Transnational narratives: father-child separation from the perspective of migrant men’s children in Ecuador

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Word count: 9696
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Multiple studies have explored the impact of international migration on family members. Nonetheless, scant attention has been given to the experiences of children who stay in the home country, especially in Ecuador. This paper addresses this gap in the transnational family life literature by exploring father-child separation from the viewpoints of children origin country. This is key to understanding the implications that separation has on the family’s well-being, thus providing a broader assessment of the effects of international migration. Through a qualitative study based on interviews and field observations, we seek to obtain a wider vision of the context in which the transnational father-child relationship evolves and understand how the children’s perception of the separation varies according to it. We can accomplish this by choosing three locations that are home to pioneer migrants in Ecuador, which have the highest rates of international migration. Qualitative data was collected from migrant men’s children in Biblián, Sígsig, and Calderón. Most of the migrant fathers, except for one, were undocumented at the time of fieldwork. Overall, we argue that although transnational fatherhood and experiences should not be assumed to be fixed but influenced by context, father-child separation does have implications, particularly, for boys.

Keywords: father-child separation; transnational children; left-behind children; transnational parenting; Ecuador

Introduction

In the last decade, as international migration increased, so did the number of children that live in fatherless homes (Dreby, 2007; UNDESA, 2013). Notwithstanding that communication with relatives in home countries has become easier due to information and communication technologies (ICTs), the lack of physical proximity between the father and child raises several questions concerning the emotional impact that parental migration can have on children that stay in the home country.
Although extensive research on the implications of this global phenomenon for children and the family structure has been carried out, it has been limited, for the most part, to the mother’s point of view, and a few recorded experiences from migrant men and other relevant stakeholders. Scant or nonexistent attention has been given in both policy and academic literature to the narratives of children—an essential group of actors. This constitutes an important omission as understanding the children’s perceptions of the separation can contribute to obtaining a holistic and fairer assessment of transnationalism, specifically, transnational family life.

Drawing on ethnographic research, this study, which took place in 2015, adds to the literature on transnational family life by analysing how children experience father-child separation. Given the limited body of literature on transnational fathering (Kilkey et al., 2013; Poeze, 2019; Pribilsky, 2004), we focus explicitly on children who reported having a migrant father. We aim to explore how our understanding of transnational family life changes or is reaffirmed when children’s perceptions are taken into account.

For this purpose, qualitative data, based on interviews and field observations, is analysed with which we are able to gain an in-depth understanding of how children grasp and respond to their fathers’ efforts to reinforce family life transnationally. The data is collected from children in Biblián, Sígsig, and Calderón, three communities where the incidence of migration is reported to be the highest in Ecuador (INEC, 2010).

Aware of the ethical and methodological challenges that can be found in research conducted with children (see Farrell, 2005; Greig et al., 2007; Carling et al., 2012), we ensured that informed consent was obtained beforehand from the child’s mother, who in all our cases was designated as the child’s legal representative. Similarly, we made sure to select children in their late teen years and interview questions were reviewed and approved by each school’s counselling department prior to
fieldwork. Finally, interviews were conducted in schools as according to the literature, this is where children feel safer and freer to express their thoughts and emotions (see Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014).

Examining the implications of transnational fathering from the perspective of children is critical at a time when gendered notions of parenthood and the discourse on parental migration’s negative effects on the family structure and children are predominant, particularly in Ecuador (see Herrera, 2013). The uniqueness of the study thus lies in that in addition to research on children’s experiences of the father-child separation being scarce, a study of this kind, which focuses solely on children as informants, is the first to be carried out in Ecuador.

The paper is structured as follows: section one provides a review of the literature on the perceived implications of father-child separation; section two briefly introduces Ecuador's international migration trends; section three details the data and methods used in the study; section four analyses the data and discusses the results; section five presents the conclusions and provides recommendations for further research.

Transnational fathering and implications for children

Transnational parenting has mostly been perceived as a strongly gendered process (Abrego, 2009; Carling et al., 2012; Dreby, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, 1999; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Parreñas, 2008). Gendered expectations of parenthood hold that women are responsible for the daily caretaking of children, while men play their roles as financial providers and decision-makers (Carling et al., 2012; Garcia & De Oliveira, 2005). Consequently, father-child separations are frequently seen as less complex or more socially acceptable than mother-child ones (Herrera, 2002; Parreñas, 2002; Pribilsky, 2004), which might also explain why the literature on transnational family life has mainly focused on transnational mothering.
Nonetheless, more recent studies on transnational parenting argue that these dominant discourses of parenthood fail to take into account different familial contexts and social norms, as well as the migrant’s structural conditions in the host country (Chereni, 2015; Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2014; Kilkey et al., 2014; Pribilsky, 2004; Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012). In fact, besides gifts, transnational communications, face-to-face visits, and remittances, migrant fathers particularly attempt to be care providers, responsible for their children’s emotional support and nurturing (Chereni, 2015; De Souza, 2014; Kilkey et al., 2014; Nobles, 2011).

For Ecuadorian men in the Azuay-Cañar region, Pribilsky (2004) finds mixed results concerning fathering practices. In some families, fathering roles are indeed gendered: fathers are seen as disciplinarians and often maintain a hierarchical relationship with their children even prior to migrating. This then highly influences the kind of father-child relationship that ensues after the father migrates. However, for men who migrate when children are very young or when wives are pregnant, some instinctively distance themselves or avoid relationships with their children altogether, while others assert forming deeper father-child connections through frequent remittances, gifts, attention to household needs and care.

Irrespective of the fathering practices migrant men engage in and their level of commitment, scholars posit that, unlike migrant mothers, more likely than not, fathers are unable to sustain close family ties (Abrego, 2009; Bernhard et al., 2009; Boccagni, 2012; Dreby & Adkins, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Kilkey et al., 2013; Parreñas, 2001). Disrupted affective ties then compound emotional distress in the family, which often results in marital dissolution and father-child distance, mostly seen in father-absent families (see Garcia, 2008; Parella, 2007; Pedone, 2006).
Transnational family arrangements and practices can affect families in multiple ways but are particularly taxing for children, who have been thought to pay the price of the separation (see among others, Abrego, 2009; Bernhard et al., 2005; Boccagni, 2012; Carling et al., 2012; Carrillo, 2004; Dreby & Adkins, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2001). As a result, when parents migrate, children display depressive symptoms, or act defensively or indifferent as a coping mechanism, especially as they grow older (Artico, 2003; Dreby, 2007; Haagsman, 2015; Menjivar, 2000; Parreñas, 2005; Smith et al., 2004).

Other effects that indefinite and uncertain separations cause include stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and frustration (Levitt, 2001; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). More importantly, unprotected and inadequately supervised children tend to display behavioural problems, have lower educational aspirations, and achieve lower academic scores in comparison to their peers (Kandel & Kao, 2001; Gonzalez, 2015). Migrant parents are then blamed for juvenile delinquency and other social problems including school drop-out, precocious sexual encounters, teen pregnancies, and drug and alcohol abuse (Carrillo, 2004; Dreby, 2007; Parreñas, 2001).

On the opposite side, scholars argue that migrant parents are blamed for the problems of youth who stay in the country of origin based on Western notions of parenthood, which hold children as highly dependent of parents and parental involvement as critical to the child’s growth (Watson, 1977; Panter-Brick & Smith, 2000). In other words, children’s relationship with their parents is the foundation on which rests their emotional development. Therefore, physical separation can interrupt healthy childhood development (Yarnoz, 2006; Romero, 2007). Unsurprisingly, words such as ‘left behind have been cited widely across these narratives (see among others, Wright, 2006).
This body of scholarship argues that the emotional effects of parent-child separation can be worse for children in divorced families (Nobles, 2011; Andrade, 2013). In fact, many have alluded to the potential gains for children as a result of their fathers’ migration. For instance, besides a reduction in child labour, Pribilsky (2004) describes how migrant men noted how working in the United States even allowed their children to wear the latest fashions to school.

More importantly, parental migration can ensure adequate health and education (Carling et al., 2012). For instance, remittances provide children in the home country greater access to education, as they increase the family’s incentives for enrolment and their ability to pay school fees (Pribilsky, 2004; Dreby, 2006). Indeed, Nobles (2011) finds a positive correlation between transnational fathering practices, particularly financial contributions, and schooling outcomes.

Furthermore, family separation can stimulate transformations in family roles as well as beliefs about what constitutes a family (Hoang & Yeoh, 2012). Specifically, it may lead to the creation of new family forms and different arrangements within existing families, such as single parentting, extended families, or social parenthood (Gerson & Torres, 2010; Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014). For instance, children often become closer to the extended family, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents, resulting in a larger support network (Baldassar, 2007; Carlson, 2006; Carrillo, 2004; Escobar, 2008; Garcia & Gomariz, 1989; Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014; Rae-Espinoza, 2006). Thus, a parent who migrates will not change the survival, living, and care conditions of the unit significantly.

Likewise, recent transnationalism research highlights the resilience and agency that children who stay in the home country develop as a result of parent-child separation (Dankyi et al., 2015; Dreby, 2007; Neimeyer, 2001; Rae-Espinoza, 2006; Zentgraf &
Chinchilla, 2012). Children find ways to cope with the separation and adapt to long-distance relationships with their parents (Rae-Espinoza, 2006; Schmalzbauer, 2008). Indeed, in the Caribbean or West Africa, separation is seen as a way for children to develop into responsible adults while strengthening systems of kinship and reciprocal obligation (Goody, 1982).

Overall, scholars argue that assumptions about the implications of parental migration and transnational parenting practices on children cannot be generalizable to all families as not all families function in the same way (see among others, Rae-Espinoza, 2006; Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2014). Different factors have been cited that determine the quality of bonds that are established between the migrant and his children. Context-specific behavioural norms as well as the migrant’s legal and socio-economic status, in particular, shape both parental care practices and the parent-child relationship (Carling et al., 2012; Poeze, 2019; Rae-Espinoza, 2006). For instance, for undocumented and low-income migrants, the possibility of performing fathering roles is practically negligible (Baldassar & Wilding, 2013; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009).

Age at separation and the type of parent-child relationship before the separation are also critical (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Dreby 2010; Pribilsky, 2004; Schmalzbauer, 2004; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). For instance, for children who experienced separation when they were older and had a close relationship with the migrant father, separation can often result in trauma, which is not seen in younger kids (Schmalzbauer, 2004). Other factors include remittance frequency, length of separation, and frequency of contact (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Carling et al., 2012; Cobos et al., 2013; Dreby, 2006; Haagsman, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2005; Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014; Pribilsky, 2004; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002; Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012). Specifically, the parent-child relationship improves when the parent
engages regularly with the offspring, when separations are shorter, and when financial assistance is frequent.

Similarly, the caregiving context and the parents’ marital status are defining elements in the practice of transnational parenthood and hence, the quality of bond the migrant parent maintains with the children. For instance, fathers who are divorced or separated are less likely to be involved with their children back home (Dreby, 2006; Nobles, 2011). Likewise, when mothers remain as caregivers, they are more likely to facilitate the relationship and contact between the migrant and his children than other types of caregivers (Nobles, 2011). Finally, the public policies that shape transnational family separation and reunification are equally important factors that determine the quality of the father-child relationship that ensues (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012).

**International migration in Ecuador**

Biblián and Sígsig are two of the twenty-two cantons comprised in the provinces of Azuay and Cañar, located in the southernmost region of Ecuador, also known as the Austro region (Gratton, 2006). International migration surged in this region during the 1970s but was limited to mostly urban professionals from Cuenca (Azuay’s capital and the third-largest city in Ecuador), particularly due to a downfall in the Panama hat trade (Kyle, 2000). However, this migration of urban elites soon influenced young male rural peasants from Azuay and Cañar, resulting in mass migration to the United States between the early 80s and late 90s. Despite owning several landholdings, most of them migrated seeking better opportunities for their children (Jokisch & Pribilsky, 2002; Pribilsky, 2004).

However, it is widely known that the circumstances surrounding international migration are risky as it involves physical, psychological, and financial hardships (Abainza & Calfat, 2018). Besides degrading conditions which have to be endured
while land crossing—fraught with numerous dangers—migrants also have to withstand working under improper conditions to pay off $8000-$9000 in loans that are levied by smugglers to cross the U.S.–Mexico border, which usually carries a 5-8% interest rate compounded monthly (Jokisch, 2002). Finally, and more importantly, migrants have to face the negative psychological and emotional effects that it entails being away from family members.

With the economic crisis of 1999 and helped by intermediaries—the tramitadores and chulqueros, who offered underground services for aspiring migrants—mass migration among rural dwellers to the United States, particularly New York City, became more prominent (Kyle, 2000; Jokisch & Pribilsky, 2002; Vasco, 2011). According to Miles (2004), today Ecuadorians make up the largest group of undocumented migrants in New York City.

The economic crisis of 1999 also affected Calderón, the industrial capital of Pichincha, which is located in the northern end of Quito. The high unemployment and low production rates forced people to migrate to the United States and particularly, Spain, thus starting a second wave of mass migrations in Ecuador. These migrants make an average of 13% of Biblián, Sígsig, and Calderón’s population (FLACSO, 2008; INEC, 2010). Both migration waves resulted in a larger female population compared to men living in these cities, as well as higher divorce rates (INEC, 2014).

In the last decade, many migrants in the Austro region have returned, mainly a result of economic crises in the host countries as well as favorable policy shifts for returnees in Ecuador (Vancluysen et al., 2016). However, according to the Migration Impact Monitoring Mechanism (MIMM) census (2015) they have to cope with the long-term effects of the separation as well as the challenges of family reunification (Verdezoto et al., 2015).
**Research methods**

This paper is part of the International Migration and Local Development Project, a collaboration between the University of Antwerp and the University of Cuenca in Ecuador, which focuses on the mechanisms that promote the migration phenomenon and its effects on the wellbeing of family members who stay in the country of origin, particularly children.

The present study draws on qualitative data, based on interviews and field observations conducted between March and December 2015, among 16 children living in Ecuador with their mothers, and who reported having a father abroad. Respondents resided in Biblián, Sígsig, and Calderón, three communities with a high incidence of migration (INEC, 2010). Eligible participants were selected from the Problems, Expectations, and Aspirations of Children (PEACH) questionnaire, a larger survey implemented in 2012 and 2013 as part of the International Migration and Local Development Project.

The average age of the respondents was 15 years old (ranging from 13 to 18). The length of separation from their fathers ranged from 7 to 15 years, with an average of 11 years. Fathers of the selected youths were residing in the United States and Spain at the time of fieldwork. Most of the children declared that their fathers were undocumented. Only one father had acquired his Spanish citizenship. Respondents were mostly from rural areas (n=12). From the group of interviewed children, 8 were girls and 8 boys (see Table 1).

[Table 1 near here] The interviews were conducted at schools during breaks. We sought permission from the schools and the mother’s informant consent to interview the children. The school was the preferred interview setting as it has been known to be a place where children feel safer and freer to express themselves without the influence of
adults (see Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014), which was also observed in our study.

Moreover, the fact that the researchers were actively involved in the school activities, such as during the Easter celebrations, allowed them to build deeper connections with the children. As a result, the children felt more comfortable when being interviewed.

Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes and was recorded, after obtaining informed consent from the child and mother. The researchers lived with host families that were highly acquainted with the rest of the community, which was essential to find participants and select the sample, which was obtained from snowball sampling. The interviews were subsequently transcribed.

Likewise, we worked closely with participating schools in order to secure cooperation at all levels and ensure student participation. After confirming and updating school lists through the school district and determining if the selected children were still enrolled at the school with the school secretariat, the researchers sought permission from the school coordinators to conduct the interviews.

During classwork or at school events, the researchers were also able to take notes on anything the children used to mention, such as their thoughts on the separation or any other experiences. A questionnaire was also filled out by parents and teachers to help understand different aspects that might be related to and influence the children’s point of view.

**Children’s narratives**

**Transnational fathering practices**

For the most part, migrant fathers in our sampled families had not been in contact with families in the home country since they left. The few who still remained involved to a certain degree, focused mainly on economic provision rather than being attuned to the
emotional needs of their children. In what follows, we examine in more detail how fathering practices were constructed across our sampled families, based on the narratives provided by the children:

**Communication and remittances**

In all of the cases, the children had been separated from their fathers for more than eight years and were aware that the separation had become permanent. As a result of fathers migrating, all of our interviewed children had been left in the care of mothers back home and mostly lived in single parenting homes, since all parents were separated or divorced, although two of them also lived with stepfathers and two with grandparents. Mothers, who were in charge of the provision of care, typically played the role of decision-makers and, at times, also bore the bulk of financial responsibilities.

At the time of fieldwork, only six children reported being in contact with their fathers. Given the majority of the fathers’ undocumented status and limited resources, migrants mostly relied on long-distance phone calls or online communication (e.g. Facebook messenger). However, some children mentioned that even calls were sometimes constrained by their fathers’ pressures of paid work, as Cristian described when explaining that phone calls were kept short as his father had to return to work:

> When I talk to him, he asks how’s everything and how I’m doing at school. Then, he talks to my mom for a little bit and nothing else. He doesn’t have much time to talk to us because he has to work (Cristian, eighteen years old).

However, in most cases, communication was infrequent and lacked substance, as Hugo revealed when describing his interactions with his father over the phone:

> The few times I talk to my dad, we just make small talk. We never discuss deep stuff. It’s as if he just doesn’t care about me. He never asks how I do at school or if
I have a girlfriend (…). He doesn’t know and doesn’t make any effort to know anything about me (Hugo, fourteen years old).

Consistent with Bryceson and Vuorela (2002), as well as Carling et al. (2012), we found that the longer the separation, the likelier it was for fathers to grow apart. Indeed, most of the interviewed youth reported that as time progressed, communication with the migrant father became less frequent. Others stated that fathers ‘only called when they felt like doing so or when they remembered to call’. However, calls were typically for financial-related matters only, which were usually dealt with mothers. For instance, one interviewee shared that once his father finished paying off a loan, he stopped calling.

Because fathers typically avoided speaking directly to the children, children only found out about these interactions either when they were mentioned by mothers or when they overheard the calls. The lagging communication with the children could have been attributed to fathers’ undocumented status, which is often blamed for reducing fatherhood to remittance support only (see Dreby, 2007; Poeze, 2019; Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2007). Nonetheless, our respondents rather suggested a sense of negligence and irresponsibility on the part of the migrant fathers, a claim that children often heard from caregivers. Even Bryan’s father who already obtained his Spanish citizenship had not contacted Bryan in a very long time:

My father told me he would take me to Spain with him. He told me they were already processing my visa, that they only needed my fingerprints. He has not called me since (Bryan, fifteen years old).

Money transfers were also sporadic. Families and migrants hoped that once the father migrated, he would earn enough money to enable their children to attend a good school or live comfortably. Ironically, despite meeting their families’ financial needs
being fathers’ main migration motive, most of the children claimed that their fathers regularly evaded financial responsibilities, even when families back home were highly indebted, or finances fell short of needs. The children doubted the lack of financial support was due to unemployment or their father’s legal status because as with calls, money transfers only decreased with time. Accordingly, mothers often combined motherhood with breadwinning to fill in fathers’ scant or nonexistent financial contributions. Many mothers had become small entrepreneurs, as Ericka’s mother who opened a sewing workshop to be able to respond to the family’s financial needs.

In fact, following the nine months of ethnographic research, we came to regard the fathers’ migration, not as a way to secure a better standard of living for their family back home, but as a selfish pursuit—an excuse to run away from their partners and their lives in Ecuador. For instance, Joel described that his father left without notice when his mother was pregnant:

My mom tells me that he left for the U.S. and abandoned her. He never told her that he was leaving. One day he just left and called her the next day from the U.S. My mom was expecting me then when this happened (Joel, fifteen years old).

As in Nobles (2011), the quality and frequency of contact and financial provisions were not differentiated between boys and girls. They did, however, vary somewhat between the Austro region and Calderón based on families’ socio-economic context. For instance, contact was more frequent in better-off families in Calderón, an urban area, compared to poorer families in Biblián, which is rural. Similarly, where the physically absent father had obtained a high-education degree, he would strive to maintain more frequent communication with their children.

However, besides the length of separation, we were able to confirm that contact was mostly influenced by the age of the child at separation and the type of father-
caregiver relationship. For instance, if the separation occurred when the child was a newborn, which happened in most of the cases, fathers were likelier to disappear, or re-partner and build a new family in the host country. At times, fathers still sent remittances but refrained from communicating with the children. On the other hand, if the separation occurred when the child was older (e.g. 5-8 years old), fathers attempted to remain in touch at least in the first few years after the separation. However, this also depended on the quality of the father-caregiver relationship.

Indeed, strained marital ties and divorce can hinder the father’s involvement with the child (also see Avila, 2008; Dreby 2006; Parreñas, 2005; Poeze, 2019; Pribilsky, 2004). In nearly all of our families, the children stated that communication with the migrant father deteriorated after fights between parents became more common, or after parents divorced or separated, usually a result of the long separation, men’s negligence and shirking of financial responsibilities, or men’s infidelity. Therefore, as with Polish migrants in the UK (see Kilkey et al., 2013), the breakdown of the marriage contributed to father-child distance. For instance, one interviewee stated that because his father was not remitting, his mother did not let his father speak with him.

**Authority**

In line with the literature, besides communication and remittances, some fathers also attempted to be involved in decision-making and nurturing, albeit this also being sporadic. This was mostly done in the form of communication and remittances, which were used instrumentally as a form of ‘distant disciplining’ (also see Kilkey et al., 2013; Parreñas, 2005).

Specifically, phone calls or the withholding of remittances were used for scolding, prescribing rules, or morally guiding children. For instance, one girl mentioned her father warned her he would stop sending money if she dropped out of
school or did not behave well. Another girl recounted how her father told her he would continue supporting her economically as long as she did not become a police officer, as he thought it was too risky. However, what fathers cared most about was that their children did not go astray. Therefore, they commonly advised their children to ‘be good, continue studying, and perform well at school’, as children often explained.

In general, regardless of whether they were in contact with their fathers or not, children, especially girls, perceived their fathers as ‘a figure of fear’ (see Hoang & Yeoh, 2012) or as ‘someone who just gives orders’, as noted in Daniela’s tale, whose father left when she was seven years old:

I don’t know if I would want my father to come back. It would be really weird if he came back after ten years. Also, it would be weird if he came here and gave me orders or told me to do something and what if I don’t want to do it (Daniela, seventeen years old)?

Hence, it became clear that children were also guided by gendered expectations for parents, typically ascribed to Ecuadorian parenting ideologies, which has been known to be a paternalistic society (Andrade & Herrera, 2001).

*Emotional support*

As mentioned previously, in general, our respondents stated that migrant fathers were uncaring or absent. Yet, in four cases, we found evidence that fathers made efforts to appear more ‘engaged’. Seeking to nurture intimate bonds with their children, these fathers attempted to maintain regular long-distance communication and prompted their children to ‘open up’, share thoughts, and seek their advice about friendships and schooling.

Nonetheless, as fathers often left Ecuador when children were young or when wives were pregnant (also see Poeze, 2019), most of the children confessed they had
never met their father and only knew him from pictures, stories told by caregivers, or Facebook. Accordingly, children were shy or unwilling to speak to their fathers or fathers had little or no point of entry for gaining insight into their children’s lives to establish the basis for conversation with them. Children used phrases such as ‘it was awkward’ or ‘we didn’t know what else to say’ to explain the emotional gap between them. Hugo confessed: ‘I just don’t feel comfortable telling him my things’. Daniela, on the other hand, admitted that she preferred to limit her interactions with her father to material needs:

It’s complicated to tell him my things and that he can guide me. He is too far away as to be my father who advises me. It’s OK that he continues being in touch so that he can send money and clothes but not to be my friend (Daniela, seventeen years old).

Hence, it can be argued that by and large, the migrant men from Biblián, Sígsig, and Calderón were mostly seen as “fathers only by check” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, p. 68).

**Responses to the separation and fathering practices**

*The father-child relationship*

As mentioned previously, most of the children had never met their father other than in pictures or Facebook, therefore, only a few of them had memories of him or recalled having built any relationship before departure (also see Schmalzbauer, 2004). Furthermore, many children complained that their father did not provide or contact them to the extent or with the regularity that they expected. Though, even in cases where the father attempted to be more in contact with the family or provide materially, he had failed to build a strong tie with the offspring.
On the other hand, some children, as Lesli described, had tried to reach out to their father or ‘created an account on Facebook’ to enhance the relationship, yet without any success:

I created an account on Facebook to add him and follow him. He only shares photos with his new family. I message him, but he never replies. To me, he is already dead. He leaves my messages on read (Lesli, sixteen years old).

Additionally, as Lesli, many children were aware that their father had built a new family in the host country. Hence, they complained that material provisions and fatherly love and care were mostly devoted to half-siblings, who were living with him. This realization was often met with anger, as observed in Hugo’s narration:

When I think that I have half-siblings and that they are living with my father I get upset because it should be me who is in that place. My father introduced me to his daughters on Facebook. He shows me pictures of them at their Taekwondo school. And I get enraged after seeing that because I didn’t get that chance to attend courses and be with him (Hugo, fourteen years old).

Consequently, the children often regarded the long-absent father as a stranger or as ‘another person I don’t really know’. Most of them told they considered their father’s physical absence insignificant. Yet, from the interviews, it became clear that fathers were not only seen as an authority figure who was expected to take care of the family’s material conditions, but the children also expected a loving and caring father who was present and provided moral guidance, especially as they grew older.

Material care and regular communication were important add-ons in the children’s evaluation of their relationship with their migrant father, but even where communication, remittances, and even gifts were frequent, the children felt neglected and lost. For instance, although all the children were attending schools, cases of teenage pregnancy were not uncommon. Hence, and contrary to Parreñas (2005) and Poeze and
Mazzucato (2014), the father’s physical presence proved to be crucial for the provision of emotional care and nurturing, especially for youths (also see Dreby, 2007). For instance, Fabián explained how his father not visiting was associated with him not being a ‘good father’:

If my father wanted to be a good father, he would check in on us, he would be more caring with us, he would come to visit us (Fabián, sixteen years old).

Nonetheless, responses to fathers’ physical absence or lack of contact were manifested in different ways by boys and girls. For girls, regardless of the age at separation, their fathers’ absence was frequently met with resentment or contempt, as shown in Ericka’s narration:

So many bad things have happened because of him. He left and abandoned us. He didn’t care about what could happen to me. I feel like I hate him, and I wouldn’t want to know anything about him. I wouldn’t be able to live with my father because, to me, he is an unknown person who doesn’t care about his daughter (Ericka, thirteen years old).

However, it is important to note that girls who showed the most disappointment toward their fathers’ absence were those who had been barely contacted or not contacted at all since the migrant father left for the U.S. or Spain, those of mothers who had been victims of physical or psychological abuse, or those who had heard stories of their fathers being unfaithful. For instance, Liseth, whose father left when she was a newborn, claimed her father was an unknown person to her because he disappeared even while being aware that they had debts:

He used to send money until I was six years old. Then, he forgot about us. We have debts and my mom is continuously stressed out about that (Liseth, fifteen years old).
Surprisingly, Liseth shared that her plan was also to migrate to the U.S. as soon as she graduated from high school to help her mother pay off their debts, highlighting a sense of empowerment and a change in the household’s dynamics.

Boys, on the other hand, although they recognized that the care provided by the migrant father was insufficient or not ideal, did not show resentment or anger. Instead, they admitted longing for a paternal figure who had an active role in their upbringing and was geographically proximate, although in general, the children stated having a close relationship with their caregiver or at least, feeling satisfied with their care arrangements. Yet, boys expressed that caregivers were incomplete substitutes for the emotional care that was expected from the migrant father. Similarly, even in cases where children had good experiences with stepfathers, they still experienced a lack of paternal care. Hence, stepfathers were unlikely to replace biological fathers. This was illustrated by Carlos when he described how his stepfather attempted to take over some of the biological father’s caring tasks:

I’m happy with the family I have now. But even though my stepfather does give me advice, it is not the same as having a father. I would indeed want to have that figure of my real father. That’s what I miss. But, oh well, my mom is always there to support me. My stepfather also takes me to work with him during the summer break (Carlos, fifteen years old).

Physical proximity and the provision of emotional care by the biological father are important elements for boys, especially in their teen years, given that although in the early stages of the child’s upbringing the mother’s role may remain primary, as children become adolescents, the mother becomes a model of a woman’s role while the father becomes a model of a man’s role (Cimprichová, 2015). For example, Cristian saw his relationship with his mother as good. He appreciated everything she did for him, but he still did not feel comfortable telling her the things that happened to him ‘as a man’.
Similarly, Bryan, while still cherishing the moments he spent with his father who visited him for two months in Ecuador, wished his father was nearby so that he could teach him about ‘the things that men do’:

I do miss having my father by my side. The two months he stayed here we got along very well. I wish he was here with us so that he can support me with my things… so that he can teach me about the things that men do. It was sad when he returned to Spain (Bryan, fifteen years old).

*Expectations for reunification*

Although the children perceived the relationship with the biological father as unique and irreplaceable, they still did not wish to live with both parents under the same roof. Children mostly justified this explaining that getting used to living with the migrant father would have been difficult since the separation had been prolonged. Others, like Carlos, pointed out to the fact that this way, fights and violence were no longer common at home, something that was not unusual in these communities, where the incidence of violence against women is high (Camacho, 2014; INEC, 2010):

If my father was here, my parents would fight all the time (Carlos, fifteen years old).

Children, in general, reported being better off now than if their fathers were still living at home. Those who had witnessed or heard stories involving violence or infidelity asserted being especially pleased with their new family arrangements. Only children in situations of inadequate care, like one girl who claimed that her mother did not respond to her complaints about his stepfather trying to assault her, or children who as a result of mothers’ breadwinning obligations experienced reduced emotional care, as in the case of Rosa, expressed a longing for the nuclear family ideal:
I would have loved to have him by my side as he would have been able to warn me about the types of men out there… to have that paternal figure. Now, I’m expecting a baby and I don’t know whether my child’s father wants to take care of my baby. If my parents would have been together, I don’t think I would be going through this. My mom works a lot and she is barely at home. I do get along with her, but we don’t get to talk too often because she almost always only gets here at dawn *(Rosa, eighteen years old)*.

Thus, while boys and girls had different perceptions regarding the father’s departure, and fathering practices and experiences may have varied depending on the child’s context, transnational family life was generally taxing for children in these Andean communities. Nonetheless, when describing their feelings about their father’s departure, some children asserted supporting their father’s decision to move abroad, especially when their mothers had mentioned an improvement in their economic conditions as a direct result of migration.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In this study, we interviewed Ecuadorian migrant men’s children who had experienced father-child separation as a result of their fathers migrating to the U.S. or Spain. We explored children’s experiences to understand how transnational fathering practices were shaped and their responses to these. Our data showed that, as noted by the transnational family literature, transnational experiences that involve father-child separation should not be assumed to be fixed, but rather as varied and influenced by the contexts in which they occur. However, we did see that by and large, fathers hardly made an effort to be involved in their children’s lives, particularly fathers that left when the child was a newborn.

Factors that evidenced to shape the separation experience were the age at separation, the length of the separation, the socioeconomic status of the child’s father
and the quality of the relationship between the absent parent and the child’s caregiver. For instance, fathers who did not have a good relationship with the child’s mother, more often than not, failed to keep regular contact with the child, either through phone calls or by providing financially, and this becomes more prominent as the separation lengthens.

The ability of the migrant father to provide financially and keep regular contact, but particularly, his ability to provide emotional care then influences how the child perceives the father-child relationship. Children do not only value acts that show emotional care from their fathers but expect this to happen. Failure to do so can create sadness in the children and induce feelings of parental neglect. Thus, contrary to prior studies, although children were somewhat influenced by social notions of fatherhood, they still saw their father’s role as being more than just a breadwinner and decision-maker. Indeed, expectations concerning fathers versus mothers did not vary greatly either.

More importantly, we observed that father-child separation can be taxing especially for boys regardless of the type and quality of fathering practices. Children, in general, who mostly belonged to households headed by a single female, appreciated their mother’s emotional and financial provisions, but still did not consider the care that was received from her or the stepfather as a substitute of the care they expected to receive from the migrant father. Similarly, the father’s presence could not be replaced with phone calls and remittances. Especially for boys, the father-child separation can have significant effects as they are often looking for a male figure that can be a model of a man’s role. Boys recognized that they were not receiving adequate care from the migrant father but still longed to have their father by their side.
Negative consequences of the separation reported in the literature (e.g. Bernhard et al., 2005; Boccagni, 2012; Dreby & Adkins, 2010), such as teenage pregnancy, were also confirmed by our study. Nonetheless, we found that girls, in particular, although showing resentment when describing their experiences and feelings about their father’s departure, displayed a remarkable amount of resilience and empowerment in the face of loss. Furthermore, although children preferred to receive fatherly love and care from parents in Ecuador, there was a general acceptance among children of the new family structure (i.e. with time, the children adapted to being raised by a single mother and not communicating with the physically absent father often), except for those who received inadequate or insufficient care from the caregiver. This can be partly associated to the flexible family norms that, though often criticized or even stigmatized, have been introduced in Ecuador and gained bottom-up legitimation (Andrade, 2013; Parreñas, 2005; Pedone; 2006; Pribilsky, 2004).

Hence, we argue that father-child separation is experienced differently by boys and girls. Despite this, physical proximity for all children, especially in their teen years, is what is desired. Even when migrant fathers attempted to provide care through regular remittances and phone calls, in which they used to ask about personal issues or attempted to give advice, this was not enough evidence for children that they were cared about. Therefore, to argue that family ties can be maintained in transnational families, at least in these Andean communities, is far from true. However, we are aware that this may have also been a result of the lack of synchronized or complementary fathering practices, for instance, return visits that combine with frequent and quality contact and care. Furthermore, these results may have also been influenced by the factors mentioned beforehand, such as parent’s marital status and quality of father-caregiver relationship. We also note that these results might differ in
other contexts and parts of the world. Hence, more research is needed to help us better understand how separation is experienced in different contexts, such as longitudinal studies, children of migrant mothers, or children from different ethnic groups or socioeconomic conditions in Ecuador. Likewise, it would be interesting to compare these results to father-child separations in married families. Finally, follow-up research on these families from the migrant father’s perspective could also help to obtain a broader vision of the context in which our studied father-child relationships evolved.

Nonetheless, our results point to the need for a policy that guarantees psychological support to families who stay in the country of origin, particularly children. Similarly, it calls for laws that strengthen family bonds and facilitate return visits, as well as enhanced policies that can provide support services for the migrant and reintegration into the national labor market. Finally, it emphasizes how important it is for the literature on transnational families to look for a different and broader approach for assessing the implications of international migration and transnational family practices.

**Acknowledgments**

The authors of this study acknowledge the logistic support provided by the ‘International Migration and Local Development’ Project at the Universidad of Cuenca in Ecuador during fieldwork, and the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO, by its acronym in Spanish) that kindly made its facilities available for the researchers while writing this article.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Funding details

This article was supported by the University of Antwerp as part of a joint Ph.D. program.

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Table 1. Number of children by gender, family arrangements, legal status, and area.

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