

Encounters in the transnational: care, responsibility and 'doing family'

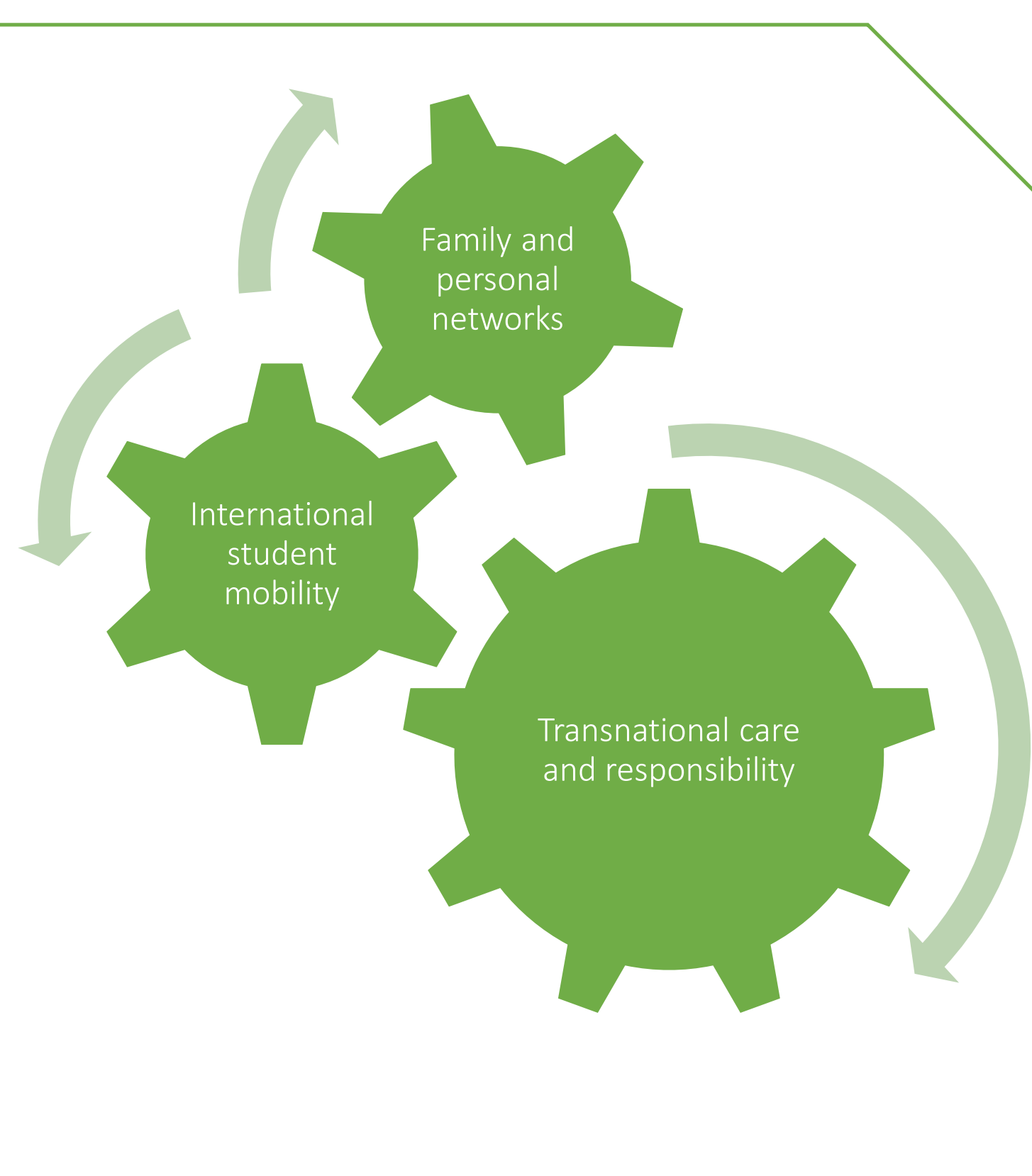
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, globally international students (IS) are growing at 8% per year, slightly ahead of total tertiary enrolment, 7%. IS mobility is one of the fastest-growing components of total global migration. Straddling temporary and permanent migration IS represent a particular group of migrants who experience unique and diverse life course trajectories.

Most research within the Canadian context has studied the experiences of international students in the 'host' society and consequently making invisible the transnational threads of relationships that impact and shape the experiences of this group of migrants.

Hence this paper examines one theme in the transnational – that of care and responsibility; and how the need of transnational care and responsibility leads to different ways of 'doing family' between the student migrant and their relationship stretched across the transnational space with their parents, siblings, spouses, and friends – particularly those located in the 'host' country.



- 'Local' friends act as surrogate family, one that is chosen by the migrant. This group creates a space in which the migrant feels accepted, and gains emotional support.
- Friends provide emotional support during academic and personal hardships
- Parents and friends are introduced; and at times parents of the migrant will ask the friend to 'look out' for their son/daughter. Thus 'extending' the family to include the 'friend'.
- This group celebrates the cultural and religious holidays, and generally is invited by the migrant to do activities that the migrant will do with family members at 'home'.
- The group in some cases is part of the 'local' community also acts a space for socialisation into the 'local' culture and customs

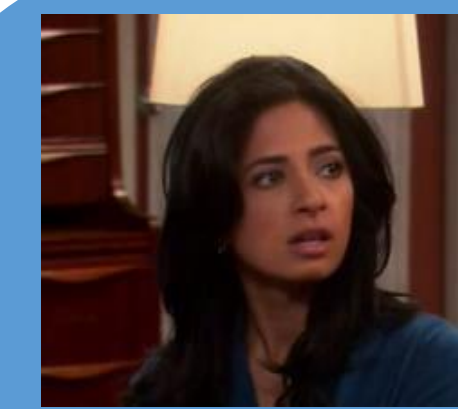
THEORIES

Research on the theme of **responsibility and care within transnational space**, is often engaged with two points of the life course: care of children, and care of elderly, aging parents. The literature on maintaining family and kinship relations across transnational spaces is extensive. Recent works focus on transnational parenting (most notably Parreñas 2005; Waters 2006; Wilding and Baldassar 2009) and care for ageing parents (see for example Baldassar 2007; Vullnetari and King 2008; Wilding 2006). However, the extant literature is much more limited in reference to single, young mobile individuals. It focuses on couples/married professionals, operating with heteronormative frames and negotiating their married life abroad while simultaneously managing relations with parents and relatives who live elsewhere (Radhakrishnan 2009).

International student mobility research also discusses the role of family relations stretched across the transnational – however the discussion is limited, particularly in Canadian context. Students experience loneliness and isolation as they learn to adapt to the new culture without the support of family or friends networks. The long distance conversations, even if regular, sometimes does not appease or provide relief to students during their time abroad. In fact, the stretched relations with their power-geometries may become stressors (Sondhi 2013).

Family, in functionalist perspective is to be understood as the site of emotional and functional support for its members, as a well a site of socialization.

- Siblings, those not in co-residency or physical proximity, act as a mediator between parents and student migrant – maintaining lines of communication via Skype, mobile phones, instant messenger etc.
- Some siblings are made responsible for the well being of their sibling by parents and keeping them apprised of their well-being.
- provide emotional support and act as confidante to the brother/sister especially when the issue at hand is one that cannot be discussed with parents such as partners they may be co-habituating with; or fiancé who are not acceptable to the parents.
- The sibling, as a buffer between parents, but still member of the 'traditional family'.



'Transnational' sibling



Student Migrant



'Local' family



Parents and extended family in India

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METHODS

QUALITATIVE	Toronto, Canada	New Delhi, India
In-depth interviews	22 international students :10 ♂ and 12 ♀	21 'returnee' international students: 10 ♂, 11 ♀ 22 parents of students who studied abroad :11 ♂, 11 ♀ (gender of student)
Participant observation	10 international students	

Quantitative

Web-based survey: 157 completed responses : 87 ♂, 70 ♀;
Geographic coverage: global
Strata: studying abroad at the time of survey, completed studies abroad and living abroad, completed studies abroad and living in India.
(sample not representative)

- Parents 'do family' from afar by maintaining regular communication (physical and virtual). Those who have financial resources, make regular trips to visit their son/daughter.
- They emphasise the importance of adhering to the culture and religious values that they instilled in their off-spring
- They 'bring in' their off-spring friend into the family, by asking the third individual to keep them apprised of their son/daughter's activities.
- The student migrant 'does family' by regularly asking about the daily on-goings of people in their neighbourhood, and social networks.

DOING FAMILY

Nelson (2006) outlines 'doing family' as interactional activities that create and sustain family ties, define family boundaries, and establish appropriate behaviour for each member. 'Doing family' like 'doing gender' involves a construction that is reproduced through repeated performances. The process or performance of doing family is cast against the idea of the 'naturally existing set of relations. It presents a critique of a normative model based on con-residency and physical unity (Zontini 2004) and facilitates an examination of non-heteronormative models. Some of the elements of 'doing family' can be observed in the ways some people are excluded and other included and performance of mundane everyday activities such as eating dinner together regularly.

CONCLUSIONS

- 'Doing family' in the transnational context involves the interaction of different groups and individuals – some who would be defined as family in traditional models (parents, siblings) and others who would not (friends).
- It appears through activities of 'caring', 'supporting', and feeling or made responsible for another's mental and physical well-being.
- Technology plays an important role in enabling migrants to be able to perform of the activities from afar with the same ease as they did when they were closer to their parents/siblings 'at home'.
- Students and parents undertake more regular communication talking about the everyday mundane things of life. Migrants ask parents about the local happenings – in the same manner as they would if they were physically present.
- Parents draw upon existing registers of 'care' and responsibility such as those of 'children's' expected lifecourse (job, and marriage) and 'managing' behaviour to ensure it's in line with the cultural norms and expectations (of 'home' society).
- Siblings also fulfil the same role as they would do if they were in close proximity. Again this is managed relatively 'seamlessly' due to ability to communicate easily via technology – which also creates a sense of privacy.
- Friends in 'local' provide emotional support along with physical proximity on which to build a relationship. Students, with the 'friends' do family by reproducing the activities they would do at 'home' with parents, siblings and extended family.
- 'Doing family' is a reciprocal process to which all members have to contribute and also receive from the relationship.