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*Christian Schramm*

# Dynamics of change in transnational families – Biographical perspectives on family figurations between Spain and Ecuador

## **Abstract:**

This paper explores the figural process in transnational families through the study of the biographical self-presentations and the life courses of family members who live apart (in Bilbao, Spain and Guayaquil, Ecuador) but remain interdependent. It asks which factors inside and outside the family figure influence the negotiation of the fragile power balances along gender and generational lines, with what effect for the structure of positions, family norms, mutual expectations and the division of tasks. Special attention is given to the deep financial and economic crisis affecting Spain between 2008 and 2014 and how this sudden change of the context in one national society impacts the transnational family life. Results highlight the importance of the long-term pre-migration family figural process for the way transnational family life is being shaped. They also show how a variety of influencing factors, observed during the migration period and located in different national societies and the transnational social space, is intertwined with the logic of this long-term process.

**Key words:** transnational families, migration, biographical research, figurations, processes of change in families, financial and economic crisis in 2008.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper explores the dynamics of change in transnational families through the study of the biographical self-presentations and the life courses of family members who live apart but remain interdependent. The family is understood here as a figure that is constantly being negotiated, with fragile power balances across gender and generational lines (see Elias/Scotson 1993, Elias 2014). The underlying empirical study focuses on transnational figural processes with individual family members located in Bilbao, Spain, and in Guayaquil, a small rural coastal community in Ecuador.<sup>1</sup>

Starting with the general assumption that change in families always means a back and forth of power balances, the questions arise which factors inside and outside the family

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1 The data presented here is part of a larger data set that has been collected in the framework of a PhD project in which, at the date of publication, analysis is still ongoing.

influence the swinging of this pendulum, with what effects, and how is this negotiation process influenced by the migration of family members? In the case of the more recent Ecuadorian migration to Spain it can also be assumed that the deep financial and economic crisis affecting Spain between 2008 and 2014 had a relevant impact on the family members living there and their cross-border family relations. But how does this sudden change of the context in one national society influence the long-term gradual, and at times transnational, configurational process of the family? And what exactly does the interplay between the crisis as a factor external to the family and the interior dynamics look like?

The main conceptual tools that help to distinguish different types of family dynamics, characterized by periods of gradual change and more or less abrupt ruptures, are the concepts of status passages (Glaser/Strauss 1971; Heinz 2009) and (biographical) turning points (Sackmann 2007; Wingens/Reiter 2011; Rosenthal 1995). Both concepts are applied here to individuals in family relationships. During the multi-sited data collection, biographical and ethnographic methods were employed. The analysis followed the principles of biographical case reconstruction (Rosenthal 1995), adapted to the study of families (Delcroix 1995; Bertaux 1995; Dausien 1996; Mummert 2012). In a first step, the challenge consisted in capturing the long-term (pre-migration) family configurational process and to put it in relation to the changes in the power balance within the transnational space of families during migration. In a second step, the interconnection between the transnational space of the family and the biographical courses (e.g. processes of social mobility) of individual family members in the local and national contexts of origin and of arrival have been analysed.

Results highlight the importance of the long-term family configurational process for the way transnational family life is being shaped (e.g. the extent and stability of power differences, the type of means of power that different family members have access to and the dynamics of interaction shaped by mutual dependencies). A variety of influencing factors observed during the migration period and located in different national societies is intertwined with the logic of this long-term process. These factors on the individual biographical level, on the level of interpersonal family relationships and on the level outside of the family are also influencing each other. The importance of the crisis in Spain for the individual family members in both nation-states is mediated by the family *history* and the (transnational) construction of the common family *story*.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously it is through the individuals that the family is influenced by a macro-level change like the financial and economic crisis in Spain. The case exemplified here demonstrates how individual social mobility processes outside the households in both national contexts are intertwined with those in the transnational social space of the family.

2 Story refers to the collective remembrance and negotiation process that relate to the events that constitute the family *history*. The differentiation between lived *history* and narrated *story* is based on theoretical assumptions in biographical research (see Fischer/Kohli 1987, Rosenthal 1995).

## 2. Context

“The middle class is dying out”, “How to live with little money”, “Collective emotional depression because of the crisis”<sup>3</sup> (El Universo 04/03 and 06/03, 1999) – at first sight these headlines could have been uttered during the global financial and economic crisis, maybe around 2009 or 2010, in a country like Spain. But they can be found on the front pages of the Ecuadorian newspaper *El Universo* in 1999. What the respective articles describe are the effects of a long period of economic stagnation and political instability that led Ecuador at the end of the 1990s into a deep structural crisis of the financial and economic system, with devastating effects for the living conditions of the middle and lower sectors of the Ecuadorian population (Larrea 2006). In the following years, many opted to change the course of their own and their family’s life by leaving the country. By the end of 2007, up to 970,000 Ecuadorians had done so (UNFPA-FLACSO 2008). The biggest share of this migratory movement headed towards Spain, where the national economy, which was growing by then, was desperately searching for additional labour force, above all in the agriculture, construction, domestic and catering sectors (Pajares 2008). Spanish politics also strategically stimulated the migration of Latin Americans, who after only two years of regular legal stay were entitled to acquire Spanish citizenship (Izquierdo et al. 2002). Most movements were individual migrations (around half were pioneering women), embedded in social and kinship networks, which at first led into irregular legal status (after overstaying the tourist visa) and employment in the lowest layers of the Spanish labour market. During the first years, people would relatively quickly find informal work and later on obtain their first residence and work permit. At the latest by 2005, when Spain carried out a massive regularization programme, most Ecuadorians acquired regular legal status. Already from 2003 on, when Spain imposed visa restrictions on Ecuadorians, family reunification started to gain importance in the migration process between the two countries. What followed was an integration process<sup>4</sup> into Spanish society marked by a fragile process of social mobility through better positioning on the labour market and also, for some, the purchase of property in Spain and/or Ecuador through easily accessible loans - what would later be known as the Spanish real estate bubble (Herrera 2012). As family reunification became more important, it seemed that the more or less definite settlement of the whole family would be the characteristic feature of Ecuadorian migration to Spain instead of intergenerational transnational family relationships. Based on data collected in 2005, Herrera and Carrillo (2009: 100) speak of “families in transition”, in which the remaining family members in Ecuador were about to start their own migration project. Nevertheless, several studies highlight the continuous importance, throughout this period, of economic remittances for the households in Ecuador (Bendixen/ Associates 2003, Acosta et al. 2006, Ponce/Olivié 2008). Surveys in Ecuador and Spain for 2007 showed that respectively around 40% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC)

3 The translations from Spanish into English are by the author.

4 Integration is understood as a multi-dimensional (social, economic, political and cultural) process of participation of all members of a social entanglement and which is pluri-local in the case of transnational migration (see Pries 2015).

2007 for Ecuador) and 20% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) 2007 for Spain) of the migrants were parents with at least one minor child in Ecuador.

The global financial crisis hit the Spanish real estate business in 2007, with the national economy entering a recession which lasted until 2014. Between 2007 and the end of 2013, more than three million jobs were lost. The construction sector, the typical occupational sector for young male migrants with relatively low education, was the most affected (Pajares 2009/2010; Colectivo Ioé 2012; Eliseo et al. 2011, 2013; Alonso 2015). But domestic workers, mostly female, also suffered from unemployment, underemployment and worsening working conditions (Hellgren/Serrano 2018). By that time, most Ecuadorians had attained a permanent legal status, and the majority had their close family members reunited with them in Spain. Many opted in the following years for Spanish citizenship and in 2014 more than half of the nearly 450,000 Ecuadorians living in Spain had become Spanish nationals (INE 2015). The crisis not only interrupted a fragile process of social mobility, leaving many unemployed and some heavily indebted due to not being able to pay the mortgage rates, but also interrupted the process of settlement and family unification (Herrera 2013: 29). Between 2007 and 2015 annual remittances from Spain to Ecuador went down by 28% (BCE 2016), which is a high percentage but does not proportionally reflect the rise in unemployment rates (Moré Martínez 2013). This indicates that huge efforts were undertaken to continue the assurance of economic support to Ecuadorian households by family members living in Spain. For Ecuadorians and other Latino groups in Spain who arrived before or during the early 2000s, a major strategy to deal with the effects of the crisis has been international mobility of selected family members inside and outside Europe or back home, at least temporarily. (Herrera 2016/Yepéz de Castillo 2014/Echeverri Buriticá 2014). While Spain experienced an economic recession between 2008 and 2014, Ecuador's economy profited from relative political stability and high oil prices (Zibell 2017).

It seems that the abrupt change of external conditions in one national context (end of 1990s in Ecuador or from 2008 onwards in Spain) had a deep impact on the way (cross-border) family life is organized. To understand the actual importance of these macro-structural events for families, it is necessary to adopt a multi-level and dynamic approach. Therefore this analysis starts with the family formation phase, looks into the mutual and asymmetric interdependencies between family members before and after migration and considers the interplay between the productive and reproductive spheres. In other words, examination focuses on the general dynamics of change in (transnational) family configurations.

### **3. Conceptual framework**

Understanding families as configurations (Elias 1993, 2014) means seeing them as a complex entity of asymmetric and interdependent relationships that link several persons with each other. Families are therefore marked by power balances with bigger or smaller power differences among their members, who are connected through functional interdependence (Elias 2014: 89), mutually satisfying their physical and psychological needs. From this

perspective, even a child has a certain power over his or her parents, if he or she has some kind of value for them (Elias 2014: 84). One crucial linking element in figurations is the need for satisfaction of emotional needs, which to a great extent depends on other people (Elias 2014: 158ff.). As families are communities of emotions and bounded solidarity (*Gefühls- und Solidargemeinschaften*) with strong emotional ties, their dissolution typically causes an inner crisis for the affected individuals (Bahrdt 2000: 97).

From this point of view, two perspectives have to be considered for the analysis of families: from a meso perspective, families are social entities in which a set of values and norms are the basis for mutual expectations (roles), which structure the behaviour of the individual members. Family members assume several roles simultaneously and are located in a space of social positions with unequal distribution of resources. Decision-making processes and the division of tasks are shaped by this structure. Family processes of social positioning are interconnected with processes of social positioning in other areas, such as the labour market, and also depend on the basic status dimensions of age, sex, gender and type of kinship relation (Jelin 2010). From a micro perspective, families consist of individuals with their own biographical experiences and projects and their own role definitions. Depending on their individual life cycle and respective integration into the kinship system of their own family of origin, each member may furthermore have specific privileges and obligations to fulfil that influence the organisation of nuclear family life (Hill/Kopp 2013; Jelin 2010).

In patriarchal societies like Ecuador, the power balance in families favours the oldest male family member as the main breadwinner and head of family. However, different factors influence the way this ideal type of family is put into practice, e.g. the social class positioning (Jelin 2010: 57f.; Therborn 2007: 37f.). One other important aspect for the study of families originating from countries with a less developed welfare state is their high importance as “units of survival” (Elias 2001: 271), which might imply a higher importance of the collective identity in the personality structures of the individual family members than is the case in Western European societies.

Transnational families are an institutionalized form of transnational social spaces that span pluri-locally over different nation-states (Herrera Lima 2001, Pries 2010). Different family members are therefore participating in the societies of origin as well as of arrival, building separate but interconnected households. Their daily life references and social positioning are located both at the national and transnational level (Berger/Weiß 2008; Gil Martínez 2006). According to the definition of Bryceson and Vuorela (2002: 3), transnational families are “families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders”. In transnational families, economic, cultural and social resources as well as care practices circulate as expressions of belonging and strategies of maintaining or shifting of power balances. As they are networks of support they are also spaces of reproduction of social inequalities. Regarding the asymmetric reciprocal exchange of care practices, Baldassar and Merla (2014: 29f) state that female members are ascribed the main care responsibility, while they usually give more than they receive.

Processes of change in families (i.e., the family configurational process) have to be analysed at three levels (Strohmeier/Herlth 1989; Bade et al. 2000: 1). At the meso level, ne-

egotiations between the different family members are shaped by the changing assumptions regarding the expectations of others throughout the family cycle. On the micro level, negotiations are influenced by the individual members' perceptions and evaluations of the practices of familial living together that are changing throughout their life course. This interior family dynamic on the micro and meso level is interrelated with change at the macro level of societal conditions. Because the interior and the exterior level are linked, the processes of individual social mobility inside and outside the family are also interconnected and influence the position of the family as a whole.

To better capture different types of change in family figurations, whether they are continuous and gradual or characterized by more or less abrupt ruptures, the theoretical concepts of status passage and (biographical) turning point are used. Status passages usually refer to a "movement into a different part of a social structure; or a loss or gain of privilege, influence, or power, and a changed identity and sense of self, as well as changed behaviour" (Glaser/Strauss 1971: 2). Heinz (2009) stresses the point that, on the micro level, status passages are constructed by biographical actors, located on social pathways. Their individual scope of action is shaped by institutional guidelines – represented by "agents of control" (Glaser/Strauss 1971: 57ff.), opportunity structures and the distribution of life chances (depending on the determinants of social inequality, such as gender, skin colour, age or the social position of the family of origin). In addition to these aspects, the individual's perceived self-efficacy should be added. Sackmann and Wingens (Sackmann/Wingens 2001; Sackmann 2007; Wingens/Reiter 2011), referring to the arguments of Elder (1974, 1985) and Abbott (1997), structure the overall life course into the courses of different life spheres (occupation, family, health, etc.). Whereas transitions only modify these courses, turning points, as radical disruptions or ruptures, can totally change their direction. These authors argue that family life courses are characterized by several changes of direction and therefore should be conceptualized through turning points. This more 'objective'<sup>5</sup> conception of turning points is combined with the approach of Schütze (1981, 1984) and Rosenthal (1995), who look closer at their subjective biographical importance. Rosenthal (1995: 134ff.) points to biographical turning points as essential factors influencing the *Gestalt* of the narrated life story. Biographical turning points lead to biographically relevant ruptures in the routines characterizing everyday life (*Alltagszeit*) and overall, larger-scale lifetime (*Lebenszeit*). The author differentiates between several types of biographical turning points. Status passages are one of them; so-called "interpretation points" are others, causing a re-evaluation of past experiences as well as present and future perspectives (Rosenthal 1995: 141f.). They are temporal cuts in the life course that separate the time 'before' from the time 'after'. Biographical turning points imply risks as well as chances.

Looking at change in family figurations through the analytical lens of these two concepts and respecting the above mentioned three-level perspective, the influencing factors of status passages and (biographical) turning points also have to be located at these three levels and considered to be interrelated. At the micro level of the biographer, there are on-

5 The use of simple quotation marks indicates the interpretative orientation of the research design, which follows the assumption that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas/ Thomas 1928: 572).

togenetically related passages, such as from childhood to youth or other biographical or life-cycle related events (sickness, marriage, desire to have children, etc.). Located at the meso level are events that happen inside the family and influence the relationships and mutual expectations (migration of another member, decease, etc.). The macro level includes events like economic crises or legal regularization programmes, leading to downward or upward social mobility, and other factors located outside the family figuration (e.g., dollar exchange rates or individual and collective actors exterior to the family).

The first step of the analysis is the biographical case reconstruction of the individual family members' life *story* and *history*, putting special emphasis on the *biographical turning points that lead to individual status passages inside the family*, e.g. in the context of individual social mobility on the labour market during migration. In a second step, the relationship between this individual status passage and the family figuration as a whole is analysed. In some cases, the individual status passage might lead to a *turning point in the family configurational process*, if power balances shift fundamentally and functional interdependencies are restructured. In this way, the link between the productive and reproductive spheres, organized along gender-specific lines (in the different national and transnational frames of reference of social positioning) remains clearly visible.

#### **4. State of the art of research on dynamics of change in migrant families**

The research on families shows that change is an inherent part of every family. They transform continuously following internal negotiations and adapt to changing external conditions. This process of gradual and abrupt changes becomes even more dynamic and challenging during migration. Looking at gradual changes, research points out the following: In the classical study of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918), and later in one of the first specifically transnational oriented studies of Grasmuck and Pessar (1991), we can observe that traditional patriarchal forms of family organisation, dominant in rural regions of origin, might lose their importance when adapting to lifestyles perceived as modern in the arrival context or because of the need to adapt to new life circumstances. Simultaneously, continuous connection to values and norms of the society of origin through modern means of transportation and communication makes a far-reaching change in traditional gender roles and hierarchies less likely (Grasmuck/Pessar 1991: 154ff.). Through the circulation of resources and care practices, transnational families keep fulfilling their primary function of guaranteeing mutual welfare. Even so, the power balance between mobile and non-mobile persons of different sex and generations is in constant movement (see e.g. Gil Martínez 2006; Pribilsky 2007; Levitt 2001a).

Research shows that the migration of mothers and wives requires greater adjustment of mutual expectations and of the division of tasks than the migration of fathers and husbands. A general insight is that families with a greater capacity for structural flexibility, i.e., to change the dominant set of values, norms and practices, are more likely to adapt successfully to the new circumstances (Bade et al. 2000; Pribilsky 2007). At the same time, traditional role models and practices are reproduced during migration, e.g., in families where mothers have emigrated without their children and other female members of the nuclear and extended family take over the mother's tasks (see e.g. Herrera/Carrillo

2009, Parreñas 2004). But not only do migrant mothers fulfil the traditional expectations towards them in their role as a mother, they also take over the role as main breadwinner usually ascribed to men (see e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo/Ávila 1997; Boccagni 2012). Especially difficult in transnational families is the satisfaction of emotional needs, which leads to "emotional gaps" (Parreñas 2008). In families where mothers have migrated alone, remaining fathers can find it more difficult to bridge this gap. They are less flexible and orientate themselves more often than mothers towards the traditional gender norms. For migrant men, it is also important to compensate their loss of status in the society of arrival with status claims in the society of origin (Grasmuck/Pessar 1991), which tends to reinforce established hierarchies. Morokvasic (2009), in an overview of the link between migration and the maintenance, reinforcement or challenging of gender hierarchies, shows how migrant women use the traditional gender order for empowerment.

Contrary to discourses that relate the causes of family rupture to the migration process itself, blaming mostly the mothers or the remaining children (for the Philippines see Parreñas 2004, for Ecuador see Wagner 2008 or Pedone 2012, for Colombia see Echeverri Buriticá 2014), studies show that the migration of a family member often means the continuation of already existing tendencies and practices. This might be the case for grandparents that were already involved in caring for their grandchildren before migration, or when the latent process of separation that a couple goes through finally becomes manifest after the migration of one of the partners (see e.g. Levitt 2001a, Herrera/Carrillo 2009).

Another relevant factor for the dynamic in transnational families is the kind of migration project that is being negotiated inside the family. It makes a difference if it has been defined more as a collective or more as an individual project (Camacho/Hernández 2005). In general, individual members often feel a tension between individual needs and compliance with family norms of solidarity. One strategy is the intent by migrant members to redefine generalized ideas of family organisation, making it easier for them to comply with family expectations and maintain their family position (see e.g. Øien 2010).

In transnational families the different ways and courses of integration of individual family members in the societies of origin and arrival shape the transnational social space of the family. Oso/Suárez-Grimalt (2018) analyse the productive and reproductive strategies in transnational families and highlight the ambiguous and sometimes conflictual relation between shifting family roles and hierarchies, individual social mobility outside the family and the social mobility process of the family as a whole. With upward social mobility in arrival societies e.g. through a change of occupational sector or by changing from *live-in* to *live-out* work arrangements inside the domestic sector), the chances of successful processes of parenthood or family reunification improve. In addition to individual and intrafamilial elements, it is therefore the concrete living conditions of the individual members, especially regarding legal status and financial resources, that determine in great part the different and changing patterns of transnational family life. The highest degree of self-determination in how to live a transnational family life is to be found in persons with formal and easy access to the societies of origin and arrival (Pusch 2013). It has also been argued that the less successful the integration process is, the more important is family solidarity (Bade et al. 2000).

Regarding the importance of the economic crisis for abrupt changes in transnational family dynamics, several authors who look at Latino families with members in Spain and

Italy, point towards a re-intensification of cross-border family entanglement and with it a restructuring of these families (Herrera 2012; Roig/Recaño-Valverde 2012; Pedone 2012; Yépez del Castillo 2014). For the Ecuadorian case, Herrera notes that the crisis “may have played a role in reengaging settled families in the dynamics of long-distance social reproduction between Spain and Ecuador” (Herrera 2012: 127). She further explains that this process of family reorganisation of productive and reproductive tasks weakens the position of the female and youngest members of the family and leads to the *re-traditionalization* of gender roles and task divisions. The strategies in arrival societies aim at the preservation of income level and acquired goods. Simultaneously, a lower income leads to less money sent to Ecuador or a reverse resource flow (Martín Díaz 2012). In both national contexts, amplified family networks and informal practices (informal credit systems, informal employment, etc.) gain importance (Herrera 2012). Contrary to the finding of *re-transnationalization* of family relationships, Aguilar et al. (2009) identify a certain *de-transnationalization* for the case of Mexican families living between Yucatán and the United States, in the context of the reduction of resource flows and other crisis related household strategies. Generally speaking, it can be noted that the level of affectedness of households in the society of origin depends on the position and role of the migrated member and how easily households can diversify their more or less important income. Therefore, it is also a matter of social positioning of the family itself.

Only few of the studies cited here worked with a multi-sited research design that considers the perspectives of different family members located in different national societies, and none of them allows for the comprehension of family processes of negotiation and change that took place before the migration process started. One of the few exceptions is the work of Mummert (2012), who in a longitudinal research design combines multi-local ethnographic field-work with a biographical approach. She identifies some elements that are constant in different migration-specific forms of organisation of productive and reproductive tasks and makes reference to long-term societal change and its importance for differences in the experiences and social practices of different generations. But, even if she explores the period of formation of the analysed families, she narrows the focus of analysis very quickly to the migration process itself. Therefore, the analysis falls short of capturing the historicity and complexity of the long-term negotiating processes on family norms, roles, positions and practices, which is needed to identify the variety of influencing factors of the negotiation process in their complexity and to fully understand their importance during migration.

The present study proposes to relate a perspective on long-term family dynamics to the individual biographical courses and interpretations of family members and their processes of integration, i.e. participation, in the contexts of origin and arrival. Looking at one selected case-family, the results will focus on the normative settings, shifting power balances and mutual dependencies in gender and generational relations (in terms of role expectations and interpretations and corresponding practices) – i.e., the functioning of the family – before and after migration. I will identify some general characteristics of one type of dynamic of change in transnational families, taking into account the role of (biographical) turning points and status passages and answer the question regarding the importance of the economic crisis in Spain for this process.

## 5. Methods

The research design combines a temporal or process-oriented perspective (Elias 2014), linking the different levels of analysis with a multi-local approach that captures the simultaneity of transnational entanglements (Marcus 1995). From a methodological point of view, the study applies Elias' logic of descent in the analysis of configurational processes (2014: 194f.). This means that the figuration at the time of the interviews in 2014 can only be explained by determining how and why it evolved from a figuration, and not by a static root cause (such as a change in the contextual conditions through an economic crisis). Since every relationship between individuals is a process of entanglement, and actions of both sides can only be explained and understood by considering their interdependence (Elias 2014: 91), different perspectives of members of the same family are connected with reference to the simultaneity of events in different places (in the transnational space). By doing so, a basic requirement of researching transnational phenomena is taken into account. The process-oriented research design furthermore captures the dynamic of the changing degree of transnationality of family life (density and intensity of exchange of symbol systems, social practices and artefacts) (see Levitt 2001b or Pries 2010), and therefore its relevance for the individual life-worlds located at the national level. To get access to retrospective, longitudinal data, the theoretical assumptions of biographical research serve as a second main methodological principle. Biographies are socially constructed patterns of orientation. They integrate the levels of experience, agency and structure, thereby overcoming the dichotomy between 'subjective/individual' and 'objective/society,'<sup>6</sup> as well as the time levels of past, present and future. Biographers in the moment of telling their life story 'make sense' of their life. From a specific present and future perspective, a selection of past events and experiences are remembered and presented to the interviewer. Through biographical analysis, the course of events (the life *history*), as well as the structure of the self-presentation (the life *story*), is reconstructed (see Fischer/Kohli 1987, Fischer 1989, Rosenthal 1995, 2004).

Data collection was carried out through biographical-narrative interviews (Schütze 1983) with different members of the same family in Bilbao, Spain, and Guayaquil, as well as in a rural community in Ecuador. These interviews were combined with multi-local ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation and several interviews with additional family members and other persons of reference) (Sunstein/Chiseri-Strater 2012, Okely 2012). Analysis on the meso level focuses on the data of individual life course and family events (family history), starting with the birth of the respective family members but including information on the history of the older generation (see Bertaux 1995). On this analytical level, the empirical material undergoes a content analysis (Mayring 2015). Analysis on the micro level follows the principles of biographical case reconstruction (Fischer/Kohli 1984, Rosenthal 1995) and focuses on the biographical self-presentations of different family members and their comparison (see Delcroix 1995; Dausien 1996; Mummert 2012). The dynamic of the case structure, which is the family, results from the biographical course of the individual members, their interactions and subjective interpretations.

6 See earlier comment. Also Elias' configurational sociology (2014) aims at overcoming the suggested juxtaposition of individual and society, besides strengthening the perspective on processes.

## 6. The Gonzalez<sup>7</sup> Family

For the purpose of this article, one case is selected from a total of six families. The presentation starts with some comments on the interview situations and the present-day perspective of narration (*Gegenwartsperspektive der Erzählung*) of the two biographers, Monica, the migrant daughter, and her mother Eugenia. In these first reflections on the individual living situations and the family figuration at the moment of the interview, a short description of the individual biographical courses is provided. Then follows the presentation of the family configurational process before and after migration. Special attention is paid to the decisive turning points that shape the transnational family dynamics.

### *Present-day perspectives and Biographical short descriptions*

#### Monica

In my first conversation with Monica in February 2014, still on the bus towards her home in a working class neighbourhood of Bilbao, she already starts talking about her life with her family back in Ecuador. The conversation continues in her kitchen revealing intimate details in a quite early stage of the process of getting to know each other (e.g. about her unsuccessful attempts to remain pregnant). At that time, it was my impression that telling her life story serves a therapeutic purpose for her. The story she tells about herself is very much embedded in her family history. Especially the relationship to her father is crucial in presenting the way she became the person that she sees herself as being today. He seemed to be the patriarch who imposes a family hierarchy based on a traditional ascribing of roles and positions along gender and generational lines, following a strict Catholic-conservative set of values and norms. As a result, Monica's individual space of action and above all her sexuality were tightly controlled in her youth. This control went so far that she repeatedly suffered from interruptions of her educational path and from the cutting off of social ties that she tried to establish outside the family. One example is her imposed break from the university, during which she lost contact with her first boyfriend, whom she had met during the very exciting first year. After this traumatic experience, she saw a psychologist and quit university. Monica also refers to intrafamilial violence that her father committed against her mother. During these moments Monica repeatedly took her fathers' side and acted against her mother. Nevertheless, from a present-day perspective, and after a process of reinterpretation linked to her migration, today she somehow blames her father for it. But, during her self-presentation, Monica does not fully permit herself a negative evaluation of her father's role in her life or in the family history. He created a world for her, in which most of her material wishes were fulfilled, and she also took advantage of this bubble that he kept her in. After leaving university early, no-one pressured her to enter the labour market, "because my father supplied everything as long as I would be at home and follow the rules" (Monica). In 2001, at the age of 25, her best friend Julia (her only close relationship outside the family) got Monica her first job. Empowered by her own income, she opposed the father for the first time openly in another conflict on behavioural norms. This lasting but latent conflict, and

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7 All names are changed.

the fact that her friend Julia left for Spain, led also to Monica's migration in 2003. In Bilbao, her economic and legal participation process follows the typical pattern. Soon after her arrival, she started working informally as a child carer earning relatively little money, but enough to live an individually oriented consumerist lifestyle. After some months living in Spain with Julia and her partner, Monica was told that her father was ill. This came as a very big surprise to her, although he actually had already been suffering for a longer time from prostate cancer. She blames herself for her ignorance, and in the interview she repeatedly evaluates herself negatively and shows a feeling of guilt. It might be that this negative present-day evaluation of herself is a result of the dilemma not to permit a negative evaluation of her father. When Monica realized that her father was seriously ill, she promised him in an intense and emotional conversation by phone to look after her mother and her younger sisters the same way he would do it. She commits to becoming the "head of the family" and not "betray his things, what he showed us" (Monica). In other words, her individual migration project becomes a collective one, in which she substitutes him in his position as head of household and main breadwinner. In 2005 she obtained her first legal residence permit and a work permit, and, some years later, Spanish citizenship. In 2008, she decided to leave the domestic sector and to continue her educational path. She started an apprenticeship and wanted to become an electrician. She quit her full-time job and started working part-time in geriatric care. When she fell ill in 2009, and before undergoing surgery, she travelled to Ecuador to hand over the financial responsibility for the family to her older brother. Back in Spain, and after the medical intervention, she was not able to return to her job and claimed social benefits. In 2010, Monica failed an important exam and abandoned the apprenticeship. In 2011, she married an Algerian man she got to know during the professional training. She finally moved out of the flat where she had been living for many years with Julia, Julia's husband and their daughter, and established her own household. She wished very much to become a mother, which implied a series of fertility treatment procedures. Until 2014 she did some informal jobs in the service sector during the summers and worked a few hours a week cleaning a school and private households. In the interview, she shows herself deeply disappointed with the state of the relationship between her and her family members in Ecuador. She complains about a lack of communication with all of them, especially her mother, and describes how she felt "a stranger in my own house" even though she had been the "pillar of the household" (Monica) for many years. Nevertheless, she assures me that her brother will receive me and help out with interviewing her mother.

### Eugenia

My first contact with the Gonzalez family in Guayaquil indeed happened through Monica's brother Jaime Jr. He closely inquired into my interests before he introduced me to his mother. Eugenia at first showed no desire to have any kind of intimate conversation about her life or the history of her family. Only when I offer to stop the conversation and the research with her family, does she start asking me questions about her daughter Monica and agrees to an interview. The biographical self-presentation then follows a similar pattern of a certain rejection. Eugenia is driven into the conversation by her wish to get information about her daughter. She might also think that having this interview with me brings her closer to Monica in some way. From a formal perspective, the resulting interview text barely shows any

narration flow. Instead, she tries to closely control the story she is presenting. The individual and family story that she finally presents resembles the societies' ideal image of Ecuadorian family life, in which she, as a mother, raises the children and grandchildren while her husband works restlessly to assure the family well-being. This family history starts, according to middle class norms, with her marrying her husband at the age of 18, and the children being born after that date. The biographical case reconstruction though shows that her factual history is another one. Eugenia was born in 1960 in a rural area not far from Guayaquil, in a poor peasants' household. At the age of 10, she was sent to live with an older cousin and to work in middle-class households in the centre of the rapidly growing coastal city of Guayaquil (see Moser 2009: 8f.). Eugenia was actually only 14 years old when her oldest son Jaime Jr. was born. She lived together with her future husband in the marginal neighbourhood of *Cristo del Consuelo*, a swampy area that was gradually being made habitable. Three years later, in 1976, Monica was born. Eugenia now only did domestic work when some neighbour needed her services to wash clothes or for short-term childcare. Her – by now – husband, Jaime Sr., worked as a guardian at the national housing bank and managed to secure a loan for a house in a residential area (*ciudadela*). In 1982, they moved into the newly constructed *ciudadela Sauces*, the "housing solution for the middle class" (El Universo 28/04/2011), and, in 1988, her third child, Jazmine was born. Eugenia's difficulty in telling a life story can also be related to her sufferings as a young girl, living separated from her parents, working at such an early age, and the early pregnancies that led her so soon into a dependency relationship to her husband. As the history unfolds, this hypothesis becomes even more plausible. She also might lack a certain biographical scope of action and significant changes in lifestyle, which are the necessary biographical conditions for presenting a life story (Rosenthal 1995, 99ff.). In her life as a housewife and mother, she experienced physical and/or psychological violence by her husband. In 1998, at the age of 38, and on the eve of a severe economic and political crisis in Ecuador, her last daughter Celine was born. With the subsequent inflation and dollarization of the national economy, the family, depending mainly on Jaime Sr.'s income, was hit hard. In 2003, Monica emigrated to Spain, and some months later Jaime Sr. died of a heart attack. Having lost her husband and being distanced from her oldest daughter, Eugenia fell into a depression. After years of dependence on Jaime Sr.'s income, she herself needed to assure the upbringing of her younger daughters, aged 15 and 5 years old. Her son, Jaime Jr. was already married at this point and responsible for a stepdaughter. Eugenia started an informal street trade with imported clothes, but a little later Monica took over the financial burden until 2009, when responsibilities were re-negotiated, and Eugenia temporarily took up the informal clothes business again. In the years following Jaime Sr.'s death, Eugenia became the main person responsible for the care of her youngest daughter Celine and the children of Jaime Jr. and of her middle daughter Jazmine, who were born between 2005 and 2007. In sum, Eugenia's family position and traditional role has not changed significantly over time. Her sporadic involvement in the productive sphere does not seem to have an influence.

After this short description of the individual present-day perspectives and the biographical courses, the question still remains of what happened in the family history that led to such an ambiguous relationship between mother and daughter, in which emotional distance and the need to overcome it are co-present. And how is it that Monica's need to feel that she belongs to the family is not being reciprocated by her family members after she had

(over)fulfilled the familial expectations for almost six years? Her brother even states in a spontaneous comment that Monica would only be “another burden” (Jaime Jr.) if she were to decide to return. And, finally, what role does the crisis in Spain play in this family dynamic?

### *The family configurational process*

In the late 1980s and the 1990s, the Gonzalez Family was a middle-class family that underwent a lengthy process of upward social mobility while depending on one income. They imitated the ideal of the single male breadwinner model with a patriarchal organisation typical of middle-class families. Based on their own experience of early pregnancies and heavy work, the parents strictly applied a Catholic-conservative set of norms that restricted the individual (sexual) freedom of their children and led to various conflicts inside the family. While Jaime Jr. rebelled, Monica submitted to the rules and took advantage in attracting all her father’s affection. The intrafamilial violence of Jaime Sr. towards his wife created a kind of alliance between the mother Eugenia and son Jaime Jr. on one side and the father Jaime Sr. and daughter Monica on the other. As a result, Monica, as the second-born child and daughter, ranked higher in her father’s preferences than her older brother. Probably, Eugenia, from a present-day perspective, feels some guilt about her role in implementing that model and for the negative impact it had for Monica’s development and which in the end has also shaped the relationship with her until the present day.

The financial, economic and political crisis that hit Ecuador, especially between 1999 and 2002, led to the impoverishment of the middle and lower classes of society. The Gonzalez family was also faced with downward social mobility. The patriarchal single male breadwinner model was becoming more and more unsustainable. At the same time, Monica’s plans to migrate together with her friend Julia became more concrete, and, while her mother supported her in a kind of passive way, her father was informed last. The economic situation of the household might have influenced his decision to let Monica go.

*The first familial turning point happened in 2004* after the death of the father, Jaime Sr. By that time, Jaime Jr. was already married and taking responsibility for his own family. From the moral point of view of his father, the fact that his son’s wife was a former single mother further deteriorated his family position. So, instead of him, it was the migrant daughter Monica who underwent a status passage inside the family. She kept the promise that she had made to her father and covered almost all the expenses that the household was to have, including transport and schooling fees for her younger sisters. Being legitimised by the appointment through her father as head of the family, she exercised the role of main breadwinner and also reproduced the traditional family system of values and norms. Over the next few years this would lead her into conflict with her brother and his wife as well as with her younger sister Jazmine, who shortly after the death of her father ran away with a man and got pregnant. Monica as well as Jaime Jr. were outraged at first about that breach of family norms. Monica blamed Jazmine and her mother and punished them by reducing the remittances. But only shortly afterwards, she showed compassion, and the whole family agreed on accommodating Jazmine, her newborn baby and her partner.

The event that mainly triggered the familial turning point was the death of the father, who needed to be substituted in some way. It occurred in the context of an economic crisis, in which the family faced severe downward social mobility. It was also Monica's migration and her social mobility in the Ecuadorian reference frame that made her status passage inside the family possible. Finally, it was the previous configurational process of the family itself, with its value system, intrafamilial violence and certain alliances that marked the multipolar power-balances and which led to the way the turning point takes place. The key characteristics of the new family figuration were its more fragile balance of power, the father being replaced by his daughter, and connected to this, the family's much higher level of transnationality as she was exercising his role from afar.

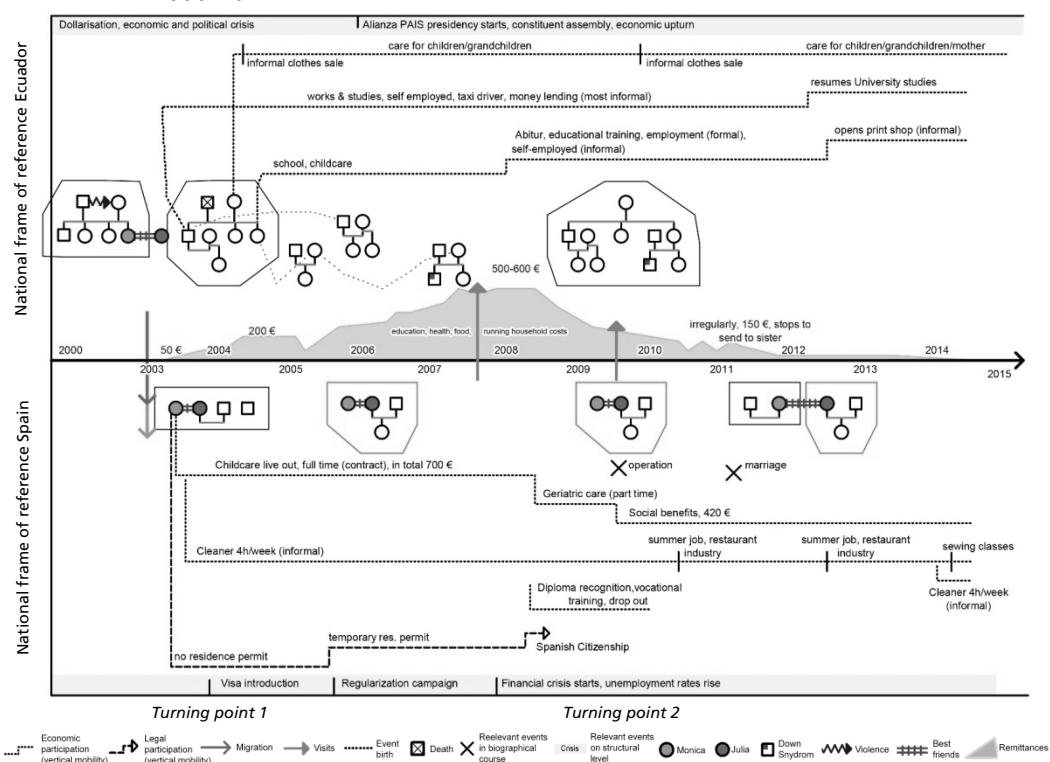
After a period of conflicts and distancing, the family members in Guayaquil got into closer interdependency. Jaime Jr. moved back into the family home, and they depended closely on each other in daily care routines. In the same period, during almost six years (2004-2009), the household income was substantially being provided by Monica. She assured the education of her youngest sister Celine, enabled the other sister Jazmine, by that time a mother of two, to finish school and enter the labour market, and she allowed Jaime Jr. to focus mainly on his own nuclear family and not worry too much about his mother and sisters, even though it would normally have been his responsibility according to traditional role ascriptions. But despite her being the main economic pillar, Monica felt estranged during her first visit in 2007, "like someone extra" (Monica) in her own house. She started a fight with her brother on normative grounds concerning the relation between their mother and his wife. In 2009, before her surgery, she returned to Guayaquil, reconciled with her brother and negotiated a redistribution of the financial burden, which would now mainly be attributed to him.

*This second familial turning point in 2009*, and with it an intrafamilial status passage for Monica and her brother, is also linked to a variety of factors on the micro, macro and meso level. Monica was ill and facing a surgery. It was a moment when she feared that she would not be able to be the provider any longer. Also, her biographical project of resuming her formal education played a role, as it reflected her past experiences of educational interruptions, the reduced working hours in the present and the future prospects of leaving the domestic sector. Also, the biographical turning point of her own marriage and desire to become a mother is of importance. On the macro level, it is Spain's economic crisis that reduced her possibilities of generating an income, while individual possibilities for her family members had been growing in the context of the political change and economic upturn in Ecuador. Also, outside the family figuration, there was a change in the possibilities of her friend Julia to support Monica, as she was in a moment of her life where she had to prioritize her own nuclear family. Again, inside the figuration, there was – on the one hand – the more or less stabilized economic position of Jaime Jr. and her sister Jazmine, and – on the other hand – the configurational process itself, which was marked by an emotional distancing between Monica and above all her mother – an outcome of the conflictual family dynamics prior to Monica's migration. The configurational process after 2009 is marked by a de-trans-nationalization and a loss of function of the separated members for each other, while cohesion inside the separate households grows. In Ecuador, the mutual interdependencies intensified in terms of care practices, economic contributions and the claims on the family house by Jaime Jr. and Jazmine. Meanwhile, Monica experi-

enced a process of individualization that lowered the importance of her collective family identity, in her words “becoming more selfish” (Monica) and taking on the roles of wife and potentially a mother to-be.

In the aftermath of this turning point the financial as well as the communication flow between Monica and her family members in Guayaquil reduced drastically. Yet negotiations on obligations and privileges continued. Jaime Jr. was only partially able and willing to cover the needs of the mother, Eugenia, and youngest sister, Celine. At the moment of the interview, Celine needed one more year to graduate from high school. For her to have any prospect on the Ecuadorian labour market, she would need to go to university, and the mother, Eugenia, was very worried who of the older siblings could and would support her.

*Graph 1: Social Genogram of the Gonzalez family and individual social mobility, 2000-2014*



Graph 1 gives a simplified overview of the interconnected lives of the family members in separate households located in different national contexts between 2000 and 2014. It shows the trajectories of the individual family members mainly in the life sphere of work (upper part) and, in the case of Monica, also her legal status trajectory (lower part). Both types of trajectories represent processes of individual social mobility. It also shows important life cycle events, such as deaths and births, changes in the household compositions, remittance sending and visits. The lifetime events are contextualized by the historic

time and the change in macro structural context in Spain and Ecuador. What can be seen here is how Monica first enables her siblings to pursue their individual paths by sending a constantly increasing amount of financial remittances (2004/2005-2008) that eventually leads into their upward social mobility. The money she sends exceeds by far the amount previously earned by her father. When she herself experiences the biographical turning point in 2009 and the downward social mobility outside and inside the family, the household in Ecuador is stable enough to sustain itself. While looking specifically at the period between 2008 and 2012 (when the uncertainty about future prospects during the crisis was highest), it becomes visible that there are various factors on the macro, meso and micro level that are interconnected and shape this turning point of the family figuralional process. The economic crisis in Spain is only one of them.

## 7. Conclusions

Through the results of my analyses presented above, my aim is to show that the influencing factors on the dynamics of change, i.e., on turning points, of family figurations are located inside the figuration on the biographical and relational level and outside the figuration on the contextual level. In transnational families, these different and interconnected factors are located in the different national reference frames of the individual family members and in the transnational space. The presented case is characterized by two more or less abrupt changes in the form of turning points, when power balances between some family members shift essentially. These turning points are influenced by the trajectories of societal integration, i.e., participation in different spheres of society, of the individual family members in Bilbao and Guayaquil which are, in turn, shaped by their individual life courses and the specific contexts and conditions (different macro-economic developments in both countries, migration policy, etc.). The high degree of transnationality of the Gonzalez family life during a certain period of time is also due to the lack of a sufficiently developed welfare state in the society of origin and the family being the crucial unit of survival, in which the expectations towards the migrant member to sustain the family are high.

Even though the organisation of family life during periods of migration shows certain specific characteristics (here, for example, the more fragile power balances after the substitution of the head of household), its essential logic is rooted in the long-term and gradual evolution of family constellations. In the presented case, social ascendance into the middle class and the excessive imitation of the class-specific model of the ideal family set the stage for the subsequent figuralional process: the way the relationships between Monica and her father and the other family members unfolded before his death explains why, after almost six years when she was the main provider, her brother considers her “another burden” (Jaime Jr.) instead of showing some solidarity regarding her possible return. It also explains why the migrant daughter feels that she does not belong to the family anymore and therefore prioritizes her individual needs, while at the same time she and her mother somehow try to remedy this distant relationship, and why there are still expectations towards her in supporting the youngest sister Celine in her educational trajectory (Monica also still perceives the obligation towards her deceased father). Under conditions of transnationality, it is the change in one national context (e.g. an economic crisis), and

therefore in the living conditions of one or several of its members, that can impact the family as a whole. But again, the way it impacts the family (e.g. de- or re-transnationalisation, and therefore relaxing or confirming its vital functions, challenging or confirming hierarchies and inequalities) is inscribed in the logic of the long-term negotiation processes and emotional dynamics, and in the resulting conflicts and alliances; i.e. in the figural process itself. The biographical significance of the economic crisis for the individual family member is, in turn, connected to the relational interdependency over time and is inscribed into the common construction of the family history.

The figural process perspective makes mechanisms of gender inequalities visible in their ambiguity and, in some cases, also in their intersection with other determinants. The educational trajectory of the youngest sister, Celine, could come to a too early end partly because she was born latest, during the process of downward social mobility of the family, only five years before the death of her father. The middle sister Jazmine suffered like her older sister Monica from the strict patriarchal family system, but, thanks to the care of her mother and the economic support of the migrant Monica, who feels deeply responsible and committed to the principles her father had established, she was eventually able to live a self-determined life with her own nuclear family. The first-born son, Jaime Jr., also suffers from the established family system that puts him in second place behind Monica, but at the same time this frees him in a way from his traditionally ascribed responsibilities. Monica, after a reinterpretation process during her migration, perceives the bubble her father held her in (having many restrictions, while at the same time enjoying many privileges that the other siblings did not have) as something very negative that has fundamentally marked her life. But she still mainly blames herself for it. The efforts she undertook to support her family, she mainly did because of the promise she had made to her father before his death. This latent critique of the very strictly applied traditional notion of family that develops during her migration is not yet present enough in Monicas' biographical self-presentation to be transferred back to Guayaquil as the innovative normative structures or systems of practice that Levitt (1998) describes as *social remittances*. The father, Jaime Sr., resembles the ideal model of head of household and single breadwinner, who led his family to social ascendancy while applying a strict Catholic-conservative system of values and norms. He accepted the conflicts that come with it, but when the Ecuadorian crisis stroke at the end of the 1990s, his position weakened, and the whole model was questioned. Eugenia's life history reflects the classic trajectory of early mother and dependent housewife, who throughout most of her life was engaged in multiple care duties (at present towards her grandchildren, her youngest daughter and her mother) and at times, had to engage in precarious productive activities.

Finally, analysis shows how the productive and reproductive tasks (i.e. the mutual dependencies) among the family members are organized. It demonstrates that the individual processes of social mobility in different national societies are connected to one another and at the same time shape the social mobility process of the whole family. The findings here reaffirm the conclusions already reached at by Grasmuck and Pessar (1991), Besserer (2002), Berger and Weiß (2008) and Rocio Gil (2006) that processes of social positioning marked by determinants of inequality, such as class, migration, gender, generation or sibling (ordinal) position have to be understood from a transnational perspective.

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