

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

On not 'being there': Making sense of the potent urge for physical proximity in transnational families at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper investigates transnational families' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and the accompanying sudden and unexpected travel restrictions. Our data consist of written stories collected in April–June 2020 from migrants with ageing kin living in another country. For many respondents, the situation provoked an acutely felt urge for physical proximity with their families. By analysing their experiences of 'not being there', we seek to understand what exactly made the urge to 'be there' so forceful. Bringing into dialogue literature on transnational families with Jennifer Mason's recent theoretical work on affinities, we move the focus from families' transnational caregiving practices to the potent connections between family members. We argue that this approach can open important avenues for future research on families—transnational or otherwise—because it sheds light on the multisensory and often ineffable charges between family members that serve to connect them.

KEYWORDS

affinities, COVID-19 pandemic, ICTs, multisensoriality, physical proximity, transnational families

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INTRODUCTION

While the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a huge challenge for individuals and families in general, transnational families in which working-age and elderly family members live in different countries have encountered particular kinds of difficulties. At the onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, nation-states all over the globe imposed unprecedented travel restrictions aimed at confining the spread of the novel coronavirus. The erection of hard borders radically disrupted cross-border contacts and care arrangements, particularly for those migrants whose migration status and resources had ordinarily allowed them to make use of flexible international travel.

Our paper investigates how working-age migrants experienced this situation where physical proximity with their families was suddenly impeded for an indefinite period extending into the foreseeable future. We analyse data consisting of written stories that we collected in April–June 2020 from migrants settled in Finland and Belgium who had family members aged 65 years or older living in another country. In particular, we focus on our observation that the loss of flexible everyday transnationalism during the turmoil of the first months of the pandemic coincided with an acute urge felt by many of our respondents for physical contact and proximity with their geographically distant families.

Our paper thus offers insight into the initial phase of the pandemic when the novel coronavirus constituted a sudden and unfamiliar threat and when the various control measures to halt the spread of the virus had not yet become a routine framed as the ‘new normal’. As Carel (2020, p. 17) notes, this situation made explicit many ideas and modes of behavior that had previously remained tacit, thereby opening an exceptional window for investigating taken-for-granted aspects of living. By analysing our respondents’ experiences of ‘not being there’, we seek to understand what exactly made the need to ‘be there’ so forceful in such a crisis and why the inability to ‘be there’ evoked such intense emotions for our respondents. To this end, we bring into dialogue the literature on physical proximity and virtual ‘co-presence’ in transnational families with the recent theoretical work of Mason (2018) on affinities, which she defines as potent connections in personal life.

We begin by discussing the extensive literature on how transnational families maintain a sense of connectedness across geographical distances, both in person and virtually. While the significance of physical co-presence is acknowledged within this literature, we argue that the vitality of these encounters is not yet fully understood. Therefore, in the following section, we shift the focus from exploring the practices by which transnational families seek to overcome distance to what Mason (2018) describes as the intangible but powerful connecting charges that people feel with others and with their surroundings. After presenting our data and methods, we discuss our key findings relating to our respondents’ keenly felt urge to ‘be there’ with family members at the outset of the pandemic. In our analysis, we examine why our respondents experienced the impossibility of in-person encounters as a fundamental and distressing loss. We argue that their experiences in this crisis situation bring into relief the importance of understanding affinities as something that is built on multisensorial encounters between family members, who are physical and relational characters in each other’s lives. This, we claim, also serves as an explanation for why even intensive communication via information and communication technologies (ICTs) failed to remedy our respondents’ potent urge to ‘be there’. In the concluding section, we explore how such an approach helps deepen our understanding of transnational family relations in ways that can open important avenues for future research.

THE NEED FOR PHYSICAL PROXIMITY IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

There is substantive literature that investigates the practices through which transnational families maintain mutual care relationships, collective welfare and a sense of familyhood in conditions of absence (see Merla et al., 2020). Family responsibilities and obligations and emotional aspects of geographical separation, such as distress, worry, guilt and longing, have been depicted as central in motivating these practices (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Kara & Wrede, 2021; Mason, 2004). The literature has focused particularly on how the emergence of ICTs has offered new channels

and expressive affordances that enable families to sustain complex and multilayered interactions and relationships from afar, thus reconfiguring experiences of intimacy across distances (Francisco, 2015; Wilding, 2006). The focus on these practices of using ICTs to alleviate geographical separation has highlighted many important aspects of transnational family lives but has also meant that less attention has been directed to the significance of physical proximity and intimacy in transnational family relations (Merla et al., 2020).

There is, nonetheless, a longstanding debate over whether 'virtual co-presence' is sufficient for generating relational closeness (Urry, 2002). As Wilding (2006) notes, ICTs can enable a sense of shared space and time and make intimacy *feel* very tangible. Seeing the faces of family members on a screen can 'produce an effect of integration, presence and surveillance' (Francisco, 2015, p. 181). However, as Wilding argues (2006, p. 134), ICTs can be seen as 'sunny days technologies' because crises such as illness or death can bring to light the very real limitations of distance. Indeed, as Baldassar (2014) notes, during such crisis events, physical proximity is often perceived as necessary for providing hands-on care and emotional support to sick or grieving family members but also because those living far away feel a need 'be there' for their own well-being. Physical proximity can also be experienced as essential in conjunction with other important life events, such as births and marriages (Merla et al., 2020). But, as noted by Skrbiš (2008) and Mason (2004), routine return visits are also significant. According to Mason (2004, p. 25), doing things together during such routine visits is crucial for acquiring an intimate knowledge of geographically distant kin, knowledge which can then be sustained in-between visits through virtual means. So, despite the emergence of multiple forms of online communication, it would appear that family visits that afford physical co-presence remain crucial for maintaining a sense of connectedness with distant kin (Baldassar, 2008, p. 206).

Yet, we still know relatively little about what actually happens when members of transnational families come together and what makes such in-person encounters so vital and valued. This is a question that must be considered in the context of legislation and policies that regulate the mobility of transnational families (Merla et al., 2020). The significance of the ability to see family members in person is highlighted in the literature that examines the experience of 'not being there' from the point of view of refugees, undocumented migrants and other similarly disadvantaged migrants whose mobility is restricted. These studies offer insight into how distressing the more or less permanent absence of physical proximity can be for members of transnational families (Yarris, 2014). Bravo (2017), for instance, depicts how the restrictive migration policies of the United States force undocumented migrants to cope from afar with the death of family members. She argues that the grieving process is unique for this group, whose undocumented status means that they cannot return to their former home country to offer support to the dying person or to offer or receive the type of consolation made possible by physical proximity. In these situations, people use ICTs to cope with the ensuing feelings of sadness and guilt and to create an illusion of 'being there'. These media are, however, not chosen because of their ability to transmit care and comfort but rather in the absence of alternatives (Bravo, 2017, p. 42).

POTENT CONNECTIONS: ANALYSING AFFINITIES IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY LIFE

While the literature on transnational families does shed light on the difficult emotions such as 'missing' and 'longing' that members of such families can experience, the sensorial dimension of such emotions is more rarely discussed. Yet, as Baldassar (2008, p. 252) notes, family relationships involve '[a]ll of the senses ... as people yearn to see, hear and touch (embrace) their loved ones', something that is only possible 'through sensual contact and co-presence'. This, we argue, is an important observation. Nevertheless, the main focus in Baldassar's article—as in much of the literature on transnational families—remains primarily on understanding the *practices* through which members of transnational families seek to establish a sense of co-presence. Mason's (2018) theoretical work on *affinities* allows us to develop the analysis one step further because this allows us to bring to light the forces and charges that are at play when people sense connectedness in their personal lives. Mason defines affinities as personal connections that feel kindred in some way and that can have positive or negative potency (Mason, 2018, p. 1). We have found her conceptualization of affinities as potent connections particularly helpful because it directed our analytical attention to the connecting

charges that produce the urge for physical proximity in the first place, which then led us to explore what makes these so powerful.

According to Mason (2018, pp. 7–10), ‘affinities are lived, made up of, and made potent in and through’ sensory-kinaesthetic registers, generated in encounters. In these registers, the different senses (sight, touch, smell, sound) and the kinaesthetic come together in the relational experience of sensations. According to Mason, sensations are multiple in a way that involves perception, feeling and experience, and she highlights that our memories are imbued with sensations too (pp. 44–45; see also Svašek, 2010, p. 868). Sensations hence constitute the ‘core seam’ in our relationships with specific others who, as Mason notes, are to one another multisensory characters with appearances, smells, voices, gestures, physicality, habits, traits, personal histories and so on (p. 51). Moreover, Mason maintains that the multisensory encounters in which affinities come alive can emerge also in relation to environments, places, situations, things and other indefinable sources that should, she argues, be understood as animate and lively rather than static (pp. 178–179). She further highlights that to understand affinities, we need to be attuned to the socio-atmospherics in which life is lived and experienced, that is, the ineffable, ethereal and enigmatic dynamics of personal and collective living in and from which affinities take shape and become potent (pp. 46–50).

Below, we explore such potent connections in transnational family life with the help of data collected in the midst of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. As Carel (2020, p. 13) notes, the pandemic brought about a drastic disruption to people’s previously taken-for-granted habits and tacit assumptions regarding ‘life as we knew it’. Following Carel, we argue that studying early pandemic experiences offers an exceptional opportunity to investigate how affinities come alive and matter in transnational families. This is because the disruption to our respondents’ ability to see their family members in person brought the usually tacit dimensions of affinities to the fore in such a way that they became more consciously aware of them. We propose that developing an empirical analysis of affinities in this context can open important avenues for future research not only on transnational families but also on family relationships more generally.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this paper comprise written accounts collected during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic from April–June 2020. These accounts were written by migrants living in Finland and in Belgium who had family members aged 65 years or older living in another country ($N = 41$). In order to react quickly to this exceptional situation, we distributed an open call for written stories through social media channels, associations and congregations serving English-speaking migrants in Finland and Finnish-speaking migrants in Belgium. In Finland, our call, written in English, resulted in 28 stories written by migrants originating from the United Kingdom, France, Greece, the United States, Canada, India, Australia and Uruguay. Our call in Belgium resulted in 13 stories written by Finnish migrants, 12 of which were written in Finnish, while one story was written in Swedish by a Swedish-speaking Finn.

Persons with higher education were overrepresented in our sample ($N = 33$). Five respondents had high school degrees, two had vocational training, and one did not provide information on her level of education. Our sample consists of relatively affluent migrants with secure legal status who previously had been able to travel back to their home countries at least from time to time. Most of the respondents are women ($N = 37$), and we received only four accounts written by men. This imbalance needs to be understood in light of prior research evidence showing that responsibilities of care and family contacts lie more heavily on the shoulders of women than men in families, which has also been the case during the pandemic (Carli, 2020). Thus, the gendered theme of our call for stories has probably made it more relevant for women and possibly also easier for them to give words to their experiences.

In the call for stories, we invited respondents to write about their lives during the pandemic. We asked them to describe in particular, ‘[h]ow has it felt to care for a family member across national borders in this situation, what kind of practical problems you might have faced and what kinds of solutions you have possibly found?’ Hence, our questions explicitly called for respondents to describe their emotions, their actions and to discuss the issue of borders. We

analysed the stories in the language in which they were written. We have translated into English the excerpts from the stories written in Finnish and Swedish that are included in this paper. The stories originally written in English are quoted verbatim.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has varied significantly across countries and over time. We chose to collect data in two EU countries that differed notably regarding the severity of the pandemic during the research period.

In the spring and early summer of 2020, Finland was among the European countries least affected by the virus. Nevertheless, on 16 March 2020, with 272 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the Finnish government declared a state of emergency, closing down most government-run facilities and limiting public gatherings. Family members were forbidden from entering care homes. Two measures, in particular, had an impact on how our respondents living in Belgium experienced the pandemic. First, Finland's borders were shut down, although Finnish citizens and permanent residents were permitted to return to the country with an obligation to self-quarantine for 2 weeks. Second, the Finnish government instructed people over the age of 70 to avoid all physical human contacts, which was widely interpreted as a near-to-obligation to self-quarantine. Large proportions of the older population lived isolated for several months and were advised to seek help with daily necessities such as grocery shopping.

Belgium, in contrast, was among the countries with the highest number of COVID-19 deaths per capita in the world during the research period. The mortality peak was reached on 12 April 2020, with 417 deaths in 24 h. In March, the Belgian government ordered the closure of schools and imposed strict social distancing measures, asking people to stay at home, with the exception of essential travel and some outdoor activities. Belgium also closed its borders to all non-essential travel. It is worth noting that in many countries, including Finland and Belgium, there were also restrictions on mobility within national borders; hence, some of the issues that emerge in our data are those that will have affected not only transnational families but also many other families.

Importantly, the differences in the context in which the respondents lived at the time of writing their stories are not reflected in the data in any straightforward manner. In fact, despite the above-mentioned differences in the severity of the pandemic situation, all the accounts were written in a context where public arenas were dominated by governmental crisis narratives accompanied by exceptional control measures, including the resurrection of hard state borders within the EU. Thus, irrespective of the respondents' place of residence, the majority of them wrote of high degrees of distress they felt because of how the pandemic had affected their transnational familial relationships. Only a minority of the stories focused on practical solutions or portrayed older family members as healthy, independent and socially active to such an extent that they would have been able to cope with the situation without any specific help from the respondent. We do wish to note, however, that it is likely that our sample is self-selected such that those who felt that the situation was particularly difficult were perhaps more likely to respond to our call. In other words, our findings are reflective of the experiences of those transnational migrants whose older family members are in need of increasing levels of support and people who overall have a relatively warm and caring relationship with their family members.

Methodologically, our initial analysis was inspired by phenomenological work on illness since the pandemic has been defined as a 'pathological state', comparable to experiences of a serious illness, which makes available for investigation the tacit structures of expectations and meaning that usually remain largely invisible (Carel, 2018). Hence, when coding the data, we first focused on expressions of crisis and disruption of previous routines of transnational family life. We were interested in how the respondents made sense of and dealt with the disruption of their everyday lives and the ensuing sense of loss of control (see Frank, 1995).

This initial analysis highlighted the emotional turmoil many of our respondents were experiencing and how these challenging experiences were very often associated with a heightened need for physical proximity with far away family. Subsequently, our preliminary observation regarding the interweaving of emotional and sensorial aspects sparked our interest in Mason's (2018) theoretical work on affinities that attend to these dimensions of relationality. In the following analysis sections, we draw on her work to shed light on our respondents' experiences of 'not being there'. We have directed our attention to the dynamics of felt connections themselves (Mason, 2018, p. 40). Analysing such 'ineffable' aspects of experience requires reading 'between the lines', following hints and suggestions and paying attention to 'what is not there' (Scott, 2018).

DISRUPTED MOBILITY AND THE POTENT URGE TO 'BE THERE'

While the COVID-19 pandemic has involved a combination of uncertainty and an accumulation of simultaneous and complexly entangled stress factors related to restrictive social measures, loss of routines, loss of employment and much more, it is remarkable that in our data, the inability to travel to visit family was often explicitly mentioned as the most problematic and straining aspect of the overall pandemic situation. This is perhaps partly explained by the fact that our respondents were responding to a call for written accounts about the challenges of transnational family life in the context of the pandemic, but it is nevertheless notable how the inability to travel was highlighted above other stressful pandemic-related experiences.

One reason why the respondents perhaps found the pandemic particularly worrisome is that the bordering policies and practices initially adopted in the EU and beyond in response to COVID-19 did not form a coherent whole, in addition to which rules for travel were in constant flux. It is worth noting that the travel restrictions imposed at the outset of the pandemic were not absolute but included various exemptions, meaning that, under certain conditions, travelling for family- and care-related reasons was possible. There were, however, multiple complexly entangled hindrances. For example, there were fewer available flights, and for some respondents, their financial or employment situations made it impossible to abide by the long quarantine periods required of travellers. Even more critically, the data show how concern about spreading the virus sometimes functioned as a major impediment to travelling. In the initial phase of the pandemic, there was still high uncertainty over how exactly the novel coronavirus is transmitted between humans, but in most countries, the dominant public narratives framed international travel as a threat to public health. When previously only particular types of transnational migration had been viewed as problematic, now all types of transnational mobility, including that of citizens, were conceived as potentially threatening. Existing processes of bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2017) were intensified through governmental narratives of danger, accompanied by family-centred discourses encouraging people to stay at home.

While pandemics tend to spark suspicion towards everyone as potential carriers of the disease (Strong, 1990), for our respondents, the distrust 'in the air we breathe, the surfaces we touch' (Carel, 2020, p. 16)—which has arguably transformed experiences of travelling during this particular pandemic—was not solely a concern over exposure and contagion but also of putting others at risk of exposure to and contamination by the coronavirus. Our respondents thus found themselves faced with a moral quandary where they had to weigh up the risks that their mobility might pose to the security of their home country, especially to their family members living back home.

The journey to Finland in the spring obviously had to be cancelled, and perhaps the biggest source of anxiety is the uncertainty regarding when I will be able to visit again. Even if leisure travel was made possible, I would not wish to danger my mother's health by going too early and through international airports. I don't know where I would spend the quarantine after arriving before going to my mother's.
(Woman, 40s, born in Finland, lives in Belgium)

The above extract shows how the necessity to protect one's family from exposure by refraining from travelling was in sharp tension with the concomitantly felt need to travel in order to be in close physical proximity to family, typically expressed by our respondents as a keenly felt urge to 'get there' and 'be there'. Hence, while the normative values implicated in the situation were complex and conflicting, the narratives further show how these tensions provoked distressing feelings of being stuck and even trapped.

Feeling guilty for not being in Uruguay to help my parents. Fear that my parents are in a risk group due to their age. Feeling of claustrophobia that I know I am not able to go back to Uruguay if something happens due to closed borders. (Woman, 30s, born in Uruguay, lives in Finland)

First came the fear. Fear that we [the respondent and her mother] will not meet again if one of us gets corona and it gets bad. Then, came the worry. What if she gets it and I will not be able to go see her and take care of her ... The epidemic has brought us closer together because one sees that the most important thing in the world is loved ones; one's family. (Woman, 30s, born in Finland, lives in Belgium)

The above extracts further illustrate several important aspects of the felt urge to 'be there'. First and foremost, there is arguably something fundamental about the need to gather one's family together in the face of a perceived life-threatening danger. In conditions of danger, it is what 'really matters' that becomes a motivating factor for action (Kleinman, 2006). Being apart is also likely to feel different when there is the threat of a definitive separation. Understanding the nearness of death is more than merely being aware of human mortality, and it can thus affect people in the same way as would the immediate prospect of dying (Carel, 2018). As the pandemic unveiled the vulnerability of our respondents' own bodies and those of their family members, many of them were left feeling an urgent need to 'get there' to be with their families.

Indeed, the need for physical proximity was often associated in our data with the daunting uncertainty regarding whether 'we will not meet again', that is, the prospect of a loved one dying without the possibility of meeting one last time. Accordingly, the most common source of distress in the narratives is the respondents' fear of an emergency. Many described ruminating about their family members falling ill or dying while not being able to travel to them. All the respondents had family members who belonged to groups at high risk of developing more severe forms of COVID-19 because of their age and quite often also due to health conditions such as cardiovascular problems or cancer. While the narratives contain some stories of family members falling ill or dying during the pandemic, it is notable that the mere prospect of an emergency was also enough to trigger a strong and acute urge to 'be there'. We propose that this widespread sense of impending emergency constitutes the socio-atmospherics (Mason, 2018) of the early pandemic era that, while defined by collective disorientation and fear in the face of the unexpected and fatal disease (Strong, 1990), on a private level charged previously ordinary and habitual feelings of family connection with an extraordinary potency.

A specific feature of this socio-atmospherics that warrants attention is the radical way in which the pandemic redrew our respondents' geographical and temporal horizons while challenging their hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions regarding how they could lead their transnational family lives. That these horizons had previously been so reliant on their ability to remain mobile is made visible in how they describe their altered sense of distance—now feeling 'longer and less manageable' (woman, 40s, born in Canada, lives in Finland)—and the sense of being 'cut off' from family and geographically 'stuck'. For our relatively privileged respondents, most of whom had been accustomed to the idea of being able to travel back 'home', at the drop of a hat if need be, the pandemic entailed a drastic disruption to their usual ease of transnational travel. It not only made geographical borders evident and substantial but also influenced their perceptions and emotional experiences of distance as the familiarity and assumptions regarding their 'usual ways, routes and journeys' were re-sculpted while simultaneously, an urge to 'get there' emerged (Mason, 2018, pp. 159–164).

Finally, we wish to highlight the range of difficult-to-handle emotions provoked by the tension between the urgent and forceful need to 'be there' and the sudden inability to travel. The respondents often described the condition of being cut off from family as extremely challenging emotionally, leading to the stress and feelings of helplessness and desperation, as illustrated by the two extracts below. These feelings tended to remain unresolved at the time of writing given the uncertainty regarding when 'normality' would be restored:

I have only two family members, both in France, my mother and my grandfather. Both relatives are sick and need my support regularly, so I travel about three times a year. I have not been able to go since last July, and it's a huge source of stress since I have no clue when I will be able to go back. ... The fact that I live apart from my family is definitely the most difficult aspect of the situation. ... I am mainly worried about not being able to go there to help if needed. I am also extremely concerned about the future of travel and when I will be able to visit there again (I usually visit every 3 to 4 months, and now it has been

already 5 months that we are apart). I manage to handle the situation due to the fact that I know they are careful and respect the lockdown very seriously. I know that if one would get sick, my world would fall apart, and I would not be able to think reasonably anymore. (Woman, 30s, born in France, lives in Finland)

I am so grateful that they are all [the respondents' parents, aunt and children] ok and hanging in there. On the other hand, I am incredibly anxious because I am cut off from them. Before, I always was two flights away... now I am not sure how I could go back if I had to, and after quarantining for 2 weeks on their side, what use will I have been if they needed me in an emergency? About a week ago I was crying for about three days over this, and now I only tear up when I think about it. Like now... (Woman, 50s, born in the United States, lives in Finland)

It is important to note that the need for physical proximity did not solely appear to stem from the fear and worry regarding older family members' health and wellbeing; in many cases, 'being there' also seemed to be critically important for the younger family members' own wellbeing (see Baldassar, 2014). One rather extreme example is the following extract in which the sources of distress are blurred and the situation is described as emotionally highly challenging 'here' and 'there'—both for the respondent and her mother:

At the peak of the corona epidemic, my mother had to undergo major surgery and spend a few weeks in the hospital. Under normal circumstances, I would have travelled to Finland to support and help her, but now it wasn't possible. It was extremely hard for my mother to be in such a fragile state while no family member was able to visit her. ... She has started to feel afraid and is unable to sleep. She suffers from melancholy and cries easily. I feel miserable that I cannot do more for my mother. ... My own husband died during the corona epidemic. It is hard, when you are in desperate need of proximity and a hug from another person, and it is not possible. In the midst of the epidemic, we are grieving, which has added to the feeling of helplessness. This has been a very traumatic experience for us all. (Woman, 60s, born in Finland, lives in Belgium)

As Yarris (2014, p. 495) argues, ruminating over the wellbeing of family members who are absent is a social, emotional and sentient experience that can cause embodied distress and suffering. Furthermore, the need for physical proximity is described in the above excerpt as a sensory 'hunger' for a hug and the comfort of human touch (Durkin et al., 2020). The extract is hence in many ways telling of how multifaceted the experiences of 'not being there' were in transnational families during the early pandemic period. The various obstacles that made travel difficult if not impossible characterized these emotionally challenging experiences. But, we have argued that the concomitantly felt urge for physical proximity with family members living afar also arose from the exceptional potency of the affinities that emerged in the context of the specific socio-atmospherics of the pandemic defined by a sense of existential threat to oneself and one's family and the high level of uncertainty regarding the future. In the following analysis section, we analyse in detail the multidimensional and multisensory manner in which these powerful charges and connections were lived. In particular, by examining how our respondents sought to remedy these complexly difficult situations by using ICTs, we seek to understand why 'not being there' remained an unresolved predicament for them.

MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF AFFINITIES AND THE DIFFICULTY OF REMEDYING 'NOT BEING THERE'

We now move on to focus on the multidimensional sensations in and through which affinities come alive (Mason, 2018, pp. 42–46). This approach allows us to shed light on why our respondents' attempts to manage the new meanings and

uncertainties surrounding geographical distance by intensifying communication with their families via ICTs did not lessen their urge to 'be there'.

Most of our respondents described extensively how they and their family members cared for one another from afar during the pandemic. They also wrote about 'feeling guilty' about not 'being there' to help older family members 'with daily stuff' (woman, 30s, born in Uruguay, lives in Finland). But the most concrete aspects of caring, such as shopping for groceries or cleaning, were not typically articulated as major sources of distress. In fact, in many of the narratives, solving such practical issues appeared to be possible from a distance, for example, by turning to the wider family network or by buying private services. This allowed the respondents to engage in caring in a socially and morally adequate manner, thereby sometimes helping them to deal with the situation also emotionally (see Yarris, 2014, p. 493). Furthermore, the respondents' awareness that their parents or grandparents were alone, particularly if this was under conditions of self-isolation, often triggered a wish to help them take care of their mental wellbeing. In this context, the respondents, whose transnational family lives had already before the pandemic largely relied on virtual communication, often explained how they and their families had come up with novel ways of spending time together online with the help of ICTs as a way of trying to alleviate feelings of loneliness. For instance, daily Skype calls between grandparents and grandchildren living under lockdown in different countries or family gatherings and celebrations online are described by some respondents as helpful. In fact, some of our respondents even assert that the pandemic brought the transnational family closer together, thanks to the intensified communication, which also allowed family members to engage in more frequent emotional exchanges than usual.

However, in a number of cases, even the most intensive use of ICTs seemed to fail to alleviate the respondents' urge for physical proximity.

I usually try to visit [my mom] every 2 months, but now that I have not been able to travel, I miss her very much. I wish I could be closer to her and help her with her basic needs like getting food from store, but I am here in Finland, and this situation is quite bad. I talk to her on a daily basis to encourage her and check on her mental and physical health. The amount of time I spend on video calls has actually surged over the last 2 months. Now I am just waiting for borders to be open to take a ticket and fly to see her.
(Man, 40s, born in France, lives in Finland)

We argue that the difficulty of remedying this felt urge from a distance has as much or more to do with the multidimensional and multisensory nature of affinities as it has with actual efforts to offer care. As Tschaepé (2020) observes, under pandemic conditions, virtual interaction through 'scopic mediation' has suddenly become considered a safe (and therefore preferred) way of interacting. This is precisely because it lacks physicality, that is, the presence of breath and touch, which have come to pose a risk of exposure and contagion. At the same time, it is exactly this physicality of others that our respondents seem to be yearning for, a yearning that virtual forms of interaction are not able to satisfy. This becomes visible in the fact that our respondents equated, in the words of Tschaepé (2020, pp. 760–765), 'seeing' their family members with physically meeting them, thus distinguishing this multisensory experience from the more distant 'viewing' afforded by communication mediated by ICTs.

[D]ue to the pandemic, my parents won't be able to come see their grandson... However, we still *communicate* regularly the way we always have since I moved to Finland: video chat. We talk every few days, and it helps keep us connected. ... One unfortunate thing that happened was [that] my grandmother (and only remaining grandparent) passed away. We were unable to *attend* the funeral, but video called in to *watch* the ceremony. ... I am glad that we were able to *visit* with her in December and January and we were able to tell her that she was going to be a great-grandmother. She was so happy. (Woman, 30s, born in the United States, lives in Finland; emphases added)

I watched a family friend's funeral via Zoom, and it made me think how very heartrending it must have been for many not to be able to *accompany* their loved one to the grave.... (Woman, 50s, born in Finland, lives in Belgium; emphases added)

We can easily understand that *seeing* a newborn family member means something more than the scopic view that grandparents can gain if they *view* the baby on a screen. 'Seeing' entails holding, kissing and smelling the baby as part of the culturally specific welcoming rituals that happen in physical proximity (see Knight, 2018). Similarly, 'watching funerals' can be a highly inadequate and emotionally unsatisfactory form of participation in rituals of human grieving (Bravo, 2017). Indeed, worry about one's ability to attend potential future funerals, as described by some respondents, also seems to arise from a desire to have a final 'physical' encounter with a deceased loved one (see Mason, 2018, pp. 11–17), as well as for the mutual support and care shared with the remaining family.

The pandemic has arguably brought a new appreciation for physical presence and especially for the importance of touch as crucial for conveying comfort and compassion and an awareness of the highly negative psychological and physiological implications of being deprived of human touch (Durkin et al., 2020). Although online communication is also full of sensory experiences—including interaction between faces and bodies and sounds of the immediate environment (Mason, 2018, p. 7)—these differ radically from the multisensory experiences that take place in physical proximity. Sensing the physicality of another person is perhaps most critically required in encounters with those older people whose lack of feeling 'at ease' with ICTs or whose diminished cognitive capacities might reduce their ability to appreciate the emotional content of the communication and to *feel* the presence of the other person through a technological device (see Baldassar, 2008, p. 255). This is exemplified by an account written by a woman living in Belgium who described her attempts to use video calling to reach her mother who was living in quarantine in a care home in Finland and had dementia. It was clear that the call had not answered either party's emotional needs:

During Easter time, we tried to do a WhatsApp call (with video), but my mother was not really able to speak to the device, and she did not probably even recognize me. What I saw that day was my tired mother and a care worker, but the communication with my mother was limited to a couple of words. (Woman, 50s, born in Finland, lives in Belgium)

Physical proximity allows for touch, and while families differ greatly in terms of their habits of interpersonal physical contact (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019), in many familial relationships, touching plays a key role in how family members routinely gain knowledge of and express their feelings for each other (Mason, 2018; Morrison, 2012, pp. 52–53). Sensory-kinaesthetic encounters also evoke sensory memories that can bring the whole relational history alive (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019), which may be particularly important when seeking connection with persons who have conditions such as dementia. This brings us to Mason's (2018, p. 51) assertion that people are relational characters in each other's lives with physicality, voices, habits, political and moral orientations and so on, as well as their own personal and shared relational histories. Because family members are characters-in-relation, they play specific roles and are in many ways irreplaceable in each other's lives, regardless of whether the affinities are positively or negatively felt. The way in which the potent urge for physical proximity arises in relation to our respondents' and their family members' relational characters is clearly visible in some of the narratives:

Once [my mother] was sick at the beginning of quarantine and it made her so worried but because of her [strong] personality [she] informed me just after she overcame the crisis. Fortunately, she was not infected with the COVID-19 virus. After that, I caught a cold badly, but she was aware from the beginning and guided me all the time without any stress. This thought that we are not able to reach each

other in any emergency cases or cannot visit maybe for another 1 year or more, makes both of us feel sad and desperate inside. (Woman, 40s, born in Iran, lives in Finland).

[My parents] haven't really changed their daily habits at all, although there would be good reason to do so. I have experienced a gamut of emotions while observing their daily life. I am frustrated and at times angry. Sad and anxious because I know that if anything happens to them, I won't be able to get to Finland—and on the other hand, if something were to happen to me, they won't be able to come here. If I take this up with them, my mother flips the topic on its head and tries to console me and often tells me 'don't worry, the risk isn't that big'. This doesn't exactly make me feel better, quite the opposite. ... I try not to preach. Sometimes I manage, sometimes I don't. (Woman, 40s, born in Finland, lives in Belgium)

It is easier to understand the strength and complexity of the feelings that such situations give rise to in the specific socio-atmospherics of the pandemic if we consider our respondents and their family members as characters-in-relation—caring, physically fragile, mentally strong, often stubborn, unthinking, inclined to preach, and so on—who share a personal history during which they have played various roles in each others' lives. As the above extracts indicate, the respondents' and their family members' relational characters are critical in shaping the way in which they experience the condition of 'not being there'. An intriguing and exceptional example of this is also the story of a man who answered our call for stories despite his distant relationship with his family:

I'm not close to my family and felt no extra burden [regarding caring for ageing family members during the pandemic] the exception being my grandmother... No contact with mother for 8 years, and I have no intention of making contact. Same situation before Covid-19. My grandmother is well-looked after by my uncle, my father ...is helped by his older wife. He is recovering from cancer. We show no outward signs of worrying for each other, I was not raised by my family.... We are all stubborn and independent, we don't like help... I avoid going back at the best of times. (Man, 40s, born in the United Kingdom, lives in Finland)

As Smart (2007, p. 49) notes, family ties tend to remain meaningful and powerful even if we try to shake free of them emotionally. While the respondent very bluntly expresses that he has no wish for closer contact with his family, his narrative nevertheless echoes something of the potent significance of even an absent family, for instance, when the respondent mentions the similarities of his family members' and his own character ('stubborn and independent, we don't like help'). It is also interesting, how the respondent clearly recognizes the normative expectation of worrying about one's family members in the context of the pandemic—also implicit in our call for stories—and that not feeling such worry demands an explanation.

In some of the narratives, we can also see how the affinities felt in relation to family members as characters entangle with affinities related to the sensations experienced in the physical environments in which family members come together. For instance, a Finnish respondent, writing her story in the month of May, describes at some length the emotional importance of Christmas celebrations in her family and how missing out on the feeling of 'warm togetherness' (Woman, 30s, born in Finland, lives in Belgium) generated by the family's shared traditions, music and decorations would be particularly hard for herself and her whole family (see Mason & Muir, 2013).

What our data clearly show is that sensory memories of past physical proximity with family members as characters in familial environments become a part of the emotional experience in the present moment. These memories also feed into a foreboding sense of what the absence of 'togetherness' felt through such sensations would mean in the

future (see Mason, 2018, pp. 7–10). Reading these accounts through the lens of affinities thus brings to light that it is the full force of the multidimensional characters of family members, perceived and felt in and through multisensory encounters in familiar and familial environments, that many of our respondents were drawn to and were unable to satisfactorily connect with via the mediated forms of communication offered by ICTs.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic, which was sudden, shocking as well as global, in the sense of both affecting the globe and being global in its effects on personal lives (Carel, 2020), has brought into relief the importance of better understanding not only the significance of physical distance but also that of physical proximity for transnational family relationships. Existing literature on transnational families has focused particularly on virtual forms of ‘co-presence’, showing how the emergence of ICTs has made some aspects of transnational family lives easier while also acknowledging that the physical proximity afforded by return visits remains important, particularly in times of crisis (Baldassar, 2008, 2014; Wilding, 2006). In this paper, we have brought this literature into dialogue with the recent theoretical work of Mason (2018) and, by doing so, moved the focus of analysis from the practices of caregiving that transnational families engage into the perceived and felt affinities between family members, defined by Mason as potent connections in personal life. We have used our data, collected in the midst of the initial phase of the pandemic, to investigate what exactly makes the opportunities for and experiences of physical proximity so crucial in transnational family relationships.

Reading our data through the lens of affinities proved helpful in analysing this complex question from various perspectives and allowed us to shed light on how the potency of personal connections is lived in and through multisensory encounters that ICTs do not fully enable. We examined our respondents’ experiences as arising in a specific socio-atmospherics defined by various uncertainties and the existential threat posed by the COVID-19 virus. The advancing age of our respondents’ geographically distant kin, which in many cases was combined with ailing health, no doubt contributed to their fears that the enforced separation might be permanent. We demonstrated how, in this context, the connections sensed between family members—that also in normal times can be strong and powerful—were charged with an exceptional potency, manifested in our respondents’ felt urge to ‘be there’ in physical proximity to their families. While acknowledging that the uncertainties related to seeing loved ones face-to-face have not been restricted to transnational families, our analysis showed how the disruption that the pandemic posed to travel, particularly transnational travel, threw our respondents’ previously taken-for-granted ability to remain mobile into question, hence radically altering their perceptions and emotional experience of distance. While the suddenness and uncertain duration of the crisis brought to light the importance of that which was no longer accessible, namely, physical encounters with geographically distant family members, such encounters gained new value as vital and urgent because they are the only way of fully sensing and interacting with the multidimensional characters of the others.

While our analysis is situated in the highly specific context of a pandemic, we propose that our empirical application of Mason’s affinities approach has broader relevance beyond the literature on transnational family lives and beyond the context of the pandemic. In particular, our analysis highlights how important it is to conceive family members as multidimensional and multisensory characters in each other’s lives. Indeed, as the pandemic has brought into relief this hitherto relatively unappreciated but vital seam of family life, we would encourage researchers to further explore affinities as significant lenses through which we can gain a new understanding of families and relationships regardless of context.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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