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DETERMINANTS OF WELL-BEING IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES: A SCOPING REVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Transnational families (TNFs) are a growing demographic in Europe, yet no scoping review has systematically mapped the multilevel determinants shaping their well-being across Europe's diverse welfare regimes. This review addresses that gap. A systematic search of Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and PsycINFO identified 42 peer-reviewed articles published in English (2014–2024) focusing on TNFs in Europe and addressing well-being. Guided by the transnational ecological systems framework, thematic analysis organised findings into four levels from proximal to distal: (1) Individual-level determinants, (2) Family & community-level determinants, (3) Institutional & policy-level determinants and (4) Societal & structural determinants. Findings demonstrate that well-being in TNFs emerges from the transaction between individual agency and structural environments, filtered through diverse European welfare regimes. These findings call for a shift from nationally centred service models towards transnational competence in social work practice and inclusive policies recognising cross-border caregiving. Future research should prioritise participatory approaches and address the geographical bias towards Western and Northern European contexts.

Keywords: Europe, migration, transnational families, well-being



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INTRODUCTION

The traditional boundaries of family life have been fundamentally altered by increasing international migration. As individuals and families navigate various cultural, economic, and political landscapes, the meaning of family well-being has expanded to include not merely physical closeness but also the preservation of emotional, social, and financial connections across borders (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). This transnational perspective contests traditional concepts of family unity and emphasises the necessity of comprehending how geographically separated family members navigate their responsibilities, identities, and support networks in a globalised context (Basch et al., 1993).

In the literature, well-being is comprehensively defined as a multidimensional construct encompassing both subjective and objective elements. The OECD (2011) approach to well-being includes both objective and subjective components such as the material living conditions and the quality of life. Subjective well-being pertains to an individual's cognitive and emotional assessments of their existence, frequently quantified through life satisfaction and emotional experiences (Diener, 1984). Objective well-being encompasses tangible factors such as economic and social indicators (Diener & Suh, 1997). Consequently, objective well-being typically includes quantitative criteria such as income, employment status, and health metrics. Conversely, subjective well-being pertains to individual assessments of life satisfaction and emotional conditions. The interplay between these two elements yields significant insights on familial well-being.

Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) define transnational families as structures that spend part or most of their time apart but remain together even beyond national borders, creating a collective welfare and sense of unity. This emphasis on collective welfare and unity is considered in this study as the transnational counterpart of the broader construct of well-being. Consequently, this definition highlights that well-being in TNFs is not merely an individual state but a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing collective, emotional, and economic dimensions. Transnational families are a wide-ranging umbrella term covering cross-border ties between a diverse group of members, such as spouses, siblings, and elderly parents. While this study focuses on the well-being dynamics centred on parent-child separation that have come to the fore in the European literature, it acknowledges that transnational well-being also differs for childless couples or extended family networks. The well-being of TNFs is affected by three interconnected aspects. First, the emotional and psychological well-being is affected by the difficulties of long-distance parenting, changing caregiving obligations, and the emotional burden of extended separation (Zhao et al., 2018), and perceived social integration

has a preventive role on life satisfaction and feelings of loneliness as a protective factor for migrants' subjective well-being (Carella et al., 2022). Migrant parents, stayer children, and elderly relatives all endure varying levels of emotional suffering, which are frequently alleviated – but not completely resolved – through communication technologies (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Zhao, 2019). Secondly, economic well-being is intricately connected to financial remittances, which function as both a tangible necessity and a symbolic manifestation of caring and familial duty (Zharkevich, 2019). Nonetheless, financial assistance alone often fails to mitigate emotional absence, and economic insecurity among migrant workers can intensify stress and instability within TNFs. Third, technology mediation and social well-being significantly influence international family relations. Digital communication tools enable migrants to preserve intimacy, negotiate parental responsibilities, and sustain everyday familial interactions despite geographical separation (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021). However, the reliance on virtual communication is also paradoxical, while fostering connection, it can simultaneously highlight distance and create new forms of emotional stress and disconnected practice (Zhao, 2019).

This study maps the determinants of well-being within TNFs in the European context. Although existing research has examined transnational family dynamics and migration outcomes, no scoping review has systematically identified how individual, familial, institutional, and societal factors collectively shape well-being across Europe. This review addresses that gap by integrating migration studies, family sociology, and digital communication research into a structured multilevel synthesis.

METHODS

Protocol and registration

This scoping review was conducted following the methodological framework outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and further refined by Levac et al. (2010). The methodological approach was additionally enhanced by incorporating guidance from the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) for Scoping Reviews (Peters et al., 2020). The study is reported in accordance with the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018). This review has been registered with the Open Science Framework (OSF) registries (reference <https://osf.io/e38bh/>).

Eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria for study selection were determined based on the research objective of identifying key determinants of well-being for TNFs in the European context. To be included,

studies had to focus on TNFs where at least one family member resided in a European country. Eligible studies also needed to explicitly address well-being or related concepts, such as quality of life, life satisfaction, mental health, social well-being, emotional well-being, family well-being, and subjective well-being. Only peer-reviewed journal research articles published in English between 2014 and 2024 were considered for inclusion.

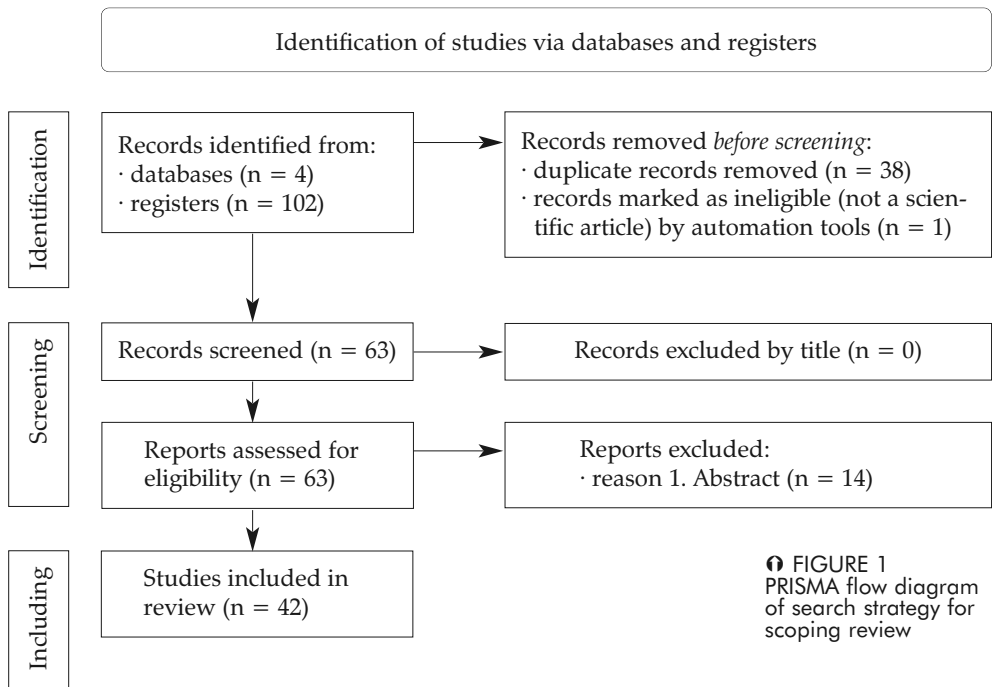
Studies that focused solely on migration without a transnational family component were excluded, as were those that did not engage with the concept of well-being. Articles published in languages other than English were also excluded, as were non-peer-reviewed sources such as editorials, letters to the editor, and conference abstracts without full-text availability. Duplicate publications were removed at the screening stage.

Information sources and search process

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify relevant literature across multiple electronic databases. The search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science (Core Collection), PubMed, and PsycINFO, ensuring broad coverage of studies related to TNFs and well-being. The search was structured using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and controlled vocabulary, including MeSH terms for PubMed. The search terms were categorised into three key conceptual domains: TNFs (e.g., "transnational families", "migrant families", "cross-border families"), well-being (e.g., "quality of life", "mental health", "social well-being"), and the European context (e.g., "European Union", "Germany", "France", "Italy"). The initial search retrieved 41 results from Scopus, 47 from Web of Science, 1 from PubMed, and 13 from PsycINFO. These records were exported and managed through Zotero software, which facilitated the screening and selection process.

Study selection

The study selection process was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, four independent reviewers screened the titles and abstracts of all retrieved studies based on the pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any discrepancies between the reviewers were resolved through discussion or, when necessary, consultation with a fifth reviewer. Studies that met the inclusion criteria during this phase were then moved to the second stage, where their full texts were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. The study selection process was documented using a PRISMA flow diagram (See Figure 1), which recorded the number of studies identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the final review.



Data charting process

To systematically extract relevant data from the selected studies, a standardised data charting form was developed and pilot-tested. This form was designed to capture essential study characteristics, including author(s), year of publication, country of study, research design (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), sample size, and data collection methods. Additionally, the form recorded how well-being was conceptualised in each study, identifying the specific frameworks or definitions employed. The extraction process was conducted independently by two reviewers to minimise bias, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

Synthesis of findings

A thematic analysis approach was employed to synthesise the extracted data. The process began with repeated readings of the charted data to familiarise the researchers with key patterns and trends. Initial coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts, which were subsequently grouped into broader themes related to the determinants of well-being. These themes were iteratively refined and clarified through discussions among the research team. Here, "determinants" are conceptualised as a comprehensive set of predictors (e.g., emotional resilience, kinship support/network) and contextual conditions (e.g., migration policies/regulations, welfare states) that collectively shape

the well-being outcomes of transnational families. This approach ensures that well-being is analysed not as a static state, but as a dynamic result of the transaction between individual agency and structural environments.

The final synthesis was presented in a narrative format, providing a structured overview of the key findings. Additionally, tables and charts were used to summarise the characteristics of included studies and illustrate the distribution of well-being determinants across different thematic categories. This approach ensured that the findings were clearly organised and accessible for interpretation.

Prior to presenting the findings, it is critical to analyse the implications of the existing literature across Europe in order to clarify the socio-political context in which the data should be interpreted. Based on the 42 studies examined, transnational family dynamics in Europe can be summarised as in Table 1.

In European literature, the well-being of transnational families is addressed as a dynamic phenomenon at the intersection of migration regimes, intergenerational care responsibilities, and socio-cultural adaptation processes. A synthesis of existing studies reveals that well-being is not only an individual health indicator but also a relational practice that transcends geographical and political boundaries. This literature varies widely from the mental health and care barriers of transnational children within the welfare systems of Northern Europe (Place et al., 2021; Szelei et al., 2024; Makrooni & Ropo, 2021) to family-based solidarity networks and parenting competencies in Southern Europe (Martins et al., 2024; Barros et al., 2023; Carella et al., 2022). Research concentrated in countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands emphasises the cumulative effects of discrimination, economic disadvantage, and language barriers on subjective well-being (Brandt & Kaschowitz, 2024; Haagsman et al., 2015; White et al., 2019).

On the other hand, labour or forced migration movements from countries such as Poland and Ukraine have brought concepts such as long-distance parenting, stayer children and resilience of separated families to the forefront of the literature (Fialkowska, 2019; Kraus & Wojtas, 2021; Dryjanska et al., 2024). Current studies focus on the role of digital communication technologies in preserving family ties by creating transnational social spaces (Nedelcu, 2017; Acedera & Yeoh, 2021) and on the fragility of migrants' mental health during crisis periods such as COVID-19 (Gerber & Ravazzini, 2022; Alarcão et al., 2024). Consequently, this European-wide body of research shows that well-being is shaped by the balance between local, national, and international policies and transnational family dynamics (Amelina & Bause, 2020; Brandt & Kaschowitz, 2024).

No	Study	Country/Region	Method	Family type	Family members (Participants)
1	Afonso et al. (2023)	Luxembourg (origin: Portugal)	Qualitative	Transnational families	Mobile members (Portuguese migrants in Luxembourg)
2	Alarcão et al. (2024)	Portugal (origins: various/global)	Mixed methods	Migrant families	Migrant adults (living in Portugal)
3	Alarcon & Prieto-Flores (2021)	Spain (Barcelona)	Qualitative	Transnational families (unaccompanied minors)	Unaccompanied immigrant youth and their mentors
4	Amelina & Bause (2020)	Germany (origins: Syria and Afghanistan)	Qualitative	Transnational forced migrant families	Mobile members (forced migrants/refugees) and stayer members
5	Antia et al. (2022)	Georgia (destinations: Italy, Greece, Poland, etc.)	Qualitative	Transnational nuclear families	School teachers and principals (perceptions of left-behind children)
6	Barros et al. (2023)	European & Schengen countries (origin: Portugal)	Qualitative	Transnational multigenerational families	Mobile adult children (emigrants) and their stayer elderly parents
7	Barros & Haenberger (2024)	Portugal / European context	Qualitative	Transnational families	General (applicable to mobile and stayer members)
8	Boccagni (2015)	Italy (origins: Ecuador and various)	Qualitative	Transnational extended families	Mobile members (migrants in Italy) and their stayer relatives
9	Boccagni (2016)	Italy (origin: Ecuador)	Qualitative	Transnational nuclear & extended families	Mobile women (care workers in Italy) and stayer relatives (in Ecuador)
10	Brandt & Kaschowitz (2024)	Europe (general / multi-country focus)	Qualitative	Transnational and migrant families	Multi-generational (caregivers and care-receivers)
11	Carella et al. (2022)	Italy (various origins)	Quantitative	Transnational vs. non-transnational nuclear families	Mobile married immigrants (living in Italy)
12	Cela & Bettin (2018)	Germany (various origins)	Quantitative	Migrant families (older migrants)	Older migrants (living in Germany)
13	Cojocaru (2021)	Italy (origin: Moldova)	Qualitative	Transnational nuclear & extended families	Mobile domestic workers (Moldovan women in Italy)
14	Dito et al. (2017)	Netherlands (Origin: Ghana)	Quantitative	Transnational nuclear families	Mobile parents (Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands)

Continues

No	Study	Country/Region	Method	Family type	Family members (Participants)
15	Dryjanska, Sanchez & Hagues (2024)	Poland (origin: Ukraine)	Qualitative	Transnational refugee families	Refugee women (from Ukraine)
16	Eremenko & Bennett (2018)	UK and France	Quantitative	Migrant families (including transnational separation history)	Young adults (who migrated as children or are children of migrants)
17	Fialkowska (2019)	Poland (origin)/ Germany (destination)	Qualitative	Transnational nuclear families	Mobile fathers (seasonal migrants) and their families
18	Gerber & Ravazzini (2022)	Switzerland (various origins)	Quantitative	Skilled transnational families	Mobile skilled professionals and their family members
19	Haagsman (2018)	Netherlands (origin: Angola)	Quantitative	Transnational & non-transnational nuclear families	Migrant parents (Angolan migrants in the Netherlands)
20	Haagsman et al. (2015)	Netherlands (origins: Angola & Nigeria)	Quantitative	Transnational & non-transnational nuclear families	Mobile parents (Angolan and Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands)
21	Hiitola (2021)	Finland (origins: Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia)	Qualitative	Transnational forced migrant families (unaccompanied minors)	Young forced migrants (living in Finland) and their family members (stayers or in transit)
22	Kaschowitz (2020)	Cross-European (various countries)	Quantitative	Transnational extended families	Mobile caregivers (migrants providing care)
23	Kraus & Wojtas (2021)	Poland (origin) / Europe (destinations)	Qualitative	Transnational nuclear families	Children and youth (left behind)
24	Makrooni & Ropo (2021)	Finland (origins: various/global)	Qualitative	Migrant families	First-generation migrant students in higher education
25	Martins et al. (2024)	Spain	Quantitative	Migrant families (at psychosocial risk)	Migrant parents (mothers and fathers)
26	Mazzucato et al. (2017)	Netherlands and Portugal (origin: Angola)	Quantitative	Transnational nuclear families	Mobile parents (Angolan migrants in the Netherlands and Portugal)
27	Meijering & Lager (2014)	Netherlands (origin: Netherlands Antilles)	Qualitative	Migrant families (older migrants)	Older Antillean migrants (living in the Netherlands)
28	Merla et al. (2020)	Australia and UK (origins: various/global)	Qualitative	Transnational extended families	Mobile members (migrants) and stayer members (elderly parents/relatives)

No	Study	Country/Region	Method	Family type	Family members (Participants)
29	Nedelcu (2017)	Switzerland and Canada (origin: Romania)	Qualitative	Transnational multigenerational families	Mobile parents (migrants) and stayer/mobile grandparents
30	Neto (2016)	Portugal (return migration context)	Quantitative	Returned migrant families	Second-generation youth (Portuguese youths from returned families)
31	Pertzikowitz et al. (2024)	Netherlands (various origins)	Quantitative	Migrant families (second-generation)	Adult children of immigrants
32	Place et al. (2021)	High-income countries (Sweden, UK, Norway, etc.)	Qualitative	Migrant families	Migrant children and young people (along with their families/caregivers)
33	Pongthippat et al. (2024)	Sweden (origin: Thailand)	Qualitative	Transnational marriage (migrant family)	Mobile women (Thai women married to Swedish men)
34	Purkarthofer et al. (2022)	Norway (origins: various)	Qualitative	Transnational families	Mobile members (migrant parents and children in Norway)
35	Rytter (2014)	Denmark (origin: Pakistan)	Qualitative	Transnational extended families	Mobile members (Pakistani migrants in Denmark)
36	Serra Mingot (2020)	Netherlands, UK, and Sudan	Qualitative	Transnational extended families	Mobile members (migrants) and stayer members (care-receivers in Sudan)
37	Sun et al. (2020)	UK (origins: various/global)	Quantitative	Migrant families	Adolescent migrant youth (living in the UK) and their parents
38	Szelei et al. (2025)	Multi-country (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden)	Qualitative	Migrant families (including transnational dynamics)	School staff and migrant parents
39	Tesfaye & Day (2015)	UK (origin: Eastern Europe / EU)	Qualitative	European migrant families	Health visitors (working with migrant families)
40	Tezcan (2018)	Germany (origin: Turkey)	Qualitative	Migrant families (older migrants)	Older Turkish immigrants (first-generation)
41	White et al. (2019)	Ireland and Netherlands (origin: Nigeria)	Qualitative	Transnational nuclear families	Mobile parents (Nigerian migrants in Ireland and the Netherlands)
42	Wu & del Rey Poveda (2024)	Spain (origin: China)	Qualitative	Transnational nuclear & extended families	Mobile parents (in Spain) and stayer children/grandparents (in China)

FINDINGS

This scoping review identified 42 studies that examined the well-being of TNFs in the European context. Guided by the transnational ecological systems framework (Moreno & Boxer, 2025), the findings were organised into four interconnected levels that move from proximal to distal influences: (1) Individual-level determinants, (2) Family & community-level determinants, (3) Institutional & policy-level determinants, and (4) Societal & structural determinants.

Theme 1. Individual-level determinants

Psychological consequences and personal resilience. The psychological consequences of prolonged separation are profound, affecting both migrant parents and stayer children (i.e., children who remain in the origin country while a parent migrates). Focusing on the innermost level of the ecological framework, this section documents high levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress, as parents often feel disconnected from their children's daily lives, leading to feelings of failure and estrangement (Dito et al., 2017; Carella et al., 2022; Gerber & Ravazzini, 2022; Szelei et al., 2025). Children also experience emotional distress from the absence of parental figures, sometimes developing attachment issues or behavioural problems (Antia et al., 2022; Haagsman, 2018). Digital communication tools such as video calls, messaging apps, and social media have been found to help mitigate separation anxiety by allowing families to stay in touch (Nedelcu, 2017; Boccagni, 2015). However, digital contact does not fully substitute for physical presence, especially in moments requiring emotional comfort, everyday care, or disciplinary guidance (Barros et al., 2023; Nedelcu, 2017). Despite these psychological risks, many TNFs develop coping strategies to manage stress and maintain emotional bonds. Emotional regulation techniques, including religious beliefs, spirituality, and social support networks, play a key role in sustaining psychological resilience (Rytter, 2014; Boccagni, 2016). Families also create transnational routines (e.g. scheduled calls and planned visits) to maintain continuity and closeness across borders (Afonso et al., 2023; Barros & Hanenberg, 2024).

Child and youth development and identity formation. While children's well-being inevitably has relational dimensions, this section focuses on the developmental outcomes that manifest at the individual level. Migration introduces disruptions in schooling and identity formation that shape children's social and academic development. Educational disruptions caused by migration-related challenges are particularly evident among transnational children. Language barriers significantly hinder academic performance, especially for those who migrate at later

stages of education (White et al., 2019; Makrooni & Ropo, 2021). Migrant children often perform worse in school compared to their native-born peers, not only due to language proficiency issues but also because of limited parental support in host countries (Pertzikovitz et al., 2024; Cela & Bettin, 2018). Children who stay in the origin country may also face academic challenges when caregivers (e.g. grandparents or other relatives) have limited time or resources to support schooling (Purkarthofer et al., 2022; Boccagni, 2015). Furthermore, migration creates internal identity struggles as children navigate belonging in both their home and host countries. This challenge is particularly pronounced among adolescent migrants, who experience pressure to conform to new cultural norms while maintaining connections to their heritage (Sun et al., 2020; Pongthipatt et al., 2024). Beyond identity strain, stayer children report loneliness, insecurity, and depressive symptoms, particularly when they do not fully understand the reasons for parental migration and interpret separation as rejection or abandonment (Carella et al., 2022; Eremenko & Bennett, 2018; Antia et al., 2022).

Theme 2. Family & community-level determinants

Transnational caregiving stress and kinship dynamics. At the relational level of the ecological framework, this section examines how caregiving is restructured across borders. Long-distance parenting creates significant emotional strain for both migrant parents and the stayer children. Parents who migrate for work often experience feelings of guilt, helplessness, and frustration as they struggle to maintain parental authority and emotional closeness from afar (Wu & del Rey Poveda, 2024; Haagsman et al., 2015; Mazzucato et al., 2017). Kinship networks serve as a primary source of emotional and financial security for TNFs. Extended family members, particularly grandparents, siblings, and close community members, frequently take on caregiving responsibilities and provide financial support when one or both parents migrate (Wu & del Rey Poveda, 2024; Tesfaye & Day, 2015). However, this redistribution of labour often leads to role overload. Caregivers who remain in the home country frequently assume full responsibility for child-rearing in the absence of parental figures (Nedelcu, 2017; Merla et al., 2020). The burden of transnational caregiving is often gendered, with women, especially mothers, experiencing greater distress due to societal expectations of maternal presence (Serra Mingot, 2020; Amelina & Bause, 2020). Older caregivers (e.g. grandparents) may carry this responsibility despite limited financial and emotional resources, which can intensify strain within multigenerational arrangements (Kaschowitz, 2020; Cojocar, 2021).

Cultural adaptation, acculturation, and social isolation. Migration can strain family relations as parents hold on to home-country values while children adapt to host-country norms, often fuelling intergenerational conflict around discipline and gender roles especially when accepted parenting practices in the country of origin clash with Western models of permissive parenting (Wu & del Rey Poveda, 2024; Tezcan, 2018; Tesfaye & Day, 2015; Hiitola, 2021; Salaris & Tedesco, 2024). Language barriers can also limit parents' involvement in schooling and push children into brokerage roles (e.g. interpreting in medical, legal, or administrative settings), creating emotional burden and role reversals (Makrooni & Ropo, 2021; Pertzikovitz et al., 2024; Alarcon & Prieto-Flores, 2021; Martins et al., 2024). Even with kinship networks, many families report isolation, and time zones and emotional exhaustion can weaken parent-child connections; support from ethnic/religious communities and cultural associations, alongside transnational mobility (e.g. visits and circular movement), is often used to cope and sustain belonging across borders (Dito et al., 2017; Gerber & Ravazzini, 2022; Boccagni, 2015; Rytter, 2014; Cela & Bettin, 2018).

Theme 3. Institutional & policy-level determinants

Economic stability, remittances, and employment policies. Corresponding to the exosystem in the ecological framework economic stability plays a crucial role in determining the well-being of TNFs. Many transnational parents migrate in search of better financial prospects, often securing low-wage and precarious jobs despite their qualifications and experience (Wu & del Rey Poveda, 2024; White et al., 2019; Tesfaye & Day, 2015). While migration can enhance household income through remittances, these gains frequently come at the cost of job instability and workplace exploitation (Fialkowska, 2019; Merla et al., 2020). Employment regulations further limit access to stable jobs, as many migrant workers are employed under temporary contracts with few labour protections (Cela & Bettin, 2018). Furthermore, heavy reliance on remittances can lead to financial dependency, making families vulnerable to economic shocks (Gerber & Ravazzini, 2022; Kaschowitz, 2020). TNFs may also experience added strain from maintaining two households (origin and host), which increases living costs and financial pressure (Nedelcu, 2017; Tezcan, 2018).

Migration regulations and legal constraints. European Union migration policies significantly affect the ability of TNFs to remain connected. Restrictive visa regimes, bureaucratic delays, and legal barriers contribute to family fragmentation and prolonged separations (Brandt & Kaschowitz, 2024; White et al., 2019). Family reunification policies dictate whether migrant

parents can legally bring their children and spouses to the host country. Many European nations impose strict eligibility requirements, including minimum income thresholds and residency duration conditions, which can delay or prevent reunification (White et al., 2019; Tezcan, 2018). These restrictions create cycles of precarity, as TNFs also face significant legal restrictions regarding access to social services and child benefits (Makrooni & Ropo, 2021; Rytter, 2014). An often-overlooked policy issue is the lack of legal recognition for transnational caregiving responsibilities across borders (Barros et al., 2023; Szelei et al., 2025). Variation across host countries (e.g. limits on changing employers under temporary permits, or exclusions tied to irregular status) can further amplify uncertainty and constrain family strategies for stability (Rytter, 2014; Hiitola, 2021).

Healthcare access and institutional barriers. Migrants frequently encounter obstacles when seeking healthcare, including legal restrictions, lack of health insurance, and financial constraints (Tefaye & Day, 2015; Tezcan, 2018). Even when access is legally granted, bureaucratic hurdles discourage many migrants from seeking assistance (Kaschowitz, 2020; Place et al., 2021). Mental health remains a significant yet often overlooked concern, with mental health services often underutilised due to stigma and lack of culturally competent care (Cojocar, 2021; Neto, 2016; Gerber & Ravazzini, 2022). Cultural misunderstandings within healthcare settings further complicate access to effective treatment (White et al., 2019; Pongthippat et al., 2024). In some contexts, undocumented or precariously documented migrants may be excluded from public healthcare, pushing them towards informal networks or costly private options (Meijering & Lager, 2014; Hiitola, 2021).

Theme 4. Societal & structural determinants

Social perceptions, discrimination, and stigma. At the macrosystem level of the ecological framework, this final theme addresses the structural influence of societal attitudes. Transnational families often face negative social perceptions in host countries, which create significant barriers to their integration and mental well-being. They are frequently viewed as a burden on the welfare system, leading to social stigma and resentment (Kraus & Wojtas, 2021; White et al., 2019). Additionally, parents who migrate for work are sometimes criticised for leaving their children behind, overlooking the structural challenges that compel migration (Antia et al., 2022; Serra Mingot, 2020). These perceptions can also affect children directly, including experiences of bullying, exclusion, or lowered expectations in school settings – often intertwined with language barriers and legal precarity (Sun et al., 2020; Pertzikovitz et al., 2024).

Systemic inequality and workplace discrimination. Discrimination and cultural biases shape the everyday experiences of transnational families, particularly in employment, housing, and education. Unlike the regulatory barriers outlined in Theme 3, the obstacles here stem from societal attitudes: migrants from non-European backgrounds face racialised hiring practices and workplace marginalisation that limit career advancement regardless of qualifications (Cela & Bettin, 2018; Kaschowitz, 2020; Alarcão et al., 2024). Women migrants of colour experience compounded discrimination, as intersecting gender and racial biases create further obstacles to securing stable employment (Dryjanska et al., 2024; Hiitola, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate the manner in which individual, family, institutional and social factors collectively influence the well-being of transnational families (TNFs). By adopting a transnational ecological systems framework (Moreno & Boxer, 2025), this study moves beyond a unidimensional lens to understand how distal policies and proximal family processes co-construct the lived realities of these families across borders. Importantly, this study conceptualises Europe not merely as a geographical entity but as a dynamic socio-political context characterised by diverse welfare regimes and evolving EU legislation, whose interaction with transnational mobility rights remains largely neglected in the reviewed literature. The central finding is that well-being emerges from the transaction between individual agency and structural environments, where economic migration may improve material conditions through remittances while simultaneously intensifying emotional burdens and caregiving challenges for both migrants and stayers.

At the individual level (Theme 1), the reviewed studies consistently document separation-related distress among both parents and children (Dito et al., 2017; Carella et al., 2022). Notably, educational barriers and identity tensions compound these effects for children (White et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2020; Pongthippat et al., 2024), underscoring the need for accessible and culturally competent mental health services for transnational families.

It may be noteworthy to mention some divergent findings before moving on to the second theme. Some studies show that determinants of well-being generally lead to different outcomes depending on the socio-institutional context. For example, in the area of identity and social integration, some studies emphasise that transnational children may benefit from developing bicultural identities that allow them to integrate into the host community while maintaining meaningful

connections to their heritage (Sun et al., 2020). However, these potential advantages are often met with systemic challenges that lead to opposite outcomes. The same or some children may frequently experience marginalisation in education and significant achievement gaps due to language barriers and limited institutional support in host countries (Afonso et al., 2023; Pertzikovitz et al., 2024). This difference highlights that individual resilience is not a characteristic in itself, but is tightly structured by the quality of harmony between family strategies and the external environment.

At the relational level (Theme 2), the redistribution of caregiving within kinship networks emerges as a double-edged mechanism: while grandparents and extended family sustain family continuity (Wu & del Rey Poveda, 2024; Vanore, 2016), this arrangement often produces role overload and emotional exhaustion (Nedelcu, 2017; Merla et al., 2020). The gendered dimension is particularly salient, as women carry a disproportionate caregiving burden that formal policies rarely acknowledge (Serra Mingot, 2020; Amelina & Bause, 2020). Digital communication tools help bridge emotional gaps but cannot substitute for physical co-presence (Fialkowska, 2019; Barros et al., 2023).

Moving to the macrosystemic level, Theme 3 highlights how institutional frameworks shape TNFs' well-being. Moreno & Boxer (2025) emphasise that governmental policies are distal factors that directly shape local family realities. The findings reveal that restrictive visa regimes and divergent family reunification requirements across EU member states create cycles of precarity (Brandt & Kaschowitz, 2024; White et al., 2019), while employment insecurity and reliance on remittances deepen economic vulnerability (Wu & del Rey Poveda, 2024; Dito et al., 2017). These institutional barriers call for more inclusive immigration laws, equitable labour rights, and fair healthcare access. Furthermore, the impact of these determinants is significantly filtered through the diversity of European welfare state regimes. TNFs residing in social-democratic regimes (e.g. Social Democratic/Nordic countries) often benefit from more robust institutional support, which may alleviate the individual burden of care. In contrast, in the Mediterranean regime (e.g. Southern Europe), the lack of institutional recognition for transnational caregiving places a disproportionate burden on female stayers and elderly grandparents (Cojocar, 2021; Serra Mingot, 2020). This highlights that migratory regimes do not operate in a line but interact with the domestic social protection models of each host country.

Beyond formal policies, Theme 4 focuses on the socio-cultural elements that affect well-being. This theme addresses how unfavourable public attitudes shaped by political nar-

ratives and the media lead to exclusion and prejudice for transnational families. Such perceptions interact with the institutional barriers identified in Theme 3, compounding disadvantage through informal channels that formal policy alone cannot resolve.

Taken together, these four levels illustrate that well-being in TNFs cannot be reduced to any single determinant. Individual resilience is enabled or constrained by family resources, which are in turn shaped by institutional regulations and broader societal attitudes. This interdependence underscores the need for multilevel policy responses that address structural root causes rather than individual symptoms alone.

From this perspective, European policy frameworks could be recommended to transition from nationally centred models to transnational social protection systems. For those staying in family-centred welfare regimes, it is crucial to establish portable social security rights and transnational care credits that recognise the informal labour provided by cross-border family members to address the documented fatigue of caregivers. Furthermore, findings regarding the educational and emotional vulnerability of transnational children necessitate the implementation of Transnational Case Management (TCM), a model in which social service agencies in host and home countries (e.g. between EU member states and partner countries) provide coordinated family support. Moreover, in order to reduce the protection gap identified in Theme 3, European migration policies should move towards a more inclusive definition of family unity that grants simplified care-providing visas to extended family members such as grandparents, who are the key pillars of the transnational ecological system. Finally, digital participation should be recognised as a social right, and affordable communication access should be provided to low-income transnational families to maintain the digital kinship relationship necessary for emotional stability.

Finally, future studies might also examine how well-being varies over time and look at variables including race, gender, religion, education and legal status. Moreover, conducting research into identity and cultural adaptability may provide additional insight into the welfare of transnational families. Additionally, further study is required to evaluate current support networks and propose solutions to enhance family well-being. Also, it is essential to acknowledge the geographical bias in current literature, which predominantly focuses on Western and Northern European experiences. This creates a critical research gap regarding the well-being of TNFs in Eastern and Southern European contexts, where different historical and socio-political trajectories may produce distinct well-being outcomes.

CONCLUSION

As outlined in the preceding discussion, various factors can potentially affect the well-being of TNFs, including economic, emotional, social and policy-related challenges. This study seeks to understand how these families maintain or preserve their well-being while adapting to new cultures, finding a balance between emotional and financial stability. It highlights the role of individual level determinants such as emotional resilience, family level determinants such as caring responsibilities and the use of technology for family communication as important components of well-being. By adopting a transnational ecological systems framework (Moreno & Boxer, 2025), this review demonstrates that these components are not isolated; rather, they form an interdependent system where distant policies co-structure local family realities. While migration can potentially lead to employment opportunities, it is important to acknowledge that it can also result in emotional and psychological stress, particularly for parents who are separated from their children. The challenges of migration can include caregiver exhaustion and shifting family roles, and the support of family and the community can be crucial in helping to mitigate the negative effects. It is also worth noting that experiences can be influenced by gender roles, with migrant mothers often experiencing higher levels of emotional stress because of caring obligations. Despite their resilience, systemic injustices and a lack of social support in their home countries may exacerbate the vulnerabilities of both migrants and stayers.

The well-being of TNFs can be affected by a number of institutional and policy-level or societal and structural issues, particularly in relation to work, healthcare, and legal safeguards. These families may encounter difficulties due to restrictive migration laws, obstacles to family reunion, and a lack of social assistance. Financial instability and dependency on remittances due to economic disparities between transnational families and locals is also a concern. The general well-being of TNFs is impacted by the difficulties they frequently have in obtaining healthcare and overcoming linguistic and cultural hurdles. These findings suggest that a fundamental shift is required away from nationalised social service models towards transnational competence (e.g. transition from localised interventions to Transnational Case Management) in social work practice. This requires social workers to act as cross-border coordinators who facilitate communication and service delivery between agencies in both origin and host countries. It is also proposed that policy interventions that meet the needs of TNFs and offer

economic stability, legal protection, and access to healthcare are potential solutions to these problems. Specifically, providing legal recognition for cross-border caregiving and establishing coordinated healthcare access for stayers in origin countries are essential steps. Global mobility, family unity, and the well-being of TNFs could all be enhanced by inclusive policies that transcend national silos and acknowledge the multi-sited nature of modern family life.

In conclusion, it is necessary that scholars, decision-makers, and social institutions collaborate to ensure the well-being of TNFs, recognising it as a shared responsibility. Addressing migration and family well-being in a holistic and intersectional manner may facilitate the management of cross-border challenges experienced by these families. Future research should prioritise participatory approaches that include the voices of stayers, ensuring that interventions are grounded in the lived realities of the entire transnational system.

Data availability statement

The full algorithm for the verification will be available.

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Odrednice dobrobiti u transnacionalnim obiteljima: pregled europskoga konteksta

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Transnacionalne obitelji (TNF) čine sve veću demografsku skupinu u Europi, no ni jedan pregledni rad nije sustavno mapirao višerazinske odrednice koje oblikuju njihovu dobrobit u europskim režimima socijalne skrbi. Ovaj pregledni rad popunjava tu prazninu. Sustavnom pretragom baza Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed i PsycINFO identificirana su 42 recenzirana članka objavljena na engleskom jeziku (2014.–2024.) koji se bave transnacionalnim obiteljima u Europi i njihovom dobrobiti. Vođena okvirom transnacionalnih ekoloških sustava, tematska analiza organizirala je nalaze u četiri razine od proksimalne do distalne: (1) odrednice na razini pojedinca; (2) odrednice na razini obitelji i zajednice; (3) odrednice institucionalne i političke razine; (4) društvene i strukturne odrednice. Rezultati pokazuju da se dobrobit u transnacionalnim obiteljima rađa iz interakcije između individualne sposobnosti djelovanja i strukturnih okruženja, filtrirane kroz europske režime socijalne skrbi. Ovi rezultati pozivaju na promjenu od nacionalno usmjerenih modela usluga prema transnacionalnoj kompetenciji u praksi socijalnog rada i inkluzivnim politikama koje priznaju prekograničnu skrb. Buduća istraživanja trebala bi dati prednost participativnim pristupima i riješiti geografsku pristranost prema zapadnoeuropskom i sjevernoeuropskom kontekstu.

Ključne riječi: Europa, migracija, transnacionalne obitelji, dobrobit



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