

Having Children at a Distance: Transnational Family Constitution among Male Migrants to France since the 1960s

Tatiana Eremenko – tatiana.eremenko@ined.fr

Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques and Institut d'Etudes Démographiques de l'Université Bordeaux IV

Abstract

International migrants are portrayed either as individuals making a unidirectional move, settling permanently in the destination country and bringing their families, or constantly mobile persons evolving in transnational spaces. However migrants' family histories draw a more complex picture. Since the 1960s male migrants arriving in France found themselves living separately from their spouses for years. One consequence of the immigrants' transnational family lives was the fact of having children born in their country of origin while they were residing abroad. This paper analyses the extent of this phenomenon and how it varies among different groups of migrants, as well as the factors determining this behavior. Descriptive statistics and event history models are applied to two survey samples of migrants residing in France: MGIS (1992) and TeO (2008). The phenomenon of having children at a distance seems to have decreased significantly over the last decades, suggesting that migrants families in the past lived in a transnational space than at present. This behavior is also correlated with other transnational practices such as having a property in country of origin or frequent visits there.

Extended abstract

Theoretical focus

Europe – an immigration region at the turn of the XX century – became an important immigration destination only after the Second World War when labor needs exceeded the labor supply and migrant workers from within Europe and neighboring Mediterranean countries were recruited. This period was *a posteriori* described by an “evolutionary model” of international migration flows of several stages: temporary migrations of young male workers strongly attached to their countries of origin; extension of their stay and the development of social networks; reunification of families in the countries of arrival; permanent settlement (Castles, Booth et al. 1984). This model viewed migrants as moving in one direction – from country of origin to country of destination – and predicted that closest family members would migrate as well.

However empirical studies have shown that the situation described above is only one possible type of migration and that actual trajectories of migrants often involve circular and return migration. With the growing mobility of persons and the greater possibilities in communication across borders, the unidirectional vision of migration came to be viewed as reductive and a new transnationalism paradigm in migration studies has emerged. Whereas “the word *immigrant* evokes images of permanent rupture [...] today, immigrants develop networks, activities, patterns of living, and ideologies that span their home and host country” (Basch, Schiller et al. 1994). According to this paradigm, migrants circulate between their two countries of attachment and family reunion in the destination country is a possibility, but not the rule.

Although the two models have different visions of the migration process, they are not incompatible. Family arrangements of migrants at different stages of their migration clearly illustrate this complementarity. Most migrants and their families, even those searching to install permanently in the destination country, go through a transnational phase – with members residing in different national spaces – as their migrations often take place in a “stepwise” fashion. Bryceson and Vuorela suggest the following definition of transnational families as those “that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’ even across national borders” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Despite the fact that family life is an important dimension of the transnational lives of migrants, the topic of family has remained under explored in transnational studies up until a recent period; most research has focused on transnational identities and the economic and political activities of migrants in their home and host countries (Le Gall 2005).

Research topic

This paper looks at one consequence of the immigrants’ transnational family lives: having children born at a distance. By this notion we mean a situation in which a migrant residing in a destination country has children born in his / her country of origin after the departure. Studies of Sub-Saharan migrants residing in France have showed how migrants with the idea of returning to their origin country may start and have a family grow abroad while they reside in France (Barou 2001). Although this situation may be part of the migrant’s project of returning, it could also be due to the difficulties of bringing their spouse and children already born to the destination country due to insufficient resources or strict immigration policies.

Studies linking migration and fertility have mainly focused on two aspects of this relation: how the departure of male migrants from a certain region decreases the fertility of women since there are fewer potential spouses and couples already formed are separated; secondly, how immigration to the destination country is followed by a period of increase in fertility among women, which may be due to a recuperation effect after the separation period (Ostby 2002; Toulemon and Mazuy 2004). This paper focuses on the situation of male migrants and how they experience a particular consequence of transnational family life in the form of reproduction at a distance. The following questions will be explored in the study:

- Who are the migrants that experience periods of separation and can be defined as living as a transnational family?
- What is the extent of this phenomenon and how does it vary among different groups of migrants?
- What are the factors determining this behavior?

To answer these questions we analyze variables usually used in the study of fertility (age of migrant and spouse), as well as migration specific factors (constitution of the couple prior / after migration, existence of other children, reunification of other family members in France, etc.) and indicators of the immigrants transnational practices (property ownership, short and long visits to country of origin, project of returning). The exploitation of the two surveys will allow comparing results over time.

Data and methods

This study is based on the statistical exploitation of two surveys: MGIS (Mobilité Géographique et Insertion Sociale) and TeO (Trajectoires et Origines). The National Statistical Institute (INSEE) and the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) carried them out in France in 1992 and 2008. The surveys cover three sub-groups of the population: migrants, descendants of migrants born in France and persons born in France without a migrant background. We focus our analyses on the migrant sample; each survey interviewed around 9000 migrants. Respondents were asked about their migration / family histories, as well as information on their links to the country of origin such as contacts, investments and project of returning. The questionnaires were designed to allow comparative analyses over time.

The surveys differ in one aspect: the geographical zones covered by the sample. In order to obtain a sample representative of the migrant population as a whole, but with sufficient sample sizes for different sub-groups, seven geographical origins were selected for the 1992 survey: Algeria, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, South-East Asia (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) and Sub-Saharan Africa. These migrant groups accounted for two thirds of the resident immigrant population in France at the time. For the 2008 survey the sample was constructed so as to be representative of the entire migrant population based on the 2006 census. Despite the two different sampling strategies it is still possible to compare results across national origins.

The following table summarizes the sample size and number of events analyzed in each survey:

	MGIS (1992)	TeO (2008)
Immigrant sample size	8897	8456
Proportion of immigrants with at least one child born at a distance	1113 (13%)	451 (5%)
Number of children born at a distance	2842	740
Mean number of born at a distance among immigrants with at least one	2,6	1,6

The analysis of the union formation process, as well as the reproductive stories of immigrants will allow reconstructing where and when the constitution of the family takes place. Our research strategy is the following: 1) identify migrants having gone through a period of separation with their family, namely the spouse; 2) explore the occurrence of family events (births) during this period. The family lives of migrants are as diverse as the migrants themselves. Some may migrate at a relatively young age and single, while others may have already formed family ties and have a spouse and children. Our study will focus on two transnational family configurations to give place to children being born at a distance:

- Migrants married at time of migration: this group of migrants had already formed a couple prior to migration. In cases when one of the spouses migrated independently, these couples went through a period of separation which could be finished either with a reunification in destination country, divorce or death of the spouse.
- Migrants single at time of migration: this group arrived in France while still single and formed a union with a person residing abroad (most often in their country of origin) after having

lived in France. The period of separation starts when the marriage takes place and finishes in the same way as with the former group.

The following table shows the prevalence of having at least one child born at a distance among married migrants, single migrants having formed a union with a spouse in origin country and the rest of the sample. As can be seen from the table it is particularly important in these two groups compared to the other family situations (mostly migrants forming their first union with someone residing in France). Further analysis will focus on these two groups.

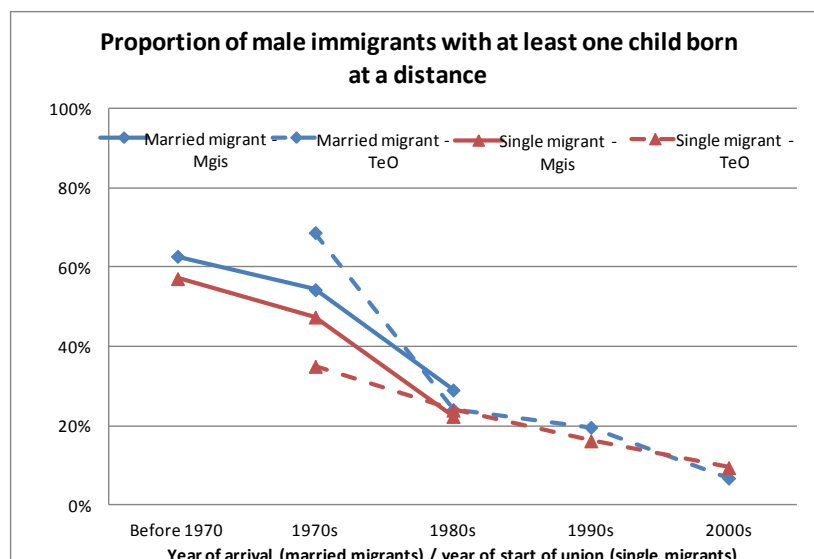
	MGIS	TeO
Married migrant	53%	25%
Single migrant	39%	18%
Other family situations	13%	5%

The phenomenon of reproduction at a distance is gender specific and rarely concerns women: whereas nearly a third of adult male migrants experience it, it is the case of less than 5% of women. This low proportion among women is not surprising, but it is worth noticing that it exists. Active women may also be involved in circular migration; after settling for a period of time at a destination some women may prefer to return to their home countries to give birth as there they have a family capable of providing them help and support. However as the implications of this situation differ greatly for the two groups, in the framework of this analysis we have chosen to focus mainly on the situation of male migrants.

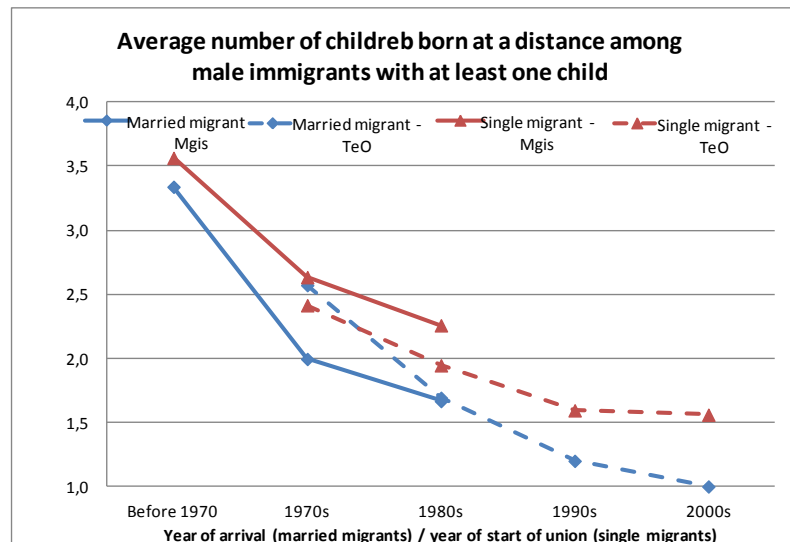
Descriptive statistics and classical indicators for describing fertility give the extent and characteristics of the phenomenon of reproduction at a distance. Regression models will explore the factors leading to this situation and how these factors evolve across different groups of migrants.

Preliminary results

The phenomenon of reproduction at a distance seems to be characteristic of a certain period of migration as it is particularly high among arrival / marriage cohorts of migrants before 1980. Up to six immigrants out of ten, would have a child born abroad while they were already residing in France (figure 1) . As limitation of work migration starts in the 1970s and family migration develops, the migrant flows change and the so does the family formation practices of immigrants. As a result the proportion gradually decreases and is less than 10% for both groups of migrants at present.



The final number of children born at a distance (figure 2) indicates that this birth was not just a one-time “accident”, but also the consequence of a situation that lasted for a certain time. For the oldest cohorts the average number of children was 3.5 and is 1-1.5 at present. As the phenomenon became less frequent, it also changed in nature. Whereas before the family of the migrant could grow and takes shape without him physically being there and that he will only discover later in his life, today it seems to be more of a temporary situation before family constitution continues in France.



The migration trajectory of the spouse is also important to consider as the spouse’s eventual migration determines where the family will be constituted: whereas men whose spouse was reunited in France are only 34% to have a child born at a distance among the oldest cohorts, the proportion rises to 78% among migrants whose spouse was never reunited.

Event history techniques (Cox models) are introduced at this point as they allow looking at the interplay of fertility and migration specific factors, as well as correlation with other transnational activities of the migrant. Although there appear to be some similar determinants in MGIS and TeO, the model is more explicative for the oldest survey suggesting that the situation in the more recent period needs to be further explored.

The oldest arrivals of migrants are those most likely to have a child born abroad. This phenomenon is particularly characteristic of African migrants (Maghreb and Sub-Saharan) and is less common among other origins. The risk of having a child abroad is particularly high for migrants who haven’t reunified their spouse.

This phenomenon seems to obey the same laws as fertility in “normal” circumstances with fertility rates seem to decline with the age of the migrant and the migrant’s spouse. However the fact that these rates are over zero shows that family live is not on “stand-by” while spouses are geographically separated, but goes on even in another and less intensive form.

This practice is also closely related to other factors usually used to illustrate one’s level of integration at destination (French citizenship, ownership in France) and importance of ties to country of origin (frequency of short visits and long stays, ownership in country of origin). Whereas the first set of variables decreases the chances of having a birth at a distance, the second set increases it.

COX Model – relative risks				
	MGIS		TeO	
Female	0.0958***	0	0.0674***	0
Single migrant (<i>ref. Married</i>)	0,849	-0,334	2.487***	0
Minor migrant (<i>ref. Adult</i>)	0.452**	-0,008	2.605**	-0,001
Arrival before 1974	3.568***	0		
Arrival in 1974-1983	1.948**	-0,003	1.694*	-0,026
Arrival in 1984-1992 (<i>ref.</i>)
Arrival in 1993-2008			0.616*	-0,054
Other Africa (<i>ref. Maghreb</i>)	0,967	-0,893	0,636	-0,109
Turkey	0.504***	0	0.322***	0
Other	0.155***	0	0.302***	0
Secondary education (<i>ref. none / primary</i>)	0.429***	0	0,846	-0,383
Higher education	0.234***	0	0,625	-0,21
Spouse still abroad (<i>ref. reunified spouse</i>)	4.328***	0	1,478	-0,206
Ego's age at start : 25-29 years (<i>ref. less than 25 years</i>)	1,026	-0,845	0.616*	-0,039
Ego's age at start : 30 years or more	0.634**	-0,006	0,736	-0,295
Spouse's age at start : 21-24 years (<i>ref. less than 21 years</i>)	0.744*	-0,04	0,806	-0,385
Spouse's age at start : 25 years or more	0.743*	-0,084	0,763	-0,348
Union duration 5 years or more prior to ego's migration (<i>ref. less than 5 years</i>)	0.653*	-0,015	0.446*	-0,028
1 child prior to ego's migration (<i>ref. 0 children</i>)	1.509*	-0,021	3.928***	0
2 or more children prior to ego's migration	1.566*	-0,021	3.284**	-0,003
Rare visits to country of origin (<i>ref. frequent visits</i>)	0.721**	-0,004	0,821	-0,323
Never visits to country of origin	0.504**	-0,006	0,928	-0,846
Stay of one year or more in country of origin (<i>ref. no stay</i>)	3.557***	0	2.792***	0
Project of returning	1,008	-0,947	1,195	-0,342
French citizenship (<i>ref. foreign citizenship</i>)	0.331***	0	0.603*	-0,014
Property in France	0,8	-0,139	0.615*	-0,019
Property in country of origin	1.424**	-0,001	1.868***	-0,001
pseudo R-sq.	0,42		0,254	
N	3885		1665	

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