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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A configurational approach to transnational families: Who and where is one's family in the case of mobile older adults?

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Abstract

This article introduces a novel transnational family configuration (TNFC) approach to study the diversity of family forms across kinship and geographical boundaries. Integrating theoretical insights from family sociology and transnational family research, it examines contemporary families as personal networks that encompass both subjectively identified and potentially transnationally dispersed kin and non-kin members. Drawing on original survey data and in-depth interviews with adults aged 55+ living in Switzerland, it compares migrants' and non-migrants' personal family networks. The results indicate that these networks are both diverse and transnational. Although there is a strong correlation between transnationality and migration background, other life-course factors also contribute to the development of transnational family networks beyond the scope of migrant 'exceptionalism'. By advocating the adoption of a TNFC approach to the study of contemporary families, in diverse population groups and various cultural contexts, this study paves the way for future research in this area.

KEYWORDS
ego-networks, older adults, personal family networks, Switzerland, transnational family configuration

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary families reflect significant transformations occurring in family life and family relationships, extending beyond the traditional nuclear family structure and transcending national boundaries. Within the increasing individualization of Western societies, the development of new patterns of conjugality, intimacy, sexuality, procreation and parenthood has led to a *diversity* of family forms and dynamics (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this context, family sociologists have developed new approaches to explore the characteristics and meanings of the diversification of 'post-modern' family life (Bengtson, 2001; Knapp & Wurm, 2019; Widmer, 2010). Particularly, configurational scholars conceptualize family as a network of people subjectively identified as family members (Widmer, 2010; Widmer et al., 2013). This relational and subjective definition of family acknowledges that family relationships transcend marriage and blood ties, including diverse sets of interdependent kin and non-kin members (Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008; Widmer, 2010). In parallel, as a result of growing international mobility and the rapid diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT), family relationships integrate growing *transnationality* in family life (Baldassar et al., 2007, 2016). Transnational family studies have primarily focused on migrant families, dispersed for a variety of reasons (e.g. economic, forced migration) across different destination countries (Bryceson, 2019), to examine everyday family practices at a distance. These studies have shown that family members scattered across borders maintain meaningful intergenerational ties and resource flows (Baldassar et al., 2007, 2016; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Kilkey & Merla, 2013; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020).

However, family sociologists using a configurational approach have scarcely examined the transnational dimension of family networks. Similarly, transnational family studies have generally overlooked relationships beyond nuclear and kinship ties. This article aims to contribute to these research fields by combining both configurational and transnational approaches. Our argument establishes a theoretical convergence between them through the study of personal networks. It advocates a perspective of contemporary families as configurations that evolve simultaneously beyond nuclear/kinship boundaries and across national borders. Using an ego-network-based perspective, we argue for a *transnational family configuration* (TNFC) approach to capture *diversity* and *transnationality* in contemporary family life, forms and relationships.

Based on original survey data and qualitative interviews, we empirically ground this approach by comparing the family networks of migrant and non-migrant adults aged 55+ living in Switzerland. We illustrate that both groups' family networks are diverse and share similar categories of alters. Our quantitative findings corroborate the absence of statistically significant differences between the two groups in the reported categories of kin and non-kin family members. Additionally, upon conducting a comparison of estimated and weighted means using Blau's heterogeneity index for both groups' family networks, no statistically significant differences were observed in the overall diversity of their network composition. Moreover, our findings illustrate that transnationality within older adults' family networks is not solely attributed to migration background. Personal trajectories – for example mixed couples, previous expatriation, children abroad – also shape family networks that transcend geographical borders. Hence, we underscore two major findings. First, regardless of migration background, individuals report a high diversity in their network composition when defining who their family members are. Second, transnationality extends beyond migrants' exceptionalism. In conclusion, we argue that these findings underscore the value of a TNFC approach for investigating TNFCs across different populations and contexts.

DIVERSITY AND TRANSNATIONALITY IN CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

Amidst individualization and globalization processes, individuals' 'normal biography' has undergone significant changes in recent decades. People now prioritize personal autonomy and the ability to make decisions about their own lives over adhering strictly to traditional family structures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The archetypal model of

heteronormality and nuclear family is challenged by 'variations of formal marriage' (e.g. single-parent and step-parent families, same-sex partnerships), 'alterations in the reproduction process' (e.g. adoption or assisted reproductive technologies) and the emergence of 'families created by choice' (e.g. kinship-like voluntary relationships) (Furstenberg et al., 2020). Additionally, family life has been impacted by the rise of 'world families' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2013) consisting of people of different origins and cultural backgrounds, living together or apart, in the same country or across countries (e.g. cross-border marriage, mixed marriage and transnational motherhood). Together, these transformations have led to an enriched array of family life, forms and relationships that transcend traditional family boundaries and norms.

A configurational approach to family diversity: insights from family sociology

In conceptualizing contemporary family diversification (Knapp & Wurm, 2019), family sociologists underline that the ways in which people experience family life are set in complex relational patterns. They argue that family diversity is shaped by complex multi-generational ties, obligations and solidarities (Meil, 2011; Bengtson, 2001), which are characterized by ambivalence and conflict (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Bengtson (2001) emphasized that family life encompasses kinship relations extending beyond the nuclear family archetype. To observe family diversity, an influential scholarship focused on 'family practices', that is the processes by which family relationships are 'done' (Morgan, 1996) and 'displayed' (Finch, 2007). Scholars focusing on 'doing family' (Morgan, 1996) – that is, studying the family as an ongoing process rather than a rigid structure bound by blood ties or legal rules – highlight the dynamic and fluid nature of family relationships. They show how the family is actively constructed through the interactional activities of its members.

Similarly, from a complementary perspective, other scholars underline that family diversity illustrates individual embeddedness in heterogeneous and dynamic networks, which generate family configurations or 'sets of directly or indirectly interdependent persons sharing feelings of family belonging and connectedness' (Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008: 3). These configurational scholars argue that family boundaries do not exist per se but are constantly negotiated and (re)defined by individuals themselves, who subjectively determine who they consider to be family (Widmer, 2010). Thus, family extends beyond blood and marital ties to potentially include a web of interdependent relationships (i.e. configuration) with in-laws, adoptive relatives, friends, colleagues and other significant others (Widmer, 2010; Widmer et al., 2013).

Drawing on Elias' concept of configuration – namely 'structures of mutually oriented and dependent individuals' (1994: 214) – the configurational approach emphasizes that individuals embedded in a family network support each other through the exchange of emotional, practical and/or financial resources. However, it also recognizes that family relationships are characterized by ambivalence (Connidis & McMullin, 2002), that is support and conflict that intersect with the competing norms of solidarity and autonomy. Moreover, from this perspective, family practices, interactions and agency are situated within meso patterns of relationships that evolve over time in line with individuals' life courses (Widmer, 2010).

On a methodological level, configurational scholars employ personal network analysis to investigate diversity and interdependencies within family configurations (Widmer, 2010; Widmer et al., 2013). Predominantly relying on quantitative data, they examine patterns of family configurations and associated covariates across various family-oriented research topics in Western societies, while considering different population groups (e.g. youth, seniors and divorced individuals) (Widmer, 2010; Lück et al., 2017). Regarding older adults, the diversity of family configurations does not decrease in later life stages compared to earlier ones. For instance, Girardin and Widmer (2015) observed distinct types of family configurations among seniors, with the most diverse cluster referred to as the 'kinship' type. This cluster includes blood ties beyond the respondents' offspring or siblings (e.g. nephews, cousins or stepchildren), as well as in-laws (e.g. daughters-in-law) and voluntary ties (e.g. friends considered family members).

Yet this scholarship has scarcely glanced at the spatial (transnational) dimension of family networks. Some noteworthy exceptions have examined the implications of intra-national residential mobility on family configurations and social support (Viry, 2012; Drevon et al., 2021) and have explored the association of geographic distance with inclusive patterns of family configurations (Widmer & Viry, 2017).

Family across national borders: insights from transnational family studies

Family relationships have been identified as everyday drivers of migrant transnationalism (Vertovec, 2009). Transnational family studies predominantly focus on dispersed families formed through the migration of traditional family members (e.g. a husband, a mother and a child). They assert that separated family members 'hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely 'familyhood', even across national borders' (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002: 18). Often drawing on the perspective of 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996), these studies convincingly demonstrate that family life and intergenerational solidarities continue and evolve despite geographical dispersion (Baldassar et al., 2007, 2016; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Ducu, 2020; Kilkey & Merla, 2013; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). In particular, the role of older adults within transnational families has been examined through two lenses: as left-behind relatives cared for by their migrant descendants (King & Vullnetari, 2006) and as grandparents caring for left-behind grandchildren in the country of origin (Ducu, 2020) or engaging in transnational childcare for their grandchildren abroad (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020).

Although, in general, the primary focus of transnational family research has generally been on kinship and intergenerational ties, recent studies are beginning to emphasize the role of non-kin members (e.g. friends, colleagues and in-laws) within transnational family solidarities (Bojarczuk, 2023; Lubbers et al., 2010; Wyss & Nedelcu, 2020). Still, these studies barely question family diversity beyond kinship boundaries, and the broader question of 'who is one's family?' remains largely unexplored.

Nevertheless, a thorough examination of Bryceson and Vuorela's (2002) conceptualization of the transnational family indicates a convergence with a configurational approach to family. The authors underscore the significance of *frontiering* and *relativizing* 'the variety of ways individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members' (2002:14). Furthermore, they emphasize the subjective identification of family members, stressing that transnational family relationships 'are created by active pursuit or passive negligence of familial blood ties and the possible inclusion of non-blood ties as family members' (2002: 14). This encourages rethinking transnational families from a configurational perspective (Bernardi, 2011; Bojarczuk, 2023; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020; Wyss & Nedelcu, 2018, 2020).

A TRANSNATIONAL CONFIGURATIONAL APPROACH TO STUDY CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

To further the (transnational) family debate, we argue that family networks are the common ground on which configurational and transnational studies can converge by envisioning contemporary families as both diverse and transnational.

With this aim, we refine the notion of TNFC that we have introduced to study contemporary families as configurations taking shape simultaneously beyond national borders and nuclear/kinship boundaries (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020; Wyss & Nedelcu, 2020). We define TNFC as a relational, multi-local and evolving entity that unfolds across different national contexts and consists of an individual's subjectively identified family members. The TNFC represents a personal network of interdependent kinship and non-kinship relationships in which social resources can be mobilized and exchanged, both within and across national borders, according to family needs and norms. Moreover, the family network and the circulation of resources evolve throughout the life course.

The TNFC approach 'de-migranticizes' (Dahinden, 2016) transnational family research by acknowledging that family members' dispersion is not exclusive to 'migrant exceptionalism' (Hui, 2016). Goulbourne et al. (2009) asserted that contemporary families are (all) potentially transnational, as 'the transnational experience is becoming common and open to families almost everywhere' (2009: 9). Thus, the TNFC approach applies to population groups regardless of their migration status or mobility experiences. Simultaneously, it is based on the premise that migrants' family networks are not a priori less diverse than non-migrants' ones.

To ground this approach, we examine two key dimensions in contemporary families: *diversity* (i.e. a plurality of categories of family members and relevant heterogeneity in network composition) and *transnationality* (i.e. the organization and deployment of family life beyond national territory). Methodologically, to study these dimensions, we consider family as a structure whose boundaries are not predetermined (Widmer, 2010) amenable to examination through an ego-centric network approach (Perry et al., 2020).

As advocated by network scholars, ego-networks provide sufficient flexibility for observing individuals in various social and spatial settings, including connections with alters from diverse social circles and contexts (McCarty et al., 2019). In fact, both configurational and migration (network) scholars have converged by using ego-networks to explore diversity, on the one hand, and transnationality, on the other. The former focuses on relationships rather than established roles within family structures, underlining the embeddedness of people's lives in vast, heterogeneous, and fluctuating webs of kin and non-kin family ties (Widmer, 2010). The latter one places strong emphasis on how migrants negotiate, create and maintain transnational social ties across multiple spaces within different national contexts (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Lubbers et al., 2010). These studies show that the examination of personal networks allows for the investigation of migrants' relationships beyond borders, regardless of where alters reside (Dahinden, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2010; Ryan, 2018).

Furthermore, network scholars stress the significance of individual trajectories being embedded in 'concrete personal relationships and structures (or 'networks')' (Granovetter, 1985: 490; see also Ryan, 2018; Lubbers et al., 2021). Accordingly, this argument is crucial to understand interdependencies that shape and channel the types of resources exchanged in family networks. Resource flows can result from both strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) and are relevant in characterizing solidarity patterns in contemporary family configurations (Widmer & Girardin, 2018). This premise posits a diversity of resource flows (Lin, 1982) and forms of support due to ego's relationships with different categories of family alters. Indeed, migration scholars advocate examining dynamic and differentiated forms of embeddedness, placing individuals at the intersection of various social relationships, structures and places over time (Lubbers et al., 2021; Mulholland & Ryan, 2023; Ryan, 2018).

By relying on an ego-centric network perspective, the TNFC approach focuses on individuals' small worlds (Bidart, 2012; Lubbers et al., 2021) and overcomes assumptions of kinship and territoriality by highlighting self-reported family relationships irrespective of their geographic location. In addition, it suggests investigating how forms of embeddedness shape family obligations/solidarities and types of resource flows through social relations and spatial environments.

Therefore, we contend, first, that family *diversity* can be observed both in the types of family members (alters' categories) and in the degree of network inclusiveness (i.e. the overall categorical diversity of identified alters in the composition of the network). Examining this composition informs us of the range (i.e. breadth/heterogeneity) of family relationships in the TNFC. This range illustrates the extent to which relationships within the ego-network extend beyond exclusive family boundaries, meaning the inclusion of a variety of kin and non-kin alters in the TNFC. Likewise, the degree of diversity in categories of family members may indicate the importance of (specific) relationships that make up the family network.

Second, we consider that family *transnationality* can be defined by family members' geographical dispersion, and the social circles and flows through which family life operates across borders. To measure network transnationality, we examine the proportion of ties in which individuals are transnationally embedded (Dahinden, 2009) relative to the dispersion of alters (Lubbers et al., 2010). The location becomes an attribute of the ego-alter family relationship, being intrinsically linked to the nature of the relationship connecting family members and social circles across the network.

Methodologically, we advocate a Transnational Family Network Method (TFNM) to study TNFC. By incorporating the spatial dimension of the family network, this method extends the Family Network Method introduced by configurational scholars (Widmer, 2010). It thus focuses on the individual's (ego's) view of the people (alters) who matter as family and their respective location. Moreover, it examines not only dyadic relationships but also the whole network in which dyads are nested (Perry et al., 2018; Widmer et al., 2013). In practice, data collection requests ego to: name those people s/he considers as family (name generators); specify their geographical location (country of residence); indicate their characteristics (age, sex etc.); define the (supportive/conflictual) nature of each relationship (name-interpreter questions); indicate the relationships between family members (name-interrelator questions), and the types of resources and support exchanged within the entire family network.

FAMILY NETWORKS OF OLDER ADULTS IN SWITZERLAND: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

To test the empirical relevance of the TNFC approach, we focus on a specific case-study of older adults. We formulate the hypotheses that diversity *and* transnationality characterize family networks of both migrant and non-migrant older adults. Subsequently, we describe the mixed methods research design employed, including the data collection procedures and operationalization.

Premises of diversity and transnationality within older adults' family networks

Sociologists have demonstrated that the increasing complexity of individual life trajectories in Western societies since the 1960s has led to greater diversity in family configurations (Kohli, 2007). Specifically, as a population cohort reaches old age, it exhibits diverse trajectories and a rich variety of patterns of family inclusiveness (Lück et al., 2017). From a configurational perspective, this implies that family relationships among older adults expand beyond the nuclear family and close blood relatives (Girardin & Widmer, 2015). On their side, transnational family scholars have highlighted the significant role of older adults within intergenerational dynamics (Bolzman, 2018; Horn & Schweppe, 2017; Horn, 2019; Nedelcu, 2007), as well as their involvement in transnational mobilities and care practices (Amrith, 2018; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020; among others). These observations suggest that older adults constitute a demographic group whose networks are potentially both diverse and transnational.

Based on this premise, we investigate family networks of migrant and non-migrant adults over 55, living in Switzerland. We formulated a twofold *diversity hypothesis* and *a transnational dispersion hypothesis* as follows:

H1.1: Family networks of migrant and non-migrant adults 55+ resident in Switzerland are likely to share a similar plurality in alters' categories, indicating a comparable family network composition.

H1.2: Regardless of ego's migration background, these family networks are likely to share a similar degree of inclusiveness or overall network diversity.

H2: It is probable that transnationally dispersed family members and resources' flows are equally present in both groups of respondents.

Research design and data collection

This study employs a mixed methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data retrieval and analysis to examine family networks of adults 55+ living in Switzerland. Data was collected in the framework of the research project 'Transnational Ageing: Post-retirement Mobilities, Transnational Lifestyles and Care Configurations' and included two primary sources: a large-scale cross-national survey and a qualitative case-study.

The quantitative survey was conducted between January 2020 and July 2020. The population register served as the sampling frame. A stratified representative sample of 14,860 people aged 55 and over was drawn by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. This sample included the three main linguistic regions of Switzerland and the main nationalities of the population aged 55+ (namely Swiss, Italian, German, Portuguese, French and Spanish nationals), as well as three heterogeneous groups of foreigners (namely Balkan nationals, other Europeans and non-Europeans). Foreign nationals were deliberately oversampled. In addition, the sample was further stratified by retirement age for Swiss nationals and by gender for all. The data analysed in this study are based on the responses of an achieved sample of 3772 respondents. Sampled individuals were first offered to participate online (push-to-web) and then had a choice between PAPI and CAWI questionnaires available in five different languages. At the end of January 2020, an initial invitation, along with instructions on how to complete the online survey, was mailed to the participants. The same approach was adopted for the first reminder, sent to all non-respondents 1 month later, at the end of February 2020. However, due to the unexpected Covid-19 pandemic situation, the second reminder, originally planned in a PAPI format, was postponed until the beginning of May 2020. It included the paper questionnaire in the language of correspondence and, based on the nationality of the respondent, also in their own language. Despite the challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, a final response rate of 25.6% was achieved. Questions included past and present cross-border mobilities, participants' and their family members' living conditions and transnational behaviours. The survey was not specifically designed to study family networks, and, therefore, questions about alter–alter ties were not included. It was, however, possible to identify respondents' family members, including their place of residence (in Switzerland or abroad), and the composition of family networks.

The qualitative case-study is based on twelve semi-structured interviews held between June and October 2021. Interviewees were selected using a snowball technique, based on two criteria: adults 55+ living in Switzerland and with family members living abroad. The respondents were made up of 12 women, aged between 64 and 86, living in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Five were divorced or widowed with no partner and seven were either married or living with a partner. Five were former migrants, whereas seven were Swiss nationals. To employ the TFNM, interviews were designed to document the characteristics of the interviewees' transnational family networks. The interview grid included name-generator, name-interpreter, name-interrelator (alter–alter ties) and alters' location questions. Due to social distancing restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemics, most interviews were conducted remotely via WhatsApp. The use of recorded narratives instead of ego-map drawings ensured that the integrity of the ego-network data remained uncompromized.

Data coding and operationalization

To test the *diversity* and *transnationality* hypotheses, we coded both sets of data.

With regard to the quantitative data source, we first used a binary migration background variable splitting respondents into two categories: 0 'people without a migration background' – *N* 1922; and 1 'people with migration background' – *N* 1804. We identified migration background by considering the individual's nationality, place of birth or parents' nationality. We chose to work with this variable under the assumption that not only non-naturalized primo migrants but also naturalized migrants or descendants of migrants have family members residing abroad. Without minimizing the vibrant debate on the potential risks of research migranticization (Dahinden, 2016), it is important to acknowledge that while using the terminology 'migrant/non-migrant' in this article, we are actually referring to individuals 'with/without a migration background'.

Second, we surveyed respondents' network members by asking participants to list family members and indicate if they lived (or not) in Switzerland. When answering this question, respondents specifically listed members under the categories of parents, children, grandchildren, parents-in-law, siblings as well as an open-ended 'other' category, allowing respondents to name up to seven other persons they considered family.

TABLE 1 Reported family members.

		Migration background	
	Total	**With**	**Without**
Reported family members	27,826	13,347	14,160
N	3772	1804	1922

The answers provided three key pieces of information: diversity in alter categories, inclusiveness (range/breadth) of kin and non-kin ties considered by ego as family members and their geographical location. In total, 3772 respondents named 27,826 relationships, with a similar distribution between migrant and non-migrant subpopulations, as shown in Table 1.

The category 'other' was chosen by 820 participants and included 5740 entries accounting for nearly a quarter of all family members. In this category, respondents named a broad range of kinship and non-kinship ties (e.g. in-laws, uncles and aunts, cousins, friends and colleagues), residing in Switzerland or abroad.

As an initial methodological procedure, data processing involved data entry cleaning using text analysis methods and data reduction into 15 categories of family members, each accounting for at least 4% of respondents within those categories. Subsequently, to eliminate redundant information, we conducted a principal component analysis with a Varimax rotation to reduce data and establish eight overarching categories, each having two modalities (living in or outside Switzerland), which collectively accounted for 61% of the variance. These eight categories were informed by both previous scholarly work and empirical findings. They included: partner, parents, parents-in-law, siblings, descendants, extended-blood family, extended in-law family and others.

To measure the overall diversity of family members in the network composition of the respondents, we computed Blau's index of heterogeneity (*H*). This index is based on the categorical distribution of alters, which characterizes the overall heterogeneity or homogeneity of alter types in a network (Perry et al., 2018). This index is extensively employed across various fields – for example economy, political science and social networks – to measure diversity:

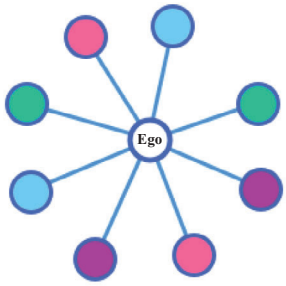
$$H = 1 - \sum_k P_k^2 \quad Blau's\ index(H)$$

We constructed the index using alters' family member type as a categorical attribute, consisting of eight overarching family member categories (*k*). Where P_K corresponds to the proportion of alters in a category *k*, with maximal heterogeneity: $(1 - \frac{1}{k})$.

The Blau index provides a measure of the overall diversity related to the inclusiveness of family members' categories (alters) in the network composition, without considering neither ego's membership to any of these categories nor the relationships between alters (see Figure 1). In our case, maximum homogeneity implies that all ego family members belong to the same category (e.g. siblings only), whereas maximum heterogeneity implies that ego's family alters are equally spread across all possible categories *k*, that is with an equal proportion among the eight categories.

Next, we performed a means comparison (estimated and weighted) between migrant and non-migrant respondents to statistically test for significant differences in the categories of self-reported family members and overall network inclusiveness. Additionally, we examined the proportion of alters living abroad to verify transnationality differences between both groups and their family members.

Finally, in the qualitative section of the study, we coded personal family network data into matrices containing information about alters' and ego's ties and attributes, including location. The qualitative data was also recoded and operationalized consistently with the quantitative analysis, followed by an examination of network diversity and transnationality. The family member category mirrors the 8-category system used in the quantitative analysis, and the H-index was computed for the 12 family networks. Subsequently, the interview transcripts served as in-depth



	Min. diversity		Max. diversity	
Category	**p(k)**	P_k^2	**p(k)**	P_k^2
Green	1	1	0.25	0.0625
Rose	0	0	0.25	0.0625
Blue	0	0	0.25	0.0625
Fuchsia	0	0	0.25	0.0625
		∑=1		∑=.25
	1-1=0		1-.25=.75	
Normalized (0,1)	0/75=0		.75/.75=1	

FIGURE 1 *H*-Index representation.

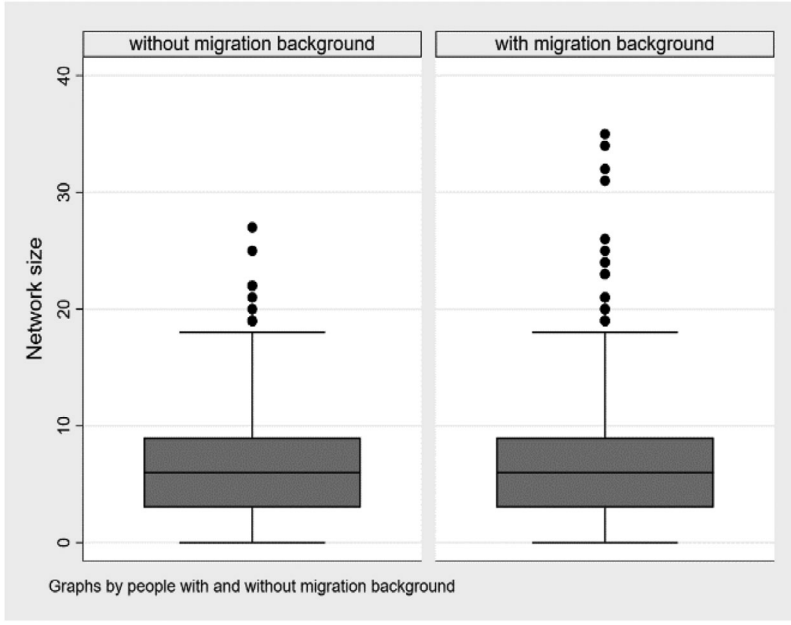


FIGURE 2 Family network size.

material to comprehensively document family diversity and transnationality, as well as the resources and types of support exchanged within respondents' family networks, based on name-interpreter and name-interrelator questions.

FINDINGS

Descriptive characteristics of family networks (size and composition)

The overall respondents' family network size consists, on average, of six individuals (*M = 6; SD = 4*), with a similar average among migrant and non-migrants (see Figure 2) and no significant mean differences among these (*F* 0.48; *p*-value 0.49).

TABLE 2 Family network composition.

	Freq.	Total	Migration background	
Family categories	***N***	**%**	**%With**	**%Without**
Partner	2911	77.3	75.1	78.9
Mother	730	19.6	20.7	16.7
Father	332	8.9	9.1	7.9
Mother-in-law	571	15.3	13.4	14.7
Father-in-law	297	8.0	7.9	7.1
Brother	1687	45.2	43.6	45.5
Sister	1789	48.0	44.5	47.8
Sons	2057	55.1	56.5	53.3
Daughters	1968	52.8	52.8	53.0
Grandchildren and great-grandchildren	1733	46.5	46.7	46.1
Extended family	413	11.1	10.5	9.6
Siblings-in-law (other family in-law)	319	8.5	8.7	7.8
Others (co-workers, neighbours, affective non-kin and friends)	151	4.1	4.0	4.8
No relationship stated	109	3.8	3.4	3.6

Note: Overall, 5% entrances were lost after cleaning.

Only 3.8% of respondents reported having no family ties. As seen in Table 2, partner is the most common family member relationship (77%), whereas descendants are the next most common lineal family relationship: sons (55%), daughters (53%) and grandchildren (47%). As expected, due to the age of respondents, lineal family relationships with parents are less frequent (mother 20% and father 9%). Regarding collateral relationships, siblings are mentioned by at least 45% of respondents, whereas other extended-blood family relationships (e.g. cousins) are mentioned less frequently (11%). Lastly, relationships with parents-in-law were reported by at least 15% of participants and relationships with in-law extended family members (e.g. siblings in-law) by 9%, followed at 4.1% by non-kin relationships (e.g. co-workers, friends, ex-partners and neighbours). These results illustrate the diversity (plurality) of self-reported relationships that extend beyond nuclear and kin family members, for both migrant and non-migrant groups. Percentages across categories are very similar.

Diversity in family networks

To assess the first diversity hypothesis (i.e. plurality of family member types among adults aged 55+), we tested for statistically significant differences between migrants and non-migrants in the eight recoded categories of family members' relationships. We used a post-estimation Wald test to evaluate the null hypothesis of equality between the parameters of the estimated means among the two subpopulations for each family member category.

Results in Table 3 show the categories of alters in our respondents' family networks, providing support for the diversity hypothesis (H1.1). This indicates a comparable distribution of alters concerning the categorical variable of family relatedness (kin and non-kin) in both groups. Furthermore, the findings exemplify the plurality of family

TABLE 3 Estimated means differences among family members categories.

	Subpopulation estimated means equality *Parameter* $\mu_{M=}$ *Parameter* μ_{NM}	
Family category	**Estimated differences by migrants and non-migrants**	
Partner	0.0411504**	(−)*F* 6.06; *p*-Value 0.014
Parents	0.0055914	(+)ns
Parents-in-law	0.004269	(−)ns
Siblings	0.021297	(−)ns
Descendants	0.191378	(+)ns
Extended family	0.0294612	(+)ns
Other in-law	0.0126462	(−)ns
Others (co-workers, neighbours, affective non-kin and friends)	0.0131782	(−)ns

*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

relationships in the networks of migrant and non-migrant older adults, extending beyond nuclear family members and kin.

These findings partially qualify our argument that a similar share of alters' categories can be observed across both groups. Except for the partner category, seven of the eight categories of alters show no significant differences between the two subpopulations. The partner category presents a negative difference, as migrants are less likely to report having a partner than non-migrants. However, this category received the most responses from both groups (regardless of the between difference). Additionally, the analysis showed that people with a migration background are more widely spread out in the working age/pre-retiree group (55–64 years) compared to non-migrants. Consequently, the former group is more likely to have living parents than the latter due to their relatively younger average age. However, after controlling for age group differences, the positive difference in the migrant parent category was not statistically significant.

Likewise, we checked the importance of family relationship categories across the entire personal family network. We examined each category's relative representativeness with respect to network size. As anticipated, both subpopulations displayed comparable patterns of representativeness per category (see Appendix B, Table B1). After controlling for network size, descendants and siblings were the only two significant statistically different categories. Accordingly, migrants are more likely to report siblings as family members compared to non-migrants, whereas the latter tend to report more descendants as family members than migrants.

Next, we examined the overall heterogeneity of alter categories in the family networks of both groups and assessed the inclusiveness hypothesis H1.2. The results of Blau's heterogeneity index centred around $M = 0.46$, with a range from 0.32[1] to 0.847 and a standard deviation of SD = 0.24. Accordingly, we tested whether Blau's index differs between sampled migrants and non-migrants, by conducting a Wald test and comparing the estimated mean parameters. The test results did not reject the null hypothesis of equality between subpopulations (*F* 0.15, *p*-value 0.698). This qualifies the H1.2 hypothesis as both groups are likely to share a similar overall diversity of alters in their family network composition.

These findings underscore the fact that when respondents subjectively define their family, both migrants and non-migrants exhibit comparable and inclusive family networks. This highlights the importance of adopting a configurational approach in the study of (migrant) transnational families. Indeed, family networks are shaped by personal characteristics, biographical trajectories and cultural factors (Lück et al., 2017; Widmer, 2010). This implies that

diversity in personal family compositions is influenced by various factors, including ego's age, gender, education, economic status, significant life events (e.g. divorce and widowhood) and societal norms that shape family values. Therefore, to validate the robustness of our previous findings, we conducted an assessment of the covariation between the breadth of reported family relationships with age, gender, education and labour market status, while accounting for migration background as a control variable. All these covariates have an impact on inclusiveness in respondents' family networks. Significant differences exist across age groups [55–74 vs. 75–100], gender [male vs. female], education level [tertiary, secondary and elementary] and labour market status [retired, active and outside] but not with regard to migration background (see Appendix A1–A4)[2]. Similarly, the OLS regression results confirm the robustness of our diversity/inclusiveness hypothesis (H1.2) – as the differences between migrants and non-migrants remained insignificant after controlling for the above-mentioned covariates (Appendix A6). This further supports our hypothesis that family networks in both subpopulations exhibit comparable diversity.

Likewise, within the study's qualitative section, seniors' family network diversity is clearly apparent, regardless of migration background. Network size among the 12-interviewees varies between 13 and 46 alters, with slightly more alters reported by migrants than non-migrants (29 vs. 24)[3]. Above all, the composition of the family networks clearly illustrates that interviewees define their family in an inclusive manner, listing partners, descendants and various other categories of alters. For example, Rafaelle, a Swiss woman aged 84, cited the smallest number of alters (13). Together with her partner, her daughter, two grandchildren and her son-in-law, she included her partner's two adult daughters, four nieces/nephews and two friends. Next, Catherine, a French woman, aged 72, married for 45 years to a Swiss man cited 20 alters: her husband, her 2 adult children and 4 grandchildren, also her son-in-law (but not her daughter-in-law), a sister and her 3 adult children, a brother-in-law and his wife, 2 of her husband's nephews and a friend. Karla, a Swedish woman aged 70, recently divorced from her Swiss husband, reported 34 alters in her family network composed of 10 descendants, 4 daughters-in-law, 3 sisters and their descendants as well as 8 friends. This diversity suggests that family networks are shaped by intergenerational relationships, whereas being embedded in heterogeneous social circles, contributing to diverse and shifting family configurations.

In addition, our study indicates that changes in marital status – for example divorce, remarriage or newly formed couples living apart – result in a greater diversity of family networks. Rafaelle is a case in point: divorced for over 40 years, she is now 84 with a partner living 200 km away. Both alternate between homes and have become step-parents to each other's children thereby reconfiguring their family network.

Additionally, Catherine's case illustrates another aspect of family life, namely the ambivalence of family relationships, characterized as much by support as by tensions, even conflicts. When Catherine spoke about her family, she did not include her daughter-in-law despite mentioning several other kin and non-kin alters. When asked about this, she revealed a 20 years' old conflict concerning her first grandchild, which is still a source of disagreement. About her daughter-in-law, she states: 'I liked her in the beginning, but since that happened, she isn't family anymore; because even if I see her a little, each time she finds some excuse to upset me. For her too, I'm not her family; her family is her parents'.

These observations not only emphasize the intricate interplay of factors influencing family diversity but also reveal the temporal fluctuations in family network composition shaped by significant life-course transitions and events (birth, death, divorce, illness, remarriage, migration, family conflicts etc.). All of which influence the quality of relationships among individuals.

Transnationality in family compositions

To test the transnationality hypothesis in family networks (H2), we examined differences between the two subpopulations in the location of alters – whether in Switzerland or abroad. As expected, when evaluating the eight categories' geographic dispersion, the statistical contrasts between the two subpopulations were significant (Table 4). It is a well-known fact that dispersion is a common feature in migrant family networks. Nevertheless, this premise lends weight

TABLE 4 Proportions of transnational family relationships.

	Anova: Proportion of alters outside Switzerland	
Family category	**Subpopulations contrasts**	
Partner	0.0245***	*F* 14.22, *p*-value 0.0002
Parents	**0.7155*****	*F* 1477.85, *p*-value 0.00
Parents-in-law	0.4480***	*F* 168.04, *p*-value 0.000
Siblings	**0.6612*****	*F* 2565.7, *p*-value 0.000
Descendants	0.1390***	*F* 190.13, *p*-value 0.000
Extended family	**0.5853*****	*F* 257.16, *p*-value 0.000
Other in-law	0.2985***	*F* 35.97, *p*-value 0.000
Others (co-workers, neighbours, affective non-kin and friends)	0.3481***	*F* 33.68, *p*-value 0.000

*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

to our argument. All previous findings point to a diversity of family relationships in both subpopulations (migrants and non-migrants), with striking similarities in alters' categories. Consequently, solely focusing on transnationality, which is primarily associated with a migration background, would have blurred the shared similarities between migrants and non-migrants in their network family composition and inclusiveness.

After assessing the estimated differences in the proportion of participants' self-reported family members located abroad (Table 4), we can identify which family categories are more likely to experience geographic dispersion. Compared to non-migrants, migrants have a higher proportion of self-reported nuclear family members living abroad. However, their partners and descendants predominantly reside within the same national boundaries. Notably, for both groups, most nuclear bonds are not transnational, with only 4% of migrant respondents reporting a partner living abroad, in contrast to 2% of non-migrants. Similarly, 19% of migrant respondents have descendants living abroad, compared with 6% of non-migrants. The most striking differences between migrant and non-migrant respondents' family network composition are evident in collateral (siblings and extended blood family) and lineal ascending (parents) relationships. The former group reported that at least 70% of their blood lineal and collateral relatives lived abroad, whereas the latter reported that at most 13% of their collateral family members did so. This difference is largely explained by the fact that people with a migration background generally leave their parents and other blood relatives behind in the country of origin.

Therefore, statistically, we cannot corroborate the transnational hypothesis for both groups (H2). However, an important caveat arises: Although transnationality is typically associated with migration background, a significant number of family members of non-migrant older adults were located outside Switzerland. Moreover, qualitative data provided a comprehensive analysis of the transnational aspect of family networks, as respondents were selected as older adults with relatives abroad, irrespective of their migration background. First, the average number of alters living abroad is roughly the same for migrant and non-migrant interviewees (12.4 and 10, respectively). Second, the number of foreign countries in which different family members live varies from 1 to 6, and the extent of geographical dispersion fluctuates within both subpopulations, as shown in the following examples.

Karla, a divorced Swedish migrant, reported equal numbers of her 34 alters in Switzerland (among them, all her descendants), as in her country of origin (mainly her sisters, nephews, cousins and friends). Catherine, the French married migrant, expatriated with her husband for 20 years, has 17 out of 20 family members spread over 6 different countries (see Figure 3). Her descendants live in Brunei and South Africa, and her extended family members and friends are scattered in four other countries.

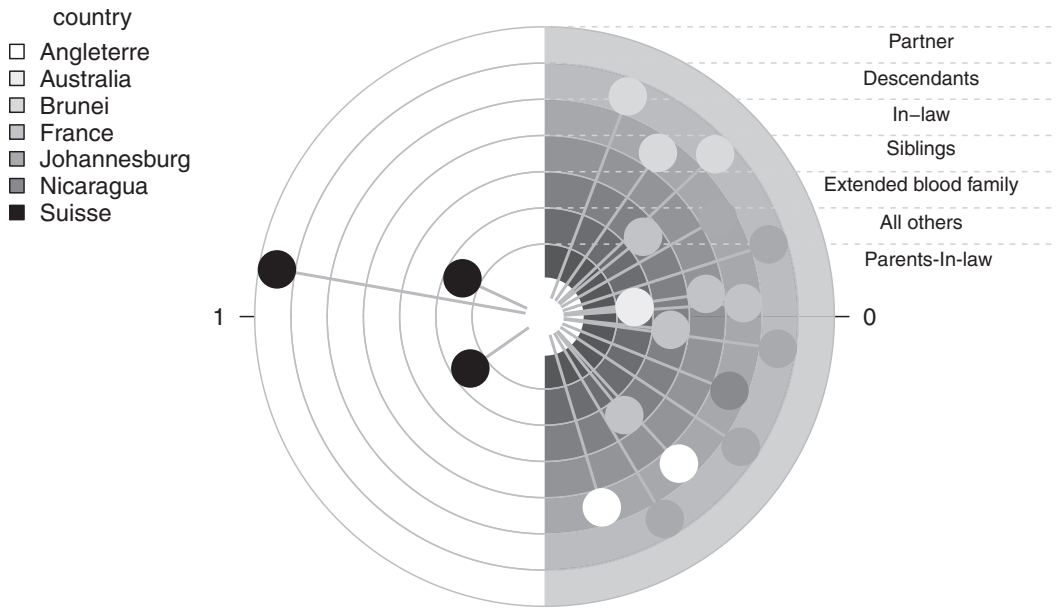


FIGURE 3 Catherine's transnational family ego-gram.

Among non-migrant interviewees, Sybille, a Swiss woman married to a Swiss man, has an extensive family network of 42 members. More than half, mainly descendants, live in Switzerland, whereas the others, including several other descendants, friends, a brother, nephews, extended-blood relatives and cousins live in Israel, USA and France. In contrast, Lili, also a Swiss Woman married to a Swiss man, has some of her descendants in Germany and two friends in Spain (7 out of 23), although the rest of her family network including her partner and other descendants are mainly based in Switzerland (Figure 4).

Finally, the only clear difference in transnationality in alters cited by migrant and non-migrant participants is that the latter are in almost all cases transnational grandmothers with expatriate descendants in one or two foreign countries. This is similarly the case for migrant participants, but only in two out of five cases. In such instances, descendants are expatriates living in countries other than ego's country of origin. As for other family member categories, migrant participants often cited sisters, nephews and sometimes friends abroad, whereas non-migrant respondents named other in-laws and friends, in addition to their children's partner(s).

In sum, the qualitative findings indicate significant variations both between and within the groups, irrespective of migration background. These variations encompass diversity (inclusiveness of network composition), and the geographical dispersion of family members. Interestingly, transnational family networks appear to be influenced by factors beyond ego's migration background. Family members' life courses (such as ego's long-term expatriation, mixed marriage or descendants living abroad) often determine the transnationality that characterizes a family configuration at a particular moment in time.

Interdependencies in transnational family networks

The empirical investigation of contemporary families as TNFC requires further exploration. A configurational approach emphasizes the importance of interdependencies among members of contemporary families and their embeddedness within structures of relationship characterized by solidarity and belonging (Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008). Consequently, in addition to capturing the overall diversity of alters and their geographical locations within a family

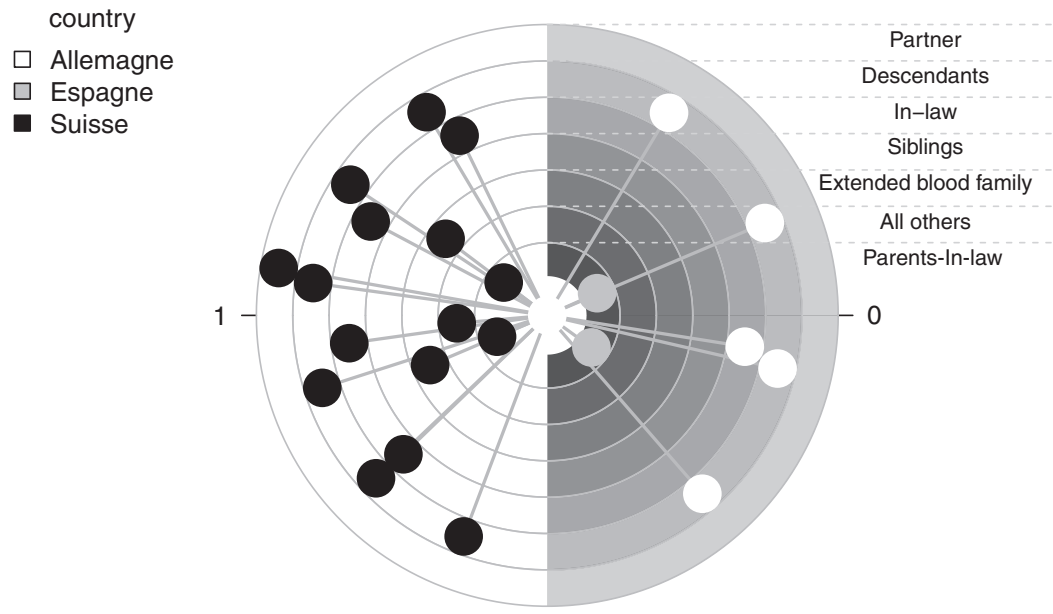


FIGURE 4 Lili's transnational family ego-gram.

network, it becomes essential to analyse the support given and/or received among members of the transnational family network.

In our study, although interrelator questions were missing in the quantitative survey, such questions were systematically employed in the qualitative case-study. They allow for the documentation of the relationships and resource exchanges within the whole family network, as illustrated by the example of Sandra, a Swiss woman married to an Italian man.

Sandra named 29 alters as family (Figure 5), including her husband and descendants in Switzerland (15), her sister and nephews in France and all her in-laws in Italy (i.e. her Italian husband's brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces).

The family network of Sandra exhibits a dense set of ties among its members, both within the local context and spanning national borders (network density 0.71). The network graph below (Figure 6) illustrates that connections and exchanges are not only maintained and renewed between alters living in the same country (e.g. Italy–Italy) but also between those living in different countries (e.g. Switzerland–Italy), as well as between different types of alters (e.g. siblings in Switzerland linked to extended-blood relatives or to in-laws in France). At the very least, family members are in touch, either physically or at distance via ICTs. Mutual help is strong both in local settings and across borders. In Switzerland, Sandra looks after her grandchildren, but when unavailable (e.g. traveling to France to visit her sister), her oldest granddaughter (17-year old) babysits her young cousins (4 and 7-year old). The circulation of transnational family care is also important. Sandra, her husband, and their descendants not only visit the family in Italy for holidays but also mobilize in times of crises (illness, death, conflicts etc.) providing emotional and practical support through physical co-presence. Sandra gathers family members living in Switzerland for various occasions, organizes regular family trips to Italy and keeps her network up to date with family news. Thus, she plays a central role in this TNFC, mediating the flow of interactions and support, constantly (re)activating and maintaining family relationships.

The interdependencies among family members in this TNFC illustrate that the bonds, solidarities and resource flows that structure family networks extend well beyond kinship and national boundaries.

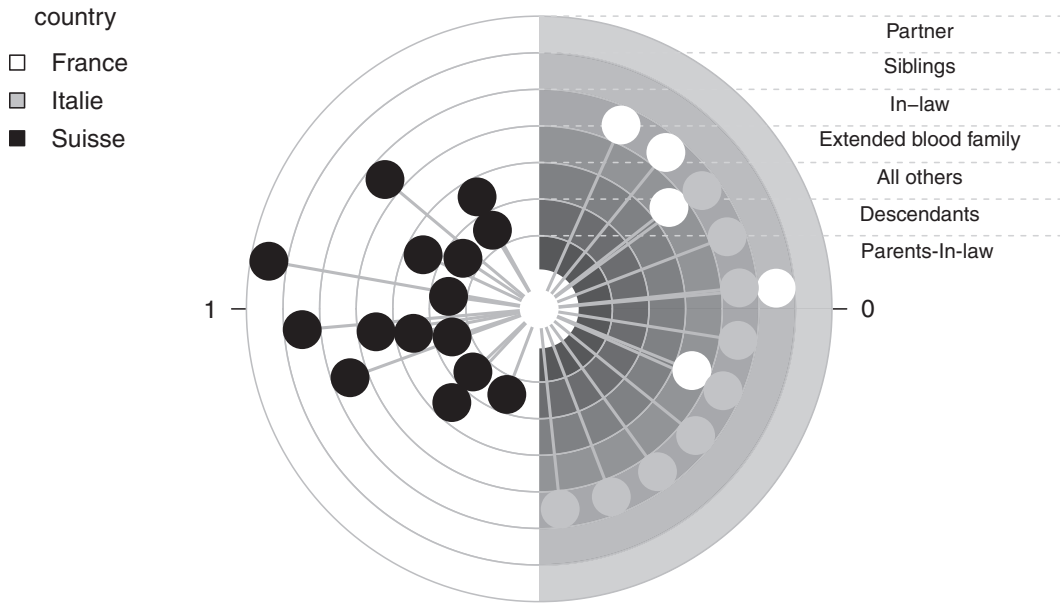


FIGURE 5 Sandra's transnational family ego-gram.

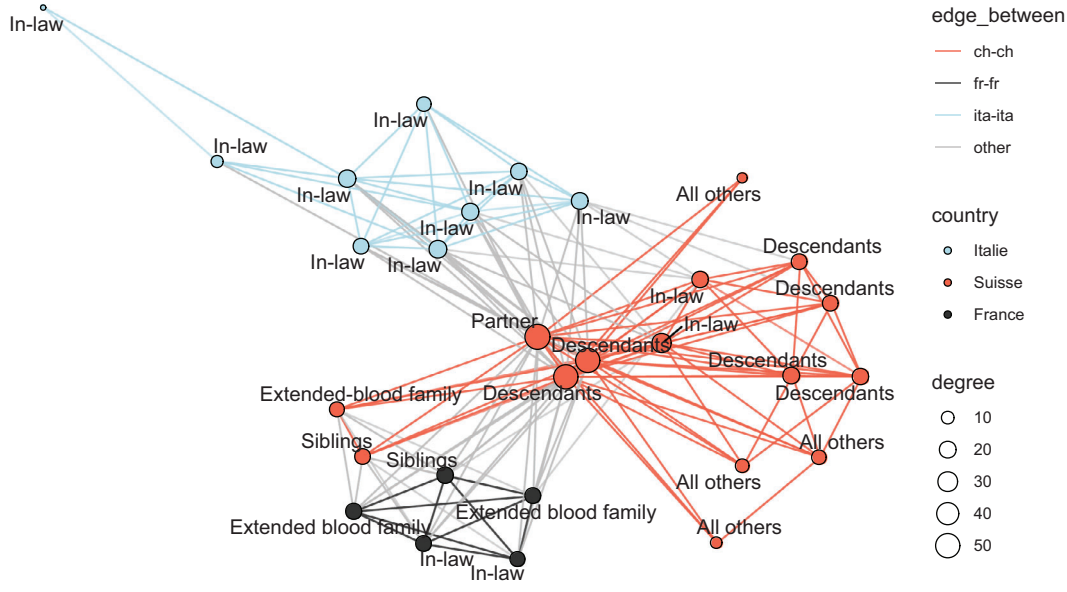


FIGURE 6 Sandra's transnational family network.

CONCLUSION

Through empirical analysis of diversity and transnationality in older adults' personal family networks, this study provides evidence supporting the theoretical conceptualization of family as a TNFC. The case of older adults in Switzerland reveals that their family networks are both diverse, including a wide range of kin and non-kin self-reported

family members, and transnational, with family relationships spanning national borders. Importantly, there were no statistically significant differences in family network compositions between migrant and non-migrant older adults, indicating similar distributions of kin and non-kin alters in both groups. Moreover, although migration background is a predictor of family members' geographical dispersion, we also identified a significant number of non-migrant respondents with transnational family ties driven by various life-course factors. The qualitative case-study further emphasized the complex interdependencies shaping support, solidarity and care circulation within these networks, going beyond mere network composition and spatial embedding of family members.

The fact that these observations apply to both migrant and non-migrant respondents indicates that the personal network approach used in family configuration studies can be extended and integrated into the transnational perspective of the family. In the case of older adults, adopting a configurational lens revealed that migrant family networks encompass a wide range of family relationships that go beyond kinship and the typical investigation of intergenerational ties and support (e.g. grandparenting) observed in transnational family studies. Moreover, the importance attached to the spatial dimension in both migrants' and non-migrants' family networks enriches the configurational perspective of contemporary families and draws the attention of family sociologists to the dispersal of family members across borders. As a result, the study of family configurations beyond the confines of a single country takes into account the impact of transnational factors on family networks in today's globalized world.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study. To fully implement the TNFC approach, the interdependencies and ambivalences inherent in family relationships need to be thoroughly explored, for example by examining the intersections between geographical distance/proximity and the benevolent/conflictual nature of family ties. Further attention should also be paid to the temporal dynamics of family experiences. This could be done through longitudinal surveys or repeated interviews that capture the links between family geographies and life-course trajectories.

In conclusion, we argue that – by bridging configurational and transnational perspectives – the TNFC approach can bring new impetus to the family research agenda. This approach provides a valuable heuristic lens for studying different types of transnational family configurations. It allows for the observation of personal family networks across different population groups, according to different criteria (e.g. age, gender and mobility), at specific stages of family life (e.g. transition to parenthood, retirement) and in different cultural contexts (e.g. South/North and Western/Non-Western). Furthermore, it provides a theoretical foundation for comparative studies to better understand how configurations of family relationships and the exchange of support between family members vary within and across population groups. The TNFC approach thus opens up new ways of observing and understanding the differentiated (relational, spatial and temporal) embedding of family relations.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in ZENODO at https://zenodo.org/, reference number 10.5281/zenodo.5775518.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/glob.12466.

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ENDNOTES

[1] With a score of 0 for 3.8% of respondents stating no family relationship.

[2] Appendix A5 presents a robustness check of within-group differences among individuals with a migration background while controlling for years of residence in host country, confirming similar family diversity within subpopulations of migrants.

[3] These sizes are significantly superior to the quantitative average network size as name generator questions allowed interviewees to list as many alters and family members as they wished during a 2-h exchange.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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