

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES THROUGH THE LENS OF MULTI-SITED QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: COSTS, BENEFITS, AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

LAS FAMILIAS TRANSNACIONALES A TRAVÉS DE LA LENTE DE LA INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA MULTISITUADA: COSTES, BENEFICIOS Y TRANSFORMACIONES DE UN ENFOQUE METODOLÓGICO

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Cómo citar este artículo / Citation: Soriano Miras, Rosa; Carolina Escobar-Blanco and Rita Sobczyk. 2025. "Transnational families through the lens of multi-sited qualitative research: costs, benefits, and transformations of a methodological approach", *Revista Internacional de Sociología* 83(4): e288. <https://doi.org/10.3989/ris.2025.83.4.1519>

Submitted: 13/01/2025. **Accepted:** 1/08/2025. **Published:** 02/02/2026

ABSTRACT

The datafication and technologization tendencies that affect our societies stimulate a debate as to the need to adapt our research strategies to the changing social landscape. This paper contributes to this debate by examining the potential of a multi-sited qualitative approach to analysing transnational family ties and by discussing possible future scenarios for the development of this field of research. We use a case study, in which a matched sample analysis methodology was used, to understand transnational practices of Colombian migrants in Spain. Drawing on this study, we illustrate and discuss the benefits and problems that have traditionally characterized multi-sited research. Special emphasis is put on practices that can be applied today to reduce research costs and the challenges of multi-sited studies. We argue that remote strategies can serve to complement and expand the existing range of methodological tools, while defending the potential and relevance of face-to-face contact and "thick" descriptions.

KEYWORDS: Transnational families; multi-sited research; thick data; qualitative methodology

RESUMEN

Las tendencias a la dataficación y la tecnologización que afectan a nuestras sociedades suscitan un debate sobre la necesidad de adaptar nuestras estrategias de investigación a un panorama social en rápida evolución. Este

artículo contribuye a este debate ofreciendo una reflexión sobre el potencial del enfoque cualitativo multisituado para analizar los vínculos familiares transnacionales e indagando sobre posibles escenarios futuros en los que se desarrolle este ámbito de investigación. Se presenta un estudio de caso donde se utilizó una metodología de análisis de muestras emparejadas, para comprender las prácticas transnacionales de los migrantes colombianos en España. A partir del estudio, examinamos los beneficios y problemas que tradicionalmente han caracterizado la investigación multisituada. Se hace especial hincapié en las prácticas que pueden aplicarse hoy en día para reducir los costes de investigación y los retos de los estudios multisituados. Argumentamos que las estrategias a distancia pueden servir para ampliar la gama existente de prácticas metodológicas, al tiempo que defendemos la relevancia del contacto personal y las descripciones «densas».

PALABRAS CLAVE: Familias transnacionales; estudios multisituados; dato denso; metodología cualitativa

1. INTRODUCTION

The research on transnational families has consolidated in recent decades as an important strand of migration studies (Baldassar et al. 2024; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Cienfuegos-Illanes and Brandhorst 2023), raising an array of questions about the forms of maintaining a sense of “familyhood” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002:3) in the context of geographical distance. This paper analyzes both the benefits and the challenges, costs, and limitations of adopting a multi-sited qualitative perspective to study transnational families in a context characterized by technological developments in communication. It contributes to the existing literature by discussing the possible implications of technological transformations that have increased human reliance on remote communication tools. It uses a case study focused on the transnational practices of families living between Spain and Colombia to illustrate the potential of the multi-sited approach, drawing on examples from fieldwork and the data analysis process. The presented study illustrates the benefits, but also the difficulties that tend to characterize multi-sited strategies. The discussion of costs associated with multi-sited strategies serves to initiate a reflection on online and other remote alternatives to face-to-face contact that have created both a possibility to lower the budget of research projects, but also a powerful incentive that may discourage researchers from addressing social realities in their context.

The paper starts with an incursion into the origins, rationale, and uses of the multi-sited approach in the study of transnational families. This is followed by the case study that focuses on the methodological aspects of research, enabling us to exemplify and discuss the shortcomings as well as the insights provided by applying multi-sited qualitative strategies to study transnational family life. Finally, based on experience in multi-sited research and exchanges between the authors of the paper, we reflect on the implications of technological transformations for the future of multi-sited studies. We argue that remote strategies may serve to complement and expand the existing array of methodological tools, for example, in the framework of hybrid designs, defending at the same time the potential and relevance of face-to-face contact and “thick” descriptions that have characterized multi-sited qualitative research.

2. MULTI-SITED QUALITATIVE STRATEGIES IN THE CURRENT RESEARCH ON TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Multi-sited research initially emerged as a largely qualitative strategy, with quantitative and mixed approaches expanding in subsequent years (Fauser 2018). It has become an important strategy to address transnational ties and practices that develop within families that are spatially dispersed. The main underlying idea is that in the context of globalization and diversification of migratory flows, family life cannot be understood if we limit our research to one location. As families operate across borders (Escobar-Blanco and Soriano-Miras 2015), the multi-sited perspective enables researchers to expand the process of data collection and analysis to encompass multiple places and in-between social fields, addressing such issues as the organization of care (Francisco-Menchavez 2020), gender roles (Acedera and Yeoh 2020) or patterns of parenthood and child-rearing (Mazzucato, Dankyi, and Poeze 2017). In this section, we first discuss the development of a multi-sited approach and its relation to the transnational perspective. This is followed by an incursion into the applicability of multi-sited strategies to study transnational family life.

The academic trajectories of the multi-sited approach and the concept of transnationalism have been profoundly intertwined (Boccagni 2016). From the theoretical point of view, the transnational perspective, which gained momentum from the beginning of the 1990s (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992) and has profoundly marked the development of migration studies, has been key in questioning methodological

nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) and highlighting the relevance of bonds, activities, and networks that connect migrants with their families both in their home countries as well as elsewhere.

Notwithstanding, the application of the transnational lens has been subject to serious criticism as it may blur the comprehension of the power of states or the influence of nationalist ideas that have a bearing, among other factors, in terms of migration policies, family reunification measures or interactions with host societies (Scheel and Tazzioli 2022). The role of place and local contexts in shaping migrants' experiences has also been emphasized (Soriano-Miras, Trinidad-Requena, and Barros-Rodríguez 2023). Many researchers drew attention to the overuse of the concept of transnationalism, questioning the real extent to which migrants and non-migrants develop lives across borders (Portes 1999).

In practice, and beyond solely the transnational sphere, multi-sited studies require researchers to trace the social phenomena built upon connections across diverse places. In qualitative designs, it typically means that the researchers become mobile and move between two or more locations, participating in migrants' and non-migrants' networks, "following" (Marcus 1995) their symbolic, emotional, sociocultural, political, or economic networks. It is fundamental to highlight that multi-sited research is not merely about adding places (Francisco-Menchavez 2020), but rather about capturing what happens within transnational spaces through the relationships, interactions, and practices that underpin migrants' family lives. It is about understanding the connections and "the in-between", to use the words of Paolo Boccagni (2016). It is based on structuring the research in various locations in such a way that a phenomenon that connects them can be analyzed through a single question (Mazzucato and Wagner 2018).

In transnational family studies, the multi-sited approach has been extensively used to address diverse aspects of family life. The organization of care and its exchange, be it in material, affective, online, face-to-face, or other form, has occupied a central role in this literature (Baldassar et al. 2024). Experiences of children, elderly parents, and other family members who require daily assistance, the redefinition of domestic and labor market obligations within families as a result of migration, or the impact of these new arrangements on gender roles and hierarchies (Acedera and Yeoh 2020) have all been present in research interests since the end of the twentieth century. From the point of view of the analysis of emotions, a strong emphasis has been put on capturing the experience of separation from loved ones and obligations towards them (Mahmud and Soriano-Miras 2025; Stock 2024), as well as on feelings that accompany tensions, over power that may arise, for example, in the context of the negotiation of gender roles. Current restrictions on mobility highlight the relevance of the political sphere in the articulation of transnational family life. The "im/mobility turn" (Bélanger and Silvey 2020) has drawn attention, for example, to limitations that impede or minimize possibilities for family reunification, cross-border travelling, family visits, or circular migration.

Despite the obstacles to cross-border mobility, Riccio (2021) argues that even among migrants who are not transmigrants, the comprehension of their context of origin is crucial to understanding their realities. To cite Boccagni (2016:4) once more: in one way or another, at least some aspects of migrants' lives are "affected by a reference to 'something' which is physically absent: a dear one left behind, the past ways of living or the homeland as a whole". As a result, some form of analytical attention to sending contexts is normally necessary.

This leads us to a fundamental debate as to the relationship between different methodological designs and research conclusions. What is highlighted and what is omitted when we compare multi-sited research with studies that work either only with migrants in the host countries or only with families in the origin? Francisco-Menchavez's (2020) study of what she calls "multidirectional care", conducted between Manila and New York City, led her to question if her results would hold if she opted for a different methodological strategy. If she limited her study to one site, the financial aspect of care would become most strongly visible, whereas fieldwork conducted in the framework of multi-sited ethnography enabled her to pay attention to diverse forms of transnational care. In the same line, the findings of Mazzucato and associates (2017), based on a mixed-method study conducted between Ghana and the Netherlands, showed there were differences in terms of reported care networks between children, parents, and caregivers. If the study was limited to just one site, this heterogeneity, as well as family tensions attached to it, would not have been detected, omitting diverse notions of care and an understanding of who the carers and caregivers are and how care should be executed. This example shows the utility of the multi-sited perspective to capture the complexity of present forms of care and of contexts characterized by circulation. The development of mobility and connections may rely on "knowledge on how to circulate," which requires individuals to have the ability to function within diverse social contexts, as evidenced in the study by Herrera and Arjona (2025:6). Transnational families may use different forms of capital (social, cultural or economic) and rely on competencies based on mobility as a form of managing resources in multi-sited migration scenarios.

There is, thus, a series of transnational phenomena that cannot be captured through single-site research. The research perspective depends on the object of study, and in the case of a multi-sited lens, the aim is to capture the complexity of experiences of families whose functioning goes beyond one place. This is especially relevant if we focus on migrants and other social actors engaged in intense and long-term cross-border mobility and exchange. Today, this exchange is strongly affected by the impact of digital tools for communication, leading to transnational interactions online (Cabalquinto and Hu 2023; Pool 2024). However, in this paper, we argue that the analysis of the transnational family milieu still requires researchers to have first-hand experience of what it means to lead a mobile life. As observed by Falzon (2009), moving back and forth between diverse locations may potentially lead to weaker relations with participants than if researchers stayed in one specific site. However, the author also suggests that precisely this being “in-between” can help us better understand the everyday experiences of migrants whose lives span across borders. Understanding individuals and groups who are “on the move” may require researchers to undertake “mobile ethnographies” (King 2018). On the one hand, there is a risk of exaggerating the impact of mobility, even in the case of otherwise transnational migrants (Sobczyk, Soriano-Miras, and Caballero-Calvo 2020). However, a fixation on one single place might be difficult to uphold if mobility and connection become a crucial element of the lives of migrants and migrant families. An interesting example of the influence of mobility comes from the literature on children of migrants. In many cases, children may spend extended periods in their progenitors’ homeland or may travel frequently, maintaining connections with their families abroad. A recent study by Jin and Gómez-Pellón (2022) shows the existence of such dynamics, for example, among descendants of migrants from China in Spain.

The influence of transnationalism on socio-economic, gender, and other forms of inequalities constitutes another key issue, with questions arising as to the potential of transnational practices to promote upward mobility, transform the existing family structures, or, rather, to reproduce power imbalance. The evaluation of this impact becomes complex as migrants may employ “multiple horizons of self-positioning” (Fauser 2018:397) when building their identities, taking as a point of reference host societies, countries of origin, migrant communities, or other social formations. Among transnational migrants whose contact with families in the country of origin is intense and intimate, the development of such complex frameworks of reference may be especially strong, and as such, requires a multi-sited gaze.

3. COSTS AND CRITIQUES OF MULTI-SITED RESEARCH

While multi-sited research has a wide range of applications, it is also not without its problems and difficulties. In the following section, we will focus on the main challenges that have traditionally affected this methodological strategy.

One of the most influential critiques refers to its costs in terms of the depth of results when a study involves moving between various locations. “Thick” description and in-depth comprehension may become a high price to pay in multi-sited designs (Marcus 2011). As expressed by Falzon (2009:7), “given that this type of research implies moving around and <following> horizontally, there is little time for staying put and <following> vertically”, which leads to “breadth vs. depth conundrum” (Mazzucato 2024:60). The underlying idea is thus that multi-sited designs may translate into less time spent at a single site, resulting in fewer data collection opportunities. As indicated by Hage (2005), one of the fiercest voices against multi-sited research, this methodological option makes it difficult for researchers to become truly immersed within the studied context. The author goes so far as to question the very possibility of doing multi-sited research. Adding new locations to study designs, simply for the sake of being able to call them “multi-sited”, may be associated with the irreflexive treatment of the strategy. In this sense Hage (2005:466) defends that we are rather dealing with a “globally spread, geographically non-contiguous site” when the research focus is on relations and connections between people and sites. However, we argue that to grasp the complexity of the transnational connection and its impact on the everyday lives of individuals, it is necessary to turn to a multi-sited perspective, as the experience of social actors is of a multi-sited character.

This takes us to the questions surrounding the delimitation of the research site or sites. How do we select them? What should be the criteria when making that choice? Should the decision to expand the research to various sites be a response to realities observed on the ground, or should we opt for a multi-sited option *a priori*, in the phase of research design? Taking into consideration the process of social construction of space and time, a fundamental question that requires attention concerns the relation between the local and wider social structures that extend beyond it. The problematization of precisely this relationship was addressed by Marcus (1995) in the nineties, and requires careful reflection in any research that aims to address family life in the context of migration. In the end, it is always the researcher who has the final say as to where to conduct fieldwork and, therefore, how to spatially define their study. As a response to this challenge, various

authors (Francisco-Menchavez 2020; Riccio 2021) highlight the crucial role of research participants and of the insights gathered throughout fieldwork in guiding the process of selection of sites that compose the social field explored through a multi-sited approach. Durand and Massey's (2004) research on Mexican migration to the United States, employing a multi-sited research design through both community-based interviews in Mexico and in-depth interviews focused on family networks detected in the US, has provided valuable insights into the social, economic, and political factors shaping Mexican migration patterns and experiences since 1982. The temporalities expressed by migrants and non-migrants, and analyzed through a life-course perspective (Erlinghagen 2021), may also serve to capture the most relevant sites that link biographies across space and time (Lauer and Wong 2010).

Similar dilemmas surface concerning sampling procedures. Throughout the research, certain networks and certain phenomena are analyzed, whereas others remain in the shadows (Riccio 2021). Again, the researchers' choices as to which participants and networks to study are crucial. In this regard, a "matched-sample methodology," as implemented by Mazzucato (2010), serves as an example of a strategy that follows social networks of migrants, gathering information on the same families residing in diverse locations. In other cases of multi-sited processes, researchers may opt not to contact different members of the same family due to ethical reasons. This is, for example, the case of Stock's (2024) research on emotions in transnational contexts in the case of Syrian migrants and their communities. Although she conducted research in Germany, Lebanon, and Syria, the author purposefully decided not to engage different family members from different places, as certain emotions, such as guilt and envy, might lead to secrets or conflicts within families that are difficult to address when polyphonic strategies are applied.

Finally, in addition to theoretical limitations and dilemmas, multi-sited research may become problematic if looked at from the point of view of its economic, emotional, social, and environmental costs, which raises questions as to the sustainability of multi-sited designs. Travel, visa, or accommodation budgets are an obvious setback, not to mention the bureaucratic obstacles of long-distance geographic mobility. However, there might also be a psychological and physical toll of moving between places and relations. The price paid by researchers in terms of their personal and family lives may not receive as much scientific interest as their study results, but drawing attention to this issue should not be relegated to informal contexts, not least as it affects the long-term feasibility of multi-sited projects. There is, therefore, a need to examine multi-sited research from the perspective of the personal biographies of researchers.

The environmental cost of multi-sited research is another issue. In times in which environmental goals require full political, scientific, and public commitment, embedding international travel into our research designs generates ethical dilemmas. In the context of the climate crisis, one might ask if multi-sited research should be encouraged at this specific time in human history. The response to such dilemmas is complex, and it becomes even more so in the reality of technological and methodological innovations that profoundly change the outlined characteristics of multi-sited studies. After addressing our case study in the following section, we will discuss the impact of these innovations on the future of multi-sited research, the new challenges associated with it, as well as possible solutions.

4. DESIGN AND CHALLENGES OF MULTI-SITED RESEARCH: TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY DYNAMICS BETWEEN SOUTHERN SPAIN AND COLOMBIA

This section focuses on a case study that applied a multi-sited perspective to analyze transnational families that live between Spain and Colombia. The research was conducted between 2010 and 2014. Through the case study, we discuss the methodological challenges of the multi-sited perspective in ethnographic approaches.

We first address the context of the study. The aim of the research, based on a mixed-method design, was to examine the impact of the economic crisis in Spain in 2007 on the practices¹ and relations of transnational families of Colombian women residing in Granada, as well as on the transformations and continuities of their migratory projects.

In the first phase, a survey was conducted among the Colombian population, 18 years old or older, residing in Granada with the aim of analyzing their socio-demographic profile, family and labor situation, remittances, and their perspective on the future of their migratory projects. The sample size amounted to 350. It was developed based on the official figures (INE, 2011) regarding the Colombian population residing in Granada, which amounted to 2093. The calculation assumed a 5% margin of error, a 95% confidence level, and the maximum

1. Transnational family practices are understood as dynamics linked to decisions about the distribution of economic expenditure, consumption patterns, and strategies for achieving some material or immaterial goals.

degree of heterogeneity ($p=q=50\%$). However, taking into consideration the purpose of this paper, which is to discuss the challenges of a multi-sited perspective in research on transnational families, the results of this phase are not of interest. What is relevant, however, is that this part of the project allowed for the identification of a subsample of Colombian women for the second phase of the research, which lasted two years and focused on transnational family practices. First, it was decided to interview only women, as the survey revealed their central role in social reproduction and in managing transnational ties. Their experiences provide insight into how family roles and responsibilities are reconfigured in migration contexts, especially in terms of caregiving and long-distance cohesion strategies (Ciurlo 2014; Parella Rubio 2007).

The first contacts established with the community confirmed that the decision as to how to obtain data and how to configure the sample should be made based on fieldwork (Palinkas et al. 2015). At this stage, observation was also incorporated, focusing on events organized by Colombian associations in Granada (mostly led by women) such as Christmas parties, Hispanic parades, and other activities, such as electoral voting days or visits of the Colombian mobile consulate. This part of the research was also conducted in different gathering places of the Colombian population, such as bars, restaurants, and sports venues, which together allowed us to learn about the diverse situations and realities that form the context in which family life unfolds. Skilled migration was also analyzed by using academic networks to learn about women's daily lives and their transnational practices.

Biographic narratives of the interviewed women were constructed to analyze their discourse. This was conducted using an intersectional perspective. Each woman recounted her life trajectory from childhood, the characteristics of the place where she lived and the composition of her social network, her educational and labor market path, and family relationships, which led them to the moment in which they started to consider migration. Subsequent personal and family experiences were also included and analyzed to capture the different stages of the migration process. This part of the research confirmed that despite the diversity of their profiles, transnational family relationships played a relevant role in their daily lives. These practices included sending remittances, maintaining constant communications, making family agreements, or projecting their plans to stay in Granada, return to Colombia, or move to another place. The importance of understanding the non-economic dimensions of transnational families, including emotional health, agreements, and the distribution of roles in the household, was captured through fieldwork. The third phase of the research was initiated at that point. Based on the matched sample methodology (Mazzucato, 2010), it included trips to different sites that made up the migratory experience (Marcus, 1995) of the interviewed women.

This phase posed several challenges. One of them was the dispersion of the families over a wide area, which required travelling over 5000 km with little funding. This phase lasted six months and was carried out in the cities of Armenia, Cartago, Manizales, Valparaíso, Medellín, Barranquilla and Bogotá. According to Riccio (2021), researchers' framing is a crucial element of the process of constructing multi-sited research. In our case this meant, among other things, that the data gathering process was conceived as research in motion, which was carried out through dynamic and constant transformations and adjustments according to the challenges observed, the strategies adopted for their resolution, and the theoretical, conceptual and methodological maturity developed in the framework of a highly complex multi-sited research process.

The reconstruction of participants' feelings and experiences—by taking into account the stories from different sites in which the research was conducted—sheds light on the role that family networks may play as a buffer against the process of social destructuring, economic impoverishment, and uncertainty experienced in the host society. To facilitate first contacts, women in Granada communicated the purpose of the research to their relatives and asked them to participate in the project. Many women wanted to send goods, such as clothes, perfumes, food, accessories, and personal and body care products, to their relatives, and travelling to conduct research in Colombia was an opportunity to do this. The delivery of the different items by the researcher contributed to the participation of family members in the interviews, but also increased the complexity of the trip, becoming the next challenge that had to be managed. In each of the fieldwork stays, different family members were interviewed, although most of them were women, as they were the most willing to meet. In the case of men, especially husbands, there was a greater reluctance to talk, and when they agreed to meet, it usually resulted in very short encounters.

The possibility of residing in the families' homes during the fieldwork made it possible to share part of their daily routines, to accompany them in different activities such as family meetings, administrative errands, or shopping, and to witness the bonds and relations with migrants in Granada from the other side of the telephone or screen. Although the time shared with the family members in Colombia was shorter than the time spent with the women in Granada, the intensity was much greater, and above all, it was fundamental in obtaining a wider picture of the trajectories captured on the basis of data gathering in Granada. On various occasions, opinions

or situations omitted or simply not expressed in the communications with the women in Spain were revealed through fieldwork in Colombia.

Another challenge that had to be addressed, despite the financial limitations, was extending the time resources necessary to complete the fieldwork in Colombia. Ultimately, the analysis of the narratives, based on the matched sample, made it possible to highlight both how mechanisms of control and subordination operate, as well as the various strategies of agency and emancipation developed by migrant women—insights that would not have been possible without the extensive fieldwork carried out.

To conclude this section, the final sample is included. The sampling procedures were designed as an action that is directed, flexible, and open to situations, contexts, and participants that could provide relevant information. Data collection and analysis were interconnected processes. All this had clear implications: (1) the selection of the units was not predetermined; (2) the discourse analysis was conducted with constant attention given to potential individuals, groups, and locations that could be relevant, as well as to the underlying power relations within the narratives produced throughout the multi-sited research, with the final goal of achieving theoretical saturation; (3) the incorporation of the logic of the information gathered through observations carried out in the various contexts of the multi-sited research goes beyond the analysis of narratives obtained solely through interviews; (4) attention was focused on the quality and richness of the information rather than on the number of units.

Table 1 includes the main characteristics of the final sample. The table includes the participants interviewed in Spain and in Colombia. In the first column, we indicate the main family role (mother, daughter, sister, wife) that the participants used to describe themselves in relation to their relatives in Colombia.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Participants in Granada	Age	Educational level	Employment status	Family residence (Colombia)	Participants in Colombia	Age
Mother	56	Primary	Caregiver	Armenia	Daughter 2	33
Daughter 1	35	Secondary	Unemployed		Daughter 3	23
Sister	45	Secondary	Unemployed		Sister	51
Mother	48	Secondary	Unemployed	Cartago	Daughter Husband	23 50
Daughter	40	Professional Training	Unemployed	Manizales	Mother	65
Mother	47	Primary	Cook		Daughter 1 Daughter 2	28 55
Mother	45	Primary	Unemployed		Son Brother	27 42
Mother	49	Secondary	Caregiver	Valparaíso/ Medellín	Grandmother Son Sister-in-law	83 20 44
Daughter	31	Professional Training	Shop assistant	Medellín	Mother	55
Mother	46	Secondary	Unemployed	Barranquilla	Daughter	25
Wife	38	Secondary	Cook		Husband	35
Daughter	55	Higher education	Caregiver		Father	92
Wife	48	Professional Training	Household worker		Sister	46
Wife	53	Professional Training	Household worker		Husband Daughter	56 25
Daughter	30	Higher education	University lecturer	Bogotá	Brother	31
Mother Daughter	50 23	Higher education Higher education	Unemployed Student		Son	24
Mother	50	Secondary	Caregiver		Husband	52

Source: Own elaboration

5. BENEFITS OF MULTI-SITED RESEARCH: REFLECTIONS BASED ON THE CASE STUDY

The implementation of a multiple triangulation strategy to understand the impact of the 2007 economic crisis in Spain on the transnational family practices and relationships of Colombian women residing in Granada allowed us to build a more robust and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, overcoming the partial or biased views that could result from the exclusive use of one technique or research in a single context. Not only was the triangulation of methods (interviews and observation) taken into account, but also that of sites (different spaces of the multi-sited research), moments (different stages of the migratory process) and perspectives (different actors involved in the studied dynamics).

The incorporation of the logic of the information captured through observation profoundly enriched the analysis of migrant women's discourse, making it possible to identify contradictions or tensions between discourses and practices and to reveal strategies of adaptation, resistance, or negotiation in the face of power structures that are not always made explicit verbally (Vigo Arrazola et al. 2023). It also contributed to the understanding of the conditions of discourse production, taking into account the power relations, institutional dynamics, and normative frameworks that influence what can be said and how it can be said in different contexts (Muñoz-Barriga and Soler-Castillo 2022).

The findings revealed that the consequences of the economic and financial crisis in Spain had a profound impact on the situation of entire families on both sides of the Atlantic. These transformations are not limited to the economic situation of the participants and their households, but also have repercussions on their emotional health, family logic, agreements, and the distribution of roles in the household, even leading in some cases to the rethinking of migration projects. The new scenario experienced by all, to a greater or lesser extent, made it necessary to analyze how this transformation has or has not altered the transnational family ties maintained by Colombian women living in Granada with their relatives in Colombia. Drawing on the sociology of emotions combined with a multi-sited approach, we were able to capture the emotional burden linked to the experience of uncertainty that affected different participants.

The understanding of these realities required us to acknowledge and reflexively analyze the social positioning of both the researcher and the study participants, who may construct their identities based on multiple points of reference linked to both host societies and countries of origin, as well as to other social contexts (Fauser 2018). In this sense, "gender, age, ethnicity, social class, and political affiliation are usually recognised as part of the process of knowledge [production] *vis-à-vis* the participants" (Guber 2011:45). The intersubjective relationships that are established during the research create meanings and have a bearing on the final written text. For this reason, reflexivity is considered of central importance in ethnographic designs, and it is fundamental in terms of recognition of the complexities and contradictions that arise and that the researchers must necessarily resolve.

In the analysis of the transnational family ties of Colombian women with diverse socio-economic and family backgrounds and administrative status, the aim was to understand the whole picture, in the sense proposed by the sociological analysis of discourse systems. Consequently, the starting point was not the discourse but the recognition of the realm of discursive exchange and interaction. Attention was paid both to structural logics and to the actions of the participants in the face of these logics, taking into consideration their agency and their capacity to actively respond to social constraints. Special emphasis was placed on the configurations of power in discourses and on the identification of relations of domination, discrimination, power and control, which are manifested through language (Wodak et al. 2003). This was accompanied by the recognition of the existence of the discursive power coming from a symbolic power and its capacity to connect with tensions and struggles.

The profiles identified place us in the context of the economic crisis of 2008, whose impact is neither homogenous nor neutral, but rather produces and reproduces patterns of economic, social, and political differentiation and inequality through the configuration of differentiated impacts on migration. They account for the variability in the framework of opportunities and restrictions which characterize individuals and which shape the ways in which migrants formulate and carry out diverse strategies in the face of the crisis. In addition, it became evident that the transnational family is also a space of conflict in which power hierarchies operate based on gender, kinship, and generational constructs, and where emotional management acquires crucial relevance (Escobar-Blanco and Soriano-Miras 2015).

The above can be illustrated by the adjustments in terms of quantity, use, and frequency of remittances (economic and social) carried out by transnational women and which at times have been subject to questioning or reproach by the beneficiary relatives. The multi-sited logic of matched samples made it possible to detect how women who had been positioned by the economic crisis as household providers experienced specific changes in the distribution of gender roles in their homes. Since these changes were not a product of intra-family

negotiations, they led to family tension and the frustration of their partners. The economic impoverishment of their households accompanied this process.

The multi-sited study provided first-hand knowledge of how transnational family practices are conditioned both by the socio-economic position of migrant women in Spain and by the higher or lower level of needs of their family members in Colombia. The discourses produced revealed high vulnerability of female-headed transnational households, especially those working in the cleaning, hotel and catering, and care sectors. The dependence on a single income to satisfy basic needs such as food, education, and public services in the country of origin left these households at the mercy of the instability and informality that reign in these sectors. The situation of uncertainty in Spain was compounded by unease and even guilt about what was happening in the country of origin, which increased the vulnerability of this group. On the other hand, when the family nucleus migrated with the family or was formed in Spain, the obligation decreased, so that sending remittances was, in most cases, only an occasional help to cover some expenses of grandparents or other family members.

Altogether, the gathered data shows that although transnational family ties are marked by affection and a sense of collective well-being, they are also permeated by conflicts for a variety of reasons. Issues related to upbringing, the use of the money sent, and couple relationships appeared recurrently, in a manifest or latent manner, in the fieldwork both in Colombia and in Spain. The above realities would not have been captured if it had not been for the expansion of fieldwork to Colombia and following family links across borders. Nevertheless, it was difficult to conduct multi-sited research due to all the costs outlined previously. If the study were conducted today, in the context of enormous progress in communication and transport, many of these challenges and problems could be avoided or at least diminished. Reflecting on this possibility, in the following section, we address the implications of technological changes for the future of multi-sited research, without losing sight of new challenges and dilemmas that arise from these transformations.

6. MULTI-SITED RESEARCH IN HIGHLY TECHNOLOGIZED AND DATAFIED SOCIETIES

Multi-sited studies require the examination of events as they occur, discussing behaviors as they take place, and identifying values as social actors internalize them. “Just as walking demonstrates movement, when we analyse processes, the gerund acquires prominence. It is in the development of social life that we can detect the tension between the actors’ aspirations and the conditioning factors, between freedom and constraints, between tradition and creative imagination” (Kawulich 2005:69). Our case study depicts the valuable insights obtained by adopting a multi-sited lens to study transnational family dynamics. At the same time, it enables us to discuss and illustrate the costs associated with this methodological strategy. In the following section, we address diverse ways in which multi-sited qualitative strategies can be transformed in the context of highly technologized and datafied societies. Based on the authors’ experience in qualitative multi-sited research, we reflect on potential changes within the research process, recognizing that researchers’ subjectivities and trajectories are a crucial element of scientific projects.

Technological and market changes in terms of global connectivity that enhance the possibilities of remote communication, which accelerated in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (McAuliffe 2021), have transformed the panorama in which multi-sited research is conducted. On the one hand, it became easier to contact individuals scattered across different geographical locations and to gather information without the need to travel to meet them in person. One of the most relevant implications of this is the possibility of lowering the costs of data collection. This is fundamental in the context of inequalities that influence researchers’ ability to travel to conduct multi-sited projects, reducing barriers linked to unequal funding opportunities and decreasing the impact of “passport hierarchies” (Pool 2024). On the other hand, this transformation is a double-edged sword as it provides a strong incentive not to get first-hand experience of the studied realities. Multi-dimensional, contextual, and dense strategies may become reduced to capturing less-textured data mediated by remote communication tools. The possibility to observe, read body language, improvise informal conversations, and draw conclusions on the basis of fieldnotes gathered in the natural environments of the participants is strongly limited in such scenarios.

This leads us to highlight the ongoing relevance of “thick” data collected in the spirit of Geertz’s (2017 [1973]) tradition. In the age of the increasing influence of big data and the penetration of digital tools that constantly monitor and gather information on human behavior, one could ask what is the place of strategies whose goal is to obtain an in-depth understanding of social realities. Despite the computational turn in social sciences and the omnipresence of tools that geo-localize our mobility patterns, register information on our social relations, or monitor our bodily functions, the capacity of “thin” data to tell us about the context in which social meanings are constructed and in which cultural practices are developed is still limited (Bornakke and

Due 2018). As we argued in our discussion of the case study, in the context of transnational families, qualitative multi-sited research maintains its potential to capture transformations of family ties and the emergence of new practices that connect social actors across borders. The reconstruction of meanings and worldviews and the comprehension of emotions that accompany transnational family life is another crucial sphere that requires methodological strategies that at least partly rely on thick data. The context and an in-depth understanding are crucial in terms of critical analysis of social changes linked to technological innovations and socio-economic and political realities that penetrate migrants' and non-migrants' lives.

For all the reasons indicated above, we defend the relevance of multi-sited research and thick data gathered in face-to-face exchanges. However, it is also important to highlight that, as evidenced in migration literature, transnational practices can, and have, been studied from a single site. Researchers may use local contexts to observe and ask migrants about their cross-border connections and practices, without necessarily following them to their home countries and communities. New communication technologies introduce new complexities in terms of methodological options. Instead of choosing between single-site or multi-sited research to explore transnational families, one can access other places, meet family members in the home country, or observe interactions between migrants and their non-migrant families without the need to move anywhere, even if it means fewer opportunities for direct observation of sites far away from the location of the research team.

The new possibilities could create a potential risk of at least partial return to "armchair" scholarship. The term was coined in the context of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to research conducted on specific populations without any face-to-face contact with them nor any primary data collection. The negative connotations of the concept are partly based on the colonial context in which the development of anthropology as a scientific discipline took place. Today, the possibility of studying other sites remotely may become tempting once again. The difference is, however, that such research does not have to be based on secondary data sources as it was in the past. Technological developments thus create a possibility of delving into distant social realities and, most of all, gathering primary information from a distance. The conditions of the Covid-19 lockdown served as a stimulus for the development of remote research strategies. The research conducted by Zambrano-Barragán and associates (2021), may serve as an illustration of this. The study focused on Venezuelan migration to seven different cities in Peru and Colombia and, due to pandemic restrictions on mobility, used remote ethnography to gather data. It is important to highlight, however, that it was only possible to develop the process thanks to pre-existing research networks and previous relationships with migrant communities. In this sense, a purely remote strategy most likely would not have been enough to arrive at similar results.

In the face of the current transformations, Mazzucato (2024), in a recent publication, proposes a typology of multi-sited designs which includes sequential trips to diverse research sites, simultaneous multi-sited projects based on international research teams, and virtual research, in which ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) is both a "subject of study and a tool" (Mazzucato 2024:62) used by researchers to examine social reality. In this paper, we argue that hybrid methodological designs might avoid the risks of overreliance on remote data collection tools while ensuring that multi-sited projects are sustainable from the environmental point of view and feasible in terms of the time and economic resources necessary to execute them. One possible option is to use online strategies in the initial and final phases of data gathering. For example, establishing first contacts and engaging in non-structured interviews with family members through digital tools may serve to build trust between the researcher and the participants. Participation in online meetings and exchanges that involve both migrants and their families abroad could take place before travelling to gather data in person, and after to refine the fieldwork findings. In this way, time spent in other locations, and thus the resources needed, could be decreased while maintaining the multi-sited character of the study.

Another key transformation that has to be taken into consideration when designing multi-site research has to do with how human connections and relationships are maintained across borders. How can we understand and analyze the development of transnational family practices that are supported by communication and transport innovations? There is a growing body of literature that focuses on the impact of ICTs on transnational practices (Sinanan and Horst 2022). Families are among social actors strongly affected by these tendencies, developing new forms of intimacy that stretch across borders (Cabalcquinto and Hu 2023). Digital tools enable researchers to virtually follow migrants and their relatives using social media data and conducting observations of transnational interactions online (Pool 2024). As evidenced by Madianou and Miller (2013), "polymedia environments," characterized by the use of diverse platforms to maintain contact across geographical space, become crucial for our understanding of current transnational family lives and their experience of "ambient co-presence," which is based on a sense of constant connection mediated by technology. Access to online communication leads to new forms of transnational bonds and practices, such as caretaking or emotional support practices mediated by digital media. For example, the study by Mitra (2025:8) on stateless Rohingya in

India sheds light on the use of digital platforms (such as YouTube or Facebook) as “digital transnational spaces” that enable members of diaspora scattered across the world to connect and forge real-life relationships. The analysis of activities that take place within the digital realm constitutes a crucial issue to be addressed if our aim is to understand connections between transnational social actors.

The relevance of ICT is not incompatible, however, with the need for a critical reflection on their social and family impact. Qualitative strategies and reflexivity associated with them create a base for critical assessment of communication changes that affect transnational families. At the same time, even though migration has been increasingly affected by technological developments, the existence of “digital divides,” which separate different groups in terms of economic factors, gender or age (McAuliffe 2021), is a crucial argument that counters the idea of research based solely on digital tools. We risk contributing to the invisibilization of vulnerable social groups, whose access to remote communication may be difficult and, thus, their representation through studies that are limited to the digital sphere may be incomplete or biased.

The technological transformations in terms of human networks not only impact families and migrants but also the functioning of research institutions across the globe. The boost to online communication generated by the implications of Covid-19 has left a profound imprint on academic life. From online and hybrid scientific congresses to remote teaching and learning, the impact of these changes is omnipresent, and the sphere of data collection and analysis is no exception. In this sense, we could ask ourselves whether doing multi-sited research necessarily requires mobility.

Although online research is one option for lowering costs, it is also important to highlight that these challenges can also be addressed through international research teams based in diverse locations. The funding opportunities increasingly require researchers to forge consortia and scientific networks formed by research institutions located in diverse contexts, often linking countries of the Global North and South. The study of transnational families in such cases does not necessarily require “following” migrants and their connections by travelling to the sites to which they are linked through family ties. Nor does it need to rely solely or mostly on digital research. Forming research teams that can gather data from different locations, thanks to their geographical proximity to these sites, is another possibility. The Mexican Migration Field Research Program (MMFRP), founded in 2003 by Wayne Cornelius and now led by Abigail Andrews at UC San Diego, may be an example of such a strategy. It is multi-sited, long-term, internationally coordinated research based on annual fieldwork conducted in Mexico, the U.S., and the US-Mexico border, focusing on often overlooked issues, including reintegration of return migrants or the impact of deportation (Andrews 2023). In such initiatives, the multi-sited character of research is maintained through the multi-sited character of the research team. The connections formed by the scientists and the research conducted by them across borders offer another viewpoint and contribute to an already rich scholarship on transnational family ties and practices.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite technological transformations that affect our current reality and the methodological strategies used to understand it, multi-sited qualitative research continues to provide potential for an in-depth understanding of our social worlds. This paper, through the case study, illustrates the benefits of this perspective in the study of transnational families, highlighting the continuing relevance of a multi-sited approach in research which focuses on patterns of social connections. The case study also serves to highlight the limitations and challenges of this strategy, stimulating a discussion of present and future changes that arise from the technological developments that are highly consequential, especially in terms of data gathering practices. The hectic pace of these transformations requires us to actively engage in conversations about the future of multi-sited research. This paper constitutes a voice in this debate, focusing on a specific field of transnational family studies.

The case study illustrates that participant observation, when included in multi-sited designs, may become a process of learning through exposure and involvement in the everyday life of the participants, which can only be achieved by sharing everyday practices, insofar as all the senses are involved in contact with the observable reality. The analyzed case provides evidence of how engagement in everyday activities of the participants, both in Spain and Colombia, enables us to understand the feelings, situations, and spaces that arise in the migratory project and that inform its development, shaping transnational practices and relationships.

To respond to realities that span across borders, we posit that multi-sited qualitative research can and should be combined with other methodological strategies to capture the complexity of transnational lives. In this context, as evidenced by the case study, the biographical perspective acquires special relevance. The present understanding of mobility as a relational and networked phenomenon, which links biographies of migrants with

those of other social actors in origin and destination countries, requires an analytical lens capable of capturing this complexity.

Along the same lines, we argue that studies that integrate mixed methodologies for approaching social reality should be encouraged. As Fauser (2018) points out, working with researchers trained in different methodologies allows them to concentrate on their area of expertise while learning from each other. The results can be, in such cases, a product of scientific dialogue if they speak of different dimensions of the phenomenon being studied. Cross-border collaboration among researchers, in turn, facilitates the use of a matched sample technique that enables us to capture how participants from both sides share social ties and exchange money, goods, information, ideas, or emotions.

Despite its benefits and insights, multi-sited research also poses challenges. First, it involves greater complexity in research design, data collection, and subsequent analysis. Gaining access to migrant communities in different locations may require constant negotiation with local authorities, community organizations, and migrants. Coordinating fieldwork in multiple locations, managing different sources of information and constructing a coherent narrative from heterogeneous data represents a considerable challenge. Secondly, it requires a significant investment in terms of time and financial resources and generates numerous questions, for example, about the locations to be included or the time needed to complete the research. Third, the members of the research team must be aware of their own social positioning and be able to reflexively examine how their personal experiences and perspectives may affect the analysis.

Finally, the understanding of a broader social space, where the links between the global and the local are conceived in an integrated rather than fragmented way, requires us to connect the logics of multi-sited research as a methodological approach, and the transnational perspective as an epistemological and contextual commitment. We strongly believe that in multi-sited research, thick data can only be gathered if face-to-face interaction forms a fundamental pillar of the methodological design. However, in societies as strongly affected by scientific developments as those of the twenty-first century, technology can be at the service of research, to prepare and finalize fieldwork, shorten the time spent in the field, or integrate local field researchers into international research teams. Beyond the study of specific places or simple comparisons between countries or different locations, multi-sited research pays special attention to the contexts in which individual practices and agency develop (Marcus 2011). In this context, the irruption of new communication and transport technologies may create new methodological challenges and dilemmas, creating at the same time new venues to explore when it comes to approaching the already complex reality of transnational families.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors of this article declare that they have no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

Authorship contribution statement

Rosa Soriano Miras: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Carolina Escobar-Blanco: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft.

Rita Sobczyk: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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