Transnationalism as a Motif in Family Stories

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Family stories have long been recognized as a vehicle for assessing components of a family’s emotional and social life, including the degree to which an immigrant family has been willing to assimilate. Transnationalism, defined as living in one or more cultures and maintaining connections to both, is now increasingly common. A qualitative study of family stories in the family of those who appear completely “American” suggests that an affiliation with one’s home country is nevertheless detectable in the stories via motifs such as (1) positively connoted home remedies, (2) continuing denigration of home country “enemies,” (3) extensive knowledge of the home country history and politics, (4) praise of endogamy and negative assessment of exogamy, (5) superiority of home country to America, and (6) beauty of home country. Furthermore, an awareness of which model—assimilationist or transnational—governs a family’s experience may help clarify a clinician’s understanding of a family’s strengths, vulnerabilities, and mode of framing their cultural experiences.

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I’m 100% American and 100% Palestinian.
—Ginan, college student

As my three student coauthors sit in my office with me puzzling over a detail in a contemporary family story, one of them—Jane Y. Lipnitsky, 22, a Russian Jew whose family left the Soviet Union when she was 7—has a solution: “Wait,” she says, whipping out her cell phone, “my mom will know.” Momentarily, Jane is deep in conversation, speaking in Russian to her mother who is in Russia (which Jane, too, has revisited) with relatives. We are researching motifs suggestive of transnationalism in family stories, and as I watch Jane, I think to myself that the very circumstances of her phone call enact a moment of transnationalism, a term referring to the ways that

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immigrants maintain connections to more than one culture as they “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994, p. 169).

Another student in my office that day is Erica Gomez, 21, double majoring in French and English and headed for law school. Born in North Bergen, New Jersey, she is the daughter of two Cuban émigrés, her father a political prisoner in Cuba for 22 years until his release in 1979. Though Erica has never been to Cuba herself, she is in touch with her relatives there. Also present is Despina Hotzoglou, 21, a psychology major born in Brooklyn. Her father was born in Greece, and her mother, also Greek, was born in Australia, though Despina’s mother’s family returned to Greece when Despina’s mother was 2. Despina spends most summers in Greece with her extended family.

I first met the three in my course, New Wave Immigrant Literature, its syllabus concentrating on autobiographical novels or memoirs by writers whose parents emigrated to this country in the second half of the 20th century or who came themselves as children under 12 (see Appendix 1). Though none uses the term transnational, the writers’ task is clarifying their own identity by exploring their own or their characters’ relation to both America and their family’s countries of origin. For some, as De Courtivron (2003) has noted of contemporary bilingual writers, their writing is an expression of their “in-betweenness” (p. 1) or of “a lifelong struggle to reconcile different pieces of the identity puzzle” (p. 2).

For some writers, as for my students, the task is complicated because the layered identity that they work to articulate for themselves is concealed by a persona completely American in dress, demeanor, ambition, and unaccented English. (Conversely, as Despina observes, when they return to the family’s country of origin, they are seen as “American.”)

Most of the writers know their family stories because they are the major source of information about the family’s ethnic and sometimes sociopolitical past. Organic though these family stories are in the text, they are not a genre that the authors examine very self-consciously. A notable exception is Edwidge Danticat (1994), who wonders about the intergenerational impact of these stories: “women tell stories to their children both to frighten and delight them . . . there is always a place where nightmares are passed on through the generations like heirlooms . . . I come from a place where . . . you carry your past like the hair on your head” (pp. 233–234).

I had long been interested in family stories and their meanings, including their relationship to the immigrant experience (Stone, 1988/2004). As the granddaughter of Italian immigrants who had come to this country at the beginning of the 20th century, I was aware that in the family stories of my childhood, assimilation was prescribed. There was praise in our stories for my grandmother who had gone to night school to learn English and who had named the family cats George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Long after the last cat had used up his ninth life, they were resurrected in our family stories; the point, told with proud amusement, was that my grandmother herself had named these cats.

The newest immigrants, especially those who arrived post-1965, encountered a culture far more accepting of both cultural pluralism and transnationalism than the one that had awaited my grandparents. I had therefore speculated that the family stories of these later arrivals might be freer of the need to endorse the “melting pot” ideology (Foner, 2000, p.183) and might instead make the case for transnationalism.
But transnationalism is less crisp in its definition than assimilation. Indeed, Basch et al. (1994) have articulated what other researchers (Garber, 2001; Kasinitz, Waters, Mollenkopf & Anil, 2002; Wolf, 2002) have acknowledged: that they are “grappling with the problem of how to understand the migrations . . . around us” because the customary distinctions between “immigrants” and “those remaining behind” were no longer so clear (p. 166). Interestingly, Basch et al. also noted that the clearest understanding of the transnational identity was being articulated in fiction, the genre emphasized in my literature class.

Wondering what role family stories might play in the articulation and maintenance of transnational identity, at the end of the semester I invited Jane, Despina, and Erica to join me in collecting family stories from the post-1965 émigrés in order to address this question.

METHODOLOGY

Pilot Study

After my coauthors had surveyed the literature on family stories, they explored their own family stories and their meanings, asking themselves questions that I had used in my own research on family stories. Additionally, they asked themselves questions designed to draw forth the kinds of family stories we had read in the previous semester. Next, I conducted one interview as the three observed. Subsequently, they interviewed each other. The results from the four interviews persuaded us to proceed to a larger sampling.

Criteria for Inclusion in the “Transnational” Sample

There were no controls imposed on how interviewees were selected. Most were the friends, relatives, college classmates, and social acquaintances of my coauthors—all individuals whom my coauthors thought might well qualify as transnationals.

Eventually, in addition to my single interview, the three added 23 interviews, including their interviews with one another. The sample included 3 males and 21 females, aged 21–60, who were born in, or whose parents were born in, Albania, Bolivia, Chile, China, Cuba, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Haiti, Korea, Palestine, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, and Turkey. There was no attempt to ascertain or represent gender differences in perceptions or intentions related to transnationalism, although the fact that all the interviewers and nearly all the interviewees were women undoubtedly affected the material elicited. We do, however, recognize that the practice and perception of assimilation and transnationalism are affected by gender (Ryan, 2002; Wolf, 2002).

Because our goal was to collect family stories from those who felt transnationally affiliated, we created a questionnaire that looked for evidence of it as articulated by or implied by Basch et al. (1994) and Leggewie (2001). The criteria included:

1. Bilingualism (except for those whose family’s home country is English-speaking).
2. Speaking a language other than English at home (again, except for those whose home country is English-speaking).
As Basch et al. (1994) have noted, transnationalism has been encouraged by advances in the technology of communication and transportation. We therefore took as indices of transnationalism additional behaviors, including:

3. Returning to visit one’s country of origin via jet.
4. Using the telephone to sustain relationships with friends and relatives in one’s country of origin.
5. Using post mail for the same purpose.
6. Using e-mail for the same purpose.

To this, we added practices that indicated interest in news developments both in one’s country of origin and in one’s country of residence.

7. Watching TV news originating from one’s country of origin (received via cable or satellite dish) and originating domestically.
8. Listening to radio stations for the same purpose.
9. Reading a newspaper from or about one’s country of origin and reading domestic newspapers.

We also looked for people who sought out associations with those from their countries of origin in:

10. Friendship, especially friendships conducted in a language other than English.

Because assimilation is closely correlated with exogamy, or marrying outside one’s ethnic group, we included a question designed to ascertain whether our respondents hoped to have as a life partner someone from within their ethnic group.

Questions to Elicit Family Stories

Based on our preliminary interviews, I revised the questionnaire we had used in our pilot study, including questions that my coauthors thought would be productive based on their own experience. During the interviews, unexpected motifs emerged. At those times, the questionnaire was revised to include the additional questions, and past interviewees were reinterviewed. In the end, each person who qualified as transnationally affiliated was asked all the questions that appear in the questionnaire (see Appendix 2). In all cases, the interviewers were free to add follow-up questions.

Criteria for Exclusion from the Transnational Sample

Ultimately, we eliminated:

1. Anyone who was exclusively English-speaking, unless his or her familial country of origin was English-speaking.
2. Anyone who explicitly declared herself or himself uninterested in dating or choosing a partner from within the ethnic group.
3. Anyone who was uninterested in visiting the country of origin.
4. Anyone who self-identified as assimilated.
Among my coauthors, all identified as transnational, though to varying degrees. Like Jane and Despina, Erica is bilingual, speaks to her family in a language other than English, and maintains relations with family members in the family’s country of origin, though she herself has never been there. However, Jane and Despina, unlike Erica, find their closest friends among their ethnic peers and speak to them in, respectively, Russian and Greek, and are also more committed to finding an ethnic peer as a future partner.

DISCUSSION

Research Literature on Family Stories

Families have always told stories, but for those who work professionally with families, family stories seem to have become the DNA of family life. The components of a family’s unique narrative strand offer educators insight into students who may be culturally unfamiliar (Sanchez, 1999) and offer clinicians information essential to making diagnoses (Kadushin, Cutler, Waxenberg, & Sager, 1969; Kadushin, Waxenberg, & Sager, 1971; Kelly & Berg, 1978), assessing relationships between parents and children (Downey & Coyne, 1990; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995; Fiese et al., 1999; Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefer, & Klockow, 2002; Pratt & Fiese, 2004; Schnitzer, 1993; Sherman, 1990; Stone, 1989, 1990), understanding gendered components in family conversations (Chance & Fiese, 1999; Reese, 1996), and evaluating grief in the face of bereavement (Sedney, Baker, & Gross, 1994). In marginalized families, family stories that especially enhance self-esteem are counternarratives (Villenas, 2001), defined by Gates (1995) as “the means by which groups contest . . . dominant reality and the fretwork of assumptions that support it” (p. 56).

Family Stories and Immigrants

Historically, among immigrant families in particular, family stories build self-esteem while offering strategies for making one’s way socially. They also supply crucial information about the social pecking order, and, for an earlier wave of immigrants, they prescribe assimilation (Stone, 1988/2004).

As the culture has moved toward multiculturalism, members of the current immigrant wave can more often expect to see accurate reflections of themselves in popular culture—not only in required courses in American pluralism but in multicultural films and best-sellers.

As American ideology has increasingly normalized “transnationalism,” the second-generation children of this wave—especially the middle-class and college-educated group—have come to live in a markedly different environment from their second-generation predecessors. They are not faced with either the discrimination or the social pressure that often compelled the second generation of the earlier wave—Maxine Hong Kingston’s (1976) experience comes to mind—to assimilate, often driving a deep wedge between the generations and making the second-wave child feel at home nowhere.

Immigrants’ family stories about birth and naming. Stories about an individual’s birth and naming generally revealed a transnational motif if it was there to be found at all. Below are three family stories, all from American-born respondents in their 20s.

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The first was told by Irene, 21, whose parents are from Greece. She was born in Astoria, Queens, a Greek enclave (well described by Williams & Mejia, 2001) and identifies as transnational. She is fluent in Greek, speaking it at home, though with her peers, she speaks Greek, or “Gringlish,” an amalgamation of Greek and English. She goes to Greece biannually to visit family and belongs to the Greek organization at her college. Her father would like her to marry someone from Crete, his birthplace, and alerted her to Creternity.com, a Web site where she could find a Cretan husband. Irene’s mother will be happy as long as her future son-in-law is Greek.

Greeks are fanatics with soccer—soccer is like a religion—and I was born in a year that the World Cup was taking place. I was the first-born, and theoretically my father’s mind should have only been on me. It was a big thing, my birth. But my mom went into labor during the World Cup so my father decided to wait until the World Cup was over because Brazil was playing and he wanted to see that game. By the time my mom got to the hospital, she delivered right away because he waited so long to take her there. They named me Irene—it’s a Greek tradition that the first child, whether it be a boy or girl, be named after the father’s parents, so I was named after my father’s mother.

The second birth story was told by Ginan, 22, a Palestinian Muslim, college student, and president of her college’s Middle Eastern Students Association. Ginan’s parents came to this country in 1971. She was born in New Jersey and currently lives in Paterson, a city with a substantial Middle Eastern population. She defines herself as “100% American and 100% Palestinian.”

There’s not much of a story surrounding my birth because by the time I was born my mom had 8 children—7 girls and 1 boy—so when I was born, it was like “Oh, another girl. Tell me something new.” My dad picked my name out. The nurse at the hospital was Egyptian, and she told him, “This one isn’t like your other girls. She looks like a flower.” When he saw me, he said, “Oh yeah, we have to call her that—Ginan—” which means “garden of flowers” but only the kind you find in Paradise. But the root word “gnn” also means “craziness.”

In both stories, the parents’ countries of origin and the associated language or religion are central to the story. Compare that with two other birth stories, told to Erica Gomez by her mother, Bizerta, 60, who was born in Cuba.

It was the first or second Civil War in Tunisia. General Patton was fighting. My father said that if Patton won, and I was a boy, he’d name me Patton, and if I was a girl, Bizerta, because at the time, Bizerte was the capital of Tunisia.

And then there is the story of Erica’s own birth:

The day before she had me, she was driving, she was very active and she was painting my baby dresser, and my dad came home late from work. She went to serve him something to eat, and her water broke . . . She said from the time she called the hospital and the time she gave birth to me, it was five hours, so I was easy. Since Leif Erikson, the Viking, discovered this country, they named me Erica.

The character of both stories is similar, and in them, Erica sees an impulse toward “cosmopolitanism,” noting,
my mother is Spanish and Irish—our family has a traditional Irish dinner, every Saint Patrick’s Day—and my father, Spanish and Chinese. I must admit I really do feel like an American. This is the land in which I was born and raised, and consequently, I take pride in the American Dream.

**Other Transnational Motifs**

In all the interviews, we went beyond birth stories and solicited a wide variety of stories, identifying recurring motifs that the author-participants themselves interpreted as advocating transnationalism, tacitly or explicitly. These motifs are:

1. Tales of home remedies associated with the country of origin.
2. A denigration of ethnic or political groups, past or present, that have been “enemies” in the country of origin.
3. An extensive knowledge of the country of origin’s past and present history and politics. Sometimes the knowledge goes back several centuries.
4. A celebration of endogamy or an expressed disapproval of exogamy via cautionary tales of those who have been exogamous.
5. A characterization of “American” or “America” that is faintly negative and an idealization of one’s own ethnic group.
6. An idealization of the country of origin, especially for its beauty.

Of the family stories we retrieved, quite a few qualified for inclusion in more than one of the categories below. Generally, the decision as to where to place it was more or less arbitrary.

**Home remedies**

Despina: Home remedies are like the backbone of an ethnicity. If you don’t participate in these practices of your own ethnicity, you’re looked at as if you’re an alien, an outsider. These cures seem to hold a transnational as well as a medicinal value; they promote pride and affiliation with an individual’s ethnicity. In my family, there’s a story about how they put ouzo on my gums when I was teething.

Here is a story from Stephanie, 21, a college student, born in Brooklyn of a Bolivian mother and a Spanish father:

Oh my goodness, home remedy stories, now you hit a good spot. When my family goes to Bolivia, they always bring back this thing called Mentisan. When I think of Mentisan, I think of Bolivia. It’s like Vicks VapoRub and they use it for everything from chapped lips to colds to fever to runny nose to stomach ache. My mother told me that my grandmother was clumsy and she would always burn herself. With the greatest of ease, she would put on Mentisan and then she would be fine. One day someone kicked the dog, so my mom took some Mentisan and rubbed it on him. I told her the fur is going to get in the way, but she said the Mentisan would still work.

Here is a story told to Erica by her mother:

Back in Cuba, my mother’s neighbors had two little girls. One day they dressed themselves and their doll up the same way to go out. My mother says she remembers her mother, my
grandmother, talking to the girls’ mother when they came back. It turns out the youngest came home crying and kicking with a huge fever. The family called the doctor but he said he couldn’t find anything wrong. The girl’s mother told my grandmother that her daughter had to have gotten the evil eye, so they brought in a santero, who cleansed her with flower water and sweet basil. As the story goes, she got better immediately.

Erica elaborates:

In Cuba, it is much more common for someone who needs some kind of cure or spiritual help to visit a santero or santera instead of a doctor (or sometimes a priest) because the results are considered more concrete. This is what my mother wants to accentuate when she tells these kinds of stories. My mother always mentions how it was a remedio santo, which translates ironically into “exactly what the doctor ordered,” or “exactly what was needed.” The phrase has the connotation of being final.

**Enemies.** It is commonplace that group affiliation is strengthened by invoking the relationship between the group and its enemy, past or present. For those with a transnational identity, affiliation with the country of origin can be strengthened via family stories about the group’s enemies, present or historical, ethnic or political.

The “enemies” slowest to disappear from family stories are often ancient, chronic, and religiously reinforced. On the subject of enemies, Theokli Hotzoglou, 40, reiterated stories that she had often imparted to her daughter:

My family came from the part of Greece that is now Turkey, so in my family, the Turks were always the enemy. My grandparents lived through the Asia Minor catastrophe [the Greco-Turkish War, 1919–1922], so the stories were very vivid, and the blood was pretty much in their eyes. Even though I never saw it, I can describe how my grandfather’s house looked in the old country because of all the stories I have heard. I can tell you what my family did the day the Turks came. They were growing grapes to make wine, so they broke the barrels and let all the barrels of wine spill into the ocean till the water became red from the wine. They preferred that the sea swallow the wine than the Turks enjoy it. In the back of our heads, all stories lead to one thing: the Turks were everything bad and evil in the world.

Adds Despina, “Greeks have a whole network to promote and keep this hatred alive. March 25th, our Independence Day celebration, is to commemorate our independence from 400 years of slavery from the Turks.”

For both Jane, Russian-born, and Erica, whose parents are Cuban, the most salient enemy in family stories is communism. In each case, the stories take pains to distinguish between the people and the government. Jane notes that the legacy of having lived under an untrustworthy government is still present in many members of the New York City Russian-Jewish community whom she approached for interviews. “They were amazed that I would even think of trying to collect truthful accounts to reveal publicly. They told me ‘just make it up!’” She knows, however, what Roberts (1994) has also observed: Evasion, dissembling, and silence were an adaptive response to life in Communist Russia (especially on the part of Jews, whose self-definition was, by necessity, largely unrelated to religious practice; see also Orleck, 1987), and that may account for some of the haziness in some of her family stories.
Nevertheless, a resident of this country for almost 16 years, Jane’s father is willing to hazard candor in telling her his experiences of communism in Russia.

It was impossible to have a really good job because you had to be part of the communist party and you couldn’t be Jewish. There were many literary writers we couldn’t read—Pasternack, Solzhenytsin, Galich—they were not permitted. We could only do what the Party allowed. If we didn’t do what was accepted, they could put us into jail, or the asylum (psychiatric hospital), or put drops of Iprit, a chemical weapon the Germans used in World War I. This made huge sores on the skin which grew, erupted, and killed very painfully.

Adds Jane,

Otkaz . . . you know what that is? Literally translated from Russian, it means Denial. It’s a political status in Russia; it means you can’t leave the country. My parents first petitioned to leave Russia in 1979. They were denied and put into Otkaz for the next 10 years. My dad was an assistant professor at a university teaching metallurgy, and he was fired. It was hard for him to find work again, and my dad never went back to teaching but took up insurance. In Russia, insurance was a very low-status thing to do—it was lower than any other job and it brought no money. My mom taught physics and mathematics to high school students, and she, too, was fired on the fear that she might start “corrupting the youth,” after all, she was Jewish and wanted to leave the country. Communism wasn’t a good thing for Jews, and it definitely wasn’t a good thing for our family.

In Erica’s family stories, too, communism emerges almost as a personified evil.

In our stories, anyone who is a communist is like Satan. There are tons of stories, like about the vigilantes. Every block has a certain house that is appointed vigilante for the block. They are entitled to be the snitch of the block: They have to know who goes into your house, who goes out, who has the key, who visits you, what time you leave, what time you get back. One story is that one time my grandmother didn’t leave a key out for my mother. She got home really late from her job, and she had to break the door so she could get in, and then she had to go down to the vigilante center and declare that she was breaking into her own house!

My dad was part of an anti-communist party, and he had several rebellions. He has stories about that and about how he saw his friends die. We have one relative who used to be anticommunist and then became a communist. They say the communists brainwash him. It’s well known in Cuba that the communists do brainwash. They take your children for a physical exam, and then the children show up a few days later and they don’t even know where they live.

Detailed knowledge of country of origin. Transnationalism is enhanced by knowledge of the country of origin’s history, politics, and significant figures. As Theokli Hotzoglou says, “I am very proud of our Greek heritage and history, and when my kids were young, I wouldn’t tell them stories about Little Red Riding Hood but about Alexander the Great.”

Sevin, 43, born in Istanbul, came to the United States in 1986 to study. She is married to an American but is raising her young son bilingually. She visits Turkey at least twice a year and thinks that she might like to retire there. What follows is a story that circulates in her family:
In 1925, the right-hand man of (Mustafa Kemal Attaturk), the founder of the new Turkish government (and its prime minister from 1925–1937 and president from 1937–1960) was (Ismet) Inonu. He came from an elite family, and he and his wife had the same image as JFK and Jackie would later have here in the United States. Everyone loved them. When my father would wait in the car for my mother, he would always say she was behaving like Inonu’s wife. Inonu always said that in relation to time, between men and women there was a 45-minute difference. “late” was 45 minutes later for women than for men. There are only stories with positive connotations about him.

Celebration of endogamy, disapproval of exogamy. Anastasia, 20, a classmate of my coauthors, told a cautionary tale about her exogamous cousin, George, who is regularly discussed with dismay in the family. At the time that Anastasia told the story, marriage was much on her mind. She was weeks away from her own marriage — to a Greek American who was in medical school. In response to questions, she noted that no, she would not be inviting any nonfamily non-Greeks to her reception, although her fiancé would be.

My grandfather’s sister has a son named George who married an American woman named Maureen, and they have two children, Josh and Eric, who are not christened in the Greek Orthodox Church. The mother is Protestant, or something like that, and they were married in a Greek church, but I don’t think she converted. They are from Connecticut so things are more lax there than here in Astoria. The kids don’t speak Greek and the Greek words they do say are with a heavy American accent, so it sounds weird. The couple has a strange relationship in which she does not want Greekness imposed in their home, so George lives this warped life — at home he is American, and with the family, meaning our extended family, he is Greek. The family doesn’t consider the children Greek. They’re the outsiders.

This story is an example of what happens when you do not marry a Greek person. You lose your identity.

Mild disparagement of Americans. While transnationalism involves a loyalty to more than one culture, those who feel the tug of these loyalties live here primarily. For families who wish to maintain their transnationalism, however, a concern is that the second generation not become too American, or too solely American. Hence, their stories may embody a mild or ironic disparagement of Americans; sometimes the agenda of the story is to objectify Americans, to make some distinctions between Americans and “us.”

When Americans are discussed in Despina’s home, they are called Americanyakia, meaning “little Americans,” but carrying a slightly dismissive connotation. “It suggests Americans are naive and ignorant, without any real knowledge of what goes on in the world,” she says.

In Erica’s family, there is a linked pair of stories that make a pointed distinction between Americans and Cubans. The first Erica’s mother told her about when Erica’s grandfather was dying of cancer in Cuba, and the second is about Erica’s own father’s open-heart surgery here:

When my grandfather became ill enough that he had to be taken to the hospital, my mother remembers that he would ask for good food like pork and sausage, which was strange since he
never really asked for anything. At this time, because of the revolution, these goods were impossible to find. But she proudly tells me how the family pulled in overtime to find these things. His brother risked his job at the market to sneak out some meat even though every single piece of meat had to be accounted for in the ration books.

When my father had his open heart surgery, a volunteer (American) suggested that we take a drive down to some mini-mall to pass the time since the operation was going to last five or six hours. We just looked at her as if, “are you crazy???” We got so upset that she didn’t even talk to us again!

These two stories sometimes get told together probably in a subconscious effort to distinguish and even glorify one attitude—the Cuban attitude—over the other. We never leave someone when they are sick.

*An idealization of the country of origin, especially for its beauty.* Here is the way that Despina’s mother, Theokli, described Greece the last time Despina asked:

The colors in Greece are more vivid and more pronounced. You have to be there to experience that. The smells speak to your brain. The sun is always out. When I went to Greece in the winter, it snowed but the sun was out every day. When I came back, it was three straight weeks of rain and moodiness, and I became just like the weather; I was as moody as the sky was.

Erica’s description of Cuba is cut from the same azure cloth:

Cuba has always been described as “The Pearl of the Antilles.” It has the starriest sky and the best climate. You can go to the beach in December. In Cuba, we had Varadero, one of the best beaches in the world. The sand is completely white and very fine. You can walk into the water until you want to stop, and it’ll never go past your knees. Then you can just lie back and relax, no undertow, no rocky bottoms, no shark attacks. Here the water is always cold, and the waves are so aggressive—like they want to beat you. At Varadero, no matter how hot it is, the water is always cool. If the beach gets too hot, you just go under the palms where the breeze is so cool you might even get a chill. Here no beach has trees, and without an umbrella, you’re practically lost.

In Erica’s narrative, Cuban beaches are not only beautiful, but *more* beautiful than their American counterparts. Notwithstanding the astounding beauty of descriptions such as these, they expose the equivocal nature of some family stories supporting transnationalism. They are so frankly idealized that they draw attention away from the narrative and to the mediated quality of the memory—the fact that a particular and subjective narrator is telling this story. Erica herself recognizes the impact of this awareness as a factor in the likely course of her own transnationalism:

I can make an educated guess, especially if I am exogamous, that the following generations will be even more assimilated than I am. Perhaps one of the reasons why this might be my direction is that I have never actually been in Cuba, or worse, that my family is trying to hold on to a version of Cuba that no longer exists.

And yet, Erica’s reaction to the idealization of a landscape that no longer exists is not inevitable either. As Espiritu and Tran (2002) noted in their assessments of
second-generation Vietnamese who know their country of origin only through family stories, the country of origin is not only a physical place but also an idea accessed through memory and imagination.

CONCLUSION

So once again we are a country of immigrants—28.4 million, accounting for 10.4 percent of the population, according to the Census Bureau (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Many feel that a slow drift in the direction of assimilation is likely, even inevitable, but there is no consensus that it will happen in a predictable or uniform fashion. Assimilation is “not the result of a single conscious decision, but the cumulative effect of a thousand small decisions,” and among them might well be which family stories get told and which evanesc (Kasinitz et al., 2002, p. 100).

My coauthors concluded what other researchers have concluded: There are various indices of transnationalism, and the strength of one factor, such as maintaining relationships with friends and relatives in one’s country of origin, is not necessarily predictive of the strength of another factor, such as the desire to marry within one’s ethnic group. Furthermore, all recognized that it was by no means certain that the transnationalism they feel today would be predictive of the transnationalism that they would feel in the future.

Nevertheless, each had a conclusion about her own transnationalism and its possible future:

Erica: For me, transnationalism is how much a person is simultaneously involved in the culture, religion, behavioral practices, and ideologies of at least two countries or areas. So am I a transnationalite? Honestly, along a continuum where being either completely transnational or completely assimilated are at opposite ends, I do not feel comfortable at either extreme. Especially in comparison to Despina and Jane, I consider myself at the midway point, leaning a few degrees over to the assimilationist end overall.

However, specific elements of my life are at different points on the scale: I do not plan—or not plan—to marry Cuban or even Hispanic, but am determined to teach my children, if I ever have any, the Spanish language. Furthermore, while I hold no attachment to more minor things such as ethnic cuisine, I take great pride in my ethnicity’s concept of family. I can make an educated guess, especially if I am exogamous, that the following generations will be even more assimilated than I am. Perhaps one of the reasons is that I have never actually been in Cuba, or worse, that my family is trying to hold on to a version of Cuba that no longer exists. Nevertheless, I will attempt to pass along my own family stories which I consider very transnational as well as emphasize the factual knowledge of Cuba’s history. Maybe after I reach a certain age, I will become more concerned about exactly what knowledge will be lost and will make a successful journey to the transnational end of the scale. Only time can tell.

Despina: I’m the poster girl for transnationalism. According to my understanding, transnationalism means your heart is in one country, but your home is in another. My identity, my being, and my soul is Greek. The majority of my friends and acquaintances are Greek, and I have never dated a non-Greek. My “enemies” are the Turks, although I have never lived in Greece and the Turks have never done anything to me. When I go to Greece, which I used to do every other year for three or 4 months, it’s not like going on vacation, it’s like returning home. We have a house in Greece, tons of family and many friends who we keep in touch with
all year long. There isn’t an expectation for moving my whole family there permanently, but my parents eventually want to be in Greece 5–6 months of the year. That’s what my grandparents do. My current occupation is teaching Greek folk dance, and I plan on continuing this career throughout my life. I will marry a Greek man, possibly move to Greece one day, and even if I remain in the United States for the rest of my life, I will strive to promote Greek heritage to the Greek community here.

Jane: Do my family stories promote a transnational agenda? Through them, my parents have made clear they would like me to stay within the Russian-Jewish culture—speaking Russian, teaching my children Russian, marrying someone Russian-Jewish, eating Russian food.

I would like to marry someone culturally Jewish, although he doesn’t necessarily have to be Russian. And should I ever have children, I will most likely send them to a Russian-Jewish kindergarten or at least to an after-school program to learn Russian and hopefully Jewish culture as well. I don’t practice Judaism, but that in no way negates who I am and how I identify as a Russian Jew. Yet in a lot of ways I am American.

I think that right at this moment, I fall right on the point midway between assimilation and transnationalism. So am I transnationalistic? Ask me in 10 years.

Implications for Clinicians

Up until a decade or two ago, clinicians’ expectations, explicitly or tacitly, were that in the United States, a family would move toward assimilation. While McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano (1982) and others made it clear that families often continued to express their ethnicity even generations after the family’s arrival, the implication was that maintaining ethnicity did not interfere with assimilation.

More recently, many have framed therapeutic issues in ways that do not presume assimilation to be a given. Turner (1991) has argued that the “2-home transcontext lifestyle” has altered the clinical experience for therapists and their Caribbean immigrant clients. Falicov (1998) has pointed out that the belief in the efficacy and inevitability of assimilation is ideological rather than empirical, and she has urged that clinicians become conscious of their own ideologies, pro or con, in regard to assimilation. The bias in favor of assimilation, she notes, is now balanced by the countervailing ideology in favor of “indigenous or ethnic reaffirmation” (p. 76). In addition, Falicov notes two additional rapprochements—both bicultural—that immigrants may make: “alternation” in which “old cultural meanings persist while new cultural modes are acquired” (p. 72), and “hybridization,” whereby “immigrants, especially children, blend rather than alternate cultural meanings” (p. 74). Her discussion indicates the complex variety of the immigrant experience and the ongoing requirement that individuals negotiate their ties to two or more countries, and to one another, in the context of family life.

Although transnationalism is a facet of bicultural adaptation, it is possible that it is not synonymous with either alternation or hybridization. It is also possible that “transnationalism” may hold out the possibility of reduced conflict between the generations common in families in which parentified children must negotiate the culture for their disempowered parents who then struggle even more emphatically to maintain their authority (Kingston, 1976). A family member who identifies with his or
her parents’ transnationalism and who is not therefore necessarily moving toward assimilation may have one fewer area for tension, or at least is framing the cultural differences between the country of origin and this country more equitably—not temporally (a devalued past and a valuable present) but spatially (what we do here and what we do there).

Parents’ cultural knowledge of the country of origin may therefore remain useful to the entire family and worthy of being learned by the second generation, a state of affairs most closely embodied by Despina’s experience with her own transnationally identified mother. Further research needs to be done, but there is the possibility that parents feel less disempowered (and their offspring less dismissive) than they might otherwise feel. Amy Tan’s attachment to China, for instance, made her not only sympathetic to, but a defender of, her mother’s heavily accented English, which she credits with influencing her artistic sensibility.

It therefore matters whether a family’s or individual’s sense of its own experience is a variant of bicultural, including transnational, or assimilationist, and it matters that a clinician be able to make an assessment. Our research, limited and qualitative though it is, indicates that clinicians may now assess family stories for evidence of transnational affiliation. Furthermore, an awareness of which model or models govern a family’s experience may clarify a clinician’s understanding of a family’s strengths, vulnerabilities, and their mode of framing their cultural experiences.

We invite you to continue the conversation begun with this article and the two commentaries that follow. Share your thoughts on our Open Forum at http://www.familyprocess.org/openforum/.

REFERENCES


www.FamilyProcess.org


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APPENDIX 1

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*Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri (1999)

*Hunger of Memory* by Richard Rodriguez (1983)

*The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan (1989)

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*Balseros* (Bosch & Mª Domènech, 2003)

*Avalon* (Levinson, 1990)

APPENDIX 2

TRANSMATIONAL FAMILY STORIES QUESTIONNAIRE

Name
Address
Age
Ethnic background

Do you live in a neighborhood that you would characterize as ethnic?  
What ethnic groups live there, aside from your own?  
I am interviewing you for research I am doing for a paper that will possibly be published.  
Do I have your permission to do this?  
Where were you born?  
Is there a story surrounding your birth?  
How did you come to have your name?
Is there any **organization** you belong to that relates to your ethnic background?
What about when you were a child?
What language(s) do you speak at home?

Number of siblings? Names?
Who lives in your home?
Do you have any nearby relatives?

Where do they live?
Language(s) you speak with them?
Language(s) you speak with aunts? Uncles? Grandparents?
Language(s) you speak with members of your own generation?
How often and under what conditions have you returned to your family’s homeland?
How often have other members of your family returned?
Is there the expectation voiced that you or your family will return there permanently?
Is there the wish or hope that or your family will return there permanently?
Who are the **enemies** of your ethnic group?
Do you know any stories about that group?

Historical stories? Stories of particular individuals from that group?
You live your loyalty to your ethnicity, but are there any stories told to you that celebrate your
  Country of origin?
In the current climate of terrorism, how does your family understand it in relation to their own
  Ethnicity?

**Maternal Side/Paternal Side**
What is your mother’s (father’s) name?
Where was your mother (father) born?
If not here, when did she (he) come to this country?
Do your parents work with ethnic group?
If she (he) was born here, then when did your maternal (paternal) grandparents come?
Do you know the story of why they came?
Are there any stories of the government leaders, present or past?
Wars, past or present?
Any stories about family **religion**?
Does your religion encourage a stance toward your country of origin?
Does your local religious center?
Are the clergy you’re familiar with members of your ethnic group?
Does your religion have any lore about enemies of your ethnic group?
Do you know any stories of what it was like for them in their country of origin?
Of your relatives here on your mother’s (father’s) side, what ethnic group are they married to?

How do your families **keep in touch** with those in country of origin?
Phone?
Mail?
Internet?
Sources of information about country of origin?
Newspaper? Radio? Television?
Do any of your relatives who live in your family’s country of origin come here to visit? Are there stories where members of your family are contrasted with Americans? Is there a special word used to characterize Americans, or those not of your ethnic group? How is America characterized? How are Americans characterized?

Has anything been said about who your family would like you to marry? What are your own expectations of who you’ll marry? What if you didn’t? Any stories of what became of people who married out of your ethnic group? Is there any ethnic group that is totally unacceptable for you to marry? Are you aware of any Web sites or organizations devoted to finding you someone who is ethnically suitable?

Was going to college accepted? Was going away to college accepted? Whom your family would like you not to marry? Stories about members of your family who have married out? How are those marriages characterized? What is the story of the reason for those marriages? Is there a story of how those marriages have worked out? Why or why not?

Are there any artifacts your family brought with them when they came here? Mementos? Pieces of jewelry? Books? Photographs? Heirlooms? Items associated with country of origin, such as flag? Any ethnic practices? Dancing? Ethnic holidays?

Can you describe the degree to which your family’s cuisine is ethnic? Any dishes that have a story that goes with them? Any stories associated with those dishes? Any stories associated with food in country of origin?

Any members of the next generation? (e.g. nieces or nephews?) Languages they speak? Expectations you’ve heard voiced for them?