HOLLY SCHEIB

"It's a Strange Truth"

Experiences of Transnational Motherhood in Newly Arrived Migrants in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Case studies of migrant families in post-Katrina New Orleans explored the complex relationships women have with their families, partners, and children. Family organization includes mothers who have left their children in sending communities to seek paid work in the United States, mothers who have brought a child to the United States as an undocumented minor, and mothers who have children born in multiple nations. Maternal agency and family-life responsibilities are shaped not only by moral and social mothering perspectives, but also by host environment factors that force women to continually reconstitute their identities as mothers. This article focuses on the lives of migrant women in this post-Katrina context in order to better understand how maternal identities and experiences are shaped by the transnational realities of their lives.

When the massive storms and levee failures of 2005 created widespread destruction in New Orleans, Latin Americans came in record numbers to take advantage of widely advertised work opportunities. This article focuses on the lives of migrant women in this post-Katrina context in order to better understand how maternal identities and experiences are shaped by the transnational realities of their lives.[1] First, the article defines current theoretical context for transnational migration. Then, the lives of migrant women are presented within the context of their transnational identities. Finally, the article reflects on the theoretical grounding for transnational mothering and concludes with a discussion on implications for policy and advocacy practice.

Defining Transnational Migration

The traditional notion of an individual living their entire lives in one location

is no longer a realistic expectation, even within countries whose borders seem impermeable. Increasingly, more people belong to more that one society, nation, or community at the same time. To understand this phenomenon, anthropologists and sociologists use the term "transnational migration."

Alejandro Portes and colleagues define transnationalism as the maintenance of occupations or activities that require regular social contacts over time across national boarders and/or across cultures (Portes, Gurarnizo, and Landolt). In earlier literature, Nina Glick-Schiller refers to transnationalism as a constant movement developed and sustained by immigrants who build extensive networks linking the new country and the country of origin (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton). She defines transnational as "those persons who having migrated from one nation-state to another live their lives across borders, participating simultaneously in social relations that embed them in more than one nation-state" (Glick-Schiller 100). Lynn Stephen describes transnational migration as a more or less permanent state of being between two or more locations. All individuals living within a transnational environment are exposed in some shared way to a set of social expectations, cultural values, and patterns of human interaction shaped by more than one social, economic and political system. Transnational migrants work, worship, express political interests, act as consumers, etc., within several contexts, not within the scope of a single nation-state.

Regardless of whether or not they settle permanently in a host country, or how strongly they maintain homeland ties, they participate in multi-national movements and expressions. Whereas the term immigrant describes one who leaves a host country to move to another country permanently, migrant describes someone leaving an area or nation for work or other opportunity but not necessarily with the intent of re-settlement. Therefore, migrant is an important distinction. For the purposes of this research, I refer to my study population as "migrant" due to the high levels of transnational practices observed and to acknowledge the fluidity and non-linear pattern of population movements.

Maintaining relationships to a homeland is not new among immigrant or migrant populations. For example, the involvement of European immigrants in the political and economic affairs of their countries of origins was well established in the early 1900s, influencing patterns of remittance, citizenship, and cultural practices (Handlin). Modern migration has changed greatly since then, politically, technologically, and economically. The borders of the United States are perhaps more closed than ever before in modern history, with post 9/11 concerns and xenophobia regarding linguistic and cultural differences fueling anti-immigration sentiment. At the same time, technological advances offer more opportunities for contact with family and friends throughout the world,

minimizing some of the burden of separation in ways that weren't available in the past. Economic changes within nations and between nations have pushed increased industrialization and urbanization. More people are shifting their homes and families for employment, or leaving families behind and sending back supportive remittances. An ever-increasing fluidity of peoples, cultures and communities has become a given in our modern world, consequently, virtually every recent migrant group features many different forms and levels of transnationalism (Murphy and Mahalingam).

The Complexities of Transnational Relationships: Generational, Historical, Gendered, and Relational

Even with the complexities of transnationalism as a construct, behavioral scientists have explored and demonstrated the social implications of transnationalism at the community, familial, and individual levels (Pessar). Current bodies of work emphasize the importance of transnational ties and practices, showing that they serve to socially enhance migrants' lives by directly or indirectly promoting and maintaining cultural values (Foner). Others have suggested these practices influence not only positive social outcomes, but positive economic outcomes as well (Rogers).

Just as every family has complex, interwoven histories, migrants experience the complexity involving his or her relationships in their sending community and host community. An example of the complexities of the transnational experience is seen through that of Lidia, a 29-year old woman from Honduras. Lidia lives in a small slab townhome in the West Bank of New Orleans, in a predominantly African-American area of the Marrero suburb. Her row of townhomes is situated between grassy canals and still water that hint to the swamps that lie outside of the developed areas of the parish. She looks several years older than her 29 years, with dark, tired eyes and a face that rarely shows expression. Her husband, a man of her age with a boyish face and gentle manner, spent some time with us during two of my visits to their home. During my first visit, her eyes were dull and her voice forced out brief, quiet statements. Over time, she grew more relaxed and told me more about her family. By the fourth visit, she was more open about her emotions regarding her complex living situation in the United States. Lidia grew up in a semi-rural area of central Honduras not far from Tegucigalpa, nation's capital city. She shared the house with two older brothers and a younger sister. To help support the family, her mother sold food to prison workers outside of a detention center a few miles away from their home. When she was "very young" her father left for work in the United States and sent money home to her family as she was growing up. These provisions allowed each of the children to attend school,

live in a house "with [multiple] rooms," and have food to eat each day. Still, she and her siblings missed their father and struggled with complex emotions regarding his absence, while at the same, appreciating what his work did for the security of their family.

> *[You grow up] with a heated resentment. It's like, okay, I have food, but I don't have my mother's hugs, or my father's, or both of them. Because sometimes Dad is here [in the United States] and Mom and the kids are in their country of origin, waiting for food, waiting for money, waiting for an embrace that never comes. But, you get used to living well [from remittances] also*. (Lidia, age 29, Honduran)

Lidia and her family participated in transnational practices each day. Lidia and her siblings dealt with the frustrations of their father being in the United States for work. This situation provided financial support, but also communicated ideas, practices, identities and experiences to her household, which normalized the situation of their divided family. In was understand that in Lidia's family, part of the responsibility of a parent was to provide enough financial support for the family to have security. After eleven years in the United States, Lidia's father was injured and returned to Honduras. Lidia explained that the time her father spent in the United States was hard on her mother. So hard, that when he did return, her mother declared that she "had no love left for him" and they promptly separated.

Seeing her parents separation profoundly affected Lidia's choices regarding her own marriage. She had only been married a few months when members of Lidia's family began to discuss the prospect of her new husband, a boy in the community who lived next door to Lidia's family home, going to the United States for work. She was angry at their suggestion and in her words, "wouldn't let her husband hear it." After their only child was born, the family began to push Lidia harder. Work opportunities were limited and the extended family was growing. Sensitive to the needs of his wife's family, and with a desire to do more for his own wife and child, Lidia's husband decided that he needed to go to the United States for work. Lidia was devastated at the thought of what separation did to her own parents.

> *So I said to him, I'm not going to be the same as my Mom. Times go by and by and I'm going to be left with nothing. If you're going to take me there, take me. If not, then forget that you have a wife or anything.* (Lidia, age 29, Honduran)

She decided that she had to accompany her husband, or risk losing her mar-

riage in the same fashion as her mother. Her father and sister were happy that both would be traveling to the United States for work, and agreed to care for Lidia's young daughter with remittances that Lidia and her husband would send back. Lidia was conflicted; she didn't want to leave her daughter.

> *After he decided to bring me, I wanted to also bring the girl, but it was too much money.* (Lidia, age 29, Honduran)

She described weeks of debate about whether or not to bring their young child, then just two years old. In the end, they determined that unless they found a way to purchase her safe arrival to the United States, it was not worth risking a tragedy. So, they made the decision to go together and leave the child behind.

> *So after that I came. I said to myself, well, if something is going to happen to me here [in Honduras] it's going to happen to me either way [whether I stay or I leave]. The difficult part is leaving your kids back. After that, your heart becomes hard. Because when you come [to the United States], you come. I look at my girl and say, no [you must stay]. And I don't know if I will see her [again] or not.* (Lidia, age 29, Honduran)

Lidia and her husband are employed within the United States and have lived here for more than five years. His work, once tied to the irregularities of construction work post-Katrina, is now steadier, thanks to the connections of a cousin he found in the area about a year after they arrived. Lidia has worked steadily since she arrived. They send money home every two weeks ("I've never missed") to help with schooling and medicines. She struggles each day, depressed and sad, missing their daughter. For five years, they have discussed whether they can bring her to the United States.

> *Maybe later, he says to me, we will bring the girl. But now, he says no. Because he is afraid something is going to happen to her on the road. That maybe something will happen to her and it would be our fault.... No, he says. So, we've decided to stay for another year and then we'll go back [to Honduras].* (Lidia, age 29, Honduran)

She explained that this is a conversation they have over and over, "at first it was only two years here, then it was three, and now, it's 'one more, one more'"). Lidia expressed anger at her father and sister, suggesting that they are not being as frugal as they could be with the funds she sends, and not recognizing how both she and her daughter are suffering from the separation. After several

visits, Lidia breaks into tears describing the conversation she had that morning with her daughter, now eight years old.

> *[She says] that she wants me a lot. That she wants to go to me.* (Lidia, age 29, Honduran)

It's the same each week, Lidia explains: *queire me vaya*. But when she talks to her father and sister and discusses the possibility of reuniting everyone in Honduras, the conversation turns to doubts. They ask what she will do when she returns, reminding her of the difficulties of finding paid employment in their town. She is grateful that her daughter is healthy and living happily with her family, but struggles with her capacity to mother her child from such a long distance. Ultimately, she is struggling with her mothering role, questioning whether her being both the child's biological mother and the source of supportive remittances, is the same as a physical mother who is present each day with their child.

> *What can I say of my family? Because, yes, it is a strange truth. They are in Honduras and I am here.* (Lidia, age 29, Honduran)

Lidia recognizes that her concept of family is not necessarily how she would like to be a family. She feels trapped by the financial expectations of her family in Honduras, the desire to stay with her husband in the United States, and her longing for her only child.

Josefina, age 32, has been in the United States for four years. Like most Hondurans I spoke to, she migrated with her husband. They hired a "coyote"[2] in Mexico to transport their only child across the border, leaving no children behind when they migrated. While thankful that they are together, she misses her family and community. When they arrived in New Orleans, they were not as welcomed as they thought they would be by the extended relatives living in a suburb of the city. Work was not hard to find at first, but housing, food, transportation, and medical care were a challenge. She describes what it is like to be away from her Honduran family for so long:

> *Up to this date, we didn't like it [life in the United States]. Comfortable, yes, but you're always worrying about family. How are my Dad and my Mom? You miss a lot. You miss a lot of things.* (Josefina, age 32, Honduran)

Even when not supporting a child in the host community, migrants still feel connected to family left behind.

Rosa, a 28-year old Mexican woman, had two children who migrated with

her into the United States, one born in Mexico and one in Texas. She struggles with many things about living here, but ultimately feels that it is the best place for her to raise her family.

> *It's a strange country for my people. But over here, there are many good things and some things that are sometimes wrong. For example, one of the good things is that there is work, they pay you well, and you're not limited. You can give your kids what over there you couldn't. You have the opportunity to buy, food, better nutrition, these things. From where we come from, where there is almost no work, they pay you little and it's a very hard situation … and here, you go out to find work and they pay you well and then you live well.* (Rosa, age 28, Mexican)

Rosa and her husband brought their children with them because they felt that if they were working here, their children should go to school, learn English, and have the opportunity to work for more income and opportunities than they would be offered in their home community.

Theoretical Orientation to Transnational Relationships

Concepts of social acceptability run through the literature regarding gender and migration. For example, Nana Oishi finds that social attitudes about female migrants have a greater impact than economic need on women's migratory choices (in Bangladesh, for example, independent women migrants are perceived as "loose" and unmarriageable; by contrast, women in the Philippines are encouraged by the state to go abroad). Other work shows how women are less likely to migrate for labor opportunities if it will damage an otherwise wholesome reputation (Kanaiaupuni). However, when migration is accepted or expected within communities as an appropriate form of family support, an individual, couple, or family unit could elevate the social status of their extended family in the home country by migrating. Further, when or if they do return, the come back to elevated social status—both as a result of remittances and for having sacrificed in the eyes of their peer networks (Guendelman and Perez-Itriago; Muse-Orlinoff et al.). Therefore, even with uncertainty regarding family separation, parenting, and filial responsibilities, there may be compelling value beyond remittance support for migration (e.g. the sacrifice for the family that is involved). Lidia struggles with how her multiple identifies play out in their transnational lives, where they must continually decide which identity will be primary in their lives. Even when not supporting a child in the host community, migrants still feel connected to family left behind.

Theories related to the economics of migration support the idea of migration as a household process, described as a rational household strategy adopted to minimize risk and overcome market failures (Kanaiaupuni; Stark and Levhari). Other economists suggest that "divided households" provide higher income at less risk than committing to either agrarian production or permanent immigration, by holding part of the family in each occupation (Grindle). Sociologist Michael Burawoy argues that divided households are encouraged through political and social messages in the host community, supporting the utility of transnational relationships within families:

> On the one hand, renewal processes are dependent on income left over from maintenance, which is remitted home by the productive worker. On the other hand, productive workers require continued support from their families engaged in renewal at home, because they have no permanent legal or political status at the place of work… The interdependence establishes the cohesion of the family. (1052-3)

Few studies have shown who stands to benefit the most from migration, though some suggest that non-migrant women bear a significant share of the burden (Grasmuck and Pessar; Kanaiaupuni). If these findings reflect host community reality of social and emotional suffering caused to women due to separation from their partners, that could further support the idea that household dynamics and values may supersede any individual feeling of kinship, encouraging women to migrate even when they leave children behind.

Women were once posited as "tied movers," "secondary migrants," or "associational migrants;" definitions which defined women as passive in the migration process. In these definitions, women tend to follow two patterns of migration: either following spouses or reuniting their families in their migration strategies. As more work has been done on women migrants and gender within migration practices, authors have shown women to more actively participate in the migration process with their own strategies and motivations (Hondagneu-Sotelo; Muse-Orlinoff et al.; Pedraza). Scholars of gender and migration cite the complex relationships that play out as gender influences a wide array of power dynamics women encounter as migrants. Women may value the domestically-focused practices that were most common for women in their home communities and seek these jobs out as migrants, at the same time, conflicted that they are not performing these same tasks in their own communities and homes (Hondagneu-Sotelo). The act of working outside the home may conflict with traditional gender roles regarding domestication and childrearing in their sending communities. Lidia, the Honduran woman

discussed, was conflicted about the fact that her sister was raising her daughter. Lidia spoke with bitterness in her voice about her sister. While she never spoke ill of her and was grateful that her daughter "had a mother-figure in the home" she expressed wistful moments of wanting to mother her own child. For example, once, after sharing some *pan de coco* that she made, she remarked that she wondered if her daughter would like the way she made it and that she hoped to teach her someday. While self-sacrifice for the betterment of one's family and children may relate to thoughts of martyrdom and even pride, in Lidia's case, she was openly angry at her father and sister for her situation. She identified not as a martyr for her sacrifices and her situation, but as one forced to make a choice that she regretted.

Anthropologists describe how individual identity is acted out through embodied experiences in a variety of ways. For example, Mariella Pandolfi suggests that identity is defined by historical social structures that inscribe the body and naturalize a person's existence in the world; in her definition, the social, political, and cultural histories a person collects translates into how they produce their gendered expressions and representations. Feminist anthropologists push this definition further. For example, Donna Haraway argues that there is nothing "natural" about how bodies are expressed. She suggests that all personal and social bodies are created and self-create in unique ways based on their location. For Haraway, location is critical, and is understood as a web of social and cultural connections. Within an individual's location, a body does not passively express itself, but must chose to be an active agent in each expression (Haraway).

A study of transnational migration patterns focused on the community of Tlacuitapa, Mexico, found that there were two types of migration patterns in that setting: in one, men marry and bring their young wives with them to the United States; in the other, men migrate and return to find a wife after earning some money to start a family. While separation from spouses, children, and/or parents and extended family is common in this community, coming to and from the United States for visiting, marriage, and holiday celebrations is also a common occurrence (Muse-Orlinoff et al.). This finding rang true in the experiences of informants from Mexico. For example, one Mexican migrant working on a house in my neighborhood in fall 2006 explained to me his excitement over the job, which was going to pay him enough to let him go home over the Christmas holiday. When I asked him how he would do this, he explained that he would take a bus west, to New Mexico. From there, he would "walk in the desert for three days" until he came to a place in Mexico where he could take another bus to his home community. This scenario of having the ability to physically return home and then come back to the United States was impossible for most families, particularly those from countries other

than Mexico. As a young Honduran man told me, "I can only go back once, when I've made enough to live on for a long time."

In addition to financial remittances, migrants transfer a range of values and behaviors that impact their host communities. Through their ties to sending communities, migrants transmit "social remittances," ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital from the host country (Muse-Orlinoff et al.). Studies focusing on sending communities have found differences among families with migrants in the United States and those without; when a family has a migrant, they display patterns of consumption, labor, social behavior, and community participation in ways that can be remarkably different from families without migrants (Kanaiaupuni; Muse-Orlinoff et al.; Oishi).

The traditional notion of an individual living their entire lives in one location is no longer a realistic expectation, even within countries whose borders seem impervious. Transnational relationships suspend migrants between multiple societies. They cannot fully assimilate into the host society and cannot dissimilate entirely from their home country, even if permanent residence in the United States is desired. Even though adaptation to society in the United States may change beliefs, challenge gendered expectations, and alter practices, migrants seek and maintain connections to their home communities.

Conclusion: Implications of Transnational Practices

Research has shown that transnational practices have positive affects on social networks and social support. Social networks supported through transnational activities may produce tangible resources, social capital, and emotional support that may offset some of the alienating and stressful effects of migration. Authors have shown that transnational practice relateS to the perseverance of ethnic identities of migrants through social support networks (Bobb; Ritsner, Modai, and Ponizovsky; Rogers). The bulk of literature on social support and social networks show that these are highly beneficial to psychological well-being. In addition, social support may be protective against discriminatory and racist events, which are known to be sources of stress and suffering for minority populations in the United States (Almeida; Jackson et al.; Kaplan and Marks; Vega, Kolody, Valle and Weir; Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson).

While there are a few studies of transnationalism and mental health, it is clear that social support, ethnic identity, and perceived discrimination are scientifically linked to psychological outcomes and that these are related to transnational practices (Murphy and Mahalingam). As researchers continue to explore transnationalism as a construct in measuring change in migrant populations, this promises to offer opportunities for public policy research and intervention related to migrants in the United States.

[1]The interviews used in this article come from a larger study of migrants in Post-Katrina New Orleans, conducted between 2005-2009.
[2]"Coyote": slang describing a person who smuggles people into the United States for a fee.

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