

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ON TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY LIFE ACROSS THE GULF OF FINLAND

Keiu Telve. *Family Life across the Gulf: Cross-Border Commuters' Transnational Families between Estonia and Finland*. Dissertationes Ethnologiae Universitatis Tartuensis 10. University of Tartu Press, 2019. 169 pp.

Keiu Telve defended her PhD dissertation at the Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu, on the 26th of August 2019. The supervisors of the thesis were Aimar Ventsel and Tiit Tammaru (University of Tartu, Estonia) and opponents Mari Korpela (University of Tampere, Finland) and Maarja Kaaristo (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK).

The thesis is structured as follows: section I consists of an introductory and theoretical cover article, summaries of the five published papers, concluding discussion, references, summary in Estonian, and a list of interviews with the research participants. Section II of the thesis comprises reprints of the five published articles that form the main body of the thesis. All of these publications (published between 2016 and 2019) are single-authored, and three are journal articles published in international, indexed, and peer-reviewed academic journals (*Ethnologia Fennica; Gender, Place and Culture; Mobilities*), whilst two are chapters in books published by Routledge.

The research questions are formulated as follows: “1) How do male cross-border commuters between Estonia and Finland extend their family life into the transnational sphere? 2) What kind of everyday practices and strategies are used to maintain family connections in Estonia-Finland cross-border families? 3) How does the mobility of one family member (the husband and the father) affect other family members? Does it also facilitate the international mobility of the wife and children?” (p. 9) The cover article summarises Keiu Telve’s research journey on the subject, which started with her MA studies, while the PhD research was also conducted in parallel with her work on two migration-themed research projects at the University of Eastern Finland, which demonstrates the author’s well-established academic citizenship within migration studies.

The introductory chapter gives an overview of migration between Estonia and Finland, the main patterns of family life in the two countries, and a review of the academic literature on transnationalism and cross-border commuting in Estonia, as well as an overview of the empirical material that forms the basis of the analysis. The second part of the cover article presents the theoretical framework of the thesis, discussing the key theoretical literature on transnationalism, family life, and masculinity that informs the thesis. The concluding section presents the main results and findings, discusses the implications of the research, and suggests further avenues for future research.

The format of the thesis, which is PhD by publications (as opposed to a monograph) is structured in such a way that it always presents the PhD researcher with a particular challenge: publishing the results of your ongoing work piece by piece without an opportunity to go back and revise as the research progresses. Consequently, this increases the importance of the cover chapter, which has to weave the published papers seamlessly together and provide a clear justification of the selected theories, as well as analytical foci. Keiu Telve has managed this particularly well: the thesis reads almost as a monograph, where the published papers, together with the introduction and conclusion, form a clear research narrative.



The resulting PhD thesis is therefore both an engaging and convincing analysis of Estonian male blue-collar skilled and unskilled workers in Finland, who live their lives in permanent transnational mobility, commuting between the two countries, and of the impact this lifestyle has on their various practices, norms, ideas and values, concerning both their family and work life. The thesis is mostly framed within the theories of the ‘transnational turn’ in mobilities and migration studies. More specifically, it deals with the notion of the ‘transnational family’ and with the subject of gender and notions of masculinity in terms of transnational commuting. The five articles of the thesis examine the studied workers’ international commuting practices, focusing on the understandings, meanings, and motivations for the cross-border commute and the ways the host society’s values have changed the studied men’s understandings of family life and social security. They also analyse the various strategies of maintaining the family connections, including creating a virtual transnational mobile field for both themselves and their family members.

The three main keywords that arise from the thesis are therefore mobility, care, and communication. Transnational families live their lives in constant mobility: the main breadwinner’s commute back and forth between two countries is demanding not only physically but also emotionally, further reinforced by the fact that Estonian blue-collar work migrants have received a lot of – often negative – attention in both the Estonian and Finnish media. Furthermore, the constant travel means the formation of a certain everyday life, which is determined by a particular geographical location: Finland is where the studied men focus exclusively on work, which means that Estonia becomes a place for family, friends, leisure, and hobbies. In this sense, the Estonian workers do seem to inhabit a diaspora ‘bubble’, mingling mostly with other Estonians living in Finland, and virtually and digitally socialising with friends and family in Estonia. In this sense,

the commuting labour migrants seem to be living in a permanent liminality, with their bodies inhabiting Finland and minds Estonia. However, it is not that straightforward: as Telve shows, a closer engagement with Finnish society does exist; however, it takes place mostly in terms of the workplace (for example, training), but also in terms of social security issues. Thus certain norms and understandings become mobile as well: Finnish values about social security and family life travel back to Estonia with the studied men and “cultural contacts and mobility may bring along changes in the ways in which men think about family and fatherhood” (p. 44).

This brings us to the second important theme, namely care: the studied men live and work abroad, in Finland, because they want to afford and provide their families with a better life, and the children with a better childhood than they had themselves, which, by their own definition, mostly means having to be able to travel, eat out in restaurants, and visiting amusement parks. Therefore, the studied men’s view of care is very activity-centred. However, these activities clearly demonstrate the previously discussed changes in the values: the men appreciate time spent with their families more and tend to take caretaker roles while in Estonia, which they did not do to the same extent before. As Telve states (p. 49), the men are taking on the values of the Finnish workplace, which includes some practices that might be seen as clashing with so-called ‘traditional’ or ‘masculine’ practices or behaviours. It seems that there is a kind of tension caused by the men’s moving towards the ‘softer’, family-orientated values on the one hand, while on the other hand reinforcing the ‘traditional’ ones (with men as the main breadwinners and a big wage gap vis a vis women). Nevertheless, it is important to note that care for these men does not only mean sending home remittances, but also being in constant contact with their families.

Therefore, the third main keyword of the dissertation is communication. The men working abroad are regularly in touch with their families thanks to modern information and communication technologies. Living family life via social media, text-messaging and Skyping become an important part of their day. One of the most important theoretical results of the thesis is that the family members therefore become important parts of the transnational communication field. “Active communication practices create a virtual or imaginative social sphere between the destination and home countries, making all family members part of collective transnational sphere through what they have good understanding and first-hand experiences of mobility” (p. 46). This means that ICT enables those dwelling in Estonia to be an active part of their family member’s mobility, even if they themselves travel to Finland very rarely or, indeed, not at all.

To conclude, the overall enquiry into Estonian migration research has gained a new important addition. With its individual-centred, anthropological approach, the study presents the “flesh and blood” behind the statistics about labour migration in Estonia, by considering what these men who endure the constant weekly travel between Estonia and Finland think, feel, and do. The results of this thesis are important not only for academic researchers on migration and transnationality, but also for different policy makers both on a national and transnational/EU level. The study also gives some suggestions where further research is needed: focusing on age, education or other demographic characteristics, and on female labour migrants, further studies on different generations of transnational migrants, or a comparative study also researching similar work migration patterns in other countries.

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