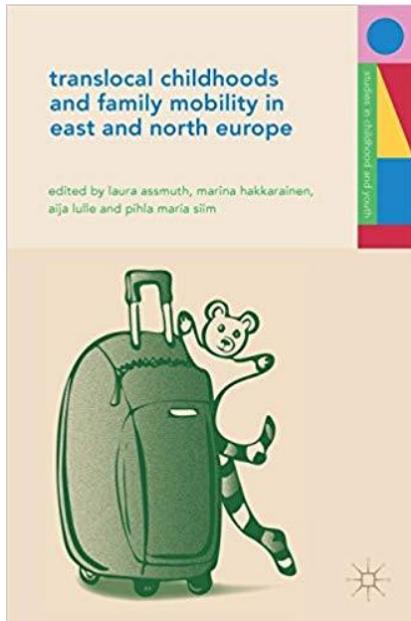


BOOK REVIEW



Translocal Childhoods and Family Mobility in
 East and North Europe
 coord. Assmuth L., Hakkarainen M., Lulle A., Siim P.M.

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Book review by Frank Elbers

This edited volume is one of the first in the literature on migration to focus on how children experience and understand mobility and migration. Even in research on family migration, little attention has been paid to children’s viewpoints, and in research on labour migration families are often not even mentioned. The contributing authors -- Laura Assmuth (University of Eastern Finland), Marta Balode (independent researcher, Riga), Agnese Bankovska (University of Helsinki), Anca Enache (University of Helsinki), Marina Hakkarainen (European University at St. Petersburg), Aija Lulle (Loughborough University), Airi Markkanen (independent researcher, Helsinki) and Pihla Maria Siim (University of Tartu) -- use an ethnographic perspective to fill this research gap. “By filling this research gap, we want to provide an in-depth understanding of how children ‘do families’ during family mobilities of different kinds.” (p. 5)

Assmuth *et al* take issue with the concept of “transnational” mobility or migration, which has been very much in vogue in the past two decades. Instead, they propose to speak about “translocal” mobility. They argue that a transnational approach can get trapped into a “methodological nationalism” as it relies on analyses of national/ethnic groups primarily in terms of their homeland/national state and national identification. Instead, “a translocal approach does not oppose internal and international migration/mobility and analyses everyday practices as experienced and narrated by both mobile and immobile family members”. (p. 7)

In their analysis, the contributors use three intertwined conceptual strands. First, they try to provide insights into how childhood should be understood as an *embodiment process*. The best example of this is how children experience food. “Translocal taste buds serve as a means of adjustment, belonging, liking, disgust and, most importantly, sense making. Experiences through localized tastes – both while on the move and when staying put – either facilitate, strengthen or at times also weaken relationships between children, their family members, friends and places.” (p. 55) Second, the authors highlight the “role of *physical and immaterial structures* that are crucial in the creation, organisation and maintenance of translocal childhood practices.” Schools, for instance, constitute a central role in children’s lives and institutions such as kindergartens are key everyday infrastructures. The third conceptual strand is that through a nuanced attention to relationships the researchers try to come to a better understanding of *children’s agency* in the mobility experiences.

The book is organised according to these three conceptual strands. *Part I: Introduction* contains the introductory chapter “Children in Transnational Families” by Assmuth, Hakkarainen, Lulle and Siim. *Part II: Embodiment* includes the chapters “And so the Journey Begins: An Embodied Approach to Children’s Translocal Materialities” (Bankovska and Siim), “Doing Translocal Families through Children’s Names” (Balode and Lulle) and “Sensitive Ethnography: A Researcher’s Journey with Translocal Roma Families” (Markkanen). *Part III: Infrastructure* comprises of “Summer Spaces: Infrastructures, People and Animals in the Baltic Summers” (Lulle and Siim), “Experiencing Inequality: Children Shaping Their Economic Worlds in a Translocal Context” (Hakkarainen) and “School as Institution and as Symbol in Estonian Migrant Families’ Lives in Finland” (Assmuth and Siim). *Part IV: Agency* includes chapters on “Children’s Agency in Translocal Roma Families” (Enache), “‘Becoming Better’ Through Education: Russian-Speaking Youngsters Narrate Their Childhood Agency in Finland” (Hakkarainen) and “Age Matters: Encountering the Dynamism of a Child’s Agency from Cradle to Emerging Adulthood” (Lulle).

In case studies, the book explores mobility from Estonia and Latvia to Finland, from Latvia to the United Kingdom, from Russia to Finland, and cyclical mobility by the Roma between Romania and Finland. Topics include naming practices, food (probably the one aspect that stands out most in children’s experience and their sense of belonging), travel, schooling, summer holidays (both children and their grandparents look forward to spending long Baltic Summers together!),

economic and other inequalities, and the importance of age in understanding children's lives. The case studies, *inter alia*, dispel the moral panic among child protection agencies and public opinion about "children left behind" or "migration orphans" in Central and Eastern Europe when parents migrated after the 2008 financial crisis to find work elsewhere. Migrating parents organise wide networks of support for their children through friends and relatives (grandparents, aunts & uncles).

Although the authors claim that age and gender need to be investigated and not assumed as they are interrelated in complex ways with translocal family life, a gender perspective is not fully developed in the case studies. Except for chapters authored by Lulle and Enache, who describe gendered dimensions of marriages between Latvian women and non-Latvian men, for example, and the gender roles in Roma communities – little attention is paid to how boys and girls experience mobility differently, or how, for instance, expectations about gender roles can be different in both the country of origin and destination. Do boys have more agency than girls? And what about the decision-making process to migrate and/or return; mothers or fathers that stay behind with or without children; caring responsibilities? These are some of the questions that the researchers could have addressed.

Translocal Childhoods and Family Mobility in East and North Europe is an important contribution to the literature on both migration and mobility and the field of childhood and youth studies. It addresses many methodological and ethical considerations when doing ethnographic research of children and their families. Full of rich detail of how children and young adolescents experience (circular) mobility and migration, professor Assmuth *et al* describe through lively case studies how they become part of, and evolve as, members of "translocal families."