MANAGING FAMILY LIFE OVER DISTANCE

Estonian Stay-Behind Partners’ Perspectives on Family Life in the Context of Labour Migration to Finland

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### Abstract

Migration is not necessarily about settling with the whole family to a new country, but instead it is becoming more common that family members are dispersed between countries. Also almost all Estonian parents who have been working abroad have decided to leave their child or children in Estonia where they are typically in the care of the other parent. For Estonian migrants, Finland is the most popular destination country and therefore, this study investigates family life in the context of Estonian labour migration to Finland.

The labour migration of one family member does not only shape the life of that person, but also the lives of those who remain behind. Because partners who stay behind with the children in the home country are rarely included in research on migration or transnational families, this study is based on their perspectives and analyses the dynamic experiences of family life that crosses national borders. Drawing on the literature of some of the leading scholars in the field of transnationalism, family practices and co-presence, I examine how family relationships are maintained, how family responsibilities are managed, and what meanings are given to family life across countries’ borders. The study includes in-depth semi-structured interviews with stay-behind partners who are currently living in a transnational family, but also those who have recently had the experience and who thus were able to better reflect on it with hindsight.

The results of the research add insights to presence and absence in family life. The analysis shows that frequent and highly regular communication over distance helps to sustain a sense of family unity. However, mediated co-presence which is produced by this long-distance communication does not replace physical co-presence which allows the stay-behind partners to best make sense of the family relationships. At the same time, physical co-presence requires adjustments in the stay-behind partners’ everyday life who during the absence of their partner have established their own routines. For some stay-behind partners, these adjustments can feel very demanding as they decrease their control over their daily routines and bring with it more tasks.

### Keywords

Transnational families, transnationalism, labour migration, family life, co-presence
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1 Introduction

All over the world a growing number of people are living apart from their families while being separated by state borders. Often this is the result of forced dispersion caused by such as violence or natural disasters (Merolla, 2010: 171), but also emigration of people for the purposes of economically supporting their family members, who remain living in the home country, has become more common (Dreby, 2007: 1050). Also, migration policies in the host countries can hinder families moving as a whole (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011: 704) or set restrictions to family reunification. In such circumstances, even those family members who do not move themselves often engage in connections that cross distances. This has been made possible thanks to developments in producing new types of communication technologies such as emails, mobile phones and Skype, and by cheaper, faster and more diverse ways of travelling. Thanks to the easiness of moving between different countries, and the development of communication technology, people nowadays have an opportunity to maintain stronger ties with family members than ever before (Ryan, 2010: 82). Such geographically separated families are far from being a new phenomenon, but they are becoming an important part of everyday life in the global context in which mobility is commonplace (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

For Estonian migrants Finland is the most popular destination country (Statistics Estonia, 2016), and based on nationality Estonians simultaneously form the largest group of foreigners living in Finland followed by nationals from the Russian Federation (Statistics Finland, 2016a). Large-scale Estonian migration to Finland started after Estonia joined the European Union in 2004 (Anniste, 2011), creating better possibilities for Estonians not only for permanent migration, but also for cross-border labour mobility. With that the number of families dispersed over the two countries’ borders has also grown. Considering that about two-thirds of working-aged Estonians, who consider working abroad, or who have a concrete plan to do so, have at least one under-aged child (Tarum, 2014: 15-16), there is reason to look at the flow of people to Finland in the context of family. The fact that nearly all parents, who have experience working abroad, left their children in Estonia, mostly in the care of their partner (Tarum, 2014: 16), makes geographically separated families an important social phenomena and refers even further to the importance of examining Estonian migration to Finland from the family perspective.
A situation where one of the parents of an Estonian family works in Finland, while the rest of the family stays living in Estonia, could be considered almost a typical feature of Estonian labour migration, although both public and academic debate on this matter has so far remained largely absent. According to the latest Estonian Population and Housing Census conducted in 2011, there are 8570 families, 7.9 per cent of the two-parent households in Estonia with under-aged children, in which one parent works abroad (Espenberg, Lees, Arrak, Aksen & Vahaste-Pruuk, 2014: 10; Statistics Estonia, 2013). Despite the modest official number, the actual amount of such families is bound to be much higher due to limitations in data gathering (Espenberg et al., 2014).

As this study will also show, these migrant parents often follow a circular migration pattern between Finland and Estonia (Lulle & Assmuth, 2013: 4). Nevertheless, as a consequence of the labour migration, the families are most of the time geographically dispersed in two different locations across the borders of Estonia and Finland. In some cases, parents might be living apart from their families for years despite initially temporary plans. These types of families, where its members are located in different countries, constitute so called transnational families (Dreby, 2006: 33). Transnational families are defined as “families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders” (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002: 3).

Transnational families are a unique form of family as they do not include having residency in the same household, which is typical to most partners with common children. However, in the Western world living at the same residence tends to be perceived as a main feature of “normal and healthy family relationships” (Baldassar, Kilkey, Merla & Wilding, 2014: 162). For this reason, it has been presumed that separation due to distance leads to familial troubles (Sørensen & Vammen, 2014: 89-90), and it has been argued that family fragmentation is a common issue following one family member’s migration (Kraler et al., 2011). Although it is generally believed that migration contributes to the decision to separate there are also studies that prove otherwise with migration having positive consequences on the relationship between the partners (Gjokaj, Zinn, & Nawyn, 2013). As migration is an important event in the life course, it has a crucial effect also on the roles and situations inside the family (Evergeti & Ryan, 2011). Although distance and physical absence which is caused by distance are
not necessarily obstacles for the development and maintenance of positive family relationships, in a combination of different factors they can influence their successful maintenance. Transnational family life can thus result in significant changes in the family structure (Banfi & Boccagni, 2011). Thus, it is important to examine how families are influenced by labour migration.

Traditionally migration research has investigated migrants and their families in the context of the host country while neglecting the family members who stay living at the home country (Baldassar, 2007a: 279). In transnational migration research, in which a lot of attention has been given to caregiving, the focus has been on the migrating family members and the ways they offer care to the family members who live in the home country (e.g. Evergeti & Ryan, 2011; Svašek, 2008; Merla, 2012). Thus, migration in general tends to be studied from the perspective of the destination countries, while the stay-behind family members have received very little attention. Migration is a life-changing decision, yet it does not only have an impact on the person migrating, but instead affects the whole family as every single member of the family needs to adjust to a new way of life (Nauck & Settles, 2011). The life of the migrant and the family members who stay behind are nevertheless very different. For this reason I find that investigating the perspectives of homeland kin is equally important.

So far relatively little interest has been demonstrated towards the experiences of Estonian migrants living in Finland, but even less academic attention has been given to Estonian migration to Finland from the perspective of family members who have remained living in Estonia. I argue that investigating the stay-behind partners’ perspectives helps to attain a more complete understanding of the experiences of transnational families. By studying those family members who have stayed behind we can understand that, for example, caregiving is not done only from the migrating family member to those at the home country, but instead can be mutual (Evergeti & Ryan, 2011), and that migration does not concern only the person migrating, but also others.

Although the migrant parents living in another country need to balance work and family life, the parent who resides back at the home country can also experience a significant increase in responsibilities. Providing for the wellbeing of the family might be one of the reasons for the migration, but at the same time the existence of a partner makes the migration possible as they stay behind looking after their common children. Due to the distance the parent who migrates will not, for example, be able to participate in
childcare or contribute to managing the household chores. Thus, commitment to the family, sharing household tasks, communication, are some examples of aspects which need to be negotiated (Baldassar, 2007b; Portes & DeWind, 2007). Migration often brings with it changes in the family members roles “introducing new inequalities between family members” (Sinatti, 2013: 215). This can lead to extra burdens for the parent who stays behind with the children and requires them to adjust to living without the partner. As the stay-behind partners are rarely incorporated into research on migration and transnational families, despite their above-described centrality, I am planning to shed some light on this under-studied topic.

This thesis thus focuses on Estonian families where one of the parents has moved to Finland due to labour migration, while the rest of the family has stayed living in Estonia, and explores family life across two countries’ borders drawing on the perspectives and experiences of the partners, who have remained in the home country with children. Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, this study examines how the stay-behind partners experience family life in the light of the labour migration of their partner and looks for answers to the following questions:

- How are the family relationships maintained?
- How are the family responsibilities managed?
- What meanings are attributed to family life over countries borders?

I will draw in this study on the theoretical literature on transnationalism, co-presence and family practices. When applied to the context of family members living in different countries, transnationalism makes it possible to understand that connections between the members can persist despite the geographical distance and borders separating them (Kilkey & Merla, 2014). Transnationalism is an important concept for this study also because it implies that a growing number of migrants have influence from geographical distance to the family life at the home country (Kraler et al., 2011: 288). The family practices approach (Morgan 1996, 2011) focuses on ‘doing the family’ and the importance of routine everyday activities on sustaining relationships and creating connectedness. This theory argues that families are not something static, but instead, require certain practices through which families are constructed (Morgan, 2011). By focusing on the practices of the families in this study, I will be better able to see how family relationships are maintained and how family responsibilities are managed. Using
the concept of co-presence allows me to examine how times spent in physical proximity and in geographical distance differ from one another and thus better see what role distance plays in these families, in which geographical separation is one of the central features.

In the context of this study, it is important to remember that at least in theory, the geographical proximity of Finland to Estonia entails easy and more frequent family visits between the countries and this is an important factor which makes the current study stand out. The proximity is an important factor comparable best with migration from such as Poland to Germany. Yet, the proximity between Finland and Estonia will not be overestimated as there are other factors that can come into play. However, return visits do have a symbolic and practical value in maintaining positive family relationships (Mason, 2004), which cannot be replaced by such things as phone calls (Svašek, 2008). Like Svašek (2008: 219) writes: “The multi-sensorial dimension of co-presence, the ability to see, hear, smell and touch each other, and to interact emotionally within the same time and space frame, allow for a unique form of intimacy which is irreplaceable by communication at a distance.”

By examining the experiences of families which are spatially dispersed, this study hopes to contribute to the understanding of modern migration patterns and to familial relationships that cross national borders. Since the analysis investigates the experiences of the families from the point of view of the partners who remained living in Estonia, it will help fill the gap in migration research, which has mainly tended to focus on the migrants. This way we will be better able to extend understanding on topics such as the role of the stay-behind family members in migration decisions or the maintenance of transnational ties. I also hope that this study will help researchers examine the phenomenon of transnational migration in the future. The final aim is to show the complexity behind Estonian migration to Finland.

To fill the aims of this study, the Master’s thesis is structured as follows. To understand the wider societal and economic framework of the topic under discussion, the first chapter introduces the reader to the recent history and the current state of Estonian migration to Finland. The second chapter will review previous relevant research regarding Estonian migration to Finland, and will more thoroughly look into research on transnational families in the international context. Besides the above-mentioned, the chapter on previous research will also touch upon the role of families in migration
research. The section to follow focuses on the theoretical approaches, in which I have brought together concepts transnationalism, family practices and co-presence. As transnationalism, which first started as a purely theoretical framework, has over the years transferred from theory to a field of empirical research (Boccagni, 2012: 119), it will be discussed from two different perspectives in the review of previous research and the theory chapter. The section before the results chapter discusses the research methods that were employed to get a better insight into family life which transcends countries’ borders. The research results chapter which draws on empirical analysis will demonstrate how the stay-behind women experience transnational family life. In the conclusion section the key findings are summarized, discussed in relation to former literature and suggestions for future research are brought out.
2 Estonian migration to Finland - recent trends and issues

In order to understand the essence of migration between Estonia and Finland, and to build a context for the current study, it is important to discuss the migration history of Estonians. In the following section I will focus on Estonians’ movement to Finland since the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, while highlighting the larger structural conditions by which these movements have been shaped. For the purposes of this study, I will look into recent Estonian migration in the second subchapter from the perspective of families. The migration behaviour of Estonians has gone through considerable changes throughout these past 25 years during which new forms of mobility have arisen.

It is important to note that the official numbers presented in this chapter do not fully capture the real extent of the situation. Estonians movement to Finland is difficult to estimate since in addition to the people residing permanently in Finland, there are large numbers of people who commute between Estonia and Finland because of work. In practice, the division between these two groups is not so easy to define. Estonians are not legally obligated to register their work abroad (Espenberg et al., 2014) or notify the Estonian state about their new residency (Tarum, 2014: 2). Thus, although there are Estonian people in Finland with full-time employment, who spend most of their time there, they can have their permanent residency in Estonia and never appear in Estonian statistics of people residing abroad. There is also reason to suspect that many Estonians, due to the circulatory migration pattern, have avoided registering officially with the Finnish police, which is why they may not neither appear in Finnish statistics about foreigners residing in Finland.

2.1 General patterns and main characteristics

Since the independence of Estonia from the Soviet Union in 1991, altogether more than 200 000 people have emigrated from Estonia (Tammaru & Eamets, 2015: 110). For a small nation that is a considerable amount. However, migration to Estonia during the Soviet era played an important role in this. Many people who moved to Estonia during the Soviet time moved back to their native territories soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Tammaru & Eamets, 2015: 110). Since the beginning of the 2000s Finland, United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany and Russia are the most popular destination countries for Estonian citizens (Tiit, 2015: 61), Finland being the principal
destination (Anniste & Tammaru, 2014: 387) both for permanent emigration and for temporary labour migration, which often includes maintaining residency in Estonia (Tarum, 2014: 2). However, despite the proximity of those two countries Estonians movement to Finland is a rather recent phenomenon, one of the reasons behind it being the restrictions set by the Soviet Union for exiting the regime.

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the year 1991, few Estonians lived in Finland and the number of Estonians living in the northern neighbouring country continued to be very small also in the beginning of the 1990s. During the period after Estonia regained its independence from the Soviet Union, one can distinguish between two different main waves of Estonian’s migration to Finland with multiple contributing factors. The first wave happened immediately after the independence, when emigration to Finland doubled. In 1990 there were only 1394 Estonians by native language living in Finland (Praakli & Viikberg, 2010: 455), in each of the following two years more than 2600 people emigrated from Estonia to Finland (Anniste, 2011: 3, Statistics Finland, 2016b). According to Statistics Finland (2016b), migration to Finland decreased in the second half of the 1990s, but started slowly growing again after the big economic crisis at the end of the decade. The main reasons for moving to Finland during the first wave of emigration were ethnic remigration, marrying with a Finnish citizen and family reunification (Pohjanpää, Paananen & Nieminen., 2003: 55-56; Liebkind, et al., 2004: 22).

The second wave of Estonian migration to Finland took place after Estonia joined the European Union in 2004 (Anniste & Tammaru, 2014: 387), which gave Estonians the possibility to go work more freely in a member state of the European Union or of the European Free Trade Association. Without the need for work permits, accessing the European Union member countries’ labour markets was made easier for Estonians. Also, the easiness of border crossings among the member states of the European Union has been seen changing how people perceive distances (Botterill, 2014: 14). However, there are several economic and cultural factors involved and thus EU accession, which simplified migration to other European Union countries, cannot be considered as the sole reason for the increase in the number of Estonians moving to Finland.

Until 2004 migration to Finland was roughly a thousand Estonians per year (Tiit, 2015: 64). When in 2003 there were approximately 1400 Estonians who changed their domicile to Finland (Anniste, Kumer-Haukanõmm & Tammaru, 2010: 1170), by in
2005 the amount had grown to 3513 (Statistics Estonia, 2016). The incentives behind the migration to Finland since joining the European Union have been mostly interpreted in relation to work and income (Tammaru & Viies, 2012: 7). Yet, together with work migration, also family migration, such as moving together with the partner or following the partner has increased (Anniste, 2011: 8).

The increase of migration following accession to the European Union would probably have been even bigger if Finland, fearing massive influx of Estonian workers, would not have set a temporary two-year barrier for Estonians’ free movement to Finland (Jakobson et al., 2012: 164). This transitional arrangement limited the free movement of people to the Finnish labour market as individuals, but had no restrictions for Finnish companies recruiting foreign labour as a service through subcontracting (Lillie, 2012). This way the temporary restrictions set by Finland caused the prevalence of companies that ‘rented’ Estonian workers to Finland (Lillie, 2012: 157). Also, in 2005 and 2006 a growth in the Western-European construction sector took place, which many Estonians saw as a great opportunity (Tammaru & Viies, 2012: 5). Together joining the European Union, the temporary restrictions that followed and the development in the construction sector had a strong effect on Estonians’ movement to abroad.

The world economic crisis of the late 2000s was another important factor in Estonian migration. As a result of the crisis, the salaries in Estonia were lowered and it was difficult to find work responding to ones qualifications (Tarum, 2014: 3-4). Industries which had average salaries and low educational requirements, such as the building sector, which had just before the economic crisis been experiencing a building boom, and manufacturing industry, were the ones to suffer most in the crisis and as a result, many Estonians employed in these fields decided to go find work abroad (Tarum, 2014: 11-12). Finland was an appealing destination point for Estonians due to its increasing demand for workers in the construction sector, but also in fields such as cleaning.

Naturally, reasons for migration to Finland differ depending on the individual, but they are usually supported by differences in living standards, geographical proximity between the countries, affordable transportation connecting the countries, as well as linguistically and culturally similar society (Tiit, 2015: 64).

According to Statistics Finland (2016a), there are currently 50 367 Estonian citizens living permanently in Finland. For the past six years, Estonians living in Finland have outnumbered Russian citizens who, based on nationality, are the second biggest migrant
group living in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2016a). Estonians constitute altogether about 22 per cent of foreign citizens living in Finland. Besides playing an important part in the Finnish population growth, the community of Estonians in Finland is also the fastest growing population of Estonians in the Western diaspora (Praakli and Viikberg, 2010: 455, Anniste et al., 2012: 40), and now also the largest (Tarum, 2014: 5).

Since the accession of Estonia to the European Union, also temporary labour migration has increased, which means that the migrants have retained their permanent residency in Estonia and commute between the countries (Anniste & Tammaru, 2014: 387). The data from the last Estonian Population Census conducted in 2011 shows that there are about 25 000 people (Krusell, 2015: 125), 4.7 per cent from the total employed population, who work abroad while having maintained their residency in Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2012). More than half of people in the aforementioned population, approximately 15 000 Estonians, work in Finland, while being registered in Estonia (Tiit, 2015: 62). Due to lack of official exact data, some sources have claimed that there can be up to 100 000 Estonians working in Finland. Most of these people employed in Finland are between 30 to 49 years of age and by occupation craft and related trade workers, who are mainly working in construction, or as machine operators and assemblers (Krusell, 2015: 125-129). This number of temporary labour migrants from the whole shows how migration to Finland is vastly different than Estonian migration to any other country of destination. Temporary migration, however, has a tendency to turn into permanent migration despite the individuals original plans (Jakobson et al., 2012).

2.2 Estonian families in the context of migration

The European Union enlargement provided Estonians the opportunity to change their standard of living through having more easily work in another country, but also played a crucial role in the development of families separated by state borders (Espenberg et al., 2014: 5). Since the beginning of the 2000s there have been almost two times more women leaving Estonia permanently than men (Tammaru & Eamets, 2015: 112-113). However, men constitute almost five times larger group of Estonians working in another country, while having their residence in Estonia (Krusell, 2015: 125). This shows that working abroad is quite a gendered phenomenon. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the building and manufacturing industries suffered most in the economic crisis of the
end of the 2000s (Tarum, 2014: 12) and those fields are mainly hiring men, thus this being one of the main reasons behind the higher number of male migrant workers.

Although the main reasons behind working abroad have been simplified to reasons such as the wish to earn higher salaries (e.g. Tammaru & Viies, 2012: 7), it can be presumed that Estonians often migrate because of the need to financially support other family members, especially due to need to provide for the livelihood of their children. It has been shown that from all the Estonians, who consider working abroad, or who have made a concrete plan about two thirds have at least one child (Tarum, 2014: 15-16). With that also the number of children who have stayed behind with only one parent has grown. It so stands that basically all parents who have experience working abroad left their children in Estonia, mostly in the care of their partner (Tarum, 2014: 16).

According to the most recent data based on the Estonian Population and Housing Census conducted in 2011, there are 8570 Estonian families with younger than 18-year old children in which one of the parents works abroad (Espenberg et al., 2014: 10). Altogether, 7.9 per cent of the two-parent households in Estonia with under-aged children have one person working abroad (Statistics Estonia, 2013). In addition to these families, there are 656 families in which both or single parents are working abroad (Espenberg et al., 2014: 10). Families in which one parent is working in Finland constitute more than half of these families with a parent working outside of Estonia (Espenberg et al., 2014: 12). This means that besides moving somewhere permanently there are numerous instances where the everyday life of a person is divided between two countries. Considering the shortcoming in migration statistics, there is reason to believe that the amount of such transnational families is also much bigger than found by the Population Census. In families, where one parent goes to work abroad, while the other parent stays in Estonia, the children are most commonly under six years old (Espenberg et al., 2014: 15).

Migrants, who have families in Estonia, differ from those who have no family of their own. To move abroad permanently or to move there only temporary can become an important question for these families in which at least one parent is working abroad. The connections of those Estonian migrants to Finland, who have a partner and children in Estonia, could be seen more permanent, as they have more reason to move back to Estonia after working abroad for a certain period. However, according to Anniste (2011: 8), family-related migration, which includes leaving Estonia together with the partner or
joining the partner, though also marrying a Finn, has increased during the 2000s. It could be presumed that once one member of the family migrates, it can change into a chain migration, which means that other family members follow the path of the first family member to the same receiving society. The information presented in this section thus asserts the need to analyse Estonian migration to Finland in the relation to families.
3 Previous research

The following chapter consists of three parts. The first subchapter includes a review of academic research conducted in relation to Estonian migration to Finland. In the second subchapter, I will discuss the position of families in the field of migration studies and its development. However, I will not be going into the different areas of family migration research. Instead, in the subchapter to follow, I will look at developments in studies on transnational families, meaning literature which focuses on families through the “transnational optic”, and whose exploration is most relevant for the current study. Because studies that analyse family relationships which exceed countries borders have been conducted in different fields of enquiry, the second subchapter will look at previous research from these viewpoints. The current study falls somewhere in between of these fields of enquiry as the focus of attention on studies on transnational families has not been on the partners who stay behind. By outlining research findings from these three areas, my aim is to clarify the connection between labour migration of one parent and the roles of family members and the relationships between them. In the end, I will use the analysis of literary sources to position the current study in the field of sociological research.

Although the chapter on transnational families will include a comprehensive review of previous studies on migration of people from the family perspective in the world context, the studies discussed will focus more on relevant literature produced from migrants groups from European sending countries considered most similar to Estonia. I have chosen to highlight studies on migrant parents and their families originally from Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania although most of the literature on transnational families focuses on migrants originally from outside of Europe (Kraler et al., 2011: 30). They are all countries in which, similarly to Estonia, the existence of transnational families has been on the rise due to growing labour migration since joining the European Union (Eurofound, 2014). Latvia and Lithuania, which together with Estonia restored their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, express the most similar migration trends, while in Poland and Romania there has been a lot of public discussion about families where parents work abroad (Pantea, 2012b: 245). I believe that studies from these countries may best highlight aspects which can apply to Estonian transnational families and will thus best contribute to the understanding of the current study.
3.1 Research on Estonian migration to Finland

Academic research concerning Estonian migration to Finland or Estonians living in Finland is relatively rare in both of the respective countries. Most of the research on Estonian migrants has been written from a social psychological perspective. Previous studies have investigated the perceived discrimination (e.g. Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola & Reuter, 2006, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind & Perhoniemi, 2007; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind & Solheim, 2009), adaption (e.g. Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2008), social exclusion risks (e.g. Mannila & Reuter, 2009), labour market conditions (e.g. Heikkilä, 2005) and integration levels (e.g. Anniste & Tammaru, 2014) of Estonian migrants living in Finland. All of these studies have included in their focus also other ethnic groups, in most cases Russian-speakers. Most of the research on Estonians living in Finland or migrating between the two countries has been conducted by Karmela Liebkind and Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti based on the results of a longitudinal study, and by Heli Hyvönen, who wrote a dissertation comprising of four articles.

Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind (2000) have, for example, investigated Estonians and six other immigrant groups’ experiences of discrimination, in addition to trust towards authorities and psychological well-being. Estonians, together with Russians, Ingrian Finns, and the Vietnamese, reported experiencing less cases of discriminatory behaviour than Arabs, Somalis and Turks. Estonians were seen to be experiencing less discrimination because of the cultural similarities between them and the Finnish majority. Estonians also expressed biggest trust towards authorities, which was found to be connected to fewer experiences of discrimination. The same line of analysis has continued in their later works in which it was found that perceived discrimination had an effect on the migrants’ psychological well-being (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006). The study by Jasinskaja-Lahti and colleagues (2006) also showed that active contacts with the members of the host society, but also with the members of the home society was in general important for migrants’ wellbeing. In an article published individually by Jasinskaja-Lahti (2008), she viewed psychological, sociocultural, and socioeconomic adaption of immigrants coming from the former Soviet Union and thus also from Estonia. The study showed positive changes in sociocultural and socioeconomic adaption, meaning skills in Finnish language and labour market position, over the course of eight years.
Mannila and Reuter (2009) have found that risk of being socially excluded is about three times lower among Estonians living in Finland than among Russian-speaking migrants. The study of Anniste and Tammaru (2014) confirms the findings of Mannila and Reuter (2009) and states that ethnic Estonians are more likely to have friends and a partner among the ethnic Finnish population, speak Finnish better, as well as be better integrated to the Finnish labour and housing market than ethnic Russians.

Hyvönen (2009) has focused on gender in immigration and interviewed Finnish women living in Estonia and Estonian women residing in Finland about, among other things, their experiences and expectations regarding the new country, adjusting to a new society and changes in motherhood. The study found that the timing of the migration and the reasons leading to the decision to move had an important effect on the experiences and expectations of the women. The Estonian women confessed that despite the migration reasons they had to inform the authorities about, the real reason behind their move was offering a better future for their children. The Estonian women started immediately searching for a work position or applying for studies, although they often had to accept work offers that were below their qualifications.

Despite most of the studies being written from a social psychological perspective, there are also a few that have taken a focus on relationships in a cross-national context. Care for elderly people by migrants from Estonia in a transnational context had been researched by Minna Zechner (2008). As the interviewees included people, who had elderly relatives in Russia or Belorussia, it was found that social policies and differing caring cultures had a strong effect on caring activities. A research study by Kutsar, Darmody and Lahesoo (2014) is so far the most relevant research paper for the current study. Kutsar et al. (2014) investigated the attitudes of Estonian school children, aged 11-13, towards parents working in another country. The study showed that most of the children have negative feelings towards migrant parents being away because of work. The children found it important that both parents would be active in their everyday life and they felt concerned about possible parental break-up due to labour migration of one of their parents. However, in case they would have to choose they would prefer father being the migrant parent. This was due to typical gender expectations of seeing the mother as the one who is supposed to take care of the children, but also because of having closer emotional relationship with the mother. The authors of the study argue that due to the absence of the other parent the children experience emotional, cognitive
and behavioural deficit. Additionally, Kutsar, Darmody and Lahesoo (2014) found that separation influences the continuity of healthy family life. However, an important limitation of this study to consider is the fact that most children participating in the study did not themselves have a personal experience of living in a transnational family.

Assmuth and Siim (2012-2014) have as a part of an international project studied perspectives and experiences of Estonian children living in Finland about their families cross-border movements between Estonia and Finland including interviews with parents. Many of the interviewed children, who were six to twelve years old, felt at home both in Estonia and in Finland, although they preferred having one permanent residence and wished that all family members would live in close proximity. Children stated that their families use social media and Skype for keeping up connections with family members in Estonia. However, grandparents often lacked necessary skills for making successful Skype calls and children often lacked patience for calling again in case of a disconnected call. Furthermore, the study found that virtual co-presence is not a sufficient means for compensating co-presence that happens in the same space. In some families, the children were travelling to Estonia every weekend because of ‘homesickness’. (Siim & Assmuth, 2015)

Whereas studies listed in this review may at first give a different understanding, considering the number of Estonian migrants in Finland, fairly little attention has been given to Estonian migration in the context of Finland. At the same time an impressive number of studies address, for example, the Philippine community living in Finland. Even in the academic context of Estonia, considering that Finland is the main receiving country there are hardly any publications on this topic. The reason behind the lack of research in this matter may be because social sciences research tends to be concerned with problems. Because of the cultural similarities and the short distance between the countries the Estonian community in Finland may be not perceived as problematic. This could be added to the fact that Estonians tend to go unnoticed in the Finnish society. Despite the two abovementioned studies focusing on the perspective of Estonian children, nothing is known about Estonian migration to Finland from the perspective of the stay-behind partners. Due to lack of research the accompanying characteristics of Estonian labour migration to Finland, and more specifically, family-related migration, might be thus very different from what can generally be perceived. This is a factor that also contributes to the importance of the current study.
3.2 Families in migration studies

Families as units of analysis were rendered insignificant in migration research for a long time. Only recently have families become of interest for migration researchers although some significant exceptions do exist, such as the classic study of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920) on Polish migrants living in America and their families. The reason for the general lack of focus on families was due to the widely popular usage of the economical viewpoint in migration studies, which saw migration being about contracts between the individual and the receiving nation state, rather than between a collective unit, such as the family and the state (Zlotnik, 1995). Through the lens of economy, the migrant was seen as an individual who is economically active (Ho, 2006), and who was portrayed to be male (Ryan et al., 2009: 64).

The migration studies’ concentration on economics with its markets, flow of male workers and money, resulted in neglecting women, and thus families, who in reality played, either directly or indirectly, an important role in migration movements (Hochschild 2000). While migrant men were perceived as labourers, women were assigned the role of wives, mothers and caretakers of home (Ho, 2006). They were viewed as passive dependants, and not as migrant workers as was the case of men (Ryan et al., 2009: 64). Moreover, in most of the earlier research the term ‘family’ was associated with migration of women (Kofman, 2004: 247-249).

Kraler, Kofman, Kohli and Schmoll (2011: 14) have discussed that family migration was pictured as immigration of women in the purposes of joining their male migrant partners. These women were perceived to be unmotivated to join the labour market of the host country or, if they did work, their income was seen only as a supplement to the earnings raised by their partner (Kraler et al., 2011: 14). This led to simplification of both groups patterns of migration (Ryan et al., 2009: 64), and the narrow male-biased focus on individuals underestimated the role of family in the migration processes. Because women were understood to be the main units of family migration, the proposed detachment of women from work life led families in migration research not to be examined (Kraler et al., 2011: 17).

It was only in the early 1980s when the authors such as Morokvasic (1984) or Phizacklea (1983) started questioning this dominant approach that saw women as dependants, and started emphasising the role of women in the labour market. The past
two decades have expressed an important move away from this narrow one-dimensional perspective and nowadays women are not anymore seen as passive followers of their husbands, instead it is more commonly acknowledged that they do also migrate because of work. All in all, it has now become more common to understand that migrants, both men and women, move for many different reasons which are not only economical, but the political, socio-cultural and economic reasons are closely related to one another and that migrants take part in various activities “as migratory movements are not discrete, unilateral or linear” (Baldassar, 2007a: 280).

One of the most important works that changed how families were studies in migration was that of Monica Boyd (1989), who discussed the role of social networks, including family networks, in migration systems and emphasised the role of networks in migratory behaviour. The study conducted by Boyd has strongly influenced the emergence of research on transnational families, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Despite the connection to sociological research on families, studies on transnational families are considered to be a distinct research area (Zontini & Reynold, 2014).

3.3 Research on transnational families

According to Vertovec (1999: 447), transnationalism refers to “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation states.” Studies focusing on transnationalism first appeared in the early 1990s (Evergeti & Ryan, 2011: 356) providing a unique turning point on how migration was perceived. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, scholars back then were still interested in the economical perspective of migration and only slowly started to change their focus (Zontini, 2010). For this reason, the first studies connected to families, whose members live in different countries, examined the use and influence of remittances sent to family members and communities at the home country (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012: 348), and the regulatory frameworks that guided these flows of remittances (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). A literature review conducted by Gustavo Cano (2005, as cited in Vertovec, 2009: 1) showed that by 2003 the amount of research studies on transnationalism had grown to 1300 scientific publications, which were mostly written in the period between 1998 and 2003. Transnationalism is now a growing scholarship, but drawing on the literature review, sending of remittances to the country of origin, including its impact on
the local community and society, still remains one of the most common focuses in empirical research on transnationalism.

The term ‘transnational family’ itself was first presented in 1998 (Skrbiš, 2008: 234). Moreover, it was not before the middle of 2000s when research started to address issues related to spatially separated families as families in which members are located in different countries (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012: 348), making it a rather recent development in social scientific research. The first studies began to investigate the consequences of migration for the members of the family who are living in different geographical locations (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). After that, the focus on transnational family research shifted to studying daily practices of ‘transmigrants’ as people who have “multiple identities and localities” (Evergeti & Ryan, 2011: 357). More recently, the discourse on transnational families has turned specifically to how migrant parents carry out their familial roles despite the distance (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012: 348) and on the effect of the parent-child separation for the children or youth (e.g. Dreby, 2007, Parreñas, 2005; Schmalzbauer, 2008). Attention has been given also to how familial relationships are maintained and reproduced over distances in time (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

Nowadays research on transnational families constitutes its own research area within the field of migration studies with studies mostly having the migrant as the unit of analysis. Moreover, research on geographically separated families has been mainly examined migrants from Latin-America living in the United States (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011: 706, e.g. Parreñas, 2005) with most attention given to migrants from Mexico and the Philippines. All in all, research on transnational families, which has mostly employed qualitative methodology, focuses on transnational caregiving, transnational mothering and transnational fathering with the two first ones having been examined most often, while being closely connected to one another. It so seems that a distinction between fatherhood and motherhood is made because it is expected that depending on the gender of the migrating parent the effects of migration on the family are due to be different.

### 3.3.1 Transnational mothering and caregiving

Due to the appearance of ‘feminist-inflected’ migration studies (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2000: 119), research on transnational families has focused mostly on women who are geographically separated from their children, who remain in their home country
(Barglowski, Krzyżowski & Świątek, 2015: 260). That means that most of the research has been done on transnational motherhood (Parreñas, 2001, Zontini, 2004) – a phenomenon, which was named by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), who studied how Latin-American female household servants working in the United States meet the needs of their children living in their home country. In fact, most of the studies regarding transnational family practices have been conducted by investigating female migrants from poorer countries working in such gender-typical positions as housekeepers, nannies and nurses in wealthier states to see how they cope with double-caring roles (Evergeti & Ryan, 2011; Gjokaj, Zinn, & Nawyn, 2013).

This research on transnational mothering has studied how the relationships between the mothers and the children are adapted and changed due to living separately (Banfi & Boccagni, 2011: 288). It has also examined the effects of parental migration on such as emotions (Castaneda, 2011), educational process, or care of children who stay at the home country (Banfi & Boccagni, 2011, see e.g. Parreñas, 2005). But it has also investigated how migration to another country changes gender relations (Gjokaj et al., 2013), how migrant women deal with the practical aspects of parenting from long distances away (Sørensen & Vammen, 2014) or with the emotional consequences of living in another country than their children (e.g. Parreñas, 2001; Constable, 1999). The studies conducted by researchers such as Hondagenou-Sotelo and Avila (1997), Erel (2002), Parreñas (2001, 2005) and Zontini (2004) were some of the first to shed light on transnationalism in the context of families, despite being focused on transnational motherhood.

It has been understood that women do both productive and reproductive work, as a result of which transnational ties are able to exist (Zontini, 2010), but in research concerning transnational families, women are still depicted mostly in the role of care providers, with caregiving being directed towards under-aged children or the elderly. Thereby, a major issue in transnational families research has been the well-being of children who live is such families (e.g. Parreñas, 2005) and how elderly people manage without the assistance of their adult children (e.g. Baldassar, 2007a). Yet, the transnational caregiving towards the elderly constitutes a separate research field and will not be discussed in-depth in this chapter.

This transnational caregiving focus is connected with domestic work and global care chains and has acquired a lot of attention especially over the last ten years (e.g. Zontini,
Care has hereby been defined as “an activity that promotes the physical and emotional well-being of people who cannot or who are not inclined to perform these activities themselves” (Yeates, 2004: 371). Giving care has been mostly studied through the ‘gendered lens’ (Pantea, 2012b: 242), which when reviewing previous research seems to be described as something that belongs only to women. Morgan (2011: 93) writes about the usage of the “gaze” as referring to looking at something in a particular perspective, rather than, in my opinion, seeing the wider picture.

To bring examples of studies on transnational mothering, Piperno (2011) has studied the impact of Romanian female emigration on the families and on the societies of the sending countries from the perspective of care drain. Based on the interviews conducted with various members of transnational families the study found that the migration of women caused heavy burdens on the families, but did not result in abandonment of caring responsibilities. Instead, the caring roles were taken over by other females of the families such as grandmothers, sisters or aunts, even female neighbours, while fathers rarely contributed to the role of a caregiver even when living in the same household with the children.

Ducu (2014) examined the strategies Romanian mothers use when living long distances away from their children for fulfilling their maternal roles by interviewing various family members such as husbands of the migrants, children, migrant women and women of the extended family, but also community members and neighbours. The study confirmed the findings of Piperno (2011) that caregiving roles were transferred to other females of the extended family showing traditional gender roles. Fathers of the families did in some cases also participate in giving children care and attention, but this in general happened very rarely. Avoidance of caregiving been found to be a method for the men to preserve their power in the family even if the mother is the main breadwinner (Pasti, 2003) and to keep their masculine identity intact (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011: 722). The fact that migration of women has led the children to be left in the care of others has also been of the main reasons behind the concentration of transnational migration research on female migrants (Parreñas, 2005), despite this focus strengthening the traditional perspective of women being seen as the only caregivers of children.
As was demonstrated by Ducu (2014), women are not seen as the breadwinners of the family, sometimes not even within their own family, and because of the psychical separation from their children they are thought to be unable to provide for the emotional needs of their children although in reality they take responsibility both for emotional and material support. Despite that, the study showed that the women took contact regularly and assigned both tasks and rewards for their successful execution from distance. Also in other research it has been found that migrant women try to do their best in keeping up their emotional connection with their children while geographically separated (Zontini, 2004; Parreñas, 2005).

Banfi and Boccagni, (2011) studied how Polish migrant mothers working in Italy maintain the relationship with their children and partners over distance. The study demonstrated that the women did so by sending home money, going for home-visits and being in contact through phone. However, regardless of the regular interaction between the parent and the child, there were cases in which the women were not anymore perceived to be a ‘mother’ by the children. As discussed by Zentgraf and Chinchilla (2012: 354) children may not any longer accept their biological parents working long times abroad as the “mother” or “father”, but rather as person who they know only little. Banfi and Boccagni (2011) found that the role of the mother was taken over by other females of the family, such as grandmothers or older daughters.

The research study by Banfi and Boccagni (2011) also indicated that migrant women experience many difficulties living long distances away from their husbands. Many women told having much shorter conversations with their partners than with the children and confessed that the relationships has lost its warmth over the time lived in Italy. Although talking longer with children, most mothers confessed that they never talk about the difficult situations they have experienced in the host country due to not wanting the children to worry. Many women also revealed that because of living far away, their husbands had been unfaithful and this had resulted in their relationship ending. Yet, also some women themselves had difficulties “resisting distance in one’s affective life” (Banfi & Boccagni, 2011: 306). Bonfi and Boccagni (2011) concluded that whatever the technology used for keeping in touch, it was not enough to maintain a loving relationship. The narrative of betrayal and abandonment has been expressed also in many other studies (e.g. Bonizzoni, 2011; Zontini, 2004).
Lulle (2014) has examined care responsibilities of Latvian migrant women, but in the island of Guernsey, through the concepts of the ‘neoliberal mother’ and mobility. The study found that most of the time the migrant mothers continued to move between Guernsey and Latvia regularly until their children had reached adulthood. For some women, going home can however be a physically straining experience because of the pain felt during the moments when they had to leave again (Banfi & Boccagni, 2011: 298).

It is in my understanding that in the literature on transnational motherhood, a significant number of researchers express conservative views and fail to question the dominant understanding which sees caregiving only as the responsibility of women and the migration of mothers as an example of bad parenting. For example, Sânduleasa and Matei (2015: 198) write: “The biggest concern is that of children who remain in their home country completely deprived of parental care. The absence of the mother is one of the important factors that contribute to changing family model, taking into account the traditional family model where mothers have the most important role in household labour (i.e., housework and childcare).” The fact that studies in transnational family research have mostly been focusing on the migrating women is itself one weakness in transnational research. The problem with this approach is that it results in fathers’ migration to be taken for granted. As Waters (2010: 65) writes: “The focus has very much been on the role of the woman as a mother, underpinned by the assumption that she, ultimately, is the primary and most important caregiver.”

3.3.2 Transnational fathering and the stay-behind family members

The transnational fatherhood literature is a rather small and slowly evolving field (Dreby, 2006: 34), although migration studies at first focused only on men. It seems that the discourse in earlier migration research which saw men only as units of labour discussed in the first subchapter of this section had important consequences for research on men as fathers (Kilkey, Plomien & Perrons, 2013). The scarce amount of research on transnational fatherhood is seen due to the perception that fathers’ absence because of working in another country, or even in another continent, is a normal phenomenon as fathers have always been the breadwinners of the family and thus their absence does not cause any shifts in their natural roles (Parreñas, 2008: 1057-1058). At the same time mothers who migrate tend to receive a lot of criticism. Mothers who have gone to work abroad to provide for the children are accused for their childrens’ misbehaviour even
when there been any situations in which the children who stay behind would be causing trouble. The fathers’ migration is publicly accepted even if this leads to fathers breaking their commitment towards the family entirely (Ducu, 2014: 124).

This field of transnational families research focusing on fathers was first brought about due to the criticism given to transnational motherhood literature, which implies as gender would correspond to being female and thus as men would be “non-gendered humans” (Hibbins & Pease, 2009: 4). Research in this field has problematized this assumption, and has focused on changes in the masculinities of men after migration (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 1997) and their parenting experiences (e.g. Dreby, 2010, Parreñas, 2008, Pribilsky, 2004). In general, transnational fathers are researched as senders of remittances and people responsible for the general wellbeing of the family (Sørensen & Vammen, 2014).

To bring examples of some relevant studies, Kilkey, Plomien & Perrons (2013) interviewed Polish fathers working in England about their fathering practices and their identity as fathers. The study included fathers with children in the UK, fathers with children still living in Poland and those who had children both in the UK and in Poland. The interviews with transnational fathers showed that their experiences were very similar to mothers’ experiences expressed in wider research. The fathers kept in contact with their children through phone and Internet, but making visits to be able to see in person was often limited. Ryan (2010) has also studied the transnational relations of Polish migrants living in the UK. By examining the ties between the Polish transnational migrants in London and their extended family back at the home country, the study revealed that living separately brought many difficulties in sustaining a healthy relationship, including feelings of sadness, loneliness and conflicting priorities.

A research study by Parreñas (2008) focusing on transnational fathering among Filipino families found that children are left in the care of their stay-at-home wives. Interestingly, when at home the fathers tended to take part in usual household chores more often than in families where the father stayed behind as in the latter case the duties were assigned to other women such as the grandmothers. The study also showed that children whose father was working abroad most of their childhood years experienced great emotional distance and discomfort when in contact. The fathers usually did not communicate with the children over distance and in the few cases when in contact the fathers used it mainly to show their authority (Parreñas, 2008). Thus, the provision of
emotional care was the pure responsibility of the wife, while the role of the father was mostly to provide material security.

When little attention is given to fathers as migrants and their perspectives (Kofman, 2004), then even fewer studies focus on the stay-behind family members, who stay at the country of origin and their perspective. This shows that the main focus in transnational family studies has been on the migrant parent. When there has been research conducted on the family members who have stayed living in the migrant’s country of origin, then the focus has been on studying the most vulnerable groups, who are the migrants’ elderly parents or their under-aged children, whereas in the current study the stay-behind partners will be put to the focus of attention to fill the gap.

Pantea (2012a) examined through the use of interviews how grandmothers manage with their caretaker roles when their children are working abroad and the grandchildren have stayed living in Romania. The study showed that a grandmother normal role was extended by such as attending school meetings. Also, such everyday things like putting children ready for school meant much more for grandmothers as they did not want anybody to think that their grandchildren are without parental care. Often caretaking not only of the children but the household resulted in tension between the grandmothers and their migrating children when the migrant parents did not contribute to the household task when at home in Romania. Altogether, however, the grandmothers did not feel like taking care of the grandchildren had significantly changed their everyday life. For the grandmothers taking care of the children was seen also as an investment for the not so far-a-way future, so to have somebody to take care of them when they are no longer able to.

Pantea (2012b) has also interviewed Romanian youth who remained responsible for their younger siblings after their parents’ migration about their experiences while they were transitioning to adulthood. The stories reflected how the young people missed out on a lot of experiences common to people at their aged such as extra-curricular activities. They gave emotional support to their siblings while they themselves were not able to receive as much as they would have wished for. There were also cases in which young people quit school to be able to care for the younger ones.

The study by Pantea (2012b) showed also that the young Romanian people tried to manage everything autonomously without asking help from extended family. In many
cases, care was provided by the young people to the parent that remained at the home country. Pantea (2011) in the study with the focus on power dynamics inside the family found that parental migration creates a feeling of empowerment for the young people, but at the same time causes them significant burdens because of the increase of everyday duties. During some periods parents and their older children work together for the wellbeing of the family, however, when the parents remain abroad only short periods at a time, older children are given more control over the household.

In Lithuania, a number of studies were carried out about families by Juozeliūnienė and colleagues (2008, 2009, 2011, 2012 as cited in Juozeliūnienė, 2013). Most of these studies have been focusing on online and printed media representations of ‘families with parents away’. The first study examined recent online articles concerning families where the parents are working in another country and comments to these articles with the aim to clarify main issues. They later continued to analyse how families, where the parents live in another country are described in article headlines and in their contents. The research group also studied the challenges children were going through due to having their parents living away from Lithuania, and in a study that followed, the teachers’, social workers’, police officers’ and children’s perspectives on parents and children living in different countries, while also analysing Internet commentaries.

According to (Juozeliūnienė, 2013) it was found that Lithuanian media had a tendency to write about the negative consequences of parents’ emigration such as children’s sadness, loneliness, stigmatization, abandonment or young people’s criminal behaviour. Transnational families were often compared to families that have gone through divorce and the children were called such as “abandoned”, “not needed” or “nobody’s children” (Juozeliūnienė, 2013: 752). Mothers who had left for work in another country were criticized especially for ‘neglecting their maternal duties’, while in families in which the fathers were working abroad were seen completely normal (Juozeliūnienė, 2013: 752). The media imagine of these families in Estonia is also quite negative although it lacks knowledge of the people’s actual experiences and the challenges this type of living raises. However, I do not support using media analysis as a method that would be able to show the actual experiences of transnational families. That especially, because media has played an important role in creating false expressions of all the children of migrants mothers being forsaken (Pantea, 2012b: 242).
As mentioned previously, there is hardly any research completed in relation to the parents who stay behind and take care of the children, neither on how the migration of one parent affects the one who stays at the home country. So far the only study conducted from the perspective of the stay-behind partners that I managed to locate is the one by Kerevica (2014), who by using qualitative methods and narrative analysis investigated Latvian family members’ perceptions of their familial relationships over distance, and the stay-behinds’ adaption to the changes the labour migration of their partner brings. However, the interview-based study employing narrative analysis draws on conclusions that cannot be made with qualitative methods such as that “the departure of relatives affects the emotional well-being of the family staying at home by increasing the possibility of depression and the feeling of loneliness” (Kerevica, 2014: 675).

In summary, existing research suggest that male and female migrants’ participation in their family life over distance tends to be different although exceptions do exist. Vertovec (1999) has stated there is always some sort of difference in the strength, frequency and scope of transnational ties when it comes to different migrant groups located in different countries. Also, the impact of migration to the family member who migrates and to the ones who are left behind is due to be different. The distance between the countries, and the time and cost of travelling between the countries could be seen as some of these influencing factors. Neither in Estonia nor in Finland attention has been paid on the social consequences of parents’ labour migration to Finland and the connections they maintain with their families at home and the effects of migration of family members who have stayed in the home country. The experiences of those family members who stay living in the home country are largely overlooked and the studies presented in this chapter can give only an idea of some of the possible results.
4 Theoretical framework

Whereas the previous chapter focuses on empirical research conducted on transnational families, this section starts by discussing transnationalism as a theoretical approach. The theoretical discussion on transnationalism presented in this chapter is based on the works of some of the leading scholars in the field. I will then carry on with theoretical concepts of family practices and co-presence, both of which I find important for understanding family life across borders. The families in this study could be approached also through gender perspective. However, in the current study, I have decided not to focus on gender or gender relations. While many studies on transnational families build on these concepts, I argue that examining transnational family life through gendered lens is not the best approach for furthering our understanding of families separated by national borders.

Being a widely used and well-known approach, I believe a focus on gender relations can easily conceal many other aspects important for describing the experiences of transnational family life and thus prohibit bringing new information to the foreground. By not bringing gender relations into the theoretical literature, I am thus hoping to reach a more focused analysis. Also, as the results of this study will show, Estonian transnational families demonstrate a more balanced division of family responsibilities than has been found in many other studies (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005), showing that it might not be the most relevant theoretical approach considering the scope of the current work. The fact that the current study relies on the perspective and experiences of women is itself not enough of a reason to bring gender relations into the theoretical framework (Al-Ali, 2002: 97). At the end of each chapter, I will highlight how I make use of the theoretical approaches chosen for the current study. With these concepts and theories in mind I will delve into the analysis of interview data presented in the latter half of this thesis.

4.1 Transnationalism

Transnationalism as a theory has gained growing popularity during the past twenty five years and has most strongly been influenced by authors such as Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, Christina Blanc-Szanton, Alejandro Portes, Thomas Faist and Steven Vertovec, The three first authors being behind the concepts debut. Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992) argued that contemporary migration and migrants differ
greatly from those of in the late 19th or beginning of the 20th century. In contrast to the migrants of those periods, they argued that migrants of modern societies are “composed of those whose networks, activities, and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies. Their lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field” (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992: 1) shortly defined as webs of social relationships (Levitt & Glick Schiller et al., 2004: 1009). In the current study, this transnational social field could be seen encompassing Estonian and Finnish societies.

Based on the historical discussion of migration, Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc- Szanton (1992) stated that there is a need for a new analytical framework which would take into account the changes that migration has gone through over the years. This lead them to propose transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick Schiller et al, 1992: 1), including people, communities or organizations (Vertovec, 2009). This theory ultimately challenges the nation state ideals of people belonging to only one country (Vertovec, 2009), and having social relationships only in the borders of that society. Also families have been perceived as bounded by the borders of a single state (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011: 704). By becoming ‘unbound’ to the borders of the states in the analysis of migration as was desired by Glick Schiller et al. (1992), transnationalism has highlighted “the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labour migration” (Caglar, 2001: 607).

Unlike Glick Schiller et al. (1992), Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999), similarly to myself, acknowledged that movements of people between host and home countries have always taken place, but it was only recently when these movements gained never before seen volume and complexity. They described it as a new “emergent social field” one that is “composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives” (Portes et al., 1999: 217). These ‘dual lives’, Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999: 217) explain, are characterised by such as speaking two languages, having property which can be called home in two countries, and working in a manner that requires “regular contact across national borders”. According to the theory of transnationalism, migrants thus uphold connections with their native country, while they are at the same time trying to adapt to the society of their host country (Stanek & Hosnedlova, 2012: 63).
The theory of transnationalism is best suitable for the current study as due to labour migration of one parent, the family life of the families under investigation surpasses the borders of the two nation states instead of taking place inside one country. These families are no longer explained by concepts such as physical unity and co-habitation and due to geographical separation their family life also cannot be researched by focusing on what is happening in the context of one country. By explaining that transnational social fields connect with each other migrants, and the people who do not themselves move (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004: 1009), the theory of transnationalism implicitly suggests that with various activities the family members, who stay behind, can also be active participants in transnational social fields.

What makes transnationalism possible in a greater extent among migrants of contemporary societies are the developments in communication technology and transportation systems (Portes et al., 1999), which are nowadays easy to use, relatively affordable, and more flexible. Whereas migrants and their families in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century were highly dependent on handwritten letters, through new communication and transportation technology migrants have the possibility to maintain stronger relationships with family members, who reside back in the home country (Baldassar, 2008).

Nonetheless, transnational relations are not the consequence of developments in communications technology or transportation systems (Kivisto & Faist, 2010: 146), but instead these advancements have only allowed communication to take place at the same time in multiple locations of the world and in an intensified manner (Vertovec, 2009: 2-3), while their actual usage itself depends on different social factors (Kivisto & Faist, 2010). Bryceson and Vuorela (2002), for example, consider obligation to take care of family to be one of the main incentives for engaging in transnational activities, while developments in producing new communication tools, among others, are only facilitating transnationalism. Transnationalism is thus definitely not a new phenomenon (Kivisto & Faist, 2010), but considering the vast developments, interactions have spread all over the world and thus become more apparent. According to Vertovec (2009: 2), transnationalism could, due to this, even be analysed as an expression of globalisation.

Transnationalism has gone through many developments over the years leading it to be used in contexts where it does not belong (Kivisto & Faist, 2010). This was noticed also by Portes and colleagues (1999) who suggested detailed criteria which would stimulate
the correct usage of the theory. They proposed that for transnationalism to be applied in analysis, the number of migrants involved in whatever process under question has to be significant. Secondly, the processes the migrants take part in have to have a long-lasting quality. Lastly, it was argued that transnationalism should be used if present theoretical concepts do not capture these activities rightfully (Portes et al., 1999). Portes et al., (1999) developed the concept proposed by Glick Schiller et al. (1992) further and as a result managed to create a new and ultimately more specific definition of transnationalism, one that fits best also to the current study. In their definition, transnationalism includes “activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” (Portes et al., 1999: 219).

When seen in the context of families in this study, I thus see transnationalism referring to the interactions between family members residing in different countries (Ryan, 2010). Thomas Faist (2000: 13) in his theory of transnational social spaces has written that mobility of people between two, or more, nation states, leads them to take part in transnational social relations, together with the “the circulation of ideas, symbols, and material culture”, ultimately creating an overarching social space in which the relevant national states belong. As has been stated also by Vertovec (2009), transnationalism includes many different processes such as economic, political, sociocultural or environmental, and thus indeed can be applied to “overarching structural units” such as countries’ governments or global enterprises (Kivisto & Faist, 2010: 136). Portes et al., (1999), however, view transnational happening not only ‘from above’, but also ‘from below’. The latter includes migrants and their social networks and thus included in the framework are also families. Also Faist (2000) in his discussion of transnational social spaces later argues that kinship groups form one example of such spaces. These are described to be more lasting, formal and including dense ties compared to social networks consisted of such as friends. For transnational social spaces to continue existing, certain kind of ties must prevail. Faist (2000) writes that these ties between families are maintained thanks to by reciprocity. But as the discussions further in this section show, this is definitely not the only reason behind maintenance of family ties.

Transnationalism ultimately not only provides an optic through which to analyse how migrants manage to stay connected with their families in the home country (Kivisto & Faist, 2010), but also vice versa. As Zontini (2004: 1114) writes: “transnationalism forces us to reconsider our understanding of households and families based on the idea
of co-residency and physical unity and to take into account the possibility of spatial separation’’. Placed in the context of families, transnationalism highlights that many migrants conduct actions that cross borders and which thus connect them with the family members who remain behind. Because of the connections reaching over these countries’ borders, the lives of the stay-behind family members are changed despite them not being the one moving (Vertovec, 2007).

Therefore, the transnationalism offers a theoretical framework through which to analyse the connections between the migrating parent and the one who stays behind ultimately showing how family lives are experienced over geographical space. As the current study approaches family life from the perspective of the stay-behind partners, it contributes to the development of literature of transnationalism by showing how the family members who remain behind can participate in creating transnational social fields or social spaces. However, to be better able to make sense of these families and additionally to make visible the ways they participate in creating these transnational spaces, we need to do consider the everyday life of those involved. This will be addressed in the following chapter.

4.2 Family practices

In his influential book “Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies” David Morgan (1996) proposed the concept of family practices with what he referred to the active character of families. Given that families form the central feature of the life of every individual, he states that families should be given more acknowledgements in sociological studies (Morgan, 2011). Morgan (1996) argues that more attention should be given to families’ everyday activities as these seemingly ordinary and sometimes even mundane and at first glance meaningless activities are those that form families. Morgan (2011b: 2) writes that: “in carrying out these social everyday practicalities, social actors are reproducing the sets of relationships (structures, collectivities) in which these activities are carried out and from which they derive their meaning.” In his view family life is therefore comprised of a set of activities with what he reminds us that families are not static entities, but instead they are about ‘doing’ (Morgan, 1996; 2011). Therefore, family members are not only mothers and fathers, but they can be seen ‘doing’ mothering and fathering (Morgan, 2011).
Morgan (2011) refers to a sense of everyday, a routine, and fluidity when discussing family practices. Included in his concept of ‘everyday’ family practices are both the life events which most of people experience such as parenting, sickness, loss of a family members and the actions that do not even seem worth discussing. These activities can be fully entwined in family life and have a taken-for-granted quality, thus being unacknowledged not only by an observer, but sometimes even by the authors themselves (Morgan, 2011; Phoenix & Brannen, 2014).

Family practices, as the name itself suggests, happen more often than once (Morgan, 1996: 190). Although Morgan (1996, 2011) often uses the concept ‘everyday’ he does not actually mean that they need to happen daily. He explains that these practices take place regularly, but can do so weekly, monthly or yearly. They can include activities common to most of the families in a certain society, or be specific for a certain group of family members (Morgan, 2011). These practices attain meaning when placed in the wider system which surrounds them (Morgan, 1996: 190), such as in the context of migration or transnationalism.

Fluidity hereby means, and which makes analysing families also more complex, that some of these activities, which can be understood to be family practices, can be also be perceived as a representation of some other kind of practices, such as those linked to gender or class (Morgan, 2006; 2011). Morgan (2011: 7) writes that “practices merge and overlap with each other like splodges of watercolour paint or those puzzles which can be seen at first one way and next some other way.” Family practices could be thus studied from different perspectives. However, what in his opinion distinguishes family practices from others is that they are conducted in relation to another family member (Morgan, 2011), which is not necessarily the case when it comes to gender related actions.

Morgan (2011) takes into consideration that people do not begin with nothing when they are ‘doing’ family life. Some of these practices are beforehand shaped due to culture, legislation, or economic situations (Morgan, 2011). As an example, in academic research on migration, it is generally acknowledged that immigration policies construct the family members’ roles by bringing attention to the rights and obligations among families in their new national contexts, thereby shaping “what the migrant family can do” (Kraler et al., 2011: 14) or has to do, though this varies greatly. Yet, family life carried out from distance, which is under investigation in the current study, is less
influenced by the social structure and involves more negotiation about “who is responsible for what, when and why” (Urry, 2003: 169).

It might seem that as these family practices are seen to be taken-for-granted, and therefore difficult to be realised even by people, who are conducting these actions, then how can they be reviled? Morgan (2011) discusses that there are situations in which the everyday nature of family can be seen. These occur when a family is going through a transition (Morgan, 2011). I argue that a situation, in which one parent has decided to move to another country for work, is one of those situations, which brings with it smaller or bigger changes in the way how family responsibilities are divided. It can change, for example, the division of labour, or how mutual care is practiced.

An important part of family practices concept is that these activities do not necessarily have to take place in home environment (Morgan, 2011: 9). Among the families, in which one of the parents lives in Finland, family life is practiced over countries borders and despite the distance they are all in one way or another involved in family practices. Finch and Mason (1993) have discussed how family responsibilities do not necessarily end because of distance. Cheap telecommunication technologies and flexible travel opportunities play a part in allowing people to conduct family practices. What makes family practices an interesting approach to the study of transnational families is that peoples’ family practices in transnational families are more widely distributed in geographical space than in families in which family members live together. By using the family practices approach, I can attain a deeper understanding of what are multiple aspects that join together in the process of ‘doing a family’ (Morgan, 2011) when it comes to transnational families. This theoretical concept of family practices has been used to examine people’s life experiences (Morgan, 2011), and is thus useful for understanding how family life between countries borders is lived. Focus on the family practices approach allows me to investigate the everyday realities of transnational families.

Although Morgan (1996, 2011) talks about family practices role in forming families, I view family practices, whether they would be conducted in common presence or through technology, as methods for maintaining family relationships. These practices link the migrant and the stay-behind family members. I believe that practices are not an end itself, they instead “acquire meaning under particular circumstances” (Madianou, 2016: 185). Thereby, I am taking into account that also non-existence of practices that
can be called family practices is in itself an important manifestation of transnational family life, which can be potentially seen to be leading to discontinuation of family ties. After all, family practices activities can “unite family members and sustain close emotional bonds across borders” (Zontini & Reynolds, 2014: 259).

Because the focus of this thesis is not to study family practices per se, I am not aiming to give a comprehensive knowledge of activities conducted within families spanning countries borders. More importantly, through talking about practices that accompany living in two different locations, I will be able to see what meanings they give to their family life. As Morgan (2006: 192) writes, family practices “have some kind of emotional dimension, some sense of personal or moral significance.” Altogether, the everyday practices approach will not only give an understanding of family life of the families in this study, but by doing so, it also helps to highlight various aspects accompanying migration of a family member.

### 4.3 The importance of co-presence

One distinguishable feature of transnational families is that mutual presence of all family members takes place rarely. Because of the distance and the physical separation that migration causes between the family members, transnational families are highly dependent on communication technology for keeping up their familial connections (Baldassar, 2007b: 389). This can include sending text messages, calling through Skype or mobile phones, sending letters, postcards, or emails. Each of these different communication technologies facilitates some specific way of interaction (Madianou, 2016: 185) and focuses on different senses. They all allow people who are located in different places not only to communicate with each other, but “the effective (emotional) use of technologies often serves to ‘collapse’ distance and render people virtually co-present” (Baldassar, 2008: 255). Often the availability of communication technology and the relatively cheap and flexible means for travelling can even increase feelings of obligation towards being in contact more frequently (Baldassar, 2007b: 401).

Communication tools thus offer unique spaces for co-presence (Urry, 2003), or in other words, for virtual co-presence (Baldassar, 2008). For example, technologies which allow hearing the loved ones voice, and thus the tone of the voice, and ways of expressing oneself, can make it feel like the other person would be more present (Baldassar, 2008: 254). Phone calls are the most common way to establish that. Urry
(2002) discusses that new technologies have ultimately changed what is understood by co-presence. However, he poses an interesting question by asking why travelling takes place although technology developments have given us an opportunity to remain connected over vast distances (Urry, 2002). By this kind of travel he refers to corporeal travel, in other words, physical movement of people.

There are moments in transnational family life that are proven to involve the need to see the other in the same space such as during an unexpected family-related event or during a more positive occasion (Baldassar, 2007b: 390-391). But more specifically, Urry (2003: 155) argues that meetings that happen in the physical co-presence “within specific times and places” are necessary for maintaining social connections between people, whether it would be friends, business partners or family members. Therefore, travelling is “obligatory for sustaining ‘physical proximity’” (Urry, 2002: 255) and it is ultimately need for physical co-presence which makes people travel (Urry, 2002).

While Boden and Molotch (1994) argue that physical proximity is mandatory for maintaining social connections, and that it cannot thus be significantly replaced with any other means of creating co-presence, Urry (2002; 2003) argues that communication tools, although each in somewhat different manner, do function as a replacement of physical presence. Yet, Urry agrees that they do not fully substitute co-presence, which happens in the same time and space. New communications technologies, such as the Internet, mobile phones and Skype, allow for physical co-presence to be substituted only temporarily. People turn to communication technology when they cannot attain a needed amount of co-presence (Boden & Molotch, 1994: 258). Thereby, it is the feeling of longing which makes family members create various forms of co-presence (Baldassar, 2008). Yet, Urry (2003) argues that social networks cannot continue to persist without any occasional face-to-face meetings. Co-presence, understood also as physical proximity which provides chances for face-to-face interaction (Urry, 2003), is thus crucial also for maintaining a sense of family life.

Both Urry (2002, 2003) and Boden and Molotch (1994) see co-presence being of different quality than interaction mediated through communication technology. Boden and Molotch (1994: 258) write when discussing about developments in communication technology that face-to-face interaction is the main building stone of human connection. They see communication conducted in person to be not only essential for various activities, but also see it as a preferred option by many. According to Urry (2003: 170)
communication over distance is more aimed at solving certain problems, it is ‘less rich and multi-faceted’. Although it has been a while now since the publishing of Urry (2002, 2003) and Boden and Molotch (1994) papers, and developments in communication technology have brought us such as smartphones, tablets, social media, Whatsapp, also some of the more recent empirical work has confirmed these arguments. Mason (2004) writes that travelling leads to ‘visiting’ and thus to co-presence with both people and places. She similarly argues that face-to-face communication cannot be fully replaced with any communication technology. Baldassar (2008: 260) found that co-presence in a physical form is appreciated more than virtual communication. Also, other authors such as Madianou (2016) have referred to communication through the use of tools as an addition to interaction which takes place in person.

Boden and Molotch (1994) argue that communication technology has considerable limits, while visiting has a major significance in learning to know the other members of the family, for practicing activities together and being present during special events (Mason, 2004). Baldassar (2008: 260) has found that the physical co-presence is wished for among most transnational families because of the “need to ‘see’ their transnational kin, with ‘their own eyes’” so to be confident that they are healthy and well. Georg Simmel (1969: 358) has emphasised the importance of the sight, stating that looking into the eyes of another is “the most direct and purest reciprocity that exists anywhere”, which enhances connection between people. Co-presence is thus ultimately about seeing the other face-to-face in the same time and space. Physical co-presence gives more opportunities for meaningful and rich discussions, which include seeing facial expressions, body language, hearing articulation, tone of voice, intonation and more (Boden & Molotch, 1994: 259). In the words of Urry (2003: 163): “This mutual presencing enables each to read what the other is really thinking, to observe their body language, to hear ‘first hand’ what they have to say, to sense directly their overall response, to undertake at least some emotional work.” It is not confirmed if this need could be satisfied through web camera (Baldassar, 2008: 260), but it is between the times of co-presence that transnational family members use other ways of maintaining contact for sustaining the knowledge about others (Mason, 2004).

Urry (2003: 156) writes that “these moments of physical co-presence are crucial to patterns of social life that occur ‘at-a-distance’”. Getting to know somebody usually needs doing things together (Mason, 2004: 425). Being able to be present in one place
allows trust to be developed between the people under question, but can also create power dynamics, and emotions such as fear (Urry, 2002: 259-260). Communication technologies on the other have a more functional nature and thus are not so productive in establishing relationships in which trust would be present (Boden & Molotch, 1994). Baldassar (2008: 254) writes that “the extra information provided by hearing and seeing people, if only virtually via the phone or skype, arguably improves the highly valued ability to cross check the validity of what is being said with how it is being said”. There are cases where people cannot see each other face to face often, but when they do, there is an expectation of reciprocal attention (Urry, 2002: 259). Co-presence makes it easier to give attention, but it also makes it easier for the participants to see if there is interest towards the other (Urry, 2002: 259). Seeing each other in the same space allows family members “to acquire mutual and shared knowledge of each other” which virtual communication can help to sustain during the time when meetings in person are not possible (Mason, 2004: 424). Moreover, there is “a rich, complex and culturally variable vocabulary of touch” involved in being in the same space in the same time (Urry, 2002: 259). Communication tools can only exemplify what is already there (Madianou, 2016).

Travel gives the opportunity for physical proximity not only to specific people, but also to places and events (Urry, 2002: 261). Members of transnational families are “through feeling the presence of people and places involving all the five senses” able to decrease their feelings of longing whether it would be towards a specific person or a place (Baldassar, 2008: 252) such as a home. There are places that need to be experienced physically, to be “seen for oneself” as through seeing we can be confident in what state the place truly is (Urry, 2002: 261). Visiting usually leads to increased communication between the family members before and after the co-presence (Baldassar, 2008: 260). According to Urry (2002: 259) co-presence is also necessary for talking about problems. Many studies on transnational families show that family members avoid talking about any difficulties they are facing when being located long distances away, so as to avoid upsetting the others (e.g. Baldassar, 2008). Therefore, time spent together and the time spent apart can be considerably different.

When applying the concept of co-presence directly to transnational families, travelling between the countries could be seen crucial for the maintenance of family ties and transformation of relationships within the family. As transnational families live most of
the time in physical distance, the moments of physical co-presence attain a deeper meaning. It does not, however, mean that co-presence and face-to-face interaction will necessarily lead to creation of closer familial relationship like geographical closeness between family members living in the same country does not necessary mean that the relationships between family members is emotionally close or that the family ties include giving care and emotional support (Finch & Mason, 1993). Moreover, doing family practices does not require that the person towards the activity is conducted is necessarily present in the same space (Morgan, 2011: 22-23). I do, however, believe that the moments of mutual presence are the best at allowing the partners to make sense of their family life, and I therefore argue that a certain level of physical co-presence is needed for maintaining family relationships.

Visiting home is both symbolically and practically important for maintaining family ties in transnational spaces (Mason, 2004). We can encounter family practices of various meanings when we consider those that are conducted when the partners are located in each of their own countries and those that take place during the periods when the migrant partners are at home (Morgan, 2011). In theory, the latter can be of much greater help when organizing everyday family responsibilities. An examination of family practices conducted in co-presence and in mediated co-presence thanks to communication technologies will thus provide a basis for understanding transnational family life, which is for certain needing a certain level of negotiation and restructuring.
5 Methodology

I will start this section with discussion on the choice of data collection methods. In the second chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the data collection process and the relevant characteristics of the research participants and their families, while discussing the changes that occurred during the process of data collection. Lastly, I will give a detailed description of the steps I took for data analysis, while also discussing the role of my own personal background in interpreting the results. The main aim of this section is to be as explicit as possible about the ways I reached to the results presented in the following section of my thesis.

5.1 Approach to research and data collection method

Because knowledge about Estonian families in which one of the parents works and lives in Finland is very limited, I have chosen to use a qualitative approach. Considering the lack of information on the topic, I found that it is more important to develop an understanding of the matter rather than to generate hypotheses and test them as is common in quantitative research. Qualitative research methods let the researcher to attain a kind of insight of the phenomenon that quantitative research cannot fully capture. According to Chambers (2012: 181), “qualitative approaches have the potential to tap into the subtle changes, ambiguities and complexities of personal and family life.” Thus, qualitative research methods let the reader concentrate on the meanings given by people and thus better understand and explain their experiences and feelings, which are most important for seeking answers to the research questions of this study.

In this study, I have decided for the use of semi-structured interviews. As one of the aims of this thesis is to bring forth the personal experiences of the stay-behind partners and thus dive into the transnationally operating ties between the family members, the study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews. Besides practical reasons, this was guided by my interest to hear personal stories. I believe every person has fascinating experiences that often remain untold just because another person does not know to ask about them. With questions prepared beforehand, I was able to get answers to questions I was most interested in and which I found most relevant, but there was still room for other topics to come up during the interviews. With open-ended answers, I was able to see how the respondents make sense of their transnational family life.
5.2 Data collection process and presentation of the participants

The research study draws on ten in-depth semi-structured individual interviews. The interviews were conducted with members of transnational families, who remained in Estonia with their under-aged children during the period when their partner was living and working in Finland. I found the interview participants through interview calls posted on two of the most actively used Estonian family discussion platforms “Perekool” and “Perefoorum”, and with inquiries to an online community “FinEst – Eestlased Soomes”, which is an online gathering point for most of the Estonians living in Finland and for those who have connections with Finland through their loved ones living there.

The interview call, which was written in Estonian, included a short introduction of myself as the researcher, the main topic of the study, criteria for the selection of research participants, explanation of the data collection procedure, protecting the confidentiality of the interviewees, and a clarification that they have the right to resign from taking part in the study at any given time. I initially did not use personal networks for finding research participants as I did not want anybody to take part in the research because of the feeling of obligation, and because I believed that studying my “backyard” does not allow me to get as good interviews as when talking with strangers. However, finding research participants turned out to be more difficult than I first had guessed, and in the end I had to turn to my own social network for two interviews.

I initially looked for participants whose partner was working in Finland during the time of data collection and had been doing so consistently for at least a year. I included both families in which the partners are married, but also those in which the partners are together without being married. The second criteria was to find interviewees who had at least one child who was aged 18 or below. I outlined both of these criteria in my initial interview call. However, I was contacted by one woman who has been living separately from her husband for years, but who ultimately had moved to Finland as well. Although the initial criteria did not include interviewing women who have moved to Finland, it came to my understanding that is a consequence of the transnational family life and thus should belong under investigation in the current study. I came to a realization that interviewing people who have had the experience of living apart from their partners due to labour migration to Finland, but who are not in this situation anymore, can still give me an insight into the lives of transnational families between Estonia and Finland.
therefore, decided to widen the sample to include interviewees who have recently had the experience of a transnational family life. Altogether, two interviewees had moved to Finland after many years of living separately from their partners and children’s fathers, and one interviewee was now living together with her partner again in Estonia.

Although I was not deliberately looking to interview women, all the interviewees were female. However, labour migration to Finland is male-dominated and thus it was expected that the people who contact me will be female. In one case, I was contacted by the migrant partner who recommended his partner who was living in Estonia, to take part in the study. Therefore, the ten interviewees included women, who are currently living in a transnational family, but also three women who have recently had the experience, and who thus were able to better reflect on their experience with hindsight and talk about the outcomes of living in such a way.

I felt that the stay-behind partners that I interviewed were very open-minded to talk to about their experiences and that the interviews gave them an opportunity to reflect on the past years, but also on the future. I noticed that instead of describing their everyday family life to me, many women were deeply analysing their experiences while talking to me even if the question did not require them to do so.

I was able to recruit families that were different in terms of the total length of the time the migrant parent had been working in Finland. The longest time of working in Finland was 11 years and the shortest two years. The families are from different parts of Estonia. All of the participants had under-aged children from the relationship with the partner or husband working abroad. The participants were from 22 to 43 years of age. Their partners were all working in similar fields of work and the families of similar socio-economic status. Half of the interviewees were currently not employed. As can be seen from the table below, the children were either very little when the parents started working in Finland or born during the time period of working abroad. Also, the migrant partners have remained working in Finland for years, despite seeing work abroad initially as temporary. The characteristics of the stay-behind partners who took part in the interviews are described in the table presented on the following page.
Table 1 Summary of participants’ characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Interviewee’s field of work</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Duration of partner’s work in Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kaisa</td>
<td>Service industry</td>
<td>2,5 years old</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anneli</td>
<td>Student, law enforcement, education</td>
<td>23, 18 and 11 years of age</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Home with children, student</td>
<td>4, 7 and 11 years of age</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irina</td>
<td>Student looking for employment (in Finland)</td>
<td>10 and 8 years old</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Cleaning industry (in Finland)</td>
<td>11 and 14 years old</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heli</td>
<td>Home with the child</td>
<td>5 months old</td>
<td>4,5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsti</td>
<td>Home with children</td>
<td>2 and 4 years old</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marika</td>
<td>Temporarily home with children, previously in accounting</td>
<td>7 and 1 years old</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krista</td>
<td>Home with children</td>
<td>7 and 4 years old</td>
<td>about 7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marianne</td>
<td>Food industry</td>
<td>13 years old</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews were conducted in October and November 2015 and in February and March 2016. In data collection communication technology played an important role. Six participants were interviewed through Skype video or phone call. One interview took place in person in a relaxed café environment in the centre of Helsinki and another one in a private location in Estonia due to the wish of the participant to meet in person. On one occasion, the interview was conducted through a Whatsapp call. Although in most cases the interviews were not conducted face-to-face, I feel that the interview quality did not suffer because of that. Instead, I believe that being able to answer the interviews questions in their home environment allowed them to feel more relaxed while answering the interview questions. Also, conducting interviews through communication tools gave me a good insight into the lives of these families, who in their everyday life are highly reliant on communication technology. In some ways, I was thus collecting the material in the ‘natural setting’ of the stay-behind partners’ family life.
All the interviews were conducted in Estonian and I used an interview guide that I had prepared before the first interview. Yet, the participants were free to talk about any topics they deemed relevant, and this way the questions prepared beforehand were combined with free talk and additional questions. There were some topics I found sensitive and that I myself as a researcher did not want to bring up, such as the amount of earnings the migrant partners make or direct questions concerning the infidelity of either one of the partners. Although these would have definitely been interesting topics for the reader, I do not feel that by leaving them out of my interviews I have lost in my analysis.

All of the interviewees took part in the study voluntarily and the possibility to resign taking part of the study at any given time or refuse to answer questions they do not feel comfortable answering was made clear already in the interview call, and also before the beginning of the interview. However, none of the participants opted for that choice. The interviews lasted in average about one hour. They were recorded using a digital recorder. I informed the participants of the need to use a digital recorder before the interview, and after which they had the opportunity to tell me if they felt uncomfortable with the recording. All of the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original language and the most relevant passages translated into English. I also obtained a verbal agreement from all of the participants for answering additional questions in case I felt the need for further clarifications. Also, I promised to send the final version of the study to all participants, together with a summary written in Estonian.

5.3 **Data analysis procedure and interpretation**

Doing the data analysis means that the researcher ultimately moves from the collected material into an interpretation of the phenomenon that is being examined (Gibbs, 2002). After each interview, I listened to the interview recording and wrote a summary which helped me to reflect on what I had learned during the interview and give me a general overview of the main ideas the interviewees had expressed. The summary of the interviews was accompanied by writing small memos of the aspects I should pay attention to in the next interviews. Therefore, the data analysis started already while I was collecting the data. Through this, I got a general sense of the collected data on which I was able to reflect. Through simultaneous involvement in data collection and
analysis, I was better able to prepare for the interviews that followed by coming up with new and relevant questions. By the end of the eighth interview, I started to feel I was not finding any new information anymore, and therefore I had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser, 1978), but decided for assurance to conduct additional two interviews. By the end of the tenth interview, no new information in relation to the research questions was found, which meant that I had attained the theoretical saturation.

After I had collected all the interviews, I moved deeper into understanding the information given by the interview participants. Instead of working through the data manually, by for example, cutting segments of the interviews out and placing them into different categories or moving between different files, I used the qualitative data analysis software program NVivo for assistance in the analysis process. I entered the verbatim transcribed interviews into the NVivo program and continued there with a detailed coding process. Using the program helped me to be faster and more effectively organize data into codes, which in the end of the process formed categories or themes.

In the initial coding process, I generated as many ideas as possible inductively from the data. While reading the data, I was giving conceptual labels or names such as ‘Missing everyday support’ or ‘Fearing what the other might be doing’ to each sentence or group of sentences with the same underlying idea so that their meaning remains intact. Unlike coding line by line, this prevented me from getting lost in the data, and not coding paragraphs, which often have many underlying ideas, allowed me to be inclusive and exhaustive in my coding process (Humble, 2012). In NVivo this process is referred to as ‘coding at a new node’. Sometimes this meant that I was able to code information under an already existing code. Yet, most important was that the created label was able to grasp the meaning behind the coded data. Doing this kept me as close to the data as possible so that the analysis would not be as strongly influenced by the literature I had been previously reading and that I would not overlook important information.

After the initial coding, I refined my research questions aiming for clarity and coherence. In the next phase of the coding process I categorized codes into units with higher level of meaning based on my research questions, making sure that I had created new categories or themes which correspond to all the codes clustered together. The codes were reviewed repeatedly. While coding, I was comparing pieces of data with each other for the purpose of not forcing preconceived ideas directly on the data. I
grouped codes which were connected to one another into categories reducing their overall amount. As a result of the analysis, I had themes emerged from the data, which made up the structure for the research findings presented in the following section of the thesis. Altogether, I identified 4 general themes.

I am aware of the biased attitude of many qualitative researchers towards the use of qualitative data analysis software: “So ingrained is this view that even though computer programs represent a genuine advancement over manual methods of data analysis and have been designed to help speed up the process, some researchers continue to resist their use” (Thompson, 2002: para. 4). Therefore, it needs to be mentioned that the NVivo software program did not analyse or interpret the data for me at any point. I, as the researcher, was still ‘the main tool for analysis’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) as I was the one giving meaning to the themes that emerged from the data. Moreover, although the codes were built in the program, they were the product of my thinking. The programme was there only to assist me in organising the interview material, in remembering what the interviews are about, and helping me to analyse it systematically (Konopásek, 2008). Using NVivo allowed doing the same procedures than a researcher working with papers, glue, scissors and coloured markers, or a researcher moving between different files, but gave even more options (Konopásek, 2008).

In treating the interview material, I have used a combination of both a naturalist and constructionist epistemological approach. The naturalist approach “seeks rich descriptions of people as they exist and unfold in their natural habitats”, while the constructionist approach seeks to show “how a sense of social order is created through talk and interaction” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997: 5). In this way I have seemingly positioned myself as a researcher between two opposites. As both of these approaches to interview material focus on the daily life of people including the things they experience (Elliot, 2005: 18), which is important for this study, I do not see the need to exclude the one or the other. I am interested both in the interviewees’ life events related to transnational family life, or in other words the ‘facts’ such as the frequency of calling or the regularity behind the face-to-face meetings, highlighted in my analysis by descriptive accounts common to a naturalist approach, but also in the processes how the interviewees give meaning to these occurrences, which is a characteristic of the constructionist approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). As the data analysis is based on ten different interviews and not on a much larger quantity of interviews, I was also able
to gain an in-depth understanding not only about the themes that arose in the coding process, but also of each participant (Fink, 2000).

To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, the names presented in the research results section by the interview quotations are pseudonyms. I am aware that different members of a family may perceive their family’s experiences differently. Since the study focuses on the accounts of the partners who remained living in Estonia, while bringing out the results of the analysis I remain aware that they do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the migrant partners, nor the children, as they are based on the subjective perspective of those who stayed living in Estonia. Nevertheless, the experiences of the interviewees challenge current understanding of transnational family life and add new and revealing dimensions to it.

While reporting the research results, I also remain aware of the fact that the roles and responsibilities of family members can change over time, especially when the children grow older. I am also taking into consideration my personal background in interpreting the themes, especially as at the time of the interviews, I had been living for about two and a half years in Finland. In a way, because of this, I was able to relate to some of the migrant partners’ experiences such as travelling between Finland and Estonia or having a limited amount of time to be able to spend in Estonia. Although the study is based on the perspectives of the stay-behind partners, I felt that because of my own experience of living in Finland, I had a good understanding of what the migrant partners may be feeling in some circumstances. This, however, may have caused me to give more attention to parts in the analysis where I encountered similarities to my own experiences. The results of the whole analysis will be presented in the following section.
6 Research results

The following section draws on the experiences and perspectives of stay-behind partners of labour migrants for exploring transnational family life. The first two chapters highlight the ways how family relationships are sustained during periods of separation. In the latter two chapters, I will first focus on family life while the stay-behind partner is living alone, and later I will turn to family life in the mutual co-presence of the partners. The first half of the results section also provides a necessary context for understanding how family responsibilities are divided during different temporalities of absence and presence of the partners.

6.1 Maintaining connectedness through communication routines

Communication technology has an important role in the lives of the families in the current study as keeping in touch constitutes one of the main practices of their everyday life. All of the interviewees talked about using Skype and mobile phones for keeping in contact with the partner who is residing in Finland. Although there were a few other forms mentioned such as Whatsapp text messaging or using Facebook chat, calling was unquestionably the most common choice for long-distance communication. In families, where Skype calling is the main tool for having longer conversations, communication is normally complemented by mobile calls. In these cases, mobile calls are used for shorter and more practical conversations.

Anneli: “In this respect, if you need something, you can always call. It is not like I cannot call today because I just called yesterday. If there is something, you can always pick up the phone.”

Although Skype allows for visual communication, using mobile phones are felt to provide the greatest flexibility. As opposed to Skype, calling on the phone of the partner does require being agreed in advance and thus seems more convenient for most of the interviewees. This makes communication also more spontaneous. As Krista reported, her partner, who has been working in Finland for seven years, often calls to her on his work breaks. Mobile calls are thus the most important communication tools for these families. Considering that all of the interviewees opted for the use of mobile calls or calling through Skype, which both allow real-time conversations, choosing from a wide variety of communication options available, it seems to be important for the families to actually hear the voice of the other and thus through this instantaneous communication
have a richer interaction. Returning to the transnationalism literature this is also one of the ways how transnational families create “social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders” (Glick Schiller et al. 1992: 9).

All of the interviewees’ ways of communication show a sense of regularity and overall the calls take place frequently. Most of the interviewees talk with their partners on an everyday basis showing a similarity in the communication patterns of these transnational families. Only Kirsti said that she was in communication with her partner after every couple of days and Anneli explained that they make longer calls after every other day.

Heidi: “During these six years there has been maybe two days during which we have not talked over the phone.”

The regularity and the sense of ‘everyday’ show that these calls are a part of the families practices (Morgan, 1996, 2011). Based on the statements given by the interviewees, calling with the stay-behind partner seems to be one of the main activities of the migrant partners’ day in Finland, as they often tend not to have any other social relations in Finland besides their work colleagues. The longer regular calls take place in the evenings after the migrant partners’ work has ended. Although most of the interviewees expressed no difficulties in attaining contact with their partner, one of the interviewees stated that after some years scheduling the calls was not so easy anymore, and resulted in loss of contact. In the end, the calls were made only for practical reasons. This was the case of an interviewee whose relationship with the migrant partner ended. Kaisa and her partner started communicating less frequently because there was a conflict in their schedules.

Kaisa: “We used to talk in Skype quite long, and through phone of course. In the end, the communication started drifting away. The times did not work out anymore – one was too busy, then the other. Generally, in the end, we used to call over the phone if we needed something.”

The abovementioned narrative also demonstrates how communication is normally not encouraged because of practical issues although long-distance communication can be used also for organising practical matters. As a quote from Marianne, whose partner has been working in Finland for 11 years, expresses that frequent communication is, first of all, taking place because of the pure need and interest of hearing and knowing how the other is doing: “I could not do otherwise, I would start to worry.” These established
routines can thus bring peace of mind for the members of these transnational families, who sometimes are worried about the safety of the partner while they are at work and on often long trips to work and back. If the communication were inconsistent and only occasional it could leave the family members feeling concerned and apprehensive as has been found in previous research (Atwood, 2013: 7).

During the conversations the interviewees and the migrant partners share detailed stories of each other’s day and the stay-behind partners tell about the situation at home and how the children are doing. The content of the communication is thus largely focused around the family. Boccagni (2012) has written that sharing stories of everyday activities means entering the everyday life of the other person. This way the migrant partners, despite being away, become involved in the everyday life of their partner and the children (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016), and the partners who remained in Estonia become aware of the daily life of the migrant partner in Finland. As the narrative from one of the interviewee exemplifies, the stay-behind partners are aware that communication also serves a deeper purpose:

Krista: “When you are already living separately, then I find that frequent interaction is important because otherwise there might come a time when you just grow apart if you do not talk about your day, listen to the other, and so on.”

In the context of transnational families, communication can be used for creating intimacy and for maintaining the family (Parreñas, 2014). The interviewees are aware that staying in touch is fundamental to maintain the close relationships between the partners and thereby to ensure the stability and vitality of the family relationships. Kaisa stated that her partner had directly said to her that this decrease in communication had been one of the reasons why he lost feelings towards her. Wilding (2006: 132) writes that using communication tools “is important for some transnational families in constructing or imagining a ‘connected relationship’, and enabling them to overlook their physical separation by time and space - even if only temporarily”. Thus, despite being separated from one another physically they can still remain connected. These phone or Skype calls taken by the interviewees and their partners, besides helping them to maintain contact, also help them “feel, be and do family” (Baldassar, 2011: 21).

The stay-behind partners also help to form connections between the migrant partner and other family members. Whereas all interviewed stay-behind partners are in communication with the migrant partner on a regular basis, there are vast differences
between communication of the children with the father from a short greeting in the beginning of the phone or Skype call to long and private conversations. Often the children are either uninterested towards talking on the phone or feel uncomfortable by doing that. Thus, ‘fathering’ was done most often through the stay-behind partner, who passed on messages to the children. Also Avila (2008) has found that migrant fathers tend to speak more with their partners than with children, and that everything that they want to say to the children is generally passed on through the mother.

Irina: “[…] And another thing is that they didn’t like talking in Skype. They didn’t want it, nor do they want to talk on Skype even now, but still, they could see each other every day.”

Considering that all the families have relatively small children, it is understandable that it is difficult for them in such active age to stay in one place for a longer time. The partner of Marika, on the other hand, is communicating often with the children over the phone. She described how the father and the son, who is seven years old, are usually talking about the games the son is playing. Heli makes sure that during the Skype-calls her child could also see the father, because she is afraid that otherwise he will not recognize him anymore. Kaisa explained that since the birth of the child, he had always been present at the Skype conversations, so he would not forget his father. She used to tell the partner everything the child did during the daytime. However, their relationship ended in spring and since that time the former partner has been in Estonia only once in August. They are still in contact with each other, but very minimally, in her words. She believes that without being able to talk to the father, who resides in Finland, the child will forget about him over time. The visual opportunities provided by Skype are thus used for keeping up the connections until the time when the whole family could be together again (King-O’Riain, 2015: 267).

Kaisa: “When I show him the picture (of the father), then he recognizes him immediately, but I imagine that if he happens to come home, then he will definitely feel very shy around him. He will recognize him, and probably will come to tell me that it’s daddy, but he will feel shy for sure. He will not run to his lap.”

Kaisa expressed being disappointed that after the breakup the migrant partner does not ask anything about their common child. But she is feeling that maybe he does not even know how to ask, because when they were still a couple, she used to start talking about these things herself. She thinks that maybe he is so used to that it is her duty as a mother.
to tell him how it is going with his child. Women often do ‘the emotional work’ including upholding the relationship between the father and children and keeping in touch with rest of the extended family members (Chambers, 2012, Holmes, 2004: 195). As Morgan (1996: 105) writes: “What the woman gives in this work is emotion as much as any kind of physical labour, while she is also supposed to be able to handle the emotions and tensions on the part of the cared for both individually and in relation to other members of the family.” As a result of this type of labour the relationship, but the also the sense of family is maintained (Baldassar, 2007b).

The interviewees did not report on any changes in their communication patterns over the years when their partner has been working in Finland. According to the respondents, the communication has stayed the same over the course of the years. This is interesting because considering the life-cycle theory, communication should increase and decrease and its patterns change as a result of different events the family experiences (Wilding, 2006: 129). It therefore seems that the families established a rather concrete routine already in the beginning of the migration. Most of the interviewees felt satisfied with the frequency and length of communication at distance by the means of communication tools implying that the communication took place as often as they wanted. This is not a surprise as most of the interviewees have calls with their partners which last for hours. For one of the interviewees communicating was not always available. Kirsti, who talked with her partner after every two days during the two years he worked in Finland, wished that they would have been in contact more.

Kirsti: “I was at home. I didn’t go to work. I would have had the time, but he didn’t have the time because he was very long at work. This caused tensions.”

Unlike many transnational families from the developing countries (e.g. Parreñas, 2014), the communication in Estonian transnational families takes place in the same timeframe, frequently and without any major restrictions. Therefore, an important factor in being satisfied with the amount of contact is the possibility to be able to call to each other whenever the stay-behind partner feels like it. The immediacy of communication, the possibility of having longer calls and being able to call when one so wishes, gives the partners the chance to have a detailed overview of the life in Estonia and in Finland and thus keep up with the family life. This daily routine of calling enables the partners to be able to be aware of the others daily routines practised when they are geographically
separated despite being physically distant. Calling thus creates a space over distance in which family life can be experienced (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016: 210).

One could notice, however, an interesting intrusion of the migrant partners’ accommodation and thus work life into when and how communication took place. The studies by Madianou and Miller (2012) and Hoang and Yeoh (2012) have found how migrant domestic workers can be restricted by their employers from using the Internet and mobile phones by the employers, but here the migrant partners experienced certain constraints due to their living conditions. Migrant partners, who were mostly living in the same accommodation with their co-workers provided by the employer, often did not have the flexibility to have Skype conversations in privacy because many men were sharing the same room. This made their partners look for new spaces for private conversations where they could talk without being interrupted.

Irina: “He went to his room and when it was summer, then he was outside. He had internet there. Sometimes someone used to stick their head between the door and commented on something and so on, but well, we managed to talk.”

These constraints from living conditions can hamper the communication and influence its content thus posing challenges to maintaining a common family life. On the other hand, the interviews showed that using communication technology in their everyday communication gives the possibility to end the argument whenever one wishes and to return to the conversation after taking some time to calm down and reconsider own thoughts, whereas in the physical presence of both partners an argument could lead to a very heated discussion. With the limited time spent on calling when considering the whole length of one day, it means that the couples had smaller changes to get into argument to begin with. In many cases, the interviewees expressed that this kind of a long-distance relationship had actually brought them closer to one another and the limited time might be one of the factors.

Krista: “One thing is definitely that if you are 24/7 together, then you might have quarrels over every little thing, but we don’t have these kind of quarrels. If we do have disagreements, then we solve them over the phone. When you get angry, you cannot raise your voice, or similar. You simply stop the call and you call back when you have calmed down. In this respect, there are definitely a lot less quarrels over small things. That is maybe the only positive thing about this.”

Anneli: “Maybe we get along better. In that matter that we don’t live on each other’s backs from the morning until the evening and we see each other seldom.
We don’t have the time to get into an argument. When you see each other four or five days in a month, then it is also a considerably more quality time.”

Heli felt the communication with her husband has improved since living in two different places as on the moments when they can talk, whether it would be on Skype or in physical co-presence, they try to take full advantage of it. However, for some families it meant that the tensions that had gathered over the period where physical co-presence was not available were released when it was achieved. Despite mobile or Skype calls allowing flexible imminent communication with the possibility of hearing among others the voice tone and connotations of the partner, some of the interviewees still expressed that the topics discussed differed from those talked about when in the same space.

Kirsti: “You could let yourself free. He was next to you and you could straight talk to him, and ask about the things that you through phone connection maybe could not talk about.”

One of the interviewees expressed disbelief towards some of the things her partner was saying over the phone and believed that in mutual presence she would be able to know the ‘truth’. Baldassar (2007b: 386) has said that co-presence makes possible to share information that only verbal communication cannot provide. It so seemed that the body language and facial expressions were important to grasp the others emotions. People value co-presence as a means to make sure the others true feelings and also wellbeing (Baldassar, 2007b: 403). When I asked the interviewees about the everyday life of their partners in Finland, they seemed to be fully aware of their partners’ activities. They seemed to be aware of their everyday life of their partner in Finland, but some still had doubts and felt that the partners might have been hiding some information. Also, one woman expressed doubts about the truthfulness of the information she received from his partner and the ‘reality’ of the life the partner had in Finland.

Anne: “Well, the relationship with the children got more distant and between us…the same way. One thing is if you talk over the phone, but another when this person is right next to you. You can see and know what he is doing. One thing is what you have been told over the phone…”

I: “Did you have a lot of concerns during that time?”

Anne: “All the time there were different thoughts.”

Some of the partners had suspicions that their husband had not been completely honest with them regarding their life in Finland. It thus seems that the geographical distance between partners increased uncertainty. According to Simmel (1997: 112) sight gives
“the most complete reciprocity”. Baldassar (2016: 115) writes that the communication tools can create different forms of co-presence which can be felt as “a sense of ‘being there’ for each other, despite the distance.” Despite being satisfied with the frequency of contact, and the real-time quality of calling being best in creating a feeling of co-presence, there were women who felt that it could not be compared to the physical co-presence of the partner. Many of the interviewees directly expressed that having the partner by their side would have lessened their “emotional burden”. What they seemed to be missing most was not practical support which needed hand-on work, but instead it was important to have the partner with them in the same space, so to have ‘the possibility of getting help’ when needed.

It thus seems that calling and other ways of keeping in touch supplement, rather than replace physical co-presence. Therefore, the use of ICTs did not manage to completely replace physical co-presence. Licoppe (2004: 136–5, as cited in Wilding, 2006: 132) discuss that: ‘communication technologies, instead of being used (however unsuccessfully) to compensate for the absence of our close ones, are exploited to provide a continuous pattern of mediated interactions that combine into “connected relationships”, in which the boundaries between absence and presence eventually get blurred.’” However, for the interviewees in this study, there is a clear difference between the time where their partner is home and when he is away. Whether or not researchers in social sciences believe that communication tools can render distance unimportant is insignificant as what truly matters are what the people involved in these practices feel. In some situations communication tools were just not sufficient. The interviews thus suggest that due to geographical separation, the migrant partners were not able to sufficiently meet the needs of their partner.

Irina: “A positive thing is definitely that I am not much more self-reliant. And I know that I can also manage alone if something should happen. But the negative aspects...Well, definitely the relationship between us was at some point pretty bad. Especially because of distance. That you talk on the phone and in Skype, but it is not the same when your husband is by your side. Now when we moved here our relationship has changed for the better.”

The fact that the stay-behind partners are satisfied with the amount of contact over distance, but still long for the physical co-presence of the migrant partner and the everyday support that they can provide when physically near shows that physical co-presence cannot be replaced with calling. For the stay-behind partners these times of
mediated presence and physical co-presence are not the same. Long-distance communication functions rather as a temporary substitute for physical co-presence (Urry, 2003), but is not able to provide the same qualities as bodily presence. As is written by Vertovec (1999: 449): “technologies do not altogether create new social patterns, but they certainly reinforce pre-existing ones.”

6.2 Time, distance and working conditions in mobility between home and work

Contrary to transnational families from the developing countries, whose travels are prohibited because of long distances, expensive ticket prices and strict restrictions for getting time off from work, regular and frequent movement between home and Finland are central to the transnational families in the current study. The availability of communication technology has by no means seem to have lessened the interviewees’ desire to see their partners in person and can thus be also considered the most important way how family life is maintained. Children of migrant parents seem to be especially fond of these meetings. For example, Krista described how their seven and four year-old children check the calendar to see when is the next time their father is coming home, while leaving was described as a sad event not for only her children, but for children of many families in this study.

When in literature on transnational families, the movement from the host country to the home country have been referred to as a ‘visit’ (e.g. Kilkey & Merla, 2014: 212; Mason, 2004, Baldassar, 2007a), it became quickly clear that this is not an appropriate concept to be used among Estonian families. ‘Visiting’ implies to being a guest and the interviewees seemed to be uncomfortable with the idea of their partners being a guest in their common home or the migrant partners’ home being seen to be in Finland. The interviewees saw the home of their partner being in Estonia with the rest of the family and thus talked about the movement from Finland to Estonia as ‘coming home’.

Anne: “The children asked sometimes when daddy is coming for a visit. I said to them, children, daddy is not coming for a visit, daddy is coming home.”

Heidi: “The youngest child is saying sometimes that daddy lives in Finland. That is where daddy’s home is. She doesn’t understand at all that daddy should actually be with us. Then I tell her that daddy’s home is still with us, and he goes to work there only. She doesn’t even seem to know about this. The middle child doesn’t know it so well either. She was only a year old when he started going to Finland.
But it is not like that with her. Maybe she understands better that daddy’s home is with us here.”

By highlighting that Finland is only a place of work for their husbands, they emphasise that home of the partner is still in Estonia. Based on the interviewees statements it could be understood that for the migrant partners, coming home is not only because of their family, but also related to their identity and belonging (Baldassar, 2011). For all of these families, the initially planned short-term circular migration has evolved into a long-term practice. Whereas there are no reasons to doubt this, the narrative can be interpreted also as the interviewees’ way to demonstrate that the migrant partner still remains connected with them and their common children. ‘Coming home’, which seems to be associated with a sense of family, could be for the stay-behind partners a way of displaying their functioning family ties. For small children it can, however, be very difficult to grasp the complexity of the situation.

All the interviewees’ partners have established a certain routine for their mobility between the two countries. In all of the families, the partners came home at least once a month, but the time that was of disposal differed between the families. For example, the partner of Marianne used to work two weeks in Finland and spend two weeks at home in Estonia every month, but after changing the employer he now comes home for about week after every two weeks. The schedule of the partner of Marika is the most flexible allowing him to spend every other week in Estonia. In most of the families the migrant partner spends approximately a week at home after a period of working in Finland. In the longest case of regular absence from home, the partner was working four to six weeks consecutively in Finland. In one family the frequency of coming home was very high as the partner was able to back and forth every weekend, yet in all the families the longest time they were not able to see each other was around two months. Baldassar (2001: 323) writes that migrants tend to have an ‘obligation’ to return so that they would “honour their ties to family and community, therefore travelling between the countries can be seen as a family practice.

Most of the families in this study are living in Southern-Estonia, which led the interviewees often to compare their families to those in which one of the partners is living in Helsinki and the other in Tallinn. They expressed belief that in that situation coming home would be much easier. Being from Southern-Estonia often meant that the migrant partner had to travel throughout the night when leaving to Estonia after a work
day. Coming home is often weighed against the time for travelling through the distance and the time that was then possible to be spent at home. Those migrant partners living further away from Helsinki thus encountered more difficulty in being able to see their family.

Kaisa: “The first two-three years I felt that it was very difficult when the other was leaving to Finland, but then somehow it got easier. Then this feeling disappeared and it became somehow obvious that he will go again. Then there were no more special emotions anymore, but the first couple of year you cried every time. And that of course also that he is so far from Helsinki. That is why he didn’t come so very often. If he would be in Helsinki and I in Tallinn then it would have been very simple, but we have still this drive to Tartu as well.”

Krista: “If he would be in Helsinki, then he could even maybe come home after every other weekend, but because he had quite a long drive, then we had agreed that he comes once a month.”

The interviews included only one case in which the partner could travel home every weekend. Although the interviewee considered the distance between their location in Finland and Estonia short, she felt that it left their partner only one day to be fully at home resulting in very short and intensive stay, which was far from enough according to the interviewee. Therefore, it seems that for the visit to be considered worth it, it should last longer rather than happen often. The concept of time attains a deeper meaning for transnational families than for families that continuously live together as the period of ‘being together’ always has a definite end in the foreseeable future.

Kirsti: “We didn’t have enough time to do anything together, because he used to do household work, and there was just no time. He was basically home only on Saturdays. There was a bit of time, but it was very stressful and the relationship suffered a bit as a consequence.”

The time for going home is always negotiated with the employer in Finland and the schedule needs to be adapted with ones of the co-workers, most of who also had families in Estonia. Planning of the trips does still involve some sort of input from the stay-behind partners. Although the men have established a certain schedule in agreement with their employers, the women stated that it is flexible in that sense that it can be shifted by a couple of days either to an earlier or later time depending on the interviewees needs.

Marianne: “As a rule it is negotiated with the employer, but when there really is need for coming home, then it is also possible to plan it differently. But the
conditions have been set with the men. They all take turn going home. It can’t be this way that they all come home at once. There must be somebody who stays there. They have established their own schedule, but when needed, it can be changed.”

As ‘visiting’, or coming home, has found to be one of the most significant ways of maintaining family connections (Mason, 2004), we can hereby notice the importance of the employment conditions on family matters. The agreement with the employer sets boundaries to the time that is possible to be spent at home, but also working assignments themselves seem to be an important factor which at times can restrict the migrant partners from going home. For example, the longest pause between meetings in the family of Heli was about five weeks. She explained that although her husband had wanted to come home earlier, his boss had not allowed the husband, who works as a construction worker, to leave the area they had been working at before the job was finished. Most of the partners of the interviewees worked in positions in which work is conducted by a given deadline. Although for some families, it allows for more flexibility as it gives the possibility of work being finished before the home visit, it sometimes also hinders travelling to back home. In most of the cases, the restrictions posed by work were seen in connection with distance.

Irina: “I think it was two months (the longest time without meeting), because he had to finish the job. That he couldn’t take any free days and because we were living in Southern-Estonia, then the way there was so long that it didn’t pay off coming for just one day.”

Not all of the migrant partners were able to travel back home when wanted and needed. The partner of Anne had called her and said that his new work contract made it impossible from now onwards to come home to Estonia. This unconventional work contract gave him only one free day in a week. In that situation, the interviewee felt that she had only two choices, either to go separate ways or to move to Finland. As the working hours of her partner did not allow him anymore to make visits home to Estonia, she decided to move together with the children to Finland.

The above-described experience shows how co-presence is deeply connected to visiting. Travelling between the home and the host country, but also communication at a distance which was presented in the previous chapter, have in general been regarded as family practices (Merla, 2012: 156), which help to maintain the relationship between the migrant and their family members (Baldassar, 2001). ‘Coming home’ is a part of this
continuous work whether the partners realise it or not and it is “not only experienced but also remembered and anticipated by those involved, and in this way shared kinship biographies can emerge and be sustained over time, with an assured past, present, and future” (Mason, 2004: 425).

For sustaining her family and thus also the wellbeing of her children, Anne has set her own personal wishes to the background. She was not able to find work in Finland for three years finally settling for a much lower position in the cleaning industry. The cleaning industry is a typical recruiter of foreigners in Finland (Könönen, 2012). While Anne would have better employment opportunities in Estonia, she has decided to live in Finland so that the family would be together. Könönen (2012: 192) has written that precariousness is influenced by the personal life situation and social networks. In this case, the desire to maintain the unity of her family has led Anne in this precarious situation. Also, Kaisa at one point decided that it would be for the best if she moves to Finland as well, but her plan of being together was interrupted by finding work in a different area of Finland followed by an unexpected pregnancy.

Kaisa: “I got fed up of being here. I was thinking all the time that what kind of a relationship it is when one is in Estonia and the other one in Finland. But I got work in Helsinki and he was working in Central Finland. The distance was still quite big. Then I got pregnant and I knew immediately that I will come back to Estonia. All of my support network and my family, grandmothers and grandfathers, are in Estonia.”

The challenges posed by distance, time and working conditions become often noticeable in unexpected situations. Irina described how her husband had missed the birth of their child, who had born three weeks prematurely. The husband had just left to Finland on the same evening, but he came home a few days after that. Over the years he had missed all the first steps of the children, many birthdays, and Christmas parties at school and kindergarten. Irina tried to record as much as possible on video, but felt it was not the same as having the partner present when the event actually took place.

Flexible work and travel arrangements allow migrant parents to be more in contact with their partners and children. Based on the interviews, many migrant partners had missed out on important events in the life of their children. Stories such as these show how flexibility on the behalf of the employer is especially important. In such emergency situations, the migrant partner needs to attain a quick permission from the employer to be able to leave work (Baldassar & Wilding, 2009). It thus also requires understanding
from behalf of the employer to be able to go home in emergency situations. The husband of Heidi is employed by an employer who understands the need to get days off from work besides the agreed schedule.

Heidi: “Basically, he has this kind of a work place that he can come home very often. Let’s say, to events related to children and so on. Basically it happens rarely that he cannot come to Christmas parties or to kindergarten events, to these kinds of things. It is not so that he is three weeks working there definitely and then a week at home. Or well, how do the men work there? So that when he needs to come home, then he can come home. Also now he came home on Thursday evening for our child’s birthday. Today he will go back and then he will come again on next Thursday, because then there is the second child’s birthday.”

In some of the families, the stay-behind partner and the children visit the migrant partner in Finland when the children are on school vacation or when they themselves are on a holiday. Most of the partners, who remained living in Estonia, had made at least a few visits to Finland over the years. However, as expressed in the previous chapter, the migrant partners are usually living in accommodation provided by the employer, which also means that many workers are sharing the apartment or house with other workers, often even sharing the room. This kind of a solution is naturally the cheapest option for the migrant partners and provides them with the opportunity to save more money which otherwise would go to the high rents in the Finnish private market. On the other hand, this strictly limits their privacy, which is also one of the reasons why they stay-behind partners have rarely visited their partner in Finland.

I: “Did you also use to go visit your husband when he was in Finland?”
Anne: “I went two or three times”.
I: “How were the conditions for visiting?”
Anne: “Like usual. There were many men in one room and there wasn’t any privacy. I was able to go there only when somebody from the apartment happened to be in Estonia at the same time.”

Kaisa was visiting her partner in Finland rather frequently when she was on a holiday, but after the birth of their child she was restricted from going to Finland for the purpose of seeing her partner as he was working in different locations around Finland and sleeping in hotels. An additional restriction here was the distance of around 700 kilometres between their locations, which she expressed was too much for travelling with a small child. The husband of Irina was living in a five-room apartment with twenty-five other men and described the conditions being so terrible that even her
husband was trying to make as long working days as possible to avoid being in that house. Many men had also been prone to alcohol consumption. According to Avila (2008), migrant men can turn to alcohol as a coping strategy for escaping their worries. Irina talked about the shock she experienced when she first saw in what conditions her partner was living in Finland.

Irina: “I have been there once. It was so horrible. They had one kitchen for the whole bunch, and also one toilet. As a matter of fact, one woman still is living in that house there. There was constant drinking and all. He had the lower place in a bunk bed and they had even built beds inside of closets, so that all the (25) men would fit into the house.”

However, the above-mentioned narrative is the worst one that was expressed during the interviews. What this extreme case highlights is that the migrant partners may be living in very poor circumstances, in which the migrant partners themselves do not support the stay behind partners’ visits to Finland. Interviews with the stay-behind partners suggest that conditions related to work life pay an even bigger role balancing work and family life in transnational contexts than they can do in cases when work and family are located in the same country. It is thus essential to have a place where one can feel comfortable. Only in one family, the migrating partner had rented a one-room apartment for purely himself and thus could enjoy full privacy. This gave much more flexibility for the partner, who remained in Estonia, to be able to visit her husband in Finland. The interviewee saw this option as the best opportunity for the well-being of her partner.

Anneli: “We have a one-room apartment in Vantaa. [...] Because he has now for so many years been working there, then well, that means, the work he does is very demanding and the living conditions must be also decent, so that he could properly rest and everything else.”

The living conditions made it difficult for the stay behind partners to come visit their partners abroad. On the other hand, some of the interviewees considered travelling with children too exhausting to uptake a visit to the place of the partner. Even if the other woman would like to go visit their partners in Finland, they are prohibited because of the living conditions. In those few families in which the partners visited the partner in Finland quite often, the interviewees described the children being very excited. The positive feelings of children towards staying in Finland were identified as some of the best things about transnational family life. The children of Anneli and her husband were often spending their summers in Finland, as well as the family of Heidi. For the mothers
and the children this was time off from their everyday life and spending causal family time without any bigger tasks making it a long-expected event. The fact that some of the interviewees are travelling to Finland shows that besides the frequent mobility undertaken by the migrant partners, also the stay-behind partners become part of transnational mobility. In a way, their mobility is a supplement to the migratory movement of the migrant partner as the stay-behind partners mobility is due to the labour migration of their partner.

6.3 Managing the household and childcare in the absence of the partner

Before discussing the everyday life of the stay-behind partners during the absence of their partner, I find it important to give some clarification on how they became the ones who remained living in Estonia. When asked how the family had come to a decision about who will be the one migrating, the families often seemed to have taken it for granted that it will be the man. In most families, the suggestion to go to work in Finland had actually come from the man himself, but with social and economic circumstances strongly affecting the decision. Many of the families, living outside of bigger cities, struggled to find work in their area, or were confronted with poor working conditions and low salaries making the migration a rational choice for the families.

Heidi: “Who don’t know about this think that he went to Finland to earn huge sums of money and that he doesn’t need to do almost anything for it. These people have never been in that situation. They don’t know what is going on inside the minds of these people who do go. I have always admired my husband’s courage and willpower. He didn’t just stay waiting. He didn’t know a word of Finnish and he still went and tried to make it work.”

Nevertheless, not all of the stay-behind partners supported going to work abroad and some men even chose to migrate to Finland without the full acceptance from the stay-behind partner. For example, in the case of Kaisa the partner went to work in Finland just a few months after they got together, and she accepted this situation because she had seen that the loss of work in Estonia had had a destructive effect on her partner. However, she added that: “the agreement was never about him actually staying in Finland.”

In their decisions the migrating partners seem most to be conforming to ‘their parental responsibilities’ as it is still very common today that fathers tend to associate the male parenting duties with being able to provide for the family financially (Chambers, 2012).
It seems that these expectations influence the decisions regarding who will be the one migrating. Only one interviewee explained attentively that they reached the decision about who will be the one going after a careful consideration and comparison of both of the partners’ social status, level of income and chances of succeeding in finding a suitable work position.

Anneli: “Because my position by that time was higher than his position. My education was higher than his education. The salary here in Estonia was also higher. The children were teenagers and they didn’t agree with changing the country. But because in this kind of physical men’s work the salary is undoubtedly higher, and one child was still two years old, we would not have wanted to drag him back and forth, then simply, quite reasonably we decided that I will stay in Estonia with the children. In addition, he spoke very good Finnish, which I cannot speak still.”

Although at first glance, the fact that fathers were the ones migrating seems to be expressing the traditional gender scripts, from the perspective of an economic approach to gender relations, it may be that the decision of who should migrate was done by considering, whether consciously or not, who has a bigger earning potential (Becker, 1985 as cited in Vidal, Perales & Baxter, 2016: 366). It still happens to be that men earn more than women (Vidal et al., 2016: 366). Due to having relatives and friends already working in the field of construction, which hires men, it was naturally easier for the fathers to find work in Finland.

In transnational families literature it has been argued that the migration of one partner brings forth the increase of household duties for the one who remains living in the home country. After the migration of their partner the stay-behind partners remained fully responsible of the common household and taking care of the children during the absence of the partner. However, the interviews show that the more actively the migrant partners participate in everyday household tasks and raising children before migration, the bigger the amount of everyday tasks becomes for those who remain in Estonia after the labour migration.

In some cases the stay-behind partners did not experience any increase in caring responsibilities as taking care of the children and the domestic tasks had already been only their responsibility before the labour migration to Finland. About half of the women interviewed did not experience any changes in the household work as their tasks remained the same also after the migration of their partner. That is not to say that the
men had no responsibilities in the household but in those cases cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children was the duty of the woman, while men in general were taking care of tasks such as renovating, repair works or building. This shows how some of the couples often interact with each other in gendered way.

Irina: “Yes, well, he used to vacuum and this kind of things, but dishes he did not wash then, and he does not them do it now either. (…) If you said something, then he did it, but he was not really an active worker at home. We have been together for 13 years, and during this time once in the morning he fried eggs. Then he came to say to me while I was still in bed, that my children are hungry, and that now he has to cook for them. Oh my God, 13 years, and once making fried eggs!”

As stated previously, changes in the everyday life of the interviewees were clearer in situations in which the partners had been actively participating in the daily family life before their labour migration. These women clearly expressed having had more to do after the labour migration of the partner, and the need to create new everyday routines. For example, the husband of Anneli had been actively participating in taking care of everyday household chores and looking after children, while she was spending long days at work, at school or on work missions abroad. Therefore, women who had before the opportunity to share household task with their partners are, in a sense, after the migration in a sense under heavier workloads. Many interviewees confessed having difficulties at first managing on their own, but soon they had established their own routines.

Anneli: “Otherwise we had it actually this way that often, for example, the meals were cooked and the household cleaned by my husband because I was working with very heavy workload. Then everything was on me, but I am telling that the older boys were very good and immediately started helping me. And I am not going to deny that we hired people for help. We hired a nanny, who also made the meals and helped keeping the rooms tidy, because my work days were twelve hours long, at least, and I often had work trips abroad. I was away from Estonia maybe half a month.”

Although the household and raising the children was purely on the interviewees responsibility in the absence of their partner, there were times, although usually seldom, when help was required, exemplified by the narrative above. For Anneli, buying the services of a babysitter allowed pursuing a successful career and additional university studies, both of which she took pride of. A close family acquaintance used to come babysit the youngest of the children of Heidi and her migrant partner when she needed
to take the older children to sport practices or events to which taking a baby was not appropriate. Kaisa and Marianne used to get help from their mothers who looked after the child when they were at work. The father-in-law of Marianne helped repairing her car. But not only members of the extensive family or close family friends stepped in to help.

Irina: “Children, you know, get sick and if you yourself are the one who replaces others at work you cannot leave. Sometimes it happened that the neighbouring grannies were watching after the children, and then I used to come check on them two-three times a day because my work was very close. How long was it…maybe 300 meters from work to home? (...) If it was really an emergency then I of course took a sick leave. The neighbours helped and my mother and father.”

In their partners’ absence they were most reliant on others for mobility. Most of the women did not have a car of their own, nor a driving licence, which made them feel restricted in their daily lives. Owning a car and possessing a driving licence would have meant more freedom. A car allows one to make their own time schedule (Urry, 2007: 112) without any outer restrictions such as having to make agreements with others. Some of the stay-behind partners looked back with regret to not thinking about it before the migration of the partner. Owning a car would have widened the possible options for places to go to and thus the opportunities for different activities. A car makes different patterns of social life possible (Urry, 2007: 120), but it would have been especially needed for taking the children to and from school. It is interesting how owning a car would have changed the view they had on living alone.

Kirsti: “We had it also before in this way that I used to do all the house chores myself, so that (labour migration) did not change much. But because I did not have driving license at that time, I was dependent on other people. It is very difficult in the countryside when you don’t have a car or anything.”

Not all of the women had the possibility to rely on the support of other people. Anne confessed not to have any close relationships with anybody besides her partner. She was therefore completely self-reliant. Although she at first expressed that the migration of her partner did not change her life much, after reflecting back on the time she realised that things were more difficult without him.

Anne: “It didn’t influence my everyday life much, because when he was in Estonia, then he anyways wasn’t home ever. He was at work all the time. In this sense, the three weeks when I was at home, it didn’t matter if I had to repair the
care or there is something to do in the house, or the electricity went away, I had to take the role of a man. It was a bit harder yes…”

Yet, as shortly expressed also in the previous chapter, the absence of the partner can be difficult not because they are not there so much to provide hands-on support, but because many stay-behind partners feel that they are responsible for the children and the household alone.

Kaisa: “Maybe the amount of responsibilities does not grow so much, but what increases is the emotional burden, which the child’s father has to carry. You are just physically and mentally so tired. I cannot imagine how hard it must be for those, who have nobody besides their husband.”

In many cases, the interviewees also took up activities that could be seen as traditionally belonging to a man. Some of the interviewees expressed that they found their situation very unequal. Anne felt that her partner was having an easy life in Finland while she had to be active in many fields, which also brought tensions to their relationship. As the experiences from other transnational families show, migrants often hide details from their families which would make the latter feel concerned.

Anne: “He lived in an apartment where there were no concerns. His business was only to go to work. I had to go to work, take care of the children, keep the household clean. It was not an equal situation.”

Therefore, the assistance came from both the extended family and also others. However, this normally occurred only for short periods at a time. Even in cases where the stay-behind parents received help from immediate family members such as their own parents or parent-in-laws, those incidents were usually singular. When before women had the possibility to ask help from their partners and thus share the caring burden then now they were mostly on their own. The participation of migrant partners in the daily life of the family takes place through phone contact, as expressed in the first chapter. Although they are naturally not able to provide hands-on support, they are able to give advice and be there for the other.

Investing time for calling and actually being there for the other can be seen as means for creating a trustworthy relationship, “it is an investment in future obligations, in the security of knowing that you can call on help if you need it and be certain to receive it” (Baldassar, 2007b: 392). Normally, bigger decisions, such as larger purchases for the household, are done together with both of the partners having an equal say. However,
Kirsti for example, said that it was easier for her to make all the family-related decisions alone, because her partner had too much work to do in Finland. Her choice to make all the decisions alone can also be explained by the absence of daily contact between her and her partner expressed in the first chapter.

Over the years, the stay-behind partners have conducted most of the childrearing. Some of the interviewees felt that taking care of the children and the household is their full-time job. These parents had ended their work contracts to be able to take care of the children. Some of the interviewees felt that long, typically 12-hour, workdays, and especially shift work which they had been previously doing, would not have left much time to take care of the children and expressed their concern that if both parents would be employed the children would suffer since they would hardly see both of their parents. This belief seemed to play an important role in the interviewees’ decision to stay home.

Krista: “Right now we manage this way that I don’t have to go to work. But for sure, if he would come back to the Estonian salary, then also I would need to work. That would be one of the first things that would change. But then again the children would suffer because the last time I used work, I could see they got enough of not seeing me in the morning or then again in the evening. It affected them a lot that they were not able to see me often.”

For some of the interviewees the migration of their partner means that they are prevented from going to work as they would not have a place where to leave the child while they are at work the entire day. Some were juggling between work and childcare until finally deciding for the latter, if it can even be considered a decision of free will. Heidi, who is raising three young children, felt that if she would also need to work besides raising the children alone most of the time, she would be like a single-mother. She organizes her days around the children managing their schedules and activities seeing childcare as her full-time job.

Heidi: “But now for example this kind of TV-watching time is very little, basically there is none because I just do not have time for it. Those things and all the bustle is are on my shoulders. I have managed to put the children to different after-school hobby groups, and trainings. All this logistics is calculated by seconds, so that I would be able to take them everywhere alone and later pick them up for coming home. When I say that I am at home, then I would say that my job is to be a fulltime mother, so that the children would get everything they wish.”
The single-mother rhetoric appeared in many interview narratives. Kirsti expressed that she had been doing the parenting for two parents.

Kirsti: “He didn’t really participate in raising the children. It used to come up as a topic many times and even pretty heatedly. I was basically raising the child alone and I was like a single-mom, because the partner didn’t really live at home. He used to be home so little. For him it also caused stress because he had to worry and take responsibility of his work, but he also had a home somewhere far away.”

It is the physical absence of their partner that leaves the stay-behind partners feeling that they are functioning for both parents. Some of the interviewees spoke of distress and others expressed feeling lonely most of the time, despite the occasional presence of the partner. What become clear was that the negative feelings experienced during the partners’ absence are often enhanced because of the situations they had to experience when alone, such as poor housing.

Anne: “When you are in the countryside, in a house that requires renovation, where the sealing is letting rain through with two little children, a one-year old and a three year old, where you have to carry them every day to the kindergarten for 3 km on foot, while walking half of the route by the large by a fast roadway, where there is no walking path despite the season, then yes, it is very hard.”

The feelings expressed by the interviewees about their partners’ labour migration and thus having to be alone with children in Estonia, confirms the argument of Urry (2003) who states that times of co-presence are necessary for maintaining family relationships. Hereby, it is important to remember that although the migrant partners are not able to provide hands-on support, it is the income they earn that allows long-distance communication and travelling between the countries. It is mainly through the earnings that they take care of the family (Baldassar & Wilding, 2009).

6.4 Routine readjustments and family responsibilities in co-presence

Former research has found that women, when being in the role of the migrant, can gain strong feelings of empowerment which are mainly caused by the distance from home, gained monetary resources and various wider opportunities (Barajas & Ramirez, 2007: 369). However, in this study many of the stay-behind women expressed satisfaction and a sense of empowerment by being able to take care of the household and the children on their own. On one hand it was supported by managing to take care of everything, whether independently or by finding other help than the partner, but also because of deciding on all the smaller aspects of everyday life independently. This was felt to have
had a positive effect on their self-confidence, despite being separated from the partner being emotionally exhausting at times. In some ways they were able to enjoy greater autonomy.

Irina: “If something happened, then I would go and do it, even when the car was broken or something. Okay, they were his friends to who I used to take the car to, but I searched for these people and all. Screwing a light bulb in or something was not a problem, or hitting a nail in. Of course when it was really bad, then I called my father. But especially that if to go somewhere, then I would go and take care of it. Otepää is very close to Valga, 40 km, we used to go swimming there with the children and we took a friend of mine with us. No need to ask for any permission, I just went.”

However, this greater sense of freedom has led some of these interviewees become so accustomed to living alone that when the migrant partner came home they felt that they required re-adjustment. As Kaisa, Irina and Krista described, it was very difficult to be in mutual co-presence again after many weeks spent apart. When being with the children in Estonia, the stay-behind partners had established their own routines and the presence of the migrant partner altered their daily life in a way that was considered tiring. The interviewees who expressed these kind of feelings, despite initially waiting for the migrant parents to return home, now found themselves secretly hoping that the partner would leave sooner back to Finland. Some of the interviewees felt that with the presence of their partner they have an additional person to take care of. Therefore, for the stay-behind partners the presence of their migrant partner involved feelings of both happiness and frustration.

Kaisa: “It was maybe this way that I was all the time alone with the child and when he came to Estonia, then we used to get along much worse than when he was in Estonia. I was already used to that I am alone, that I need to take into consideration me and myself and the child. When he arrived I felt that I am so tired and that he is such like a burden to me. You get so used to being alone that when I third person comes, then it is very difficult and very exhausting. I often used to think that he could go already back to Finland, that I am so tired. That whole week with the partner and with the child was much more tiring that being just the two us with the child.”

Irina: “It was the worst for me when the youngest child was one years old. Then I felt that I just cannot anymore. He was like a third child for me. When I was alone with the children, I didn’t have any problems, but when he came home then the problems started pouring down on me.”
These emotions shaped the relationship with the migrant partner, as Kaisa explained that they were getting along much worse in mutual presence than when communicating over long distance. She, as well as some other interviewees, felt responsible for taking care of their partner when he was at home, which meant cooking for them and keeping the household spotless. Baldassar (2001: 323) writes that “relatives who did not migrate are obliged to welcome the return of the emigrant relatives and keep a place for them”. In a way, these stay-behind partners seemed to be influenced by gender expectations which were ingrained into the interviewees’ own thinking and caused stress to them. Although none of the interviewees expressed it clearly, it could be due to a feeling of obligation to provide for the husband as he is the one who, through labour migration, supports the family with remittances.

I: “What was the most tiring thing about that?”

Kaisa: “Well, that the food has to be made, you have to clean and everything needs to be in order. When you are alone with the child, it doesn’t matter if you have clothes piling up somewhere in the middle of the room. During the time when he was home, I had to be like a perfect housewife. It was really very tiring.”

I: “Was it rather your own feeling that you have to act differently or did he also say something about that?”

Kaisa: “No, he never said anything about it, but I felt that it could be like that. There is some kind of an obligation. I have been raised that a man has to get a warm meal and...”

The homecoming of the partner can thus result in a number of changes in the daily lives of the stay-behind partners. The changes in routine that the presence of the partner brought varied from small everyday things, such as having the household items scattered around the house in places where they usually are not, to not having the control over the remote control or not being able to see friends, as they preferred not coming over during the time when the partner was able to be home. Even taking over tasks that were normally the duty of the interviewees, such as taking the children to school, seemed sometimes troubling.

Anne: “I have developed certain rules with my children, our own traditions, what we did at home, and when my partner came home for ten days, then it changed all of our plans. I was raising the children one way, because I was together with the all the time. I set my own rules. When my partner came and started acting based on his rules, then it brought a lot of confusion for the children about what is right and what they have to do. That was one of the most complicated things. When you are together all the time, then you agree on these kind of things, but when
another person is away for such a long time, then inevitably disagreements are bound to happen."

While when living alone with the children they were able to act accordingly to their own interests. During the times spent together with the partner they were dependent on his activities, opinions and wishes, which had to be negotiated in their own daily life. Upon meeting, the stay-behind parents went through an adjustment period. For them, this meant a constant reorganizing of everyday life from ‘my time’ to ‘together time’. That means learning to plan things with taking the others into account. Most women expressed to be able to adapt to these changes in routine during the first few days. Anneli, however, expressed that for her partner, who has the possibility to spend some parts of the winter at home, adjusting normally takes a couple of weeks.

Krista: “The first week after his going away is harder again, as you got used to him being at home but then he is not there again. You have to get back to the routine that you had before. And then when he has been away already for a couple of week you don’t think any more about having to do everything alone as you get used to it. But when the time that he comes home starts coming nearer, you start counting the days when he comes. When he arrives, you slowly start getting used to him being home again.”

What is important here is that these adjustments are only temporary. The partners can, however, get so used to their ‘own time’ and ‘own order of things’ that being together permanently can become a struggle. Heidi however feels that in that situation you have to learn how to let go and make compromises.

Heidi: “It is the same with us as well, but we discuss everything through. I have also thought and read and tried to find the best methods how to make it work. For example, when I had more time, when didn’t go to school yet, then I tried to be active in sports. I like sports a lot, but because of this I have also cancelled many events. When he comes home, then I cannot tell him that I have a competition and that I will go there now. When he comes home it is our common time. Often many good things overlap, but then you have to make a choice. For us the choice is family.”

Most of the interviewees described that the time their partner spends at home goes to taking care of the household. When at home, men participated in the household tasks but normally the men and women had their own specific tasks as shortly discussed in the previous chapter. Cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes were some of the routine tasks that mostly tended to belong to the responsibility of the stay-behind partner also when the migrant partner was home. However, according to the statements from the
interviewees, the migrant partners still participated in household activities during the
time they were home. The men normally take care of such things as car maintenance,
renovation, building, and different kind of repair works or making firewood.

Marianne: “Mostly, I would say, these kind of repair works and bigger works
outside are his to do. I won’t go cut wood in the forest for example (laughs). My
responsibilities are the same as all the other housewives: making food and
cleaning. These kind of smaller tasks. These are still mine.”

Many men also actively participated in childcare. For example, Marika described how
the older son is completely on responsibility of the migrant partner when he is at home.
Yet, Heidi, for example, seemed to be hesitant to let her partner to participate in daily
household tasks when he was at home in their common apartment. She continued to do
the chores herself, not because they were ‘women’s’ to do’, but, because of her
continuous presence home, she was more knowledgeable of the household and the
location of different items in the household. In their common summer house, which she
visited only together with her husband, chores were divided equally.

Heidi: “I cannot say to him when he comes home that wash the dishes. Naturally,
I will wash the dishes and take care of everything. I am the one who knows where
all the things are. I don’t really like it either when he is home for two days and
then when he goes away I have to start looking for things that he has put to
another place (laughs). Usually it is this way that when we are going somewhere
with the children, and he is helping to dress the children, he asks where this or
another clothing item is. Basically it is easier for me to do everything. That means
putting everything ready. It is natural that he does not know everything as he is
still quite little at home.”

As the partners who remain in the home country are the ones taking care of the
housework on a regular basis, they also seem to have control over the household. In a
way this control can also restrict them of getting assistance from the partner who spends
most of the time away from the common home. Morgan (1996: 148) writes that:
“housework, as a regularly repeated activity, imposes a form of control over the
temporal order of the household and control over and privileged access to certain
spaces, most typically the kitchen.” As the narrative from Heidi shows, in a situation
with restricted time it often does not make sense to ask the partner to do something one
could do faster and more efficiently themselves. Doing housework thus provides a
certain control over time and space (Morgan, 1996).
Some women find empowerment through working abroad (Ducu, 2014), but here it happened through other means. For example, Irina openly expresses how their children think of her as the one who has the authority in the household. Therefore, it can be that the absence of the migrant parent, who in all of the cases in this study is male, can lead the children to see only the stay-behind partner as the one with authority at home. It seems that they felt being the ones running the household, but with the presence of the partner this status was jeopardized. Something similar has been described in a study by Pantea (2012b) who found that young adults who have been left to take care of their siblings while their parents are working abroad have attained a feeling of ownership over the common home and the routines that take place in it. Transnational family life can thus also lead to changes in the parents’ authority in the family. This authority is derived from the stay-behind partner being the one home with the children and thus having more control over their everyday life.

In a way, having to take care of household duties in a limited timeframe is one of the things that make these families different from families where all the members live continuously in the same household. Despite being able to see each other relatively often, the partners had limited chances to spend relaxed time together. Many of the interviewees confessed that, considering the time the migrant partners were able to spend home and the time that was spent on household-related tasks, they were left with very limited amount of time, if at all, to just enjoy each other’s company, which caused concerns among many families. For example, despite the partner of Kirsti being able to come home every weekend, he was in reality left with only one full day in a week at home.

Many of the interviewees felt that the time their partner spends in Estonia is definitely not a holiday, and it can, in some sense, be actually more exhausting than the paid work in Finland. Many women talked about their partner’s activities at home in connection with taking care of the family well-being. There are men who seem to be compensating for their ‘time away’ by being very active in the family life during their times in Estonia. It has been argued that in transnational families productive work takes place in the host country while reproductive work is completed in the home country (Schmalzbauer, 2004). The migrant partners usually take care of things that have piled up during their absence, and building and renovation tasks, as well as car repairmen.
That means that everything needs to be taken care of during a rather limited time. At the same time, many tasks were left undone because the women did not have their own car.

Anneli: “Because I don’t drive a car, we go and take care of the things that are still undone. After one month there are always some sorts of things that need to be settled. Somewhere there could be a need for a man and a screwdriver, which I don’t do. These are the basics things.”

Kaisa: “His assignment was still that the cars would be in working order, so that all the parts would be changed and everything would be done, so that I would just sit in the car and drive that I wouldn’t need to worry about that. When he comes to Estonia then he has a lot of things to do. This whole week he is basically running around. It is not a holiday for him when he comes to Estonia...But in that sense, he still dealt with the child and was of help.”

Although left with relatively little time together, for some couples the time together in Estonia also involves going to spas, cinemas and trips around Estonia. In some cases issues of locating ‘free’ time became confrontational. Whereas the time spent together might be seen as private time by the men, for women it is not so simple as they have still have the “responsibility” to take care of the children (Morgan, 1996: 150). Heidi confessed that it requires a lot of work and dedicated time for keeping the same connection up. Naturally, being in the physical co-presence of one another does not mean that intimacy has been achieved (Urry, 2002), but it was also expressed by some of the interviewees that it would have been better for the mutual relationship.

Kaisa: “He said that the birth of the child has changed me a lot. Maybe that also affected us breaking up. When you are alone in Estonia with the child, then the child is most important to you. Maybe when he would have been home, then he would have been more important than the child. He felt left in the background. He wanted to call me and I said that I cannot right now because the child is sleeping. Different restrictions came in the way. I couldn’t move anymore so freely and do everything, and he didn’t like it.”

While Marianne herself found that her husband has too little time for just relaxing with the family, according to her, her husband feels that working in Finland has allowed him to just focus on the family once he is in Estonia. He believes that if he would have been working in Estonia, he would be every day so tired after work that he would not get anything done in the household. In that sense, the work position of some men allowed for greater flexibility. Anneli’s husband is usually not working from late autumn to early spring, and during that time the household duties and taking care of the children belong entirely to the husband. Since during winter she is the busiest, she does not need
to worry about home related things and thus can devote herself fully to her work and studies. Anneli confessed that she actually enjoys this way of living and found that it can cause problems when people have just begun their relationship. She analysed her own transnational family life in the following manner:

Anneli: “Maybe if I wouldn’t have any children at home and I would be very bored then I would move to Finland as well, but I am not bored. Maybe because I have had different activities, I haven’t had the time to cause myself depression. The time is limited and things need to get done and there is just no time to be sad.”

With the exception of Anneli and her partner, who has decided to stay living in Finland while being able to spend five months of a year in Estonia, the interviews showed a struggle between the wish to be in Estonia and the aim to secure the financial well-being of the family. The move that was first thought to be temporary has turned into a longer stay for all the families, and in some cases the women do not anymore see a way to end this pattern of family life, despite following the job market in Estonia continuously. As Marianne explained, she feels that for a man it is very difficult to lose the financial stability he has attained due to working in Finland. Heidi and Krista felt that if her partner would return to Estonia, both of them would need to start working and the children would suffer in the sense that they would miss out on many things that they have the chance to do at the moment. Working in Finland has allowed the children to be active in after-school activities, which can take up quite a lot of resources. Also, the children would not be able to see the mother basically at all because of shift work despite being in the same country. This highlights the ambivalences that emerge from labour migration, making moving back to Estonia a difficult choice. Although the migrant partners ‘heart is in Estonia’, as was said by many interviewees, it gets very expensive to let go of the commitment to provide through working abroad once started.
7 Discussion and conclusion

Based on interviews with stay-behind partners of Estonian transnational families, this study has shown how family life is experienced in the context of labour migration to Finland. By bringing in the stay-behind partners’ perspective, which so far has remained underrepresented both in transnational families’ research, but also in research regarding Estonian migration to Finland, the current work has contributed to the understanding of transnational families. Moreover, by taking the partners who remain in Estonia as a unit of analysis, this study has showed how migration of one family member influences the experiences of other family members. This study has also shown the connectedness of labour migration and family structures, undermining simplistic views which see Estonian labour migration to Finland to be guided only by individual economic gains. Instead, as the interviews show, the choices that were made by migrant partners were in most cases reached by thinking about the needs of the whole family.

Through the concept of family practices, which points our attention to the everyday life of transnational families and to the activities that make up their lives (Morgan, 2011) as a guiding force, I was able to explore experiences of transnational family life in closer detail. For example, the characteristics of communication between the migrant and the stay-behind partners point to the importance that being in touch with one another has for these families. Calling is undoubtedly the most preferred option for long-distance communication among the transnational families in this study. When compared to many other transnational families in the world, such as Mexicans or Filipinos living in the United States, the Estonian transnational families do not encounter any major difficulties in keeping contact over distance. They have relatively easy access to communication technologies which allows them to communicate daily and in long durations at a time.

This frequent and regular communication allows the partners, despite being located in different countries, to be knowledgeable of the everyday life of each other (Svašek, 2008). Thereby, the stay-behind partners seem to be aware of the higher purpose that this communication serves. When communication takes place regularly, frequently and in longer durations, emotional ties between people who are residing in geographical distance are more likely to be stronger (King-O’Riain, 2015: 260). Therefore, using
communication technology in a patterned manner helps the stay-behind partners to overcome the ‘spatial distance’ between them and their partners residing in Finland, and to uphold their familial ties (King-O’Riain, 2015: 256-257).

Nevertheless, maintaining family relationships by long-distance communication, and through the mediated co-presence which the communication provided (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) was found to be not satisfactory enough to replace physical co-presence. For this reason, all the migrant partners come home to Estonia on a regular basis. The analysis suggests that physical co-presence is important for the stay-behind partners for making sense of the family relationships. Even though communication at distance can help in maintaining family connections, these ‘visits’ have a symbolic and practical quality which cannot be replaced by phone calls (Mason, 2004). In these moments of co-presence the partners are, for example, able to talk about topics that they are resistant to take up over the phone. They are also able to follow the body language of the other person which allows them to better understand what the other is thinking. Most importantly, the ‘visits’ allow the children and the migrant partners to see each other with their own eyes which is important for ‘learning’ about one another. This knowledge is sustained, when at distance, through communication tools (Mason, 2014: 424).

In connection with the previous, this study found that ‘visiting’, which is a term used in literature on transnational families, has a connotation of being ‘a guest’, and does not adequately describe the migrant partners’ movement from Finland to Estonia. The Estonian migrant partners have the possibility for rather frequent movements between the countries which, for example, makes it possible to witness the growth of their children. One of the reasons for the inappropriateness of the term ‘visiting’ in the context of this study is the frequent quality of these movements when compared to such as Italian and Carribean transnational families living in the United Kingdom (Zontini & Reynolds, 2007). Parents, who spend many years working abroad can discover when returning that they are not anymore accepted as parents or close family members by their loved ones (Edgar, 2007; Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012), whereas Estonian migrant parents with their regular and frequent movements have better chances for sustaining their connection to the family and the common home. They stay-behind partners instead used the phrase ‘coming home’, which the analysis found is a way for them to reinforce
the migrant partners’ membership in the family and the completeness of the family, despite the migrant partners’ regular physical absence.

Through communicating over distances, and through travelling to Finland which some of the stay-behind partners engaged in, the research also demonstrated how the partners who remained living in Estonia actively participate in creating ‘social fields’ or ‘social spaces’ discussed in the theoretical literature on transnationalism. It is the stay-behind partners’ continuous interaction which helps the transnational family to keep functioning (Zontini, 2004). Moreover, previous research has found that while migrant mothers usually stay active in the lives of their children through regular phone calls directed to the children personally, the fathers tend to reduce their contact with the children mostly to remittances (Parreñas, 2005: 256). In the current study, the stay-behind partners were often acting as a bridge between the children and the migrant parent by communicating information from either of the sides to the other. With that they also help to create the symbolic presence of the father at home while he is physically absent (Atwood, 2013). With those findings, this study has added a new dimension to the literature on transnationalism. It is not only the migrant parents who often actively try to maintain connections that span the borders of the society where they live in, rather this process can be reciprocal. Thus, in future research, more attention should be paid on the involvement of stay-behind parents in transnational social fields.

Research on transnational families has previously shed light on some of the activities that families can take to overcome the geographical distance that separates them. Yet, it has not given adequate attention the circumstances which can constrain these processes (Bonizzoni, 2009: 86). Focusing on the everyday practices (Morgan, 1996) of the Estonian transnational families, I was able to create an understanding of some of these various aspects which affect their family life. The experiences of these families seem to be shaped the most by distance between the work location of the migrant partner and home in Estonia, the flexibility of employment conditions, and living conditions of the migrant partner. Living in accommodations together with many other people can lead to lack of privacy needed for phone or Skype conversation. It can also affect the opportunities of the stay-behind partners to visit their partners in Finland. In turn, flexible work arrangements and shorter distances are important for the migrant partner to be able to ‘go home’ more frequently. Distance itself is not such a crucial factor but it
becomes important in the combination of limited time and job flexibility as they make co-presence harder to reach. Although the job flexibility seems at first glance to be an excellent thing, it can put the migrant partners in a precarious situation in which they spend long hours at work every day when they are in Finland. Thus, although on one hand this flexibility gives the migrant partners more freedom, on the other hand it reduces it (Könönen, 2012: 196). These limitations to keep contact are unique and, according to the best of my knowledge, have not been reported in earlier research on transnational families.

Many studies show that when the parent who migrates is female it shifts the family responsibilities to other females of the extended family as fathers are disinclined to take over the previous assignments of the migrant mother (Dreby, 2006; Parreñas, 2005). Despite many Estonian stay-behind women retaining the same responsibilities they had had before the labour migration of their partner, there were also those who during the absence of their partner took charge of tasks that previously belonged to the man. In many families the everyday familial responsibilities for the stay-behind partners did not go through changes because the family responsibilities that belonged to the migrant partner and required hands-on work, were now conducted during their stays at home. The physical absence of the partner can, however, leave the stay-behind partners feeling that they are responsible for the household and children alone.

Regardless of taking over new responsibilities or not, the interviews revealed that many women take great pride in managing the life at home in the absence of their partner, which is often felt to be empowering. Nevertheless, most of the stay-behind partners had relatives and neighbours who helped when it was needed, but extra help was rarely used considering the whole time period of the work of their partner abroad. In distance, the migrant partners participate in more significant family-related decision-making through the usage of communication technology. Most of the family-related decisions, when the partners are physically separated, are still made by the stay-behind partners on their own due to their physical proximity to the children and to the common household. The household duties are in most cases divided when the migrant partner is home. In fact, household related activities take a large part of the partners’ together time in Estonia which can leave them few chances for spending time together as a family without any obligations. This, however, tends to be accepted by the stay-behind partners who see the situation from the perspective of limited time.
The study shows the appearance of multiple temporalities; from ‘presence’ to ‘absence’, of the migrant partner, between which the stay-behind partners are required to constantly adjust. The concept of family practices implicitly refers to the role of time and space which are strongly connected with each other (Morgan, 2011). Family practices always take place in some certain time and space. For the partners who are living most of the time in two different locations, this means that also their everyday routines take place in different contexts. For the stay-behind partners all of them are conducted in Estonia, while for the migrant partners life is divided between Estonia and Finland. Yet, the ‘together-time’, or alternatively ‘presence’, strongly differs from the everyday life of both partners. From the perspective of some stay-behind partners this time is more demanding in the sense that it decreases their control over their daily routines and simultaneously brings more tasks with it. The pressure ‘to do more’ than when being alone seems to be caused by feelings of obligation, which in the context of this study can be interpreted by having to repay for the work the partner is doing for the family well-being in Finland.

Due to this, these families’ experiences of time are bound to be different than in families that live together on a daily basis. There is the constant change in the family life rhythm from ‘absence’ to ‘presence’ of the migrant partner. With that this thesis has also highlighted some of the emotional consequences of living in separate countries. While some felt that, due to the lack of control over the everyday, the time together was tiring, other interviewees felt that it was much more of a quality time despite the time on exposure being of restricted nature. For some the relationship had gone through an improvement because of the latter. Many participants stated that due to the lack of physical co-presence between them, they now found themselves arguing less and taking time to appreciate the presence of one another better, which are some of the many ways for sustaining an emotional connection (Holmes, 2004: 189). This is important because the quality of relationships between family members during the separation phase influences how easily reunification will take place (Falicov, 2002). I find the concepts ‘time’, ‘absence’ and ‘presence’ to be important for future research on transnational families.

While talking about family life, the results of this thesis also point our attention to many other important topics in the field of migration research such as integration or working conditions of migrants. In one way or the other, all of these topics are interwoven into
how the families experience a transnational way of life. In all of the cases in this study the initially-planned short-term move has resulted in a more permanent situation. As the research showed, in the longest instance the partner had been going to work in Finland for 11 years, while moving between the countries monthly. In two cases, working in Finland had eventually led also the stay-behind partner and the children to settle in Finland permanently as a whole family. Often, however, the male migrant partners are employed in companies which hire mainly Estonians. This does not support migrants learning Finnish or acquiring connections necessary for a successful permanent migration. I find that policies in Finland do not pay adequate attention to cross-border workers from an integration perspective; most likely because of the situation is perceived to be only temporary. What makes creating suitable policies understandably difficult is that Estonian migration to Finland is not a straightforward process from one country to the other.

It is normally expected that transnational family life will not last forever and that sooner or later it will lead back to co-residential family arrangements (Skrbiš, 2008), whether in the migrants’ host country or home country. In order to maintain the unity of the family, the women can feel pressured to move with the children to Finland. This was highlighted by the story of an interviewee who had moved with the rest of the family to Finland because the new work position of the partner did not allow him anymore to come to Estonia as frequently anymore. This experience, in which the former stay-behind partner struggled to find a work position and finally had to settle for one in the cleaning industry, shows how the stay-behind women sometimes have to put their own personal goals aside and, in the process of improving the economic situation of the family, can actually experience a decline in personal social status (Könönen, 2012). Labour migration can also lead to new forms of family life such as in the case where the migrant partner decided for a permanent settlement in the host country but spends some months of the year living in Estonia. The above-mentioned examples illustrate how migration shapes the social relationships inside the family, but also how families shape migration (Gjokaj et al., 2013).

Missing the voice of the migrant partner could be seen as one of the limits of this study and incorporating the migrants could have given a more complete picture of the phenomenon. In some particular cases, such as when interviewees told that their partners are not making ‘visits’, but instead they are ‘coming home’, it would have been
interesting to find out the migrant partners’ own perspectives to the matter (Mason, 2004). Also, it is important to remember that often the migrants do not only have responsibilities towards their partners and children but also to their elderly parents (Baldassar & Baldock, 2000). Future research could thus focus on the migrants and study their family responsibilities in more extent. However, it is crucial to understand that the aim of this thesis was to bring forward the perspectives of the stay-behind partners. I believe through that the current study, which is located in the intersection of migration and family studies, has provided a nuanced understanding of Estonian labour migration to Finland, and enhanced understanding on transnational family life.
References


Appendix

Preliminary interview questions

The following contains a preliminary version of my interview questions with what I started the data gathering process. The interview questions and the order of asking them changed depending on the situation of the interviewees and the flow of the interview. The questions presented here are translated from the original language Estonian.

Background of the interviewee and the family

How many children do you have in your family, and how old are they?
How long have you been together with your partner?
What is your profession?
What kind of work is your partner doing in Finland, and what was the profession of the partner before starting to work in Finland?
How long has your partner been working in Finland?

Moving to Finland

How the decision to move to Finland came about? What drove the partner to go to work in Finland?
How much did you discuss the decision between one another? Did children participate in the decision-making process?
How did your partner find the work position in Finland?
How did you come to the decision that you will be the one staying in Estonia with the children?

Keeping in contact

How do you keep in contact and how often? How often does the partner communicate with the children?
What do you think about this kind of long-distance communication?
How often do you meet in person, and how has it changed over the years?
What has been the longest period spent away from the family, and how did it come about?
How much time does the partner spend at home? How do you spend that time together?

Role division

How did your typical day look like when your partner was yet not working in Finland?
If and how has the division of household chores and parental roles changed after your partner started working in Finland?
How does the partner participate in family life when in Finland?
How do you feel towards such division of roles?
Do you have any people who help you when the partner is not present?
**Relationships among the family**

How do you feel towards living in different locations most of the time? 
How have children reacted to your partner being away often because of work? How have the adjusted to the situation? 
How has your life changed after the migration of your partner? 
What do you now think or feel differently compared to the time when you partner was not yet working in Finland? 
What kind of questions has working in Finland raised among the family? 
How you think it has changed the relationships inside the family? 
Have you discussed what does the partner feel towards going to work in Finland?

**Expectations and hopes for the future**

What were your expectations towards your partner moving to Finland and how have they changed? 
What are the good sides of this kind of family life? What about the bad? 
When you look back over those years, is there something you would consider doing differently? 
What do you recommend to other families where one parent is considering moving to Finland? 
What would change for you if the partner would stop working in Finland? 
What are your plans for the future? How long is your partner still planning to work in Finland?