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Experiences and perceptions of family reunification among Syrian refugees in Berlin, Germany

with particular focus on the individual meaning of transnational family ties

Master Thesis

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Abstract

One frequently discussed issue within the migration debate is the family reunification of refugees. Especially the recent refugee flows from Syria since the Syrian civil war have aroused substantial political and societal disagreements in Germany: relatively high numbers of Syrian refugees might cause subsequent migration flows by family reunifications. Current research focuses on the quantitative assessment of this phenomenon, but only little attention is paid to the aspirations and motivations regarding reunification with relatives of the concerned refugees. This thesis aims to grasp insights on their experience of family reunification and their individual understanding of family ties. To elaborate on the meaning of family ties for refugees and the effect on their understanding of reunification, the transnational migration approach is used, which focuses on remaining family ties despite spatial distances during migration processes. By analysing eight qualitative interviews, the research purposes to gain an in-depth understanding of the family concept as well as opinions on and experiences with family reunification perceived by Syrian refugees presently residing in Berlin, Germany. The results indicate different perceptions and new experiences of age and adulthood in the Syrian and German cultural context. The position of the mother was emphasised as a mediator in the transnational family network. Regarding the reunification process, the wish to revisit family members after the separation period seems to be strong, whereas a residential reunification is not predominantly intended.

Keywords: forced migration, Syrian families, transnational family ties, family reunification, separation

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List of Abbreviation

BAMF	Federal Office for Migration and Refugees
CDU	Christian Democratic Union
Destatis	Federal Office of Statistics
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
LAF	Berlin State Office for Refugee Affairs
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany

1. Introduction

In the past decade, forced mobility caused by civil war increasingly received more attention in public and political debates in European countries, especially referring the extent of financial support and government-funded integration. Since 2011, stimulated by the Arabic spring, rebel groups fighting against the authoritarian regime of President Assad in Syria. With the appearance of the Islamic State (previously "ISIS") in mid-2014, fighting between the Kurds and the Islamist militia took place. The brutal actions have caused a civil war and results in a large refugee movement from Syria. Whereas the majority of Syrian Refugees fled to neighbouring countries, a significantly high number of refugees fled via the Westbalkan-Route towards Europe (Ostrand, 2015).

Due to its stable economic situation as well as advantageous asylum and migration policy, Germany was one of the most frequent destinations of refugee flows. By the end of 2017, approximately 600,000 refugees with a protected status were expected to live in Germany (Brücker, 2017). These unpredictable and sudden increase of displaced people come along with new obstacles but also challenges for the government and our society. Within the context of future migration effects of the refugee immigration to Germany, especially the topic of the family reunification is relevant. Therefore, not only the legal and political perspective but especially the societal and the one of the persons concerned is essential to examine the meaning of family reunification.

1.1. Problem Statement and Political Debate

One of many is the recent debate on family reunification among refugees. The right to family reunification solely refers to nuclear family members, which are spouses and minor children. Extended family members such as non-married partners, siblings or parents of full aged children are therefore excluded (Grote, 2017). Moreover, family reunification for subsidiary protected individuals is only eligible when spouses have been married already before entering the destination country (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2018). According to the current regulations, family members who are entitled to subsidiary protection and whose residence permit was issued after 17.03.2016 are not eligible for family reunification under the Residence Act until 31.07.2018 (BAMF, 2018a). Subsidiary protection intervenes when neither refugee protection nor the right to asylum can be granted, but a return to the origin country is too dangerous as it will cause serious harm (BAMF, 2018b). In 2017, the estimated number of refugees with subsidiary protection status was approximately 200,000 (Brücker, 2017).

Prohibiting family reunification arouse substantial disagreements in the German Federal Parliament. Especially the left-winged and green parties claim that the human rights of refugees are violated. If refugees are not allowed to reunite with their family members, it will worsen their mental health and complicate the integration process, which is essential within the refugee discussion. The waiting period of two years will push family members into the tugboats and deters refugees from really arriving in Germany (BÜNDNIS 90/ DIE GRÜNEN, 2016). In their draft bill amendment, the left party "Die Linken" alleged to the government that the share of refugees who get subsidiary protection status increased rapidly after regulation had been set. However, the proportion of subsidiary protection was only 1.3 per cent. It was only with the change in the law that it rose systematically to more than 72 per cent, even though neither the situation in Syria nor the refugee rates recounted had fundamentally changed (DIE LINKE, 2016). The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), in contrast, states that hard restrictions are necessary to prevent overloading of the registration systems in the country. Proponents fear that financial and residential resources are insufficient to hold more refugees, which will affect German inhabitants as well as the legal capacity of the welfare system. Recently, the re-elected

grand coalition of the CDU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) negotiated new agreements regarding the family reunification. Starting in August 2018, family reunification for a subsidiary protected person has been determined that the immigration is limited to 1,000 persons per month (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2018).

1.2. Academic and Societal Relevance

The political and public discussion shows a strong focus on the quantitative limitation of family reunification regarding financial, organisational and integration resources within the country of destination. The Federal Office of Statistics (Destatis) and the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees (BAMF) publish regularly new refugee statistics which includes, among others, information about family reunification. Therefore, there is an adequate overview of how many refugee family members want to reunify, also among refugees with subsidiary protection status and beyond the nuclear family (Brücker, 2017). In 2016, 94 percent of family reunification went to Syrians Resettlement of spouses and children (BAMF, 2017). Nevertheless, since many refugees are single and have no children, and the vast majority of spouses and minor children already lives in Germany, the legally possible reunification potential is often lower than assumed (Brücker, 2017).

So far, information concerning numbers and estimations on family reunification of Syrian refugees has been well documented, yet only little is known about how Syrian refugees perceive family ties themselves and experience separation and reunification with their relatives. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural context of family ties among Syrian refugees in Germany, a qualitative research approach is needed to contribute to the research on family reunification and add the perspective of the persons concerned. Without doubts, quantitative studies are needed to adjust facilities as well as financial resources, but respectively qualitative studies shall be treated with the same importance. Understanding certain behaviours and meanings of the family can help to comprehend the concept of family reunification perceived by Syrian refugees which further improves the effectiveness of respective political actions.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the opinions and experiences on family reunification considering the socio-cultural context of transnational family ties of Syrian refugees living in Germany. This perspective is examined by the research question:

How do Syrian refugees living in Germany experience and perceive family reunification within the context of their transnational family ties?

Regarding the methodological approach of the semi-structured interview guide applied in this research (see Chapter 3.2.1), the research question is subdivided into three questions, that contributes to the overall discussion of the research question:

1. How do Syrian refugees perceive and define family ties while living in Germany?
2. How do Syrian refugees maintain or rebuild their family network while being separated?
3. What are the opinions of Syrian refugees in Germany regarding family reunification with separated family members?

This chapter served to introduce the topic and to explain the political and legal situation of family reunification. The following sections of this research is composed as followed: Chapter 2 is dedicated to the theoretical background and summarises the existing literature. The methodological approach is described in detail in Chapter 3. The results obtained from the interviews are presented in Chapter 4. Finally, in Chapter 5, the research questions are answered, the results are reflected with the literature and suggestions for further research and policy is made.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents and discusses the theoretical approach that is central to this research. This research is based on the perspectives and approaches of transnational migration, a framework addressing the multiple cultural influences on personal perceptions of migrants. The transnational migration approach contains the concept of transnational families as well as the concept of transnational social spaces as further explained in Section 2.1. Based on this, current literature on the family in the Syrian context, family migration network and family reunification is presented in Section 2.2. Finally, Section 2.3 will present and discuss the conceptual model emphasising the theoretical approach to this research

2.1. Transnational Migration

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines transnationalism as "the process whereby people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical border" (IOM, 2008, p.500). As a conceptual view point within international migration theoretical frameworks (Faist, 2011), transnational migration approaches were brought to attention in the 1990's by social anthropologists, whereas sociology scholars continued this tradition later. "This approach dealt with dense and continuous ties across the borders of nation-states, which concatenate into social formations" (ibid., p.26). Transnational migration approaches evolved from new forms of, for example, labour migration and political refugees, which could not be sufficiently explained by the usual international migration theories. The traditional frameworks rather refer to actors having networks and activities both in the host country and in their home country, which creates one single social sphere that crosses nations (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Faist, 2011). Thus, Basch et al. (1994, p.27) have defined the term trans-migrant as immigrants, who constitute such social spheres in the destination country by maintaining social ties of their home country. These transnational ties can also vary in frequency, depth and range depending on certain migration groups (Foner, 1997; Vertovec, 1999). The main characteristic of the transnational relationships is that they are not geographically and spatially bound to a nation state. Consequently, such relations allow getting away from the narrowed "container"-thinking implying that transnational phenomena develop across national states and beyond national borders (Pries, 2011; Hollstein, 2017). It characterises that networks of (extended) intergenerational families and social spaces can encompass several countries (Pries, 2011). Due to the consideration of transnational acting and interacting, the present theoretical framework considers the specific circumstances of Syrian refugees in Germany and addresses the transnational influential sphere of their beliefs, perceptions and experiences. Since family reunification is explored in this paper, the definition of the transnational family (Section 2.1.1) and the interpretation of transnational social space (Section 2.1.2.) within this theoretical model are outlined in the following subchapter.

2.1.1. Transnational Family

The family concept refers to a form of social organisation based on bio-medical and socio-emotional relations to other actors from the same ancestry (Sharma, 2013; UNSD, 2018). The inter-family relationships are considered to be strong social ties, which influence the individual socialisation and social networks (Reher, 1998; Weber, 1904). Regarding the present assessment of transnational migration within nowadays society, those family ties remain despite of spatial distances during migration processes and form the concept of the transnational family (Trask, 2010).

Whereas economic scholars focus on individual motivation to migrate, sociological perspectives pay more attention to the influence of the family on migration processes (Pries, 2011). This does not only include the migration process of the whole family itself, but also the individual migration that had been made in the context of family decisions and behaviour. "From

this view, nearly all migration could be defined as family migration” (Cooke, 2008, p.260). Through these family-based migration processes, in which family members are left behind, transnational families can be formed.

In line with this, Therborn (2014, p.16) sees transnational families as an “extended reproduction of existing family patterns by spatial displacement”. The migration process may be seen as a family strategy for a better life and may outline the importance of family itself (ibid.). A more detailed definition is given by Glick Schiller et al. (1992), who conceptualise the transnational family as "social processes whereby immigrants create social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders, and develop multiple familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political relations that span nations” (cited by Bakker et al., 2014, p.261). According to Falicov (2007, p.159), there are “families who maintain emotional and economic connections across continents” which makes it especially difficult for researcher to investigate specific types of family ties among the transnational migrants since family members “live in different ecologies and languages, peer relationships, work settings, or political systems”.

According to Pries (2011), transnational families should be seen as rather heterogeneous groups that have very different ideas of defining internal family roles and of establishing networks. Furthermore, research on transnational migration showed that the process of migration identified consequential changes in the social life of the migrants since family and kinship structure are being reconstructed (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). However, family structures, family roles and residencies can change without leaving the social space of the family (Pries, 2011).

In the context of refugees, transnational behaviour cannot be determined directly as they have specific migration motives and histories (Bakker et al., 2014). Refugees may be constrained by persecution in their home countries and, therefore, may fear to perform any kind of transnational behaviour (Mascini et al., 2012). Portes et al. (1999), as well as Vertovec (2001), point out the importance to study socio-cultural activities of the transnational family to examine, among others, migrants' engagement with the family back home (Bakker et al., 2014: 262). Based on this argumentation, the construction of a transnational family plays an important role for the social integration of refugees regarding both the cultural dimension of family ties, influencing the present experiences of a refugee and the individual perception of potential family reunification in a spatial context. Regarding the latter, the relevance of space is outlined within the next section.

2.1.2. Transnational Social Space

Bryceson (2002) defines the territorial reference points of transnational spaces into real places and symbolic places. The first represents the regions of origin and the current residence, whereas the latter identifies a “region that is chosen as a place to live and with whose culture people identify themselves” as well as “places of identification with institutions” (Bryceson, 2002, p.29). Considering family ties, transnational social spaces can, among others, emerge from migration when one part of the family remains in the country of origin (Pries, 2014). The decisive factor for understanding transnational social spaces is that they are not tied to a specific geographical location, but extend multi-local across the borders of nation-state societies (ibid.) Migration projects arise in transnational spaces, in which family life usually plays a central role. Although networks extend beyond the migrant families, they often rely very strongly on family relationships (Pries, 2011). Opposed to what is assumed in assimilation approaches, migrants do not abandon their home culture as soon as they have settled at their new place of residence but create new references, form a multipolar identity and create specific living spaces for themselves by dealing with the respective local conditions (ibid.).

The social dynamics of families between origin and destination country are not primarily constituted by permanent physical mobility, but by the transnational social organization of

the everyday life (Pries, 2010). Modern technologies, e.g. internet and improving telecommunications systems facilitates daily social practices of communication. Skype, e-mailing, chatting and telephoning increase speed and efficiency to connect with one's own social network regardless of the distance, thus social spaces do not have to be tied to one place (Vertovec, 2001; Pries, 2014).

In general, the most studied forms of transnational research are educational exchange of students, tourism and the cross-border mobility of qualified employees (Pries, 2014; Gerhards and Rössel, 1999; Hillmann, 2000; Rudolph and Morokvasic, 1993). Focus is also on other forms of labour migration such as the guest worker phenomenon (Pries, 1996; Pries, 2008; Pastor & Alva, 2004; Amelina & Faist, 2008). However, transnational migration in the context of refuge and forced displacement has been less documented compared to labour and educational migration. However, refugees are assumed to perceive transnational social spaces and transnational families as cultural reference points influencing their cultural experience in the destination country, but also their social networks. The integration of a transnational migration approach within family ties is highly valuable regarding the assessment experience and perception of family reunification.

2.2. Family Ties, Network and Reunification

Based on the three main topics that is guiding this research: (1) the meaning of family and family ties based on the socio-cultural context, (2) the maintenance of the (transnational) family network and (3) the experience on reunification, this chapter is further into three subchapter. It summarises literature on family in the Syrian context (2.2.1), transnational family network (2.2.2) and on family reunification (2.2.3).

2.2.1. Family in the Syrian Context

Young & Shami (1997) do not support a generalisation of 'the family'. However, they argue that 'the Arab Family' does not exist because family is also in Arabic areas not a timeless and constant unity, but remains fluid and is therefore under continuous alteration. Social circumstances may influence the size and composition of the family. As well as other Middle East countries, Syria also shows large complexities in modern family compositions. Differences are influenced by class background, rural-urban residence and religious or ethnic beliefs (Rabo, 2008). In the Syrian language, nuclear family are differentiated in several terms. *Ahl* is defined by the nuclear family at birth, whereas *Aile* stands for the nuclear family through marriage, i.e. spouse and children (ibid.). Rabo (2008) also states that large extended families are, admittedly, not the norm in most of the urban areas, but sibling relations still have a significant importance over generation and gender.

Traditional families are still strongly influenced by patriarchal structures, in which men and elderly have supremacy and are persons of authority (Suad, 1996; Barakat, 1985; Barakat, 1993; Rabo, 2008). Patrilineal structures are recognizable if the ancestry is determined by the paternal side. According to patrilocal structures, a couple is expected to live with the family of the husband after marriage (Suad, 1996). However, in the modern family these structures are changing and also matrilineal kinship relationships become very important. Besides, also in Arabic regions, family transformations are present, e.g. joint families or single households (ibid). Furthermore, the decision on the residence after marriage may become depended on economic and social conditions and less on patrilocal structures. These transitions in family structures lead to a democratisation of the relationship between husband and wife as well as between father and children (Barakat, 1985). Adhering to such patriarchal structures is seen as an obstacle to modernisation (Barakat, 1993).

The literature agrees on the high value of the family in the Arab society and is interpreted as both a social and an economic unity (Barakat, 1985). Often, the family is also seen as

a primary source for economic security and political resource (Suad, 1996). Protecting family members and caring for one another seems to remain the first priority. In addition, the well-being of the family is paramount and placed above one's own (Suad, 1996; Rabo, 2008).

2.2.2. Transnational Family Network

Transnational family network can be explained as a network of people within the family that have a connection with each other and acts together in a transnational social space. Boyd (1989) recognized new interests in the research that lies in the function of the family and their formed networks that re-explain migration structures and conceptualizations. Transnational families spread geographically across national borders and thus create kinship networks in which information, resources, support but also commitments are given and exchange (Harbison, 1981; Boyd, 1989; Al-Sharmani, 2010). Such networks enable families and relatives to stay connected between the host country and destination country. Furthermore, it can provide security, minimise risk and maximise resources of the family (Al-Sharmani, 2010).

Sönmez (2017) underlines the importance of social networks of Syrian refugees that migrated to neighbouring countries. Transnational migration networks are created, among others, by the fact that migration to the destination country depends strongly on locally existing social connections. Therefore, having family and social ties in the destination country, also has a significant impact on the migratory behaviour (ibid). Decisions on migration movements can be made in the family network by encouraging and motivating each other to, for example, follow or migrate together with a family member (Sönmez, 2017; Boyd, 1989). Current studies in the Syrian context focus strongly on the function of family ties and the social network in the choice of the destination country (Sönmez, 2017).

Liu (2013) argues that network ties can be very diverse. Existing literature states that strong ties have a higher importance than weak ties in the migration context. The author refutes it by showing that specifically weak ties play an important role among male migrants, whereby the friendship network plays an important role (ibid). Defining the strength of ties, i.e. how strong and weak ties are determined, varies strongly based on the context. Regarding the content of this thesis, strong family ties are defined as close relationships between family members that have developed through emotional closeness and over time. Accordingly, weak ties are defined as detached relationships that perform rather emotional distances, regardless if shared within the nuclear or extended family (based on Al-Sharmani, 2010).

2.2.3. Family Reunification

Family reunification is not “a simple or straightforward process” (RASNZ, 2012, p.7). The conditions for family reunification vary depending on the residence status of the receiving person, but also with regard to the relatives willing to join the family (Grote, 2017). Family reunification refers to the migration of family members to a (refugee) person who is already in the country of destination, intending to reconstitute the family unit. The right to spouse and family reunification is based on the human right to the protection of marriage and the family, which is reflected in article 6 of the fundamental law of the Federal Republic of Germany (Lingl, 2018). However, the right to family reunification refers primarily to the nuclear family, i.e. spouses, life partners and minor children who join their parents and parents who join their unaccompanied minor children. (Grote, 2017). In Germany, minor children, are legally defined as a person being under the age of 18. In Western-European countries such as Germany, this often comes together with independence from the parents, which may not necessarily account for Syrians as well (See Chapter 4.2.1). Huddleston et al. (2015) claim that the definition of family is, next to delays in processing applications, the major weakness of family reunification in Germany.

In 2016, 94 percent of family reunification went to Syrians Resettlement of spouses and children (BAMF, 2017). Nevertheless, since many refugees are single and have no children,

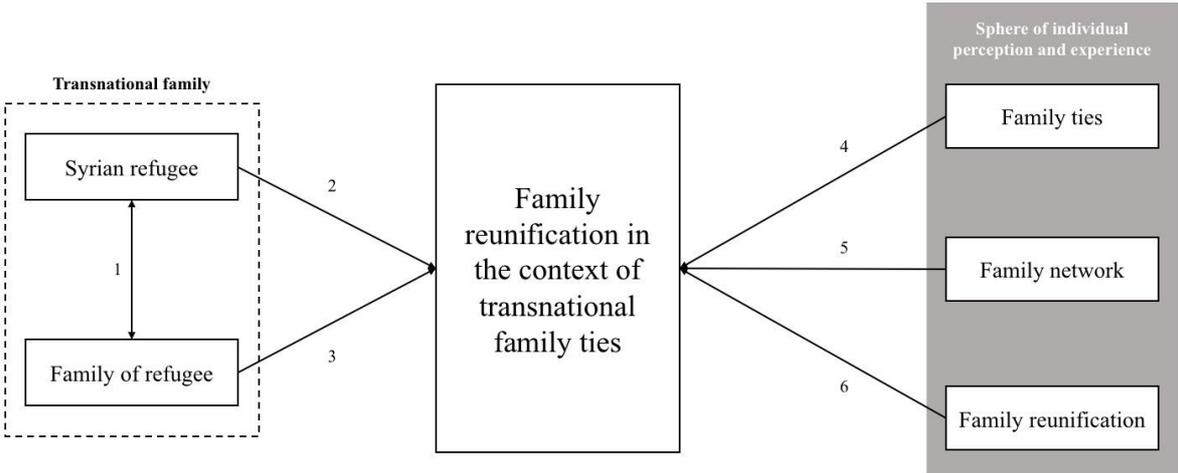
and the vast majority of spouses and minor children already lives in Germany, the legally possible reunification potential is often lower than assumed (Brücker, 2017). In average, for every refugee in Germany 0.28 persons are entitled to join their family members, whereas for Syria refugees, the proportion is 0.34 per person. (ibid).

The topic of family reunification in Germany has been widely documented. Historical approaches (Lingl, 2018; Barwig, 2014), legal frameworks and its limitations (Grote, 2017; Schmitt & Muy, 2017; Heuser, 2017; Cremer, 2017) as well as quantitative reports (Brücker, 2017; Grote, 2017) have been elaborated in the past recent years. However, less attention has been paid on studies about the meaning of family reunification for the individual and the family themselves as well as on their opinions and experiences on family reunification. In a comparative study on six European Union member states including Germany, Strik et al. (2013) studies the impact of family life regarding the family reunification policies. They claim that rules on family reunification “create long-term separation, make reunification costly, frustrate people and further tensions between the spouses and families.” (ibid.: 110). Whereas this comparative study focusses on the legal framework, this paper can add valuable information while including meanings and opinion stated by the refugees themselves.

2.3. Conceptual Model

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model, which serves as a theoretical framework for this research. It encompasses the approach on transnational migration and the literature review as summarised above. The question on how family reunification is perceived and experienced by Syrian refugees in Germany in context to their transnational family ties is illustrated in the centre of the model. Thereby, it is important to look at the two actors, who influence the perception of family reunification with transnational interactions. On the one hand, these are the Syrian refugees in Germany itself, who can also be defined as the transnational migrants, and on the other hand, their separated family members. Both interact within the concept of transnational family (1).

Figure 1: Conceptual model of Family reunification within the concept of transnational family ties



Note: 1: Interaction between refugee and family under the permission of separation, 2: Adaption to and maintaining of family norms, 3: Family-shaped values, beliefs and norms, 4: Perception of family ties within the Syrian context in Germany, 5: Maintenance and reconstruction of transnational family network, 6: Opinions of the transnational actors on family reunification.

As shown in the literature review, transnational migrants do not abandon their home culture when migrating to the destination country, but adapt to it and maintain the socio-cultural norms within their new living environment (2). The latter especially refers to the family-shaped values, beliefs and opinions are relevant (3) (Pries, 2011). These respective cultural values are taken into account when explaining perception on reunification based on transnational family ties. Accordingly, family reunification and family relationships are not defined solely by the refugees as individuals but influence individual behaviour regarding the transnational family experience. Additionally, the conceptual model considers the sphere of individual perception and experience. Within this context, the primary research question can be derived from three thematic blocks: the perception of family ties within the Syrian context in Germany (4), the maintenance of transnational family networks (5) and the opinions of the transnational actors on family reunification (6). Both the transnational family factors as well as the sphere of individual perception and experience influence the individual opinion on, perception of and expectations on family reunification and are highly relevant in terms of the qualitative assessment of this issue. In the following, the methodology based on this conceptual framework is outlined.

3. Methodology

This chapter is devoted to the methodology of this study. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the individual meaning of family ties among Syrian refugees, a qualitative research design is applied in this research. The first section (3.1) explains the qualitative research approach in more detail based on the underlying objectives and theory of this study. Section 3.2. describes the methods that were used to collect the data. Further, section 3.3 clarifies how data were analysed and, finally, section 3.4. discusses ethical consideration that has been taken into account while conducting qualitative research.

3.1. Research design

Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand behaviour, beliefs, opinions and emotions from the perspective of the participants themselves (Prasad, 2005). Therefore, to tackle the research objectives and questions, qualitative studies are exclusively applicable to obtain valuable results. To understand individual perceptions, the emic perspective is crucial as it enables to explore individual interpretations that participants associate with certain norms and values (Hennink et al., 2011). It is especially useful when working in a cross-cultural context (Liamputtong, 2010).

This research was guided by the interpretative paradigm of qualitative research. In contrast to the positivist paradigm, in which the researcher is interested in quantifying data and focusses on the facts, the interpretative paradigm allows to collect empirical data from the participants and their context. It tries to explain that reality is socially constructed and influenced by the social, cultural and personal context of the participants (Hennink et al., 2011). The latter becomes increasingly important in this research as it focusses on participants from a particular country, that migrated towards a particular destination country. Hence, they may experience various cultural differences and create diasporic identities. The participant's perceptions of the family are not only influenced by their cultural and social backgrounds from Syria, but it is also based on their new environments and a new living situation in Germany. Considering these cultural differences and interactions, it is even more important to acknowledge that reality is socially constructed and it gets, therefore, essential to study participant's perceptions from their own perspective. The sensitive and greatly complex topic as well as the consideration of each perception and meanings, the research was realised on a micro level. The research was characterised by a cyclic process, which allows to move back and forth between the stages of the research design, data collection and analysis, as pointed out by Hennink et. al. (2011, p. 4) as the "Qualitative Research Cycle".

3.2. Data Collection

The primary data collection of this study has been conducted using in-depth interviews. To make the data collection as transparent as possible this section is further divided into three paragraphs. First, the method itself and the interview guide (3.2.1.) is explained. Furthermore, it gives information on the recruitment procedure (3.2.2.) and a detailed description of conducting the interviews (3.2.3.).

3.2.1. Interview Guide

At first, an interview guide was developed based on existing theory and on the conceptual model. To be more precise, it is a semi-structured interview guide. This particular form has the advantage that it steers the interviewees to stay close to the topic, but simultaneously gives the participant the possibility to create their own discussion structure and to add valuable information that has not been asked directly based on the interview guide (Fedyuk & Zantai, 2018). The interview guide was tested through a pilot interview, which helped to identify ambiguities

and adjust or even add concepts and questions, which is also defined as “making inductive references (Hennink et al., 2011). In addition, the second and third interviews were also seen as pilots, since only from the fourth interview onwards a sufficient self-awareness of the researcher became noticeable. Most inductive inferences of the interview guide were made in these three beginning interviews.

The outline of the interviews was based on the guidelines by Hennink et al. (2011) starting with an introduction, continuing with open and key questions and ending with closing questions. The introduction clarified the purpose of the interview as well as its conditions (see section 3.4.). Opening questions were used to build rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee while asking a very broad starting question to let the participants talk about themselves. Not only was this helpful to create rapport, but it was also a suitable way to get a quick overview of the participants. The key questions were focussed on the research objectives and are, therefore, the essential part in order to answer the research questions. In the closing questions, the interviewee had the opportunity of adding anything which had been left unsaid during the interview. In all parts, interview questions were open and non-directive and included probes. The latter enables to investigate more in-depth information and to come back to the topic carefully, if the interviewee is digressing (ibid.). Active listening was very essential, e.g. to elaborate on the participants’ sayings or ask for further information, to ensure the interviewee that the interviewer was still listening (Helfferrich, 2011; Hennink et al. 2011). Equally important was to allow breaks (Helfferrich, 2011), because even though it could cause unpleasant silence, it encouraged participants to continue talking and to explain an issue in a more detailed way.

Based on the research question, in-depth interview is the most suitable method since it gives the opportunity to get comprehensive information about the socio-cultural context of people’s perceived meanings and opinions directly from the population of interest itself (Hennink et al., 2011). Harmoniously with the research aim, the in-depth interview enables an emic perspective and may, hence, benefit from individual subjective and profound information of the study population (ibid.).

3.2.2. Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited using non-random recruiting techniques as they are introduced by Hennink et al. (2011). Other than in quantitative research, a random selection of participants is not relevant in qualitative research, since it neither aims to generalise data nor wants to ensure statistical significance, but “to gain a detailed understanding of a certain phenomenon” (ibid, p.84). At first, a research population was defined and afterwards approaches and sources to recruit participants were identified. Initially formal as well as informal networks were contacted to get in touch with Syrian Refugees. To conduct interviews in state-funded refugee camps, I first had to apply for consent at the Berlin State Office for Refugee Affairs (LAF). The approval came surprisingly quick, which was due to the fact that I know the director of the refugee camp. Being a key informant, he acted as a gatekeeper (Hennink et al., 2011) that enabled me to get in contact with the Syrian community in the refugee camp, whereby he helped to recruit participants, based on the requirements of the research population.

Table 1: Requirements of participants for recruitment

Nationality	Syrian
Age	Legal age, i.e. above 18
Residence permit	Legal permit, i.e. person with either subsidiary protection status or entitled to political asylum
Language	Sufficient command of English or German

Table 1 lists the requirements that the participants had to fulfil. First, the participant should hold the Syrian nationality and live in Berlin, either in refugee shelters or in their own residences. Second, it was necessary, especially while working with formal institutions, that the participants had a legal refugee status and residence permit, either a subsidiary status or an entitlement to political asylum. Furthermore, the age of majority had to be reached, i.e. above 18 years old. Finally, the participants needed to have sufficient proficiency in either the German or the English language.

Moreover, the director introduced me to the participants and, before starting the interview, would shortly inform the participant on what the interview would be about, which helped to build trust and ensure clarification. Five participants were recruited using this formal network. The approval of the LAF enabled to conduct interviews in any public refugee institution. Unfortunately, the use of any further formal network was left unsuccessful. Institutions, such as other refugee camps, churches and several Syrian associations in Berlin, were approached, but without any response. Based on the response of the LAF, this problem could be ascribed to the high amount of daily requests and the shortage of time. For this reason, informal networks were introduced to this research as well. Local Facebook groups, Syrian bakeries and other Syrian networks were contacted and visited, whereby similar problems of accumulated requests arose. An insider of a network mentioned, that people are getting tired of doing interviews and talking about the same stories all over again. It seems that the phenomenon on Syrian refugees in Germany, and Berlin, in particular, became a quite over-researched population

However, two participants were recruited through this procedure. One participant, I could win by contacting and further visiting a store which sells hand-made products made by people from the Middle-East. The other participant I was introduced to by a friend, who recommended me to interview this particular person since he had a very interesting opinion on family as well as on family reunification. Finally, one participant has been recruited thanks to the snowball technique. In this particular case, this technique had the advantage that the recruited participant was already “linked to the study by a familiar, trusted person who can describe the interview process and alleviate any concerns” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 100).

3.2.3. Conducting the interview

A designated and large quantity of participants is not preferred in qualitative research since the number is based on the saturation process, which is induced when collected information starts to repeat itself (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hennink et al., 2011). This can become quite challenging to realise in the scope of a Master Thesis since time and financial resources are mostly limited. Considering the mentioned recruitment obstacles in the section before, this research bases on eight conducted in-depth interviews.

In total the conducted in-depth interviews had an average duration of slightly over one hour. However, recordings range from 40 minutes up to two hours, depending on conversableness and language proficiency. Even though the participants could decide whether to do the interview in German or in English, language barriers were inevitable. It occurred that a lot of question were formulated too scientifically and complex, which had the result that participants could sometimes not understand the questions clearly. The researcher is not able to understand Arabic and, therefore, the participants could not answer in their mother tongue. Consequently, the data lost in richness, especially when asking on the individual definition of family. This is extremely important to take into account when analysing and interpreting the data. Only once, a translator had to join the interview since the participant could not freely speak in the required languages. The participant was really interested in participating and since valuable data could have been collected also out of the translation, this interview was included in the data analysis under specific consideration that data did not come directly from the participant.

Furthermore, the participants decided on the location where the interview took place in order to ensure privacy and physical comfortability of the environment (Legard et al., 2003).

Unfortunately, concerning the latter, that could not be granted in every case. Half of the research population lived in refugee camps, where only limited mobility was possible, especially for those who had children. One participant, who really wanted to participate, but who was always very busy with work, asked to have the interview at her workplace in the end. Nevertheless, the generous Syrian hospitality was experienced once by being invited to a participant's apartment in the refugee camp. The interview was conducted while the whole family was present, which gave an extremely valuable insight into the context of Syrian family living in Germany under particular circumstances.

3.3. Data Analysis

Before the analysis of the data, the collected recordings of the interviews were fully transformed into a verbatim data transcription. It was beneficial to the research process to transcribe and read the transcription carefully immediately after the interview had been conducted. The procedure was not only necessary to identify saturation, but also enabled the researcher to adapt the interview guide for further interviews. The pilot interview guide was mostly based on the theory regarding the research questions and its research aim. The first interviews brought new aspects and concepts to the researcher which had not been found in the literature beforehand. If the researcher conducts all interviews successively and then starts to transcribe and analyse, data analysis would be a linear sequence rather than a circular process. Albeit the analytical work as suggested by Hennink et al. (2011) shall always be conducted circularly, which is also used as a methodological framework in this thesis (see 3.2.1)

After having transcribed and anonymised the data, codes were defined and developed using the qualitative data analysis software program Atlas.ti. The coding procedure helped to reduce, organise and compare the complex amount of data. It, furthermore, helped to identify the range of issues that had been raised in the interviews and to understand meanings and perceptions of the participants attached to certain issues (Hennink et al., 2011; Richards, 2015). A mix of analytical coding and descriptive coding were applied, whereas the first method got slightly more attention. Analytical coding reflects on themes that are in the researcher's interest and that became important in the research process. It allows getting an in-depth look at the context. The descriptive coding, however, focuses more on who, how, where, etc. questions and gives information, for example, on demographic or geographical characteristics (Cope, 2016).

Roughly 100 codes, both deductive and inductive, were developed during the coding procedure, which were summarised in a codebook (see Appendix). Deductive codes were derived from existing theory, literature and the concept model of the research, whereas the inductive codes were derived from the data, or more specifically, the participants themselves. The latter can set the foundation for developing grounded theory (Hennink et al., 2011; Egan, 2002). Nevertheless, for this research both, inductive and deductive, theory development was desired, considering that theory is developed through already existing theory and new empirical findings (Hennink et al., 2011; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Additionally, further steps of the analytical cycle were realised. The codes were categorised into summarised code groups. Afterwards, I used thick description of these code groups in order to get a better understanding of how a particular issue had been discussed. The codes were further merged together into themes, whereas the categorisation was based on interpretation. For these themes, (see Chapter 4) saturation was reached, since they were found repeatedly in the data.

3.4. Ethical Consideration

In every research, either qualitative or quantitative, considering ethical issues is obligatory to the researcher. Especially, qualitative studies may be more prone to ethical challenges (Hennink

et al., 2011). This section is further divided into two paragraphs. The first deals with the informed consent and anonymity, the second devotes to the positionality of the researcher in this study.

3.4.1. Anonymity, informed consent and risk of harm

Starting with one of the most important considerations, the anonymity of the participants. Complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed when conducting in-depth interviews since it involves face-to-face contact between the participants and the researcher. However, the researcher can support the anonymity by using pseudonyms or numbers, while reporting on the results. (Hennink et al., 2011). Hence, I changed the names of the participants in this research. Since the amount of participants, with eight interviews, was comprehensible, it becomes quite challenging to not linking interviews to certain persons and location. Nevertheless, to overcome that quotations could be directly linked to a participant, personal information, such as names of family members or origin city in Syria, were anonymised in the verbatim transcripts and in the quotes presented.

Next to the importance of anonymity, it is crucial to ask the participants for consent. Therefore, a consent form was used to ensure the transparency of this research. Reflectively, it has to be noted, that the form of a printed consent sheet was not always appropriate in the given context. A lot of participants seemed to be rather deterred from the appearance of a form and about the idea of signing it, which may have reminded them on official formulas by the foreigners' registration office. The consent form was then discussed in detail together and the participants gave me their consent orally. In any case, the participants were fully aware of the research intention and content of this study, as well as the explicit conduct of the in-depth interview. It included, that the participation of the interviewees was completely voluntary throughout the whole study process. Participants were always allowed to interrupt the conversation or leave the study for good, especially when they would expect potential harm.

Research projects shall ensure to minimise harm and maximise benefits for the participants (Hennink et al., 2011). To maximise benefit for the participants, the researcher should not only focus on publishing or in this case write a thesis to obtain a degree, but also provide societal relevance for the study population (ibid.). This can start already when participants feel comfortable with sharing their stories and feel pleased with being heard. Twice, I received very good feedback on the purpose of my study after the interview ended, as it is exemplified in the following quote:

“I want to thank you that you are not just trying to spread the story! That you are actually trying to study it. Because I think it is really important to study, than just to hear or just to [...] they are not trying to study the underground. So, it is really amazing and I really thank you for doing this!” [Aaliyah]

Both were very thankful because I had listened carefully to their experiences and for being deeply interested in their opinions and meaning in order to understand their social-cultural context. Yet, due to the personal and sensitive topic of this research, the risk of harm can be sometimes inevitable, when reviving experiences from the past and talking about separated family members. Therefore, it was always essential to provide clear communication between the researcher and the participant to ensure trust and to make clear that the interview could always be interrupted. In the interviews, one could notice that participants showed sad emotions, especially when talking about very close family members, that are still in Syria. But it never occurred that the participant needed to stop the interview, due to these emotions. However, it occurred quite frequently that participants had to continue with questions or had to take a break, because of the language barriers. Not talking in the mother tongue, can be very tedious, especially when going into a very complex topic. Some interview lasted over an hour. Nevertheless,

the participants were always open when questions got too complicated or when they wanted to continue or pause on the interview. This acknowledgement helped me to minimise the harm to the participant and to take this language barrier always into consideration.

3.4.2. Positionality of the researcher

The researcher needs to be aware of particular challenges when working with unfamiliar cultures. Given that the research population of this studies are Syrian refugees living in Germany, it is important to note that the researcher herself is German. Therefore, the research took place in the researcher's own country, but not in the own culture, since the focus lays on the socio-cultural context of Syrians in Germany. Further socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender or even occupation status of the interviewer can have a strong influence on the participant's behaviour during the interview and may create power relation (Smith, 2010).

At the beginning of the interview, I made clear to the participant that I am neither a volunteer worker nor a political active that has any direct or indirect influence on family reunification matters. That was always accepted and understood by the participants. Neither my age nor my gender seemed to be an important issue during the interviews. It was striking that my German nationality influenced the participants in their sayings, especially when talking about cultural differences and German politics. Sometimes I could see, that the participants were very careful in their answer and were revising them in order to give a respectful answer even when disagreeing with the German culture.

Vice versa, it is also crucial that the researcher respects any values and norms of the study population. The own culture and the individual perceived norms and values of the researcher should never be taken as a measure for different cultures (Smith, 2010). The same applies to one's own attitude to the problem statement, that often goes hand in hand with the research objective. While also this research is motivated by a problem statement about the current family reunification laws, it was very important to have a neutral aspiration towards the interviewees opinion on the topics (Helffrich, 2011).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the harm for the participant should be minimized as much as possible. However, also for the research, there is a risk of harm. It needs to be aware that interviewing a person with traumatising backgrounds about high-sensitive topics may affect the researcher emotionally. My previous experience, such as working in refugee camps and listening to stories about escape journeys, gave me emotional consistency and prepared me well to work with sensitive topics.

4. Findings

Even though the number of participants is readily comprehensible, the research population turned out to be quite heterogeneous. The research population consisted of four women and four men, the ages ranged from 22 to 36. As already mentioned, the majority of the Syrian population is Arab, but there are also some minorities of Kurds, Palestinian, Christians and Armenians. So is this research population, which was not predominately planned in the recruitment procedure. In table 2 one can see that three of the participants are Kurdish, one is Palestinian and four are Arab. It was striking, that the Kurds and Palestinian participants were always revealing their ethnicity without being directly questioning it from the interviewer. They mentioned differences between their ethnicity and Arabs in Syria also with regard to family, whereas the Arab participants were not mentioning differences at all.

Table 2: Overview of participant's demographic characteristics

Name ¹	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Having Children	Family Reunification	Place of residence
Bassam	33	male	Kurdish	yes	no	Refugee camp
Nesrin	31	female	Arab	yes	no	Refugee camp
Hedda	36	female	Kurdish	yes	in process	Refugee camp
Yaro	23	male	Kurdish	no	no	Own flat
Aabid	26	male	Arab	no	no	Refugee camp
Hamza	22	male	Palestinian	no	yes	Shared flat
Aaliyah	22	female	Arab	no	no	Shared flat
Derya	36	female	Arab	no	yes	Own flat

Note ¹: Original names have been changed

Furthermore, the table shows that three of the participants already have children who live with them in Germany. This has to be taken into account when evaluating the individual meanings of family. On the other hand, two of the participants had already been reunified with family members through family reunification process and one participant is now in the process of bringing her son to Germany. This has to be taken into account when looking at the result of the experiences of reunification and separation. It is also worth noting that half of the participants is living in a refugee camp, in which all of the participants with children belong to this particular group. The experience, perception and necessity of the topic of family, reunion and separation naturally differed from that of single participant living in flats.

In the further parts, the finding will be discussed in several themes. First, "Introducing Syrian Family", in which the participant's own meanings of family as well as cultural differences that have been perceived regarding the topic of the family will be discussed in section 4.1. Second (4.2.), "Staying in Contact" examines how participants organise their family network while living apart from one another. Lastly (4.3.), "Reunifying or not?", reveals experiences as well as their preferences on reunification and the advantages and disadvantages that comes with it.

4.1. Introducing Syrian Family

Love, respect, and support are words that have often been used to define what family means. Broader explanations defined family as a safe place, which gives you mental grip and warmth, and that family is the first place to grow up, that shall give you the ideas of morality. Family also gives strength and hope, and functions as a back-up in all life situations. Even with a few numbers of participants partaking in this research, a lot of differences regarding the cultural, political and traditional meaning within the Syrian population could be noticed. Therefore, there

is no one definition of the Syrian family. Nevertheless, one could see that all agreed that family has an extremely high status in their life in exile and that participants be very attached to family, either being separated or reunified. The importance of family was equally noticed among all the participant, either Kurdish, Arabic or Palestinian.

The family has served as a trigger for escape, especially for the parents among the participants, as they hope for a better future for their children in Germany. Even though they had to separate from other close family members back in Syria; the children are first priority.

I go to Germany because I have small children. I am afraid for my children. That is more important... but also my family in Syria [sighs]... yes! maybe we can do something here. I thought maybe we can go to Germany [...]. Maybe we can do something for my children, like learning, like studying. (Nesrin)

Regarding this issue, also other participants with children of their own in German showed similar behaviour as they all agree that the violent situation in Syria has become too dangerous for their children, which led to an extremely hazardous route towards Germany in order to save their children.

Moreover, family has been defined as being a unity, which can only work if together with all its members. It is a private union, where everybody is interlinked with one another and support is exchanged. The unit is about completing one another and looking at family as a whole rather than at the individual as exemplified in the statement below,

“Family is a unit that makes everyone stronger. It should not limit anyone: Everyone steers each other in the right direction.” (Hamza)

However, not everyone had the same attitude and experience towards the family as a unit. Especially, as mentioned in the quote above, the part on steering each other was often claimed with family having too much control, which in turn can restricts again. Looking at the following quote, we can see that the presence of family is perceived as both positive and negative.

“So, it is a curse to have a family at the same time it is beautiful to have a family. Whenever you break you have them, but they control you. They own you, you know? Family should not own. parents should not own. That’s why I like the idea, when you are 18 you should go out of that.” (Aaliyah)

On the one hand family is always supporting and helping one another out, but on the other hand it gets too close that it can limit one in certain behaviours. The last part of the quote slightly shows empathy and adaptation towards discourses of being 18 in Germany.

To become an adult has a very different meaning in the Syrian and German culture, which gets particularly interesting when looking at the family reunification law in Germany. As already mentioned, until the age of 18, a person is counted as a minor and may bring the parents with the family reunification procedure. If the person gets above 18, the parents are not counted as the nuclear family anymore and the right to bring the family to Germany stays out. However, there is a big difference in the perception of becoming an adult and, therefore, the meaning of being 18. In Germany, the age of 18 symbolises adulthood and independence from the parents, whereas in Syria children are more likely to stay at home with the parents.

“I don't know if that's true though, but from the people I've seen it's either the kids are out at 18... finished! And they think that they are grown up... which is completely insane. [...] We hardly have that, so... that a boy or a girl move out at the age of 18. So sometimes already for university or something, but

then there is a reason for it, they usually come back home then, too!”
(Hamza)

Especially among the non-married participants without children, this particular topic was discussed. It often arouses in the context of differences between Germany and Syria regarding the family. The quote shows, that moving out of the parental house is mostly related to two life course changes: Either the child is getting married or he or she goes studying in a different city. Participants clearly perceive cultural differences, since they mentioned that it is common in Germany to move out by the age of 18, whereas in Syria there is no direct age limit. Whereas some disagree on becoming an adult with 18, others advocate this idea. The latter mostly comes in combination with notions of disagreement on parental control. In Syria, parents exert a lot of control over their children. They are fully involved in the child's life course, i.e. what they are going to study or where they are going to migrate.

“In Syria, we have under control. Like, my father controls his child, he shows the way you should move... the right way. Same in Germany, but we have more control. Like, when the father says anything to you... you must do it! Never discuss anything! Even that I studied teacher for children... was not my decision... my family's decision.” (Yaro)

As we have seen before, the family decided on migrating to Germany in order to retrieve a better and safer life for their own child. In this context, the child was old enough to go on his own. That was particularly hard for the father because of the controlling, thus not being able to lead his son anymore. Even though decisions of parents are respected, parental control has been perceived as something rather negative. In Germany, participants experience, that the family has less control over the children and that more privacy is given, whereas in Syrian families, freedom and privacy is rather scarce. Especially now, while living in Germany and creating new diasporic identities apart from their parents, the wish for more freedom and privacy becomes bigger. Besides, to become more independent, to learn how to deal with certain issues by oneself and to create own spaces is highly desired by the participants.

However, these experiences were not only made in Germany, but had already been perceived in Syria before leaving. Among others, these have even led to migration into a country with a Western society in order to live a more self-determined life. Among the participants, Germany is perceived as a very open and free country where people can live more tolerant, private and individualised lives, whereas in Syria the family lives really close together and is too much controlled by the society, a society that is still hold on to traditional and religious norms.

“Imagine me being there and actually being in an age that I am comfortable with my sexuality. I would totally be a different person. What would I do with myself? Should I press myself in getting married? [...] I cannot have the picture of a family that I want in Syria. I can have it here.” (Aaliyah)

The quote shows that being open about homosexuality in Syria is perceived to be impossible, whereas in Germany or elsewhere in Europe living together with a same-sex partner and creating an own image of a family is realisable. For the first time, the own sexuality could be experienced freely in Germany at the age of 18, which played a huge part in entering adulthood.

For young Syrian refugees migrating to Germany without parents is a further, maybe also forced, way to turn into adulthood, since they are on their own and need to be responsible for themselves. Having a different perception on adulthood can make this extremely challenging, especially when used to being led by the parents.

*I took care of my 14-year-old sister. Cooking, eating, washing, [...]school!
And yes, since then my father has been looking at me differently. (Hamza)*

This quote shows an example that young Syrians immediately need to learn how to grow up and show responsibility also for younger family members, while parents are still on the journey to Germany. At the age of 18, he was alone in Germany with his sister for five months waiting for his parents to arrive in Germany. This particular phase made him become very mature. Besides, he gained great respect and trust from his parents, as for him respect within the family is very important within the family.

Even though the participants refuse parental control and wish for more freedom and privacy, they still show great respect. Parents were also seen as a role model. They are being admired about their experiences and knowledge. Family may act as a mirror that reflects of what a person wants to be and influences strongly the development of one's own perception of family.

4.2. Staying connected

Contact plays an important role among the participants to maintain the family network. Mostly, family members are not only divided between Germany or Syria but are also distributed in other countries. It occurred, that a family had been completely separated apart, with the father, the brother and the mother and sister being all distributed in different countries. For multi-transnational families like these, staying connected is particularly complicated. Internet and advanced communication software simplifies to stay in contact and makes it possible to see each other face-to-face, if only digital.

*“Look, my daughter was born in Jordan and my mother is just looking at my daughter... in photo on the mobile phone... every day I send photos of my children. My mother is crying, and I am crying... that is so hard, so hard.”
(Nesrin)*

This quote shows that digital face to face contact cannot be fully replaced by the feeling of seeing each other. It often happens that family members have never seen their own close relatives in person. Like the mother mentioned in the quote above, who has never met her own grandchildren in real life. Also, the participant herself claimed, that she does not know the children of her sisters and brothers. Only with the help of WhatsApp groups, the family can share pictures of relatives with one another and inform on each other's life.

Not for each participant and with each family member is contact equally important. The frequency of contact depends on how strong or weak their family ties are. Regular contact was mostly established when participants show very strong ties with family members. Mostly these ties were shared with parents, siblings as well as nieces and nephews. Several times it was mentioned, that contact became specifically important when a close family member is deceased. The need for regular contact is extremely high to be constantly informed on the health status. However, we have seen in the previous chapter that strong ties may also come together with a rather negative aspect, i.e. that family members are indeed very close in Syria, but there is also no privacy given. Even being strongly attached to family members and underlying the importance of contact, sometimes contact has also been perceived as an obligation. Participants still feel obliged to always inform the parents in Syria on their doing, which creates a feeling of being controlled while parents constantly ask on actions and behaviour.

“I should call them [the parents] every day. [...] In the morning... in the evening, but I make them space, because I have a lot of things to do... not just calling!” (Yaro)

Especially the male participants feel mandatory to contact their parents regularly, whereas they are distracted by other important tasks, such as finding a job and learning the language.

Significantly less, but yet discussed broadly, were remarks about scarce contact with family members, which accordingly come together with weak family ties. Not only was this mentioned among extended family members, but also within the nuclear family.

“My sister and me always try to stay connected. My brother not that much, he always been the second father for me. He never had any care of what I am doing and so on. When he wants to call is because he wants me some stuff to do and so on. My father, I told you, I spoke to him from a while, [...] we are not in contact.” (Aaliyah)

The quote above reflects clearly the relationship to the brother and the father, while claiming that connection had stopped at one point in time, which is, among others, related to the several migratory processes of the family. Also, other participant shared disrupted relationships of family members, which affected their behaviour on contact.

“I have no direct contact, but I do have contact with my mama. I hear what's going on with my brothers. But there is no direct contact.” (Hedda)

As we see in this quote, the mother acts as a mediator, that holds the connection, if only indirectly, between separated family members. The participants often inform themselves about the condition of close as well as extended relatives through their own mothers. Contrariwise, relatives obtain information on the participant's condition through the mother. Therefore, it seems that the mother has a very crucial role in holding together the family network.

4.3. Reunifying or not?

4.3.1. Consequences of Family Separation

Many participants showed that there is at least one close family member who is being sorely missed. Family members have not seen each other for up to six years. Being separated for such a long time creates tremendous grief among the participants. Again, here it gets particularly hard, when close relatives are diseased or when children are included in the separation process. It often happens that men come to Germany alone and leave their family behind, because they cannot afford the journey to Europe for the whole family. Even if possible, to bring them with the family reunification procedure can last years.

“I have a friend, he waited for his family for three years and then his son became a man.” (Derya)

Even though participants did not experience it themselves, it has been often mentioned during the interview, especially while talking about acquaintances. In the mentioned quote above we see, that a man had to wait for so long, that he could not see his own son growing up. Also in the previous chapter we have seen that a mother of a participant is not able to see her grandchildren growing up. In addition, many participants are worried about family members back in Syria, due to the unsafe situation in particular places. For example, participants were concerned about their family since they are living in areas where the army go to houses and rummage

through them. Especially concerned were they about their brothers to be drafted as a soldier by the military groups.

“Right now... they want from my big brother [...] to fight for them. So, right now he spends his time at home, not going out, because of the check point. Maybe they will take him.” (Aabid)

In addition, participants showed concerns about the safety of family members in daily life situations back in Syria. A participant shared this issue while waiting for his father to reunify in Germany. He worried a lot about the father while being in Syria, as he himself got wounded by a bomb once.

“I missed my father, a lot. I always had worries because he was still there and because I know what it is like there. I know if he would just be on the street like that... just like that... something bad could happen to him.” (Hamza)

The last two quotes were only some examples out of many, that describe the consequences and obstacles of family separation.

4.3.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Family Reunification

However, consequences of separation were experienced greatly, disadvantages as well as advantages of reunification with the family was discussed. Concerning the advantages, especially for young male refugees, family reunification may prevent them from displaying criminal behaviour. One participant talked about young male refugees, who would change positively after their family had come to Germany.

“So many who might run amok wouldn't do that if their family was here. Many who... I don't know... abuse girls sexually, would not do that at all. So if they wouldn't be angry [...]. That is no excuse in any case, but there is a reason and the reason is quite clear. There is one thing that (one) sees in all people who do this now [...]. So those who have done really bad things so far had no family, had no one, we're just boys... alone. And single boys alone are the worst thing the world can offer.” (Hamza)

In this, seemingly quite radical, quote, certain behaviour of young males is due to the fact that they are separated from family. We have seen in a previous chapter (see 4.1.1) that parents have great control over their children, and vice versa children show great respect for their parents. Therefore, single young men would behave more positively if the parents were in Germany in order to lead them into the right direction. Whereas this example is only based on the participant's assumption, further advantages were discussed, based on the participant's own experiences.

“The relationship with my sisters is now becoming different here. Like here, I feel like more responsible for my sisters and we need to help each other. We need to be strong here. It is very hard to live here. It is a new culture... a new community... new things to learn. [...] So, we stick together more like before in Syria.” (Derya)

In this example, the participant brought her sister via a long trial to Germany, since she had been diagnosed with cancer and she was supposed to receive better treatment in Germany. Besides, her other sister had also joined her in 2015. The reunification process improved the relationship between the sisters immensely.

“I know, I have someone to depend on, when I am really in need. All the time, I asked them for help in everything and they are supportive. And also me, like, I need to give my youngest sister a really good life.” (Derya)

This added quote reveals the exchange of reciprocal support by the sisters, that has really benefitted the participant’s life in Germany. Support, mentally and financially, has been perceived as crucial and mandatory. Without any questions, school fees, language courses and rents are being paid for the other. This has created high motivation to work hard in order to get a steady income and, therefore, to be able to give the own sister a good life. A further motivation, is to get a permanent residence after several years of working, to be able to visit her parents again and to support them financially.

Another example was described by a participant, that is currently in a trial to bring her oldest son, aged 16, to Germany, which has been a long-term process until now, since she has a subsidiary protection status and been rejected twice. The participant came to Germany with her four children while she had to leave her son with his father in Turkey. The father has been remarried again to a woman who does not accept his son of the former marriage.

“Yes, I would be proud when my son can help me with my children, because my (other) children are still small... and I have great hope when my son lives here. [...] He is always worried about me, because I am always tired. I cannot do the shopping. He can make instead of me or so... Yes, I have hope!” (Hedda)

While not being wanted in Turkey, the son is desperately needed in Germany. Being a single mother of four minor children, living in a refugee shelter and organising the daily life has been very hard for the participant. There is barely time to search for a flat, to go to language classes or even less to find a job. The son could support the mother with everyday tasks, such as buying groceries or getting a job to provide the family with a steady income.

These two examples have shown, that reunifying with family members may have a beneficial impact on their life in Germany. Nevertheless, the disadvantages of reunification have been discussed among the participants as well. Especially the male participants seem to have rather negative opinions on family reunification. On the one hand, Germany is already holding a large number of refugees, of whom many cannot find work or housing and have been stuck in shelters for several years. On another hand, participant discussed, when bringing refugees to Germany there is always the risk of 'bad people' who are trying to change the culture and who are exploiting the law, through fake marriages and counterfeited certificates.

“When I do family reunification, I have to pay for everyone, too. Until now I don't have a job. [...] What is my mother doing here, like, what would she do here? That doesn't work, she can't work and she can't do nothing as well! That is all boring when she would come here.” (Bassam)

Further discussions on reunification often come together with obstacles that participants have perceived, especially regarding their parents. In their perception, elderly people above 60, are not very welcome in Germany, as they cannot work. Following the comment above, it was also

often discussed that parents deliberately do not want to come to Germany as there are not enough opportunities and they would not get along with the different culture and the mentality.

4.3.3. The wish to visit

Besides, their parents do not want to live and reunify in Germany, because they feel too attached to Syria since it has always been their home. Even though, the participant expressed their wish for reunification.

“I really need to see my family. It is really important for me. I know that they won't be happy here. It is hard, it is quite hard to live here in this country. It is not easy. I would love if I could bring them and they could have good treatment and they visit me. But otherwise, there are in Syria. [...] Here, for them, they can't live here.” (Derya)

That comes to a result that participants often expressed an urgent wish to (re)visit and see their family again since there have been years of separation and, as we see in Chapter 4.2., video calls cannot replace real contact. In the quote above the participants expresses the wish to see her parents again, particularly now as her father is sick. Lebanon could be the place where the family can meet again, but for now, more money needs to be earned. Besides, traveling would be much easier for the participant when holding a German passport, which takes at least five years to achieve. Therefore, obstacles for only visiting one another are as present and inevitable as there are in the reunification process.

“I wish to see my mum. [...] I am just asking to see my mum! Is that a huge deal to ask? It is not. The perfect right to have. And we don't have it. [...] Like, if we, if I and my mum, want to go to Lebanon for a lot that we can go back to the country that we are in. At least, we need 2.000€. I don't have 2.000€ with me. I cannot even save 2.000€ with me.” (Aaliyah)

Not only limited visa regulations are perceived as obstacles but also the lacking of financial resources. The quote shows an example of frustration about missing the mother a lot, but there is no feasible way to visit. The participant claimed that the right to see her mother was taken from her since visa regulation is stopping her. Therefore, the right to family life to her perception has been violated by the state and the laws, since she is not able to see her mother at all.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

Based on the theory and the findings, this concluding chapter reacts again to the research question. Before answering the research questions (5.2), the most prominent findings will be reflected and compared with literature (5.1). Finally, the thesis will end with recommendations for further research as well as for policy practices (5.3).

5.1. Discussion of findings

A wide range of perception, ideas, as well as experiences could be collected due to the participants' versatile lives back in Syria, their individual migration history and their diverse development of their new life in Germany. The results are so diverse that I come to the same argumentation like Young & Shami (1997), who argued that "the Arab family" does not exist (see 2.2.1.), that we cannot talk about the one Syrian family here. Nevertheless, prominent finding that has discussed repeating among the participants could be identified, which will be now discussed.

As we seen in chapter 4.1, participants experienced new ways of becoming an adult. Adulthood is strongly combined with marriage and parenthood in Islamic countries (Rabo, 2008). In the context of young Syrian refugees migrating to Germany without the company of the parents, they are often obliged to take responsibilities for themselves and even for younger siblings for the very first time in their life. That creates new forms of experiencing adulthood. Moreover, in Arabic-influenced places, children are educated to absolute respect towards their family and accept the decisions of the parents, who mostly decide directly or indirectly about the future of the children (Rabo, 2008; Abudabbeh, 2005; Habib, 2016). However, it was noticeable, that in the context of migration, young Syrians starting to detach themselves from their parents and their control, while living in Germany on their own for the first time. They desire for freedom and privacy reinforces as they also perceive that Germans are starting to move out of the parental home and become independent from their parents with 18, whereas the family in Syria stays to exercise control over the children. These new desire for independence and the, former mentioned, new experience of becoming an adult are strengthen the characteristics of a transnational migrant, who do not abandon their home culture when migrating to the destination country, but adapt to it and maintain the socio-cultural norms within their new place of residence (Pries, 2011).

In chapter 4.2. it was striking that the mother often functions as a mediator of the transnational family network. This aspect can be reflected in the literature. Abudabbeh (2005) states that hierarchical structures may be reflected in communication structures since the mother is often the mediator between the father and the child. Especially, in patriarchal structures, the men often obtain land and have the authority of the household, whereas in practice the woman is the real manager of the family and use the private setting of the family to demonstrate their power (Rabo, 2008; Joseph, 1999). Within the transnational migration context, we see that the mother still functions as the manager of the family and, specifically in this case, of its network, even though it now crosses border. In addition, statuses often increases for women after migration compared to men that often perceive a loss in their status (Mascini et al., 2012). Therefore, the importance of the mother in the family network functioning as a mediator may even become more important after migratory movements and resulting separations.

Even though family ties remain despite spatial distances during migration processes due to regular contact (Trask, 2010), digital communication does not replace real contact and physical closeness for most of the participants. In addition to the consequences of long-term separation and disadvantages for family reunification in Germany, the participants wish to revisit their family member again, as we could see in Chapter 4.3. Transnational migration studies suggest, that due to globalisation and fast transportation distances are shrinking over the world (Pries, 2011; Buccagni, 2012). Therefore, the family network maintains, among other, due to

migrants visiting their family back home, especially among the migrant groups of qualified employees and international students (Pries, 2011). In the context of refugee migration this freedom of visiting and shrinking distances is not given, because not only financial resources are lacking but also transnational mobility is legally restricted. Therefore, I agree with Boccagni (2012: p. 7) that “an analytic distinction between physical, social, cultural and emotional distance should be obviously maintained, while their distinct combinations should be empirically appreciated” and I suggest to add the perspective of the legal distance for further analysis of transnational families.

5.2. Conclusion

With the help of the three major themes, “Introducing Syrian Family”, “Staying Connected” and “Reunifying or not”, that had structured the findings chapter, the research question on *How do Syrian refugees living in Germany experience and perceive family reunification within the context of their transnational family ties?* will now be answered through the three sub-research question:

How do Syrian refugees perceive family ties while living in Germany?

The first theme “Introducing Syrian Family” showed, that a variety of definitions and meanings of the family had been made by the participants. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that family has a high value in their life in exile, either being separated or reunified. Migratory decisions were made together as a family, while in most cases the safety of the children had highest priorities. Furthermore, the family is perceived as a unity, a closed network, where everyone is interlinked and that makes everyone stronger while steering each other in the right direction. In addition, it was discussed that parents in Syria have great control over their children. Concurrently, Syrians show great respect for their parents. Nonetheless, participants, that now live in Germany for the first time on their own, wish to detach more from the control of their parents in order to gain more privacy, freedom and independence. In Syria, entering adulthood is strongly interlinked with either marriage and parenthood or starting to go to university, which is also the time when children leaving the parental home. Now in Germany, participants have experienced new ways of becoming an adult, since they now need to be responsible, not only for themselves but sometimes also for younger siblings.

How do Syrian refugees maintain or rebuild their family network while being separated?

Data, presented in the theme “Staying connected” showed that contact is extremely important in times of separation to maintain family relationships. Internet eases communication practices such as video calls and formation of WhatsApp groups, in where the whole family meet together to share information and photos. Yet, online communication cannot replace real contact. The frequency on contact depends strongly on the relationship with family members. Strong family ties came together with regular contact, vice versa weak ties with scarce contact. In combination with the latter, it has often discussed, that mothers act as a mediator, who connects, if solely indirectly, separated family members together. Therefore, the mother has an important function in the transnational family network.

What are the opinions of Syrian refugees in Germany regarding the family reunification with separated family members?

Participants feel very attached to their family and have often shown vast grief due to separation. It appears that participants have been discussed disadvantages as well as advantages. On the one hand, participants wish for family reunification as they and their family members could benefit from it. Being together with family may prevent young adults on misbehaving and committing crime since their parents would be there to lead them. Furthermore, participants have

been or will be benefitting on bringing family members to Germany, in order to get support, either financially, mentally or domestically. On the other hand, participants see obstacles and disagree on reunifying being the best choice. Family reunification can also mean that there will be one more person to take care of, particularly if parents who cannot work in Germany, want to be reunified with. Especially, as support within the family is perceived as standard and highly mandatory among the participants. This may complicate the already different situation on finding a flat for the family or finding a job. In addition, parents often did not even want to reunify in Germany, as they would hardly adapt to the culture and mentality. The participants are very aware of the obstacles, also legally, of family reunification. Yet, they have an urgent wish to see their family once again in form of visiting one another, after long time of separations. However, this is also complicated by strict visa regulations and lacking financial resources.

5.3. Recommendations

With the help of applying an interpretative paradigm, conducting in-depth interviews and using a semi-structured interview guide this study could gain an in-depth understanding of the opinions and experiences on family reunification considering the socio-cultural context of transnational family ties of Syrian refugees living in Berlin, Germany. It aimed to understand certain behaviour, perceptions and familial structures regarding the socio-cultural context of family reunification. However, the geographical context is very important to take into account, since this study focusses exclusively on Syrian refugees living in Berlin, a city which is characterised as being cosmopolitical and multicultural. Besides, Berlin has the highest population and second highest population density in Germany (Destatis, 2018). Refugees in Berlin may experience and perceive different obstacles and situations, compared to refugees in more rural areas. Hence, further research is needed in order to see if experiences and perceptions of Syrian refugees living in Berlin differ from other participants living in other parts of Germany.

Furthermore, this research solely reflect on the view of Syrian refugees in Germany, whereas also the social and economic situation of the left-behinds can have a great influence of the transnational behaviour of the family (Bakker, 2014). George E. Marcus (1995) has provided a useful methodological outline of 'multi-sited ethnography' essential to the study of transnationalism. Such research involves 'tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity' (ibid, p. 96). Further research using this particular methodological approach can be extremely valuable to add the view of the family member back in Syria to this study, especially, since we have seen that family members often do not want to reunify in and move to Germany.

Lastly, I would like to come back to the problem statement in the beginning, that the German government shows a strong focus on the quantitative limitation of family reunification regarding financial, organisational and integration resources, but underemphasises the refugees own experiences and perception on family reunification. I would like to suggest that political actions on family reunification topics consider the individual meaning of family of refugees living in Germany. Regarding the findings of this research, an example is to consider the meaning of being 18, as it is differently perceived in the Syrian culture than it is in the German culture. Current legislation on family reunification is only entitled to the nuclear family, whereby this term is derived from Western society and, therefore, "cannot be assumed to be the best option for all families" (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011: p.706). Furthermore, it should be considered that the wish for family reunification is not necessarily equal to the wish to visit. Even though family reunification is not predominantly wanted, the wish to see family members again is urgent and desperately desired.

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Appendices

Codebook

Theme/ theme	Sub- theme	Code	Type	Description
4.1.Introducing Syrian family		Family as a trigger to migration	Inductive	Family based decision on migration. Migrating to safe the own family
		Family as a unity	Inductive	Family as a unity, which only works together with all ist members. A close network, where everybody is interlinked with one another
		Family as home	Inductive	Home more as a feeling and a place, when having relatives around.
		Large families	Deductive	Having a large family including extended family members
		Nuclear families	Deductive	Close family members; the core family
		Transnational families	Deductive	Family members are distributed not only in Syria and Germany, but also in other country
		Family as a trigger to migration	Inductive	Family based decision on migration. Migrating to safe the own family
		Family as a unity	Inductive	Family as a unity, which only works together with all ist members. More like a close network, where everybody is interlinked with one another
		Family as home	Inductive	Home more as a feeling and a place, when having relatives around.
		Large families	Deductive	Having a large family including extended family members
		Nuclear families	Deductive	Close family members; the core family
		Better chances for children	Inductive	Parent hope for better future of their children in Germany, in terms of education, well-being and wealth
		Children as first priority	Inductive	Putting the own children first and oneself behind
		Inner-Syrian Differences	Inductive/ Deductive	Having disagreement and differences within Syria. In Syria they are living different ethnicities, who are very heterogenous in tradition, mentality and culture.
		Respect	Inductive	The importance of respect among the Syrians, especially towards parents.
		Importance of family	Deductive	How important it is to have a family
		<i>Importance of family in diaspora</i>	<i>Deductive</i>	<i>The importance of having their family members in Germany</i>
		Perception on family roles	Inductive	How the roles within family are perceived and discussed
	Meaning of family	Deductive	The participants individual meaning of family	
	Control in family	Inductive	How family members controlling one another. Different from parental control	

	<p>Disapprove family</p> <p>Inner-familistic differences</p> <p>Parental control</p> <p>Parenting</p> <p>Becoming an adult</p> <p>Control from society</p> <p>Cultural differences</p> <p>Control in family</p> <p>Disapprove family</p> <p>Diasporic Identities</p> <p>Disapprove culture</p> <p>Moving out of parental home</p> <p>Trust</p> <p>Respect</p> <p>Responsibilities</p> <p>Wish for privacy and freedom</p>	<p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Deductive/ Inductive</p> <p>Deductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p>	<p>Do not agree with family members</p> <p>Disagreements, Conflicts and differences within the family</p> <p>The control that comes from the parents towards the children</p> <p>The education that parents give to their children in Syria</p> <p>Enter adulthood, not equal to turning 18. Participants facing new experiences of becoming an adult</p> <p>How society and culture and the mentality of Syrian population is controlling the family</p> <p>Differences between Syrian culture and Germany. Issues that participant experienced while living in Germany. Issues they miss, do not understand, and had to get used to.</p> <p>How family members controlling one another. Different from parental control</p> <p>Do not agree with family members</p> <p>Development of new personalities, characteristics, beliefs, meaning over time in Germany</p> <p>Disapproving with cultural norms, coming from religion, society and tradition</p> <p>The time when you move out of your parents. Is different as it is in Germany</p> <p>To build up trust or to lose trust because of conflict/dissapointment</p> <p>The importance of respect among the Syrians, especially towards parents.</p> <p>Responsibilities one shares within the family</p> <p>Participants wish for more privacy and freedom from their family, especially parents, since they live(d) very close to the family.</p>
4.2 Staying connected	<p>Changes in Contact</p> <p>Importance of Contact</p> <p>Mother as a communicator</p> <p>Obstacles in contact</p> <p>Rarely Contact</p> <p>Regular Contact</p> <p>Changes in family ties</p>	<p>Deductive</p> <p>Deductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Inductive</p> <p>Deductive</p> <p>Deductive</p> <p>Deductive</p>	<p>How the contact has changed within time; Contact changes due to migration and seperation</p> <p>Contact is very important among the participants. Not only in seperation, also in general. It is part of the culture.</p> <p>The participants check on their siblings and relatives through their mothers and vice versa</p> <p>Issue came along with inner-familistic differences. Participants need to change location when contacting their parents, because she lives with her boyfriend, which the family disapprove on</p> <p>Mostly along with weak family ties. Participants have not a lot of contact with some family members. Mostly this relates to extended family members, but also to the father (mentioned by one)</p> <p>Mostly along with strong family ties and with close family members (mother, father, siblings), Contact at least once per weak, but sometimes also mentioned with obligations.</p> <p>How ties with family members changed after migration and over time</p>

	Strong family ties Weak family ties	Deductive Deductive	Having close relationships with family members Having distant relationships with family members
4.3 Reunifying or not?			
4.3.1 Consequences on Family Separation	Consequences on separation <i>Fear for family in Syria</i> Experience on Separation Separation as a decelerator for integration	Deductive <i>Deductive</i> Deductive/ Inductive Inductive	The consequences that participants face themselves but also at other refugees while being separated with family members. <i>As an outcome for consequences, it appeared that participants being concerned about family that are still in Syria.</i> The experiences and the process that refugees had with their family members while fleeing to Germany May also accord to reunification as an accelerator for integration. Meaning that separation has a negative impact on integrating into German society.
4.3.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Family Reunification	Advantages for reunification Disadvantages for reunification Family as an accelerator for integration Family as a decelerator for integration Obstacles for Reunification Process of Reunification Reunifying in diaspora Wish for reunification in Germany Disapprove politics Oldest son as a provider Syria is home Unfamiliar and unknown legal system Moving out of parental home Support in family Financial Support <i>Remittance</i> Reciprocal Support	Deductive Deductive Deductive/Inductive Deductive/Inductive Inductive Deductive Deductive Deductive Inductive Inductive Inductive Deductive/ Inductive Inductive Inductive	Positive aspect on reunification. How refugees could benefit while reunifying. Negative aspects on reunification in Germany. Problems while reunifying Own family could be helpful for integrating into German society; learning German, finding a job... Own family may deter indirectly the integration process into German society; learning German, finding a job, finding a flat... Obstacles that appear while being in the reunification process, Issues that may hinder the refugees to do reunification Explanation on the process of the reunification with family members. Experiences with reunifying with family outside Syria The wish that participants expressed to reunify with close family members in Germany Disapproval with politics in Germany and Syria, as well as global politics The oldest son of the family takes the role of the father, when he is absent, to provide for family members. Syria is the place where the people belong, where they grew up and what is home for them. Syrian refugees being unfamiliar with the legal system and bureaucracy of Germany, that leads to obstacles in family reunification The time when you move out of your parents. Is different as it is in Germany Supporting tasks that participants do for family members, which haven't listed exclusively Supporting the family with money <i>send money back to family in Syria</i> Supporting one another. Give and receive support

	Support household	Inductive	Family members to help out in the household, e.g. take care of the children
4.3.3 Wish for visit	Wish for visit	Inductive	After discussing disadvantages and obstacle of reunification. It seems that the participant are more willing to just see their family members once again! More like a visit
	Obstacles for visiting	Inductive	The obstacles participants face for visiting or meeting with family outside Germany (and Europe).
	Family as a right	Inductive	The right for having, seeing and being with the own family. The right to family life

Interview Guide

Master Thesis: Perceived meaning of family ties among Syrian refugees in Germany

Interviewer: S.Stroisch

Interview No.:

Introduction

Hello, my name is Sophie and I am a Master Student of the course "Population Studies" at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences of the University of Groningen. This interview is conducted in the context of my Final Thesis in which I want to explore the perceived meanings of family ties as well as the experiences of family reunification in Germany among Syrian refugees. The questions I am going to ask you will relate to this topic. I would like to underline, that I am particularly interested in your individual stories and experiences from your own point of view. All you have to share with me is very valuable for my research and is highly appreciated. There will be no wrong answers! Everything you will tell will only be used for academic purposes by the researcher and the supervisor and will not be shared with other parties. To guarantee your anonymity, your name will not be used (or any other information, which can be directly lead to your person). I also would like to point out, that I conduct this interview only in the function as a researcher. I am neither a volunteer worker nor am I political active in any case. I do not have any contacts with policymakers, journalists or any other actors who have an influence on any family reunification matters. The interview will be recorded as nothing will be left out in the analysis. I also like to point out that participation is at any point in time voluntarily. You are always free to interrupt and end the interview. Before we start, I would like to ask you to sign this consent form to assure that you have agreed to participate in this interview and to be recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening Question:

For the start, can you tell me something about you?

Probes: Age, Education, Family status, Occupation, Year of escape/move, Hometown in Syria

With whom did you come to Germany?

With whom do you stay/ live now in Germany?

Probes: close/extended family members

Family (Ties)

In general, how would you define family for yourself?

Probes: members, (economically) security, support, social integration

Whom do you count to your close family?

Probes: Who? Why? intimacy, belonging

Do you see differences of family between the Syrian and German context?

Do they differ also from other Syrians?

Probes: terminology, meanings, state regulations, religions, practice, members?

Do you see similarities of family between the Syrian and German context?

Probes: terminology, meanings, state regulations, religions, practice, members?

Communication

How would you describe your relationship with family members in Germany?

How would you describe your relationship with family members in Syria?

Probes: contact, which family member

How do you usually communicate with family members abroad?

Probes: frequency, medium, with whom?

How often do you usually have contact with your family members?

What does contact with family members mean to you?

Probes: support, care, important, expected, obligatory, emotional

Separation and Reunification

Have relationships changed family members changed by the process of migration?

Probes: differences, communication, importance of ties, emotional bonds

How was it for you and your family members to separate?

How do you now experience the distance with family members?

Probes: separation, emotional, joint or individual decision

How do you experience the limitation of family reunification by the German government?

Probes: difficult, extended family members,

Would you like to reunify with separated family members? Why? Why not

Probes: who, extended family members, integration, well-being, separation trauma

Closing Questions

From your perspective and experiences, do you think German politics can improve regulation and limitation regarding the reunification policy? How would they look like in your opinion?

Do you have any other important issues you like to add, which in your opinion have left unnoticed in the interview?

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

Thank you very much for your participation and time!

Consent Form

Master Thesis: Perceived meaning of family ties among Syrian refugees in Germany

Researcher: Sophie Stroisch

- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the study after the interview before the thesis has to be submitted, and to decline to answer any individual questions in the study.
- I understand that my participation in this study is confidential. Without my prior consent, no material, which could identify me will be used in any reports generated from this study.
- I understand that all information I provide will be kept confidentially as a password protected encrypted file on a password protected computer.
- I have had the opportunity to discuss this study. I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.

Please circle YES or NO to each of the following:

I voluntarily participate in this research.	Yes / No
I consent to my interview being audio-recorded	Yes / No
I approve that this interview and the results will be used for academic output.	Yes / No
A pseudonym of my own choosing can be used in this research	Yes / No

If YES

Please state fictional name here: _____

“I agree to participate in this individual interview and acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form and the research project information sheet.”

Name: _____

Signature of participant: _____ Date: _____

“I agree to abide by the conditions set out in the information sheet and I ensure no harm will be done to any participant during this research.”

Name:

Signature of researcher: _____ Date: _____

Information sheet

Research Title: *The perceived meanings on family ties among Syrian refugees in Germany: under the particular consideration to the family reunification policy*

Researcher: Sophie Stroisch (s.stroisch@student.rug.nl, Tel: +491774424318), Masterstudentin in Population Studies der Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Nederlande

Supervisor: Bettie Oosterhoff (a.t.oosterhoff@rug.nl), Faculty of Spatial Sciences, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Background

The study is part of my Master thesis, which serves as the final thesis of my Master studies in Population Studies at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Netherlands. The issue is based on the current regulation of the family reunification of refugees in Germany. Negotiations on quantitative restrictions have been politically widely debated and discussed in the literature. However, the restriction that the reunification only refers to the core family remained, yet, largely unaffected. Therefore, the study aims to understand the socio-cultural context of the family ties of Syrian refugees in Germany. Furthermore, the experiences and restrictions of refugees with regard to the current regulation of family reunification will be examined in more detail.

Research questions

What are the meanings and perceptions of family ties from the perspectives of Syrian refugees in Germany?

1. How do Syrian refugees maintain or rebuild their family network while living in exile?
2. What are the refugees' experiences with the limitation of family reunification concerning the individual perception of family ties?
3. How are family ties embedded within the social-cultural context of Syrian Refugees in Germany?

Methodology

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the individual meanings of family ties among Syrian refugees, a qualitative research design is applied. 8-10 in-depth interviews will be conducted. The interviews are only recorded auditive and transcribed afterwards. The transcripts are encoded using Atlas.ti software for subsequent analysis. The resulting data will only be accessible to the student researcher (Sophie Stroisch) and her supervisor (Bettie Oosterhoff). Data itself is anonymized as far as possible. In the Master Thesis and in presentations, the data are presented in such a way that they cannot be traced back to a specific participant. Participants have the opportunity to receive a summary of the research results after completion of the analysis process.

Participants

I am looking for Syrian refugees who are currently in Berlin, Germany. Participants should be fluent in either English or German. As the rules on family reunification for subsidiary protection are particularly limited, refugees with subsidiary protection status are given priority in recruitment. Participation in the interviews is always voluntary, i.e. the participants can withdraw from the study at any time before the submission of my master thesis. Nevertheless, participants should be motivated and able to talk about their experiences. There are, of course, no costs for the participants, nor is any incentive planned.

If you or a person in your institution know someone who meets the requirements and is willing to participate in an interview I would be very happy if you could contact me. The individual experiences and stories of Syrian refugees are incredibly helpful and valuable, not only for my research but for a general understanding in society. A participation is highly appreciated by me.

Thank you in advance!

Sophie Stroisch

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