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Communication over
the distance – Dona
Júlia's home. Photo:
Dora Sampaio

Silence as boundary-making: acts of care and caring across borders and generations

Existing work on transnational families and communication across borders has largely focused on the substance of transnational communication. This paper flips this perspective by examining what is silenced during transnational exchanges. It argues that to improve our understanding of distant intergenerational relationships, we must carefully consider what is not said and why during transnational contacts. Drawing on ethnographic research with ageing parents in Brazil and their immigrant offspring in the United States, this paper illustrates how migrants and non-migrants curate their lives, conceal emotions, and sieve their lived experiences as acts of care and as a way to safeguard intergenerational family relationships across borders under challenging circumstances. Silence and communication voids are often used as invisible boundaries and inter-subjectively produced in order to protect both ends of the transnational exchange. This is achieved through tacit agreements on what subjects are considered 'safe' topics and ones to be avoided. The paper conceptualises silence as a boundary-making through a four-fold typology and seeks to push forward debates on transnational communication and care.

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