Unease & longing: Mother–infant separation

What you need to know:
Women separated from their infants due to migration continue to have relationships with their children; however, it is not one represented by physical touch and intimacy. This research shows that absent mothers can experience unease about their separation, which they demonstrate through uncertainty and longing when talking about their children. Family fostering and allowing infants to go back and forth between countries are actions taken to address separation.

What is this research about?
Research on migrant mother-child separation has usually focused on children and young adults. However, separation between migrant mother and infant has received far less attention even though there has been a rise in this trend. Separation between a mother and an infant may produce unique insights on migration practices because infants’ dependency on mothers and caregivers creates specific demands. For many mothers, separation means not carrying out intimacy or close touch, and other daily tasks necessary to take care of their baby. Multiple caregivers, such as aunts and grandmothers, may step in. Other strategies, such as infants dividing their time between different countries throughout their childhood, may be used to cope with separation.

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This research explores the experiences of mother–infant separation among professional women migrants in Singapore. This study formed part of a larger study, Southeast Asian Women, Family, and Migration in the Global Era, which examines the family, parenting, and childbearing experiences of migrant professionals from Indonesia.
What did the researcher do?
Leslie Butt worked with professional, religious, and cultural associations, along with her own existing networks to recruit women. As part of the research, the researcher interviewed nine women based in Singapore. Of these women, three were mothers who had experienced separation from their infants. These three women’s stories, and strategies and actions they took to address separation, are highlighted in this study.

What did the researcher find?
The interviews with mothers who had been separated from their infants show a mix of guilt, grief, discomfort, and justifications for separation. When interviewing mothers who had children in their care, everyday childcare tasks were the focus of discussions. On the other hand, women who were separated from their children talked about their infants in ways which highlighted uncertainty and longing.

The researcher described how women presented their separation in ways that decreased criticism around migration, working, and allowing others to care for their child. It was typical for participants to view their infants as the flexible child that they needed. Finally, support and care built around the infant from spouses and extended family played a role in each woman’s experience.

How can you use this research?
This study offers a foundation for future research on the struggles, coping mechanisms, and challenges of migration which requires mother-infant separation. Moreover, future research should continue to explore the experiences of ‘children not raised by parents’ to bring to light professional mothers’ struggles to maintain family goals in today’s society where stability and mother–infant nurturing remain the expectations for parenting.

About the researcher
Leslie Butt is an Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of Victoria.

Keywords
Mother-infant separation; Singapore; Southeast Asia; transnational families; transnational social relations

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