Traversing: Familial challenges for escaped North Koreans

Abstract

This research contributes to the development of migration theories by examining the challenges and opportunities faced by UK-resident migrants from North Korea in maintaining transnational family ties. Particularly, it reflects critically on the role played by 'place' as a regulatory apparatus in shaping the migrants' experiences of family relationships in a transnational social space. The findings are drawn from thematic analysis of data from life history interviews with 14 North Korean defectors. In light of the prevalence of back-and-forth stepwise migration for the defectors and their families across multiple nation-states, I propose the concept of 'traversing' to describe the strenuous transnational familial experiences and complex mobility trajectories of North Korean escapees, which goes beyond a linear journey from the sending to the host place. While existing migration research has capitalised on the host place in selectively enabling and stratifying migrants' access to transnational family rights, I argue that, instead of assuming forced migrants have free access to their home countries, it is important to consider the interplay between multiple places in understanding the challenges for vulnerable migrants to access essential family rights and maintain transnational family relationships.

Keywords: North Koreans defectors; transnational family justice; transnational family ties; traversing

Introduction

Since 2004, the UK has accepted the second largest number of North Korean refugees after the Republic of Korea (ROK), and approximately 1,000 North Koreans hold UK resident permits (ONS, 2015). However, in recent years many North Korean asylum seekers have struggled to secure refugee status (Park, 2015), exemplified by a sharp rise in the rejection rate of their applications from 7.4 per cent in 2007 to 80.1 per cent in 2010 (Song, 2015). Under the ROK's constitution defectors who seek asylum in South Korea are entitled to receive protection and citizenship from the Southern government (Choi, 2018), which the UK government uses to reject applications by those who are suspected of holding ROK citizenship (Watson, 2015). An associated compounding issue is the challenges the Home Office is faced with in distinguishing between 'genuine' and 'bogus' refugees: between those who have already obtained South Korean citizenship; those who seek asylum via a third country outside the two Koreas; and ethnic Korean-Chinese (*chosonjok*) feigning as North Koreans (Song and Bell, 2018). Resonating this, Park (2015) points out the toughened screening of North Korean asylum applications and a decline in the success rates in the UK since 2008. Those whose applications have failed undergo degrading and inhumane treatment by the UK government's restrictive and draconian immigration regulations reflected in the 'hostile environment' policies (Webber, 2019). In particular, restrictions imposed on these asylum seekers have significant ramifications for their transnational familial life, consistent with the experiences of other immigrants from non-EEA (European Economic Area) countries in the UK who do not meet the minimum income thresholds under new family migration rules introduced by the Coalition Government in 2012 (Sirriyeh, 2015).

While some research has studied North Korean defectors in the UK (Watson, 2015; Song and Bell, 2018), their lived experiences remain under-researched. In particular, the transnational familial relationships they practise are noticeably under-explored. Families

constitute a vital component in the lived experiences of refugees, which are deeply embedded in their memory of home (Al-Ali, 2002). They additionally provide a sense of connectedness and security in their precarious existence as 'escapees' who cannot return to their home country. Thus, the transnational familial relations North Korean defectors practise needs further examination. Many studies have critically engaged with theorisations of transnationalism (e.g. Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 2009) and transnational families (e.g. Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Baldassar and Merla, 2014). These have paved the way in terms of developing useful analytical frameworks in investigating the familial experiences of transnational migrants. However, I contend that there needs to be a different approach towards theorising the lived experiences of North Korean refugees, due to their unique political situation in their country of origin, which criminalises anyone who leaves the country without a government permit as well as those who contact defected families in another country. This poses life-threatening challenges to many of them in retaining familial ties and practices, and resultant social injustices are manifested in extreme forms, such as the imprisonment and execution of the left-behind family members.

By focusing on the extreme challenges faced by North Korean escapees in maintaining their transnational family relationships, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, it contributes to the justice perspective on transnational family migration by highlighting 'place' as an important apparatus in differentiating and stratifying transnational migrants' access to essential family rights. While existing migration studies have often highlighted the host place in selectively curtailing migrants' rights to transnational family life (Griffiths and Morgan, 2017), I draw attention to the sending place and highlight that North Koreans' ability to sustain cross-border familial relations is shaped and constrained by the totalitarian regime's lack of a fair justice system. In doing so, I illustrate the ways in which the escapees'

asylum status in their host society intersect with the social and political justice systems in their sending place in shaping their lived experiences of transnational family relationships.

Second, this research aims to contribute to the theoretical development of transnationalism, border(ing) and transnational families by proposing the concept of 'traversing', which encapsulates step-wise migration across multiple countries and its consequential impact on the familial lives of North Korean defectors. North Korean escapees traverse multiple places and cross multiple national borders in a non-linear, back-and-forth manner to maintain their transnational family ties and re-establish those which have become severed. Hence, the conceptualisation of 'traversing' encourages scholars to go beyond the dichotomy of sending and host places to examine the complex journey across places as both an outcome of place-bound (in)justices and a process of social (in)justice in the making.

Rethinking transnationalism and transnational families

Transnationalism refers to a range of practices, activities and institutions through which migrant individuals maintain multiple connections and interactions with people and organisations in their homelands and/or across borders of other nation-states (Vertovec, 2009). 'The transnational turn' since the early 1990s (Vertovec, 2009, p.14) is characterised by significant changes in the scope and intensity of movement across nation-states owing to the vast advancement in transport and communication technologies (Castells, 1996). This has enabled individuals in diaspora to maintain more regular and intensified relationships with their family members across borders via a wide array of media, such as visits, phone calls and the internet (Carling, 2008). Thus, transnational families are regarded as overcoming spatial, legal, symbolic, political and racial barriers through the movement of various tangible and intangible objects whilst increasingly sharing their lives together across distance (Parrenas, 2005, p.318).

The concept of transnationalism has been hugely important in terms of furthering our understanding of familial relations across different territorial, political, economic and cultural boundaries in contemporary contexts. However, existing theories around transnational familial relations are largely founded on an underlying assumption that migrants in diaspora have fairly unconstrained access to their country of origin as long as individuals have resources (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Parrenas, 2005). For instance, in her research on transnational family relations between Filipino migrant mothers and their children, Parrenas (2005) suggests that regular communication through phone calls and remittances is an established aspect of the everyday life of transnational migrants and their families left-behind. Although she acknowledges how the formation of intimacy across borders is embedded in larger structural inequality, such as geographical locations with different infrastructures, her suggestion evinces a narrow understanding of migrant individuals' experiences, excluding those who might struggle to carry out family relationships on a regular basis from distance due to the extreme political situation in their exit country. Schiller and Salazar (2013) draw our attention to the limits of equating mobility with freedom and to the underside of mobility that may link to new confinements and exploitation, especially in the cases of refugees and asylum-seekers. This suggests that studying transnational migrants and their communities requires a framework that enables us to go beyond a fixation on the host place to explore the role of sending place in configuring transnational migrants' rights to family life.

Skrbis (2008) maintains that emotions are particularly germane to the study of transnational familial relations because the experience of migration lends itself to emotional implications through the processes of leaving loved ones and familiar environments. Reflecting this, much literature has examined the affective and emotional dimension in cross-country family relationships (Baldassar, 2008; Wise and Velayutham, 2017). This

affective/emotional dimension provides an important lens to analyse the narratives of my interviewees whose access to their home country — whether it is physical or virtual via telecommunications — is highly constrained.

Drawing on these, I argue that we need a more inclusive framework to fathom transnational families that surpasses the practice of physical and virtual connectedness. As I will demonstrate in the findings section, many North Korean defectors have families scattered in different nation-states, including the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and they endeavour to maintain ties with their families via various channels, which is often financially costly and life threatening. They also live with worries about the safety of their families and try to bring them out of the DPRK to a safer country, using expensive means. According to Baldassar (2008), emotions are an integral part of constructing co-presence in transnational familial relationships across multiple geographical localities, particularly the emotions of 'missing' and 'longing'. Building on her proposal, I suggest that the emotions of 'desire' to connect and 'anxiety' about the safety of their left-behind families are an important facet of transnational familial experiences among North Korean defectors, together with the senses of 'missing' and 'longing', proposed by Baldassar (2008).

Theorising transnational families

Bryceson and Vuorela (2002, p.3) describe 'transnational families' 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'. Numerous studies have examined transnational familial relations and practices, especially focusing on care (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avilla, 1997; Parrenas, 2005; Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Mingot, 2020). These studies have highlighted the influence of

gendered social expectations in maintaining cross-border connections and intimacy. Among these, Baldassar and Merla (2014) make a critical contribution to the theoretical development of transnational care. Critiquing the concept of the 'care chain' that restricts mobilities of care to 'back and forth movement between two nodes of a chain' (p. 29), Baldassar and Merla propose 'care circulation' as a more apposite theoretical concept that captures the uneven and multidirectional care between families in different nation-states. They argue that the 'circulation of care' framework expands the categories of analysis to other family members beyond mother-child relationships (Baldassar and Merla, 2014). I agree with the usefulness of the categorical expansion through their framework, together with the efficaciousness of its metaphor in encapsulating the multidirectional care flows beyond the dichotomous 'chain' model. However, I argue that it is limited in unravelling the experiences of refugees and forced migrants with complex mobility trajectories beyond care issues as well as analysing various strategies they deploy to maximise family survival and their restricted abilities to preserve family ties and connectedness.

Other extant works have shed light on the transnational familial activities and challenges faced by refugees and forced migrants (e.g. Lim, 2009; Mazdiva and Zontini, 2012). Drawing on a qualitative study of Sudanese refugees in the USA, Lim (2009) elucidates the importance of cultural values and obligations in maintaining connections between family members in different nation-states. This study further illuminates the near impossibility of being able to visit their homeland because of the geographical distance and a lack of finance among Sudanese refugees. Additionally, the work of Mazdiva and Zontini (2012) provides valuable insight into the transnational care challenges of forced migrants, drawing on their research on Zimbabwean asylum-seeking mothers. Their study emphasises the importance of a sending country and the context of their exits in shaping transnational familial experiences of forced migrant mothers. Moreover, they highlight the significance of

the immigration policy of the host society in shaping asylum seekers' ability to maintain and forge transnational familial ties. Whilst these studies are insightful in illuminating the transnational experiences of refugees and forced migrants, they do not offer any theorisation. Similarly, although there exist some attempts to capture the experiences of forced migrants, including the multiple, long journeys they take (e.g. Marfleet, 2006), transnational family relations among them are under-theorised.

Directly addressing such theoretical paucity in this field, Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) provide useful conceptual frameworks to examine familial relations and practices across different national borders. They propose two interrelated concepts of transnational families: 'frontiering' and 'relativising'. Bryceson and Vuorela (2002, p.11) define 'frontiering' as 'the ways and means transnational family members use to create familial space and network ties in terrain where affinal connections are relatively sparse'. They use this term to challenge or subvert the Eurocentric use of the term linked to their colonial and imperial past when Europeans invade other countries and exert hegemonic dominance. In that respect, 'frontiering' highlights the proactive ways in which non-European migrants move to Europe to create 'new cultural, economic and social frontiers to benefit their own families' as well as contributing to the rich cultural, economic and social development of European countries (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002, p.11). The authors deploy the concept of '(familial) relativising' to expound the characteristics of 'frontiering' with specific reference to an individual's practices of the family transnationally. 'Relativising' is defined as 'the variety of ways in which individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002, p.14). The authors (ibid.) delineate that 'relativising' involves immigrants' ability to forge and maintain family relations and ties 'selectively' based on 'temporal, spatial and need-related considerations.' Thus, it stresses individual agency in constructing familial relatedness and attachments in a context where face-to-face

daily interactions are not possible. These are highly useful concepts that challenge hegemony by putting emphasis on the agency of 'subaltern' actors and their proactive roles in forging and maintaining family ties.

On the other hand, although their edited collection includes the accounts of forced migrants, the undue emphasis on agency overlooks barriers faced by some in constructing such frontiers. Founded on this, I propose the concept of 'traversing' as pertinent to the experiences of North Korean defectors and other forced migrants who face similar challenges. The verb 'traverse' means to travel across or through places, sometimes in a sideways or zigzagged manner, with connotations of struggle and the negotiation of obstacles. Predicated on this, the concept seeks to encapsulate the structural barriers and social injustices that defectors face in creating new meanings and opportunities to retain familial ties with those in and outside the DPRK, alongside the convoluted processes of their own migration. It encompasses four dimensions of transnational experience for forced migrants: the geographical (physical) and temporal aspects of multi-step mobility; the consequential impact of such perilous moves on transnational family relations; the processes and strategies of maintaining family ties; the affective and emotional dimension.

First, going beyond the dichotomy of sending and host places, 'traversing' describes step-wise migration processes in which individuals have to take many different routes to overcome various obstacles to reach their destined country, often demanding a prolonged period of time. This entails setbacks such as repatriation to the DPRK or imprisonment in a third country such as Laos. Second, 'traversing' does not only depict their own mobility processes but also the (in)justice consequences of them: i.e. often left-behind families in their exit society whose such positions are forced by the regime as well as the scattering of family members transnationally owing to the difficulties they face as 'illegitimate' escapees. This dimension also illuminates divergent ways in which people practise family either to protect

their members by leaving them behind or separating from them or migrating with their families to stay together. Third, ‘traversing’ also applies to the varying processes and strategies in which many defectors try to maintain familial relations across multiple borders via phone calls, sending money, together with their attempts to bring out their family members from the DPRK, using expensive and risky means (Lankov, 2006). Similar to their own migration processes, these attempts can take many different stages with the possibilities of multiple setbacks. ‘Traversing’ thus delineates the hostile conditions which many defectors encounter due to the unfair justice system of the regime that bars their contact with families in the DPRK, which draws attention to the role played by the sending place in curtailing transnational migrants’ family rights. Fourth, the concept seeks to capture the emotional and affective experiences of forced migrants. Whilst emotions are embedded and manifested in the various transnational family practices of North Koreans, such as remittances, anguish about the safety of their families in the North and desire to connect with them are especially potent in the theorisation of ‘traversing’.

There are some overlapping characteristics between ‘frontiering’/‘relativising’ and ‘traversing’ in terms of the direction of geographical mobility from poor countries to rich countries in search of a better life and the proactive role of migrants in maintaining or at least their attempts to maintain family ties across multiple borders. However, the concept of ‘traversing’ is distinct from them principally in three ways. First, ‘traversing’ represents the non-linear and multiple side-ways in which many forced migrants cross borders to escape and to bring their families or maintain contact, dissimilar to ‘frontiering’. Second, the central characteristics of ‘traversing’ are fundamentally different from ‘relativising’ in the sense that it entails strenuous and dangerous channels that migrants use to maintain ties cross multiple borders owing to the extreme condition of the exit state. In this respect, ‘traversing’ highlights the limited ability of the individuals to form and maintain transnational familial

relations and ties, unlike ‘relativising’, which implies the individual’s freedom to pick and choose in forging and maintaining family ties. Third, emotional and affective aspects, particularly longing, desire, anguish and worries, are an important part of ‘traversing’. Although the term itself does not suggest emotionality, it is key to its conceptualisation and notably absent in the other two concepts. Furthermore, I argue ‘traversing’ could be applied to those settled in other countries, including South Korea, as well as refugees in Europe, such as Syrians. This is unlike ‘frontiering’ and ‘relativising’, which are limited to the conceptualisation of transnational familial experiences within Europe.

Methods

This paper is drawn from research on North Koreans living in the UK, using life history interviews with 14 defectors. I focused on the barriers and opportunities they encounter in their transnational familial practices and strategies, in conjunction with the human rights abuse and social injustice faced by defectors inside and outside North Korea.

Sample

Getting access to North Korean defectors is generally difficult because the majority of people want to keep a low profile due to the potential risk they and their families in the DPRK face from the regime. Additionally, because of the sensitive nature of the topic, it was highly challenging to find willing participants. In order to overcome this, I made initial contact with the founder of Free NK (North Korea), a UK-based North Korean human rights group, clearly outlining the purpose of my research. During this initial contact, the founder agreed to participate in the research as well as introducing me to other potential participants. From this, I used the snowball method to access a further 13 participants. The majority of the participants lived in New Malden in Surrey. Four participants – all but one were in the

process of asylum-seeking – resided in the Manchester area. All the participants had families remaining in North Korea.

Data collection

The life history interviews with all the participants who lived in New Malden took place in the Free NK office by the choice of the participants. The interviews with those who were living in Manchester took place in a hotel room where the researcher stayed, a participant's house, and an interview was conducted via Skype. The durations of individual interviews ranged from two hours to over four hours. All the interviews were audio recorded with the consent from the participants. In order to protect anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this paper. All the interviews were conducted in Korean by the researcher who is originally from South Korea. The interviews began by asking the interviewees to tell their life stories from North Korea to the UK, using whichever format and order they wanted. The researcher let the interviewees talk with the minimum of interruption. Once they finished their stories, the researcher asked numerous prepared and prompted questions that she wanted to explore further.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using the method of thematic analysis (Ritchie et al., 2003). The coding was carried out through a number of processes. At the initial stage dominant themes from the data that emerged repeatedly within and across interviews were identified and categorised with specific reference to transnational familial experiences. The analysis of narratives focused on how certain phenomena are constructed in their stories whilst also unpacking the role of political, economic and cultural structure in shaping individual lives from their personal accounts. This process was repeated in order to identify key themes that

might have been overlooked in the first round of coding. Then, the sections relating to these themes were read and re-read whilst also further notes were made. More in-depth reading and analyses were carried out in order to link them to particular theories. Alongside this, I also listened and re-listened to the audio recordings of the interviews to discern emotional signals and subtleties. This was a crucial process in capturing the emotional richness of the data and the deeply painful experiences of the participants. In order to preserve the nuances and subtleties of the Korean language, the analysis was executed in the original Korean transcripts and only chosen extracts were translated in English.

Findings

'Traversing' journeys

The story of Ms Lee, a widow in her 60s, is a prime example of the step-wise, non-linear, perilous journeys she and her family took to get to the UK, crossing many different national borders, as in the case of many other North Korean defectors. Ms Lee lived with her teenage son, and two grown-up daughters, one of whom got divorced and returned to her house with a baby girl when they lived in North Korea. In the 1990s when the North faced severe famine, Ms Lee and her two daughters began to visit their relatives in China who lived near the border between the two countries to get food. However, unlike the usual occasions, the last time when her daughters went to China in the late 1990s, they did not return for three months and without any contact. Later Ms Lee found out from a North Korean official who she knew personally that her daughters were trafficked and sold to Chinese men. In search of her daughters, Ms Lee crossed the Tumen River with her teenage son and baby granddaughter.

From her relative in China who received calls from Ms Lee's daughters, she found out where they were sold and managed to find one of the houses. The man's family who her daughter was forced to marry refused to take three additional family members and demanded

a large sum of money for Ms Lee to buy her daughter out. With no money, Ms Lee walked miles to get to another mountain village and persuaded the head of the village to lend her money in exchange for her daughter to marry another poor man whose family were willing to take all her family members out of desperation. On the one hand, this illustrates the important role of Ms Lee as a mother, who played a centripetal role through her efforts to 'keep the family together'. On the other hand, she also expressed the sense of shame she felt in such a dire situation, which *forced* her to 'sell' her own daughter to an 'inadequate' man for survival. This was not an isolated example and there are other families in my sample, for instance, whose daughters volunteered themselves to be sold as a strategy for family survival. This indicates gender plays a significant role in transnational justice and how women's 'choice' is embedded in the patriarchal system, in which they are largely treated as 'expendable' subjects. However, simultaneously I argue that recognising their agency, even if those individuals were *forced* to make such a 'choice', would be an important step in understanding their willingness and ongoing endeavour not only to protect their family in times of crisis but also to retain transnational family ties against all odds.

Due to her resourcefulness and hard work, Ms Lee and her children cleared the poor man's family debt by collecting and selling roots and fruits in the market abundantly found in the mountains whilst also harvesting a lot more grains than the Chinese family ever managed. However, their resourcefulness began to create a sense of jealousy among villagers who had initially turned a blind eye before reporting them to the Chinese police. Ms Lee, her son and the baby were eventually forced to leave the village and look for safety in a bigger town where they were introduced to a Korean-Chinese priest via another North Korean escapee they met on the bus to the big town. They were offered a shelter and food by the priest, lived a secret life for about a year until they were caught by the Chinese police and repatriated to North Korea.

Ms Lee described the inhumane treatment she and others received in the process of repatriation as follows: ‘once you are repatriated to North Korea, you are not a human, you are a dog.’ Ms Lee and her son managed to escape to China again with the help of her daughter and relative in China, and they reunited with the priest who then helped them to settle elsewhere. Yet again, Ms Lee was caught and repatriated. Using her family connection with an official in the local intelligence service, she was set free and escaped back to China, where she was reunited with her son. After these two incidents and the ostensible precariousness for Ms Lee to settle in China, the Korean-Chinese priest, along with an American missionary whom they met during their stay in China, decided to help her family to escape to South Korea. Ms Lee, her son and granddaughter were taken to the border between China and Laos with other North Koreans. From then on, they had to walk through Laos mountains to get to the Mekong River where they were supposed to be taken to Thailand by boat in order to reach their supposedly final destination, South Korea. However, they were caught by the Laos police before getting to the Mekong River. They were then transported to Thailand. According to Kwak (2018), many defectors have been forced to seek illegal and perilous routes, primarily due to China’s strong repatriation policy in combination with the South Korean government’s reluctant approach towards confronting China on humanitarian grounds.

After staying in Thailand for six months, they finally arrived in the ROK, having taken approximately eight years from the point of their first defection. However, life in the South was much tougher than they anticipated. Despite her son graduating from a good university in Seoul with his multilingual ability, he struggled to find a decent job that matched his qualifications because of his North Korean background. For many years he moved from one unskilled job to another, such as working in a petrol station and night taxi shifts, suffering from depression. Ms Lee’s granddaughter also became the target of bullying

at school, which caused severe depression (see Jeon et al., 2013). These eventually made Ms Lee's family leave South Korea and seek asylum in the UK. Their asylum applications have been rejected a few times since their arrival about six years ago and they continue to fight to stay in the UK with their lives still hanging in limbo.

The case of Ms Lee illustrates the long, arduous journeys and repeated attempts experienced by the majority of North Korean defectors to find a better life whilst maintaining family ties. Once defectors reached their safe destination, they sought to contact their families in North Korea using whatever financial means they had. However, maintaining regular contact with families in the DPRK remains a challenge to many, as my data suggest, because of the tighter border control, together with a lack of financial resources relating to their legal status and employment situation in the host society. In addition, seeking a 'decent' life for themselves as well as their family members remains an ongoing struggle for many. In this process, many defectors often get separated from their family members who have also fled North Korea, sometimes temporarily and other times permanently. For instance, Ms Lee's daughters who stayed in China were reportedly executed by the North Korean army after being caught and repatriated to North Korea during their attempts to escape to South Korea. This has meant Ms Lee's granddaughter had permanently lost her mother, thus Ms Lee continues to be the main care provider for her orphaned granddaughter. Nonetheless, this does not stop them from being proactively involved in seeking to maintain and (re)establish familial relationships across multiple borders. As noted by numerous studies (Parrenas, 2005; Baldassar, 2008), remittances and technological advances have had a significant impact on some of the defectors' ability to connect with their families transnationally, as exemplified below.

Divergent strategies of 'doing' family

Whilst some defectors, such as Ms Lee, migrated jointly to keep their families together, not all families stayed together physically but had to use telecommunications or remittances to maintain intimate ties when actual visits were not possible, as will be explored in this section. This highlights the divergent ways of 'doing family' (Morgan, 1996) among North Koreans in a transnational realm, given the different constraints they face.

As identified in other literature on transnational families (Wise and Velayutham, 2017), remittance plays a crucial part in the survival of families who have remained in the North. Despite their limited income in the receiving country, many defectors send money back to North Korea, using expensive brokers. My data suggest that remittances are normally sent unidirectionally by defected members in South Korea or the UK to their families in the North. Apparently, receiving money from their defected family members has become common practice in North Korea nowadays, according to Mr Jin, who escaped the country on his own, leaving all his family behind. Many aspects of the DPRK are contradictory and paradoxical in their images and practices. Whilst the government is allegedly trying to crack down on communications with and receiving money from defected families, in reality corruption and bribery are a common feature of the country, with local government officials turning a blind eye to get bribes (Sweeny, 2013). Thus, unlike the government stance on a strict state control, the workings of the system are arguably porous with the constant infiltration of foreign information and products and money (Baek, 2016). Mr Jin describes the 'clandestine' recognition among North Korean civilians that having defected family members has become the envy of some people in recent years:

> At the beginning when defectors sent money from abroad, families couldn't spend it openly because of ongoing surveillance by the secret police. But the situation has changed a lot now. If people say 'so and so has defected'

> although not openly, people would say ‘Ah, those who have families defected must be very happy because they can spend the money they have received freely!’ The secret police might try to catch them to get bribes but wouldn’t report them to the government.

As illustrated above, remittance is an important strategy in maintaining transnational family ties beyond the provision of financial means for the family to survive but also ‘conduits of emotion’ as a symbol of love and care from a far (Wise and Velayutham, 2017, p.126).

Additionally, for North Korean families spread across different borders, the availability of communications technologies is vital in maintaining regular contact with their family members in other countries. This includes communications with their families in the DPRK, using mobile phones facilitated by costly brokers. The use of such phones is illegitimate in North Korea and being found out using them would result in severe punishment. However, those who have successfully escaped have access to an array of communications tools that are relatively cheap and easily available to use at any time. Thus, defectors whose families have settled in different nation-states outside the DPRK, such as the UK and South Korea, can enjoy regular contact between themselves. This is illustrated by the case of Ms Keum, a mother of three children. She and her husband were granted asylum and thus held a secure UK visa that allowed her family to travel to other countries. She maintains frequent contact with her sister who has settled in South Korea and describes transnational family relationships as ‘all good’:

> Interviewer: How do you keep in touch with your siblings in South Korea?

Ms Keum: We use Kakao Talk (a South Korean free mobile instant messaging application) and we also visit each other. It's just North Korea that we can't go but other countries are all free so we keep in touch frequently.

Interviewer: Compared with when you were in North Korea, what do you think family relationships are like now?

Ms Keum: If we want to see them, we can visit them. I don't think there are big difficulties. Of course, it would be better to live closer but even if they live far away, it's not like North Korea where you can't visit; there are no major issues. We went to see them last year and if my siblings want to travel abroad, then they also visit us. It's better to live in different countries than living in the same place so we can have a chance to visit other countries.

Her last account reveals the ambivalent and contradictory discourses on the proximity of families: her account initially suggests the idealisation of 'proximate families' (Baldassar and Merla, 2014); yet, her latter remark indicates it is better to live in different countries, which is portrayed positively as offering chances to travel and visit each other although the primary reason for her family to live in a different country from her sister is possibly to seek a better life after experiencing discrimination in the ROK like many other defectors.

However, this is a rather 'classed' view that chimes with Bauman's (1998) 'tourists' who have freedom and ability to travel easily. For instance, this is contrasted with the experience of Ms Lee, whose precarious legal situation and limited economic and social capital render her family members to stay where they are with little room to travel freely, like Bauman's (1998) 'vagabonds'. Although Ms Keum did not come from a high *songbun* (the caste system in North Korea), her late parents were skilled professionals (an engineer and a doctor), and she was a qualified nurse. While she and her husband who is also a defector do

not lead affluent lives in the UK, they have capacity to maintain close connections with her siblings in South Korea: for example, her husband's international human rights activism work offers regular opportunities to travel to the ROK, in which she and her children joined. Also, both her sister and her sister's husband have requalified themselves as doctors and lead successful lives in the South, which is not typical among North Korean defectors (Lankov, 2006). Evidence suggests the class positions prior to defection continue to play an important part in the post-migration experiences of North Koreans. For instance, those who had privileged upbringing in the North tend to be more successful in adapting in the South using their varied forms of capital, compared to those who came from the countryside with limited forms of capital or few transferable skills (Yoon, 2001). This 'classed' experience of familial relations is also associated with some individuals' ability to maintain cross-border familial ties, constrained by infrequent physical contact.

Ms Park escaped North Korea to China due to the effect of famine with her daughter who was single at that time. During their attempts to cross the Tumen River and their secret stay in China, they were caught and repatriated to North Korea three times but managed to escape again. While staying in China, her daughter married another defector and had a daughter. In order to help her daughter and her husband's escape to South Korea, Ms Park began to look after her granddaughter and still remains as a main carer. During their attempt to reach South Korea, her son-in-law was caught and executed while her daughter managed to escape and safely sought asylum in the ROK. Now her daughter has remarried in the South and has a young son. The traversing journeys and hard life as stigmatised refugees in the South (Chung, 2009) have resulted in Ms Park's granddaughter being separated from her own mother, raised by her grandmother in a different state. As suggested in other literature (Yoon, 2001; Lankov, 2006), most North Korean re-settlers in the South are marginalised and discriminated against due to prejudice towards them, such as struggling to find skilled jobs

that match with their qualifications. This often causes defectors in the South to struggle to get by, let alone being able to afford expensive private education for their children prevalent in the South. The public education system in the ROK is perceived by many parents to be inadequate for a high-quality education, only providing a basic level. Thus, the private education market thrives due to the demands of parents who seek additional education outside the formal system (Oh, 2010).

In addition, with the significant influence of globalisation, English competence is regarded as an essential skill in the ROK's white-collar job market and therefore private English lessons for young children are common (Cho, 2014). This contributes some families to strategically seek 'secondary-migration' together or separately to an anglophone country, such as the UK (Song and Bell, 2018). Ms Park took on the direct caring responsibilities of her granddaughter partly to maximise the opportunity to raise her in an English-speaking country:

> Interviewer: While you are raising your granddaughter, how do you decide about education?
>
> Ms Park: I discuss with my daughter. We use KaKao Talk to maintain regular contact.
>
> Interviewer: Obviously you and your granddaughter are keeping regular contact with your daughter but how do you think your granddaughter is feeling about this long-distance relationship with her mother?
>
> Ms Park: She is a teenager and a few months ago she said her mother abandoned her, she rebelled to her mother. So I explained to her in detail that she hadn't abandoned her and why I, her grandmother, am looking after her. In South Korea life is hard and one of the reasons why we didn't send her back

there is because if she lived in Korea, her mother had to send her to English *Hagwon* (a private after-school institution). I said your mum is struggling and she's got your younger brother as well so if you go there, it's hard for you. There are things that your mum can do well to look after you by living together but also things that she can't do well so she seemed to understand it.

Interviewer: Does your granddaughter have regular contact with her brother or see him regularly?

Ms Park: No, she saw him once when he came to the UK.

Interviewer: Does she have a strong bond with her brother?

Ms Park: No there is hardly any bond… so I feel pain in my heart when I think of it.

As illustrated in Ms Park's account, such 'traversing' migration processes and the particular conditions of forced migration among North Korean people have numerous implications for familial relations and justice. First, some families strive to stay together as illustrated by the narrative of Ms Lee in the previous section. However, other families choose to separate across different national borders to maximise the life opportunities for their (grand)children and to obtain upward social mobility. These societies provide the hope of creating a 'new' life built on individual ability through economic and social success, free from the prejudice they experienced in the South, albeit which might turn out to be illusive (Song and Bell, 2018). Whilst this might disrupt the idealised notion of family togetherness, this concurrently offers more strategic options for the family members with children to manage challenging circumstances more effectively. This also has implications for parenting against the norm of the 'mother-child' care framework of the West (Hays, 1996). Studies have suggested challenges mothers face in their attempts to care from distance and gendered

expectations of mothering continue to influence the expectations of children and the mother's care-giving practices (e.g. Parrenas, 2005). In that regard, it is not surprising to hear Ms Park's granddaughter blaming her mother for abandoning her. Consistent with this, gender continues to play a vital part in some defectors' transnational familial experiences. As noted in the cases of Ms Lee and Ms Park, it is mostly women who take responsibility for childcare (in these cases grandchildren), reflecting the patriarchal culture deeply entrenched in the DPRK. Moreover, since the famine in the mid-1990s, women's role in feeding the family and saving their lives have become prominent, which has contributed to their attenuated hardships by taking multiple burdens as a breadwinner and domestic carer (Park, 2011). Further to this, women form the majority of those leaving the DPRK due to the regime's patriarchal structure that has enabled women to exploit their less noticeable status in official employment (Fahy, 2019). On the basis of these, it is expected that women continue to play a primary caring role for their orphaned grandchildren outside the DPRK or become a central figure in strategising family survival and social mobility by initiating immigration into an anglophone country with a grandchild.

Left-behind families

While some manage to escape with their family members or bring them out of the regime, many participants have families remaining in North Korea. During my interviews, it became apparent how deep and painful were the defectors' concerns about their left-behind families. Two participants in particular have their own children still living in North Korea. Mr Lee escaped the North with his wife and a younger child. When answering a question on the number of children, Mr Lee initially did not include his left-behind child. His deliberate act of omission in his story however paradoxically made a more visible mark and encouraged me

to have probed further to unpack his feelings and emotions. His following account clearly shows how his feelings are imbued with guilt and sorrow:

> Interviewer: I'm sorry but would you mind telling me why you could not bring your oldest child when you left?
> Mr Lee: He was about 10 at that time; he didn't live with us. He was sent to his grandmother as we didn't know what would happen to us. We thought we couldn't all die but there was no guarantee we wouldn't, so someone, at least one person should survive.

The conditions of North Korea challenge the 'nuclear family' as 'norm' in Western contexts and illuminate how conventional family forms and practices are threatened through famine and hardship. This also highlights the divergent ways in which people practise family: some leave their families behind as a protective strategy whilst others take them along. Mr Lee's story further demonstrates that fleeing the regime risks the lives of the entire family. His following excerpt illustrates the difficulties he faces in maintaining regular contact with his own child:

> Interviewer: Do you have contact with him?
> Mr Lee: I talked to him on the phone about three years ago…Ahhh! I really tried hard to bring him out later when I was in China but it didn't work so I thought the god is giving me a burden, to show me that I can't do everything I want.

As stated in my theory section, emotional anguish about family safety, together with the desperate desire for reunion with their left-behind families, form an indivisible part of the familial experiences of most defectors.

The following accounts also highlight growing difficulties and worsening situations in North Korea since the latest Kim Jong-Un regime. The pain of leaving their families in their 'home' country continuously haunts many defectors, including Mr Kang, who defected with his wife, leaving his three children in the North:

> Mr Kang: Every time we think of our children, our chests tighten. I say to my wife it's our fault not to bring them with us when we left, but our worries about them would not make them be able to leave North Korea. Thinking about them won't do anything. But in fact, even now when I think of my children and North Korea, I suddenly wake up at night.
> Ms Park: Even if I want to contact my brothers, surveillance in North Korea is too tight. I don't have the courage to put my younger brothers' lives in danger because of a meagre amount of money that I send and I wish wholeheartedly they stay alive then we can meet one day. I'm living with such a desperate wish.

As is evident from the above excerpts, the political situation and the justice system of the exit country have a profound impact on the transnational familial experiences of North Koreans. However, as appositely put forward by Massey (1998), one also needs to look at the structural conditions of both sending and receiving countries in order to unpack the complex intersection between different factors. In that sense, it is not only the lack of social justice in North Korea that hinders defectors from maintaining ongoing and regular contact and

relations, but also the justice system of the host society. For instance, evidence suggests that settlers in South Korea have better access and chance to reach their families in North Korea even if the ROK government does not allow it legally. This is the result of their legal status as recognised Korean citizens once they have passed the security check-ups, as well as due to a lump sum of settlement fees that the South Korean government provides to them (Chung, 2009). According to Choi (2018), when defectors arrive in the South, they are put in a place called *Hanawon* (means the House of Unity in Korean) to receive three-month social adjustment education after passing the initial security checks. Once they complete this process, individual re-settlers are given KRW 27.6 million (equivalent to approximately US $27,000) to help with their settlement in the South.

In contrast, those who are stuck in the prolonged asylum processes in the UK have a limited ability to contact or reach their families owing to scant resources. For example, keeping in touch with family through telecommunications and sending money would be extremely difficult for some defectors in the UK with precarious legal statuses, whose asylum applications have been rejected. The UK government does not grant refugee status to those who are found to have arrived in the UK from South Korea (Watson, 2015). This is illustrated by the account of Ms Lee whose story was featured at the beginning of this section. Ms Lee has been trying to maintain regular contact with her brothers in the DPRK as well as sending remittances. However, her contact has been halted since she came to the UK:

> Interviewer: Do you still keep in touch with your brothers in North Korea?
> Ms Lee: When I lived in South Korea, I contacted them twice or three times because I could afford then but I can’t since I came here. If I ask brokers, it might be possible but it will cost too much so I haven’t contacted them for six

> years…I'm worried whether they can even have porridge, but my biggest worry is whether they are alive or dead.

When Ms Lee was in the ROK, she and her family were able to work as legitimate citizens, which enabled her to pay for expensive brokers to contact her brothers. However, in the UK they were not allowed to work as their asylum applications had failed a number of times, which had a direct impact on her ability to contact her family in the DPRK. This reflects the unjust UK immigration rules punitive towards 'poor' migrants and international migration regimes that are principally founded on discursive practices of tighter border control through the clear categorisation of migrants and the illegalisation of certain groups, especially a large number of asylum seekers. This has had an impact on Ms Lee's capacity to connect with her families transnationally in conjunction with the North Korean justice system. The hostile migration regimes, justice systems of the UK and the DPRK prevent these individuals from exercising their basic human rights whilst hindering them from being fully integrated into these societies. These all concomitantly affect the transnational family practices of defectors, having an aggravating effect on their experiences of maintaining intimate relations cross borders.

Conclusion

Focusing on familial relationships among North Korean defectors in the UK, this paper contributes to re-thinking the role played by 'place' as a regulatory apparatus in curtailing forced migrants' access to essential family rights. This has highlighted the importance of investigating familial relations in unravelling structural inequalities and unjust political and legal systems through which individuals' intimate lives are shaped. Whilst the relational and familial challenges experienced by refugees and asylum seekers form a central part of the

broader social challenges facing them, most existing research has overlooked these by focusing on the politics of refugees (e.g. Marfleet, 2006). Thus, by examining the capability and obstacles of forced migrants to forge and maintain intimate relations cross borders, this paper has illuminated the intersecting role of the justice systems of both sending and receiving places, as well as the multiple places along the complex journey of traversing.

The paper has underscored that the political condition of the DPRK – and particularly not having access to their 'home' country – forms an important part of North Korean defectors' experiences. This puts refugees in a vulnerable position, which has significant implications for their ability to maintain transnational family ties. Existing research on transnational families has often highlighted the borders erected by host places, i.e. mostly developed countries in the Global Northwest, in stratifying migrants' unequal access to essential family rights (Sirriyeh, 2015; Griffiths and Morgan, 2017; Webber, 2019). In a similar vein, the UK government's scepticism and hostility towards North Korean asylum seekers have constrained their ability to maintain regular contacts with families remaining in the DPRK, as exemplified by Ms Lee's case. Concurrently, my findings highlight the role played by social and global injustices embedded in the sending place in shaping migrants' ability to maintain and 'do' family lives in a transnational context. This means a justice perspective on transnational family migration should consider not only the role played by nation-states in shutting migrants and their families out, but also the role of sending places in curtailing the family rights of those who have out-migrated or escaped from their country of origin.

Extending place-bound analysis, the paper also demonstrates the potential of the concept of 'traversing', which encompasses four dimensions, as a new analytical tool. It encapsulates the geographical and temporal dimension of mobility: the long and perilous paths North Korean escapees take to reach 'free' countries that guarantee their basic human

rights, such as freedom of movement and direct interactions with their families. Much existing research tends to conceptualise transnational ties as binary between sending and receiving places (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Parrenas, 2005). However, the notion of 'traversing' and the experiences of North Korean defectors have underscored the multitude of different nation-states they travel passed and/or scatter around.

Challenging the place dichotomy, the conceptualisation of 'traversing' considers transnationalism as an ongoing process of incessant border crossing, enabled by the mobility of people from one place to another – above and beyond just maintaining social relations across borders. Moreover, it elucidates that the transient characteristics of destination because what is considered to be the 'final' destination at one time may soon turn out to be a transitory place. Furthermore, the life stories presented here highlight the importance of spatial and temporal dimensions in shaping forced migrants' experiences. As illustrated, there are clear spatial limits in terms of the sending country as well as the host society but also temporal aspects that need to be considered as time and space interplay in the defectors' experiences and ability to forge transnational familial relations. For instance, if they were in the middle of escaping and stuck in a third country, such as Laos, their ability to connect with families would be severely limited; by contrast, if they were in a country that grants legitimacy to their stay as well as financial support, such as South Korea, their ability to contact or bring out their families back home would be enhanced (Lankov, 2006) although the South's government outlaws North Koreans contacting their families in the North. As a result, the defectors' rights to family life is in constant flux as the configuration of the time-place nexus changes.

'Traversing' captures varied strategies adopted by North Korean defectors to 'do' and 'protect' their families in a milieu where they encounter numerous constraints, either by moving together or being separated. This elucidates that the precarious existential perils

North Koreans and their families face demand multifarious countervailing tactics. ‘Traversing’ also represents the consequential impact of such journeys on their ongoing efforts to preserve their familial ties across different borders, capturing multiple layers of challenges faced by forced migrants more appositely. Further, as illustrated by my findings, injustices throughout the process of ‘traversing’ are not only experienced by North Korean defectors in the form of physical family separation, they are also vividly reflected in the nuanced and intense emotions of anguish, desire, loss and love the defectors have for their families. Founded on this, the paper has argued for a more imaginative approach towards a theorisation of transnational families by incorporating the emotional dimension of transnational experiences (Skrbis, 2008). Such theorisation can provide a useful analytic platform to study the transnational family relations of survival migrants.

Although I developed the concept of ‘traversing’ in specific reference to North Korean defectors, I am cautiously optimistic that this could also apply to a much broader range of forced migrants, as raging climate disasters, warfare, and political persecution have expelled an unprecedented number of people from their home countries or have rendered their homeland uninhabitable and inaccessible. Thus, this article provides a preliminary analytical framework to more accurately fathom the experiences of those who are forced to leave their homelands and those who do not have the access to their sending places and left-behind families. The concept further widens the analytical framework of transnational familial relations and practices among forced migrants beyond the field of care, epitomised by the work of Baldassar and Merla (2014). Whilst such a concept as ‘care circulation’ is valuable in the realms of transnational family, highlighting the multidirectional and asymmetrical mobilities of care, ‘traversing’ more felicitously encapsulates the multidimensionally challenging experiences of forced migrants in their attempts to sustain and forge family relations cross different borders as well as the diverse strategies they adopt

to navigate the challenging and restricted terrain.

This study has a number of limitations. First, the paper is drawn from a small minority of those living in the UK. In this regard, their experiences are likely to differ from those residing in other countries, such as South Korea and the USA. Though it is hard to generalise, the familial challenges in my sample might present more difficulties than those in the ROK, especially those who do not have legitimate status, as discussed previously in the case of Ms Lee. Additionally, the questions explored here warrant further investigation into the familial relations and experiences among defectors post Kim-Moon and Kim-Trump talks and ongoing negotiations in the international position of North Korea with their nuclear weapons. As has emerged in this paper, the majority of defectors continue to live with pain and guilt alongside trauma. At the heart of my attempt to unpack transnational familial relations and experiences is the need to work towards improving the ways in which social justice works in a transnational social space to guarantee forced migrants' essential family rights in order to enhance their quality of life.

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