

# Family generational relations in the context of refuge and asylum

## Methodological reflections on the investigation of doing and displaying family

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### 1 Doing and displaying family, multi-dimensional family relations and educational configurations in refugee families

There is an emerging body of work on family, education and migration studies (Hertz-Emden 2000; Krüger-Potratz 2013; Geisen et al. 2013; Riegel et al. 2018). Many studies focus on general pedagogical practice with refugee children in a range of educational settings, such as schools, as well as in the fields of youth welfare and social work (Brinks et al. 2016; Hartwig et al. 2018). While timely, this body of work pays little attention to intergenerational family relations and child-rearing practices in the context of refugee/forced migration studies (Westphal/Aden 2020). Given that (forced) migration tends to expand family structures and familial upbringing in terms of both membership and context, despite limitations posed by powerful legal and political norms (Aden/Westphal 2021), it is crucial to address how family structures and relationships are changed and reorganised under refugee/asylum conditions and how they are intertwined with educational practices.

In the field of sociology, international family research no longer defines the family as simply a societal unit, but rather as the interplay of various everyday discursive family practices that are informed by different social structures and cultural norms. Instead of taking family as “being”, researchers explore how people are “doing and displaying family” (Finch 2007: 67; Jurczyk 2014). This is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain actions constitute “doing family things”. They thereby confirm that these relationships are “family relations”, emphasising “the fundamentally social nature of family practices” and taking families as sets of interactive activities that are associated with particular family values (Finch 2007: 66).

In particular, attention is given to the desire to be recognised and perceived as a “good” family (Dermott/Seymour 2011: 70). This is noticeable in marginalised mi-

grant and refugee communities, in which positioning the family as a good and functioning unit is particularly evident (Westphal 2018; Westphal et al. 2017). The practices of making a good family and parenting are reorganised, affirmed and renegotiated both within and outside of the family. Walsh (2015) examines the “displaying family” of migrants in a northern English city and draws attention to the impact of the “multiple audience” on familial practices. She argues that “displaying family” is challenged locally as well as transnationally and is accompanied by ambivalent expectations. Elsewhere, Reynolds and Zontini’s (2014) study comparing Italian and Caribbean immigrant families in England demonstrates clear limitations to “doing and displaying family” that result from postcolonial framing and restrictive EU migration policies. Despite this, the families are shown to react logically and transformatively to these obstacles by establishing a “resilient family bond” (p. 263).

Because of empirical difficulties in research on family-based child-rearing (Matthes 2018), there is a small body of recent empirical work on family upbringing and education in Germany. For instance, Müller and Krinninger (2016) developed the notion of “pedagogical figuration in transition” (p. 146) in order to understand the practice of family-based child-rearing, indicating the significance of the interdependencies between a family’s inner and outer world, as well as the family’s history and its present situation. In the context of migration, Hamburger and Hummrich’s (2007) account of the pedagogical relevance of both generation-different (parents/ children) and generation-same (siblings/ peers/ cousins) relationships has come to the fore in their research into family and migration. In identifying the multidimensional nature of family relationships, they propose that migrant family relations need to be closely studied in regard to three distinct factors: firstly, the migrant families’ social contexts both in their countries of origin and the host location; secondly, pedagogically relevant persons and groups (i.e. parents and those serving a parental function, guardians, educators, and teachers); and finally, institutions. Thus, rather than locating generational relations solely within family units, the respective concept for migrant families encompasses a broader social and cultural scope. Pedagogical figurations in the migrant context, then, require consideration of the relevant social contexts and associated persons.

This paper aims at reviewing the reflections we have made on our research design. The focus is on the conditions that have arisen from the Covid-19 pandemic-post-pandemic period and the ethical challenges that have accompanied each step of our research to date. We begin with our research design, then turn to broad ethical issues faced in our research. Afterwards, we present our current approach to fieldwork and examine the choices, dilemmas, and opportunities that confront us.

## 2 Research design of the project “Change and Dynamics of Family Generational Relationships in the Context of Flight and Asylum” (DyFam)<sup>1</sup>

The DyFam project explores how family structures, relationships and child-rearing practices are (re)produced, organised and negotiated in everyday life in the context of flight and asylum. Focusing on refugees from an East African country, we strive to amplify less studied voices with regard to family practices in Germany. Family and value systems in African societies are varied and manifold, with numerous countries and a mix of tribes and regions that each have their own unique characteristics (Sauer et al. 2018). In addition, colonisation, industrialisation and international migration all play an important role in the constant changes evident in the family constellations of African societies (Kleist 2017). In this study with families from Somalia, there was a need to focus not only on the most easily recognisable nuclear family unit, but also on extended family structures, in addition to other intersections like religion, educational background, etc. (Aden 2016).

Based on the theoretical perspectives outlined above on child-rearing family constellations and migrants’ transnational family relations, particularly with respect to “doing and displaying family”, the project fieldwork took the form of in-depth home visits in several German cities. This fieldwork revealed the interconnectedness between extended generational relations, asylum-related experiences, such as family separation, structural and everyday racism, vulnerability and transnationality in family child-rearing. Thus, our aims are, firstly, to contribute to the further development of a theory of family upbringing; secondly, to overcome normative constraints in the consideration of the family; and, finally, to map the reality of the “Migrationsgesellschaft” (migration society) in family theory and empirical studies. To be more specific, the research pursues the following questions:

- How are family structures, family relationships and educational practices (re-)established, organised and negotiated in the transnational context of flight from Somalia to Germany?
- What appears to be the understanding of “family” and child-rearing in the Somali-German community?
- How do family dynamics work and change, and what are the significant child-rearing constellations and practices in generational family relations?

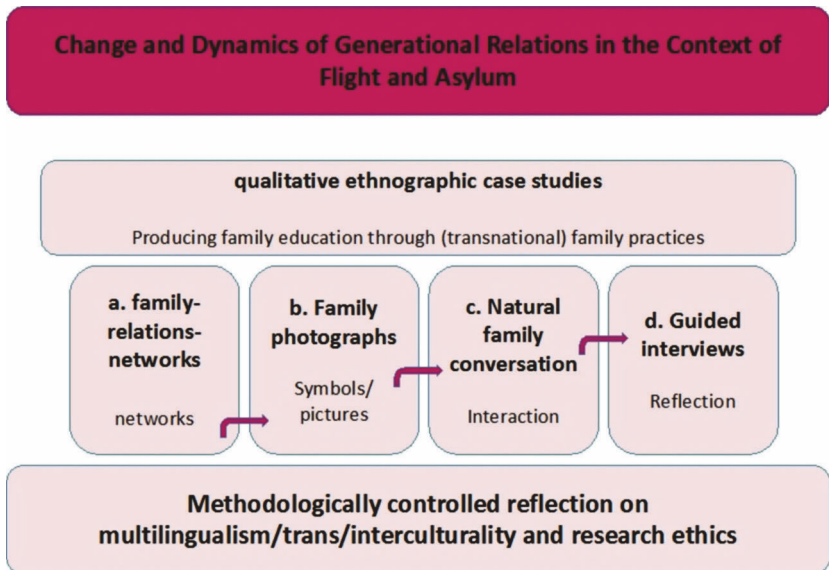
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1 The DyFam project is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Project leader: Prof. Dr. Manuela Westphal. Team members: Dr. Sina Motzek-Öz (to 02/21), Dr. Jiayin Li-Gottwald (from 04/21), Samia Aden (MA), Franziska Korn (MA), Anita Hubo (BA)

- What interdependence (Elias 1978) exists between extended generational relations, forced migration and asylum experiences and transnationality in the context of family-based child-rearing?

Taking a qualitative ethnographic approach, various research methods were applied for field access and data collection in multiple research stages. By collecting different types of data, such as fieldnotes from family visits, family photographs, family conversations and interviews, we hope to capture practices of family and education through various approaches, and explore the experiences and logic of child-rearing practices (Westphal et al. 2019). Thus, in a transnational context, we examine the symbolic, interactive and reflexive construction processes behind family-based child-rearing based on the example of Somali immigrant families. We take a methodological transnationalism approach (Amelina/Faist 2012) and consider the worldwide transnational network practices of Somali families taking place at multiple locations. In short, the figure below illustrates the project research design and the interplay between different data collection steps and methodological reflection regarding language, transnationality, research ethics and methodological challenges:

Figure 1: Research Design of Project DyFam (own illustration)



### 3 Research methodology and reflection

#### 3.1 General ethics and challenges in ethnographic studies in the context of refugee families

Ethics have been a major topic of academic discussion in the area of ethnographic studies and is a subject of great interest to researchers in migration studies. This is due not only to the specific nature of ethnographic research, which requires close interactions with human beings, but also to the specific positionings of refugees and immigrant communities. Challenges in ethnographic research with refugees and migrants predominantly concern ethical aspects such as sensitivity to trauma, vulnerabilities related to the forced migration/flight and asylum process, as well as communication and linguistic capabilities and trans-/interculturality. While we have clearly face contact, communication and language issues in the current study, we have also witnessed the effects of trauma, family fragmentation and the extended family system.

#### 3.2 Research challenges and (im)possibilities during the pandemic

##### Two chronological periods

During the early research phase of the project, the Covid-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, presented an enormous challenge. The conditions we encountered created a tension between the core foundation of ethnographic home visit-based research (social intimacy) and the social realities of a pandemic situation (social distancing). In order to give a clear sense of the immense impact of the pandemic on our project, we have drawn on data from two distinct chronological periods that also record the experiences of the research team. By juxtaposing and discussing our own field experiences with those of the study subjects, we illustrate the complexity of ethnographic family research in a refugee context within the unique environment of a pandemic.

##### Virtual working practices: the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown

Given the urgent global public health situation, the principle of non-maleficence in ethnography rose to the fore (Murphy/Dingwall 2001). Although the concept of “doing no harm” in ethnographic research usually refers to non-physical and non-medical risks (ibid.), the Covid-19 pandemic changed the scope of this principle. This resulted in health and safety issues being prioritized; health risks to both the research subjects and researchers were of utmost concern. As the pandemic situation required strict health and safety rules to protect the families and researchers, the research team drafted its own health and safety measures and rules at the very beginning of the project (Oct. 2020). In this draft, we firstly reviewed the vulnerable

situation of refugee families during the pandemic, for whom social distancing was hard to follow because of their precarious working environment and poor living conditions (i.e. Nowicka 2020). In the hope of accessing the field, we also altered our data collection methods to more digitally-based and outdoor modes, such as online questionnaires and “walking interviews” (Kinney 2017).

Despite our optimism, following the partial lifting of pandemic restrictions in the summer of 2020, a second hard lockdown took place in the winter of 2020. To this end, and with careful consideration of (and in accordance with) the Covid-19 national emergency laws and local regulations, both the fieldwork and efforts to access the field were postponed. In the period that followed, one established team member left the project, new team members were recruited and onboarded between February and April 2021. The research team shifted primarily to Zoom meetings and virtual work practices; occasionally, physical meetings were undertaken with Covid-19 testing protocols in place. Since fieldwork was not possible, the newly rebuilt team once again reviewed its research strategies. The major changes put into place and the work undertaken during lockdown included structuring the theoretical frameworks, methodology training, reflecting on our research ethics and design, and so on. While some of these frameworks followed standard procedures, the detailed plans were individually tailored to the project in their entirety.

### **Accessing the field: the introduction of the vaccine and lifting of social restrictions**

Early in 2021, the Covid-19 vaccine became available in Germany and the number of people who had received two jabs continually rose. In order to defend the unique strengths of on-site field observation in ethnographic research, we continued with our initial plan for home visits – a situation that was made possible by the vaccines. This was complemented by new strategies to meet the challenges encountered in the context of migration and flight and in the particular circumstances of a pandemic. We believe that researchers’ immersion in the everyday realities of family life enables us to observe complex phenomena and gain a sense of the unspoken rules that govern participating families’ child-rearing practices. Studies have called for greater attention to be devoted to “sensing” and “making sense” alongside “watching” in ethnographic research. Body, sense and place are intertwined in the process of meaning-making (Rodaway 2002). Thus, it is vital for our researchers to be present in the physical space in which child-rearing occurs and to make sense of their own human experiences while doing so.

However, this approach still required great caution in order to maintain the health of all those involved, create trust among the research participants, and ensure the occupational safety of the researchers. Attempts to access the field were only encouraged if researchers were fully vaccinated and took Covid-19 tests both before and after the field visit. Although the current situation with respect to the

pandemic may look very hopeful, it is still important to be aware of any future unpredictability. We are reconsidering the plans we made during the outbreak of Covid-19. This might consist of interacting with participants at a playground, or meeting the families at an outdoor café or nearby park. This would still give the researchers the chance to build trust with the research participants and exchange information with them.

### 3.3 Reflections on current fieldwork

#### The impact of Covid-19 on our potential participants and gatekeepers

After all researchers being fully vaccinated, we have started to access the field. Instead of relying on the same point of contact to recruit all families, we have approached a variety of different gatekeepers – a “multi-method” approach to field assessment. Our gatekeepers include private contacts, such as friends and families, and various migrant self-advocacy associations, avoiding field contacts through social workers/social work institutions. It is important to note that gatekeepers have great impact on our field experiences. In particular, their experiences during the pandemic shaped our access points to the field. This became especially evident when we encountered the withdrawal of one of our gatekeepers and some potential participants. The citation below is an exchange between a gatekeeper and our research team:

Hello Mia, Corona has messed everything up again. There are many rules. I don't think it would make sense for Anne to come. There are only a few parents in the parents' café and we have a lot to sort out.. internship doesn't make sense either for the time being...kind regards from Dune<sup>2</sup>

Ms. Dune is head of a parents' café at a local school. She contacted the research team after reading a press release about the DyFam project. The team met her and later developed a constructive relationship with her. It seems that contact with her has been put on hold as a result of her experiences during the pandemic, as expressed by her opening her sentence with the word “Corona”, which seems to emphasise the damage caused by the pandemic. The comparison she draws between “messed everything up” and “many rules” describes the “mess” caused by the virus in the parents café, whereas her repetitive use of “make no sense” suggests that she would like to take a break from her contact with the research team “for the time being”.

While disappointment and uncertainty have been familiar to us throughout the pandemic, other encounters with the gatekeepers and the field have been

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2 All names are pseudonyms. the text message was originally written in German and translated by the author. Mia and Anne are both researchers from our team.

overwhelming and exciting. Our fieldnotes record that one of our researchers was driven around an urban area by one of our gatekeepers for four home visits on a single afternoon. The families were prepared, the gatekeeper was organised and the home settings were stimulating. Such field-accessing experiences have enabled us to look at our data with various lenses, perceiving the action of accessing the field as a socially constructed truth in which each individual participant is part of the process of knowledge-making. Our hope is that the multiple methods used to access the field may capture the complex interactions between our research participants, ourselves, our gatekeepers and the research settings, thus making a significant contribution to our future reflections on research methodology.

### **Sampling and kick-off meetings**

At the time of writing, a number of meetings with seven different families have taken place in different cities and towns in Germany. Following the project fieldnote guidelines, detailed fieldnotes have been carefully recorded by each individual researcher immediately after each meeting. After the first visit with each participating family, the team created a family relations network map outlining the relations within each family, and it is our intention to collect further data based on this information. It is important to note that the start of data collection is itself a complex journey. The predominant challenges during this period of field access have been building contact, trust and relationships with our participating families. There were a number of reasons for our uncertainty, including Covid-19 social distancing, our assumption that we were attempting to access a “hard-to-reach” group, the failed first attempt at field access (see the example of Ms. Dune), and time and resource constraints stemming from our project plan. In addition, we assumed that possible hesitation and reluctance from potential participants might relate to concerns about the impact of participation on their asylum status, on their family stability, and the social and linguistic differences between the participants and the researchers. In the end, as newcomers to the field, we were also uncertain whether the contacts we initiated would develop into a stable field relationship. Nevertheless, despite all the unpredictability, our later fieldwork has proved that the participating families we have recruited trust us and are willing to remain in contact.

It is worth noting that our early experiences accessing the field ultimately inspired us to be more flexible, patient and engaging. We have constantly sought new strategies. For instance, despite our best efforts at producing printed trilingual information sheets (in Somali, German and English), our potential participants have not always appeared to fully understand the written information provided. We noticed from initial meetings that our participants were more comfortable with oral communication, so we created a recruitment/information video to introduce our project using pictures and verbal explanations in German and Somali. In order to overcome linguistic and communication difficulties, we recruited a student assis-



tant who is fluent in Somali, German and English and is familiar with the research field. We also changed our communication strategies. Rather than using the written forms so popular in the academic world – letters or emails – we chose to make spontaneous phone calls, send voice messages, WhatsApp messages and Facebook direct messages. It was clear that this is the preferred means of communication for many of our participants.

#### **4 Reflexivity in ethnographic fieldwork and its impact on doing and displaying family**

Not only have we continuously updated our data collection strategies as a result of our field experiences, our research methodology has continually shifted as well. In particular, the strong sense of co-constructing the research data between the researchers and the participating families is worth mentioning. Working together to make the family relationship cards is an example of collaborative “doing and displaying family” that took place during our research. In order to reveal who belongs to the family, and borrowing Viry and Herz’s (2021) concept of transnational family from a network perspective, we designed a family relationship map in which the participants to fill in their family members. The making of the family relationship maps was a complex and situational process. While some maps were made by the researchers and families together, with the researcher serving as an instructor and/or scribe, one participating family insisted on completing the map as “homework”, leaving the researcher out of the actual filling-in process. Because the family relationship maps were co-constructed, the concentric circles refer to the emotional and/or geographical and/or genealogical distance between family members as a way of understanding transnational family practices.

The negotiation process of making the family relationship maps is an example of the co-construction of the research data and the involvement of the researchers in the process of generating the “doing and displaying family” data. Similar experiences of researchers’ involvement in “doing and displaying families” occurred during our subsequent family visits. For instance, one researcher was invited by a participating family for Sunday breakfast. After arriving, the researcher was led to a furnished breakfast table complete with elegant table arrangement, well-polished cutlery and a set of white porcelain plates. The older son was eating quietly, whilst the parents were helping the younger ones spread butter on and cut their bread rolls. The clean and polished table setting and the harmonious family interactions during breakfast suggested a strong practice of “doing and displaying family” in which the family breakfast practices were conveyed to and understood by the researcher, who was portrayed as the outsider at the scene.

The research team is very aware that we were never observing a family as if we were not there. We were very aware that our existence in the field transformed the events that occurred. By way of reflection on the methodology, our own social positions as a research team have dramatic impact on the research outcomes. For example, one of our original plans was to look at family photos and symbolic items displayed in the homes of our participants. During our initial visits, we noticed that this typically Western middle-class way of “doing and displaying family”, which was expected by the academic researchers, is not practiced by our participants. They rarely display photographs in the home. This encounter further increased our confidence in pursuing a sensory ethnographic approach (Pink 2015) to data collection. In other words, we ought not to focus solely on “seeing” and “speaking” but must be prepared to open our ears, noses and other senses to comprehend the field. Such experiences have also enabled us to focus our attention on a non-Western and post-colonially-informed ethnographic approach (Meißner 2020) in the context of refugee and migrant families, within which the world is not “primarily perceived by sight” (Oyewumi 2005: 4).

As researchers, both as a team and as individuals, our own race, gender, linguistic and social backgrounds contributed to our observations, fieldnotes and interviews. As a multicultural and multilingual team, our collective thinking and doing, as well as our intersectional identities as individuals and researchers and our power positions influenced our research design and the outcomes of ‘doing and displaying family’. This is exemplified by the fact that each of us built different field relations with the participating families, in which different data emerged. For instance, our Asian female researcher, who is a mother, shared a similar life stage as well as immigrant and parent identity with some of the participants, and the data that emerged in her fieldwork were closely related to motherhood, friendship and future life planning. Concurrently, when our researcher with a Somali background, who is not a parent, visited the same participating family, her data revealed a clear focus on the topics of racism and discrimination. Reflecting on these experiences, it is important to note that the “doing and displaying family” we present in our study is an interactionally co-constructed judgement of value and practice by the researchers and participating families.

## 5 Final reflections and possible contributions

Despite the immense challenges and occasional frustrations, the pandemic and our research interests in the dynamics of and changes in intergenerational family relations and child-rearing in the refugee and asylum context have provided opportunities to carefully review and re-evaluate our research strategies. Our theoretical and methodological design and strategies have been constantly tested, shaped and al-

tered by our theoretical frameworks and field experiences during the pandemic. As our research is oriented on a “participatory family research perspective” (Walsh 2015: 85), we understand the importance of the actions of both research subjects and researchers in the process of knowledge construction. Using different methodological approaches, we draw attention to power (inequities) and vulnerabilities in research relationships, as well as hierarchies within families. By adopting a flexible ethnographic perspective, we also seek to develop a more flexible approach to the uniquely situated reality (Blommaert/Jie 2010) in which our research is taking place. We consider the pandemic and our participating families as the particular points in time and space that are uniquely relevant to our project.

The effort of carrying out research during such an uncertain time offers us a chance to understand the lived experiences of family-based child-rearing during the pandemic among refugees and immigrant families as it unfolds. The nexus of the pandemic and our Somali research subjects has led to not only challenges but also opportunities for us to develop a more innovative, flexible, situational and reflective approach to our research. In this paper, we argue that the challenges of research in the refugee/asylum context, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, had a profound impact on our ethnographic research on family-based child-rearing. However, they have also given rise to reflection and methodological innovations that have the potential to contribute to both theory and policy.

Throughout the pandemic, the research team has adopted a step-by-step mode of practice requiring intensive reflection. By concentratedly discussing the processes, ethics, impact and knowledge production in our research, we aim to apply openness, courage, and creativity to develop and test innovative and unconventional ways of carrying out our ethnographic study. Our intention is to conduct our ethnographic research with refugee families using novel approaches and methods, but also to be sensitive to the creativity, challenges, and chances we face due to an accident of history. By doing so, we hope to make contributions theories of child-rearing and “doing transnational family” (Westphal et al. 2019) as well as to the multi-sensory and sensuous methodological developments within ethnography (Jackson 2018; Pink 2010, 2015) and family research. To conclude this paper, we would like to draw attention to our connectedness and solidarity with those in our field, who are the genuine inspiration for pursuing this study. We endeavour to contribute to knowledge about the practice of solidarity (Motzek-Öz et al. 2021) between researchers and research subjects during a worldwide pandemic.

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