

Family Reunification in Europe

Exposing Inequalities

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1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the transformations of displaced people's family lives in the context of enforced transnationalism and long-term separation. Under conditions of violent conflict, refugees often cannot flee together in their particular family constellations, be it as nuclear family or with members of the extended family. It is often only one family member, who embarks on a long-distance journey due to different reasons such as lack of financial or social capital and the high risk of such journeys. Other family members then stay behind, be it in the place of origin, as internally displaced in the same country, or in countries of first reception. Many families, yet certainly not all displaced individuals (Belloni, 2019), hope to reunite at a later point of time in the preferred country of destination, such as Germany. The intended temporary separation from family members does, however, often continue for an indefinite period, as borders, lack of financial means, visa regimes, and the overly bureaucratic regulations of family reunification hinder the reunion of family members (Damir-Geilsdorf & Sabra, 2018; Löbel & Jacobsen, 2021; Sauer et al., 2018; Tobin et al., 2022).

In this chapter, we look into different transnational family constellations, which evolved and constantly change under conditions of long-term displacement, and in particular when one or more family members have moved to another country of protection, in our case to Germany. In all family constellations presented in our chapter, separation from loved ones for an indefinite time and yet maintained family relations across two or more countries is a drastic experience. We wanted to know how family separation, prolonged waiting for a possible reunion, and the enforced transnational organisation of family life, which we understand as 'enforced transnationalism' (Al-Ali et al., 2001), is experienced by refugees. To answer this question, we bring together insights on experiences of forced migration and protracted displacement (Etzold & Fechter, 2022; Hyndman & Giles, 2016) with research on transnationally separated families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Merla et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2018) by using a figurational approach (Baur & Ernst, 2011; Bogner & Rosenthal, 2017; Castrén & Ketokivi, 2015; Elias, 1978). Our analysis is based on 73 qualitative interviews with refugees from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan and experts on displacement and family reunification, which we conducted in Germany

in 2020 and 2021 in the frame of an EU-funded project on the ‘Transnational Figurations of Displacement’ (Christ, Etzold, et al., 2021).¹

We take four steps in our analysis. At first, we introduce the conceptual perspectives of social figurations of displacement, which we see as a particularly useful research perspective for the study of displacement dynamics, and expand it with recent literature on transnational family life under the condition of enforced separation. After having presented our methodological approach, we outline the governance regimes of family reunification to Germany under conditions of displacement and its implications for separated families. At the core of this chapter, we present three distinct transnational family figurations, which evolved after some family members moved to Germany while others could not. Each family figuration is introduced by two different case studies. We close with reflections on the policy implications of our findings and the critical potential of figurational thinking.

2. Conceptual approach: transnational family figurations of displacement

This chapter brings together recent discussion on refugees’ experience of displacement and lives in exile (Etzold & Fechter, 2022; Hyndman & Giles, 2016) with studies on transnational families and family separation (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Merla et al., 2021). Our focus lies on the transnational family constellations that might evolve under conditions of displacement, more specifically even under conditions of long-term and enforced separation from family members. Figurational theory (Elias, 1978) helps us to bring together these perspectives.

2.1 Social figurations of displacement

Despite ongoing separations from loved ones, refugees must not be considered as isolated individuals. Their everyday lives – and more precisely their emotions, actions, and decisions – are fundamentally shaped by different ‘social figurations’, in which they are embedded and which often transgress international borders. The figurational approach that was developed by the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1978) tries to overcome artificial divisions between the micro, meso, and macro level in sociological studies: it can thus be usefully applied when studying individuals’, for instance refugees’, perceptions and practices; their social relations, e.g., within transnational families; and how both are influenced and transformed by

1 We sincerely thank all our research participants who openly shared intimate details of their family lives in and beyond Germany with us, and to the experts who provided crucial background information. Moreover, we would like to thank Gizem Güzelant, Mara Puers, David Steffens, Philipp Themann, and Maarit Thiem for their participation in the data collection and writing of interview protocols, and Rolf Alberth and Lars Wirkus for their support with data management. We acknowledge the funding of the European Union for this research that has been conducted within the frame of the Horizon 2020 research and innovation project TRAFIG (Transnational Figurations of Displacement; grant No. 822453).



broader societal structures such as border, visa, and asylum regimes. Figurations can be understood as power-laden and ‘dynamic social constellations between interdependent individuals that are produced in and through interactions and transactions’ (Etzold et al., 2019, p. 10). A figurational approach is particularly useful in the study of displaced and separated families because it shifts the focus from the individual displaced person to their social entanglements and the ways that ties are maintained through practices that transgress multiple places and countries (Castrén & Ketokivi, 2015). Moreover, in the context of violent conflict and displacement, individuals’ positions within these webs of relations, the modes and practices of maintaining connectivity with others, and the wider political, economic, and social structures that ‘normally’ shape their lives are radically transformed (Bogner & Rosenthal, 2017). The figurational approach is highly sensitive to such transformations (Baur & Ernst, 2011) and can be applied to map the changes of displaced people’s practices and relations over time. In addition, the approach invites reflections on the power relations between people and sees the power shifts in social relations as fundamental driver of transformations (Etzold et al., 2019; Etzold & Fechter, 2022).

2.2 *Transnational family figurations*

Individuals are embedded in multiple social figurations, such as friendships and business networks, local communities, or states. The ‘family’ is, however, one of the most central social constellations in people’s lives. What and who constitutes a family must not be taken for granted. Rather, it is the practices of ‘doing family’ through which the different members of a family constantly (re)negotiate and (re)produce who belongs to the family, how family life is organised, and how the different members imagine their lives as a family (Jurczyk et al., 2014; Montero-Sieburth et al., 2021). From a figurational perspective, family relationships are conceived of as being both ‘personally lived and embedded in wider webs of relationships’ (Castrén & Ketokivi, 2015, p. 1). This perspective clearly contradicts the understanding of who belongs to a family and thus has a right to family reunification from a legal perspective (see Section 4). Moreover, figurational thinking helps to map the evolution of family relations – be it more subtle changes like emancipation processes, gradual power shifts, e.g., between sexes or generations, or rather radical ruptures, as is often the case when a family member dies or one, several, or all family members are forced to flee whilst others remain behind. Most displaced people experience separation from their families – be it the nuclear or the extended family – for different periods. Family separation and the resulting enforced transnationalism, if some members have crossed international borders and others have not, are the norm rather than the exception for displaced people (Damir-Geilsdorf & Sabra, 2018; Sauer et al., 2018).

2.3 *Enforced transnationalism*

Refugees’ cross-border journeys often lead to a transnationalisation of their lives, which has both advantages and disadvantages for those fleeing and those who stayed behind. Transnational relations are upheld through different familial practices

such as sending remittances, everyday communication by phone or through social media, care practices, as well as mobility, wherever this is possible (Christ, Etzold, et al., 2021; Merla et al., 2021; Tobin et al., 2022; Vancluysen, 2022). The hope to reunite one day – back ‘home’, at the place of asylum, or in another country – is a fundamental subject of discussion in transnationally dispersed families. Yet, many displaced families struggle to actually realise family reunification under conditions of ongoing violent conflict or persecution in the home country, legal insecurity in the country of protection, and bureaucratic hurdles that stand in the way of reunion (Christ & Etzold, 2022). An involuntary continuation of transnational family lives for an indefinite period is thereby enforced upon displaced people through the governance regimes of asylum and migration. According to Al-Ali et al. (2001, p. 395) ‘enforced transnationalism’ encompasses transnational activities that are constrained or pushed into certain directions by the combined effects of ‘state policy, the context of flight, historical antecedents, or the dominance of particular ideological, moral or cultural positions’. Entrenched experiences of ‘enforced transnationalism’ then do not only come into being through forced migration in the wake of violent conflict and/or state persecution, but also through the ‘forced immobility’ (Lubkemann, 2008) of other actors. We argue that refugees’ transnational practices often have to be upheld because family members cannot depart from countries of origin or countries of first arrival and cannot overcome the multiple barriers to family reunification that are arbitrarily or even strategically upheld by European nation states.

3. Methodology

The data for this chapter is based on research for the TRAFIG project, for which we conducted qualitative interviews with refugees mainly from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan living in Germany (Christ, Etzold, et al., 2021). The research team consisted of seven interviewers, who engaged with 73 people by using semi-structured interviews, biographical interviews, a focus group discussion, and expert interviews. Among them, 50 interviews were conducted with refugees and their network contacts in the years 2020 and 2021. The interviews are biased with regard to the fact that we were mainly able to interview one family member; we therefore do not know the perspective of other family members, in particular the ones living in the place of origin or in countries other than Germany. We analysed our data with the software MaxQDA by coding interviews. With the aim to distinguish the different transnational family constellations that matter in the lives of refugees, we developed a code relations model that resulted in the different ‘family figurations in displacement’ (see Section 5). For the code relations model, we analysed all 50 interviews with refugees based on their contact persons and the kind of support they provided at the place of living, across other places within Germany, translocal, and across international borders. The family figurations in displacement are not to be mistaken with a typology characterised by clear boundaries. Rather, they are to be understood as a process modelling of the most

significant social constellations of the refugees we spoke to. Persons can take part in different figurations at the same time, for example they can be part of a reunited nuclear family figuration, as they are jointly living with close family members at a place of asylum in Germany, but still be embedded in a transnational extended family figuration if they maintain contact with members of the wider family living in other countries, for example, Turkey and Sweden. Moreover, under conditions of displacement, family figurations do change substantially. For example, a married couple lives with two children, but then the ‘local nuclear family figuration’ becomes torn apart because the husband’s life was threatened and he was forced to leave the country and fled to Germany. They then lived in an ‘involuntary separated family figuration’ across two countries. Later, his wife and two minor children could follow him through family reunification and were then able to live together again at one place, but now in Germany; they thereby became a ‘reunited nuclear family figuration’. The figurational approach seeks to highlight such processual changes (Baur & Ernst, 2011), in our case, in family relations (Castrén & Ketokivi, 2015).

4. The governance of family reunification to Germany

For many people who are directly affected by violent conflict, and in particular for those who are continuously living under conditions of protracted displacement, family reunification is often one, if not the only, legal pathway to protection and security. What recent trends in family reunification to Germany can we observe, and how do they relate to global displacement trends? What does the governance of family reunification for refugees coming to Germany look like?

In the ten years from 2013 to 2022, almost 850,000 persons arrived in Germany with a visa issued for family reunification. Before 2014, the majority of applications were granted to Turkish citizens. From 2015 onwards there has been, however, a substantial increase in the issuance of visas for family reunification to Syrian and Iraqi nationals and to a smaller extent also to Iranian and Afghan citizens. In 2016 and 2017 the share of beneficiaries of family reunification arriving in Germany from these four displacement-affected countries was 45 per cent. In 2017 alone 29 per cent of all arrivals to Germany on the grounds of family reunification were granted to Syrians. Among the 33,400 family reunification visas that were issued for Syrians in that year, most (59 per cent) were granted to children joining their parents, almost one-third to women joining their husbands, and a smaller share (5 per cent) to parents joining one of their children (BAMF, 2019, p. 103). After 2017, the share of Syrian nationals among beneficiaries of family reunification arriving in Germany reduced to 10 per cent in 2022 (BAMF, 2023, p. 116). Besides the often-cited statistics of asylum application, these figures demonstrate the impact of the wars and humanitarian crises in the Middle East on migration to Germany and the significance of family reunification as a – if not *the* most important – legal pathway out of protracted displacement (Christ et al., 2021, p. 10).

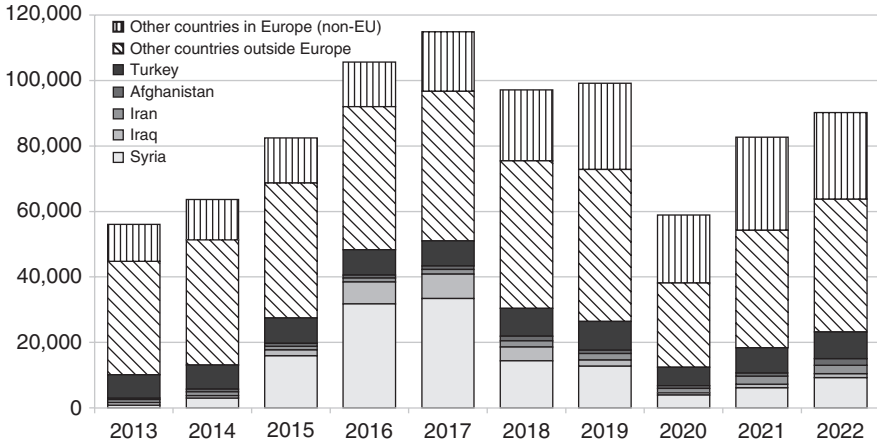


Figure 16.1 Family reunification to Germany (2013–2022), according to the top nationalities²

The right to family reunification is enshrined in German law, more specifically in the Residence Act (§§ 27–36). Recognised refugees who apply for family reunification within three months after the final recognition of their protection status have the right to privileged family reunification, meaning that they do not need to provide sufficient living space, healthcare insurance, or sufficient means of subsistence (Grote, 2017, p. 5).

A range of problems are, however, associated with the application and implementation procedure of family reunification to Germany, as noted by multiple scholars and human rights organisations. First, the application procedure takes too long. As the German diplomatic missions abroad are often understaffed, in particular in the Middle East, they could not handle the rapid increase in the demand for family reunification visas since 2014 (Grote, 2017, pp. 36–37). In 2016, the average waiting time for the required personal meeting at the German embassies or consulates in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon was 14 months (Pro Asyl, 2016) – a time in which the security and living conditions as well as the health of family members residing in countries of (first) reception often deteriorated. In this sense, the bureaucracy of the visa regime can contribute to blocking complementary pathways to protection and to protracting the affected people’s displacement situation.

Second, the bureaucracy of the visa application disadvantages, and in some cases even jeopardises, people in need of protection who have been forced to flee from their homes in a hurry and who could thus not bring along all the required documents (Den Haese & Verhellen, this volume). If certain documents are missing, it is not only costly and time consuming to replace them, it is also very risky, as the displaced, their relatives, or other trusted persons have to return to war

zones or interact with the officials of states from which they have fled in the first place or from which they have been persecuted. Moreover, some countries such as Eritrea do not have a harmonious official documentation (Christ, Etzold, et al., 2021; Mekonnen & Palacios Arapiles, 2021; Ton, 2018; Arapiles & Mekonnen, this volume).

Third, the narrow understanding of a ‘nuclear family’ who is entitled to family reunification according to the German Residence Act as the spouse and ‘parent-child-relationships’ (Grote, 2017, p. 18) is not necessarily in line with the reality of displaced people’s family relations, in particular their sometimes complex transnational family figurations (Christ & Etzold, 2022). Parents and grandparents of recognised refugees (older than 18 years), siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins, adult children, and grandchildren are excluded from the right to family reunification. In recent years, it was particularly difficult for unaccompanied minors already residing in Germany with or without a protection status to reunite with their parents and siblings due to a lack of documentation, long times of waiting in bureaucratic procedures, no access to legal support, and inadequate guidance by the minors’ legal guardian (Winzenried, 2017). The minors’ right to welfare and family cohesion is often violated by the state.

Fourth, there have also been quotas to further reduce the potential and actual number of persons arriving through family reunification. Between 2016 and 2018, family reunification was suspended for two years for people with subsidiary protection. Since August 2018 it has been permitted again, but a maximum limit of 1,000 national visas for family members of beneficiaries of subsidiary protection per month was set (BAMF, 2022, p. 107). Visas are issued according to so-called humanitarian criteria, such as length of separation, age of the children, or a severe illness. Thus, for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection it was, and for some still is, a protracted process to bring family members to Germany.

5. Enforced transnationalism in family figurations of displacement

Having outlined the governance of family reunification in Germany and some of the key challenges for refugees to realise their right to family reunification, we now shed light on how family members experience separation, enforced transnational family lives, and an eventual reunion. Based on our interviews with refugees living in Germany, we identified three distinct family figurations that exemplify diverse family constellations in a transnational space: 1) the reunited nuclear family, 2) the involuntary separated family, and 3) the transnationally extended family. Each figuration is being portrayed with two different cases that differ in terms of the position of the individual within the family (child, parent, wife, husband, etc.), the order of the family members’ journeys, and the different governance regimes in place (e.g. for Syrian and Eritrean refugees). The figurational approach has the potential to illuminate the dynamics between different families (e.g. Rosa and her children followed her husband/father through family reunification, whereas Dahab has been separated from her children for years) and even within a particular family (e.g. Tahir’s wife followed through family reunification, whereas Tahir’s elderly

mother was not eligible). A successful reunion depends on many factors, such as financial and social resources, but foremost on the conditions of the governance regimes (e.g. eligible family members for reunification, (im)possibility of obtaining necessary documents).

5.1 *The reunited nuclear family figuration*

The reunited nuclear family figuration refers to a nuclear family that has been living together at one place that has then been separated due to conflict and displacement but finally – after an uncertain period – reunited again at one place. The following two case studies of refugees from Syria show how separation due to displacement, a life under conditions of enforced transnationalism, and eventual family reunion have been experienced.

Tahir from Syria is married – his wife lives with him in Germany now, but they did not leave Syria together. Rather, they decided that he would go there alone at first via ‘irregular routes’, and she should follow later via a more secure legal pathway. He had received information from contacts who came to Germany before him that family reunification would be a safe way to bring spouses or children. After his arrival, Tahir first supported his wife in Syria financially and helped his mother for her onward journey. He recalled being depressed and feeling guilty after his arrival in Germany, as he was already safe while his family remained at risk. Tahir had a strong sense of obligation to bring his family here as soon as possible. It took, however, two and a half years until Tahir was able to bring his wife to Germany through the family reunification process. Tahir had received refugee status and benefited from legal support from counselling agencies during the application procedure. Tahir’s mother, however, was not eligible for family reunification, which means that she could not enter Germany legally. Therefore, she travelled irregularly from Syria to Europe – first to Turkey and then over the Aegean to Greece. His mother could not leave Greece immediately, as planned, and ended up living in a refugee shelter in Greece for a whole year before she was able to irregularly travel on to Germany. She also stayed in contact with Tahir and his other relatives in Europe, who attempted to accompany her through the process. She recalls that her time in Greece was difficult because she wanted to reunite with her children. She was also worried because she was an older woman on her own in Greece and suffered from diabetes.

Tahir’s example shows the emotional burden of long-term separation. Even though he eventually succeeded in providing a safe journey for his wife through family reunification, there was no possibility to bring his mother as well, as the family reunification process is only possible for members of the nuclear family. The elderly woman thus had to risk an irregular and dangerous journey alone. Now that his wife and his mother joined him in Germany, he is still worried about his two sisters living in Syria (SsInt-BICC-GG-001-DEU).

The other example is Rosa from Syria, who told us her story as a family member following her husband through family reunification. She also experienced enforced transnational family life; however, the period of separation was much shorter compared to other refugees. Rosa’s husband left Syria for Turkey to find work there.

However, as he could not find adequate work, he moved on to Europe on an irregular journey. The decision to leave was a difficult one, as Rosa recalls:

We thought about what to do if we stay, we don't know what is coming, Aleppo was gone, half of Syria was gone, if we stay, we always discussed. When will this war end, what should we do with the children. We stay, it doesn't matter. But the children need school, need security, just need good lives.

(SsInt-BICC-MT-002-DEU)

Rosa was weighing different options for the future of herself and her family, and not knowing how long the war would last, she preferred to leave for the sake of her children's future.

After Rosa's husband reached Germany, he received refugee protection and was able to apply for family reunification. In order to apply for the visa, Rosa and her children had to travel to the German consulate in Turkey, as this was the only German diplomatic representation in the region accessible to them. The irregular border crossing to Turkey was, however, very dangerous and difficult – only after the tenth attempt were they able to cross the border on foot. They knew that many people also died on the way. The family went to Istanbul, where they met Rosa's brother who had reached Istanbul one month earlier. The children were happy to be together with their cousins. After six months, the visas were processed and the family faced a difficult farewell, as they had to say goodbye to Rosa's brother and his children. When Rosa recalled this moment in the interview, she cried: '[Other] people are looking at the airport, why are these people crying all the time, it was very hard. [They do not understand that] this is not a vacation, we know we can't see each other'. When Rosa and her two daughters finally met their husband/father again after a one-year separation, they had mixed feelings. On the one hand, they were very happy to be reunited, but on the other hand, they were sad due to the separation from their other family members. Rosa explains: 'We lost each other. Family plays a big role for us' (SsInt-BICC-MT-002-DEU).

Both cases show the discrepancy between the formal eligibility for family reunification and the feeling of family members who belong to a family. Tahir wished for protection for his wife and his mother in Germany, but only his wife could travel safely through family reunification, whereas his elderly mother had to resort to an irregular journey. Rosa and her children could follow her husband through family reunification but still felt sad to separate from her brother and his children in Turkey. There was no option for them to follow to Germany through family reunification as well. Whereas the German legal system defines families as a nuclear family, our interviewees have a much broader understanding of family. Moreover, both examples demonstrate that the families experienced enforced transnationalism – at least a temporary separation from loved ones. Even though the family reunification process is a safe pathway, it often entails dangerous passages as well, as either the sponsor first travels irregularly or the beneficiaries need to move to another country in order to be able to access the visa procedure.

5.2 *The involuntary separated family figuration*

Most of the families we encountered in our research had endured the plights of family separation for a certain time but eventually reunited. However, there are families who are separated from their families for a very long period and are thus continuously experiencing enforced transnationalism without an end in sight. Life in such an involuntary separated family figuration places an enormous psychological burden on all members of the family. The uncertainty of family reunion forces many displaced families to organise their family lives across the distance. If a reunion is not possible, the family member in Germany tries to support the separated family members financially and emotionally. We will present two cases of protracted family separation, which differ according to who took the journey and whether it is the spouse or a child who is left without the other family members.

Omar is an unaccompanied minor from Syria who arrived in Germany with the intention to bring the other members of his nuclear family. He fled from Syria in August 2015, as his father, a medical doctor, was threatened for refusing to treat wounded IS combatants. Omar had to convince his father that it would be best if he goes to Europe alone. When he arrived in Germany in August 2015, he was still a minor. Around one year later, he was granted refugee protection. Two months later, a few days before he turned 18, he submitted the application for family reunification for his parents. The rejection on his application came some weeks after Omar had turned 18. According to a judgement by the Court of Justice of the European Union in April 2018,³ the right to apply for family reunification cannot depend upon the speed of authorities processing an asylum procedure, stating that the date of application should be relevant, not the date of the decision (Desmet, this volume). Therefore, Omar appealed the rejection with the support of an NGO. At the time of our interview, two years had passed, but Omar had not received a decision yet. He had been separated from his parents for five years, which put a lot of stress on him: 'I was a child as I entered Germany, 15 years old. Every child needs his parents. . . . I always dreamed of them being with me in Germany . . . the same dream every day'. Omar had planned to meet his parents in Northern Iraq in July 2020. From the flat to the visa, everything was arranged when the COVID-19 pandemic made the trip impossible. Omar compared his disappointment of not meeting his parents with waking up from a nightmare. In this nightmare, he dreamt that he wanted to have a glass of water but was not able to find it and stayed thirsty forever. Omar financially supports his parents and thereby contributes crucially to financing the education of his three sisters at private universities in Syria. Omar talks to his parents twice a week. They assure each other that everything is fine, and they should not worry. Nevertheless, both sides are aware that this is not true. Whereas he upholds the transnational connectivity with his family in Syria, he has no contact with his extended family members living in Germany (SsInt-BICC-Ds-005-DEU).

3 CJEU, 12 April 2018, C-550/16, *A. and S.*, ECLI:EU:C:2018:248.

Dahab, an Eritrean woman, is a parent who went first to Germany with the intention to bring her children through family reunification. However, she has now been separated from her children for more than seven years already and still does not know how long this will last. When Dahab decided to flee Eritrea, her husband had already died. As she knew of the dangers of the journey through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean, she decided to bring her two minor children to her mother in Ethiopia and hoped to avail of family reunification after being recognised as a refugee in Germany. On her journey, Dahab met her current partner, Solomon, with whom she is now living in Germany. The couple has four children together; however, the two children with her deceased husband are still living in Ethiopia, as the family reunification process has failed so far. Even though Dahab was recognised as a refugee in Germany in 2016, and fulfilled all criteria for privileged family reunification, she faced manifold bureaucratic hurdles, among which the following list is non-exhaustive. Dahab's children should have registered as refugees at the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), the Ethiopian authority cooperating with UNHCR, within the first two years after arrival in Ethiopia, of which Dahab was not aware. The non-existent registration was a big obstacle, which retarded the process of family reunification significantly (see also Belloni & Verschraegen, this volume). She tried to accelerate the process by travelling to Ethiopia, but failed. However, she finally was able to meet her children during the time of her vacation. Finally, in 2019, her children were registered as refugees with the help of the newly established Family Assistance Programme by the IOM. In spring 2020, the children had a long-awaited appointment scheduled at the German embassy, which was then cancelled due to the pandemic. Instead of a quick reunion, the waiting period continued. To make things worse, a violent conflict started in the region of Tigray in Ethiopia where the children were living. The whole region was cut off from any connections, be it flights, land transportation, or communications. Dahab did not have any information about her two sons and her mother; it was a time of anxious waiting on the whereabouts of her family. After four months, Dahab learnt that her family had been displaced, but was now in safety. A few weeks later, the children finally were able to travel to Addis Ababa for the visa interview. As the children do not have birth certificates, the children and Dahab must undertake DNA testing as proof of identity and biological kinship. The test was not a problem for Dahab in Germany; however, as of now, one and a half years after the embassy asked for this requirement, the children have not been able to do the testing due to the ongoing conflict. Moreover, Dahab was not able to be in contact with her children for the last year, as the conflict has continued and the Tigray region remains disconnected.

Both cases present separations of children from their parents – Omar from the perspective of the child, Dahab the perspective of a mother. In both cases, the children are or were minors – therefore, the narrow definition of family with the entitlement to family reunification according to the regulations apply. Nevertheless, both families experience protracted separation and an enforced transnationalisation of family lives. Bureaucratic regulations often hinder family reunification in Germany. Some requirements are impossible to meet for refugees, for example

obtaining identity documents by the Eritrean state. Moreover, the procedures are lengthy and very complex, with many actors involved. In some cases, going to court and taking legal action is the last remaining option. As returning to the country of origin is often impossible – e.g. due to the revocation of the refugee status or the threat of persecution – and reunification in Germany is complicated, families consider different options to at least temporarily reunite. Omar tried to meet his parents in Iraq, and Dahab visited her children in Ethiopia. But unforeseeable external factors can hinder such family reunions. Omar’s visit was impeded by the pandemic, and Dahab could not travel to Tigray due to the continuation of conflict. Years of separation make a huge difference in the eyes of children and their parents: the lost time cannot be made up again.

5.3 *The transnational extended family figuration*

The transnational extended family figuration refers to extended families that maintain connections across two or several states. In the case of our interviewees, it is not exceptional that the extended family is not living at the same place or even in the same country, but in very different countries. Among others, one reason why extended family members are spread across several countries is the impossibility of family reunification schemes for extended families. There is simply – with very few exceptions, such as humanitarian admission programmes (Etzold & Christ, 2021; Tometten, 2018) – no legal options for safe pathways of family members other than the nuclear family. To uphold familial connections – ‘doing family’ – entails different practices, such as transaction of financial resources, care practices, or communication, not only within the nuclear family but within a wider network of familial relations (Jurczyk et al., 2014), as the two following stories of Syrian women show.

Hawa from Syria and her three children arrived in Germany from Turkey in 2016, after having followed her husband through family reunification. Her husband’s original plan was to go to Norway in 2015, but when he wanted to change in the Frankfurt airport, police caught him and gave him the choice to either stay in Germany or fly back to Syria. Hawa’s familial network stretches across several countries. The majority of her family members have settled in different receiving countries; there is only the family of her sister who is still living in Syria in their town of origin. She is there with her husband and does not want to migrate but really would like to visit Hawa. Another sister is in Vienna; she also followed her husband via family reunification to Austria. Moreover, Hawa’s parents, two brothers, and a nephew live in Vienna. Additionally, she has an uncle living in London, a friend in Paris, and aunts in Dubai and Canada. Hawa talks to her family in Syria and Austria almost every day; their communication even increased during the pandemic. She talks most with her mother and sister in Vienna. Hawa feels at home when visiting her relatives in Austria. Despite having her close relatives in Austria, she does not plan to move there. She feels obliged to stay in Germany and to give something back to the country. In Germany, Hawa’s main focus is her own family with her now four children. But her example shows that her everyday life is strongly influenced by transnational family relations (SsInt-BICC-MP-007-DEU).

Asma is from Aleppo, Syria. She left Syria in 2015 together with her daughter, who still was a baby. When she arrived in Turkey, she waited for her husband to join her. Except for the beginning of their journey, the family travelled together as a nuclear family. Her case is one of the very few examples from our sample of a nuclear family that was not separated during and after the journey. From Turkey, they moved on to Greece by a rubber boat and reached Germany through the Balkan route. The flight was physically very demanding for Asma, as she was pregnant during this time. A couple of weeks after their arrival in Germany, the unborn baby died and Asma became seriously ill. She recovered and after some time got pregnant again. The baby died again. The loss of her two children was a drastic experience for Asma and her family. During the time of the interview, Asma was pregnant again. The pregnancies and the death of her two children were the prevailing topics of the interview.

Asma shared her sorrows during the new pregnancy with her mother and sisters in Syria, who are an enormous resource of emotional support. Despite the geographical distance, they are the first to know about the examination at her gynaecologist and never miss whenever she has an appointment there: ‘They all have in their calendar: Asma has an appointment’. Asma, who daily chats with her mother via WhatsApp, tells the interviewer how her mother awaits her call: ‘When my mother knows I have an appointment with the gynaecologist, she always waits to call me. Everything ok? She doesn’t say hello. When I say everything is ok, then she says: “How are you?”’ (SsInt-BICC-SC-001-DEU).

Both examples demonstrate how extended family networks stretch and are maintained across several countries whilst the nuclear family is living together at one place. Whereas Asma’s family travelled together, Hawa and her children were separated from her husband but eventually reunited in Germany. For both, family is more than ‘just’ the nuclear family, even though there are no plans of the extended family member to reunite and move together at one particular place. They both are ‘doing family’ at a transnational scale, as they frequently communicate with each other and provide, among others, emotional support. While Hawa can frequently travel to Austria to see her parents and other relatives, it is impossible for Asma to visit her mother and sisters in Syria. Both expressed that they suffer from being distant to loved ones, but the means of overcoming this enforced family separation differed. After all, digital connectivity cannot fully replace personal encounters.

6. Conclusion – family separation, enforced transnationalism, and policy implications

The figurational approach offers a new perspective to displacement, as displaced people are not considered in isolation but as being part of different constellations, such as their families (Christ, Isikozlu, et al., 2021). In addition, it conceives of social relations as ever evolving; not necessarily due to individuals’ own priorities and decisions but due to changing circumstances and larger structural forces over which the concerned people have no control. Violent conflict, forced migration, temporary or long-term family separation, and in some, but not all cases, family reunification have constantly transformed the family figurations of Syrian

and Eritrean refugees we spoke to in Germany. This has always had long-lasting and far-reaching consequences for all family members, who more often than not live scattered across multiple places and countries: there is a change of positions, gender roles, and identities of the family members embedded in a certain figuration. All the families portrayed in this chapter have experienced separation from family members in the wake of displacement, which reflects a predominant pattern for refugees now living in Germany (Damir-Geilsdorf & Sabra, 2018; Sauer et al., 2021). The separation between the family members is not voluntarily, worse even, the duration of separation is often substantially prolonged due to the encountered barriers to family reunification. The transnational organisation of family life is then enforced upon displaced people, not only temporarily but consistently.

Policies, legal norms, and dominant discourses have tremendous influence on the family figurations of displaced people, yet their capacities to navigate the bureaucratic landscapes of family reunification are often limited. Not only due to a lack of means and legal support, but also due to very different conceptions of who 'counts' as family, many of our interviewees were deeply frustrated by the barriers to the reunification with loved ones. Conceptual discussions in anthropology and sociology (Jurczyk et al., 2014; Montero-Sieburth et al., 2021) lead us to reflect on the narrow legal definitions of family, such as in German law, which hardly correspond with people's own sense of belonging and their daily lives. After displacement and despite separation, refugees are deeply engaged in communicative practices and provide financial and emotional support to family members, also to those living in other countries. Physical distance does not mean emotional distance. Social media help family members to actively participate in each other's lives and to share personal moments across different places and borders. Social, emotional, and technological connectivity allow refugees and their kin to 'do family' in a transnational space.

Displaced people must nonetheless navigate the complex structures in the governance of family reunification in order to reunite with family members. They face numerous hurdles and obstacles: crossing the border irregularly to apply for the visa in a country of first reception, lack of legal support, issues of registration, and missing identity documents, to name just a few. That is why conditions of 'enforced transnationalism' often prevail over years and years. On the other hand, not all families would like to reunite. 'Living apart together' in a transnationally extended family seems to work well for many.

The figurational approach that we propose to study refugees' family reunification procedures helps to analyse the complexity of lived family constellations and thus also challenges a simplified legal concept of family. A figurational approach neutrally describes different actors constituting a figuration, and it sheds light on how the figuration is formed by external factors, such as the governance of family reunification. Through this description, figurational thinking has the potential to analyse the normativity of the official definition of a family and the politicisation of the family reunification process. Family reunification is usually hindered due to the legalistic framework (who is [not] eligible for family reunification) and the bureaucratic conditions (e.g. proofs of identity), which largely differ between

different states. Family reunification is – in terms of numbers – the most important legal pathway for refugees to Germany. But still, the needs of displaced and separated families are only inadequately met. Not only are the procedures very lengthy and overly bureaucratic, but also is the reality and complexity of family constellations that have been torn apart by violent conflict and displacement-induced separation oftentimes not recognised. Refugees’ enforced transnational lives are not only an inevitable side effect of cross-border mobility, but also an (un)intended consequence of multiple mobility barriers, in particular systematically upheld barriers to family reunification.

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