

# **Family Separation and Emotional Distress in a Transnational U.S.-Mexico Immigrant Community**

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## **Introduction**

The emotional repercussions of migration are experienced not only by individuals who migrate, but also by their family members and friends that remain at home. Transnational families separated by migration have to adapt their familial roles and relations across borders (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, Dreby 2010, Hondagnue and Sotelo 1998, Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007, Schmalzbauer 2004). In order to adapt to the loss of family members due to migration, families in origin communities and migrants in destination communities must depend on larger social networks for social and emotional support and to help fulfil the roles of the missing family members. Although transnational families rely heavily on social networks, their relationships within broader migrant networks are under-researched.

Transnational scholars recognize the importance of using methodologies that acknowledge intersections between the social networks of migrants and individuals in origin communities (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), but quantitative studies in particular have not been particularly successful in incorporating social network analysis into migration research (for exceptions see work emerging from the Mexican Migration Project Data, Massey 1987). In order to examine the issue of family separation within the context of a social network, we use the quantitative Network Survey of Immigration and Transnationalism (NSIT) to directly gauge measures of emotional well-being and social embeddedness of both migrants and non-migrants within a binational, multisite, migration network. We hypothesize that the more centrally entrenched in a social network an individual is, the better he or she will be able to cope with the separation from their family member(s). In spite of the anticipated benefits of wide-reaching social network ties, we do

not expect social support from social networks to supplant the emotional support of close family members, particularly for women.

The NSIT (N=600) is an innovative data set that uses a sampling strategy that gets at the heart of the social network and affords the opportunity to measure the strength and breadth of social ties among migrants and non-migrants within a binational social network. The survey includes both quantitative and qualitative components. Because the survey, described in further detail below, allows respondents to nominate family and friends on both sides of the border, and has questions that specifically measure the frequency of communication for each of these ties, we are able to examine how day-to-day relationships among migrants and non-migrants correlate to their well-being. Moreover, unlike previous quantitative surveys, we can also measure correlations between levels of emotional well-being and levels of assimilation as well as levels of entrenchment within the social network. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data and sampling out in two rounds from friends and family members of the initial seed respondents, the NSIT goes beyond the capacities of previous studies addressing transnational families.

### **Background: Gender and Family Separation**

Research has suggested that while families across borders generally maintain connections with their kin, lengthy separations can bring about emotional hardships that can threaten the quality of life both for migrants (Espin 1987 and 1999, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997) and their families in the communities of origin (Dreby, 2010, Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007, Silver forthcoming). Most of our knowledge about transnational families comes from qualitative studies with small samples, and most of these

studies only examine the emotional repercussions of family separation on one side of the border (for notable exceptions, see Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999, Dreby 2009 and 2010, and Schmalzbauer 2004). The multitude of qualitative studies examining transnational families has demonstrated a need for larger quantitative studies to examine the emotional impacts of migration on transnational families.

Psychological and emotional repercussions of migration should not be downplayed in the literature as they are an important aspect of transnational life. Quantitative studies about migration and emotional well-being focus almost exclusively on migrants while neglecting their families remaining in origin communities (Berry 1997, Bhugra et al. 2004, Espin 1987 and 1999, Sundquist et al. 2000). Because migrants do not exist in a vacuum their well-being may affect the well-being of their families in origin communities, and vice versa. Qualitative studies addressing the emotional repercussions of migration have found that family members, and particularly women, in both origin and destination communities experience substantial hardships as a result of family member migration (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, Dreby 2010, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). Both qualitative and quantitative research has demonstrated that migration is a gendered process with distinct gendered outcomes. Because of cultural conceptions that situate a woman's central role within the family as a wife and mother, renegotiations of families across transnational borders have generally affected women more negatively than men (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, Dreby, 2010, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007, Salazar Pareñas 2005, Silver forthcoming).

Despite a recognition that researchers should examine migrants within a social field that extends beyond one insular nation-state (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), most studies

do not fully acknowledge a migrant's social network when examining repercussions of migration. Studies that extend the field of analysis beyond national borders, moreover, tend to only examine transnational *family members* while neglecting *larger networks of support* which are essential to the lived experiences of migrants and individuals in origin communities. Aside from acknowledging "other mothers" who are often kin (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), studies generally neglect social support that extends beyond this primary position of mother role replacement. Furthermore, studies that recognize the influence of social networks on transnational families tend to stress the negative repercussions of social control and gossip about transnational families in the origin communities while neglecting wider social networks as units of social support (Dreby 2009, Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). The social networks in which migrants and their families are embedded may have both negative and positive influences over the ways in which transnational families maintain and renegotiate their relationships.

While qualitative studies have advanced our understanding of transnational families considerably, quantitative studies have largely neglected in-depth examinations of family relations across borders. Most quantitative explorations of transnational families have stressed the economic benefits of family member migration (Durand et al. 1996; Massey and Parrado 1994; Taylor 1992; Taylor 1999) without simultaneously acknowledging the emotional hardships that emerge from family separation. Quantitative studies that address the emotional impacts of migration, moreover, are generally unable to assess the strength of bonds between family members across borders and must rely instead on indirect measures of family closeness (Silver forthcoming). By relying on direct measures of the strength of family ties and by situating migrants and their kin within a broader framework

of a social network (see Figure 1), this study uses both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the interactive influences of migration and social networks on the emotional well being of transnational families.

### **Data and Research Design**

The data for this study comes from the Network Survey of Immigration and Transnationalism (NSIT), an innovative, multisite social network survey of a binational community in Guanajuato, Mexico; Houston, Texas and the Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill triangle region of North Carolina (Chávez, Mouw, Edelblute, and Verdery 2010). The NSIT is primarily a quantitative survey of 600 individuals within a migration network spanning three communities and two countries. Figure 1 provides a visual map of the binational social network. We also collected qualitative data by asking free-response questions with a subsample of 100 individuals. In addition to incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data, the NSIT allows for direct measures of social networks by examining both the depth and breadth of the social ties of individuals within the network.

The survey was collected in two steps. First, a snowball sample of migrants in the destination community in North Carolina was conducted, starting with 10 seeds. As discussed in Chavez, Mouw, Edelbute, and Verdery (2010), we undertook several measures to protect the privacy and gain the trust of community members in the U.S. and Mexico while conducting the survey. Most importantly, we trained community members to collect the data and assist with the referral process to new interviews, which was critical for the diffusion of information about the survey and the high response rate that we obtained (85% in the U.S. and 97% in Mexico).

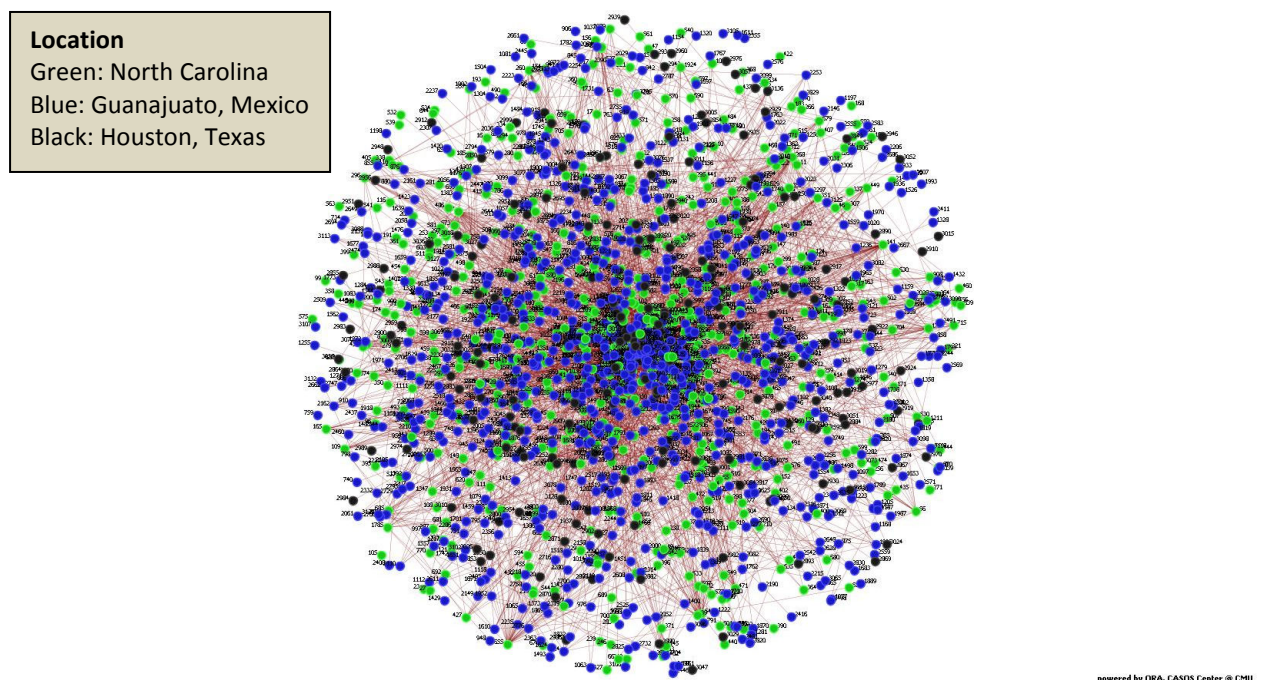
After a month of data collection in North Carolina, we randomly selected 17 friends and family nominations in Mexico non-migrants (including returned migrants) who were nominated as friends and/or relatives from our N.C. sample as seeds for the second stage of sampling in Guanajuato, Mexico. For each of these initial seeds, we sampled four levels deep into their social network using a branching tree-structure to organize the subsequent waves of sampling: we sampled 2 friends and 2 relatives from the seed person, then 1 friend and 1 relative from each of the stage two respondents, then 1 friend or relative from each of the stage 3 respondents, for a total of 21 respondents from the extended social network of each seed. In addition, we attempted to sample all returned migrants who were mentioned in the N.C. sample that we could locate.

By examining the number of family and friends that each respondent nominates, we are able to assess the breadth of their social support system. Moreover, we can assess the level of interconnectedness within the social network. These measures will afford the opportunity to test if insular versus varied social networks are correlated with higher degrees of wellbeing and coping with family member absence due to migration.

In addition to the innovative sampling design which allows us to more accurately situate respondents within their social networks, we are also able to assess the strength of their social networks in both conception and practice. By directly asking respondents how much they miss their relatives in other countries, we have a direct measure of the conceived strength of their transnational social ties. By also asking them about the frequency of communication, we can measure the strength of their ties in practice. As frequent communication may not only convey affection but also social control (Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007), the qualitative data will allow us to add texture and nuance to our

interpretations of our quantitative findings. In addition to direct measures of social ties and happiness, the data also allows us to assess various measures of assimilation, acculturation and identity. When analyzed together, all of these measures will allow for an empirical analysis of how social networks influence processes of incorporation for migrants and impact emotional well-being for transnational families.

**Figure 1: Binational Migration Network Map**



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