BRIEF REPORT

Emerging Ideas. Transnational family dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review

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Abstract

Objective: The article reviews literature on the implications and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on transnational families (TNFs), gathering up-to-date evidence of how the pandemic changed the dynamics of TNFs in different life dimensions, how these families have coped with adversity,

and how the academic debate is recognizing the complexity of transnationality in situations of crisis.

Background: Transnational families consist of members who live in multiple countries while maintaining a sense of familyhood (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). The COVID-19 pandemic presents significant challenges for TNFs as crisis responses prioritize national borders and institutions.

Method: A scoping review was conducted using Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) extension for Scoping Reviews (Tricco et al., 2018), and Peters et al.'s (2015) guidance for systematic reviews. Of the 113 references identified, 29 met the scoping review's inclusion criteria.

Results: The effects of the pandemic on TNFs were particularly noticeable in terms of uncertainty, psychological health, communication, social networks, care, and time use.

Conclusion: Mobility restrictions and concerns about disease spread were significantly challenging. Although TNFs were able to adapt rapidly by using technology and innovative solutions to maintain their relationships, social inequalities were also exposed by the pandemic.

Implications: Robust support systems are needed for TNFs, both at their point of origin and destination, to assist them in managing challenging circumstances that disrupt their daily routines and interactions. Future research could further explore and develop these support systems to better address these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Transnational families (TNFs) can be defined as those who live physically apart but maintain a sense of familyhood and unity that goes beyond the limits of national borders (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Despite its proximity to the notion of migrant families, the concept of TNFs marks a difference in the understanding of migration itself. It moves away from viewing migration as an "uprooting" process and instead recognizes the various ways in which migrants preserve their connections with their country of origin and their relatives (Glick Schiller et al., 1995). In this sense, despite the vast migration scholarship and although the phenomenon of TNFs is not recent, there has been a renewed academic interest in the topic, emphasizing the need to consider the transnational embeddedness and challenges these families face (Boccagni, 2015).

TNFs can assume different configurations, including families living apart due to work expatriation, education, marriage, divorce, economic migration, forced migration, retirement migration, and other reasons. TNFs vary widely in terms of socioeconomic characteristics, geographical distribution—which may include only two countries (bitransnational) or several countries and continents (multitransnational; Bryceson, 2019)—and the length of the separation, which may be temporary or indefinite (Cho & Allen, 2019).

Research on TNFs has questioned the essentiality of geographical proximity for kinkeeping (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Česnuitytė et al., 2017; Mazzucato et al., 2017; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016), care provision (Baldassar et al., 2016; Juozeliūnienė et al., 2020), or communication (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Madianou, 2019), pointing out, nevertheless, that specific needs of TNFs, such as cross-border welfare and social protection, remain inadequately addressed at the institutional and policy levels (Boccagni, 2015).

As a worldwide crisis with profound impacts on the global community, the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to have brought increased challenges to TNFs, as mobility has been restricted, access to essential services has been limited, and reliance on digital communication platforms has increased, alongside the need to provide and/or receive health care. Additionally, the global response to the pandemic and efforts to control its spread put in evidence how crisis management follows a territorialized approach, remaining primarily focused on national borders and institutions.

Through a scoping review of the extant literature, the objective of this article is to examine the implications and effects of the pandemic on TNFs, gathering up-to-date evidence of how the pandemic changed the dynamics of TNFs in different life dimensions, how these families have coped with adversity, and how the academic debate is recognizing the complexity of transnationality in situations of crisis. Although this study focuses specifically on TNFs, it provides a starting point for understanding the evolving challenges they face during crises. By concentrating on TNFs, we aim to identify emerging issues that, although not exclusive, are sufficiently representative. This represents an initial step in exploring these dynamics and underscores the need for further research into how events like COVID-19 impact families separated by international borders.

The analysis began with an interdisciplinary group discussion involving experts in migration and family research, including those who have conducted studies on the impact of COVID-19. This expert group, selected for their specialized knowledge of challenges faced by TNFs during the pandemic, worked collaboratively to identify the main dimensions through which the pandemic may have affected these families. Uncertainty, psychological aspects, communication, social networks, care, uses of time, language, and education were the main themes that initially emerged. Once the methodology and selection criteria were defined, the first screenings allowed for the exclusion of language and education, as they were not significantly addressed in the articles under analysis. The scoping review was, therefore, guided by a thematic analysis centered on the first six themes identified. The analysis was conducted using Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) extension for Scoping Reviews (Tricco et al., 2018), and Peters et al.'s (2015) guidance for systematic reviews.

This article is divided into five main sections. Following the introduction, we present a brief review of key discussions and challenges for TNFs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the existing literature linking TNFs with uncertainty, psychological aspects, communication, social networks, care, and uses of time, and anticipating how these dimensions may have been affected by the pandemic. The following section outlines the methodology. Next, we present the findings through the analysis of the results by theme. The concluding section focuses on the most important findings, limitations, and implications of this study for future research.

Key discussions and anticipated challenges for TNFs during the pandemic

TNFs navigate life across borders, employing different strategies such as digital communication, return visits, caregiving arrangements, and emotional support to maintain their familial connections (Glick Schiller et al., 1995). In the following sections, we highlight key discussions present in transnational family scholarship, anticipating expected challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a complex concept with multiple dimensions. Boholm (2003, p. 167) has discussed uncertainty as pertaining to unforeseen events, peculiar possibilities, and irregular incidents in life. This implies acknowledging change and the understanding that situations are not fixed; they can change significantly, either positively or negatively. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused global uncertainty, affecting TNFs facing social, political, and economic unpredictability. As mentioned by Koffman et al. (2020, pp. 212–213), the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for health care systems regarding how to respond effectively, particularly in terms of the structures and processes of care. However, this "unprecedented uncertainty" has impacted every aspect of existence. TNFs were likely to devise various coping strategies to confront this unprecedented situation. Analyzing these strategies can reveal the factors that influenced the adoption of certain practices over others, providing valuable insights into their shaping and implementation. Examining the practices of TNFs during the pandemic can reveal critical policy gaps in regulating their rights at the transnational level, such as the inconsistent recognition of diverse family types, including LGBT partnerships within the EU, highlighting the need for more inclusive transnational regulations.

Psychological aspects

In alignment with social support theory, three important theoretical perspectives—(a) stress and coping, (b) social constructionist, and (c) relationship—emphasize the role of social network characteristics influencing the psychological well-being of TNFs (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Within this general context, the pandemic crisis brought changes in family routines and emotional, social, and behavioral aspects (Lateef et al., 2021). The consequences and fears resulting from the disease, as well as being in lockdown, can contribute to heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and a general decrease in psychological well-being (Lateef et al., 2021; Simola et al., 2023).

Communication

Regular communication is essential for maintaining family bonds and understanding family dynamics as a relational process (Morgan, 2011a, 2011b). Because physical and geographical distance often shapes TNFs' communication patterns, particularly the use of digital communication, communication has been a central topic in transnational family scholarship (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). The possibility of using technology to maintain frequent contacts and care remotely has the potential to strengthen kinkeeping. However, it also raises several challenges, namely to those who cannot access technology or provide remote care (Cuban, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on travelling and physical contact are expected to have changed TNFs' communication dynamics by increasing pressure on the use of technology and by boosting the so-called "digital kinning" (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020).

Social networks and relationships

Transnationalism is defined as "a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders" (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p. 9). Despite the physical distance experienced by members of TNFs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of maintaining a familial connection is emphasized, preserving a sense of

belonging (Baldassar, 2010; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020). Although social support in closer relationships is a universal need (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it might require additional effort and resources in the case of TNFs because they are dispersed across state borders (Lubbers et al., 2021).

Social networks serve as a vital mechanism for TNFs to reduce uncertainty and cope with stressful situations, especially during the adjustment period to a new country (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Liu & Shaffer, 2005). TNFs need intra- and intergroup relations as this adjustment does not happen in a social vacuum (Liebkind, 2003). Social and fictive kin also play an essential role in their adjustment processes. They provide them with the material and social support that enables newcomers to integrate into a new society. Families with social networks in both home and host country are more likely to access support (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). TNFs' social network support is mainly provided by their extended family and by their friendships (Végh et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for TNFs, such as restricted cross-border mobility due to travel bans. These restrictions likely caused social networks to "turtle up," shrinking in size (Forgette et al., 2009) and prioritizing stronger, existing connections over weaker ties (Romero et al., 2016). This dynamic potentially limited TNFs' ability to access the broader support typically provided by their transnational networks.

Care

Care is crucial in transnational family practices and exists across borders, generations, and life stages (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Regardless of their residence, families are striving for supporting activities to make, remake, maintain, contain, and repair the world we live in. Care encompasses the physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities (Dowling, 2021). Migration can affect the expectations and responsibilities migrants have toward their family members who are left behind. These expectations may change, shift, or stay the same when the family lives in a different place. Transnational care provisions, like the movement of care workers across borders, are strongly influenced by gender. Gendered care provisions persist due to cultural norms and limited institutional support in one's home country, which are reinforced by welfare regimes. These provisions are mainly driven by a strong sense of collective responsibility toward family members. Migrant women have a significant responsibility to maintain caregiving ties with their home country (Anderson, 2001; Lutz, 2007; Parreñas, 2005, 2015). Within such an intricate construction, TNFs' care practices were likely to be entirely reconfigured during COVID-19, impacting all aspects of their provision.

Uses of time

In "normal times," TNFs face significant time challenges related to basic communication, emotional connections, and intimacy (Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011). Polymedia environments enable transnational family members to connect with each other (Baldassar et al., 2016; Licoppe, 2004; Madianou & Miller, 2012), leading to new forms of copresence, including virtual (information and communication technology based), imagined (based on recalling), and proxy (based on objects/people whose presence trigger memories of the absent members), which complement the missing face-to-face interaction (Baldassar, 2008). However, all this communication is challenged by time constraints: Beyond differences in the time zones that affect everyone, low-skilled immigrants in particular face additional challenges, as they have, in many instances, time-intensive jobs (Cortés & Pan, 2019) and face long queues in accessing essential services, such as health care (Garcés et al., 2006). At the same time, all immigrants must devote time to integrating into the host society, understanding cultural differences in service provision, and dealing with

administrative tasks (Fortuny & Chaudry, 2011), and, in some cases, even taking language classes (Kouritzin, 2000). In turn, children from TNFs exhibit different patterns of time usage that often substitute schooling with leisure or housework activities (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2014; Jordan et al., 2018).

The pandemic and postpandemic times brought a generalization of working from home (Smite et al., 2023), which implies more time for many by saving commuting time and inducing flexible working hours. At the same time, it has an ambiguous influence on time and flexibility, as working from home creates a blurred division between family, leisure, and work time. For TNFs, this changes the setup and may allow more time to connect with family. From a different perspective, when housing conditions are poor, when people overwork, or when connectivity means (such as internet connections) are missing, this may actually hinder time with TNFs. This scoping review explores whether these two opposing assumptions hold true with respect to uses of time.

METHOD

The existing studies on COVID-19 and TNFs cover a wide range of topics and involve various fields. A thorough examination of the findings in this scoping review could offer valuable recommendations for addressing future global crises. The research field is diverse and interdisciplinary, with a wealth of COVID-19–related research papers providing ample insight for guiding actions during future crises. Therefore, a "reconnaissance" exercise is needed to identify implications for practitioners and future research. Along with heterogeneity, such aims call for a scoping review (Peters et al., 2015; Tricco et al., 2018). In addition, we address broad topics with the aim of understanding their contribution to our research questions and with no intention to assess their quality, which also leads to the need for a scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

We followed the five-stage protocol for scoping reviews proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Stage 1, identifying the research questions, was done in two rounds of open debates between team members, all academics from various disciplines (anthropology, sociology, and psychology) and countries. This scoping review was guided by the following questions: (a) What were the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on transnational family dynamics? (b) How do TNFs adjust to contexts of global crises? (c) What lessons for the future can be learned regarding the effects of crises on TNFs?

The experts, representing various disciplines and research areas, convened to determine the main themes to be addressed based on their expertise and existing pre–COVID-19 literature on TNFs. Eight themes were identified as relevant for detailed analysis and inspection: social networks, communication, psychological aspects, uncertainty, uses of time, care, language, and education.

At Stage 2, to identify relevant studies that comprise our literature corpus, we searched two databases, namely ERIC and Web of Science (WoS), which contain high-quality peer-reviewed publications. WoS is a highly selective database. Adding ERIC increased the chances of including humanities literature, which was relevant due to our interdisciplinary approach. Publications were searched for titles, keywords, and abstract terms related to pandemics (e.g., COVID, Corona, SARS-COVID) and transnational family dynamics (e.g., transnational parents, children). The search strings were ("transnat* famil*" or "transnat* parent*" or "transnat* child*") AND (COVID* or *pandem* or corona* or sars-cov*) for WoS and ("transnat* famil*" or "transnat* parent*" or "transnat* child*") AND (COVID* or *pandem* or corona* or sars-cov*) for ERIC. Full details and links to the search results are included in the supplemental material. After a search on May 19, 2023, 54 publications from WoS and 59 from ERIC were chosen.

Nevertheless, the search strategy risks failing to include works that investigate international migration and deal with cross-border intrafamilial relations but do not specifically label anything as transnational. We have experimented with using search strings that could bring in terms such as "international migration/migrant/etc" and "family" and "pandemics" or their variants. However, the number of results is tremendous (thousands or tens of thousands), becoming unmanageable. In addition, a quick inspection of several results revealed that most are completely unrelated to our research question. Therefore, we opted to restrain the search to the mentioned initial string, with the risk of leaving some papers that do not use "transnational" as a term uncharted. Let us also note that our primary interest is in transnational activities, which makes it natural to impose "transnational" as a mandatory term for the publications we have selected as our focus. Although, as explained, we acknowledge that some other publications might have been relevant, we are also confident that most of the relevant literature is included in our analysis.

At Stage 3, a study selection was conducted in order to include only relevant publications. The 113 results were evenly divided among nine independent reviewers and assessed with respect to relevance based on title, abstract, year of publication, and a very general quality-check criterion: being peer reviewed. Two publications were excluded for being published before COVID-19, and seven were not peer reviewed. Two texts were not fully retrieved. Ultimately, 29 items were included in the review, whereas 73 were found to be unrelated to the subject matter. The PRISMA figure (Figure 1) shows the screening flow and the search strings used. Publications are summarized in the supplemental material, including their purpose, scope, methods, and key findings.

At Stage 4, charting the data was partly automatically done, resulting from the information extracted from ERIC and WoS (bibliographical information, from authors to keywords and abstracts). In addition, a narrative description of each study was produced based on effectively reading the publications. This task was again divided between team members and led to the summary descriptions from the supplemental material, which refer to the population of the studies, methods, aims, and main findings to set up the context in which the TNFs were inspected in times of COVID-19. In addition, the 29 items selected for the review were analyzed using the eight proposed themes. Each author of this paper received four to five publications and analyzed each publication thoroughly. Two themes, namely language and education, were not addressed in the selected corpus of literature, and given space constraints, we decided to leave them out of this paper (Table 1). For the remaining six, the main findings were drawn from each publication and proposed to all other authors.

At Stage 5, we proceeded with collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. Six of the authors received the task to reconsider the findings drawn from the corpus of literature during the previous stage. They drafted the main conclusions for each of the themes. Three other authors went through the resulting paper and homogenized the tone, made observations, and asked for further reflection and clarification. Regular meetings for discussions and data confrontations were used to refine the findings. Three of the authors took implications from each theme to set up the main conclusions and provide a draft of the discussion, which was further refined through internal discussions of the whole team.

Findings

Uncertainty

The analysis of the articles revealed that COVID-19 was associated with uncertainty about the impact of infection, safety measures, travel regulations, national responses, and reunification with loved ones abroad.
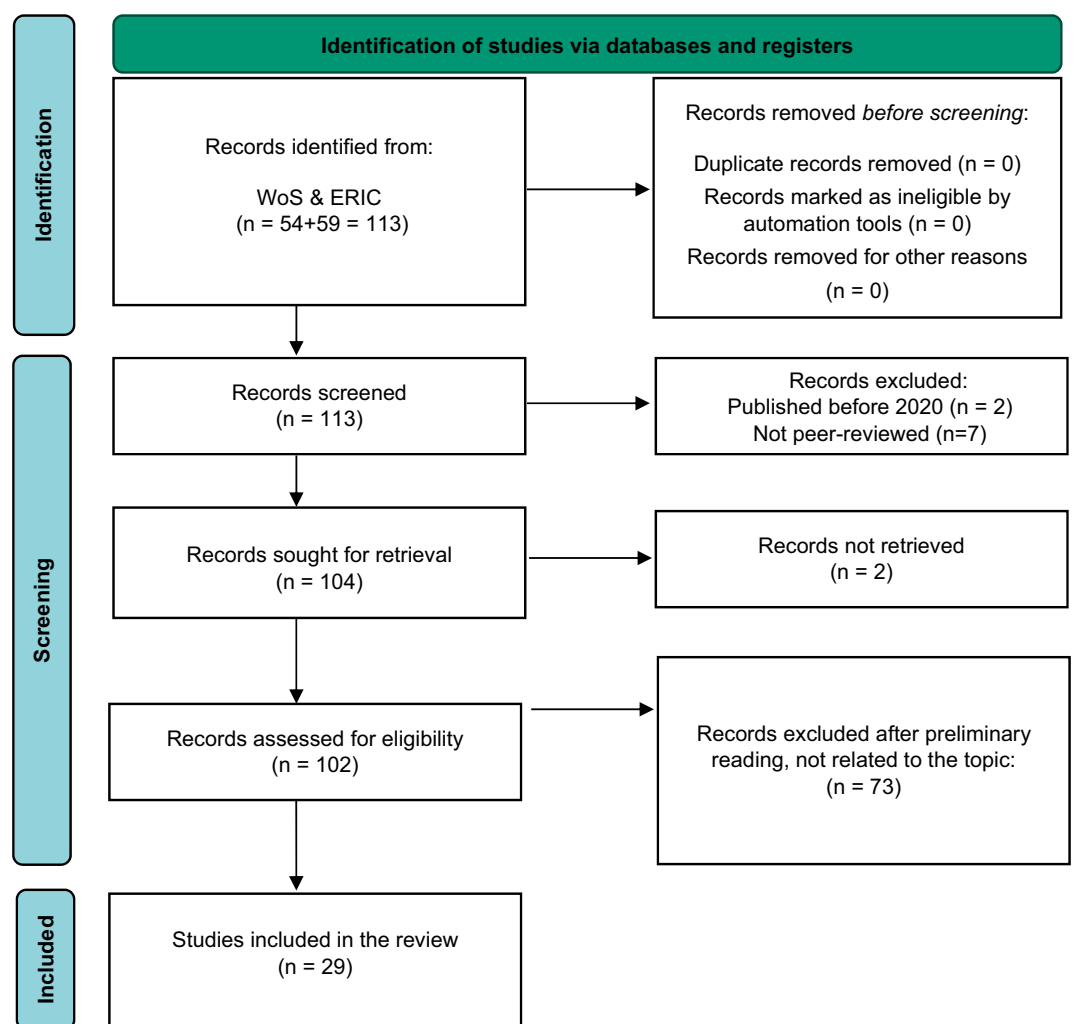
FIGURE 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. *Note*: The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram shows the screening flow and the search strings used. Adapted from "The PRISMA 2020 Statement: An Updated Guideline for Reporting Systematic Reviews," by M. J. Page, J. E. McKenzie, P. M. Bossuyt, I. Boutron, T. C. Hoffmann, C. D. Mulrow, … & D. Moher, 2021, BMJ, 372(71), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71. Copyright 2021 by BMJ Publishing Group.

TABLE 1 Themes.

Themes identified in the interdisciplinary expert group	Themes identified after the first screening
Uncertainty	Uncertainty
Psychological aspects	Psychological aspects
Communication	Communication
Social networks	Social networks
Care	Care
Uses of time	Uses of time
Language	
Education	

It was found that before the outbreak of COVID-19, families with members working abroad in precarious, undocumented situations were negatively affected by limited cross-border travel and an uncertain future. Transnational family members, including undocumented workers and students studying abroad, encountered numerous challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The unfamiliar persists as a consistent presence in the lives of these families. Simola et al. (2023) emphasized the worrisome nature of the pandemic due to uncertainty. This included inconsistent policy responses, changing travel restrictions, and initial uncertainty about how the virus spreads.

Skovgaard-Smith (2023) highlighted the heightened effects of cross-border immobility and associated uncertainty on TNFs residing in multiple territories. The uncertainty surrounding travel restrictions prompted a reevaluation of familial arrangements, including the legal custody of children in different countries. International students in Canada faced barriers to accessing basic daily services, such as international transportation and the opportunity to return to their country of origin, where they had access to their own housing and support network, amid the ongoing pandemic (Hari et al., 2023). Uncertainty in housing and anxiety regarding immigration status and long-term prospects in relation to immigration and career were reported among individuals in the same category.

Kempny (2023) examined the effect of the pandemic on migration experiences and its potential to exacerbate unequal mobilities. This paper explored the dichotomy of passivity and activity in uncertain times, specifically highlighting the active role played by women. The author examined how certain migrants are positioned in a dual manner, leading to different levels of vulnerability. Working-class women faced greater vulnerability in terms of job loss and low income compared to middle-class women, who enjoyed the advantage of being able to work remotely.

Border closures during the pandemic separated couples living across borders, particularly those not legally married, highlighting previously overlooked aspects of transnational family dynamics. In Norway, for example, unmarried couples who had faced no prior border challenges suddenly encountered restrictions, prompting the government to introduce a temporary romantic partner category to address their situations (Staver & Eggebo, 2023).

Charsley and Wray (2023) examined how bureaucratic and immigration control timelines intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating challenges for TNFs seeking family reunification in the United Kingdom. The prolonged separation caused uncertainty and anxiety, as there was no guarantee of reunification.

After the initial COVID-19–related measures, Canadian international graduate students (IGS) faced uncertainty regarding their ability to leave or return to the country (Fandino & Banerjee, 2022). The IGS were excluded from government arrangements. They also encountered a surge of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. The pandemic showed that the Canadian government sees IGS as a source of labor and potential permanent residents to address future workforce shortages. However, this perspective fails to consider the diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, needs, and aspirations of this group (Fandino & Banerjee, 2022). The authors highlighted that the pandemic has revealed and worsened nearly all global inequalities.

Chinese international students in the United Kingdom faced similar insecurities as TNFs during the pandemic, highlighting shared challenges in their lives. Hu et al. (2022) demonstrated that international education mobility was considered low risk prior to COVID-19, but this perception has changed significantly since then. The students' increased insecurity was influenced by the double stigma they encountered. Chinese students in the United Kingdom were perceived as both insignificant to the British state and as adversaries associated with the alleged source of the pandemic (Hu et al., 2022).

Jayasuriya (2021) argued that the pandemic has revealed the ongoing vulnerability experienced by many migrants and their families worldwide and also highlighted the unequal treatment of migrant citizens compared to national citizens by labor-receiving states.

Psychological aspects

TNFs faced unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant psychological impacts. Travel restrictions led to prolonged separations from loved ones, intensifying feelings of isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the psychological vulnerabilities of TNFs, particularly in terms of stress, loneliness, and financial anxiety. Although digital communication provided a partial solution, it could not fully compensate for the emotional void caused by prolonged separation. Moving forward, policies should address the mental health needs of TNFs by improving access to psychosocial support and facilitating safer mobility options during global crises. For transnational family members, the pandemic brought emotional needs, the need for closeness, and feelings of loneliness to the forefront, and videoconference tools have become crucial for connecting with extended family and addressing such needs (Mantilla, 2022). Polymedia communication with relatives, providing support and comfort, eased the feelings of separation from parents and grandparents (Popyk & Pustułka, 2021). However, digital communication with family was found to increase anxiety and depression due to the absence of physical connection (Mantilla, 2022). During lockdowns, Galstyan and Galstyan (2021) and Popyk and Pustułka (2021) proposed allowing quarantining in shared households to address the lack of interaction with families in different countries. This would provide more diverse relationships to compensate for the absence of extended family members.

Galstyan and Galstyan (2021) found that being part of a transnational family during the pandemic intensified feelings of shame, such as being infected after contact with a relative abroad or practicing safety measures that contradict cultural norms from the country of origin. The pandemic's restrictions had adverse effects on the mental well-being of transnational mothers unable to visit their children (Skovgaard-Smith, 2023). Skovgaard-Smith (2023) documented higher levels of strain, stress, mental and physical illness, and social isolation. The emotional stress related to transnational motherhood, particularly resulting from compromising prevailing motherhood norms, was exacerbated during the lockdown.

Duh-Leong et al. (2022) found that travel restrictions impacted low-income Chinese-American families' childcare arrangements. This led to a range of emotional responses, including heightened anxiety and financial stress, as well as a sense of relief in being able to personally raise and care for their children. During the pandemic, many members of TNFs were unable to visit or care for family members in critical moments, heightening grief and a sense of helplessness. It appears that these prolonged separations exacerbated preexisting mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Skovgaard-Smith (2023) observed a rise in discriminatory practices and attitudes toward migrants, resulting in feelings of exclusion, isolation, unhappiness, and ostracism. Discrimination was experienced when certain home countries denied the repatriation or visitation of their citizens residing abroad, resulting in feelings of statelessness and neglect. Migrants often face challenges in accessing support from both their host and home countries to care for their relatives living abroad. Charsley and Wray (2023) found that British citizens going through the process of reuniting with non-British spouses and children experienced heightened anxiety due to prolonged separation and uncertainty about future reunification. Horton (2022) and Simola et al. (2023) found that immigrants experienced a high level of distress during the pandemic due to their limited ability to offer assistance and sufficient material and emotional support.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new risks to international education mobility, which had previously been considered low risk. Hu and colleagues (Hu et al., 2022) found that Chinese international students and their families were particularly affected by the transnational infrastructural disruptions. According to the authors, such families possess the necessary endurance and adaptability to sustain themselves amidst the changes caused by a member's migration. Transnational family relationships adapt to aid Chinese international students' (im)mobility (Hu et al., 2022).

The pandemic generated a range of complex stress factors, but for many respondents in this study, the inability to visit family emerged as one of the most pressing challenges. Transnational family members also faced additional obstacles, such as reduced flight availability, financial constraints, and employment challenges, which led to increased stressful situations (Simola et al., 2023). Public health narratives framed international travel as a threat, amplifying existing bordering processes and suspicions surrounding all forms of transnational mobility. This led to a moral dilemma for respondents, who had to weigh the risks their mobility might pose to their family members' health, reflecting a broader societal distrust during the pandemic.

The tension arising from the desire for physical presence resulted in emotional challenges, including desperation, guilt, frustration, and anger (Chatterjee, 2022). Chatterjee's study focused on the experiences of wives and spouses during the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on the social and psychological impacts of international migration on TNFs. The study indicated that a significant number of spouses are experiencing psychiatric disorders, such as insomnia, depression, anxiety, and hypertension. The emotional and geographical separation caused by the pandemic has placed considerable strain on marriages, contributing to challenges in marital stability.

Overall, COVID-19 revealed how vulnerable TNFs are to the emotional disruptions caused by global crises, highlighting the need for policy interventions to support these communities in times of such crises.

Communication

Communication was a prominent theme in the review. COVID-19 has impacted how communication is performed and understood (Watson et al., 2021). Multiple studies have shown that the global lockdown and travel restrictions have caused TNFs to rely more on digital technology for communication. This has resulted in increased interactions and regular contact among family members (de Andrade et al., 2022; Galstyan & Galstyan, 2021; Hu et al., 2022; Mantilla, 2022; Popyk & Pustułka, 2021; Simola et al. 2023; Skovgaard-Smith, 2023; Ślusarczyk, 2023).

Virtual communication has expanded its applications, including using platforms like Zoom for family events like funerals (Mantilla, 2022; Simola et al., 2023) or witnessing the birth of a new family member (Simola et al., 2023). Zheng (2022) highlighted the significance of communication in TNFs for identity formation and self-presentation. Specifically, the author examined the experiences of Chinese students in Australia undergoing queer transitions and their use of social media to navigate familial communication (Zheng, 2022).

Digital communication facilitates frequent contact and reduces physical distance, but research underlines that it cannot fully replace the importance of physical presence. Simola et al. (2023) found that information and communication technology (ICT) alone did not effectively reduce the desire for in-person interaction. They suggested that this challenge stemmed from the complex and sensory aspects of human connections. Skovgaard-Smith (2023) found that nonpresential interactions were inadequate substitutes for physical presence, especially when a relative was ill.

Limitations and restrictions relevant to virtual communication were evident in certain groups, highlighting its drawbacks. Simola et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of technology proficiency for experiencing the positive emotional impacts of ICTs. De Andrade et al. (2022) found that although ICT use during the pandemic strengthened family ties, it did not prevent the exclusion of older family members or those with hearing impairments from this mode of communication. Popyk and Pustułka (2021) revealed that relying solely on virtual communication instead of combining face-to-face visits with virtual interaction negatively impacted the communication between grandparents and grandchildren in TNFs. According to Ślusarczyk (2023), ICT was advantageous for families already accustomed to virtual

communication; however, when older adults were unfamiliar with or unwilling to use technology, family ties suffered during the pandemic.

The analysis of the articles revealed that changes in communication, including sharing information about the virus, containment measures, regulations, and new methods of health care provision, were the most important issues under investigation. Galstyan and Galstyan (2021) coined "pandemic transnationalism" to describe the exchange of ideas and practices during COVID-19. This occurs through phone calls, emails, social media, and sending personal protective equipment by mail. The authors assert that TNFs, amid the pandemic, had to consider not only local regulations but also regulations in the countries where their family members resided. This suggested a shift in the conveyed and understood information, both in terms of its substance and quantity. Hu et al. (2022) found that maintaining close communication among transnational family members was crucial for validating information during the uncertain COVID-19 pandemic.

Social networks and relationships

Digital communication technologies have played a crucial role in improving relationships among TNFs and migrant communities during the pandemic (Mantilla, 2022). Galstyan and Galstyan (2021) found that migrant family members share new information with their social networks in the home and host country, resulting in the collective consumption of social remittances. Contemporary technologies have improved social cohesion, facilitating the transmission of both material and social remittances through enhanced copresence. Prepandemic bonds have influenced the shaping of pandemic digital communication (Popyk & Pustułka, 2021).

The pandemic resulted in increased use of digital technologies, which further contributed to the promotion of digital solidarity (Mantilla, 2022). Digital communication was used to replace in-person visits between grandparents and their migrated grandchildren during the pandemic. However, it can be limited by a lack of internet access or devices and cannot fully replicate the bonding experience of face-to-face visits (Popyk & Pustułka, 2021). It often fails to facilitate adequate communication due to children's limited interest and attention span at a young age. In kinships, face-to-face communication is still the preferred mode, especially between children and grandparents (Popyk & Pustułka, 2021).

Mobility barriers alter the visiting patterns of family members in their home country. Short-term visits became inefficient due to the need for preventive quarantining upon arrival in both the country of origin and the country of residence (Juozeliūnienė et al., 2021). Stigma and conflicts with neighbors were reported alongside the spread of the virus. The absence of family gatherings during holidays like Easter, Christmas, and New Year's Eve and challenges in grieving and mourning have disrupted the important role these events play in maintaining strong bonds within TNFs (Juozeliūnienė et al., 2021).

Familial and friendship bonds held great significance, emphasizing the value placed on both types of relationships. Digital communication during COVID-19 facilitated reconnecting with old friends (Skovgaard-Smith, 2023). Online social gatherings allowed migrants to join in, fostering a feeling of closeness and shared presence with loved ones abroad. At the same time, virtual interaction intensified the feeling of being physically distant and absent by highlighting what is happening and being missed in the home country (Skovgaard-Smith, 2023).

Numerous studies have examined international students and their families living across borders. Fandino and Banerjee (2022) found that online socialization led to the division of students into internationals and noninternationals, resulting in increased isolation for the former group. Inequality patterns worsened and expanded during the pandemic, even in online settings. Transnational anxiety led international students to seek support from their families for both economic and emotional reasons (Hari et al., 2023). Hu et al. (2022) pointed out the significance of

family social ties in (im)mobility choices. These factors, along with economic and cultural capital, were crucial in helping students during the pandemic. They provided necessary resources and information to those who were stranded between countries without support.

Care

The challenges of caregiving in the context of COVID-19 have brought to light several key issues. First, there was a temporary suspension of the assumption of mobility, impacting the ability to provide personal care to the family left behind, leading to what Merla et al. (2020) referred to as immobility regimes and exacerbating new care strategies. Second, maintaining virtual caregiving methods became crucial, with ICTs playing a vital role. According to Baldassar (2020), older members of TNFs demonstrated proficiency, and in some cases greater competence, with these technologies compared to the general population of their age group, as they were more "trained" to use ICT. For years, the use of ICT has been seen as the "social glue" for spatially separated families. Last, the situation prompted the search for "compensation" strategies to navigate the new challenges (Joseph et al., 2022; Skrbiš, 2008).

The papers examined cross-border immobility, changes in family care strategies, emotional aspects of care, care needs and care expectations of TNFs members, role of care-related cultural and social norms, and intergenerational solidarity. Immobility prevented TNFs from providing care to their relatives abroad in various areas such as child care, family care, and care for adults (Duh-Leong et al., 2022; Mantilla, 2022; Nehring & Hu, 2022; Skovgaard-Smith, 2023). This was particularly challenging for those accustomed to frequent visits from family members who live abroad (Juozeliūnienė et al., 2021). Migrants refrained from travelling due to fear of the virus, even if it was possible for them to do so. Isolation and lack of support were particularly evident during times of illness, the arrival of a new family member, or death, which restricted the ability to give or receive care (Skovgaard-Smith, 2023).

These conditions affected caregiving responsibilities, leading to changes in care provisions and practices across various dimensions. The pandemic led to changes in family dynamics as relatives living abroad had to find alternative caregiving arrangements for their families. Both migrants and nonmigrants sought new ways, distinctive to the prepandemic period, to ensure the well-being of their loved ones (Galstyan & Galstyan, 2021). Slusarczyk (2023) identified three caregiving strategies used by Polish TNFs during the pandemic, distinct from those employed in the prepandemic period. First, the use of ICTs for providing nonmaterial components of care, particularly emotional and moral support, increased as a substitute for more intensive in-person contact. Second, sending money to cover care-related costs that could not be provided personally became a noticeable care strategy. Third, more complex care assistance was provided during less frequent visits to Poland compared to the prepandemic period. Thus, caregiving evolved through various "reconfigurations" to adapt to new circumstances in addressing care needs. Some of these adaptations may have lasting effects, extending beyond the end of the pandemic.

Care-related literature highlighted the importance of virtual caregiving methods during the pandemic. Simola et al. (2023) found that virtual methods effectively maintained certain caregiving responsibilities, such as grocery shopping. Mantilla (2022) discovered that digital communication facilitated more intensive caregiving practices, as reported in various studies. Another emerging care-related practice resulting from the pandemic was a form of transnational social remittance referred to as "pandemic transnationalism." This concept involves transferring ideas and exchanging caregiving practices across borders to address pandemic-related challenges (Galstyan & Galstyan, 2021), such as sending protective items like masks, gloves, and sanitizers as expressions of care and fulfilling familial obligations.

However, the pandemic not only led to the development of new strategies and practices but, in certain contexts, also resulted in a reduction of care and social support. Maviza and Nzima (2022) demonstrated that, within South African and Zimbabwean TNFs, decreased cash remittances due to job loss and the cessation of in-kind remittances due to lockdowns and travel restrictions were observed during the pandemic. Although transnational care involving remittances intensified in the postpandemic period, it has not fully returned to prepandemic levels. Another stream of literature on transnational family caregiving reflects that, alongside the increased and intensified provision of transnational care in various forms, new care needs also emerged due to the pandemic. Several studies examining the care needs of older adults during the pandemic emphasized the heightened importance of family members' physical presence and care, which TNFs had to address (Maviza & Nzima, 2022; Simola et al., 2023; Ślusarczyk, 2023). In this context, Simola et al. (2023) found that older adults experienced a need for their family members' physical presence. They expressed concerns about their family members' inability to travel and provide adequate care.

The pandemic has exacerbated changes in child caregiving practices. Duh-Leong et al. (2022) illustrated, using the example of low-income Chinese American families in the United States, that parents who could not visit or reunite with grandparents in their home country had to rely on them for support from afar only. Additionally, older children and teenagers were compelled to take on more caregiving responsibilities than the prepandemic period. Rodriguez-Cruz (2023) demonstrated that teenagers in TNFs assumed new caregiving roles, such as caring for infected parents in the absence of the other parent living abroad, negatively impacting their academic performance.

Thus, pandemic-related transnational family literature highlights the importance of intergenerational solidarity, cultural and social norms in care and social support, and caregiving responsibilities as key factors influencing the reconfiguration of care practices. These elements acted as crucial "social glue" during the pandemic. Both during and after the pandemic, the enduring presence of normative expectations and reciprocal morality regarding care remained prevalent. Simola et al. (2023) found that familial persistence continued despite the emotional distance of TNF members. Maviza and Nzima (2022) pointed out that children maintained intergenerational support for their parents during the pandemic, despite economic challenges, as a display of morality and moral reciprocity. Oso and Martinez-Bujan (2022) discovered, through their exploration of Latin American TNFs in Spain, that "interpersonal pacts" and cultural norms shape informal social protection strategies within these families. These studies suggest the pandemic enhanced social protection strategies and care in the studied TNFs. However, others (Juozeliūnienė et al., 2021; Ślusarczyk, 2023) have argued that these enhancements and pandemic-induced changes were relatively temporary and may not have long-term effects.

Uses of time

Unexpectedly, our corpus of literature does not include any reference to the time devoted to regular interactions within the TNF under the constraint of spending time at the job or in other social interactions. However, the practices of interaction within the family are reported to change in response to the need to accommodate time zone differences.

Time becomes a burden when transnational family members are in different time zones. Paradoxically, such a burden was accentuated by the pandemic, which disrupted the regular visits home. For instance, the relationship between Chinese students in the United Kingdom and their families on another continent (7-hour time zone difference) was under immense pressure, as they had to manage an unprecedented situation in an extremely short time frame and with countless variables changing from one day to the next, such as imposed quarantines, closed borders, and cancelled or rescheduled flights (Hu et al., 2022).

Asynchronous communication provided by social media partly solved the time zone difference and was embraced more than ever during the pandemic (Mantilla, 2022). For instance, commenting on Facebook posts or having WhatsApp groups allowed a permanent connection between family members and a developing feeling of belonging without harming time resources. TNFs' members had to make quick decisions to develop a "minute-to-minute response mechanism" in the face of rapid change and unpredictability (Hu et al., 2022, p. 78). The mere fact that this mechanism was developed indicates strong bonds that tend to make such families subject to the constant collaborative effort necessary in the context of a transnational existence (Hu et al., 2022).

From a different perspective but still considering the desynchronization of family life across borders, Horton (2022) addressed a specific case of pandemic-caused temporal disruption. Many undocumented Mexican migrants experienced what Horton refers to as an "acceleration of time" following an unexpectedly rapid deterioration of health and often premature death of the immigrants' parents. Typical death rituals were condensed and sometimes organized via the internet (Mantilla, 2022), with less time for mourning and reflection and a lower level of interaction with relatives. A sense of "shrinking of time" becomes present (Horton, 2022), and one could consider whether it affects the stability of TNFs.

DISCUSSION

Our scoping review aimed to address the challenges faced by TNFs during the COVID-19 pandemic. It relied on a scoping literature review and found that transnational family members faced challenges in different areas of their lives during the pandemic.

The physical restrictions and mobility limitations were partly compensated for by digital communication (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted communication among transnational family members, leading to an increase in the use of digital technology that allowed digital kinkeeping, communicating, and providing and receiving care. However, the pressure for the use of technology also highlighted inequalities, namely regarding its access and the skills and conditions needed to use it. TNFs with access to technology were, to a large extent, less deprived in terms of communication. In contrast, TNFs with limited access to technology or without the skills or conditions to use it experienced more negative effects of the pandemic on communication.

During COVID-19, TNFs prioritized maintaining strong family bonds and solidarity despite communication and travel challenges (Lubbers et al., 2021). Social networks, including friends, relatives, and extended family, are crucial for TNFs to receive support in their home and host countries, aiding in their economic and social integration in new social environments (Liu & Shaffer, 2005; Végh et al., 2023). TNFs faced challenges during the pandemic, including cross-border distance problems, travel restrictions, and limited international mobility (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Collings & Sheeran, 2020). Social networks supported TNFs in combating loneliness and isolation during the pandemic (Kovacs et al., 2021). Additionally, they facilitated digital communication and fostered kinship and relationships (Baldassar, 2023; Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). These studies confirm the importance of close friendships in the lives of TNFs, supporting our initial assumption that familial and social relationships are crucial. Real-world challenges, like missing traditional celebrations and facing difficulties in grieving and mourning, hinder the symbolic role of these events in preserving bonds that prevent TNFs from disintegrating. Social remittances strengthen interconnectedness in TNFs. Our review emphasizes the significant role of international students and their social networks in the lives of TNFs. It reveals notable changes in their social network patterns and kinkeeping during the pandemic.

TNFs encountered distinct psychological challenges amid the pandemic, and the disease impacted their emotional and social lives, well-being, and routines. The effects stem from

physical separation, travel limitations, and uncertainties, as observed in psychological studies related to COVID-19. Individuals in TNFs faced increased stress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic, particularly those lacking social support. Isolation negatively affected transnational family members' psychological well-being, serving as an additional stressor (Ahorsu et al., 2022; Wiederhold, 2022). Research highlighted the heightened distress resulting from communication barriers, financial challenges, and the inability of transnational family members to reunite. This worsened existing tensions, requiring new coping methods and strong support systems.

Furthermore, TNFs face various challenges arising from the increasing global uncertainty. The pandemic has led to a significant increase in racism and xenophobia toward migrants globally (Fandino & Banerjee, 2022; Hu et al., 2022). COVID-19 has also exposed the inequalities and stigmatization experienced by many migrants in their daily lives. Our analysis of TNFs and their uncertainty during COVID-19 revealed that they faced unpredictability in social, political, and economic aspects, particularly in relation to health care services (Koffman et al., 2020). TNFs have developed various coping strategies in response. Herrera et al. (2022) discovered that TNFs' migration motivations shifted during the pandemic due to heightened uncertainty, social inequalities, and lack of protection in host countries.

The study showed that TNFs face unique challenges related to time and space. Transnational family members are often located in different countries and time zones, complicating coordination and communication (Baldassar et al., 2016; Cortés & Pan, 2019). TNFs should allocate more time to assimilate into the host society and extend their working hours (Cortés & Pan, 2019; Jordan et al., 2018). During the pandemic, TNFs had more time to spend together at home despite potential challenges like lower socioeconomic status and limited facilities. This increased time together may impact the quality of family interactions (Smite et al., 2023). Contrary to our expectations, the studies in our review did not examine changes in working hours. They identified three key time-related stressors: replacing in-person interactions due to time zone differences, limited time for resolving family issues, and a perception of time shrinking due to reduced ritual gatherings and higher mortality rates among older undocumented immigrants. Asynchronous communication's impact on family ties is evident. However, the reduction in time for traditional gatherings may hinder the strengthening of bonds, posing a challenge to the long-term sustainability of these relationships.

The literature on TNF dynamics underscores the importance of care practices across distances (Baldassar, 2007; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Christou & Kofman, 2022). These practices involve strategies for receiving and providing care, negotiating responsibilities, and maintaining collective family belonging through shared welfare and social reproduction, irrespective of distance or migration patterns (Christou & Kofman, 2022). Studies reviewed emphasized that changes, social ruptures, and crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Amelina et al., 2024; Skovgaard-Smith, 2023) play a critical role in reshaping care practices or "compensations" (Joseph et al., 2022; Skrbiš, 2008) in areas such as child care, elder care, and family support (Duh-Leong et al., 2022; Mantilla, 2022; Nehring & Hu, 2022). These shifts often challenge social and cultural norms, particularly regarding gender roles and intergenerational solidarity, while testing TNFs' ability to adapt to obstacles, immobility, and evolving needs. Pandemic-related restrictions on mobility significantly limited TNFs' ability to provide in-person care. However, the increased use of information and communication technologies helped sustain emotional, moral, and social support, though older family members often needed assistance with digital literacy (Joseph et al., 2022). Although TNFs demonstrated resilience and adaptability, there is no evidence of significant long-term changes in caregiving practices. Nevertheless, the enhanced use of ICTs and online caregiving options is expected to continue, reflecting an ongoing evolution in how TNFs manage care across distances.

Limitations

An important limitation of our endeavor is linked to excluding publications based on their absence from the WoS and ERIC databases. On the one hand, we wanted to use the inclusion in such data sets as a rough indicator of the reliability of the publications. However, given the limited resources, we could not extend the selection area. For instance, by adding everything from Google Scholar, we would end up with thousands more publications. Nevertheless, among them, some should be valuable, which hinders the exhaustivity of our inquiry. However, we are confident that most of the papers pertaining to both reliability and relevance to our research questions were included in the analysis.

The selection of keywords determined the structure of the article collection used in this review and could produce some biases in the presented discussion. First, there is no shared definition of TNF. Second, there are other terms, such as migrant families or divided households, that could have been used instead but were not included as keywords in our search, given the intended explicit focus on TNFs. Finally, migration scholars often discuss transnational families implicitly, without applying the exact term, which renders these articles absent from our data set despite their relevance to the main topic.

In order to secure a high-quality review of the discussed papers, we restricted the analysis to two major databases—ERIC and Web of Science—because both include only peer-reviewed publications. This, however, provided us mostly with articles published in English. The review focused on content analysis rather than statistical analysis. Despite establishing clear evaluation criteria for deciding on themes prior to the screening process, there remains a risk of subjectivity in selecting topics and examples. The number of articles reviewed and their heterogeneity (in terms of discipline, focus, and applied methods) combined with limited space did not always allow us for systematic engagement with the content. In this context, combined with the varying number of articles per subtheme, there is variation in the length of the subsections of the paper, especially in the Findings. This process represents an emerging approach in review methodology, offering a starting point for refining future reviews in this area.

Implications

The reviewed studies suggest the need for robust support systems for TNFs, both at their point of origin and destination, to assist them in managing challenging circumstances that disrupt their daily routines, interactions, and communication. To counteract the adverse effects of isolation, people devised creative ways to maintain contact with family members across borders. Familiarity with new communication technologies became essential in this endeavor. Designing policies to develop skills, particularly for older generations and at the source, could be valuable. Incorporating digital literacy and family connection technology programs could be considered as part of these policies. The findings also highlight the importance of harmonizing international social protection systems. Developing mechanisms to promote social benefit and facilitate the transfer of rights could ensure TNFs receive the necessary support, regardless of their geographical location. Finally, there is a pressing need for stronger TNF laws. It may be necessary to examine immigration laws to address the needs of TNFs, including family reunification and dual citizenship. In conclusion, the findings indicate the need for a comprehensive strategy to bolster TNFs. It is crucial to establish robust support systems and tackle underlying structural concerns, such as social protection, health regulations, and legal frameworks that impact TNFs. Such implications may hold water for every potential global crisis, not only pandemics, and they could be used as a framework to start intervention in such global events.

Conclusion

Our comprehensive review of published works regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TNFs has highlighted their resilience and ability to reinvent family connections. The adaptation of communication through online tools, such as for modifying rituals, has reaffirmed the significance of family ties and is likely to persist in normal circumstances.

However, a prolonged period of uncertainty and physical separation beyond that caused by COVID-19 could exert excessive stress on members of TNFs, potentially leading to the failure of coping mechanisms supporting remote TNF members. Therefore, preemptively developing small programs to assist TNFs in managing physical separation, as well as integrating these tools into psychological support services, is likely to enable these families to navigate major global challenges on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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