

Family context and personal social networks of refugees in Germany

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Nearly 71 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2018, 29.4 million of whom are either international refugees or asylum seekers (*UNHCR 2019*). While the great majority flees to neighbouring countries, the on-going conflicts and political instabilities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and various Sub-Saharan African countries have led to sharply rising numbers of people arriving in high-income countries. Germany is one of the major destination countries with more than 1.5 million first asylum applications, mainly submitted by men and women from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea (*BMI/BAMF 2019, BAMF 2019*). Due to these developments, the admission and integration of refugees has been in the focus of controversial discussions in politics and the public in Germany. Therefore, in Germany, most studies – across different disciplines – deal with issues of integration and participation of forced migrants. Up to now, there are only very few studies focusing on families of refugees, although it is clear that families play a crucial role both for the decision to migrate and for integration and participation in the country of destination.

Forced migration has been characterized as traumatic. Refugees have often experienced persecution, imprisonment, rape, and torture in their countries of origin or during their migration route. Also, in their countries of destination, refugees may continue to deal with social isolation and exclusion, conflicts with cultural expectations and mainstream institutions, role changes, as well as identity crises (*Bernier 1992; Lamba/Krahn 2003*). In this context, family relationships can be a “source of support for one another during a traumatic situation” (*Chambon 1989*) and an “important anchor in a world turned upside down; sometimes remaining the only stable social structure in an otherwise disintegrated society” (*Staver 2008*). Furthermore, it can be assumed that family relationships have an indispensable function with regard to social and material security due to inadequately developed welfare state systems in their countries of origin. From this point of view, family relationships in the home country are also a crucial resource that goes beyond the purely emotional content (*Geserick et al. 2019; Nauck 2004*). Once at destination, the role of the family can become ambivalent, particularly if family and kinship relationships are regarded as an integration alternative and all social contacts take place within the kinship network. Thus, there might be the risk that extensive family contacts will absorb a variety of social needs and constitute an institutional system competing with the host society to cope with everyday problems. This might reduce the frequency of contacts with persons of the host society. Previous research has confirmed the importance of these social contacts and interactions for migrants’ integration, such as their integration into the labour market (*Esser 2001; Kanas et al. 2012; Lancee 2010, 2012*). In this case, familial ties and a strongly familialistic orientation can become an obstacle to integration (*Geserick et al. 2019; Nauck 2004*).

Although researchers have acknowledged the positive role of formal and informal social ties in the settlement process of immigrants, few have observed this phenomenon among refugees. Fewer still have offered a comprehensive and systematic analysis of refugees’ personal social networks (*Lamba/Krahn 2003; Siegert 2019*). In order to fill this gap in current research and to contribute to the relatively small body of research on family structures and arrangements and their interrelation with personal social networks of recent refugees, we aim to answer the following research questions: How does the family structure and the place of residence of close family members determine the size and composition of the personal social network? What other personal and family characteristics as well as structural conditions are important in shaping refugees’ social networks?

2. Data

To answer these research questions, this paper makes use of a so far unique dataset, the refugee sample of the *German Socio-Economic Panel (IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees)*. The sampling frame of this survey covered all adult individuals (aged 18 or older) who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2016 and who have filed an asylum application at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) or were hosted as part of specific programmes of the federal government or of a federal state (*Bundesland*), regardless of the outcome of their asylum procedure and their current legal status. Therewith, the dataset contains representative data on persons who applied for asylum in Germany between 2013 and 2016 (*Kroh et al. 2018*). The second wave of this panel contains questions not only on the current family situation, the whereabouts of family members, as well as detailed socio-structural and legal aspects, but also on personal social networks (*Brücker et al. 2019*).

3. Preliminary results

The family arrangements of refugees in Germany are diverse (*Kraus/Sauer 2019*) and patterns of forced migration are different for male and female refugees (*Kraus/Sauer/Wenzel 2019*). These results are confirmed by our descriptive analysis on place of residence of close family members and size and composition of personal networks (Table 1). Our definition of close family members includes the spouse (for persons in a relationship) and possible children, as well as living parents and siblings. In the second wave of the refugee sample have been included questions on significant people with whom one can talk about personal thoughts or feelings. Up to five people and their relation to the respondent could be named. If the mentioned person was not a family member, a follow-up question concerning the person's origin was asked (either from a) Germany or from b) the country of origin or c) another country). Preliminary results show that there are slight differences in the number of persons in the network according to the place of residence of close family members. While men whose close family members are all living in Germany name on average 2.23 significant other persons, those with at least one family member in Germany name 2.01, and those with all family members abroad name 1.65 persons. This order is the same for refugee women with slightly higher values for those with family members in Germany and much lower values for those with all family members abroad.

Table 1: Network size and composition by place of residence of close family members (in per cent)

	Men				Women			
	At least one close family member in GER	All close family members in GER	All close family members abroad	Total	At least one close family member in GER	All close family members in GER	All close family members abroad	Total
Size of network								
Number of significant persons mentioned (mean)	2.01	2.23	1.65	1.96	2.08	2.38	1.36	2.09
Composition of network								
Nobody mentioned	7.4	9.1	21.0	10.2	4.6	3.6	28.0	5.1
Only partner	31.1	13.0	5.2	24.6	27.0	10.7	0.0	24.4
Other family members	44.0	56.7	35.7	43.4	54.6	64.8	36.0	55.2
Non family members, same origin	9.4	10.6	24.6	12.5	7.8	12.2	30.0	9.0
Non family members, other origin	8.1	10.6	13.5	9.3	6.1	8.7	6.0	6.4

Data: IAB-BAMF-SOEP, wave 2, 2017 (unweighted percentages)

Regarding the composition of the network, 10 % of the men and 5 % of the women indicate that they have no significant person, with whom they can talk about personal thoughts or feelings. 68 % of the men mention only family members and 21 % at least one non-family member, whereas nearly 80 % of

the women name only family members and 15 % at least one non-family member. These results vary substantially according to the place of residence of family members. If at least one family member is living in Germany, 75 % of the men and 82 % of the women indicate only family members as relevant network persons and nearly 18 % resp. 14 % non-family members. If all close family members are living in Germany, the proportion of non-family members is surprisingly slightly higher. If all close family members live abroad 41 % of men and 36 % of women indicate only family members as significant others and nearly 38 % resp. 36 % at least one non-family member (Table 1).

In order to test if the association between different family arrangements and the place of residence of close family members and the size and composition of personal networks is robust, we estimated different logistic regression models, controlling for other variables that might shape the composition of one's network. In the first step, we examined the chance of having mentioned at least one non-family member in the group of significant people versus having mentioned only family members (M1). In the second step, we analysed the chance of having at least one non-family member originating from Germany or a third country versus having mentioned only family members or non-family members from the same origin (M2). The respondents who have indicated that they have no significant person with whom they can talk about personal thoughts or feelings were excluded from the analysis sample.

Table 2: Different logistic regression models predicting the composition of networks (odds ratios)

	Model 1 (Only family members mentioned versus at least one non-family member mentioned)	Model 2 (Only family members & persons from country of origin mentioned versus at least one person from Germany or a third country mentioned)
Sex (ref. men)		
Women	0.804**	0.828
Age at arrival	0.968***	0.981***
Citizenship (ref. Syria)		
Iraq	1.005	1.690***
Afghanistan	0.717**	1.043
East-Africa	1.359*	0.968
Other African countries	2.00**	2.334***
Duration of stay	1.015***	1.011
Years of schooling (ref. 0 – 6 y)		
7 – 11 years	0.881	0.789
12+ years	1.225*	1.145
Place of residence of family (ref. all family members abroad)		
At least one family member in GER	0.372***	0.695**
All family members in GER	0.339***	0.588**
Family size	0.947***	0.940***
German language proficiency (ref. not good)		
good + medium	1.330***	1.996***
Social identification – origin (ref. weak)		
strong	0.749***	0.673***
Labour Force Status (ref. nor working)		
Working, internship, education	1.074	1.410**
Constant	1.989***	0.234***
Pseudo R-squared	0.101	0.0718
N	3,757	3,757

Data: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Sample, wave 2, 2017 (unweighted); missing values in independent variables included as separate category, but coefficients not displayed.

* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Beside place of residence of family members, several independent variables controlling for basic demographic and migration-related aspects were included in the models like sex, age at arrival,

citizenship and years of schooling (Table 2). Furthermore, a variable controlling for the size of the family was added to the models. The labour force status was included in order to control for opportunities to meet other people via work or education and German language proficiency as an indicator for the possibility to get in contact with persons of the majority population. As an additional independent variable the social identification with the country of origin was included as a crude proxy for one's transnational identity.

Preliminary analyses show that women are less likely to name non-family members (M1) and that there is a negative association of age and a positive of duration of stay. People originating from Afghanistan, East-Africa and other African countries have a higher propensity for having mentioned non-family members than people from Syria. Respondents who attended school for 12 years and more are also more likely to mention non-family members as important network persons. In contrast, the opportunity of meeting other people via work or education (operationalized by labour force status) does not seem to be relevant for the composition of the network. This could be a hint that persons outside the family have been known from the country of origin already or the migration route to Germany. Persons who have a medium or good knowledge of German language are more likely to name non-family members than persons with only a low knowledge of German language as well as respondents with a weak identification with their country of origin are also more likely to have important persons outside the family. It also has to be considered that possibly persons who share their personal thoughts or feelings with people outside the family have learned faster German. Persons outside the family might also lead to weaker connections with the country of origin. Thus, this causal link might be bidirectional and no causal interpretation can be made. Those persons whose close family members are living in Germany are less likely to mention significant persons outside the family in comparison to respondents whose complete close family is living abroad. Also, the size of the family is important in the sense that a smaller family size is associated with a higher propensity for having mentioned non-family members.

By taking a closer look if at least one non-family member originating from Germany or a third country has been mentioned (M2), it could be revealed that there are only minimal differences between both models. Some of the independent variables which have been important in the first model do not show statistically significant effects, such as sex, citizenship for some origin groups, duration of stay, and years of schooling. But the association between the composition of the network and German language skills as well as social identification with the country of origin is very similar. Here, respondents whose close family members are living in Germany are also less likely to mention significant persons who are not from the same origin in comparison to respondents whose entire close family is living abroad. However, in this model the labour force status seems to be crucial for the composition of the network – a clear hint that opportunity structures matter for meeting people who are not from the same origin.

In summary, also under control of other independent variables the place of residence of family members and the family size could be confirmed as important predictors for the composition of personal social networks of refugees.

4. References

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