways the father’s absence affects the family unit and shapes its future.

9. In a recent study of transnational adoptions, Briggs (2006: 49) documents precisely this position being voiced by adoptive parents and lawyers involved in illegal adoptions who believe they are “saving” the children from a worse fate.

10. Intensive maternity refers to an ideology widespread in the West positing that the biological mother cares naturally and exclusively for her child. She is judged to be the most appropriate caregiver because that role supposedly springs from the maternal instinct (see Solé and Parella 2005: 5).

11. Unmarried and in her forties, Amelia is considered a spinster in rural Mexico—a woman who has few possibilities of finding a husband. In a transnational family, she is an ideal candidate to be a substitute mother.

12. In rural mestizo communities such as the one where Adrián lives, it is not uncommon to address a grandparent in this fashion, although the diminuitive of *grandmother* or *grandfather* (abuelita/abuelito) is more usual.

13. Although parents in many cultures delegate to older siblings some responsibilities for caretaking and socializing their younger siblings (see Cicirelli 1994), Ana’s full-time responsibilities far exceeded such custodial roles. To use Stack and Burton’s terminology (1994: 37), Ana was kin-scripted to care for her younger siblings. As these authors explain, “It is important to understand how power is brought into play within the context of kin-time and kin-work. The question this raises is summed up in the tension reflected in kin-scription. Rather than accept the attempts of individuals to set their own personal agendas, families are continually rounding up, summoning, or recruiting individuals for kin-work. Some kin, namely women and children, are easily recruited.”

14. If the perpetrators are caught by immigration officials, the documents are confiscated.

15. Briggs (2006) argues that, in the current age of neoliberalism and globalization, transnational adoptions of children from the South and East by parents in the North and West are linked to a range of illegal activities built
upon transnational networks (kidnapping, forced prostitution, and human organ trafficking)—all of which have been documented as occurring in Mexico.

16. Briggs (2006: 55–56) makes a useful distinction between formal and informal adoption, showing how both practices have historical roots in cultural matrixes.

17. Ye, Murray, and Yihuan (2005) conducted a study of rural children left behind in relatives’ care by parents migrating to the cities of Midwest China. The migration of Philippine women to Rome and Los Angeles has been studied by Salazar-Parreñas (2000), and to Taiwan by Lan (2003), while most recently cases of South American women working in Europe and leaving children in their homelands have been documented by Solé and Parella (2005) for Barcelona, and by Raijman, Schammah-Gesser, and Kemp (2003) for Israel.

**Bibliography**


