

Transborder families at the Mexico–US Border

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Transborder Families at the Mexico-U.S. Border

Abstract

The Mexico-U.S. borderland is a complex and diverse region, encompassing multiple power structures and diverse populations. Most scholarship and analytical discussions around this border focus on irregular migration and humanitarian crises. In contrast, the rise of transborder literature reveals a more convoluted borderland where the lives of people and families are conducted simultaneously on both sides of the border. This paper examines transborder families and their strategies in the Baja California-California region. Transborder families have at least one nuclear member working or studying in the U.S. while living in Mexico. In contrast to most recent transborder literature focusing only on individuals and individual border crossing processes, I argue that the nuclear families with transborder members are part of the transborder fabric which includes work commuters, and transborder students. Transborder families, as a unit, collectively endure the implications of daily border crossings, profoundly impacting the family processes and dynamics unique to their condition.

With empirical data collected between 2018 and 2019 in the border cities of Mexicali-Calexico and Tijuana-San Diego through in-depth interviews with thirty transborder people, the findings of this paper show that transborder families have a deep understanding of the (trans)border dynamics and its risks, just as transborder individuals would. Additionally, empirical data show that transborder families instrumentalise transborderism and employ it as a strategy for a better family future. In this sense, transborder families are vectors of analysis that expand transborderism as a theoretical, conceptual and empirical approach in the region.

Keywords: Transborderism, Mexico-U.S. Border, Transborder Families, American Dream, California.

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Introduction

The population located at the Mexico-U.S. border is heterogeneous. This diversity of identities and conditions in the region extends beyond national processes. These also involve connections and interactions across Mexico and the U.S., particularly related to transborder families, which experience these processes daily. As stated in the introduction to this edition, the continuous migration from the Global South to the Global North in Latin America, along with the porosity of borders, facilitates multiple family configurations bonded together through distinctive practices of care. The Mexico-U.S. border holds a particular significance in this regard, being one of the most crossed borders in the world by documented and undocumented people and families. Additionally, border towns such as Tijuana have been considered postmodern laboratories with hybrid identities that mix tradition with modernity (Garcia, 1990). Transborder families at these border towns are hybrid and mixed, as the following sections present. In this paper, the discussion centres on nuclear families whose one or more of their members legally cross the Mexicali-Calexico or Tijuana-San Diego border on a regular basis to work or study. These families are fixed in mobility, characterised by high levels of mobility but restricted (Jackson, 2012), navigating in circular motions between the Global South and the Global North daily, and highly influenced by the remnants of the American dream. I argue that families with at least one transborder member are transborder units of analysis, as its members collectively but differently shared the implications of daily border crossings. This breaks from traditional approaches to transborderism linked only to the individual. These families have agency and mobilise or instrumentalise their transborder condition as a strategy for economic, sociocultural, or migration benefits.

The Mexico-U.S. border is legally crossed by millions of people per year. In the second quarter of 2024, 18 million people crossed it (Smart Border Coalition, 2024). To focus on California, approximately 200,000 people cross it daily through its seven Ports of Entry (PoE), commonly known as checkpoints. The two main counties in this border state are San Diego and Imperial, each with two Ports of Entry (PoE). The twin cities of Tijuana and San Diego, as well as Mexicali and Calexico, belong to these counties, respectively (Smart Border Coalition, 2024). In total, there were over eight million crossings between Tijuana and San Diego last year (Rios, 2024). In 2023, there were an average of 132,100 daily pedestrian and passenger crossings in Tijuana-San Diego. In contrast, Mexicali-Calexico had an average of 49,200 daily crossings (Smart Border Coalition, 2024). However, disaggregated and recent

information about the transborder population or border commuters is still missing. Border commuters cross the border from Mexico to the U.S. daily for work or study. They do so with a lawful document, such as a U.S. passport, U.S. birth certificate, green card (for Legal Permanent Residence), or student visa.

As mentioned, accurate statistics on transborder populations today are not available. One of the reasons is that the U.S. government does not register the purpose for crossing regularly. Even if so, those who work or study in the U.S. without the required documentation will not declare their reasons for crossing. This could be the case of those who cross to work with a non-immigrant visa, or pupils or students enrolled in public schools, who would require them to live within the school district. However, some numbers are available that help us measure the dimension of the transborder dynamic at the Mexico-U.S. border.

In 2015, approximately 39,599 transborder pupils or students, referred to as learners from this point forward, crossed the border daily or multiple times per week (Orraca, Rocha, and Vargas, 2017). Today, it is estimated that thousands of learners cross the border from Mexico to the U.S. to attend school (Fichten, 2024). Regarding work commuters, 42,000 green card holders worked in the U.S. while living in Mexico in 1974. In 2020, approximately 7,000 to 8,000 U.S. nationals resided in Mexico and crossed the border daily (North, 2020). The reduced statistics challenge developing a comprehensive understanding of transborder families in the Mexico-U.S. region. However, the qualitative empirical data discussed in the following sections help with this challenge.

The objective of this paper is twofold. Using collected empirical data in the Mexicali-Calexico and Tijuana-San Diego border cities, I widen the scope of transborder scholarship that focuses on individuals, not families. This paper examines the concept of transborder families as units of analysis in transborderism, providing the conceptual ground to then investigate how their border condition is instrumentalise as a strategy for economic, migration or sociocultural mobility.

First, a literature review on transborderism and transborder families is presented in this paper. At the Mexico-U.S. border and drawing on Norma Iglesias-Prieto (2011) work, transborderism is understood as a life dynamic and condition that stems from daily or high-intensity border crossing. This dynamic has sociocultural and family implications, making transborder people bicultural and bilingual, holding complex and sophisticated knowledge

about border practices. Transborder people also have strong personal and professional connections to both sides of the border. Current literature limits the notion of transborder to those who physically cross the border, missing how this impacts the rest of the nuclear family. The analysis continues by introducing the role of the American dream in the emergence of transborder practices and border commuters. Is mostly through the economic evolution of the borderlands that border crossing dynamics solidify. Then, a brief overview of the methods used is discussed focusing on the type of interviews conducted, location, positionality and ethics implications.

The second part of the paper presents the findings. The first finding argues for transborder families as units of analysis with collective and shared lived experiences of transborder dynamics. This creates the ground and conceptual work to understand how these families instrumentalise their transborder condition for their benefit regardless of the challenging dynamic. Lastly, some closing remarks are put forward in the conclusions of this piece.

Transborderism and Transborder Families

To speak about transborderism requires some groundwork. The term is ‘thrown around’ *-de un lado a otro*. It is common to find literature that considers transborderism to signify a crossing of a metaphorical border (Anzaldúa, 1987) or to describe that a geopolitical border was crossed (Heyman, 2017). These understandings of transborderism are more linked to transnationalism or practices commonly related to transnational studies or diaspora politics. In addition, transborderism is also used to analyse local, regional, and international practices that originate in geopolitical lines of demarcation, which Mateos (2017) calls ‘territorial folds.’ Is this latter understanding of transborderism, where the border gets (re)territorialised (Vila, 2003) or border(ised), and where the operationalisation of assemblages of power (Enriquez, 2023) becomes more visible. Mezzadra and Nielson (2013) state that the borders in Latin America, including the one between Mexico and the United States, have at least two dimensions: capital and political. The analysis of transborder families contests this dichotomy by including cultural (Garcia, 1990) and sociological (Keating, 2005) elements in discussing this border.

From this perspective, transborderism or territorial folds are not formal or centralised practices (Dilla and Chavez, 2023) that would entail organised and planned governmental

participation. It does not refer to transborder paradiplomacy or organised transborder exchange between communities located on borders with defined and precise objectives. This view of centralised transborderism is prevalent in border studies situated in South America. However, I draw on Norma Iglesias-Prieto (2011) interpretation of transborderism from a Chicana and Chicano studies approach that considers the process as ‘the frequency, intensity, directionality, and scale of crossing activities; the type of material and symbolic exchanges; and the social and cultural meanings attached to the interactions’ (p. 143). In other words, transborderism is a life dynamic and condition that involves frequent border crossings for significant activities, leading to the creation of a thirdspace (Haug, 2021). Individuals in this thirdspace, or transborder habitus (Valenzuela, 2014), are often bicultural, bilingual and may even be binational. This means that transborder people possess a deep understanding of the intricacies involved in crossing the border. They have grounded and sophisticated knowledge of navigating harsh and militarised border policies. So far, scholarship and literature production have focused mostly on transborder subjects, leaving other sociopolitical configurations outside of this analytical framework. This is the case of family units at the border. The work of Norma Ojeda (2009) and Tessman and Koyama (2017) on transborder families at the Mexico-U.S. border are exceptions.

As put forward in the introduction to this special edition, in Latin America family configurations are fluid when in the move, influenced by coloniality, gender, care and Global South to North migration patterns. Transborder families at the Mexico-U.S. borderlands are historical sociopolitical institutions present in this region since the border was established in 1848 and more noticeably since the beginning of the 1900s (Meneses, 2022; Sanchez, 2023). These families are heterogeneous in multiple ways. For instance, in composition, ethnic background, mixed-citizenship or multi-status, and lawful border-crossing capabilities. In the words of Norma Ojeda (2009):

‘Transborder families in northern Mexico are units that, in different levels of social action, have historically developed quotidianly in a social geographical space that involves two societies at different stages of their demographic transition and have major economic and social differences such as are Mexico and the United States [...] The transborder family occupies an important place for having its origins in the very historical formation of the U.S.-Mexico border, but also for being the expression of a more contemporary phenomenon that reproduces itself through certain types of social and demographic practices that allow to

guarantee its quotidian reproduction in the face of unequal social and economic characteristics of the two countries.’ (p.17)

Ojeda’s work articulates some of the complexities of transborder families along the Mexico-U.S. border and inserts her analysis in a broader analytical framework related to migration. Ojeda situates transborder processes as part of a transmigration framework. Transmigration in this context refers to border and relational dynamics that stem from social, cultural and economic interactions on both sides of the border. These interactions create different levels of involvement, some deeper than others, depending on the type of activities with the other side of the border. Transmigrants are heterogeneous, crossing the border in either direction, seeking services, goods, or opportunities to study or work. These border interactions create family units with Mexican and Anglo-American traits.

For instance, transborder families within the transmigrant framework include family units with strong personal bonds to the other side of the border, without this necessarily requiring daily crossings. In the case of the Tijuana-San Diego border, Ojeda sheds light on the relevance of multidirectional crossings and their correlation with socioeconomic strata, particularly in relation to the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA was implemented on 1 January 1994 and was later renegotiated and renamed in 2020 as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. Since NAFTA, the number of southbound commuters has increased, as people in high-level management of transnational manufacturing companies with offices in Tijuana tend to live in San Diego. These work commuters belong to higher socioeconomic levels than northbound commuters living in Tijuana but working in San Diego. Ojeda also considered people from San Diego who retired and relocated to the Mexican side of the border.

However, in the case of this paper, transborder families are not only analysed or strictly linked to NAFTA or working commuters. The present analysis expands the scope of transborderism by including learners as extenders of transborderism on to their nuclear family. The dynamics and strategies of these families encompass both geopolitical aspects and transborder processes, integrating the implications and impacts of daily border crossing. Additionally, transborder families instrumentalise transborderism as a family strategy for improving their living conditions. The following sections elaborate on these arguments.

The Mexico-U.S. Border and the American Dream

The current Mexico-U.S. border was established between 1848 and 1854 after the Gadsden Purchase was finalised (Ganster & Lorey, 2016). In Tijuana, there is a big sign near the border fence with the phrase 'where Latin America begins'. The Mexico-U.S. border is a geopolitical space where multiple dynamics interact such as Global South to North migration, care as the base of a supporting network for people on the move, economic asymmetries between regions, border porosities, and palpable vestiges of colonial, gender and race ideologies. The Mexican-U.S. border is unique for its geopolitical location, but it shares processes occurring in South America. Such characteristics and processes particularly of people and families on the move, are discussed throughout the rest of the chapters of this volume. Herrera and Bonilla highlight the centrality of movement in Venezuelan families, and Cortes explains how coloniality and notions of belonging is relevant to identity creation particularly in Chilean education settings. This is also relevant in the case of transborder learners in Calexico and San Diego as they are constantly in the move and endured racialization. As many of the borders in Latin America, the Mexico-U.S. one has undergone significant changes in terms of politics, economics, and society. During the 1900s, northbound migration patterns emerged in Mexico. Most Mexicans initially viewed the U.S. as a source of employment and not for permanent residency (Ganster & Lorey, 2016).

Josiah Heyman (1991) noted that the Mexico-U.S. border experienced an 'open period' between 1848 and 1917, whereby Mexicans faced reduced immigration control when crossing the border. While most border controls targeted Chinese individuals, who were excluded from the U.S. via the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Sanchez, 2023), the looser control over Mexicans crossing northbound during this time proved beneficial for the development of U.S. industry. In particular, the railroad and agriculture industries employed around 4,500 Mexicans (Barrera, 1979; Acuña, 2007), replacing Asian labour. On the Mexican side, railroad construction was seen as a crucial state investment by President Porfirio Diaz, facilitating connectivity between the 'new' north and the rest of the country. This connectivity, in turn, allowed more Mexicans to join the migrant labour force drawn by the US (Durrenberger 1969, Ganster & Lorey 2016).

Between 1910 and 1917, the Mexican Revolution prompted approximately 10% of the Mexican population to migrate to the United States. The number of border crossings during this time was also noteworthy, with around 890,371 Mexicans crossing into the U.S. by

1920, including 628,000 temporary workers. Only in 1912, there were 23,238 crossings, and in October 1913 alone, 8,000 Mexicans entered the U.S. (Ganster & Lorey 2016).

Meanwhile, the American Dream gained traction and recognition in the United States and beyond.

In 1900, the New York Post published an article saying, 'Beware, resentful multimillionaires, for they will destroy the American dream' (Churchwell 2018, p.27). Initially, the essence of the American Dream was to break free from birth conditions to construct a country closer to its foundational ideals of equality. During the Progressive Era (1890-1920), multiple interpretations of the American dream emerged that were not solely tied to economic progress and opportunities. Newspapers of the time printed articles and stories about different types of American dreams with headlines such as the 'American dream of naval supremacy' (1877), the 'American dream of a republic of Cuba appeared to be over' (1906), and 'Mexico in American hands is the American dream' (1916). Churchwell (2018) notes the changing character of the American dream, just as the border itself. The pursuit of the American Dream became deeply ingrained in the Mexican psyche in the following decades. This is particularly true in the Mexico-U.S. border, where the American dream takes on a unique character as it was transborderised (Meneses, 2022).

As mentioned, the American dream was understood as a producer of possibilities where people could break free from birth conditions that limited their human, social and economic development. Pursuing the American dream, which would bring upward social and economic mobility for those inside and outside the U.S., became a life choice and process. With the rise of the Hollywood industry, magazines and new editorials featuring pictures gave a glimpse into the luxurious life of the famous 1 per cent (Churchwell 2018). This created a desire among the general population and readers to achieve material success, and a new concept of modernity emerged.

The emergence of transborder families and practices at the beginning of the 1900s can be linked to these social, ideological and political processes. The U.S. side of the border presented opportunities for struggling Mexicans or those already residing on the border. The 1940s and 1950s were particularly significant in this context, as two million people migrated from Texas to California, resulting in a population surge in Baja California (Ganster & Lorey, 2016). On the Mexican side, the presence of *maquiladoras*, or assembly plants, in the 1960s served as a pull factor, attracting people to relocate to the borderlands

and providing job opportunities within Mexican territory. On the U.S. side during this same decade, the end of the Bracero Program played an essential role in today's transborder families and the overall binational migration dynamic.

The Bracero Program was a twenty-two-year binational effort granting Mexicans temporary contracts to work in U.S. agribusiness. Over four million Mexicans participated in this circular binational job scheme. When the Program ended in 1964, many Mexicans relocated to the borderlands to continue crossing to the U.S. seasonally. The combination of people relocating to border areas for economic reasons and former Mexican braceros returning from the U.S. increased the number of commuters (Villalpando, 1977) transborderers and transborder families.

As previously commented, Ojeda's work (2009) sheds light on the role of NAFTA in increasing border commuters, including southbound crossers, throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In her work, she also included the impact of this binational instrument on transnational families, mostly relocating to the U.S. from Mexico, arguing that both types of family units are not mutually exclusive. This is the case in some of the stories included in this paper. Some transborder families were transnational families first, as they did not cross the border daily or regularly at a high intensity, but they had strong family connections on the other side. However, economic hardship during the 1990s and 2000s forced these transnational families to relocate to Mexico, where they stayed in the borderlands to continue working and studying in the U.S., considering transborderism the best choice to follow (Meneses, 2021).

The political and economic evolution of the borderlands has been accompanied by challenges when it comes to border crossing. Historically, border crossers have witnessed and endured growing racialisation of the Mexican people, the politicisation of the border and its 'cleaning' practices, growing asymmetries between Mexico and the U.S. related to their economies, politics, and (in)securities. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the border was securitised, profoundly impacting border-crossing dynamics at the checkpoints or Ports of Entry. One of the populations most impacted by political changes at this border is transborder communities, and therefore, anyone involved in their dynamic.

The historical account is relevant to illustrate the political, cultural and economic context where transborder population live and must navigate. This includes the benefits and

disadvantages experienced individually or collectively. In this sense and as stated in the introduction of this paper, the empirical data collected show how the transborder dynamic impacts the nuclear family of a transborder subject, and the way that these families engage with transborderism as a strategy to enhance their economic and political prospects.

Methods

The empirical data informing this qualitative project was collected over ten months in 2018 and 2019 in four cities in Mexico and the U.S. I interviewed thirty current or former transborder individuals in Mexicali-Calexico and Tijuana-San Diego. They all were transborder learners with a mix of border-crossing and not border-crossing parents. Most of them belong to the 25-35 age bracket. The rest were under 20 or over 40 years of age. The most senior participant was above 60 years old. As for gender, only eight identified themselves as men, and the rest identified as women. This variety of ages and genders allowed me to trace transborder practices within border families historically. Some of them went from being learners to transborder parents. The data presented here is part of broader research focusing on transborder learners. However, this paper includes original data archived until now that focuses on family dynamics rather than individual experiences.

A call for participants was distributed through social media and among a border-research network. The first recruitment phase filtered transborder people from transnational people who also expressed interest in participating. After providing a research brief and stating that their participation would be recorded, I set up appointments for meetings on the side of the border that the participant preferred. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, with open-ended questions. The average length of each interview was two hours, and approximately 3,600 minutes of original data were compiled. The personal profiles of the participants were mixed in multiple ways. The younger participant was in her early twenties, and the senior was in her fifties. This allowed me to trace how transborder families have lived through border changes. The participants held different lawful documentation for crossing the border and attended private or public schools in the U.S. Most respondents to the call identified as women.

This paper captures the data collected through transborder methods. For example, I conducted interviews across the Mexico-U.S. border, with a focus on the California area. The participants were asked in which country they would like to be interviewed, and I would

cross back and forth international boundaries. As part of transborder methods, the languages used were Spanish, English and Spanglish. This would allow participants to express themselves as freely as possible and to transition from language to language without any difficulty. I am originally from the Mexicali-Calexico border and lived through the pre- and post 9/11 border changes. I have, for over 30 years, crossed this border regularly, experiencing (de)escalating enforcement and protection policies. The number of observations I had of this border, combined with my professional experience as a policymaker in public education and its internationalisation, sparked my academic curiosity to understand this distinctive political configuration of border crossers. As a researcher with transborder experience in the region, I became an insider-outsider, allowing me to create a transborder environment while observing my potential biases. For example, the data was voice-recorded and stored in a cloud storage account, which was password-protected. The signed consent forms were kept inside a backpack in case I needed to cross the border after the interview. This was crucial in protecting the participants' anonymity, a principle I continue to uphold in this paper, as all names have been changed.

Additionally, I draw on previously published scholarship on transborderism and transborder people to complement the analysis of transborder families. Such literature helped me deeply analyse the empirical and theoretical processes surrounding this unique family dynamic at the borderlands. Since the data collected is part of the Baja California and California context, this paper will focus on this border region, considering transborder families located in the twin cities of Mexicali-Calexico and Tijuana-San Diego, with official residence in Mexico, whose all or some of its members study or work in the U.S. Hence, the family dynamic would entail engaging with daily or regular crossings, deeming them transborder families.

Findings

1. Transborder families as collective entities

Transborder scholarship mainly focuses on individual interactions to determine this condition. This is valuable as it allows academics to understand the complex and intricate processes that transborderism entails. This fixation on the individual has limited the exploration to understand how this practice extends to the support networks of those who

cross the border regularly to study or work. This is too restrictive. In contrast, the few existing literature on transborder families such as Ojeda's (2009) consider to be transborder all families whose culture includes Mexican and Anglo-American traits, determined by place of birth, kinship, and economic activities. This includes U.S. retired workers who relocated to Tijuana, for example. This is too general. This first finding of this paper bridges these contrasting positions by showing that families with transborder members constitute a transborder unit who collectively experience a border life. This analysis begins with transborder individuals who regularly or daily crosses the border from Mexico to the U.S. and is expanded to include their nuclear family members. This lifts the restricted understanding of transborderism based solely on individual interactions and the type of documentation used for crossing, which delimit broader understandings of transborder families. This claim is based on the narratives from the participants who shared the ways their nuclear family coped with transborder practices as they crossed daily to study from Mexicali or Tijuana to Calexico or San Diego respectively.

At the border, 'our children are not only invisible, but they also stand out' (Bejarano & Morales, 2024, p 76). Ambivalence is one characteristic of border life. To be included and excluded, to be wanted and unwanted, to be Mexican and American. Transborder families navigate border ambivalence and bordering practices in multiple ways. For instance, those transborder pupils attending private schools in California are wanted inside their institutions as they are the main customers, while being racialised. This was a main concern from 2001.

After the terrorist attack to the World Trade Center in New York, reinforced U.S. border protection changed crossing dynamics. For example, the waiting line at the PoE increased to four hours in Mexicali and Tijuana (Meneses, 2022). This impacted transborder families, making their strategy and dynamics more difficult. Parents of transborder learners would save a spot in the queue for their children, who sometimes must wait up to six hours to cross the border in the mornings. This is in addition to the multiple acts of violence that border crossers experienced at the U.S. checkpoint, which include discrimination and other forms of violences (Meneses, 2021).

Such was the case for Matt, who was a transborder pupil when the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center were perpetrated. His mother, who did not cross the border daily, could knew the potential changes in the U.S. political environment following the attack. She understood that what happened in New York would affect the Mexico-U.S. border and

Matt's daily crossings to school. Matt has dual citizenship with Anglo features such as light skin complexion and blue eyes. This sometimes would mean that he is racialised less by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers than learners with darker skin, although this is not the usual case. Matt's mother bought him a t-shirt with the U.S. flag and instructed him to wear it when crossing from Tijuana to San Diego. He remembers his mother saying, '*so they [CBP officers] would know that you are not the enemy*'. This level of political understanding, fear, reaction, and action demonstrates a complex and deep level of engagement with the other side. For instance, it displays a sophisticated analysis of the border binational condition, bordering practices, and daily activities that are also present in transborder families' strategies. Matt's mother employed the strategy of demonstrating political and national support for the U.S. to protect Matt as much as possible during his border crossing at that time. As discussed in a previous section, this type of complex understanding and analysis of the politics influencing daily border crossings is developed within a transborder habitus (Valenzuela, 2014). Even though Matt's mother did not cross the border daily, she developed a transborder gaze to support her transborder son.

Some transborder families also experienced the effects of border militarisation after the terrorist attacks as they were racialised, profiled as persons of interest, interrogated and detained at the U.S. Ports of Entry. Phil was detained for hours with his brother and father in San Diego. In their case, Phil's father also worked in the U.S. For no apparent reason, they were detained at the PoE for almost the entire day. After they were released, a CBP officer mentioned that they should have been let out hours ago. The three of them lost the entire day, affecting their attendance at school and work, and enduring the consequences of their absences, which also impacted their mother. Phil recalls his mother being extremely worried for not know the whereabouts of her husband and sons. She suspected something must have happened at the checkpoint and decided to wait for a while before reaching out to the border authorities.

Transborder parents engaged with the dynamic in multiple ways. For example, Elizabeth from Tijuana-San Diego explained how her mom would try to help with her homework despite an important language barrier, sharing '*my mom would reach out to proficient English-speaking friends to make sure she understood the homework instructions clearly.*' Isabel's family would wake up quite early to take her and her sister to school in Calexico on most days. She shared that when her parents would not be able to pick them up, *they even*

sent a coworker or an employee to pick us up in the U.S. '. Pedro's parents would alternate driving a group of learners across the Mexicali-Calexico border since 'sometimes we would be late for the school bus in Calexico because of how long it took us to cross the border.. it was easier for my mom to rotate than to take me daily. ' Sofia's parents would drive to the checkpoint in Tijuana at around 3:00 am and park the car to save a spot in the waiting line. They would sleep in the car, and by the time the checkpoint was opened, the rest of the parents would drive their children to the border. Then, the kids would walk towards the car, which was already in line and ready to cross. Sofia also mentioned that 'this is something that many parents do...you see many students just walking through the car lanes. '

However, sometimes the efforts made by the parents or other family members are perceived as insufficient by some transborder learners. For instance, Karla from Mexicali-Calexico remembers being frustrated with her parents when sharing that *'it frustrated me that I couldn't get A honourable or B honourable, even if I tried... I couldn't get a 10 because I didn't understand what they were saying, and my mom was frustrated because she wanted to help me study, but she didn't understand it very well either. '* Her parents would try to help her as much as possible, but she continued to receive low marks and noticed that her friends with higher parental involvement in their homework were getting higher marks.

Karla's parents crossed the border daily to work in the United States, and her siblings attended U.S. schools. Her parents, however, were working without lawful documentation. The risks of this transborder family were quite high, adding daily stress to the family as she understood that *'things could change quickly...we had to be very careful.'* In addition, waiting times at the border reduced her parents' availability to help with school chores. When her siblings were born, her parents asked her to help them with their homework, but Karla remembers *'I did not want to do it. I was done with my homework so I wanted to have more time to do things I liked.'* This affected her relations with her family at the time, as she felt a high responsibility over her siblings.

These cases illustrate the heterogeneity of transborder families with one or more transborder members. These families are bilingual and bicultural in composition, holding multiple levels of border knowledge. For example, these families navigate Mexican and U.S. education systems, switch between Spanish and English as needed, and navigate legal and bureaucratic processes on both sides of the border. The lived experiences of these families, demonstrate practical and cultural border knowledge including healthcare access, political regulations, and

at least two sets of social norms that enables them to exist across territorial, cultural, linguistic and institutional barriers. Moreover, these families experience as an entity the effects of the hardship of transborder dynamics, such as time-demanding processes, tensions, racialisation, and militarisation, while developing coping mechanisms to mitigate these adversities.

Analysing transborderism through these families as a unit expands our understanding of this condition as it is experienced collectively through emotional, economic, linguistic, political and logistical support. This provides the conceptual ground for discussing how these families engage with border life. When transborderism is seen as a collective practice instead of an individual one, it is possible to determine how families exercise their agency and instrumentalise their condition in response to structural, identity, migration and economic challenges. Furthermore, this paper contributes by adding consistency to transborder practices and entities at the borderland. The figure of transborder families forces us to rethink traditional academic and empirical explorations at the Mexico-U.S. border. The following section examines how transborder families transform their condition into an economic, social and mobility strategy. In doing so, it highlights the agency and diversity of transborder families as they negotiate their border life.

2. Transborder families instrumentalise transborderism as a strategy

The legacies of the Bracero program and the American dream continue to be present in the narratives of transborder families as they strive for a better future for their children or the entire family unit. However, these families engaged with the dream differently considering living in Mexico while working to be included in the U.S. job market. These are the primary motivations for engaging in transborder practices as a family strategy, with security concerns added later. However, transborder families are heterogeneous in multiple ways including planning or not to become one. Some transborder families planned their binational status by having children in the U.S., while others became transborder unexpectedly or due to sudden relocation to Mexico. Let us begin with unplanned border dynamics.

Unplanned Transborder Families

Tanya was born in California where she and her family lived. Her parents are from Mexico and Peru, with strong ties to Tijuana. Her father and mother migrated to the U.S. when they

were young and met there. They were both seeking better job opportunities to enhance their quality of life. Tanya is the oldest of two, and both have visited Tijuana multiple times before to see family or friends. When she was a teenager, her family began struggling financially, deciding to relocate to the Mexican side of the border by crossing the border with their trailer home, a *'transborder home'* as she would call it. The main reason for this was so they could all continue working and studying in the U.S. Tanya's family, like many other transborder families, understood the possibilities living in Mexico brought when holding a U.S. salary, allowing her parents to provide for their basic needs and hopefully something more. Her new transborder life consisted of waking up as early as 4:00 am, waiting in line for hours as the entire family crossed the border daily, going to school, and then staying in the car or public library until her parents left work. Her days were long and exhausting, making her life rather difficult. She shared *'My initial transition to my transborder life was one of the hardest introductions, not just to transborder living but to life. That is my foundation.'*

This switch from being transnational to a transborder family was also the life story of Raul, who became transborder only in high school. Unlike Tanya, Raul was already living in San Diego, but he had never imagined that his family would relocate to Tijuana due to economic hardship. He shared *'I was born in San Diego...I never imagined I would end up living in Tijuana. During the financial crisis of 2008, we lost the house, and my parents decided to move to Tijuana...I started to cross the border daily.'*

Even when he knew the area quite well, becoming transborder affected him deeply as his life dynamic changed. His family was a combination of border crossing intensities and mixed status. Regardless, his nuclear family adapted to the transborder dynamics supporting the needs of those members that crossed the border daily. This included his parents waking up earlier to make lunch, helping them get ready for school, dropping them off at the checkpoint and helping them upon their return.

The cases of Tanya and Raul illustrate how some families with binational members develop transborder strategies to cope with sudden events, such as relocation after economic hardship. However, not all unplanned transborder families were living in the U.S. permanently as it is the case of Lily.

Lily was born prematurely in California, where her father worked over the summers. Their official residency was in Mexicali, but unexpected circumstances made her a U.S. citizen. Even then, the family was not looking at becoming transborder, and she was enrolled in Mexican schools. However, her English-language skills were not developing as optimally as per the opinion of one of her secondary school teachers. After deliberation, her parents decided to use her U.S. birth certificate and enrolled her in a U.S. school, unexpectedly becoming a transborder family. Lily shared how challenging the transition was, stating that *'it was hard and difficult...my days became longer, and I did not know anybody at first. Studying in English was hard...commuting to school in public transportation took hours and was challenging... I come from a working class, and this was the chance for better life opportunities.'* Her parents could not cross the border with her due to time restrictions, but they supported her. They would adapt as much as possible to the oscillating transborder dynamic. Sometimes her parents would cross with her and help her with school tasks. However, this was not always the case, and Lily believes her family should have adapted better as she relied on her own to finish school successfully. She remembers that *'I had to figure out how I had to turn in my homework because nobody explained...I had to speak to the school administration for things.'* In Lily's case, her parents considered acquiring English-language skills and proficiency the best family strategy for her future professional and personal life in the U.S.

Although being an unplanned transborder family, Lily's case shares with planned transborder families the importance of language proficiency with a native accent and U.S. cultural knowledge. This is a family plan as it often requires adapting to border dynamics, becoming bicultural to a certain extent, and to hold the financial means to have children born in the U.S. or to be granted a student visa. Additionally, some of these families planned on becoming transborder as a migration strategy as the following subsection examines.

Planned Transborder Families

In contrast to the previous subsection, some transborder families planned on becoming one through having children in the U.S. or by acquiring a student visa. The motivations to do so can go from the wish to relocate to the U.S. or only to provide the children with linguistic and social capital deemed desirable in a globalised job market. In this case, transborder is a project where parents and guardians must consider a multitude of factors, such as

determining the lawful document their children will use, the economic sacrifices, the family dynamic, the level of physical involvement in the process, mode of transportation, and other structural elements such as access to healthcare in the U.S. in the case of an emergency, and waiting times (Lareau, 2003; Tessman and Koyama, 2019). For transborder families, these difficult considerations are worthwhile as the strategy aims at economic and social mobility or even at migration. Not enrolling their children in Mexican schools is not a matter of challenges in accessing the system, but a strategic decision. Access to Mexican schools including those offering bilingual education, most likely will not grant fluency in English with a native accent, or U.S. cultural knowledge that would help in a globalised job market. However, there are some cases where transborder students enrol in Mexican schools mostly for economic reasons. However, this paper focuses on lived experiences from those crossing northbound as in the following case.

Victoria was born in California. Her parents wanted to relocate to the U.S. for better job opportunities, but they were unable to do so. Their family strategy was to have their children born in the U.S. and hopefully one day, they could all migrate to the U.S. However, giving birth in the U.S. is expensive, and her parents decided to have only one child with U.S. citizenship. She shared, *'For my mom it has always been the American dream, to come and live here (U.S.) ...She always wanted to live and conduct her life here.'* When Victoria was born, the family became transborder, adjusting to their new mixed-status condition, and in support of Victoria's studies in the U.S., by crossing the border as much as possible to attend Teacher-Parent meetings or being present to a certain extent in U.S. school activities. She explained, *'I crossed the border mostly by myself or friends but my mom supported school activities'*. Victoria's mom achieved her objective of becoming a legal resident in the U.S., where she considers the quality of life better than in Mexico.

Another group of families consider themselves transborder not only as a strategy but also as a family identity. In the case of Maria's family, they have been transborder since the beginning of the 1900s when her mother attended school in Calexico. At that time, she explained, it was normal for people to live in Mexicali and attend school in Calexico, which was already the case back in 1914. The checkpoint was experienced differently, and the process was not too taxing. However, this lax border changed as the century progressed. Back then, her family's strategy was to pursue education for the children, and the schools available were on the U.S. side of the border, in Calexico. Today, Maria's family continues to be transborder, a tradition

that has been passed down through four generations. Even with good bilingual schools on the Mexican side today, she mentioned that *'being transborder has its benefits...developing language and cultural skills.'* This transborder identity, as a family trait, is shared by other first- or second-generation learners' part of transborder families. However, most transborder families in this research considered that economic, social, and political factors were the primary reasons for adopting transborderism as a family strategy.

Overall, the strategies of transborder families include an element of adaptability as a family unit to the daily border dynamics with varying border-crossing capabilities or intensity. Transborder families are also mixed in terms of culture and language, as being transborder entails being bicultural and bilingual. Their existence as units and their instrumentalization of transborder as a family strategy are also unique in essence, challenging traditional notions of border(ing) practices attached only to the individual in the context of the Mexico-U.S. border.

Conclusions

The findings of this paper firstly recognise transborder families as collective units providing the conceptual grounds to secondly understand how and why these families instrumentalise their transborder condition as an economic and social strategy for mobility and survival, either planned or unplanned. These transborder units live in the Mexican state of Baja California with members who work or study in California, U.S. Transborder families are mixed in composition as the nuclear members can have mixed nationalities, some or all the members are bicultural and bilingual while having different border crossing dynamics.

The empirical data supports these findings by illustrating how transborder practices are experienced collectively through emotional, economic, linguistic, political and logistical support by all the nuclear members of transborder families. In other words, the implications of being transborder are also lived by the family members who are not border commuters. For instance, logistics planning, coping with long waiting lines, waking up early, and overcoming language barriers are some examples shared by the participants in this paper. Therefore, the implications of being transborder are not restricted to those crossing the border daily but also affecting those who support such a process even if they do not cross the border themselves.

In addition to the conceptual provocations, this paper discussed the composition of transborder families and recognises their agency by examining the way they instrumentalise

and mobilise their border condition. The life story of Maria illustrates how living in Mexico and attending school in the U.S. has been a family dynamic since the early 1900s but by the 1960s, relocating to the Mexican side of the border to study or work in the U.S. was deeply influenced by notions of the American dream. This paper considers this connection, centring on the lived experiences of transborder families.

In this context, the discussion engages with the adaptive mechanisms of transborder families in support of this life dynamic divided into unplanned or planned strategy. This analysis examines how parents and nuclear family members engage with a border life when living in Mexico with children in U.S. schools. The empirical data illustrate how parents and siblings deal with long border waiting times, border hardship, and language barriers.

The complexities of transborder families offer a new perspective on circular border practices within a widely researched and relevant area. The life stories of transborder families show how the Mexico-U.S. border is lived, strategized, mobilised, constructed, and endured. They also demonstrate how the border became a family marker and signifier. Through deeply emotional connections to both sides of the border, transborder families add a dimension of care and support to a militarised and exclusionary area, shedding light on the changing dynamics impacting the everyday life of Mexico-U.S. borderlands. The bodies of transborder families are vessels of border(ing) politics, including their histories, tensions, militarisation, racialisation, exclusion and inclusion, displacement and migration, resistances, and the impact of (un)documented crossings. In this context, transborder families are at the frontline of border resistance and resignification.

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