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The role of the imagination in transnational relating: the case of Nigerian children and their migrant parent in Ireland

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of imagination in the lives of transnational Nigerian transnational children and their migrant parent in Ireland. Migration of a parent is a rupture in a child's life that triggers imaginary processes that are real in their developmental consequences. Following Zittoun & Gillespie, (2016), imagination is a process that generates a disjunction from the person's unfolding experience of the "real" world, and as unfolding as a loop, which eventually comes back to the actual experience. For the left-behind child, this imaginative loop remains 'open' as parents return becomes extended in time. The dilemmas for the migrant parent and child are explored.

Introduction

In migrant sending regions in the Global South, it is estimated that approximately one quarter of all children live with at least one parent living abroad, in family structures referred to as transnational families (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). Much of the focus of research to date has been on transnational relating, that is, how intimacy and care-giving is sustained between migrant parents and their left-behind children at a distance (Parrenas, 2001; Dreby, 2010; Mazzucato et al, 2015). A key question has been how is a sense of 'familyhood' maintained by family members that do not share their daily living space and activities? (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Even at a geographic distance, it is possible for families to seek to fulfill their duties and obligations to each other through engagement in family practices, the 'doing' of

family life (Morgan, 2011). Family practices are practices “through which a family is created and re-created” (Mogan, 2011, p. 11). For example, in the case of transnational families, remittances serve as a key family practice in which the remitter feels and is seen by family members back home as fulfilling their family obligation (Laharie et al, 2009; Hall et al., 2019). Among Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, the use of ICT to maintain meaningful relationships with children mitigated the emotional costs of separation between transnational mothers and their children (Penn and Wong, 2013).

Beyond material practices, a core element of family practices is there has to be a social recognition of the other as a family member (Morgan, 2011), each positioned in a relation of care to the other. A theoretical and empirical challenge is to understand how transnational family members manage their everyday routines and activities in the place where they live while also trying to take part in a joint life involving relationships of care with a distant family member in a place that is beyond their direct, physical experience. One way of doing this is through careful management of communication. For example, Netherlands-based Ghanaian migrant parents carefully managed communication practices with their children’s caregivers in the country of origin by abstaining from raising concerns about their children’s material and emotional care in order ensure the caregivers role was continued (Poeze, Dankyi & Mazzucato, 2017).

The imaginary aspects of family practice in transnational relating have been under-examined compared with the more practical aspects (Morgan, 2011) yet such practices may play a critical role in transnational relational strategies. Chamberlain & Leydesdorff (2004) noted how transnational families engaged with memories of people and places in their imagination as a strategy to maintain an imaginary unity and coherence in personal and family identity. Similarly Bryceson (2018) noted how imagined feelings of common identity and mutual obligation helped

to sustain transnational relating between migrant parents and stay-behind spouses through activating memories in imagination. Memories are poor substitutes for personal contact however, particularly in families where children's physical and psychological development is rapid. Dreby (2010) and Carling (2008) mention the centrality of the life of the imagination in transnational relating as parents, children and caregivers imagine the life of the other but both noted that such imaginings can lead to miscommunication and tension, even hurt, can enter relationships. In Mexico, Dreby (2010) noted that lengthy parent-child separations mediated by infrequent telephone calls resulted in "time dislocations" whereby parents had a mental image of their children as they were years before. This created a challenge for imaginative processes in long distance relating. She poignantly quotes one of her respondents who noted of his son; "I cannot imagine him big, only little, the way I left him". This failure of imagination created an experience of disconnection between the reality (her grown up son) and her experience of him as a much younger boy.

Affect is an important dimension of imagination (Vygotsky, 2004). Wetherell, McConville & McCreanor (2019) extended practice theory to include affective practice. Affective practice is interested in the work of "emoting and the performance and modification of affect" as people engage together (Wetherell, McConville & McCreanor, 2019, p. 3). Baldassar (2008) explored the emotions of "missing" and "longing" as part of the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1993) needed to maintain transnational family relationships among Australian-based Italian migrants and their ageing parents in Italy. Feelings of absence and loss motivated family members to imagine shared co-presence to reinforce a sense of family closeness. This imaginative practice often motivated family practices such as making phone calls and sending cards or gifts. Feelings of longing stimulated imaginative practices such as when a mother kept

her migrant adult children in her heart through nightly prayers to ensure she was with them every day. Through such imaginative practices, migrants and parents were able to have an emotional experience of family closeness which supported their wellbeing.

In Vietnam, in a case where a migrant father had been absent for most of his children's lives, imagination was central to family affective practices. Feelings of longing were both created and managed through their mothers' constant efforts to maintain the father's imaginary presence in their everyday lives such as at mealtimes and in relation to their schooling. In the periods between phone communications, through their mother mentioning their father often, they creatively imagined what he might be possibly doing and if he thought about them and in this way, it impacted their ability to sustain their relationship with him (Lan Anh hoang & Yeoh (2012).

Children are also agentive in utilizing imagination as an affective practice to exert influence on parents' decisions and behavior (Lam & Yeoh, 2019). From Southeast Asia, they give an example of a child that intentionally sought to mobilize imaginative processes in the absent parent, using her grandfather's sickness as a reason to command her mother over the telephone to 'Come home! Grandfather is sick!'. The image of a sick father and a daughter who was missing her reduced the mother to tears and who noted "I want to go home but I can't [but I tell her] yes, I will soon. *Malapit na* [very soon]." Reassuring talk was used to manage the pressure of persuasion. This paper examines the imaginary practices of Nigerian migrant parents in Ireland and their children living with a caregiver in Nigeria and asks if and how imagination supports distal relating in the face of immobility as a result of parents being stuck for many years in the asylum system in Ireland.

And as unfolding as a loop,

Uncouples and loops out before eventually coming**Theoretical approach**

Although it is clear that imaginative practices play an important role in transnational relating, there has not been a detailed exploration of the ways in which imaginative practices sustain transnational family life. This paper utilizes a sociocultural model of imagination proposed by Zittoun & Gillespie (2016) which takes a view of the imagination as active and fluid. Following Zittoun & Gillespie (2016), imagination is defined as “the process of creating experiences that escape the immediate setting, which allow exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities” (p 2). It involves an “uncoupling” from the immediate setting, “looping out of the setting’s proximal sphere of experience, moving at a psychological level into a distal sphere of experience, and then looping back into the present, and recoupling with the proximal setting” (p 10). It is a ‘real time’ phenomenon, operating in the here and now for the purpose of a particular moment. For the purposes of this paper, following Zittoun & Gillespie (2016) three dimensions of imaginative processes are distinguished. Firstly, the imagination has a temporal and geographic dimension. The imagination can move from the present to the past or the future, or even other alternative presents and from one geographic location to another. Even as the embodied individual is anchored to the sights, sounds and sensory demands of their physical location, imaginative processes facilitate an experience of leaving the immediate setting to be transported to another time and place. This enables an exploration of the triggers of imagination and the functional role imagination may play in transnational relating through affective practices such as in managing feelings of longing or loneliness. It offers a way to conceptualize how, in the context of physical absence, family members can experience psychological closeness as a

parent imagines their life back in Africa or a child imagines a future where she is living an idyllic life with her migrant parent elsewhere.

A second dimension of imagination is that it is a social and cultural process facilitated by the use of resources. Resources include personal experience, information and images from technology and social media and representations of self and other. As such, resources ‘fill in’ the content of imagination. Resources can facilitate an expansive experience, which may have real world consequences in mobilizing action or alternatively be constraining (that which is impossible to imagine) and thus limit future action (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016).

A third dimension of imagination is relational, that of imagining self and other. This supports family practices of social recognition of the other so that practices can be directed to the other in a meaningful way. In co-living contexts, parents and children’s joint participation in shared activities supports the ability of parent and child to engage in position-exchange. Position-exchange is the ability to take the perspective of another, to exchange social positions, to move out of one’s own position in order to reflect on the situation of the other (Gillespie, 2012). In the absence of physical experience of the other, resources such as photos, stories or talking on the phone can allow one person to construct an impression of the experience of the other (Gillespie, 2012). In doing so, that person shifts from the here-and-now real world of ‘*as-is*’ to an ‘*as-if*’ position to imagine the world of the other (Josephs, 1998; Zittoun, 2007). For transnational children, the imaginative space is populated by experiences from the physical relationship with the migrant parent pre-migration, but it also becomes infused with content from the migrant’s new home country such as images and expectations gained from television, movies and the consumption patterns of other returned international migrants.

Context

This paper examines the imagination and (im)mobility in transnational relating between Nigeria and Ireland through case-studies of asylum-seeking migrant parents who have spent extended periods of time in the asylum system in Ireland and their children and caregivers in Nigeria. In Nigeria, there are established cultural practices of children living away from their biological parents in child fosterage arrangements (Oni, 1995), which do not mean a severance of the bonds to biological parents (Renne, 1996). The preference is for a close kinship relationship to exist between a foster carer and child such as a biological grandparent or maternal or paternal aunt (Renne, 1993). Such a child-raising practice is within normative kinship obligations and is often used to support social mobility of the child and his or her family (Okunola & Ikumold, 2010). In Ireland, the asylum process has been an important mode of entry for Nigerian migrants to Ireland (Komolafe, 2008) but a consequence was that many migrant parents became stuck for much longer than they ever had imagined in the asylum system. Between 2011-2013 when this study was conducted, the average length of stay in asylum-seeker Direct Provision accommodation centres was 48 months and in many cases more than 7 years (Jesuit Refugee Service Ireland, 2019). At that time, the Nigerian population in Ireland was female-dominated, with large proportions in their 30s or 40s and children up to very early teens (CSO 2012), partly as a result of Irish citizenship law which, up until a referendum in 2004, automatically granted citizenship to children born on the island of Ireland. This paper asks: what is the role of imagination in the strategies that Nigerian asylum seeker parents in Ireland and their children and caregivers in Nigeria use to sustain family life?

Method

The material presented in this chapter is based on multisited, multitemporal ethnographic fieldwork with 8 Nigerian transnational families through interviews with the migrant parent in

Ireland, their child and the child's caregiver in Nigeria exploring transnational child-raising. The 8 families were participants in a survey of 309 Nigerian migrant parents in Ireland, purposively sampled so that half of parents had children in Nigeria and therefore were living in transnational families (White, Dito, Veale & Mazzucato, 2019; Veale & Andres, 2014). All 154 survey respondents who were living in transnational families were invited to participate in the ethnographic study. A condition of participation was that the migrant parent consented for the researcher to visit their child and the child's caregiver in Nigeria. Furthermore, the child and caregiver also had to give their informed consent. A total of 18 families in the migrant parent survey met these conditions and all families who consented were included in an ethnographic study. This paper is based on a subset of this group, that is, eight families whose migrant parent was registered as an asylum seeker in Ireland and were living in accommodation centers known as direct provision centers. The justification for this is that these parents experienced state-enforced immobility as a result of being in the asylum system, often for many years and imaginative practices emerged as important in everyday family practice. We do not assume that their experiences are representative of transnational Nigerian families in Ireland, but the particularities of their lives offer situated case studies that draw attention to the role of imagination as a strategy to sustain family life in asylum-seeker transnational families. Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the sample.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Ethnographic fieldwork included participant observation, life histories and semi-structured interviews with migrant parents living in Ireland, with their child and their child's caregiver in Nigeria and follow-up phone calls. In Nigeria, children and caregivers were interviewed separately at the children's home although the caregiver may have been in the same room. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Semi-structured interviews explored the decision to migrate (and for children, knowledge, if any, of this decision), how transnational caregiving was organized in practical and material ways, how caregiving was functioning, strategies of parents,

children and caregivers to sustain family life over time, negotiations and conflicts and impact of transnational child-raising on parents, children and caregivers. Ethnographic fieldnotes were organized under these reporting themes.

The study researcher (Andres) was female, also living away from her country of origin, in her early 30's and a mother and so shared some characteristics with participants. She moved back and forth between Ireland and Nigeria over a two and a half year period from 2011 to 2013. The researcher became a point of contact between migrant parents, children and their caregivers, a tool of 'connection' between the disparate geographic locations. This raised ethical issues of confidentiality as participants were guaranteed confidentiality yet participants wanted to hear about the life of their family member elsewhere. This was addressed by agreeing what information could be shared, such as about general conditions of living in Direct Provision accommodation centers in Ireland and the fact that asylum seekers did not have a right to work. Photographs of children in Nigeria were shared with the migrant parent in Ireland. One mother responded 'Thank you, thank you, I can see what they look like now..she kept talking about much she has grown, how big she is now'. Personal information was not divulged about one side of the family to the other to preserve confidentiality. There was an ethical protocol in place if the researcher became aware of harm or abuse to a child but this case did not arise. Ethical approval was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork.

Grounded theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967) was used to identify emerging theoretical insights. Ethnographic field reports and interview transcripts were read and reread, coded and memo's were used to guide analysis, followed by the selection of relevant cases, observations and data. The theme of physical immobility/imaginative mobility emerged as an important theme and the data was further analysed to explore the temporal and geographic dimensions of imagination, cultural resources in imagination and relational imagination in sustaining family life. The following section draws on two case studies to illustrate key analytic themes related to the role of imagination in transnational relating as a strategy to sustain family life. The case studies

are chosen as they offer a contrasting analysis of developmental status when the child is older (10 years) or younger (3 years) at parental migration and the economic situation of the transnational family, as economically sufficient (child goes to private school, basics of food and shelter are adequate) and barely subsisting (a struggle to cover school fees and basics of food and shelter) to explore implications for imagination as a strategy to sustain family life.

The case studies are chosen as they offer a contrasting analysis of developmental status when the child is older (10 years) at parental migration and the economic situation of the transnational family is economically sufficient (child goes to private school, basics of food and shelter are adequate) as shown in case study 1 and when the child is younger (3 years) at parental migration and the economic status of the transnational family is barely subsisting (a struggle to cover school fees and basics of food and shelter) as seen in case study 2. Implications for imagination as a strategy to sustain family life are explored in both case studies.

Im/ mobility & imagination

Case Study 1

Asylum policy in Ireland directs that registered asylum seekers live in ‘Direct Provision’ which is a means of meeting basic needs of food and shelter which are provided directly while refugee status claims are processed rather than through full cash payments (Reception & Integration Agency Ireland, 2019). Accommodation centres are known as Direct Provision Centres. The environment at the direct provision centers visited by the researcher did not allow for a sense of safety or a feeling of ‘home’. Parents were not allowed to have visitors to their rooms, and the common rooms were cold and had old, worn and unclean furniture. The center had an atmosphere of temporariness. It was a place designed for ushering people through. But as a residence for families for seven or more years, it was a depressing place that did not facilitate a good family life. This reality of life for the migrant parents and their children in Ireland was not understood by the children back in Nigeria, and did not feature in the imaginings of their own

potential life in Europe with their migrant parent, as portrayed in popular culture, on television and in commercials.

Titalayo lived in Nigeria with her two sisters, and was cared for by her maternal grandmother and aunt. Her father was a migrant with a new family in the UK, and had traveled between the UK and Nigeria for as long as she could remember. Her mother was an asylum seeker who had been living in a direct provision center in Ireland for 6 years, 9 months. Shortly after arriving in Ireland, she gave birth to twins, who at the time of the research were six years old. Titalayo, the second daughter, aged 15 years, was asked about her life in Nigeria. The process of responding triggered an imaginative loop of being in the here and now but wishing to be with her parents as noted here.

Researcher: I want to get some understanding of how you live your life, to imagine how your life is. Could you try explaining to me how you live, what you do, what your life is like here where you live?.

Titalayo: My life where I live is fun, but at the same time...how I wish my parents were also here. You feel they enjoy at that place and wish you were with them.... Ah the way (my mother) talks on the phone she too also misses us, and it makes her feel somehow sad that for so many years she cannot see her children, how they look.

Titalayo was content with her life in Nigeria as she was doing well in a private school paid for by her father and felt loved by her grandparents, aunts and many cousins. However, as her imagination uncoupled from her immediate setting where she experienced life as fun and moved through geographic space to imagine her mother and the siblings she had never met enjoying their life 'at that place', it created dissatisfaction in that moment; she imagined the life she could be enjoying if only she could be there with them. Titalayo could hear the sadness in her mother's voice yet she also imagined that her mother enjoyed her life in Ireland, a contradiction that was hard for her fifteen-year-old self to make sense of.

There were other contradictions she had to negotiate between her lived experiences in Nigeria and her imaginings of life in Ireland. Titalayo's mother had difficulty saving the money needed to send for Titalayo's upkeep as her status as an asylum-seeker meant she did not have the right to work in Ireland. Titalayo noted:

The tough part is when my mother doesn't send our provision money fast, and there is nothing with my grandparents. It looks weird [then] you feel bad then when the money is gotten back.

With respect to the provision money, she compared her situation to other children, for example, 'when they come to school and say my mummy bought this for me'. She experienced an imaginative resource gap ('it looks weird') that was difficult to fill between what she, her grandparents and school friend's imagined life to be in Europe, supported by the stories and consumerist objects brought back by the migrant parents of school friends which shared their social representations of life abroad and her mother's difficulty in sending money. She then had to affectively manage this gap in her imaginative world—that it looks weird—with the evidence her mother was doing her best when the money finally arrived. This imaginative wish for a wealthy migrant mother in Europe also infused happy moments.

The happy part, its like if my results are good, like when I passed all my GCEs, I told them but I wish she were here just to surprise me, to say 'if you do well, this is what you are going to get from me'.

This moment of satisfaction and pride was accompanied by an imaginative experience of a surprise visit from a well off and gift-laden mother, an expansionary experience that confers a social recognition of her as a good daughter who is fulfilling her obligations to do well in school; part of the transnational intergenerational bargain; the migrant parent makes sacrifices for her children's future and those children must then work hard in recognition of this.

Across transnational spaces, Nigerian children and their Irish-born siblings were often aware of the existence of the other, but had no face-to-face experience of each other. They had spoken on the phone, seen each other on Facebook, viewed photographs of the other, and in this way,

incorporated each other into their imaginative lives. In general, children in Nigeria were older children, while their siblings in Ireland were still young. In Titilayo's case, she had not met her twin brother and sister who were born in Ireland. When asked to imagine how the twins live in Ireland, she said:

This year is going to be seven years [since her mother left]. I think about, oh gosh, these children. They are born in Ireland, they have not even been to Nigeria, they've not even seen their grandma and grandpa before, and they have not even set their eyes on me before. They've only seen my artificial self (picture) and vice versa.... The relationship is over the phone, so they don't even know if I am their sister. The relationship is not that close.... I am sad because I don't even know that much about them. I think it has to do with the government and only the government can make it change'.

Photographs and the mobile phone brought the siblings into relationship with each other, but it felt artificial rather than real. Titilayo did not have a sense of that she was recognized by the twins as a sister but rather was experienced by them as a disembodied voice on the phone, separated from their everyday family life. Yet although inadequate, photographs were a resource to fill in the imagination of the distant other. As Titilayo and the twins have never had a physical experience of each other, there was a breakdown in the ability to claim a sibling relationship with certainty ('they don't even know if I am their sister'); in particular, Titilayo imagined this task of claiming kinship was more difficult for the twins than for her. Titilayo recognized that the twins had thin resources to support imaginary practices of relationship with their family life in Nigeria as she notes; they had not been to Nigeria, they had not seen their grandma and grandpa and in turn, she did not know much about them. It is easy for the imaginative space to break down as it reaches the edges of imaginative resource material. This has consequence for the work of relating and sustaining 'familyhood' as 'the relationship is not that close'. However from her position in Nigeria, she reflected on their lives:

The advantages there are they will know more about Ireland, and some other places. They will have access to technology, and if they're old enough to get a job, they can make use of it. They will also know what their mum can do and not do. Those are the two advantages I know. The disadvantages are, they won't know their grandparents, sisters and brothers.

Unlike her, in their future lives, they will be able to travel, and they will have access to technology and the global work opportunities that that will afford them. 'Technology' symbolized their imagined future, through her eyes, as global citizens. They also had direct knowledge of their mother's situation rather an imaginary experience as was Titalayo's experience, including knowing the constraints of her life that Titalayo heard about but had to imagine in the face of contradictory social representations of the wonderful life to be had in Europe and which she had to affectively manage in order to sustain a positive orientation towards her mother in her mind.

When thinking about her own future, Titalayo made it clear she did not want to stay in Nigeria and had her sights set on going to live with her mother and go to university abroad. This has been her dream and intention since she was young. She felt this was important because of the course she wanted to study:

Researcher: And what course is that?

Titalayo: Mass. com.

Researcher: Is it 'mass communication' like reporting in TV?

Titalayo: Yes.

In spite of a good life in Nigeria, Titalayo clung to the hope of an imagined future in Europe. She wanted to go to university 'Not in Nigeria, but abroad', where she imagined her future life with her mother. Her imaginative world gave her a way for a future self to escape her immediate environment. Mass communication studies functioned as an expansionary resource to broaden her future horizons. Interestingly this career choice was itself most likely influenced by the

globalized media as the window or resource through which she had come to ‘know’ Europe i.e. through television news stories and their news presenters. A key imaginative resource was the exact medium through which ‘that other place’ was known and she was able to imagine herself standing in the television presenter’s shoes. Yet in her day to day life, her emotional experience was often one of longing; ‘Everything is just like I wish, I wish. I wish there is a way that I can see my mum. And I know my wishes will come true one day’. ‘My mum’ and the place in which her mother was living were fused together as an idealized and positive ‘other’ place where she could live in the future. The ‘as-is’ (real life in Nigeria) was found wanting compared to ‘as-it-could-be’, which was an imagined, desirable (being with my mummy) but at that moment unlikely future. Her ‘self’ project was organized and constructed toward an imagined migrant future, including studying hard and researching about and waiting for the time of reunification with her migrant parent. This future ‘as-it-could-be’ organized her here-and-now development as she studied hard, a preadaptation for future mobility – but this goal was simultaneously not yet within reach. To some extent, Titalayo’s experienced self was focused not on the past or present but on this richly textured imagined story of a new life. Yet this future-forming orientation (Gergen, 2015) in the imaginative realm resulted in supporting a sustained commitment to education in the everyday practices of the here and now, fulfilling her responsibilities as a good daughter to her parents.

In everyday life, phone and social media, in particular Facebook were important mediums of communication with her mother. She called the other children to come and see her mum on Facebook. One of the things that made her sad was that ‘they all know her on Facebook and greeted her on her birthday. Now we are in final year, I don’t think they will get to meet her’. Facebook provided visual, acoustic and narrative information about her mum and it was important to her that her friends could also see her and hear her voice. The real-time voice and images provided by social media nourished the fading memory of her mum so that some understanding of the other was possible. In this way the relational dimension of imagination was supported. Yet it was a struggle sometimes to keep her imaginative connection with her mother

alive. She had a sense of having a privileged life in Nigeria where she was well taken care of, ate good food, lived in good accommodation that was paid for by her parents in Europe and her maternal uncles. She felt loved and wanted by her grandmother and aunt. Yet she could feel time moving on without any evidence that her mother was coming back or that she would go to stay with her mother in Ireland any time soon.

Case Study 2

Asa's mother, Alice, was also a migrant in Ireland and lived in a direct provision center. And like the mother of Titilayo, Alice came to Ireland seven years earlier and had a child, Obi, the same year. Asa was only three years old when her mother migrated. Asa struggled with feeling not only the loss of her parent but also the loss of being separated from the opportunities afforded by the West. Cultural globalization, the meaning and significance of the West, infused relating and the juxtaposition of the hardship of life in Nigeria and ideas about this place that was far away complicated family life. And in the case of Asa and Alice, it was further complicated by the dire poverty of the family in Nigeria. Asa's grandmother and aunt (mother's mother and mother's sister) could not afford regular meals for the nine children living with them and themselves. School fees were often paid late, and the children, grandmother and aunt all shared one small room. The little room was crowded and damp, with both insects and mice visibly crawling around.

Alice migrated to seek asylum because she feared for the life of her unborn child. With the help of relatives and friends, she was able to come to Europe and claim asylum. At the time of the research, she and Obi were living in a direct provision center for seven years, awaiting the outcome of her asylum application. Alice and Obi were provided with food and accommodation and a small stipend as she did not have a right to work, given her legal status as an asylum seeker at the time. At ten years old, Asa had no recollection of her mother. She did not have personal autobiographical memories on which to draw as imaginative resources. Imagination was not supported by remembered experience. Similarly for the migrant mother trying to imagine her

child, she would have had to sustain her imagination of her child with memories from the past from when her child- now edging towards her teenage years- was a toddler. According to Alice, they talked on the phone sometimes, about the food she eats, about school and Alice tells her in these calls that she should come and take her away. As the researcher moved between Ireland and Nigeria, it was clear that Asa and her maternal grandmother shared a notion of Europe as a place where one went to work, to get money and to come back to Nigeria as a wealthy woman, and that this has affected their expectations of the support the migrant mother should contribute. Asa and her grandmother gained their understanding of the global North from television, films and the gifts of clothes, toys, phones and electronics that they saw other children of international migrants enjoy. This complete lack of knowledge about the realities of life in Ireland for those who entered the asylum system gave them no opportunity to foresee or to now imagine the difficulties the migrant faced. They had no imaginative resources at their disposal to imagine life as an asylum seeker. There was nothing in their sphere of experience to support an imaginative shift to the sphere of experience inhabited by Alice so it was difficult to orientate to the mother in her everyday life world. With respect to the relational dimension of imagination, there was a gap in the knowledge, images and social representations of the physical or social position of her life as an asylum-seeker that was necessary for them to be able to patch together an impression of her experience and thus engage in a process of position exchange (Gillespie, 2012). Similarly, before the mother migrated she was constrained by a lack of imaginative resources about the lives of asylum seekers in Europe to ‘step outside’ the world of television and film images of Europe. The ‘imaginings’ that perhaps sparked the action of leaving Nigeria was an imaginative possibility of escaping the circumstance of fearing for the life of her unborn child. As Zittoun & Gillespie (2016) note “the loop of imagination entails a “stepping out” of the immediate situation which can have consequences for the immediate and future situation” (p. 122). Paradoxically, imaginings of Europe to save the life of one child meant the migrant mother than got stuck in immobility and was unable to live with her other child as she grew up.

This inability to imagine made it difficult for the family to believe what the migrant mother was telling them which had consequences for their strategies to sustain family life in the face of broken expectations. This led to verbal confrontations between the caregiver and the migrant mother, which ended with the mother crying and the caregiver then saying that she believes her. In Nigeria, Asa's grandmother explained, 'I thought that immediately when [daughter] left, she would get a job and would be sending money to me easily. It is not like that. She never knew it would be like that... I didn't expect that when she traveled abroad, we would continue suffering'. Alice said that Asa expected her to send money and gifts:

Yeah, and she wants everything. But she wants to be with me! If she's sad and I tell her 'don't worry I'm coming for you', she will shout and scream and tell her friends that 'my mum says she is coming to take me!!', you know. And inside of me I just...shh...I feel bad because I know I'm lying to her.

To manage her daughter's demands, Alice she said, 'don't worry I'm coming for you' and her daughter's response was 'my mum says she is coming to take me!!'. In order to manage the painful demands of the present, the mother focused on an imagined near future where she would come for her daughter. In Alice's case however, she felt the force of the falseness of the imagined future she offered her daughter. The lack of imaginative resources on Asa's part and the false future imaginings put forward by Alice to manage the pain of separation and the burden of her daughters expectations had consequences for their relationship. Asa exerted her agency by at times refusing to talk to her mother, saying she 'did not know her'. She told her grandmother that she does not know this woman who calls, but never lets her see her, a performative affective practice conveying her distress. Yet Asa held onto the idea of being reunited with her mother.

Researcher: Where is your mother staying now?

Asa: Europe

Researcher: And how long has she stayed there?

Asa: Since when I was small....

Researcher: Since she left for that place, did she come back to see you again?

Asa: No.

Researcher: When you talk with your mum, what are the things you would talk about?

Asa: About the food I eat, school. I tell her that she should come and take me away.

Researcher: You tell her to come and take you. And what does she say?

Asa: She says that she will come and bring me there

It was difficult for Asa to know how the lives of those in the asylum system were constrained by laws that restricted the right to work. Within her experience, she expected a parent to be agentive, volitional and self-directed as in Nigeria. One cannot be ‘stopped’ from working should he or she wish to do so. It was difficult for Asa to understand the passivity of her mother, her inability to meet her material family obligations and the immobility that kept them separate. This made her angry and sad at different times. The pressures of global consumption (‘she wants everything’) caused tensions that lead to a breakdown of trust in the parent–child–caregiver relationship. But Asa also believed ‘she wants to be with me’. Asa imagined an idealized reunion in which her mother will bring her ‘over there’, so ‘together-over-there’ was a symbolic resource to deal with the pain of separation in the here and now, and ‘as-is now’ was transformed into an idealized ‘as-it-could-be’. Yet her mother, as long as she was in a direct provision center, was uncertain how long she would stay there, whether she would be granted leave to remain in Ireland or whether she and her daughter would be deported back to Nigeria.

Methodologically, the consequences of the back-and-forth movement of the researcher between the family members in Ireland and Nigeria were that the researcher was able to tell the family in Nigeria that their daughter/mother really was in a center for people who seek asylum and that she was given food and shelter, but she was not allowed to work, and therefore could not make money. Asa and her grandmother said that they did not believe her until the researcher came and confirmed what the migrant mother told them. The migrant mother was relieved that they no longer thought she was telling lies. As such, through her mobility, she entered into family communication practices and supported a leap of imaginative understanding as her stories

provided semiotic resources to bridge the gap between social representations of life in Europe and lived reality. This transformed affective practices in the family and modified affects of distrust.

These two case studies reflected common themes across the eight asylum-seeker migrant parent-child-caregiver triads in this study. The ability of members of the family to sustain family life was challenged by the enforced immobility of the asylum system. In one family, affective practices of demand ‘Mummy when are you coming!’ mobilized imaginative processes of hope “Oh God, I hope soon I be able to travel with my children”? A migrant father kept promising his children he would see them very soon, knowing this might not be true and he worried his lying would break down the trust his children had in him. One daughter tried to pressurize her parents to take her to Ireland while simultaneously expressing doubt if it would ever happen, thus continuously emoting in her communications with her parents. As a result, when her father called, she stopped picking up the phone, something her father noted was ‘very heavy’ in his heart’ for him. In another family, the child refused to talk to her mother, telling her grandmother she did not know this woman who calls but never lets her see her. In telling this story, the migrant mother cried and the family in Nigeria laughed saying ‘she is just a child, that is how they can be’. Children expressed agency through family communication practices. And in some cases, the inability to imagine the other (‘she does not know this woman who calls but never lets her see her’) resulted in a refusal to recognize the other as family, as a mother.

Conclusion

The findings reported here explored imagination as a strategy in the lives of Nigerian migrant parents in Ireland and their children in Nigeria to sustain family life. Due to structural factors of moving through the asylum process, asylum seeker migrant parents and their children were separated for lengthy time periods and for an uncontrollable duration. Over time, it seemed that the imaginative world gained in importance in the absence of physical relating. A core analytic theme was relating in an imaginative space, and how the ‘global’ entered the imagination and

relational world of the developing child in ways that had tangible consequences for family practices (Morgan, 2011) including affective practices (Wetherell, McConville & McCreanor, 2019). The analysis utilized two case studies to explore three interrelated dimensions of imaginative processes: the temporality of imagination; the use of resources in imagination and imagination as relational and embedded in family practice.

With respect to the temporality of imagination, the analysis presented here drew attention to an under-researched form of mobility, that of imaginative mobility in the context of physical immobility. Following Zittoun & Gillespie (2016), it showed how imagination can move from the present to the past or the future, or even other alternative presents and from one geographic location to another to support transnational relating. Imagination enabled left-behind children to uncouple from and ‘loop out’ (Zittoun & Gillespie, p 10) of their immediate experience to connect the experience of their parent in that distant place, although re-looping back to their own experience kindled dissatisfaction with their present life.

With respect to the use of resources in imagination, children were engaged in making meaning of the migrant parent’s reality in the absence of personal experience of the context of their lives in Ireland. This was a fundamentally challenging developmental task. Imaginative resources included technology such as phone and Facebook, remittances, photographs, and images from films, television and the media. Sometimes these were helpful in supporting family practices but other times the contradictions between social representations of life in Europe and reality were too great; resources were limited or insufficient to fill the gap in imagination. Migrant parents struggled to meet the children’s expectations that they have free access to the material goods of a global consumerist culture. In their turn, left-behind children felt not only the loss of the parent but also the imagined loss of being separated from the opportunities afforded by the West and they daydreamed of an imagined future in Europe.

With respect to relational imagination, children struggled to understand the migrant parents' perspective, as their exposure to media and television provided them with social representations of life in Europe that made it difficult to understand the perspective of the migrant parent and to engage in position exchange (Gillespie 2012). For children whose parent migrated when they were very young, such as Asa, they lacked a capacity to have a convincing, 'felt' imaginative experience of their parent whereby the imaginative experience is informed by both real (physical, remembered) experience and symbolic, internal representation. The imaginative loop fails to be anchored to a concrete, once-experienced presence but rather an experienced absence which resulted in children sometimes refusing to 'know' their mother. This failure to socially recognize and orient to the other is antithesis to sustaining family practices (Morgan, 2011).

Finally, this paper was based on an innovative methodology that involved researching members of the same families who are living apart as a result of migration: the Nigerian migrant parent in Ireland and his or her child and child's caregiver in Nigeria. A possible reason migrant parents participated in this study was the opportunity that the mobility of the researcher gave them to maintain a connection with their children in the face of their own current immobility and through photographs gathered and information shared about the context of life in the asylum system, the researcher contributed resources for imagination of the other which shaped family communicative practices. A question for future research is if there is a developmental 'threshold' for children to have sufficient, real experience of their parent before migration to support relational imaginary processes and to sustain family practices? Also, as children become older and age out of rights to family reunification in Europe, what would be the impact of a trajectory from imaginative mobility to imaginative immobility on family practices including affective practices should the barriers to moving to Europe to join their migrant parent continue to be insurmountable as the child becomes a young adult? In this respect, mobility policies that

recognize the importance of supporting sustaining family practices between Europe and elsewhere in the world will be needed.

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2. Pseudonyms have been used for all research participants.

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