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# Resilience among Nigerian transnational parents in the Netherlands: a strength-based approach to migration and transnational parenting

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**Abstract** *In this article, we adopt a strength-based approach to transnational parenting. Recent studies have shown that not all transnational parents have a negative sense of well-being. Here, we explore parental resilience over a lifespan to understand how mothers and fathers alleviate the strain of spatial separation from their children. Having established from a quantitative study on the same group that neither men nor women necessarily suffer emotionally from separation from their children, we report the findings of a qualitative study on 18 Nigerian men and women in the Netherlands. We look at the strategies and resources that parents employ to overcome the challenges of migration and transnational parenting, to forge a sense of identity and belonging in a migratory context, to ‘do family’ while spatially separated, to deal with the difficult life events associated with migration, and to maintain a sense of agency amid stringent migration regulations. By revealing the importance of cultural and individual resources in fostering resilience, the contribution of our study is to the literature on the influence of structural factors in the promotion of well-being.*

**Keywords** MIGRATION, NETHERLANDS, NIGERIA, RESILIENCE, SPATIAL SEPARATION, TRANSNATIONAL PARENTING

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Transnational migration impinges on the formations, practices and experiences of families across the globe, with the actual occurrence of transnational families being one such effect. 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

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feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely “familyhood”, even across national borders’ (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 3). These families exist because migrating parents leave their children in the country of origin, either by choice or due to stringent migration policies in the receiving country. They also exist because children move across national borders alone or with only part of their family to flee war or seek better opportunities; because parents have sent their children back home either to reduce child-raising costs or to ensure that they are brought up in their traditional cultural environment; and because families form while the partners are residing in different countries (Appiah and Mazzucato 2014; Bledsoe and Sow 2011; Hashim 2007; Mazzucato and Schans 2011; van Wijk 2007; Whitehouse 2009; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). Transnational families exist all over the world and have been around for a long time. Yet, only since the turn of the century has the phenomenon attracted significant research and policy interest (Mazzucato and Schans 2011; UNICEF 2006). Two reasons for this are that an increasing number of mothers are now migrating and that developments in policy circles have moved debates on family-related migration to the centre of discussions on migration, integration and multiculturalism. Tensions arise over problematic assumptions about what constitutes a family, which often rely too heavily on the ideal type nuclear family, and on policy, or legislation, that includes families in the moral debate on good citizenship and that attempts to exert juridical and political control over them (Goulbourne et al. 2010; Kraler 2011; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012).

While most research portrays transnational family life as problematic, several recent studies are now suggesting that some parents and children do well despite the difficulties they encounter (Cebotari et al. 2016; Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014; Haagsman et al. 2015; Mazzucato et al. 2016). By moving away from the more common, problem-focused approaches and introducing a strength-based slant emphasizing resilience, in this article we seek to situate and understand these positive outcomes. Strength-based approaches to research and social policy begin with a focus on the positive potential of individuals, families and communities to build strengths and prevent negative outcomes (Maton et al. 2004). Resilience research seeks to understand the solutions people find to their problems and the resources that help them in the process (Liebenberg and Ungar 2009).

In the following, we first make a case for a strengths-based approach to the study of transnational families. Subsequently, we describe our research methodology. Through our case study of Nigerian migrant parents in the Netherlands, we then describe four sources of tension that transnational parents identified in the research and explore how and with what resources they tried to resolve them. Taking advantage of our qualitative methodology, we reveal what strategies and meanings lead to resilience from the migrant parents’ perspective. Our findings show that, besides structural factors such as employment and documentation, which we know impact positively on the well-being of transnational parents (Haagsman et al. 2015), ‘soft’, cultural and individual resources are pivotal for experiences of resilience. This article thus provides an empirical base from which to understand the processes through which transnational parents achieve positive outcomes.

### **A resilience approach to transnational family studies**

The transnational family literature has tended to stress the negative effects of transnational parenting on relationships between the affected family members and on the developmental pathways of individuals, generations and sometimes even nations (Åkesson et al. 2012; Boccagni 2012; Bryceson and Vuroela 2002; Carling et al. 2012; Dreby 2007; Mazzucato 2011; Parreñas 2005; Schmalzbauer 2004; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). Spatial separation between parents and children appears to be associated with significant risks for all parties, particularly when the separation is between mothers and children. Parents will undergo hardship, compromise their own well-being and accept low-waged jobs purely in the interest of being able to remit funds to their families back home. Furthermore, because of their feelings of guilt, loneliness, longing to be with their children, migration related ‘ambiguous loss’ and ‘family boundary ambiguity’, they often suffer from depressive symptoms and emotional difficulties (Dreby 2007; Falicov 2005; Fog Olwig 2007; Levitt 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2002; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). The risks to children include poor or decreased educational attainment, deviant or anti-social behaviour, a ‘happiness deficit’ and emotional problems. Other people in the ‘care triangle’ are also vulnerable because of the strain on resources and emotional challenges (Graham et al. 2012; Poeze et al. 2016).

There has been some criticism of the over emphasis on risk and adversity and, to counter the tendency to pathologize definitions of transnational families, there has been a call to include the views of a wider range of actors (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2002). In addition, scholars have argued, it is important to take account of the context, for norms about what constitutes family and ideal parent–child relations may influence experiences of transnational family life (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). In the same vein, scholars have noted a Western bias in assumptions about the nature of ‘attachment’ and ‘parent–child bonding’. Others have pointed to the need for a longer-term perspective when assessing the costs and benefits of transnational parenting, for it may well be possible to resolve the difficulties experienced soon after spatial separation at a later stage (Mazzucato 2013; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). Furthermore, some recent large-scale studies have shown that not all transnational family situations have negative outcomes (Cebotari et al. 2016; Graham and Jordan 2011; Haagsman et al. 2015; Mazzucato 2014) and here we seek to understand these findings. With our focus on how people develop resilience over the course of their lifespans, we hope to contribute to our understanding of the more positive outcomes of transnational parenting. Besides providing an evaluation that puts people’s well-being at the centre of the argument (Sen 1993), this focus helps us to capture resilience as a process.

While research on resilience has become increasingly multidisciplinary, it has traditionally been strong in the fields of psychology and public health. The early research on this topic explored how, despite exposure to adversity, individual characteristics can contribute to good mental health and positive developmental outcomes (Rutter 1987; Tol et al. 2013). Later shifts in the research directed attention to the social, material and cultural context in which the protective factors and resources that promote resilience presumably lay. Scholars thus conceptualize resilience as

situated at the intersection between individual capacities and the responsiveness of environments to provide the resources needed to thrive (Liebenberg and Ungar 2009). In the field of transnational family studies, explorations of resilience are rather new. Recent studies have started to show ‘the creative ways that parents and family members carry out their traditional roles and responsibilities even while separated, as well as the resilience of substitute carers and children left behind in adapting’ (Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012: 348; see also Baldassar 2016). Furthermore, though not specifically under the rubric of resilience, several large-scale studies on transnational families analyse associations between child well-being and context-level factors (Fan et al. 2010; Wen and Lin 2012). The resilience study by van der Ham et al. (2015) on the health of Philippine domestic migrant workers, Wong and Song’s (2008) work on stress among migrant workers in Shanghai, and Greeff and Holtzkamp’s (2007) research into family-level resilience among migrants are also interesting. We contribute to this literature by identifying what strategies and resources migrant parents adopt to promote positive well-being for themselves and their children in their transnational family lives. We do so through our case study of Nigerian migrant parents in the Netherlands who have children in Nigeria and other countries.

### **Nigerian transnational parents in the Netherlands**

Emigration flows from Nigeria to Europe and the USA started in the 1960s. With political instability and economic decline in Nigeria, the numbers increased substantially over the subsequent two decades and, since the mid-1990s, there has been an incremental growth in the number of Nigerians living in the Netherlands. During this period, the Netherlands government substantially tightened its rules on immigration and family reunification and Dutch migration policy has now become one of the most restrictive in Europe (Entzinger and Fermin 2006). Currently, with some 12,036 registered first- and second-generation migrants (Central Bureau for Statistics 2015), Nigerians are among the largest African immigrant groups in the Netherlands, with many undocumented ones also allegedly living in the country (Haagsman 2015).

We based the findings in this article on the fieldwork of one of us, Lidewyde H. Berckmoes, conducted over a nine-month period during 2013/14 in The Hague, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. The study formed part of a larger project on transnational families ([www.tcra.nl](http://www.tcra.nl)), including a quantitative study of Nigerian migrant parents in the Netherlands, some of whom had left their children in Nigeria and others who were living with their children in the Netherlands (Haagsman 2015; Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014; Haagsman et al. 2015). The aim of this qualitative study is to situate and gain a better understanding of the research outcomes of these large-scale studies. We thus collected the family life histories of 18 Nigerian migrant parents (5 women and 13 men), 15 of whom have at least one but up to four children living abroad (see Table 1). A Nigerian research assistant who had acted as a survey interviewer in the quantitative transnational family research project helped us to select 12 of the 18 interlocutors. Because he used his network, various participants had a connection to a specific neighbourhood and African Pentecostal church in The Hague. This enabled

(some) participant observation and facilitated the building of trust. Interlocutors were aged between 32 and 54, had lived in the Netherlands for anywhere between a year and 19 years, had different legal, socio-economic and employment statuses, and were primarily of Yoruba and Igbo background, though the group also included one Edo, one Hausa and two of unknown ethnic origin. Partners with whom they had children abroad were mostly Nigerian, but included one Ethiopian, one South African and one Ugandan.

**Table 1: Characteristics of interviewed parents**

|                             |  |   |                                |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>               | Male, <b>13</b>                        | Female, <b>5</b>                              |                                |
| <b>Legal status</b>         | Documented, <b>16</b>                  | Undocumented, <b>2</b>                        |                                |
| <b>Employment status</b>    | Unemployed, <b>10</b>                  | Employed, <b>8</b>                            |                                |
| <b>Marital status</b>       | Married, <b>6</b>                      | Separated or divorced, <b>10</b>              | Widowed, <b>2</b>              |
| <b>Years abroad</b>         | Fewer than 5, <b>5</b>                 | 5–10, <b>2</b>                                | 10–20, <b>11</b>               |
| <b>Children – countries</b> | In Nigeria, <b>11</b>                  | In two countries, <b>4</b>                    | In the Netherlands, <b>3</b>   |
| <b>Parents – countries*</b> | The Netherlands and Nigeria, <b>11</b> | The Netherlands and a third country, <b>4</b> | The Netherlands only, <b>3</b> |

\*The location of residence of the (two) biological parents

Life histories offer insights into subjective understandings of lived experiences, help one to recognize diversity in a population group and permit a long-term (albeit retrospective) perspective. We designed an interview format inspired by this method, and attuned it to the themes of migration, family and transnational parenting. We semi-structured the interview to give the interviewee space to identify the aspects most relevant to their migration and parenting experiences – themes we had introduced to the interlocutors in the introduction and through probing questions. The interview sessions lasted from between 45 minutes and two-and-a half hours. Eight interlocutors conducted two or more interviews and nine interlocutors collected complementary data via phone calls, text messages and participant observation during home visits and in church. In addition, we spoke to three community health workers and one academic expert about issues that Nigerian migrant parents face in the Netherlands. To comply with ethical guidelines for research, we explained the purpose of the research, ensured confidentiality, emphasized the voluntary nature of the exercise and took care to be sensitive to situations in which conversations could lead to emotionally difficult moments. In these instances, we showed understanding, took small breaks, changed the subject and enquired if there were things we could do to ease the situation.

We started our analysis by inductively identifying recurring themes in the family life histories, for which we used the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. From this, we developed our interest in resilience, a theme that also came up in the large-scale quantitative studies in the broader research project. In the second round of analysis, we systematically utilized a table to gain insight into what strategies and resources people used to acquire resilience. Following Liebenberg and Ungar (2009), we took ‘tensions’ resulting from potential threats as a starting point. Tensions in this

study refer to apparent contradictions in relation to family life while straddling two or more countries. We explored similarities across interlocutors as well as sought patterns in individual life histories to identify the resources fostering or hampering the resiliency processes that our interlocutors had identified. An important advantage of life history interviews in resilience research is that they help explore positive processes and outcomes as they develop over a lifespan (Masten and O'Doroughty Wright 2010).

### **Tensions and resilience in transnational parents' lives**

In line with developments in resilience research outlined above, we define resilience as the dynamic interaction between personal capacities and the capabilities and constraints of the environment in which people resolve their experiences of adversity in culturally relevant ways. By investigating how parents deal with the tensions associated with migration and family life, we aim to identify the strategies they employ in pursuit of positive outcomes over their lifespan. The family life histories revealed four main tensions – (1) creating a sense of identity and belonging in a transnational migrant context; (2) 'doing family' while spatially separated from family members; (3) feeling calm about migration-related decisions that led to adverse (family) life events; and (4) maintaining a sense of control and direction in the context of stringent migration policy and regulations. These four tensions are not the only challenges our interlocutors recounted. However, they were recurring concerns (in more than four family life histories) and in the quantitative study of Nigerian transnational parents conducted among the same research group (Haagsman 2015; Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014; Haagsman et al. 2015). Below, we describe the meaning given to each tension and then explore the strategies and resources our interlocutors employed to pursue positive outcomes. (See Table 2, for a schematic overview of the findings.) Some of the tensions revealed important gender and life stage dimensions, to which we also point.

#### *Sense of identity and belonging in a transnational context*

An important theme in the family life histories is the search for a sense of identity and belonging after migration. Here, belonging refers above all to an emotional sense of feeling at home (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Our findings showed that most transnational parents feel torn between Nigeria and their host country. For example, Idona (aged 43), who left Nigeria 18 years ago, said that she felt at ease in neither Europe nor Africa. She has an adult son in Nigeria and a daughter in the Netherlands, is not in a relationship and is unemployed. She described her life in Europe as 'boring' and complained about the presence of financial stresses: 'You know, ahh, bills it is too much here, and now with the economic problem now in Europe, Jesus Christ!' She longed for a lengthy period in Africa, claiming that she would not need counselling and antidepressants if she were there, but at the same time explaining that whenever she visited Africa, she missed the quiet to which she had grown accustomed in the Netherlands: '[Africa is] bwabwabwabwaba. You know, you go crazy, when you are home, you know, it is like you want to run back.'

There appeared to be two main strategies through which parents resolve tensions in this area. The first is to cherish or invest in one’s ethnic or cultural background. The main resources employed to this end are childhood memories and teachings and regular contact with people, institutions or art that represent one’s background. For instance, Nina (aged 46), who had previously worked in the cultural domain when in her home country, explained how her traditional musical skills helped her to cope with tough times, and 41-year-old Zaki, who had been a university teacher in his home country, mentioned that he cherished his late father’s advice to ‘remember whose son he is’. For him, this translated into regularly attending the nearby mosque, investing in relationships with fellow Nigerian migrants and making daily phone calls to his wife and children in Nigeria.

**Table 2: Schematic overview of the findings**

| <b>Tension</b>   | <b>Strategies for resilience</b>  | <b>Resources</b>  | <b>Factors shaping tensions, strategies and resources</b>   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Identity and belonging in migratory context</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investing in ethnic or cultural background</li> <li>• Challenging national boundaries</li> </ul>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childhood exposure to diversity</li> <li>• Childhood teachings</li> <li>• Cultural resources (e.g. music)</li> <li>• Pragmatism</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural/ethnic background</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Kinship position</li> <li>• Age of child</li> <li>• Relationship with other caregiver</li> </ul> |
| <b>‘Doing family’ while spatially separated</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact: new modes of doing family</li> <li>• Stimulate density family system</li> <li>• Constructions of temporariness</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SICT (structures)</li> <li>• Visits to Nigeria</li> <li>• Financial resources</li> <li>• Religiosity</li> <li>• Optimism</li> </ul>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment</li> <li>• Documented status</li> <li>• Policy and legislation</li> </ul>   |
| <b>‘Peace’ with migration-related negative events</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcoming negative effects</li> <li>• Attributing meaning</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analytical skills</li> <li>• Social network capital</li> <li>• Support by those left behind</li> </ul>                                     |   |
| <b>Sense of agency in constraining migration context</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobility to place with better opportunities</li> <li>• Small acts of resistance</li> <li>• Working on self</li> </ul>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information</li> <li>• Education services</li> <li>• Pride/ self-esteem</li> </ul>   |   |

The second, contrasting strategy is to construct an identity and sense of belonging in ways that challenge national boundaries, for instance by emphasizing one’s shared race or religiosity. For example, 35-year-old Jonah said that ‘I decided that it was better I come to the Netherlands since there are blacks here’, while Shelly (aged 33) spoke of how ‘she gave me food and promised to take me to a church on Sunday because I told



her that I am also a Christian.’ In other, alternative constructions of identity and belonging, spatial notions remained important. Yet, instead of national boundaries, parents referred to broader categories like ‘Africa’ and ‘Europe’ and ‘abroad’ when alluding to their background and place in the world. For some people like Abraham (who is in his fifties), even ‘Africa’ was too limited to encompass his sense of belonging: he self-identified as ‘global’. Abraham has been in the Netherlands more than 13 years, after spending several years in the USA and part of his childhood in Sierra Leone. He attributed his global identity to his childhood education: ‘My father was a visionary person and made sure we were brought up globally.’ His father had encouraged him to interact with visitors from overseas. The resources mentioned in relation to this second strategy are like those of the first. Abraham mentioned childhood teachings. Otito (aged 44 years), who had travelled to pursue studies throughout his youth and early adulthood, believed that childhood exposure to inclusive notions of identity helped, specifically the enormous size of Nigeria and the many nations present there. Gabriel (53 years), one of the few respondents without documentation, a job or a home, argued that this strategy of identification was a pragmatic adaptation to limited support available in the new country: ‘If you check the populations of Nigerians here, they are limited; the whites are more in number. So, I cannot do things with Nigerians alone; you move with all cultures; I have friends from Suriname, Antilles.’

The two strategies are also revealing for the politics of belonging in the Netherlands, which tends to stress difference and ‘allochthony’ (Mepschen 2016). The perceived emphasis on ethnic or cultural difference in Dutch society came up recurrently in interviews, and, as exemplified by 46-year-old Nina, mother of twins in Nigeria and a son in the Netherlands, often expressed in frustrations:

[The children] are born here, and are entitled to the [Dutch] nationality, but they are not real Dutch; they have categories. The foreigners that came; people like me and other people, who for one reason or the other got their nationality here, are not *real* Dutch. They are categorized as second[-class] citizens.

The strategies the migrants employed in this area clearly had their limitations, for others would still confront them over their differences. For example, Jonah (35 years), whose child lived in England while other family members remained in Nigeria, felt frustrated that his own more open and interconnected worldview was in disaccord with the prevailing views in the Netherlands: ‘The Dutch do not realize that South will be North and North will be South. They try to keep the Netherlands to themselves, closed.’ Similarly, although Abraham (who is in his fifties) tried to challenge ethnic or national difference by stressing his ‘global’ identity, he felt that, ‘though I have always been global, I had to integrate; let me use that word to break it down.’

#### *‘Doing family’ while spatially separated*

The quantitative findings from a study of a similar group of respondents (Haagsman 2015; Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014; Haagsman et al. 2015) show that transnational

parents mediate their subjective sense of well-being through their relationships with their children abroad. These findings fit in with the second tension mentioned in our qualitative interviews, namely that of ‘doing family’ while spatially separated. Rather than seeing family as a given, ‘doing family’ refers to the active ways in which people continuously construct and maintain ‘family’. Family structures, roles, rights and responsibilities require constant renegotiation, especially when family arrangements differ from the normative frameworks (Strasser et al. 2009: 167) and this can put pressure on relationships. Living up to one’s family responsibilities, giving and receiving practical support, and experiencing emotional closeness are all liable to create tensions.

Our respondents mentioned the challenges of living up to family responsibilities in relation to a range of different family members, including children, spouses, parents and siblings. Culturally ascribed roles, as well as gender and kinship positions, influenced the nature of the strain experienced. Only or eldest sons in a family (in our sample six men fitted this kinship position) appeared especially burdened with family responsibilities. One can best understand this weight in the light of Nigeria’s patriarchal society, as our interlocutor Jonah (aged 35) exemplified: ‘As the firstborn in African culture, it’s required of me to take care of my mother and siblings.’ Difficulties in fulfilling one’s family obligations were sometimes a result of spatial separation, at other times they were already a part of the motivation to migrate. One of Jonah’s reasons to leave Nigeria was to support his mother and siblings financially after his father’s death, yet he also had difficulty fulfilling this role in the Netherlands. He wanted to ‘have an impact on people’s lives’, which he felt was only possible by substantially contributing to their living costs. Yet, this was difficult because of his low-wage job. Furthermore, for two years, he also had to support his daughter in England.

We also met fathers who felt that renegotiating their family responsibilities in transnational family arrangements gave them certain advantages. Tobias (aged 38) and Abraham, both entrepreneurs, saw advantages for their transnational businesses, for which they now had more time and options. For instance, Tobias’s wife acted as his business partner abroad. In addition, she gave his mother, who was otherwise alone, grandchildren in the neighbourhood. Joshua (aged 40), who had recently encountered troubles in his marriage, was relieved that he could hide his hurt and humiliation from his mother while he was travelling to various places in the African region before settling in the Netherlands about a year ago, for the spatial distance had enabled him to temper his mother’s expectation of frequent contact.

Both fathers and mothers mentioned practical support and emotional closeness as being problematic areas in relation to child raising. Zaki (aged 41), who had left his wife with three children a year earlier to pursue a Ph.D. degree in the Netherlands, had regretted that he could not help his wife by taking their son to the doctor when she had to work. Idona (aged 43), who had left her 18-year-old son when he was still a baby, said: ‘my son said something one day that made me feel really bad; he said, “mummy I have never seen you get angry”’. Nina (aged 46), who had left her twins in the care of her mother and later her younger sister, felt that, despite being unemployed, the distance did not hamper their practical care. Yet, like Idona, she missed providing emotional

closeness on an everyday basis. ‘So, what I am missing is that I do not have the opportunity to touch them and play with them every day like I do here with my son ... but taking care of them is the same thing.’ Several interlocutors, including Idona, also missed having practical and emotional support for themselves. ‘As a single mother, I stayed with my mum [when I lived in Nigeria] ... but no matter the difficulty then, it wasn’t as difficult as I’m feeling the difficulty here, because there was always a supporting hand around then.’

Our interlocutors described three strategies that helped them resolve tensions in doing family. First, in line with the quantitative research findings that reveal that contact is very important for positive relationships (Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014), parents explained that they adapted the forms through which they fulfilled responsibilities or expressed affinities, particularly using social media and modern communication technology (Baldassar et al. 2016; Kilkey and Merla 2014; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). For instance, almost all the migrant parents referred to their use of instant messaging and calls through the internet to communicate regularly with their children and other family members. Five parents described the importance of occasionally visiting Nigeria to give and receive emotional support in person, to experience physical closeness and to fulfil ceremonial roles at weddings or burials.

The possibilities of pursuing this strategy depend on financial and technological structures and resources. In this regard, Nina recalled that after migrating in 1996, lack of affordable communication technology meant that it took her six months before she could talk to her mother and ask about her baby twins. She only felt able to procure and utilize these resources once she had legalized and regularized her stay (cf. Erdal and Oeppen 2013: 877). Furthermore, we found that the relationship with the caregiver and the age of the child both crucially affect the quality of transnational relationships. ‘Being married to or in a relationship with the biological parent of the child decreases the odds of having a poor parent–child relationship by 66.6 per cent. However, this association ceases to be significant when age-related variables are added to the model’ (Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014: 1689–90). Our life history results help to explain the effect of this interaction. For example, the parents described how social media and phone contact are so much more difficult when the children are very young and that this makes the mediating role of the child’s physically present caregiver especially critical. For instance, Otito (aged 44), who left his son in the care of his mother and ex-girlfriend when pursuing his studies in the Netherlands, explained how he once got angry with a two-year old niece because she repeatedly failed to answer his question. His teenage son then intervened to say that ‘she did answer; she nodded.’ At later stages in life, other challenges could come up. Otito’s teenage son showed increasing reluctance to talk to his father on Skype because ‘at his age he is too busy playing computer games’.

A second, sometimes complementary strategy for doing family while spatially separated is to operate a denser family system by stimulating multiple rather than dyadic transnational family relations. Some of our interlocutors encouraged their Netherlands-born children or new partners to forge independent links with family members left behind in the country of origin. For instance, 37-year-old David, who had a close

relationship with his brother in the Netherlands as well as with his family in Nigeria, worried about the lack of closeness between his South African partner in the Netherlands and his parents in Nigeria:

She is not close to [my family in Nigeria], which I tried to make her understand, that she has to get closer to my family because my family is important [just] as her family [in South Africa] is also important. I get close to her family, I talk to her parents, travel to South Africa to see them. ... As she is coming [into a relationship with me], she is coming into my family.

Nina (aged 46) felt that her attempts to build a dense family network had paid off, as her enthusiastic account of her son's contact with her twins and other family members in Nigeria shows:

Waoh! The first time my son [who was born in the Netherlands] and my twins [whom I had left with my mother in Nigeria] met each other [in person] was in 2009; you may think they grew up together by the way they related. ... When they met each other, it was like they already had met before – very nice! The last time I travelled [to Nigeria], I didn't go with [my son] but when I came back [from Nigeria] last month, he told me that he will like to see his sisters again; and my mother [in Nigeria] also begged me that she will like to see [my son] again.

The resources employed for this second strategy for doing family while separated, were much like those used for the first strategy, namely social information and communication technology (SICT), preferably coupled with visits. However, the possibility of using these resources to pursue resilience depended somewhat on the migrant's documentary status, financial resources, collaborative relationships with caregivers abroad and the children's ages.

A third strategy that the transnational migrant parents employed to manage their negative emotions built on constructions of temporariness. For instance, 41-year-old Zaki, who harboured plans to return to his wife and children as soon as he finished his Ph.D., emphasized throughout our conversation that his stay in the Netherlands was only temporary. In other words, he argued that the difficulties he encountered in doing family now did not matter because they were of a passing nature. Constructions of temporariness were also critical for 53-year-old Gabriel. He had fled from Nigeria more than ten years earlier for fear of persecution, had never gained recognition as a refugee and had remained without proper documentation. He feared that his reason for flight could also affect the safety of his wife and children should they know where he was, so he therefore had no contact with them. Yet, he still insisted that the separation 'is very temporary, and by the grace of God, all the yokes will soon be broken and life will move on as it is supposed to be.' Given that there had been no improvement in his situation since he had fled, Gabriel relied primarily on optimism and faith to deal with the strains he encountered in his family life.

*Feeling calm about negative (family) life events*

All the parents we interviewed recounted how their decisions to migrate and pathways to transnational parenthood had involved unplanned, negative family-life events. Joshua (aged 40), Otito (aged 44) and David (aged 37) had separated from or divorced their partners, which they attributed at least in part to the spatial separation or its consequences. Terence (aged 37) and Jonah (aged 35) found themselves homeless and on the streets after their arrival in the Netherlands. Shelly (aged 33) arrived with a human smuggler who forced her into prostitution. She then fled, risking her life and the safety of the daughter she had left behind because her captors had threatened to go after the child should Shelly try to escape. Nina (aged 46) and Idona (aged 43) were in abusive relationships with partners on whom they relied for their documentation. In addition, Idona, when still undocumented, had reluctantly aborted a pregnancy because she felt unable to provide her unborn baby with a stable home, for which she was still looking. 'It is really hard leaving home and coming into a land alone, it's like I am still living in a jungle; I am in a jungle; I am still looking for a home.'

Our interlocutors described these unplanned, negative events as extremely disruptive. Several transnational parents were visibly emotional when speaking about events with which they had not yet come to grips. Other parents (n=8), however, appeared relatively calm about the unplanned, disruptive events. For them, two processes seemed to help. The first was to undo or overcome negative consequences successfully, for instance by repairing a broken relationship with a partner or obtaining independent legal documents. The second was to 'give the negative events a place', for example by identifying their underlying causes or imbuing them with a new meaning. In this regard, 44-year-old Otito, whose relationship fell apart because of his decision to move to Europe, said that he had allowed himself to believe his friends instead of listening to himself, which meant that he had failed to grasp how important returning to her home country was for his ex-girlfriend. She and Otito had met at university in Ghana when Sierra Leone was at war. He had expected her to follow him to the Netherlands, but she instead chose to return to Sierra Leone to help rebuild her home country. He regretted how things had unfolded, but felt that he understood why. Another example was Nina (aged 46), who had left her twins with her mother when she became an undocumented migrant. She then found herself in an abusive relationship with the father of the son to whom she had given birth in the Netherlands. She was able to explain and justify why she had moved abroad. 'If I was fortunate to have come from a rich family, I wouldn't have left my children to travel abroad; and if their father behaved responsibly ... but at times you plan something in life and the situation around you will change it.' Otito and Nina engaged in self-reflection and applied their analytical skills to come to terms with the past. Transnational parents also mentioned the importance of moral support from left-behind family members. Tobias (aged 38), whose wife helped in the family business and who had given grandchildren to Tobias's mother, gained comfort from the fact that his wife 'feels it is a good thing for the family to be together but she also understands what I am trying to do; she doesn't feel bad about it.' Abraham (who is in his fifties) saw several advantages in the transnational family arrangement, but his son

was finding it increasingly difficult. As he put it, ‘my first one is the one that right now is feeling it, and whenever I am with them, he always asks questions about why I am always away.’ Abraham then tried hard to help his son understand the reason for the separation: ‘I make him understand that though I am supposed to be with them physically, he should not be bothered by my absence.’

*Agency in circumstances of regulated migration*

A fourth tension that our respondents experienced was over the ability to give direction to family life in the context of stringent migration policies and regulations, in other words it was about having a sense of agency. This starts with the decision about a migration destination. For Tobias (aged 38) and some others, knowing something about the host country and its reputation informed their choice of where to go. ‘Well, then people saw Germany as a policing country, where people don’t have freedom; Holland was a bit lenient then, and some of us preferred to come to Holland.’ Many other migrant parents had only a limited influence on the direction of their mobility, as immigration laws in most Western countries lay down strict conditions for migrants and refugees. Idona (aged 43), for example, had fled without knowing where she would land up, and had found herself obliged to apply for asylum in the Netherlands instead of the UK, where she had hoped to go.

Our interlocutors used two other strategies to ameliorate the hardship associated with the new country’s stringent rules and regulations. The first involves everyday acts of resistance (Scott 1986), for which both Otito (aged 44) and Nina (aged 46) provide telling examples. The Dutch government had twice rejected Otito’s application for family reunification with his son. Given his documented status, good educational qualifications and successful career, he would probably have succeeded in obtaining a temporary visitor’s visa for his son, but instead chose to meet him in other places in the world, such as Dubai. He feared that his son might not want to go back afterwards and, as he explained, because he was ‘a bit stubborn: if my son cannot come properly, then also not for a short-term visit if the Dutch are not willing to give the visa.’ His sense of pride and self-esteem played a part in his decision to visit his son outside the Netherlands after the state had rejected his application several times. Nina (aged 46), who was unemployed, needed travel authorization to visit Nigeria if she was to continue to receive her social security benefits, but when the authorities rejected her application, she went anyway, even if it was against the rules. As she explained:

There are a lot of things that I find difficult, especially now that there is no job. ... The moment you have *uitkering* (social benefits), they will be pushing you around; they are the ones to determine how you are going to spend your day. If you want to go somewhere, you have to tell them; if you come back, you have to report back to them; if they invite you for an appointment, and you fail to go, they seize your money. In fact, I am sorry to use this word, but I call it ‘modern slavery’. I prefer to work and have my freedom. I hate being pushed around because of *uitkering*, I don’t like it. ... For example, when I was about travelling

to Nigeria, I filled a form from them that I wanted to go on holiday, but they rejected it; that they cannot allow me to go on holiday. OK, I went [anyway, and they cut my social benefits].

They directed another strategy towards changing the self rather than the environment and this entailed improving their skills or obtaining documents that could help them deal with the challenges. As such, some of our interlocutors invested in higher education or in improving their Dutch language skills, or they tried to influence their legal position in the country. For example, Adon (aged 35) and his Dutch girlfriend decided to marry so that he could pursue reunification with his daughter, who since her birth had remained in Uganda with his former girlfriend. Other parents tried to handle their negative emotions or other health issues better. Idona (aged 43), for example, who had had a happy childhood with nothing to worry about other than what ‘food to eat in the evening’, had later in life developed a coping strategy to handle her hardships that entailed overeating. She now faced poor health due to obesity. Her personal strategy to become ‘OK again’, was to regain control over her weight by taking walks in the park: ‘when the frustration started, I was eating so much that I added a lot of weight, weighing 136 kg. ... When I started losing weight, I started seeing a kind of difference and started seeing some kind of little joy in seeing myself achieving something.’

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we explored resilience in the lives of Nigerian transnational parents in the Netherlands. Using family life history interviews, we gained access to the subjective meanings parents give to their past and present migration and to their experiences of family life. We identified four core tensions in their transnational family lives: (1) questions on identity and belonging, (2) doing family while spatially separated, (3) feeling calm about negative migration-related events, and (4) maintaining a sense of control and direction in the context of stringent migration regimes. The second and third tensions are specific to transnational family life whereas the other two relate more broadly to migrants than merely to parents in transnational families (Delanty et al. 2008; Skrbiš et al. 2007). These tensions form an enduring presence in the lives of transnational migrant parents, although critical events or life junctures may accentuate or relieve them. Transnational family arrangements also may accentuate these tensions.

The wide variety of strategies and resources we have identified in this study, which transnational migrant parents build up over the course of their lives to resolve the tensions they face, have helped to create the resilience that so many of them are able to demonstrate. Large-scale studies on the well-being of Nigerians in the Netherlands have revealed the importance to resilience of material resources, new communication technologies, home visits, moral support from those left behind in the country of origin, as well as the migrant’s employment and documentary status (Haagsman 2015; Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014; Haagsman et al. 2015). Our qualitative findings reinforce the earlier findings on how these resources work towards creating and sustaining resilience. Moreover, our study also identified the importance of ‘soft’ resources, such as cultural

interests, childhood experiences, religiosity and individual characteristics such as pragmatism, optimism, self-esteem and analytical skills. The migrants' religious upbringing or education obtained before or after migration partly shaped what material and 'soft' resources they could access in the new country.

We found that the migrants often employed individual and cultural resources in strategies geared towards bestowing new meaning on adverse experiences, rather than towards the adverse experience itself or towards the social structures causing tensions, for which the possibilities often appeared limited. These findings resonate with the psychological process of self-affirmation, a coping process that restores threatened self-regard rather than threat itself (Steele 1988). Although we found that transnational migrant parents showed resilience, they often negotiated it from a marginalized position and at odds with majority structures, thus limiting their agency. Future research, based on a larger sample or quantitative study could help identify whether specific types of resources promote specific strategies, and which profiles may better equip the migrants to deal with the various forms of adversity they experience.

Our qualitative approach enabled us to investigate resilience as a process rather than a characteristic, sum of resources or product. The importance of a processual approach to resilience becomes obvious when we look at how the stages in children's lives shape the tensions that their migrant parents face. With children's coming of age, both they and their parents experience transnational family life differently. Furthermore, over the course of their transnational migration trajectory, parents encounter a range of different challenges and have different resources at their disposal. They may find or lose jobs, obtain proper documents, or develop individual skills to deal with adversity. We argue that recognizing such dynamics is important for identifying changes that take place and lead to resilience. For instance, 43-year-old Idona's overall narrative was negative, but she felt that her newly gained success in improving her health and building her self-esteem was perhaps a first step towards turning things around.

Furthermore, analysing resilience as a process allows one to recognize the transnational migrant parents' own potential agency. To understand their success in the pursuit of resilience, we should not underestimate the creative efforts they make to search for and employ helpful resources. Migrant parents use their agency to build an alternative identity or sense of belonging in response to the first tension we identified; in their efforts to create a denser transnational family network (namely the second tension associated with doing family); and in their search for hope at even the most desolate moments, when resources in the environment appear absent. Gabriel (aged 53) spoke of how:

If I am down now, within a short time *I find something* that will make me happy so that I will not remain down. If I continue to feel down, the devil will be happy that he has knocked me down ... I don't allow those things to break me.

Gabriel's words affirm the importance that transnational migrant parents accord to a strength-based approach in their attempts to pursue and achieve positive outcomes



despite the existence of adverse circumstances. Focusing on resilience, we argue, allows us empirically to capture the resources and strategies that transnational migrant parents adopt in their search to lead fulfilling family lives.

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