Long distance relationships: working towards a combined approach to transnationalism and the sociology of relationships

Gillian Abel
Anthropology and Sociology
School of Social and Cultural Studies
The University of Western Australia
abelg01@student.uwa.edu.au

The modern globalized era, [is] an era defined by an unprecedented interconnectedness in which identities, ideas, cultures and politics are embedded in the global and the transnational. The boundaries between home and away, local and global, traditional and de-traditionalized, and here and there, have become increasingly blurred (Skrbis et al., 2004: 116).

Amongst some of the major social changes confronting contemporary individuals are individualization (Beck, 1992), deterritorialization (Appadurai, 1991), and detraditionalization (Beck, 1992). These processes, like transnationalism, are largely viewed as symptomatic of modernity. The individualization thesis is an important intersection of transnationalism and the sociology of relationships, characterising, as it does, what Beck (1992) sees as the eventual end point of the market society: the individual whose potential for mobility in the global market is unfettered. Beck writes that ‘Family, neighbourhood, even friendship, as well as ties to a regional culture and landscape, contradict the individual mobility and the mobile individual required by the labor market’ (1992: 87).

This paper asks how people negotiate the competing demands of mobility for the labour markets and the need for connection to others through friendships, family, community and the nation. I argue that much current literature tends to divide the analytic tasks. While research on transnationalism tends to focus on mobility, with some attention to continuing relationships, the sociology of relationships tends to
focus on interpersonal connections with some attention to mobility. Here, I intend to explore what might be offered by an approach that aims to deal equally and simultaneously with mobility and relationships. British researchers Green and Canny (2003), in their report *Geographical mobility: family impacts*, have utilised a similar approach to that which I propose. This paper seeks to extend that contribution to the literature by highlighting similar issues to be dealt with, but in a transnational setting.

I begin by outlining the main features of recent research on transnationalism, pointing to some of its features and gaps. For instance, Basch et al (1994: 22) note that 'Bounded social science concepts that conflate physical location, culture, and identity can limit the ability of researchers first to perceive and then to analyze the phenomenon of transnationalism.' I shall then turn to the sociology of relationships and demonstrate that similar limitations are caused by the tendency, despite some exceptions, to conflate relationships with preconceived notions of the family and with particular spatial and temporal locations. While it is tempting to believe that increased mobility and the tendency to individualization signal the demise of personal interdependence in the era of late modernity, there is ample evidence that this is not the case (Gray, 1996; Holmes, 2004; Baldassar et al., 2006). I will argue that the combined approach to mobility and relationships which this paper recommends offers a more nuanced look at social lives in late modernity than is possible by looking at these areas individually.

**Transnationalism**

Regarding transnationalism as merely mobility between nation states is inadequate as it fails to draw attention to the myriad of social interactions which are influenced by such movement. At the same time arriving at a definition of what does constitute transnationalism is equally problematic. For example, as a Scottish migrant who arrived in Australia over eight years ago I am concerned that the current definitions of transnational do not fit my situation. Although my life ‘feels’ transnational, this label is not supported by much of the literature. Portes (1998:16) for example, argues that ‘transnationals are at least bilingual’. An ability to revert to my local dialect which would render me unintelligible to most Australians, not to mention many fellow Scots, does not make me bilingual. Common language and phenotypical similarities with the majority Australian population can be said to render my transnational status somewhat invisible.
In *Nations Unbound* it is argued that ‘Transnationalism is a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries’ (Basch et al., 1994:22). This definition can be said to fall short by claiming that transnationalism refers only to migrants. As Roudometof argues ‘The emerging reality of social life under conditions of internal globalization or glocalization is what should be properly understood as transnationalism’ (2005:118) In this interpretation it is not only migrants who live transnational lives. In a similar vein Kennedy and Roudometof profess a desire to ‘open up the theoretical space in order to allow for the examination of additional transnational groups that do not fall within the category of “new immigrants”’ (2002:5) They argue that there are relatively few people in the world today whom cannot be considered to be transnational, and note:

Transnational communities and cultures need to be understood as constituting a much wider and more commonplace phenomenon than the existing research might lead us to suppose. We argue that transnational relationships are not confined to the experience of migrants; rather they are extending into and shaping the lives of people engaged in many other kinds of associations, clubs and informal networks as well as into cultural life at large (2002:1).

The reach of transnationalism can be seen as both a symptom of and a reaction to globalisation. Actors on the transnational stage both engage in practices defined by the increasingly global economy and are involved in the creation of new ways of dealing with their increasingly global situations. For Portes (1999), grass-roots transnational activities developed as a response to globalizing practices and the necessity for mobility in the labour market. Even in situations where mobility is less of a necessity and more of a choice, accepting that this is not a straightforward dichotomy, transnational activities follow. Recently I returned from Scotland with a full length ladies’ kilt, a gift from a friend who thought that, being Scottish in Australia, I would have more potential use for it than she would in Scotland. She implied a necessity for me to demonstrate my Scottishness. In a similar manner, I have over the years despatched various souvenirs, books and ephemera devoted to Australia northwards by way of involving those left behind in my present life (See also Baldassar, 2001). My experience of transnationalism may not, as I have pointed out, fit neatly into many of the scholarly definitions but it does constitute more than merely mobility between nation states.
Reflexivity

The two-way process of transnationalism described above has been facilitated by significant changes in opportunities for travel and communications in fairly recent decades (Portes et al., 1999). To the extent that I live in Australia but maintain close and enduring ties to Scotland, I consider myself transnational. In adopting this lifestyle I can be said to have employed a degree of self-reflexivity. Lash (1994: 115) identifies two types of reflexivity, structural and self. In the latter ‘agency reflects on itself’, that is, agency is privileged over external influences. For Beck (1992), self-reflexivity is manifested in the increasing degree of personal choice available in relation to marriage, having children, career path, where to live, and so on. This is obviously important in the context of both transnationalism and the sociology of relationships. Kennedy and Roudometof recognise:

the emergence of reflexivity in relation to community building in the second modernity, no longer are people tied to an ascriptive community rather they can enter and leave a community voluntarily, community becomes a process of invention and reinvention (2002:8).

This is exacerbated by, and could equally be said to exacerbate transnationalism, as people are exposed to a greater breadth of options for social connections. I have recently been joined in Australia by one of my brothers and the other is currently looking at options to emigrate with his family. Despite this, those who decide to move, rather than those who have little choice in the matter, should not be viewed as wantonly deserting their original community or established social relationships. Reflexivity, as discussed above, causes a multiplication of the ways in which individuals, and larger groups, deal with the societal changes I have already mentioned. Transnationalism opens up opportunities for the creation of communities which defy the traditional notion of them as bounded in time and space, but which are every bit as real for their constituents. (Basch et al., 1994) Negotiating commitments across boundaries becomes, for many, part of the focus of daily life, this highlights the benefit of an equal and simultaneous approach to the study of mobility and relationships as advocated in this paper.

Deterritorialization and Detraditionalization

This transcendence of specific territorial boundaries and identities is what Appadurai (1991), drawing on the earlier work of Deleuze and Guattari, calls deterritorialization.
Deterritorialization and detraditionalization are intrinsic processes in the current era of modernity. They are strongly associated with the reflexiveness described above which is implicated in the creation/recreation of communities and identities. Kennedy and Roudometof argue that:

Transnational cultures lead to the formation of communities of “taste”, shared beliefs or economic interests—to list a few of the factors that work on the global scale. This mobility of cultures, people, economic resources and much else besides necessarily both requires and creates deterritorialization—an increasing number of situations in which social interactions take place across, beyond outside and frequently without any reference to particular nations, borders and identities (Appadurai 1990). In effect, transnationalism is necessary, unavoidable and advantageous. It has become a built-in feature of the cultural, social and political and economic lives of many people everywhere (2002: 13).

Deterritorialization is therefore invariably connected with the concept of the nation state, which occupies an important position in the transnational literature. As already mentioned, this is not without its problems. It may be that privileging the nation-state obscures the existence of other collectivities which exist in the transnational setting, such as those made up of friends and/or families.

While deterritorialization can be seen to be reducing barriers between communities, detraditionalization can be viewed as a process whereby fluidity increases within communities. For Beck (1992), detraditionalization does not lead to a society without tradition. Rather, those traditions become subject to greater scrutiny and are less likely to be accepted as a given. Willis and Yeoh (2000), while recognising the contribution of Basch et al in this area, maintain that there is a need for a more gendered approach to transnationalism. This is particularly important in relation to detraditionalization, the effects of which can be said to be exacerbated in the transnational setting. Traditional family structures are increasingly subjected to the strains of geographical distance, and the role of women in particular as caregivers is rendered increasingly complex but notably does not disappear, as attention to relationships has demonstrated (Baldassar et al., 2006; Holmes, 2004). Deterritorialization and detraditionalization are, as demonstrated above, complex concepts and, again, I believe that taking an approach which looks at mobility and relationships equally and simultaneously can lead us to a greater understanding of that complexity.
Sociology of relationships

Having established my belief that our conceptions of transnationalism can be enhanced by looking at such mobility in conjunction with attention to social relationships I now turn my attention to the specific contribution which the sociology of relationships can make. The sociology of relationships could be said to be most closely associated with the study of the micro level of society. Roseneil and Budgeon (2004: 139) express concern that sociology 'has never granted as much importance to the study of informal, private and sociable relationships as it has to matters of public, economic and political organization'. These concerns echo those of Adams and Allan (1998:3) who point out that ‘friendships do not operate in some abstract, decontextualised world… they are constructed—developed, modified, sustained, and ended—by individuals acting in contextualised settings’. This statement can be extended to include all relationships; our connections with family, work colleagues and institutions are amongst others equally defined by the context in which they arise: a context which we have seen is increasingly likely to involve a transnational element. By examining social relationships and the contexts in which they occur, in this instance a context of societal change and transnationalism, we can garner a more nuanced appreciation of what transnationalism is.

Individualization

As already noted, the individualization thesis is characterised by the individual whose potential for mobility in the global market is unfettered however a nuanced look at such mobility, as proposed above, cannot ignore the significance of personal relationships. As individuals seek to establish a place for themselves in the world they are arguably forced into realms of decision making previously unknown and consequentially made increasingly responsible for their choices (Beck, 1992). Within the sociology of relationships, the family occupies an arguably privileged position and this amid a climate of popular concern over its alleged demise.

As Smart and Shipman (2004: 503) note, 'The individual of the individualization thesis seems to exist without parents, without kinship ties, and with concerns only for their own psychic well-being’, their research disputes this proposition. A disadvantage of individualization identified by Beck is that many of the institutions which constrain lag behind the reality of the situation and still prescribe ideals more
appropriate to the previous era of industrial modernity. To this end ‘the family’ is still promoted as an ideal type despite the fact that in industrial society it was held together by the exclusion of women from the paid workforce which they are now expected to participate in on an equal footing with men, at the same time as maintaining the bulk of domestic/caring duties.

It is argued that distance relationships are a means to accommodate capitalist work practices (Holmes, 2004), representing as they do, the individual mobility and the mobile individual mentioned earlier. Despite this they also ‘highlight [that] even in appearing to accommodate to individualisation, disconnection from others may be resisted’. In this way a migrant who has chosen to move or a partner who has been forced to move in a similar context may resist this individualisation by striving to maintain close interpersonal relationships with those left behind. Migration could be seen as an imperfect choice; it may well be appropriate for the individual, couple or family unit making the decision to move, but it is likely to involve a level of guilt at leaving others behind.

Feelings of guilt may be present even in relation to family or friends the migrants wish to disassociate from (Baldassar, 2001). It is said of women in distance relationships and of women commuters that ‘The sense that they “should” be prioritising their caring duties casts a shadow over the joy of independence … Individualisation processes have changed intimate relationships, without necessarily bringing women freedom from the obligation or desire to care’ (Holmes, 2004:197).

The continued impact of gender constraints can be seen manifesting themselves in distance relationships despite their apparent embrace of the individualization process. In this respect Holmes agrees with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), who argue that for women the individualization process remains incomplete.

In decentring the family we can move towards a broader understanding of social relationships. Roseneil and Budgeon’s (2004:153) case studies suggest 'that if the study of intimacy and care remains within the frame of “the family” and the heterorelational then much of what matters to people in their personal lives will be missed.' Bernardes (1986:597), likewise argues that 'we must abandon the use of “the family” as a sociological operand...and thus destroy the notion that there exists a central type of “family structure” with which are associated uniform experiences and behaviours'. As a migrant, I can vouch for the importance of non-kin based
relationships in my own experience. Similarly the subjects of Roseneil and Budgeon’s research emerge as having elaborate support networks inclusive of non-kin members. This challenges the primacy of the family but also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995) assertion that individualization comes ‘at the cost of commitments to family, relations and friends’ (quoted in Simpson, 2003:4).

Bernardes (1986:605) posits, that 'A static ideal-type model of “the family” involves little account of human agency', hence his call to work beyond such. Comparisons could be made between this and the moves in cosmopolitan theory to decentre the nation-state as a unit of analysis and recognise that its functions have been radically altered by globalisation. As physical mobility leads to the creation of social fields that cross national boundaries individualization can be said, as Beck (1992) points out, to create new identities across existing social boundaries such as class and gender. To this end, similarities can be recognised between theoretical approaches to the sociology of relationships as discussed above, and transnational studies.

The recognition that, in the areas of both the sociology of relationships and transnational studies there is a desire to open up debate by removing overriding structural assumptions, namely ‘the family’ and ‘the nation state’, validates the call for an approach to research which gives equal attention to mobility and relationships. Szanton-Blanc et al note that 'what is transnational is embedded in the local'. This statement, as reported, stresses the 'importance of focusing on people and their relationships'. On a similar note, Bernardes (1986:597) argues that 'We need to recognise...the fact of human individuality, the ultimate uniqueness of individual experience and the ultimate uniqueness of individual life-course'.

**Conclusion**

The links between individualization and reflexivity, both tied up in notions of choice, whether implied or real, are key in bringing transnationalism and relationships work together. This emerges through their potential to expose people to a greater breadth of options for social connections. By seeking out day to day practices, and by examining social networks, we can get beyond the pre-occupation with the nation-state definition of society in today’s transnational context. We can accept the nation-state as a defining factor in an individual’s identity construction, but not as the defining factor. At the same time we can see how ‘the family’, important as it may be, is only one
variable in an individual’s complex arrangement of social networks. 'Relationships …
develop and endure within a wider complex of interacting influences, which help to
give each relationship its shape and structure’ (Adams and Allan, 1998: 2). An
approach which recognises the breadth of social options on offer and which embraces
macro, meso and micro levels of societal interactions offers a more holistic view of
present day society.

References

anthropology In Recapturing anthropology : working in the present
(Ed, Fox, R. G.) School of American Research Press : Distributed by the University of

Baldassar, L. (2001) Visits home: migration experiences between Italy and Australia,
Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, Vic.

Borders: Migration, Ageing and Transnational Caregiving, Palgrave
MacMillan, Basingstoke.

transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized
nation-states, Gordon and Breach, S.I.


Own' In Individualization: institutionalised individualism and its social and

facilitate the conceptualisation of family diversity, Sociological Review, 34,
590-610.

NWSA Journal, 8, 85.

mobility : family impacts, Policy Press, Bristol.


Willis, K. and Yeoh, B. (2000) Introduction: Gender and Migration Research In Gender and Migration