

TRANSNATIONAL LIVES: CULTURE, VULNERABILITY, AND CARE ACROSS BORDERS

Emília Araújo

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

Mieke Schrooten

Odisee University of Applied Sciences, Brussels, Belgium/University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

Carlos Barros

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Cultura, Faculdade de Ciências Humanas, Universidade
Católica Portuguesa, Lisboa, Portugal/Instituto Politécnico da Lusofonia, Lisboa, Portugal

1. EVERYDAY TRACES OF TRANSNATIONAL LIFE

Are contemporary lives increasingly transnational? What are the phenomenological contours of this experience? And how can we understand ways of living that overflow the boundaries of a single space, a single temporality, and fixed places of belonging? These questions guide this thematic issue of the *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies*, dedicated to the analysis of transnational lives, the cultural forms through which they are lived and represented, their vulnerabilities, and the conditions in which they unfold across borders.

Following Garfinkel (1967), one could say that transnationality does not become visible, first and foremost, at the level of abstract theory, but in the subtle and often less visible textures of everyday interaction. Paying attention to small everyday conversations is often enough to understand how people and families leave traces of their lives in the territories they pass through. These traces emerge in fragments: in references to others, in stories of departure and return, in duties, absences, and expectations that extend beyond the immediate present. In many cases, they reveal forms of relational continuity that go beyond territorial proximity and challenge assumptions that family, and especially care and belonging, depend primarily on physical co-presence (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

These same traces become particularly visible when the spaces and times of mobility are shaped by expectations of improving social and economic life, as well as psychological, relational, and symbolic well-being. In this sense, mobility is never reduced to movement; it implies the reorganisation of life projects in multiple domains. Around us, in bars, gyms, public transport, classrooms, hairdressers and other ordinary spaces that structure daily life, we repeatedly hear stories of connections left, built, rebuilt, and maintained between distinct geographies. These stories unfold in contexts structured by distinct legal and administrative frameworks, even when we speak of regions often perceived as “integrated”, such as the European Union.

Daily experience continually reminds us that these frameworks do not eliminate distance, nor do they guarantee coherence between regulatory systems. Migration processes

increasingly imply the reorganisation of relational, emotional, and care arrangements involving both those who move and those who remain in the country of origin (Barros et al., 2024; Bryceson, 2019). There is always someone elsewhere: a friend left behind, a family member remembered or evoked in conversation, a relative in need of assistance or care. Many people travel back and forth between cities, regions, and countries, giving and receiving what only family members, certain relatives, or friends can provide, and which distance can only partially accommodate. One person abandons their doctoral work and job in Portugal to care for their mother in Brazil; another maintains a rented apartment in France while returning to Portugal to accompany their elderly mother to medical appointments; many Portuguese families repeatedly travel between Portugal, France, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, or Luxembourg to care for their grandchildren; while others seek to ensure this care remotely, through digital communication, improvising solutions that are simultaneously necessary and insufficient. Such arrangements correspond to what has been conceptualised as the circulation of care in transnational families, in which obligations, support, and emotional labour are negotiated asymmetrically at a distance and over time (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Baldassar et al., 2016).

On plane and bus trips, people carry not only themselves, but also objects of continuity — food, clothing, small gifts, and everyday artefacts that materialise relationships at a distance. These objects circulate between those who remain in Portugal and those who live elsewhere, functioning as material extensions of care, memory, and belonging. Sadness, expectations, affection, and longing also circulate with them, sometimes mediated by WhatsApp messages, voice notes, and video calls. Digital communication allows for immediacy, but it does not replace the sensory and affective experiences of physical presence. Instead, it enables forms of mediated co-presence through which relationships are sustained, negotiated, and emotionally reinforced at a distance (Bacigalupe & Parker, 2011; Barros, 2023). Photographs, often accompanied by emojis, communicate what is otherwise difficult to express. There are recurring accounts of siblings separated by visa restrictions, of documents awaiting apostille, and of constant negotiation of bureaucratic requirements. Conversations oscillate between the everyday and the urgent: life, the weather, prices, rituals, aesthetics, fashion, health, and difficulties of family, friends, and acquaintances. These events unfold over time and are structured around key moments, such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals, which become rare opportunities for physical co-presence.

2. TRANSNATIONALITY AS A CONDITION OF LIVING BETWEEN PLACES

Appadurai's (1996) reading of modernity, through the concepts of overlapping landscapes — ethnoscapas, technoscapas, financescapas, mediascapas, and ideoscapas — allows us to understand transnationality as an ongoing process of becoming, marked by the fluidity of social experience. In other words, transnationality is viewed as a dynamic configuration of movements, flows, and connections that structure contemporary life, far

beyond rigidly delimited territories. This approach to transnationality invites us to understand transnational lives not simply as lives that traverse space, but as lives reconfigured by the constant interaction among spatial mobility, mediated communication, the circulation of material goods, affects, and social and symbolic representations. We therefore emphasise that transnationality is primarily a condition that organises social experience more broadly, constituted by simultaneous forms of connection, circulation, and participation in different social fields (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2009). It manifests itself in the way people navigate different normative orders, institutional frameworks, and cultural expectations, often simultaneously, while sustaining relational, emotional, and practical ties across borders (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

Transnational lives, therefore, imply the experience of living between there and here, between before and after, between memory and dream, between belonging and alienation. This “in-betweenness” is constitutive of how people experience identification, continuity, and rupture. It shapes orientations toward the past, present, and future, and informs how people negotiate issues of identity, responsibility, care, and belonging. In this sense, transnational family life increasingly involves not only mobility itself, but also the continuous reorganisation of emotional, intergenerational, and care relationships between those who move and those who remain (Barros et al., 2024; Bryceson, 2019).

From these processes emerge particular ideological and affective dispositions, which could be described as a transnational way of being, something neither stable nor uniform, but continuously reconfigured by changing experiences of mobility, displacement, connection, and recognition. Values, practices, and expectations overlap in layers and are sometimes contradictory, reflecting the multiple contexts in which they are formed. Cultural and artistic practices, in particular, often carry these layers, expressing the interweaving of memory, displacement, longing, and at times, resentment.

Viewed from a cultural perspective, this definition of transnationality likens migrant life to a life in parentheses (Gonçalves & Gonçalves, 1991), in transit and marked by instability. However, while valuable, such an interpretation should not obscure the extent to which these lives are structured by power relations and inequality. Transnationality is deeply inscribed in legal regimes, migration policies, economic hierarchies, historical inequalities, and cultural classifications that shape the possibilities of movement, settlement, recognition, and participation. The capacity to move, remain, return, or care across borders is unequally distributed, depending on citizenship, class, gender, race, and geopolitical position (Schrooten et al., 2016a). This means that transnational lives are not uniformly experienced as fluid or liberating; for many people, they are marked by constraint, uncertainty, relational asymmetry, and unequal access to resources and recognition (Barros, 2026; Liversage, 2025).

3. VULNERABILITY AS A RELATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL PROCESS

It is precisely at this intersection between movement and constraint that vulnerability becomes a central analytical concern. That is to say, vulnerability does not equate to

an individual deficit, a lack of resilience, or an inability to cope with adversity. In contexts marked by migration, ageing, technological transformation, and the reorganisation of care, vulnerability is relationally produced and structurally situated. Experiences of uncertainty or fragility emerge from the interaction between social inequalities, family relationships, institutional arrangements, and access to symbolic and material resources. More than resulting from personal shortcomings, vulnerability arises through historically situated constellations of structural conditions, institutional fragmentation, unequal access to rights, and differentiated forms of recognition (Farmer, 2004; Quesada et al., 2011). In other words, vulnerability is produced contextually through the intersection of social positions, institutional arrangements, and systems of government (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Gorovitz, 1994). These interactions unfold in different contexts, from intimate relationships to broader sociopolitical structures.

From an ecological perspective, we can argue that experiences of risk and protection depend on multiple levels — interpersonal, community, institutional, and societal — each shaping opportunities for participation, recognition, and belonging (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Walsh, 2016). As we have highlighted, however, in transnational contexts these dynamics rarely unfold within a single territory. On the contrary, family relationships, obligations, and care systems are distributed across borders and sustained by mobility, reciprocity, communication, and mediated presence (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Baykara-Krumme & Fokkema, 2019; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

In this sense, vulnerability is also revealed through the quality of relationships, access to support networks, and the availability of mediation resources that facilitate participation and social inclusion (Barros, 2026; Schrooten et al., 2016b). This relational understanding of vulnerability helps explain why transnational lives constitute phenomena of investigative relevance. They make visible how value systems, legal regimes, economic hierarchies, and cultural representations seek to fix lives into static categories that, in practice, are made through spatial and temporal fragmentation. At the same time, transnational family relationships are frequently organised by expectations of reciprocity, interdependence, and care that fuel relationships of belonging and also generate tensions, ambivalence, and unequal burdens of responsibility between generations and places (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Lowenstein, 2007).

Like other social dimensions, culture is a territory of mediation, symbolic dispute, and production of meaning. In this thematic issue, culture is approached as a mediating force through which transnational experiences are expressed, interpreted, and negotiated. Cultural achievements — literary, visual, performative, or digital — reflect transnational life; they condition how it is experienced, interpreted, and communicated. They provide languages, images, and narratives through which experiences of displacement, belonging, vulnerability, and aspiration can gain meaning, visibility, and recognition (Hall, 1990).

4. TRANSNATIONAL LIVES AS A FORM OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL LIFE

This issue seeks to show that transnationality constitutes one of the dominant ways in which contemporary life is organised and experienced. Although this condition is not yet fully recognised, neither in legal terms, nor in institutional frameworks, nor consistently in social or political discourse, it continually emerges in the experiences that make up daily life. It manifests itself in the experience of belonging, simultaneously and unequally, to multiple territories; in memories that connect individuals to other spaces and times; in the circulation of artefacts, objects, and cultural elements over long distances; and in the flows of care, obligation, expectation, and responsibility that accompany these circulations. Viewed in this light, transnationality is a spatial condition, but also a theoretical construct that translates contemporary experiences of relationally distributed, temporally stratified, and institutionally fragmented life (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2009), which are forged, even under frameworks that continue to assume a coincidence between territory, social relations, and institutional belonging. It is important to better understand the nature of these dynamics across space and time, which fuel practices of reciprocity, care, and interdependence that often extend beyond co-presence and territorial continuity. Family life, support systems, and moral obligations are reorganised at a distance, often requiring continuous coordination between those who move and those who remain, while adapting to different legal, institutional, and cultural contexts (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Bryceson, 2019; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Lowenstein, 2007).

5. CARE, FAMILY, AND THEIR RECONFIGURATION AT A DISTANCE

These dynamics become particularly visible — and conceptually relevant — in family relationships distributed across borders. Those who migrate may experience isolation, uncertainty, or precariousness, often associated with the loss of close support networks and the demands of navigating unfamiliar institutional contexts. At the same time, those who remain may face loneliness, reorganisation of routines, and uncertainty about future care arrangements. Vulnerability, therefore, does not reside solely in the person who moves, nor can it be reduced to a singular life situation. On the contrary, it circulates across relationships, generations, territories, and institutional contexts. It is produced by the reconfiguration of care, obligation, and belonging that migration implies. Research on transnational families has shown that migration reorganises systems of care, responsibility, and belonging between those who leave and those who stay (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Bryceson, 2019; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Haagsman et al., 2026). These dynamics often involve the redistribution of emotional labour, caregiving expectations, and practical responsibilities across generations, frequently requiring family members to negotiate caregiving through combinations of mobility, temporary return, digital communication, and deferred reciprocity (Baykara-Krumme & Fokkema, 2019; Lowenstein, 2007). In contexts marked by ageing and geographical separation, caregiving increasingly relies

on mediated forms of coordination that challenge conventional assumptions about proximity, presence, and family responsibility (Guerra & Barros, 2025).

However, these processes, in addition to being structural, are also profoundly affective and moral, involving expectations, negotiations, and sometimes sustained tensions at a distance. Family ties are frequently organised around solidarities that combine emotional closeness, practical support, normative expectations, and ambivalence, requiring continuous negotiation between different temporal, geographical, and institutional realities (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Lowenstein, 2007). The circulation of care in transnational families does not, therefore, eliminate vulnerability; it redistributes it unequally among family members, generations, and life-cycle phases, simultaneously creating possibilities for continuity, support, and resilience (Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

The perspective developed in this thematic issue is conceptual, empirical, epistemological and methodological. It is conceptual insofar as it seeks to contribute to an approach capable of understanding contemporary ways of living between places, not as a deviation from the norm, but as something increasingly constitutive of it. It is epistemological insofar as it aims to make intelligible a reality that remains only partially visible within the dominant institutional and analytical frameworks, which continue to privilege territorially delimited understandings of social life. It is also methodological because the contributions gathered here raise, implicitly or explicitly, the question of how to study a condition that is simultaneously spatial, temporal, relational, and mediated. Traditional approaches based on delimited places, linear temporalities, or singular units of analysis are often insufficient to capture the complexity of transnational lives. Instead, the articles in this thematic issue mobilise a range of methodological resources — including photography, literature, autobiography, ethnography, digital games, audiovisual platforms, and multi-sited research on education and migration — to grasp dimensions of experience frequently neglected or simplified in institutional discourse. Through these approaches, the contributions engage with forms of experience that remain difficult to articulate within formal categories: hesitation, guilt, fear, longing, symbolic wounds, fragile care, aspirational exhaustion, infrastructural dependence, historical resonance, and the ongoing challenge of belonging to more than one world.

6. THE TEMPORAL ORGANISATION OF TRANSNATIONAL LIFE

In transnational, relational exchanges, time itself becomes a resource, a form of obligation, and a means of relationality. Time is given through care, presence, and attention; it is expected to be reciprocated, redistributed throughout the phases of life, and reinterpreted in different cultural and institutional contexts. These temporal exchanges can sustain relationships, but they also generate tensions that do not always align with the organisation of life in the countries where different family members reside. In this sense, they constitute a source of individual, generational, and family dilemmas, as well as a place where vulnerability is simultaneously produced and negotiated. Time, in this sense,

is a relational and moral resource, often combining affection, obligation, voluntariness, and deferred reciprocity in ways that resonate with broader understandings of exchange and social interdependence. This approach to family support and reciprocity mechanisms ultimately demonstrates the limitations of national legal systems in recognising and accommodating the dynamic and temporally complex nature of transnational relationships. Institutions tend to presuppose co-presence and stability, while transnational families depend on circulation, mediation, memory, and deferred forms of reciprocity (Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

This raises a fundamental question: how do families experience being a family when cohabitation ceases to be the norm and when continuity depends on mobility, digital communication, memory, and forms of deferred or negotiated reciprocity? This question invites us to reconsider assumptions about proximity, care, obligation, and belonging, and to think more carefully about how these are reconfigured at a distance. Transnationality must therefore be understood as a dynamic and processual condition that unfolds through its own temporalities. It is through these unequal and overlapping temporalities that transnational life becomes simultaneously possible and difficult, continuous and fragile.

The contributions gathered in this thematic issue offer multiple points of analysis regarding this temporal dimension. They show that, in the exchanges that sustain transnational life, not only material resources circulate, but also time itself between individuals and across generations. Time, in this sense, cannot be reduced to chronological duration. It is given, received, postponed, negotiated, and, in some cases, returned. It functions as a relational medium through which care, obligation, belonging and expectations are enacted, often throughout the phases of life and under asymmetrical conditions of reciprocity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Lowenstein, 2007). Transnational lives are thus often lived in multiple temporal regimes. State time, family time, digital time, work time, memory time, generational time and bodily time not only coexist but also frequently overlap, interfere and conflict with each other. In transnational contexts, they are rarely aligned stably or predictably. On the contrary, they intersect unevenly, generating tensions, interruptions, delays, accelerations, and temporal dissonance that constitute how life is experienced across places.

Vulnerability ultimately arises precisely at these points of tension. When temporal regimes fail to reconcile, the consequences are profoundly affective, relational, and political. A visa period may be shorter than the time needed to provide care. A border may delay or suspend a future. A message may arrive too late to meet an urgent need. A child may grow up while a grandparent remains absent. A memory may return before the social conditions for its recognition are met. Temporal plurality is a lived condition, experienced through ruptures, delays, accelerations, mismatches, and uncertain synchronisations. It is in these frictions that vulnerability is produced, not simply as exposure to risk, but as a relational condition shaped by dependence, recognition, obligation, and mediation. People are vulnerable because they are linked to others, they care for and are cared for, they depend on institutions, and they inherit histories and expectations. They also depend

on the temporalities that affect them. Vulnerability is, therefore, inseparable from the temporal organisation of social life. In transnational contexts, presence itself must, moreover, be reconsidered in temporal terms. Presence is often episodic, mediated, imagined, symbolic, remembered, performed, and archived. A grandparent can be present via video call or a WeChat message. A refugee can be present through communication within a digital game. A migrant's past can be reactivated through a song, a photograph, or a narrative. Historical violence can remain present through the content that circulates.

The analytical task, then, is not to oppose presence and absence, but to examine the different degrees, forms, and intensities of presence that emerge through temporal and spatial divisions. Transnationality is made through these mediated forms. It is lived through representation, communication, memory, and practices that create bridges over distance, frequently generating forms of mediated co-presence that sustain continuity despite fragmentation (Nedelcu, 2017). Cultural objects such as images, novels, autobiographies, performances, videos, platforms, and games are not limited to illustrating transnational life. They alter the way in which it becomes articulable and recognisable. Such cultural objects are sites where a place where vulnerability, temporality, and belonging are actively produced. Thus, in transnational contexts, family solidarity, digital co-presence, and access to support networks can function as resources that allow individuals to experience fragmentation and mobility, even when these conditions remain structurally inscribed (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Nedelcu, 2017).

7. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE THEMATIC ISSUE: TRANSNATIONAL LIVES AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

In this issue, we present eight contributions that engage with the analytical concerns outlined above in different but complementary ways. Instead of approaching transnationality from a single disciplinary or methodological angle, these articles collectively explore the intersection between culture, politics, and lived experience, showing how transnational configurations are articulated through everyday practices, mediated representations, and institutional structures. These experiences unfold through memory and imagined futures, and are rooted in histories that continue to shape contemporary forms of life. As such, the contributions gathered here intersect with the concepts of transnationality, vulnerability, and care, while also addressing the role of temporality in these different domains, as something given, negotiated, deferred, and returned through relationships and contexts. Taken together, these contributions can be read through various analytical entry points.

Cátia Ferreira, in “(Dis)Connected Lives: Mediated Intimacy and Transnational Vulnerability in *Bury Me, My Love*”, examines the digital game *Bury Me, My Love* as a space for representing forced migration, mediated intimacy, and transnational vulnerability. Through ludonarrative analysis, player-created content, and multilingual user evaluations, the article shows how the game transforms displacement, distance, care,

and uncertainty into an interactive experience, opening a space for empathy, ethical reflection, and critical engagement.

Jiayin Li-Gottwald's contribution, "Long Ties, Filial Tension and Temporality in Transnational Chinese-German Families", focuses on the relational and emotional dimensions of caregiving in transnational family contexts. It explores how filial obligations, emotional labour, and intergenerational expectations are negotiated at a distance, showing that spatial separation does not diminish, but often intensifies, feelings of responsibility, guilt, and moral tension.

The article by Denis Leandro Francisco and Gabriela Eufrasia Sousa Passos, "*Seul, São Paulo*: Tensions, Othering, and Transcultural Representations in the Novel by Gabriel Mamani Magne", focuses on literary analysis to examine transcultural dialogues and processes of mobility. By exploring narrative constructions of migration and encounter, the contribution reveals how literature can capture the complexities of identity, language, and belonging in transnational contexts.

Mario Luis Grangeia's article, "Between the Divided Soul and the Hybrid Soul: Memories of Immigration to Brazil in Miguel Torga and Roberto Leal", further explores the role of memory and representation in shaping understandings of migration. By analysing autobiographical and cultural narratives, the article examines how migratory experiences are reframed over time, contributing to broader debates on hybridity, identity, and belonging. It raises important questions about who can speak for migration and under what conditions such representations are recognised or legitimised.

Rui Leitão and Daniel de Carvalho Lopes, in "Transatlantic Circus — Circus Flows Between Portugal and Brazil", analyse the historical circulation of circus practices between Portugal and Brazil. Their contribution shows how cultural forms travel, transform, and incorporate themselves into new contexts, while maintaining links to shared histories and traditions. In doing so, they illustrate how transnationality is not only a contemporary phenomenon but also a historically rooted process that continues to shape cultural exchange and memory.

Isabela Vieira Bertho, in "Photographs in Dialogue: Migration at the Mexico–US Border, Visual Memory, and Illuminations of the Past", focuses on the visual mediation of migration through photography. The article analyses Mónica Lozano's photographs of the Mexico–United States of America border through visual montage, showing how images can create dialogues between past and present, linking contemporary border dynamics to deeper historical processes without collapsing temporal differences.

Dalvacir Xavier de Oliveira Andrade's contribution, "Transnational Platform-Living: Brazilian Content Creators on YouTube and Digital Labour in Portugal", shifts the analytical focus to digital infrastructures. By examining the work of immigrant content creators, the article proposes a neomaterialist methodological approach to understanding communication on digital platforms. It highlights how migration, visibility, and platform infrastructures intertwine, and how digital environments both enable and constrain forms of participation and recognition.

Finally, Andrea Szinay-Kis's article, "Involuting Infrastructures of Aspiration: Chinese Education-Migration and the Pursuit of Elite Schooling in the United Kingdom", explores transnational educational mobility through the perspective of aspirations and institutional organisation. By introducing the concept of "aspiration infrastructures", the author shows how educational trajectories are shaped by complex temporal investments, expectations, and uncertainties. While such infrastructures create opportunities, they can also produce burnout, pressure, and diminishing returns, highlighting the ambivalent nature of transnational mobility in contemporary contexts.

Taken together, these contributions show that transnational lives are produced and negotiated at the intersection of relational dynamics, temporal structures, cultural representations, and institutional frameworks. They also show that vulnerability is not a marginal or exceptional condition, but a constitutive dimension of living between places, emerging from the tensions and misalignments that characterise these configurations (Walsh, 2020).

This special issue advances an analytical understanding of transnational life that transcends strictly spatial approaches and foregrounds the interaction among culture, vulnerability, temporality, relationality, and power. It invites readers to engage with the complexity of lives lived between places and to consider how such experiences challenge and reconfigure existing conceptual frameworks. We hope this issue contributes to ongoing debates in transnational, cultural, and migration studies and opens new avenues of research on vulnerability, temporality, and cultural forms of life across borders.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Emília Araújo is an associate professor with habilitation in Sociology at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Minho, where she teaches in the Department of Sociology. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Minho. She is a researcher at the Communication and Society Research Centre and a collaborating researcher at the Centre for Research in Economic and Organisational Sociology, ISEG Research in Economics and Management, University of Lisbon. Her research interests lie at the

intersection of the sociology of time, gender, culture, and social studies of science and technology. She has participated in several national and international research projects and networks, including the COST Action CA21143 – *Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe*.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3600-3310>

Email: era@ics.uminho.pt

Address: Departamento de Sociologia, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057, Braga, Portugal

Mieke Schrooten is an associate professor of Social Work at Odisee University of Applied Sciences and the University of Antwerp. She holds a bachelor's degree in Social Work, and a master's degree and a PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Her expertise lies in migration and social work research, with a particular focus on transnational social work, migration governance, and the role of civil society in welfare provision. She is a board member of the European Social Work Research Association and the chair of the COST Action CA21143 – *Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe*, from which this thematic issue emerged.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6880-4492>

Email: mieke.schrooten@odisee.be

Address: Odisee University of Applied Sciences, Warmoesberg 26, 1000, Brussels, Belgium

Carlos Barros holds a PhD in Psychology, with a specialisation in Social Psychology from the University of Lisbon, and has an interdisciplinary background in the social and behavioural sciences. He completed a postdoctoral fellowship in Integral Human Development (2022–2024) and subsequently conducted postdoctoral research in Psychology, Cognition and Social Sciences (2024–2025) at the Catholic University of Portugal. He is currently an invited professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Lusophony and at the Catholic University of Portugal. He has taught and conducted research as a visiting scholar at international institutions. He serves as the Portuguese representative on the management committees of COST Actions CA24150 – *Values in Turbulent Times: Navigating Social Changes and Challenges* (2025–2029) and CA21143 – *Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe* (2022–2026), where he is the co-leader of the Health and Well-being group.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5498-068X>

Email: cbarros@ucp.pt

Address: Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Palma de Cima, 1649-023, Lisboa, Portugal



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