With the head in two places:

Experiences and Support among Separated Refugee Families

A Multi-Sited Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the subjective experiences of separated refugee families awaiting family reunification to the EU. While a lot of the European public attention and research has been directed towards the increasing number of asylum seekers since late spring 2015 'coming here', a lot less is known about the implications of 'leaving there'. Instead of focusing on only one aspect, this research connects the here and there of migration as a three months multi-sited field research was conducted in Germany and Lebanon. Inspired by ethnographic research methods in the collection and evaluation of data, 19 interviews with separated families were analysed in order to look at both sides of separated refugee families – those who leave and those who stay behind. Not seeing refugees as detached individuals but rather as strongly connected members of affective systems, a family perspective was chosen to clearly point out how intrinsically the here is connected to the there and to understand what effects the rupture from the family and the familiar takes on separated family members.

Combining the data of the field research with the concepts of transnational families, ambiguous loss and social support, this study sets out to to answer the main research question: how do separated Syrian refugee family members experience and cope with the absence of the other while awaiting official family reunification in the EU? The results of this research are structured into several chapters with most attention being paid to transnational social ties and how separated families are able to support and console one another from a far by looking at instrumental, informational and emotional support.

Even though separated refugee families share certain aspects with other transnational families, they are dramatically circumcised in their choice of coping strategies to maintain familyhood as well as only limited predictability and degree of control over family union. Since official family reunion was not regarded a given outcome, separated refugee families had to face an ambiguous loss characterized by uncertainty and powerlessness. While all family members faced the same situation of an unclear loss, there was a significant difference in the ways the different family members experienced the absence of the other.

Trying to support one another at distance, most families were unable to provide the most needed instrumental and financial support as they could only rely on informational and emotional support to show some sort of involvement in the lives of the absent others. Feeling like having little in their hands to improve each other's situation, the least that could be done was not to worsen the other's situation by retaining unsettling news about the unsure prospects of family reunion or the emotional state, a strategy that was adhered to on both sides but with certain differentiations. The

rather controlled exchange of information and emotions led not only to partly uneased communication but also caused family members not to be double but separately embedded in both local contexts.

While the forceful separation of families puts the family members already in a vulnerable situation for anxiety and worry, the lack of meaningful support functions at hand made the experience of separation even more burdening.

Key words: Ambiguous Loss, Reunification, Separation, Social Support, Transnational Families

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1 Introduction

'My head is in two places. My mind is thinking here and there. It is not normal.'

This is how Amira[1], with her son Ahmad sitting on her lap, described the separation from her husband, who remained in Syria as there was not enough money for both to leave together for Germany. Even though the right to family union is a widely recognized fundamental human right and anchored in international, European and German law, Amira has been separated from her husband for more than 10 months and is one of the current 65 million displaced persons (UNHCR, 2016a) of whom many are separated from their families. Closed borders, besieged cities, lack of funds, missing documents, and slow bureaucratic procedures are just a few examples of the outcome of protracted family separation, which in turn drastically alters the daily lives of the separated family members as responsibilities are newly distributed, uneasy role changes occur, and family members live with steady worries about the others' well-being (Wilmsen, 2011). The hardships and challenges resulting from the family's separation, however, are not only faced by those who stay behind but also by those who leave, who shoulder the responsibility to arrange a better future for the families and have to cope with the burdening thought of having left behind their significant others in an often dangerous environment.

During eight months of employment in emergency accommodation shelters in Berlin, I witnessed how the rupture from the family and the familiar took a heavy toll on refugees who were separated from their families. Some would partake regularly in the offered activities but retreat at one point for several days and tell me that they could not join for any workshops as they were thinking constantly about their family and all their problems. The many talks with fathers, sons, mothers and children who were separated from their families showed me how closely the ‘here’ is attached to the ‘there’ (Procter, 2000) and led me to the idea to conduct three months of multi-sited field-research in Berlin, Germany, and Lebanon (February to April 2016) to look at both sides of separated families in order to grasp the implications of family separation at the subjective level: how do separated Syrian refugee family members experience and cope with the absence of the other while awaiting official family reunification in the EU? By looking at similarities and differences of the experience between those who leave and those who stay, the study will further answer the following three sub-questions: what concrete challenges arise for separated refugee family members after one parent has migrated? How are separated family members affected by the living situation of the significant other? What forms of instrumental, informative and emotional support take place

1 All names of the informants have been changed.

between the family members to console one another?

Discussing forced family separations, it is not only important to bear in mind the aforementioned various reasons that keep families apart but also to point out that there is a general abundance in constellations of forced family separations. While families being split within the same country are mostly limited to reunite as there is no possibility of movement, the transnational separation also imposes legal obstacles to family reunification as manifold requirements have to be fulfilled for the right to reunification (Staver, 2008). In addition to this, there is a fundamental difference in regard to who left the family. The migration of a child, one of the parents, or another key relative result in strikingly different living arrangements and are therefore fundamental to the experience of family separation. Being aware that family separation is thus an easily conflated term as it might also include the separation of non-refugee families, this study focuses on the parental migration of Syrian refugees to Germany. Even though the perspective of the migrating parent as well as the family which stays behind is taken into account, none of the 19 interviewed separated family members were married to one another, with the exception of one case (see ethical considerations).

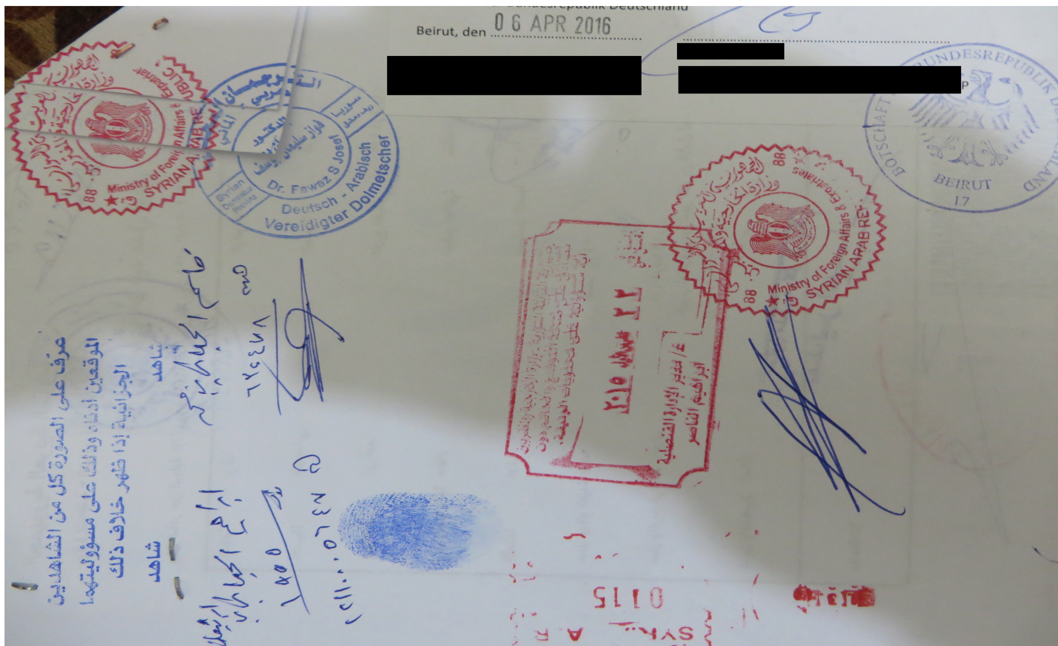
Besides personal motivation, this research is relevant as there was a long-lasting and only recently changing tendency in academic literature to treat those left behind as passive recipients, as the migration literature can be said to have thus "far 'left behind' the 'left behind'" (Toyota et al. 2007; p. 158; Mazzucato, 2011). Even though those left behind are currently more and more put in the centre of research, the subjective perspective of the non-migrant kin continues to be neglected as many studies focus on economic and political factors (Chereni, 2015). By combining the subjective and the family perspective, the displacement experience of both sides can be better understood since the refugee is not a single detached individual but rather embedded in a meaningful social and emotional network that heavily affects his/her well-being (Staver, 2008). Furthermore, this study aims to fill a gap in knowledge since large parts of research on separated families are related to labour migration or migration of choice, but much less has been written exclusively about those who were forced to flee (Wilmsen, 2011). Having introduced the scope of research, the procedures to family reunion will be shortly explained to prove the study's relevance not only from an academic angle but also from a more practical perspective.

In Germany the right to family reunion in the context of asylum is only applicable to those who received the international refugee status (§25, §30 and §32 AufenthaltG, 2016). In the case that the asylum-seeker is merely granted subsidiary protection, family reunification is not possible until two years after the day of the decision as ruled by a national law from March 2016 (Bundesregierung, 2016). While 96,8% of Syrian refugees were granted the international refugee

status in 2015 (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016a), a significant change in decisions occurred within the first four months of 2016 as 16% of Syrian asylum-seekers were only granted subsidiary protection (Pro Asyl, 2016b) turning family reunion for many Syrian refugees from an expected outcome into a merely hoped for possibility. Even though the duration of the asylum procedure varies from case to case, on average it took 8.1 months in 2015 for the German authorities to decide over an asylum request (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016b). Only after, and if, international refugee status is given, family reunion can be requested and families are able to apply for reunification via online appointment platforms at the German embassies abroad. At the moment the waiting times for these appointments are extremely long as the next appointments for example in Beirut, Lebanon were only free from April 2016 after 14 months (Pro Asyl, 2016a) and already in September 2015 people had to wait 12 months for their embassy appointments in Turkey (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015). On the day of appointment, the family has to arrive with all children and present the necessary and prior officially legalized documents (passports, wedding certificate, birth certificate). While this study mostly looks at the burdens of uncertainty and family coping strategies during the protracted separation, another study could be easily filled with the hardships and limited feasibility for family reunion caused by strict document requirements, the incurred costs, and the threats of crossing borders as there is longer an operating German embassy in Syria and many families, especially Palestinians, face security issues when trying to cross borders, let alone leave their villages (Sebastian, Muy 2016; Amnesty International, 2014; Pro Asyl, 2016a).

Depending on the completeness of the documents that are handed in, another 3 to 4 months pass before the visa is finally issued and plane tickets can be bought. Having interviewed the director of the consular and social affairs at the German embassy, a minimum waiting time of 2 and a half years was estimated (Clemens Kohnen, 2016). This stands in stark contrast to the expectations of the families that were interviewed as they thought on average family reunion would take place six to nine months after the arrival in Germany. It follows that many families found themselves in a situation of separation for an unexpected long length of time which let several challenges arise for the migrant and those left behind, while at the same time many means to support one another were blocked due to the specific context of forced migration. The study is thus also particularly important at this point in time as the growing numbers of asylum-seekers who started arriving in the EU in the late spring of 2015 began to receive their asylum decisions and a large part of the newly arrived are eligible for family reunion (Pro Asyl, 2016a). However, since most European governments are rather unwilling to take on more refugees in the form of family reunion or to speed up the procedures, protracted family separation will remain a tremendous problem for displaced families and additional hindrance to integration for many asylum-seekers

(Clemes Kohnen, 2016; IRIN, 2015; ICRC, 2014).



Picture 1: One of the many necessary documents for family reunion: Officially legalized wedding certificate

1.1 Theoretical Conception

As there is no grand theory of migration to thoroughly discuss the experiences and challenges of separated refugee families awaiting family reunion in the EU, Portes advocated to use a set of mid-range theories to help explain one's specific findings by linking them to different but appropriate concepts (1997). In order to shed light on the experience and coping strategies of separated refugee family members awaiting reunification, this study relies on the concept of transnational families, ambiguous loss theory, and the theory of social support which will be more elaborately in the beginning of each following chapter. The concept of transnational families deals with separated families and how these develop, maintain, and negotiate bonds of emotion across distance (Baldock and Wilding, 2007). While the research area is vast and ranges from child care at a distance to selectivity of migration and the importance of remittances (see Glick, 2010 for full review), most strands of research focus on the negotiation of changes in the gender division of labour, gender relations and ideologies, and intergenerational relations as a result of separation (Landolt & Wei Da, 2005).

Even though the concept of transnational families highlights the most relevant peculiarities of family life at distance, such as the importance of transnational social ties between separated family members (Boccagni, 2010; Baldassar, 2007), the concept's broad scope would categorise separated refugee families just as another separated family. Wishing to clearly delimit the

experiences of separated refugee families from other migrant families, the theory on ambiguous loss will be therefore introduced to highlight how uncertainty and limitations in choice are the most prominent characteristics of separated refugee families (Boss, 2009; Wilmsen, 2011, 2013). Unlike other conceptions of loss, ambiguous loss theory describes an unclear loss where someone or something is physically absent but psychologically present, and the resolution to grief is complicated by the fact that there is the eventual possibility of resolving the loss through long and uncertain periods of waiting for family reunion (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). Last but not least, the theory of social support will serve as a more precise tool-kit to look at transnational social ties and the different means of supporting the significant other at distance (Boccagni, 2015). While social support in general is understood as support provided by significant others in order to buffer stressful experiences (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988), different functions of support may be relied upon in order to do so: instrumental support (tangible, hands-on assistance), informational support (advice and sharing of information) and emotional support (assurance, affection) (Wills & Shinar, 2000).

Introducing the study's structure, the first chapter discusses the study's methodology and informs the reader about the process and choice of qualitative data gathering, data evaluation and composition of informants. In the second chapter the concept of transnational families will be introduced as the overarching framework discussing the particular characteristics of separated families. However, as this concept is quite broad, there will also be a discussion on how separated refugee families differ from other transnational families in the third chapter by using ambiguous loss theory in order to show how uncertainty and the limitation in choice affects the families' experience. Divided into three sub-chapters, the fourth chapter introduces social support theory to better understand the involvement at distance and how families are (to a certain degree) able to affect each other through instrumental support, informational support and emotional support.

2 Methodology

As this study deals with the experience of family separation, the research was based on qualitative methods in order to focus on the subjective perception and different coping strategies. One advantage of qualitative research is that it allows fluent dynamic process in gathering data (Seale et al., 2004). Instead of arriving with predetermined ideas, previous field research showed me that initial assumptions often do no hold and therefore a rather inductive approach was chosen. Trying to shed light on the individual experiences, the collection of data relied mostly on ethnographic research methods: few cases were studied in detail with social phenomena explored through fieldwork and data collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observations (Barker, 2012). However, it is important to emphasize that even though this research

was inspired by ethnographic methods, it does not fully qualify in all aspects as an ethnographic study since the length of the stay (3 months of field research in two places) was arguably too short and the extent of involvement in the informants' lives differed among the two interviewed groups (see David, 2009). While I worked with most of the informants in Berlin for several months and met them casually after I stopped working, I did not have the same access to the separated families in Lebanon as I met most of them for the first time at the day of the interview. While ethnographic methods were nevertheless highly helpful throughout the data collection, it would go too far to categorize the study as strictly ethnographic.

2.1 Multi-Sited Field Research and the Field

With the ambition to understand the consequences of family separation from both sides: the ones who left and those who stay behind, a multi-sited research method was chosen in order to conduct interviews in Berlin, Germany as well as in Beirut and the Bekka valley in Lebanon. The reasons for choosing both locations were rather pragmatic. In Berlin I already knew many asylum-seekers waiting for family reunion who were willing to do interviews themselves or knew other people who could help me by translating. Since the security situation in Syria did not allow for any field research, Lebanon was chosen as the destination as the Levantine Dialect is spoken in both countries making it easier to find Arabic speakers who were willing to help with the translations of interviews. In addition to this, Lebanon has the highest Syrian refugee population ratio, 4,5 mio Lebanese population and 1.070.854 refugees (UNHCR, 2016b) and last but not least during the interviews in Berlin it was often said, that Lebanon is easier to reach for Syrians than Turkey or Jordan and caused most families to apply for family reunion via Beirut. From all the neighbouring countries of Syria, Lebanon seemed to be thus a promising research case.

The essence of the multi-sited approach is to follow connections, people, and relationships across space, since some social phenomena cannot be understood by merely focusing on one side (Fazon, 2016). While the multi-sited ethnographic approach has been strongly criticized by prominent academics like Hage who regard the multi-sited undertaking merely as a fancy buzzword and lacking any means to produce thick knowledge as the researcher deals with plurality instead of diving deeply into one context (Hage, 2005), Marcus, one of the founding fathers of multi-sited ethnographic research, argued in order to represent the sort of multiplicity caused by identities and activities of multiple agents in varying places it is not enough to focus on one context (1989). Akin to Marcus, I follow Castle's reasoning: “if the dynamics of social relations transcend borders, then so must the theories and methods used to study them” (Castles, 2003, p. 23). It is not about neglecting the importance of depth, but rather reaching a deeper understanding by grasping the

eventual complexities and multiple causalities which arise from a geographically distant site (Horst, 2016). With this understanding of multi-sited research and a certain blurring of the field, a clear definition of the field is needed as the main aspect of anthropological studies is based on the extent to which the researcher relies on experience from the field (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997).

Since today's world is infinitely interconnected and overlapping, it is essential to choose a cautious construction of one's field of study to delimit its constituent relationships from any other possible contextualization (Amit, 1999). Therefore it is not enough to merely define a field by setting geographical boundaries (Clifford, 1992; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, 1997). Doing research on the experiences of separated refugee families, the field of this study is best described by the translocal relations between the family members (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004) as this definition enables the researcher to look at the flow between the local contexts of the families: their living situations, experiences of family separation, how the families communicate and affect one another.

2.2 The Informants

During three months of field research in Germany and Lebanon, 19 interviews with separated Syrian refugee families were conducted (see appendix 1 for overview of informants). In Berlin I spoke to 10 persons (8 men, 2 women) whose families were still residing in Syria, two living in Turkey and one residing in Lebanon. All informants arrived in Germany at some point in summer 2015 (May – July) and at the time of the interviews the informants were separated on average for 9 months from their families. All were staying in government shelters and only two had already received their residence permit (international refugee status). Whereas the men arrived without their children, the two women arrived with their only child (both 2 years old).

In Lebanon I interviewed 9 families (8 female headed, 1 male headed) whose spouses left for Europe between March and October 2015 and have been separated for roughly 8 months (many also experienced prior phases of separation). Most families had two children and five families knew of their husband having received the residence permit but only two of the families were already notified when they will have their appointment at the embassy. Apart from one family awaiting family reunion to Holland and the male-headed family actually residing in Syria, all informants lived in Lebanon and were to go to Germany. Even though not all 19 families shared the exact same circumstantial context (e.g migrant in Germany – family in Syria), this study looks upon the experience of family separation from a rather phenomenological perspective and therefore all interviews were included in the analysis. However, the different contexts such as the diverging living situations of families residing in Syria or Lebanon play an important role and will be considered throughout the analysis. While it was very difficult to find a larger number of families

sharing the exact same circumstances, country of residence and at the same stage in the family reunification process, the data's richness is seen as an advantage as it allowed for the differentiation of various groups and contexts.

In addition to the interviews I conducted with separated refugee families, I also spoke to 6 institutions and NGOs involved in family reunion or providing support to refugee families: the German embassy of Lebanon, Berliner Beratungs Zentrum (German NGO in Berlin providing help and support throughout the process of family reunion), International Committee of the Red Cross (the primary NGO to restore family links), UNHCR, Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (cash assistance programs), and International Rescue committee (NGO offering psychosocial support for women). Even though these interviews were highly informative, they do not play a role in the analysis as they served rather for the accumulation of background knowledge.

2.3 Approaching the Informants

Doing field research in both sites, snowball sampling served as the primary means to access informants via the provision of contact information from other informants (Noy 2008). There were several reasons why this approach was opted for. Most importantly, snowball sampling activates "dynamics of natural and organic social networks" and therefore develops a certain degree of trust (Noy 2008, p. 329). Being aware of the fact that speaking about the protracted separation from one's family is a very emotional subject to talk about, I did not want to appear as a complete stranger at an interview. Instead I relied on informal contacts (friends of friends, people I already interviewed), who were able to approach potential informants in their role as relatives or friends to present me and my research intention.

After having worked in an emergency shelter for refugees in Berlin, I stayed in contact with many Syrian refugees. Once I started my field research, many of them helped me as interpreters or arranged meetings with other Syrians who were awaiting family reunion. In many interviews, the informants mentioned that they would not talk to a stranger about their difficult family situation, but since they knew me they trusted me enough to share their stories. Having played a lot of football with Tarek during his stay at the shelter he told me after the interview:

> *"I will never sit, talk and make an interview with anyone. Especially talking about my family. Only because we respect you, we trust you – only because of you I talk about this. Otherwise I would never say anything about my family."* (Tarek)

Syrian friends from Berlin who already arranged some interviews for me also gave me

Syrian contacts living in Lebanon who could help me with my research. Like that I met Firas who lived together with his mother in the Bekka valley (the region bordering Syria with the highest number of Syrian refugees). Since the mother worked at a woman centre she knew several separated families and together the three of us went to interview four families. After having contacted two grass root organizations I was invited to present myself and my research. Having learnt about my research intentions they decided to support me in my undertaking and put me in touch with four women who were awaiting family reunion. Through a friend from my Arabic class I also was put in touch with a father and his son waiting for family reunion. Even though I used the snowball system differently in Berlin (the refugee shelter being the big snowball) and in Lebanon (several smaller snowballs), I met all informants after they heard about me via a person who they trusted. This increased the interviews quality since more information is disclosed when the interviewee-interviewer relationship has a degree of trust to it (Dundon & Ryan 2010).

Picture 2: Firas and his mother on the way to our next interview.

Another advantage of snowball sampling derives from the informants taking the first step towards the researcher. By their voluntary willingness to partake in the research without being directly asked, the classical, asymmetrical power relation is undone and a more comfortable interview setting emerges (Noy, 2008). In addition to this, the snowball method enabled me to find hidden populations. Just as many NGOs working with refugees have tremendous bureaucratic and protective barriers before allowing to do research with their beneficiaries, waiting in front of the German embassy for families who have their appointment seemed as a very awkward alternative. Instead, I relied on the vast social networks of my informants who knew other families in the same situation and were happy to put me in touch with them. This did not just make finding informants easier but also served as a sort of constant feedback mechanism: if the interview had gone wrong, I would not have been forwarded to other families (Noy, 2008).

As helpful as snowball sampling is portrayed, it would be naïve to turn a blind eye to the loopholes and weak spots to this approach. By using a respondent-driven sampling mechanism, the researcher automatically gives up a lot of control (Heckathorn, 1997). One no longer knows who one will speak to the next day and utterly relies on the information provided by the linking person. Therefore this kind of sampling does not guarantee for a great representability of one's data set. The informants in Berlin for example were all friends of people I met at the emergency shelter and arrived more or less at the same time. Therefore, the snowball system may keep the researcher in a social bubble where experiences might be very differently discussed than in other social groups (Noy, 2008). Nevertheless, it was deemed more important to have a somewhat trust-based circle of informants rather than a representable group of informants, especially when researching emotional topics like family separation.

2.4 The Interviews and the Language Barrier

Since the research followed an inductive approach, the conduct of semi-structured interviews allowed the informants to lead the conversation and highlight aspects that might have been overlooked in the conception of the loose interview guidelines. Closely related to unstructured interviews, the semi-structured interview, however, maintains a small degree of control over the interview as the researcher prepared a set of themes and questions to be covered at one point in the interview (Barker, 2012). The core themes of the interviews to be touched upon in every interview were: decision for family separation, change of living situation after separation, receiving and providing support, expectations of family reunion, communication and waiting (see appendix 2 for interview guideline). By not following a strict chronological order asking about these themes, a comfortable and natural setting developed, allowing the informants to "open up and express

themselves in their own terms, and at their own pace" (Bernard, 1988, p. 204 in Barker, 2012).

On average the interviews took between 60 and 90 minutes. In the beginning of each interview I presented myself elaborately. As the first minutes of an interview are decisive in order to turn from a stranger into a person to be trusted (Kvale, 2007), a lot of time was taken to explain the motivation for this research and express gratitude for the informant's willingness to be interviewed. After having asked for permission, I was allowed to record all interviews in order to better focus on the points raised by the informants and not being distracted by jotting down notes. In contrast to previous worries, informants were generally very open to speak. In the beginning difficulties were expected talking to women about their family's situation, being a stranger and male foreigner. The women however were very willing to share their thoughts and stories. Some even thanked me in the end as they deemed the interview as very relieving like Yana, a working mother taking care of three children all by herself who said 'I felt more comfortable having told you everything. I spoke form my heart because I was tired and it was good that you were here.' Often the conversations continued for quite some time after the interview as many informants in Lebanon had lots of question about Germany and the everyday life. Since there was no budget to pay the interview participants, this was the least that could be done to give something back in return.

The interviews in Berlin took place individually in the informants' rooms of the government shelters and in Lebanon I spoke to the informants either at their home or at their work (some worked and volunteered in grass root NGOs and another woman wanted to talk to me at a hostel where she worked as a cleaning lady). Speaking to informants in their houses helped the general interview atmosphere as they felt safe and relaxed but as a downside many women would have to take care of their kids every now and then or they were even in the same room the whole time. Upon being asked if it were not a better idea for the kids to leave the room since serious topics were discussed, some women agreed, whereas others did not see it as a problem. Also, there were signals of reluctance to speak about occasional family tensions as some family members where either sitting next door or in the same room. These problems were not present when interviewing informants at their workplace but also the repeated disturbance by co-workers interrupted the interview flow at times. It occurred often that I was invited to a family's house and spent the first ten minutes speaking to the woman's brother or whole family. In these moments the opportunity was seized to ask some general questions before asking if it were alright to speak to the wife alone in the room next door. I asked this questions only after I had the feeling that it was understood why I am here and the interpreter confirmed that it would be alright to ask at this point in time. Sometimes there was no need to ask as the men or other relatives left the rooms by themselves.

Picture 3 & 4: Interview settings in a shelter in Berlin (3) and a shared flat of a Syrian family in the Bekka Valley (4).

One of the biggest hurdles doing interviews was the language barrier as many informants did not speak English. In combination with the lack of funds to hire professional translators, I relied mostly on the voluntary help of non-professional interpreters. As a product of not hiring professionals, there were distinct levels of English. Even though the interpreters' translation were written down one to one in the later course of transcribing, no quotation marks ("...") are used when quoting informants, as one cannot be sure if that was actually exactly *how* the informants expressed it. Instead I use single quotation marks ('…') to reproduce the informants' statements and ideas. By choosing voluntary, non-professional interpreters data might have been lost in the course of translation but by the same token a good interpreter's characteristics are not only defined by his linguistic skills. To a certain degree the interpreter has a "double role of interpreter and researcher as she or he is also co-constructing meaning, organizing study logistics and acting as a cultural ambassador" (Harris et al. 2013,p. 408). Whereas the researcher can only smile in the background and try to come over as friendly as possible, the atmosphere and outcome of the interview lies to a large extent in the interpreter's hands and words (Harris et al. 2013). Throughout the course of time I met more and more Syrian and Lebanese people who were willing to help me translate. A small network of interpreters thus came about through informal contacts. Even though most interviews were translated by Syrians, twice a Lebanese helped with the translations. Being aware that this might have an impact on the informants, it was clearly asked far in advance if it were alright if a Lebanese would translate the interview. None of the two informants opposed to this.

The interviews I had with the NGOs and the German embassy were quite structured and straight-forward as I had a clear idea on which questions I wanted to ask. Before every NGO interview I skimmed through the transcribed family interviews and picked topics or statements which were mentioned by the families but could be seen differently from an institutional

perspective.

2.5 Transcription and Evaluation of Data

In order to work with the recorded data, all interviews were transcribed according to a simple transcription method since the study focuses rather on content than how precisely informants intonated, emphasised or pronounced their statements (Kucartz et al., 2008). Even though every word has been taken over and very strong emphasis was marked, pauses and or filling words were left out in order produce an easily readable document to work with (see Dresing & Pehl 2013, pp.21-22 for the rules of the chosen simple transaction method).

After the recordings had been thoroughly transcribed, the method of qualitative content was chosen for the "interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh 2005, p.1278). Of the several forms of qualitative content analysis, the conventional content analysis (Hsieh, 2005) was used as it does not rely on preconceived categories (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002) to formulate categories and coding but rather pursues an inductive approach allowing categories to flow from the data and not theoretical concepts (Marrying, 2000). Apart from this method reflecting the inductive approach of the study, conventional content analysis is a useful study design to describe a phenomenon and especially appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited (Hsieh, 2005). After having read through the collected data several times to obtain a sense of the whole data (Tesch, 1990 in Hsieh, 2005), the data was read word by word to come up with different codes. Having written the key themes and findings down into first thoughts of what the analysis may consist of, the whole data was revised again in a second phase of analysis formulating sub-codes and reflecting upon the established categories (Marrying, 2000). After the final formulation of categories and having coded the data, relevant theoretical concepts were sought for and applied to the established categories to analyse the study's findings. Here, it should be pointed out that the wealth in collected data serves as the fundamental focus of the study and at times it is prioritized to give more space for the insights in data than lengthy literature reviews of theoretical concepts.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Being aware of the emotional laden context of separated families and understanding that social science should not only serve scientific but also human interests (Kvale, 2007), all data was anonymised and new names have been given to the informants when referring to quotes. To further guarantee the informants' anonymity, all data in the overview of the informants was abstracted as much as possible. Concerning the well-being of the informants, the interview guidelines and the

questions' appropriateness were discussed in advance with the supervisor. In addition to this, it was made very clear at the beginning that the interview could be paused or ended at any point if the informant felt that the questions were inappropriate or talking about the family was too hurtful. Whenever an informant was fighting with tears, this was repeated and little breaks were initiated (e.g. glass of water). Following the approach of informed consent (Schnell & Heinritz, 2006), a lot of information about the study's purpose was provided in order let the informant take an appropriate decision whether to partake in the study or not. In order to avoid making false promises, I was quite blunt from the beginning on how little effect I or my research project will have to hasten family reunification. All of this information was expressed in the first five minutes of the interview before the informants were asked if they were still willing to partake in the interview.

In order to conduct a self-critical preparation and execution of research, it is paramount to identify possible areas of tension which might harm the participants of the study (see Krause 2016 for the "Do-No-Harm Approach"). Having learnt within the first interviews in Berlin that many migrants would not tell the whole truth to their families, it was a conscious decision not to interview both sides of the same families. Not wanting to find myself in the uneasy situation where my answer to a family's question would contradict the migrant's version I kindly turned the offers down to interview the migrant's family via Skype. However, one exception of interviewing the husband in Berlin and his wife in Beirut took place. This only occurred because I was offered several times by the husband himself to meet his family after he heard that I will go to Lebanon. He was the only informant with family in Lebanon and I thought this way I might get access to other separated families. Both parties were assured before interviewing that I would not disclose what I talked about with the other. Another ethical consideration concerned the children. Even though their experiences were also part of the research, no children were directly interviewed as talking to children about stressful events should not be left to someone untrained to do so (Docherty & Sandelowksi, 1999). Instead, questions about the children were directed only to the parents.

2.7 Terminology

While there is no internationally accepted definition on family due to the cultural and regional abundance in family definitions, the definition of family is context-related (Fourlanos, 1986) and for the purpose of this study, family is defined within the legal realms on family reunification: the nuclear family consisting of the spouse and children under the age of 18 (Art. 4 (1), EU Directive on the right to family reunification 2003). The term official or legal family reunification aims to describe regular resettlement of the family in contrast to irregular migration where families cross borders in order to reunite the family by illegalized means.

3 Separated Refugee Families = Transnational Families?

In order to shed light on the experiences of separated refugee families, the concept of transnational families serves as the point of departure since this framework does not only deal with separated families in general but also hints at some aspects which have to be considered in order to grasp the challenges and particularities of family life at distance. Being aware of the broad and inclusive nature of the concept, this chapter also touches upon some of the fundamental distinctions between separated refugee families and other transnational families.

3.1 The Concept of Transnational Families

The concept of transnational families originated from the broad field of transnationalism, but more specifically the work of Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc who recognized a crucial shift in contemporary migration and introduced the idea of the chronically interconnected transmigrant (Kvisto, 2001). Focusing on the fact that migration means more than just departure, the character of migration was framed as a "a process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and of settlement" (Glick Schiller et al., 1994:6). In the course of migration, social fields are established that transcend geographic, cultural, and political borders (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p.6) as "transmigrants construct and reconstitute their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society" (Glick Schiller et al., 1995, p.48).

Since the word transnational was introduced in the context of family and migration studies only in the late 1990s, one could argue that the transmigrant or transnational families have existed long before since any family which retained relations across the boundaries of kingdoms, empires or nation states could be included (Skrbis, 2008). In contrast to Skrbis, Bryceson and Vuorela define transnational families more narrowly as "families [where family members] live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely 'familyhood', even across national borders" (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002, p. 18). Following the definition of Bryceson and Vuorela, geographical separation is thus not the sole aspect of transnational families but rather touches upon the conception of Glick Schiller et al. that the continuity of family bonds and the mutual sense of belonging serve as the primary characteristics. Studying transnational families, it is thus essential to look at how mutual attachment compensates for physical separation, and how family members negotiate the distance through their ways of doing family (Baldassar and Merla, 2013; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011).

To understand how familyhood is continued at distance, attention has to be paid to the social ties and emotional connectivity between the migrant and the family. The term trans*national* families is actually a bit misleading at this place and should be replaced or at least understood as trans*local* since it is mostly privatised ties originating from specific local communities that shape separated family life (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004; Boccagni, 2010). Boccagni describes the reciprocal social ties between separated kin as „any social relationship and practice 'at distance' that allows immigrants to exert relevant influence on the social lives of those behind and vice versa that allows the latter to impact the life course of the former in significant ways" (Boccagni, 2010, p.186). It follows that even though separated family members may be geographically far away from one another, their strong emotional ties allow them to affect one another (Kvisto, 2001). In order to better understand how the involvement of family members from a far support and affect one another, the theory of social support will be introduced as a supportive conceptual tool at a later stage.

Following the migration of a parent, however, a change occurs not only in the means of communication and support but also in the established patterns and roles that organize and give meaning to the demands and commitments of the family (Graham et al., 2014; Toyota et al., 2007). Especially, gender and generational differences play a big role in the experience of family separation and will be discussed throughout the study. In order to understand how families have to continue to meet the same needs but within a dramatically changed context (Rigg 2007; Landolt & Wei Da 2005), one should look beyond the concrete, visible family interactions, e.g. phone calls, money transferral etc. (Nobles, 2011; Vertovec, 2004), and also focus on the emotional level (Skrbis, 2008; Chereni, 2015). According to Skrbis, emotional contents pervade transnational relationships and should not merely be seen as occasional and convenient resources which are simply used to explain peculiarities of transnational family life. Instead "emotions are to be understood as constitutive of the transnational family experience itself" and shared by both the migrant and the family (Skrbis, 2008, p. 242). Due to the strong ties between the family members, a more or less regular flow of affections, information and material resources is established, and causes both sides to be double embedded within two separate social systems: here and there (Boccagni, 2010).

Even though the concept of transnational families highlights which aspects are of importance when analysing family life at distance, the concept is rather inclusive and due to the broad definitions, the causes for the separation of a family as well as the diverging implications are neglected. The emphasised connectivity of family members in different location holds for a long-

term contracted and well-paid migrant worker just as much as for a forcefully displaced and separated family. Both examples can be encapsulated within the same social phenomenon of family separation, yet the everyday realities and challenges are barely comparable at best. Transnational families are thus by no means uniform as "there is not only one type of transnational families, but rather a continuum of familial arrangements" (Landolt & Wei Da, 2005, p. 647). To render the great variety for reasons and more importantly the consequences of migration visible, it is worthwhile to take a look at Rigg's concept of "lines of influence" to get a better understanding to what extent separated refugee families differ from other transnational families (Rigg, 2007, p. 174; see Table 1).

Table 1: Lines of influence (Rigg, 2007, p.174).

Lines of influence	Possible outcomes/questions to be asked
1. Voluntary or involuntary?	Voluntary migration is much more likely to be livelihood enhancing and wealth generating than involuntary movements.
2. Accumulation, consolidation or survival?	Migration can be interpreted as part of a survival strategy or of a strategy of consolidation or accumulation. What drives migration: prosperity or destitution?
3. Livelihood diversification or livelihood specialisation?	Does migration contribute one, perhaps relatively minor, element in a complex system of household occupational multiplicity (pluriactivity) or is it a central pillar in a less diversified livelihood?
4. Poor, middle or rich?	For poor individuals and households with few assets, migration may be a case of moving to survive. For the very poor or ultra poor, lack of resources may be such that migration is impossible. For richer households, migration is more likely to lead to a degree of accumulation of both financial and human capital (skills)
5. Male or female?	Male/female migration tends to be selective in terms of who goes, where they go and what they do. In addition, source households often have varying calls on the income of the migrant depending whether they are male or female
6. Older or younger?	Younger migrants are more likely to migrate as part of a life-cycle experience (a rite of passage). Households' call on their income is consequently less. This will vary, though, according to the wealth status of the household. Older, married migrants are more likely to migrate with a clear economic/livelihood logic and rationale, and work and the fruits of work will be selected and transferred accordingly.
7. Household strategy or individual choice?	Can we see a migration event as part of a wider household strategy (who decides?) or as an individual choice, sometimes made against the wishes of the wider household (parents)?
8. Labour deficit or labour surplus?	Is the source household (and community) in labour surplus or deficit? How have other activities, and particularly farming, adapted in response?
9. Rural–rural, rural–urban or international?	Rural–rural migration will usually be less remunerative than rural–urban movements which, in turn, will be less rewarding in economic terms than international labour migration.
10. Economic transfers (remittances) or no economic transfers?	Are funds remitted? How much and how regularly? This provides an insight into question 7 above, particularly. How are funds used? This provides an insight into questions 2 and 4 above. In addition, what of other transfers (consumer goods, for example)?
11. Encouraged or resisted?	Is an individual migration event resisted or encouraged by the household? If it is resisted, how does this resistance evolve over time? A migrant who leaves against the wishes of her or his household (e.g. a daughter) may in time come to be seen as a central and necessary element in a household's livelihood.
12. Circular (seasonal), irregular or long-term?	One-off migration is likely to be motivated by a different set of factors than regular, seasonal movements (circular migration).
13. Staying or moving?	Which households and their members don't move, and why?
14. Leaving or quitting?	Are 'leavers' also 'quitters', and why and when might migrants abandon, rather than just leave, their source villages?

By formulating 14 questions, Rigg looked at the factors that need to be considered in order to understand and assess the different goals, decisions and processes of migration as well as the impact on those who are left-behind (Rigg, 2007). Without looking at the motivation why a parent

decided to leave, why the family did not migrate together, and to what extent the families have a degree of power over their reunion, one would turn a blind eye to the essential differences between transnational families. It is thus fundamental to point out that family separation should be much more regarded as an outcome of specific circumstances and not merely a temporal state or condition. With the lines of influence in mind, attention will paid to the 19 families interviewed for this study in order to clarify how separated refugee families come about, why their experiences are of a specific nature and what kind of support mechanisms are blocked.

3.2 The Peculiarities of Separated Refugee Families

In contrast to other constellations of transnational families where separation is often much more driven by choice, the interviewed families termed family separation frequently as an unavoidable outcome. Wishing to speak for all Syrian women, Hanan, who lived alone with her two young daughters in Beirut, explained 'it is the same situation for everyone... We are all in the same situation of having no choice.' The loss in choice resulted from the deteriorating living conditions in Syria and the neighbouring countries in combination with the extreme difficulties for refugees to legally enter the EU. Since families were not willing or able to migrate together the illegal way due to the lack of money to pay for all family members, safety concerns, or the involvement of the (extended) family (Fleischer, 2007), for many there was no alternative to the family's separation (see table 1, point 13).

Drawing on Rigg's "lines of influences", the outcome of family separation was constantly portrayed by the families as being survival or destitution-driven (see table 1, point 1 & 2). Informants described how the decision of leaving Syria was forced upon them due to the everyday risks of living in the war-torn country: the destroyed houses, the closures of schools (UN Human Rights Council, 2016), but also the general pessimism concerning the country's future as one informant explained: 'there is no future in Syria for the coming generations. Why would we stay? We have nothing, everything is destroyed'. For those fleeing from Syria to Lebanon, it was rather the lack of work and opportunities that posed the principal reasons for later family separation. Due to the difficulties of finding work, 33% of Syrian refugee households in Lebanon reported of no family member being employed and those who were employed worked on average only 15 out of 30 days a month (UNHCR, 2015, p. 5). As a result 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon were living below the poverty line of 3,84$/day (Lebanese Government & UNHCR, 2016, p. 13) and due to the increasing rent prices (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2014; Caritas, 2016), many families were no longer able to make ends meet as their economic situation was steadily deteriorating. Like Zaineh, a mother of four children who used to live with her husband in outer Beirut, many families came to

realize 'in the end, the situation was so bad that he had to go'.

Differing from regular migrant families who are able to return home on visits and thereby are more likely to ensure an intact family relationship over long periods of separation (Baldassar, 2007; see table 1, point 12), the displaced are not able to return back home due the general insecurity and the significantly limited right of movement for asylum-seekers as long as their cases are not decided and the necessary documents for travel are not yet issued. The control over unity thus lies no longer in the families' hands, as it is not the joint efforts that counts but the bureaucratic processes of the asylum system that determine who will be reunited and when. The asylum system's procedures and rules do not only keep the families from predicting the date of their reunification but also strictly prohibit the migrating parent from working and providing for the family back home. Whereas remittances and other forms of direct support are essential for transnational families to compensate for the physical absence (Parreñas, 2001), the restriction of employment for certain time periods after requesting asylum thereby puts additional pressure on the separated refugee families (see table, point 10).

Characterized by involuntary movement and abrupt changes, refugee families are often not able to follow long-time prearranged plans and well informed considerations like other transnational families (Jastram & Newland, 2003). Compelled to flee at different times or along different routes due to restricted opportunities or resources at hand, many families explained how their initial plans often did not succeed and eventually culminated in separation as an unintended result. Thereby the temporary strategy of family separation at times turned into an accidental, protracted separation (Sample, 2007). Deviating from other transnational families that might separate for a predetermined duration of time, in the context of forced migration it is thus not uncommon for families to go through unexpected and extremely long phases of separation and being split up several times. Uncertainty is thus a central aspect of forcefully separated families, making it extremely difficult for families to plan ahead and giving lots of room to negative potentiality instead of stability and assurance.

It follows that the forceful separation is not the result of a clear-cut decision but rather an unavoidable outcome characterized primarily by uncertainty and limitations in choice. Even though separated refugee families qualify as a transnational family, they might be best described as transnational families of circumstances (Wilmsen, 2011), highly distinctive from other constellations of separated families. However, separated refugee families should not simply be portrayed by negation and comparison to other transnational families' coping strategies. Instead the theory of ambiguous loss will be applied in order to better understand how uncertainty and the limitations in choice create a degree of helplessness and constant worry which form the

fundamental characteristics of separated families within the context of asylum and the wait for official family reunion.

4 The Experience of an Unclear Loss

There was a manifest contrast in expectations and reality concerning the duration of separation as nearly all informants stated they learnt from friends and the internet that it would take between six months and one year before the family will be reunited in Germany. In contrast to the rather precise temporal expectations prior to the departure, at the time of the interviews no one knew how much longer it will take before the family would be reunited again and only very few dared to express a time estimate ranging from one to two years longer than expected. The only fact that most informants did know, was that they will have to wait for a very long time, as it was shared knowledge that the appointments at the German embassies were only given out for the next year. Regardless of the prolonged waiting periods, nearly no one spoke of official family reunification as a given outcome or only being a question of time. Adding to the widespread incertitude, a new German law was passed in March 2016 and ruled that family reunion will be suspended for two years in such case as the asylum-seeker is only granted subsidiary protection and not the refugee status (as discussed in context sub-chapter). As a result of these changes in jurisdiction and decisions-making, the uncertainty stretched from "when" to "if" family reunion would occur within the legal channels and led to a certain perception of loss.

4.1 The Theory of Ambiguous Loss

Just as material things (house, wealth, capital etc.) can be lost in the context of forced migration, it is often the loss of agency, social support or the very concrete loss of beloved ones that may trigger a variety of emotional, physical, and behavioural responses (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). Instead of understanding loss as a clear-cut finality, the theory of ambiguous loss, formulated by Pauline Boss, goes beyond the simple concept of losing someone or something (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002) by focusing on situations of unclear loss resulting from uncertainty, whether a beloved one passed away or is alive, absent or present (Boss, 2007). There are two scenarios where ambiguous losses occur - when a loved one is either physically present but psychologically unavailable, or when they are physically absent but psychologically present (Boss, 2004). Whereas the former describes the challenging family circumstance of dementia or Alzheimer and is irrelevant for this study, the latter fits quite well to the circumstances of protracted family separation. Due to the time-consuming family reunion procedures, the changing legal contexts as well as the dangerous environments of the conflict zones, it is uncertain how long the family will

have to await the reunion and if it will occur at all. The family members have no option but to keep living with the paradox of each other's presence and absence (Boss, 2009). In addition to this, forcefully separated families hope to be reunited but they are also aware that they and the family life will not be the same as it used to be before (Boss, 2007). The consequences of family separation therefore took many burdening forms and spurred the families to escape this situation of uncertainty as fast as possible. However, the families' determination to be reunited as soon as possible was obstructed by the waiting procedures of the German asylum system and therefore they experienced a degree of powerlessness which is characteristic to situations of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2007). Since the loss is unclear and occurs beyond one's sphere of influence, boundary maintenance is replaced by boundary ambiguity (Boss, 2004), as family members experience great difficulties with the coping and grieving processes of a loss that is feared but not yet certain (Boss, 2009).

Even though the theory has its origins in the realms of clinical family therapy, it is easily incorporated into studies on migratory processes (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002) since the individual as well as the family serve as a unit of analysis and the psychological and social perspectives are equally integrated (Boss, 2004). Socially seen, family roles are confused, tasks remain undone and the family is immobilized whereas from the psychological perspective cognition is obstructed by the ambiguity and lack of information, freezing of grieving processes and putting decisions on hold (Boss, 2004). Applying this theory to separated refugee families, the theory's scope touches not only upon *someone* eventually being lost – the spouse, father, mother or children - but also *something* eventually being lost – namely the togetherness of family life.

4.2 Waiting between the Here and There

Separated refugee families awaiting official family reunion did not only have to undergo times of worry, uncertainty and weariness, but also faced unbendable legal rules rendering them powerless to accelerate their reunion by their own means (Rousseau et al., 2004). As it lied in the hands of the authorities to handle the documents and ultimately decide on the permission, the families had no choice but to wait. Instead of the monotonous, long act of waiting that was wearing thin on the migrants, it was rather the state of uncertainty that the families who stayed behind complained about. The long delays not only created a lot of space for negative potentiality (Boss, 2004) but also started to weigh down on the family members and partly also on their beliefs for official family reunion to happen. Since there were very few signals that the families could rely on to indicate how far they were in the process of reunification, it was a common idea not to have precise expectations about when family reunion might happen, as Haya whose husband left 8 months ago said 'I am afraid that those will not hold and I will get even more frustrated'. According

to Boss, the uncertainty of the timeframe of separation as well as the inability to guarantee the family's well-being causes feelings of ambivalence that can lead to immobilization and anxiety (2004). This fits well into the waiting experiences of Bana, who lived together with her son and her step family in Beirut and described her everyday life as something 'in between despair and waiting'. Waiting, because she could not do anything but hope of hearing good news and despair because there were so many rumours about family reunion, for example people who arrived in Germany without families are sent back to Lebanon. 'I cannot know what is the true story. When can I go? If he will be back? If we are losing money? If the future will be better? I cannot know because a lot of people say a lot of stories.' For Bana, just as for most other families that had to wait for family reunion to happen, the combination of lacking information as well as the perceived powerlessness result in increased anxiety. Regardless of how much information spouses were willing to exchange, no migrant was able to say with confidence when their family might be reunited. Coming back to the importance of informative support in Chapter 5.1.3, there was a general lack of information that turned the eventuality of family reunion even more uncertain and the experience of ambiguous loss more intense (Boss, 2009).

Picture 5: The Germany embassy in outer Beirut.

The only points of reference on how far one is in the process and how much longer the condition of ambiguous loss has to be endured were the migrant's interview for the residence permit, and the notification of having received the permit or the embassy appointment. As these crucial moments often did not happen within the initially expected period, unrest emerged. The cluelessness about the family's future was only aggravated by the migrants' inability to grasp and explain why the procedures were taking so long, referring to them as 'chaotic and random'. Having heard that asylum-seekers have their interviews normally three months after they arrive, Nour became more and more scared and asked if the authorities might have lost her husband's file since he had been in Germany for 6 months without an interview. Just like Nour realized quite early on that family reunion will take even longer than expected, uncertainty and the fear of negative potentiality did not cease the further the families were in the process of family reunion. Having received the residence permit and already having requested an appointment at the embassy, Haya got nervous because normally three months after the request one would receive a confirmation email but this did not happen 20 days after she was supposed to get one. The delays in family reunion are thus expected at any stage and, even though reaching the next step was deemed important in order to sooth the family's anxiety, uncertainty was infinite as there were still many delays expected along the way to further postpone family reunion. Apart from spurring unrest, the uncertainty about the family's prospects also puts decisions on hold (Boss, 2004; Frost & Hogett, 2008), making it difficult to plan ahead in times of waiting, as Haya explained:

> *'Even when something breaks in the house, I am not fixing it because I am not taking decisions on the long term. But at one point I have to eventually do it. But it bothers me because I feel like I am spending money for nothing. I am in a state of waiting.'* (HAYA)

Awaiting family reunion can be thus described as waiting in a situation of limbo. Family members want to move in order to be reunited but are to stay put for an indefinite time until further notice. Caught between the here and there, another clear boundary maintenance is challenged - the family member is absent for an indefinite time but at the same time the person is not lost (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2002). As a consequence, family members found great difficulties when trying to arrange the "loss" since it was not a definite loss and there was the possibility to be reunited by official, legal or even illegalized means. Many families were therefore unsure how to judge the family's separation (Boss, 2009). Even though there was a shared notion of family separation being bad for the family but probably best for their current situation, Bana had already been separated from her husband for nine months and explained how, until the time the interview was conducted,

she could not say if separation was a good or bad idea: 'you have to wait for the next step. Something will happen. Wait for next step, then you can judge.' In line with many other families, Bana's statement shows how ambiguity ruptures the meaning of loss, as family members are frozen in both coping and grieving (Gergen, 2006). An uncertain yet irresolvable situation does not only challenge the human's need for finality but also leaves families few alternatives but hope that the loss is not final (Boss, 2009).

Due to the many pressures resulting from family separation for both sides, it was frequently made understood that family separation is considered a temporary loss since families were not willing to adapt to live separately from one another for the long-term – separated from his two young sons and wife Nizar said 'my family is my life. I can't wait for years, not seeing my family' Like many other migrants he considered other means of family reunion to snatch back control and agency over their future.

4.3 Trying to put an End to the Wait

All informants agreed that the circumstances of separation were harming the families and that they need to be reunited as soon as possible. Asking if there is anything that could be done to fasten up family reunification, most families that stayed behind shook their heads whereas many migrants mentioned the possibility of bringing the family by illegal means. Even though making the family cross the sea was mostly regarded as 'plan C or D' by the migrants due to the safety considerations and often also the lack of money, many began to reassess the risks against the prospect of prolonged family separation. Frustrated by the delay in one's asylum procedure and the slowly encroaching loss in hope for official family reunion accompanied by steady worries about the families' well-being, many men set their own time limits. If no news about one's residence permit was to be received over the next few months, the families would be asked to cross the sea or some even considered to return to their families, meaning to have wasted a large sum of money to finance the journey to Europe for nothing. Whereas some informants continued to regard crossing the sea as too dangerous, others like Sayid who initially refrained from this undertaking suffered too much from anxiety and uncertainty. Wanting to be together again with his wife and 3 year old son he began to contemplate:

> *'I am thinking of trying to get my family here illegally but it is dangerous to get them by water. I tried it myself, I know the feeling. [...] no 100 pro cent decision yet [...] I am also very scared to bring them illegally, what if something happens to them? Catastrophe if they die! I cannot live anymore. My life will be over [...]When they come through water and*

something bad happens, what can I do? I cannot make time go back.' (Sayid)

Like Sayid, all informants who considered to bring their families were aware of the dangers and understood that by jeopardizing their family's well-being, one would eventually no longer face a situation of ambiguous loss but mourn for a definite loss. At the same time, putting the family in danger was the only leeway of action to put an early end to the family's separation in an environment of frustration, powerlessness and uncertainty. The difficulty of facing this decision was complicated by the fact that no family was willing to embark with the children on the illegal journey to Europe because the women did not want to put their children in danger once again after they already had to go through so much misery. Therefore even the dangerous option of bringing the family was blocked and rendered families truly powerless concerning the fate of their reunion.

In conclusion, family separation was experienced by the informants as an unclear loss, undermined by the feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty. As there were no reliable points of reference when family reunification will occur, the families had no choice but to wait out the uncertain and arduously slow family reunification process. Unable to take matters in one's own hands as the illegal migration was deemed too dangerous for the rest of family, it was uncertain whether family reunion would take place at all within the closer future or only one day in within many years, eventually in a different place or form than originally intended. As the prolonged and indefinite separation filled the daily lives with worries and incertitude about the other's well-being, the provision of social support at distance was paramount and will be discussed in the next chapter in order to show how attempts were made to overcome these constraints.

5 Transnational Social Ties: doing Family at Distance

In the concept of separated families, the transnational social ties play an important role as they are deemed to hold up the familyhood during periods of separation (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Skrbis, 2008). However, these social ties are vaguely defined and only stress the potential to influence the lives of others and vice versa (Boccagni, 2010). In order to better understand how transnational families support and affect each other at distance, this chapter introduces the theory of social support and focus will be placed in the following three sub-chapters respectively on the provision of instrumental support, informational support and emotional support to look more closely at the different means of family involvement at distance.

5.1 The Concept of Social Support

Social support theory serves as an appropriate conceptual bridge when discussing transnational social ties in separated families since both concepts deal with affective and instrumental forms of help among significant others to cope with burdens and stress (Boccagni, 2015), embedded in a network of mutual obligations and interest (Cohen et al., 2000). As a discipline rooted in sociology, social support theory basically considers the the relation between social ties and psychological well-being dating back to the end of the 19th century (Durkheim, 1897; in Cohen et al., 2000). Functioning as stress buffers, the various forms of social support protect against different stressful events (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cassel, 1976), redefine the stress appraisal (Thoits, 1986) and prevent maladaptive behaviour responses (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cutrona & Russel, 1990).

Over the course of time the omnibus definition of social support as "resources provided by others" has been constantly criticized (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988, p. 4) and led to a crystallization of several elaborated notions: *social networks* representing the number of possible support providers or people in an individual's environment, *social integration* referring to quantity and structure of social relationships (size, density, frequency) and the degree of subjective perception of embeddedness as well as *social support* describing the quality and functions of social relationships (Schwarzer et al., 2003). As social environments may bring supportive but also stressful elements with them, it is important to go beyond the amount and frequency of support and also to consider how and what kind of support is being given by turning to the different functions of social support (see next pagetable 2, Wills & Shinar, 2000, p.89).

Table 2: Description of supportive functions (Wills & Shinar, 2000, p. 89)

Function	Other Terms	Examples	Theoretical Benefit
Emotional support	Confidant support, esteem support, reassurance of worth, attachment, intimacy	Allow discussion of feelings, expression of concerns/worries; indicate sympathy, approval, caring, acceptance of person	Alters threat appraisal of life events, enhances self-esteem, reduces anxiety/depression, motivates coping
Instrumental support	Tangible support, practical support, behavioral assistance, material aid	Provide money, household goods, tools, transportation, child care, assistance with cooking, cleaning, shopping, repairs	Solves practical problems, allows increased time for rest and relaxation, other coping efforts
Informational support	Advice/guidance, appraisal support, cognitive guidance, problem solving	Provide information about resources, suggest alternative courses of action, provide advice about effectiveness	Increases amount of useful information available to individual, helps obtain needed services, leads to more effective coping

While there are two more functions of social support, namely validation and companionship support, this study relates only to the above mentioned strands (instrumental, informative and emotional support) as these functions of social support best reflect transnational social ties (Boccagni 2010, 2015) and can be provided from distance, with certain limitations on instrumental support (Baldassar, 2007). Nevertheless, the physical absence significantly debilitates the families' social support network and will be closer looked upon in the following analysis (Boccagni, 2015). Studying social support in the context of migration, it is furthermore paramount to look at the emergence of eventual loss spirals in case the loss of a key support provider can't be offset (Hobfoll, 1989) and to distinguish between perceived and received support, as the reception of social support is not actually deemed equally important as the general belief about the availability of support (Wethington & Kessler, 1986).

Cohen et al. (2000) remind us that it is essential to put as much stress on the social, as on the support itself since social support occurs only in a system of regularized social relationships, communication, and mutual obligation (Schwarzer et al., 1989). As relationships are shared with specific persons, significant and not generalized others, not all sources of support are capable of providing the same kind of support (Wills & Shinar, 2000). It follows that the motivation and possibility for social support has its origin in relationships and changing circumstances which inhibit or foster the provision and reception of support, affecting not only the personal interaction but possibly causing relationships to alter and role strains to come about (Wills & Shinar, 2000). In other words, just as relationships constitute social support mechanisms, so does the (non)provision of support affect the relationships. Since social support is reciprocal, the relationship between migrants and those left behind is more complex than a one-sided transfer of resources and should not only look at the material remittances but also at the reverse remittances (Mazzucato, 2011). Within this understanding, those staying behind are not to be seen only as passive receivers but as affecting the transnational exchange of care not only with their demands and expectations but also with their provision of support to the migrant (Boccagni, 2015).

5.2 Instrumental Support – the Implications of Physical Absence

The category of instrumental support includes the provision of tangible goods such as money and other means of hands-on physical assistance and can be exemplified as any direct way of assistance to overcome a practical problem – e.g. material aid, household chores and taking care of children (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988). The migration of a parent thus represents a concrete loss of helping hands and thereby caused a vast increase in responsibilities for those who stay back, especially for the spouse (Toyota et al., 2007). Apart from family members acting as a mediator

between society and the individual, transmitting internalized social values, traditions, beliefs and customs (Bronfenbrenner, 2004), they also function as an alternative safety net and represent many different roles such as health-care providers, educators and social workers (Bogenschneider, 2002). However, the loss of a key support source and the fundamental alteration of the family's support structures did not only put those who stayed behind and had to deal with the new challenges under pressure but also took a toll on those who left as they felt responsible for the family's deteriorating situation (Chambon, 1989).

5.2.1 The feeling of helplessness

In the context of forced migration, the separation from the families severely affected the migrants as family life at distance implies a worrying uncertainty about the well-being of the others which is only aggravated by the fact that one is not able to directly intervene and help the family (Barwick et al., 2002). While migrants are physically far away from their families, their thoughts and minds are very much affected by the events and people back home (Procter, 2000; Savic et al. 2013).

Picture 6: A poster of a photo exhibition about the war-torn region of Rojava taped onto the the door of a Kurdish informant in a refugee shelter in Berlin.

Thus it was not only the family's unstable and dangerous situation that kept the migrants worried but rather the feeling of an absolute loss of control over the family's well-being, characteristic to situations of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2009). Majid suffered enormously from this helplessness as he had to leave his wife and 16-year-old daughter behind in Damascus and was steadily worried about their safety due to his absence:

> *'There is no one to protect them. There is no man. I cannot protect them, I cannot do anything. So they live in danger. […] I am afraid that something bad will happen to them. A soldier comes in by force or she gets stopped at a control post - they might do bad things to her. If I were there it would be better.'*(Majid)

The migrants' inability to help and support their families in a meaningful way emerged in nearly every interview and can be regarded as an intense experience of worrying transnational social ties where full affection meets absolute impotence (Boccagni 2010, p. 195). Having interviewed migrants whose families lived not only in Syria but also in neighbouring countries, it is important to mention that these migrants were not spared the daily fear for their families' well-being. Even if the threats were different to the lethal dangers of civil war, these informants were nevertheless nervous about their families' s worsening economic situation and stressed the unsafe areas where the families lived as well as the low level of acceptance for Syrians in neighbouring countries.

Apart from the general inability to help and protect the family in everyday life, the most prominent instrumental means to support the family at distance was the sending of money. Focusing on the importance of remittances, studies on the mental well-being of separated fathers concluded that inability to financially support the family was a constant pre-occupation and source of worry (Nobles, 2011; Wilmsen, 2013; Savic et al., 2013). The same applied to the informants in Berlin who were not able to send money as a result of not having received their residence permit yet and thereby not entitled to pick up employment like Akram explained:

> *'Here and there, we have financial problems. My family is living off savings. They have probably been used up already or at least very little is left. Once the money is up I will rely on friends and family to support my family. And I do not even have the residence permit yet. Until now I could not send them any money.'* (Akram)

According to Nobles, in the context of dire economic circumstances separated families often

deem the migrant's financial investment more important than the non-financial contributions (2011). Linking this finding to the theory of social support, it is not merely the provision of support that is important but also what kind of support is being given and to what extent does this form of assistance match the demand of the one in need of help (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cassel, 1976). It follows that distinct types of supportive functions are differentially useful for various types of problems. Thus, the provision of emotional and informational support is most likely not directly improving the family's livelihood yet the only kinds of support that can be provided by most informants. This problem was often reflected throughout the interviews in Berlin as the migrants constantly referred to a notion of helplessness towards their families as the government allowance is just enough to live in Berlin and nothing could be sent home (Wilmsen, 2013; Savic et al., 2013) as Nizar explained: 'I can't do anything here. This is Germany here, I cannot do anything. I cannot control anything.'

Picture 7: A refugee shelter room in Berlin shared by three people.

As a result of the inability to support the family in a meaningful way, the pressure on the male migrants increased as they experienced a role strain since they were not able to fulfil the traditional role among Arabic heads of families to provide for the wife and children (El Masri et al., 2013; Christiansen & Palokovitz, 2001). Coming back to the importance of the "social" in social support, the regularized social interactions do not only cause a mutual obligation but also construct certain role identities which guide one's behaviour, contribute to the self-esteem, and to a certain degree develop an understanding of the self (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988).

Instead of doing everything to guarantee the family's well-being, which was the reason why most arrived in Germany, time was described as 'being lost' by migrants, like Hayyan who lived in a

shelter and portrayed the daily routine of waiting for his asylum decision and family reunion as 'smoking, talking sleeping, then talking, smoking, then sleeping again and eating.' These daily rhythms were not just acquiesced by the informants but caused tremendous frustration. According to Nizar the long waiting times, little government allowance, shelter life, and the legal restrictions to take up work made one feel 'like you are in prison. It’s a big prison; you can’t do anything. Only stay, eat, and sleep.' The migrants expectations of being able to provide for the families, clashed with the stark realities of the long asylum procedures making them feel like being stuck in empty, repetitive daily rhythms which were full of worries about the family. In addition to the arduously long-waiting, many migrants were not only frustrated by the temporal delay in family reunion and their helplessness but were also very much aware of the repercussions on their families (Savic et al., 2013) as Hayyan's son was in need of medical treatment and 'everyday that has passed knowing my son needs more treatment, the more pressure I have.'

Picture 8: The room in a container refugee shelter where Hayyan spends most of his time smoking, talking and sleeping while waiting for family reunion.

The awareness of what implications were caused due to one's physical absence let doubts come up as it is common among migrants to feel remorse, regret or even guilt for having left the family (Wilmsen, 2013). While some migrants regretted having left, like Hayyan who said 'If I had known that it would take so long I would never have come here', the majority did not so much regret the idea of having left in the first place but rather not having taken the family with them. Even though regret was a present theme during the interviews, the notion of guilt was rarely explicitly mentioned as the informants did not know of the long waiting times prior to their departure and thus did not feel necessarily responsible for the protracted separation (Baldassar,

2016). Another explanation why guilt was not that prominent is the fact that many compared the living situations of the family to the prospect of a life together in Europe and felt that the current hardships have to be gone through in order for brighter days to come. In that respect, the separation was at times appraised by families as a spark of hope and a possibility to improve the children's well-being and future opportunities in order to downplay the event's stressfulness (Cohen & McKay, 1984).

These moments of hope and optimism, however, were rather an exception amongst the migrants as many tried to distract themselves from the unsettling inability to help their loved ones. Searching for distraction was thus a central coping strategy among the migrants to escape one's worried mind, as Nizar put it: 'I try to distract myself any way I can, because if I keep thinking about my family I will go crazy'. The idea of 'going crazy' was also expressed by other informants and learning German or working was regarded as one of the most helpful distractions. Since nine of the ten informants were not allowed to work because they did not receive their residence permit yet, only four hours of government paid German classes offered some distraction. However, nearly all informants reported great difficulties in focusing to learn German because 'of the family problem'. Difficulty in focusing is a common trait amongst forcefully separated family member (Savic et al. 2013; Willmsen, 2013) and was described by Amira 'I like to learn German but it is difficult so stay in my head and study. My mind is not with me. If my husband were here, I could learn German.' The absence from one's family does thus not only occupy and worry the migrants but actually obstructed many to pursue activities that would make them feel somewhat better and help to arrive in Germany.

5.2.2 Staying Behind and the implied Responsibilities

Concerning provision of instrumental support from the families that stayed behind, neither the migrants nor those left behind spoke of the expectation to provide financial support to the migrant. Even though the reverse remittances are more of an informative and emotional nature (as discussed in chapter 5.3 and 5.4), families nevertheless instrumentally supported the migrants as they were often the ones who would have to arrange the necessary documents and get these legalized at the German embassy (Mazzucato 2011). Even though this portrayed an important and time consuming task, the central issue was the immense shift in responsibilities and the many roles that women had to take over after the spouse's migration (Masri et al. 2013). Hanan who lived in outer Beirut alone with her two daughters (3 and 6 years) and freelanced aside from working full-time to make ends meet, described how tiresome it was to fill both shoes:

'I am supposed to have both mother and father role. This makes me pressure. It is difficult to tell the children that I cannot control everything. I am very tired. I need my husband, someone to blame problems on [laughs]. *Someone to take them* [the daughters] *to the school bus. It is little details but everyday you are supposed to make it alone. It makes me cry and fragile. A lot more fragile than before. When the children are sick, I am supposed to be next to them, but the same time I am supposed to come to work, pay rent, food and tuition fees, to cook and I have to be there when the kids ask questions. I have to be there for two people. I am filling all the roles.'* (Hanan)

The large and sudden increase in tasks experienced by Hanan was a significant challenge for all families and thus constitutive to the implications of family separation. While this pressure was shared amongst all women, families were situated in different living arrangements and social networks which were partly able to buffer the effect of the migrant's absence (Hobfoll 1989). Not being able to dive into a discussion on each and every constellation, fundamental differences were evident among families living in male-headed households of (extended) family and mothers who lived alone with their children.

5.2.2.1 Challenges of Female-Led Households

Four out of the nine interviews in Lebanon were conducted with mothers who lived just with their children. Of these four, three resided in Chatila, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut which also many non-Palestinian Syrian refugees moved to since the onset of the Syrian war in 2011. It was considered a dangerous place by the Lebanese society but also by some informants referring to it as 'the jungle'. Already before the husbands' departure, the families felt unsafe but the insecurity only increased after their spouses had left (Bogenschneider, 2002). While no one dared to bother Yana and the family while the husband was present, she has been approached several times after his departure by men in the camp who threatened to kidnap her 15-year old daughter in order to marry her if she were to play one more time by herself on the streets. After a similar incident affecting her two other younger children, she was too scared to allow her children to leave the house by themselves. Whenever she left for work, she had no choice but to lock the door with the children inside and leave them alone for 3-4 hours. Confirming the migrants' worries, it was not only the foregone proactive provision of instrumental support but merely the physical absence which significantly affected the family's well-being. In line with the UNHCR report on female-led households of Syrian refugees and their increased vulnerability (2014), Haya also stressed her unsafe situation, especially at night, as she mentioned stories of rape and felt a lot more vulnerable after people found out that she lived alone.

Apart from the lack of security, nearly all women reported of being worse off economically after the husband had left (UNHCR, 2014), as most did not receive any remittances. Comparing life before and after migration, Haya explained:

> *'Before, two people were working. We did not really have to borrow money but now I have to. He used to pay the rent for the house, food and I would pay for school, kids etc. But now I have to pay for both.'* (Haya)

Like her, the vast majority of families had to rely on debts and spoke of not having a choice but staying home with the kids all the time in order to spend as little money as possible (Lebanon Cash Consortium, 2015). As a result of not having received any resources or tangible forms of support in exchange for the spouse's migration, families were facing tremendous difficulties to offset the loss of social support (Cohen et al., 2000). In situations where individuals or groups are not able rely on other sources of social support to buffer the loss, loss spirals develop as essential resources are used in order to prevent the loss of other resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Living alone with the children, Zeinah for example experienced a loss spiral as she had to work after her husband left in order to pay the rent. A woman agreed to watch her children but when Zeinah came back one day her children were playing alone on the street without any supervision. Not being able to work and guarantee her children's well-being at the same time, she quit her job and had to take her children out of school as she was no longer able pay the tuition fees. The absence of instrumental support thus bears more far-reaching consequences than merely overcoming the daily and rather pragmatic challenges.

The chances of entering loss spirals after a key source of social support breaks away is very high in the context of forced migration. Being forced to flee their home country, families lose their original support networks as they often had to leave friends and their extended family members behind (Rousseau et al., 2004). Already feeling like a stranger in the new environment, the departure of the spouse only aggravated the situation of mother-children households as Aya expressed the feeling of 'No one helps me. I am all alone.' The general lack of support structures is further undermined by the fact that many families faced difficulties in building up new support structures as refugee families often move several times within the host countries (UNHCR, 2014).

In the case of Lebanon this occurred due to the increasing rent prices, short-term oral living contracts, and house evictions (Caritas, 2015). Remembering the two months alone after her husband left and before she moved in with her brother, Zeinah described the time of being alone without any support as the 'worst days in my life. It was worse than war. It was like an everyday

war against me. Everyone was against me. I got very tired after he left.' Having lost a helping hand, the single mothers often stressed the pressure of being solely responsible for the family and described the immense increase in tasks as extremely fatiguing since they were not experiencing the positive impact of instrumental support, namely time for rest and relaxation (Wills & Shinar, 2000).

5.2.2.2 Living with Extended Family: Networks of Support and Dependency

Seeking support in order to avoid shouldering all responsibilities and care-taking roles alone, many women chose to move in with extended family members (Staver, 2008). Due to the integration in social networks, loss spirals were less likely to occur as families enjoyed various benefits of sharing rent prices, tuition costs being covered, food being shared and general everyday support in child-care enabling some women to work (Schwarzer et al., 2003; Hobfoll, 1989). Even though the extended family members were able to fill the gap of the migrant's absence with economic support, hands-on assistance, and a feeling of protection, they did not replace the migrants since not all providers of support reach a distressed family member the same way (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988). Irrespective of what kind of person or relative can provide what sort of support, it is more important to underline that merely the presence of a social network or social relationships does not necessarily carry the potential for benefits but might be just as well the cause for stress and conflict (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988). Acknowledging all the positive effects of living together with (extended) family members, attention has to be paid to the challenges of shared housing.

Five of the families that were interviewed lived together with extended family members and were mostly thankful for all the support they received but also spoke of intra-family tensions which arose due to the lack of privacy or perceived dependencies, as Bana explained how she grew tired of always having to ask her father-in-law for money. Because of his bad economic situation she proposed that she could start working, but the family prohibited her to do so. Even though angry at her in-laws for not letting her decide for herself she could not do anything against it as she was eating their food, living in their house and drinking their tea. Thus, the economic and the daily help of the extended family did not only take supportive but also restrictive forms (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Furthermore, living with (extended) family should not presuppose good relationships among the individuals. During the interview with Bana, her son came into the room crying and yelling that he was hit by Bana's brother-in-law. Comforting her son, she silently said that this would not have happened if her husband were here. The brothers had already had a big fight before about this and now she felt like she could not do anything about it because she did not want to tell her husband. He would only call his brother and there would be a big problem: everyone would know it was her who

told him and they would say there was no reason to have spoken of this incident. She added 'I try to avoid any problem because my husband is not here and no one can help me […] I also want him to feel good and not to worry.' As there were no alternative housing solutions, many women decided to keep their heads down, as the shared feeling of being a burden prevented Bana to stand up for herself and her son (Amnesty International, 2016).

Due to the high rent prices many families shared one apartment and it was not a rarity that more than ten people shared a flat (Caritas, 2015). Zeinah lived with 14 people in a three-room apartments and spoke of a constant lack of privacy and space, creating a lot of tension and making it difficult to draw back. With nine children not agreeing what to watch on television, it was often the kids who began small fights which made the 'families feel disturbed'. Whereas it was 'nearly impossible do something special for my children because I always have to adapt to the rest of the house,' it was also the hosting families that had to adapt - 'My brother's wife has to cover up and feels like a stranger in her own house because we are not all direct family'. Being aware of the extra burden one imposes on the others, Zeinah explained how 'sometimes I have to stay with my children in a room and lock it so the kids don't go out and fight or be noisy with the other children'. Shared housing with extended family may thus be helpful in many aspects as the loss of instrumental support was offset, but at the same time these networks are not only supportive as dependencies were created which restricted and limited many families' lives (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988).

To conclude, the lack of instrumental support did not only cause tremendous issues for those staying behind as they were partly incapable offset the loss of the migrant, but also affected the migrants as they were suffering from not being able to provide the necessary and expected support. While the migrants experienced a role strain as they were not able to fulfil the role of the provider, the spouses staying behind experienced an overburdening shift in responsibilities as they were trying to fill the many new roles. Trying to buffer the effects of the migrants' absence and to avoid loss spirals, families often relied on the help of extended family. However, these social networks were not always of a purely supportive nature as perceived dependencies were caused which at times led to tensions and distress.

5.3 Informational Support – Bridging the Gap of Separation

Trying to overcome the rift caused by a parent's migration, communication between the separated family members is paramount to bridge the separation gap (Vertovec, 2004). While this chapter focuses on the rather factual communication, the emotional perspective will be dealt later on. Looking at the exchange of information between divided family members within the theory of

social support, informational support deals with the provision of valuable information that is needed in order to solve problems, to inform about available resources, and to give advice about alternative courses of action (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Just as informational support might be used in order to actively improve the situation of the other, it is also argued that informational support aims to avoid the occurrence of stressful event (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988). Therefore the focus lies not only on the transferral of essential information but also on the retaining of information, often termed as informational or subjective filters in the study of transnational families (Boccagni & Banfi, 2011; Baldassar, 2007) in order not to unsettle the significant other.

There are many studies stressing the importance of frequent contact during separation in order to reduce anxiety and maintain the personal relationships within families (Kanaiaupuni, 2000; Asis et al. 2004; Levitt 2001). Mostly speaking via internet calls or messaging, the whereabouts of the families were decisive for their access to internet and other means of communication. One informant at times had to spend several fearful days without having heard from his family because the village's only internet café was down or due to unstable phone reception, while the families in Damascus, Turkey and Lebanon could be easily reached. While there were very few cases where this coping mechanism was blocked for longer time periods, the vast majority of the informants were in daily contact with their family. However, bearing in mind that it is not only the frequency of social support that decides its efficiency but rather the quality of the support provided which lets us now turn to the experienced challenges of informational support (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988).

5.3.1 A necessary but hurtful ritual

While most families deemed the frequent contact as important since hearing the others' voice allowed for a sense of proximity to emerge, this personal space was filled with painful experiences and vividly reminded the families of their current separation (Boccagni, 2010). The mixed feelings concerning the contact with the distant family member(s) could be best captured as a necessary but hurtful ritual. Due to the inability to provide instrumental support, family members were not able *to* assure the wellbeing of the other but could only *be* assured by the regular contact to those abroad. Hayyan explained the simultaneousness of necessity and helplessness as: 'Of course I feel sad when speaking to them, but I have to check on them. I cannot do anything but check on them'. Since rituals are characterised by repetition and proceeding in a certain order (Graf 2014); it is not only the frequency of communication that turned the phone conversations into small-scale family rituals but also the fact that the same topics were always discussed. The vast majority of the families explained that after asking about news, a daily update took place about what they ate and did – ‘Everyday they tell the same things: who they visited, what they are doing. Always the same thing’.

Relieved to hear the beloved voices, this reoccurring pattern is hurtful, because the families were not only reminded of their difficult situation but also felt remorse for not being physically there for each other as they could only exchange words (Boccagni 2010). The conversations were thus of an ambivalent nature, uplifting yet painful at the same time and experienced on both sides. Never getting a precise answer about family reunification from her husband who left six months ago to Germany, Nour was explicitly told to stop asking one day because 'he [the husband] doesn't know and the more I asked him he said the more it hurt.' It follows that even though communication is fundamental to maintain familyhood at distance (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002), in the context of powerlessness and absence of temporal horizons, the necessary contact was marked by unease and the need to tiptoe around touchy subjects.

While both sides did not know when they will be reunited, families had to become accustomed to a situation of ambiguous loss and relentless stress (Boss 2004). Arduously waiting for the notification to arrive when the family will be reunited, it was especially the migrants, like Nizar, who were obstructed by the asylum system's lack of clarity to answer all the family's questions:

> *'When speaking to my family, I am happy in the beginning, the first 5 minutes after that they ask about all the problems. What is the news? What is the matter with you? Why can't we come? I don't have all the answers for the questions they are asking.' (Nizar)*

Apart from not being able to instrumentally support their families, the experienced powerlessness amongst the migrants was only enhanced by the fact that they could not even answer the families' questions and give the information that was so urgently needed. Little or no access to vital information about the families' prospects, however, does not imply that informational support was being blocked as migrants continued to speak frequently with their family and differently coped with the lack of reliable information (Boccagni 2015). Most migrants told their families that they honestly did not know when they will be reunited and explained that only upon having received the residence permit would the family be one step closer to family reunion.

Religion also playing a prominent role amongst forced migrants to overcome the experienced powerlessness (Rousseau et al., 2004), migrants referred to god and told their families how it is not in their hands to fasten up the family's reunification. While telling the truth to the family might be understood as one kind of informational support, it was not regarded as such amongst the informants as it was not considered to be useful information leading to a more effective coping mechanism for the families (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Since social support theory holds that

different functions of support are only helpful in specific contexts (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988), most migrants regarded any kind of informational exchange as empty words like Tarek explained: ‘Speaking to them does not make me happier afterwards because nothing has changed. I can’t make their lives better. When I hang up nothing has changed.’ In line with Tarek's idea that informational exchange will not improve the family's wellbeing, most migrants at least did not want the family' s situation to further deteriorate. Worries about the physical and mental integrity of the families led some, like Majdi, to tell his wife that family reunion will happen in the course of the next few months even though he knew this was not true: 'It is difficult for me. It is actually lying but I cannot say the truth. She is in a complicated, difficult situation. If I say this [the truth], it will be extra difficult for her.' The migrants were thus not only frustrated by the lack of reliable information about reunion in order to ease the family's situation, but actually faced difficulties when divulging information as managing truth and distance put them in a situation where they were the ones to decide how much and what kind of information to transfer (Baldassar, 2007).

5.3.2. Distorting the truth

The daily contact was the only means to continue family life at distance, but did not represent a full substitute to the physical presence as the distance caused a highly fragmented and selective flow of information (Boccagni, 2010). In a situation of uncertainty and powerlessness, the least that could be done was to give hope and not let the family's situation further deteriorate. By choosing not to discuss worrying experiences or 'anything that would make the family sad', the informants, like Hayyan, put up subjective filters in order not to let the significant others be worried about the manifold difficulties (Boccagni, 2010; Baldassar, 2007):

> *'I say the truth to them, but I do not tell them the whole truth. I tell them the system is slow but not all the details like that I slept in a Döner shop for one month and there is no money or that I am still in the same cloth since I arrived in Germany because I do not have money to buy new ones. I do not tell them all of this stuff'* (Hayyan).

Akin to Hayyan, many other informants refrained from telling their families about the living conditions in the shelters, the delay in receiving government subsidies, or about getting sick. While the retainment of these everyday aspects did not allow the significant other to support or console the migrant, they did not reflect wider implications for the family's reunification. However, some migrants also chose not to share essential news on their asylum cases with their families. Elias received a letter two months ago stating that he might by deported to Hungary as a result of the

Dublin procedure. Due to this notification, he expected the family reunion to be delayed by one or two years on top but chose not to tell the family about the letter because, he tried 'to make hope, not take hope.' From an outsider's perspective this could be simply categorized as lying but for many migrants distorting the truth was perceived as the most beneficial kind of informational support, as it helped to avoid further worsening the family's already destitute situation and to give hope (Boccagni & Banfi, 2011).

Deliberately leaving out bits of information and using information filters was not only performed amongst migrants but also by those who stayed behind. Some families made it clear throughout the interviews that they believed the migrants were doing worse than them due to the isolation from family and the imbalance of the migrants' affection clashing with absolute impotence. Functioning as the linking bridge between the steadily worried migrant and the family's wellbeing, women chose not to tell their husbands about some negative incidents as Haya recounted how stressful it was once her husband tried to be more involved in the family's life after his children expressed their doubts about his willingness to bring them at all. 'He started to call every second hour and tried to be there as much as he could' - he would tell Haya when he was about to take a nap, once he woke up or he would ask if the kids are safe and if she would mind to go and look at what they were doing. Bereaved from any tangible acts of care to be present in the family in forms of money, presents or visits, which are classical tools for transnational families to cope with separation, migrants felt unable to compensate for their physical absence and could only rely on phone calls which at times resulted in overcompensation (Parrenas 2005). Many women experienced difficulties in dealing with the husbands' over-involvement and Haya ended up telling him to spend more time with his friends in order to ‘forget about us a little bit'.

As a result of the distance and both parties applying informational filters, there is no eased communication between the separated family members and unequal levels of knowledge are constructed (Boccagni 2010). However, the differences in knowledge about the local context is an inherent issue in the constellations of separated families as those who left the family are often familiar with both contexts and the inherent pressures, having left the ‘there’ to come to the ‘here,’ while those who stay behind only know one context yet have concrete expectations about the there, partly conjured by the filtered information of the migrant.

Knowing both local situations, migrants did not always believe their families when hearing that everything was fine as the knowledge of the situation in Syria or Lebanon made Akram believe, ‘it will never be okay there. Even if they say they are ok I know they are lying because I know the situation over there. I see it on the news.’ By the same token, migrants felt that they needed to sound optimistic and play down the challenges and issues of their lives in order to keep the families'

hope up. Providing filtered information only spurred the imbalance in knowledge as migrants had to deal with the families' high expectations about Germany as Sayid explained: ‘They tell me “you are in Germany, you have to work, make money. Why do you sit at home not doing anything?” They don't know the rules and processes here.’ Informational filters do not only render the intra-family communication fragile (Baldassar, 2007) but most importantly lead to a different degree of embeddedness. In contrast to the idea that transnational families are *double* embedded in separate social systems (Glick Schiller et al., 1995;Boccagni, 2010), split family members are rather *separately* embedded in the local social systems. While it is that families are simultaneously somewhat embedded in two distinct local and social contexts, here and there, it should be put in the foreground that the degree of embeddedness differed a lot as families were in control of the flow of information and emotions (Baldassar, 2007). Being fully and double embedded therefore did not occur automatically but was much more a question of the family members' willingness to let the other partake in all aspects of their lives, especially the unsettling and worrying moments.

5.3.3 Staying in touch

It would be a mistake to relate informational support in the study's context merely to the eventual outcome of family reunion since the frequent communication enabled a sense of proximity at distance (Boccagni 2010). As a consequence of the absence and separation, migrants and their families longed to be with one another and staying in touch by means of long-distance communication created a sense of shared virtual co-presence (Baldassar 2008). Paying attention to the significant changes in transnational communication due to modern internet communication technologies (Wilding 2006), the sending of pictures, videos and voice recordings hold a special place in the families' communication because real-time face-to-face conversations or hearing the voice renders the absent more present than simply reading their words (Baldassar 2008). Recording voices and videos were one way to involve each other during important events like birthdays, hearing the young child's first words or watching the toddler take the first steps but also the daily updates of what the family members ate, did and how they slept were essential for families to try to close the gap between them. Those staying behind, like Hanan, considered it highly important to tell the migrant detailed information of the family's life ‘in order to make it feel like he lives with us.’

By updating the each other with daily events, the migrants stayed involved in the family's everyday life and could be asked for advice. Sami explained how his wife and three children who were living in Turkey asked for his permission about nearly everything they bought. Even though they knew that they have to spend as little as possible and they can judge better for themselves what they really need, he smiled when telling how even in his absence he is still the head of the family

and that they always turn to him. The knowledge of the family members' daily life did not only help the migrants but also the children to accommodate to the absence as Hanan's daughter was always very happy to hear that her father knows all the small details about her life even though he is not here. This kind of advice and involvement relating to informational support eased the experience of separation as both sides were spared the feeling of abandonment or isolation and remained to stay in touch (Cohen et al., 2000)

In conclusion, keeping each other updated about the personal lives, informational support was necessary to overcome the separation gap, to maintain family unity at distance, and to be assured of the others' wellbeing. However, informational support does not only concern the provision of information as subjective filters were used on both sides, migrants and those staying behind, to hold back information that was deemed too unsettling for the significant other. As a consequence, truth was distorted at times and caused family members to be separately embedded in each other's lives.

5.4 Emotional Support – Proximity at Distance

Emotions should not simply be seen as a convenient and occasional resource called upon to explain certain peculiarities of transnational family life, but rather as constitutive part of the transnational family experience itself (Skrbis, 2008). Since emotions do not exist in a vacuum but are rather a social fabric of society, the phenomena of migration and family separation are two social processes full of emotional meaning (Parrenas, 2001). Linking emotions to social support theory, emotional support is the most heterogeneous categorization amongst the three presented functions of social support. In essence, it provides the feeling of being cared for, loved and esteemed by others (Wills & Shinar, 2000) due to the availability of one or more persons who can provide comfort by listening sympathetically and showing empathy (Thoits, 1986). Approval, acceptance, and reassurance of worth by significant others help the individual to be embedded in a network of mutual interests and obligations (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988) and enables individuals to express feelings, concerns, and worries in order to alter the threat appraisal of life events as anxiety is reduced and the assured self-esteem motivates further coping (Lepore et al. 1996).

5.4.1 Feigning one's Mood

As the separated families were caught in a situation of uncertainty and perceived powerlessness concerning their own fate, migrants repeatedly stressed how important it was for them to give hope and show their affection to the family as Nizar repeatedly told his family: 'all the time I give them hope: You must wait. The life here is good. Inshallah I will get *Aufenthalt* and I

will be bringing you here.' Putting time and effort to provide the significant others with emotional support can be portrayed as an investment in a reliable relationship and a means to continue familyhood at distance (Baldassar, 2007). Trying to weaken the harm of family separation and to downplay stress appraisal, migrants intended to give hope and asked for patience while assuring their families how much they missed them, that everything will be fine, and these difficult days will be forgotten once they would be all together again (Thoits, 1986). Elias explained how he sometimes went to shops and took pictures of bikes, toys or other games to send these to his children telling them of all the presents he already bought for them and they could play with once they arrived. These acts of care serve as another example of how migrants tried to overcompensate their physical absence as they try to ensure the emotional wellbeing of the family by showing affection and keeping their spirits up (Parrenas, 2005). Even though situated far away from one another, migrants were able to emotionally support their families but the geographical distance also allowed them to hide emotions (Baldassar, 2007).

As described in the last chapter, informational filters were used in order not to cause additional stress to their loved ones in the context of uncertainty and powerlessness. The same also occurred in the emotional realm, especially among male migrants, as they used emotional filters (Boccagni & Banfi, 2011) as a way to distract from one's emotional state. The feigning of happiness was described as a necessary act in nearly every interview with the migrants, as Sami explained how it allowed to conceal the inner emotional state: 'I do not let my family feel I am sad. Even when I cry while speaking on the phone I pretend to be laughing. Every time they call me, I cry on the phone.' Striving to provide hope and assurance, all male migrants refrained from expressing their worries and feelings as they continued to 'try to be happy on the phone' instead of representing an extra burden to their families. While some male migrants said that their wives and families sense that they are not doing as well as they were pretending, most women I spoke to in Lebanon confirmed that their men mostly say they are happy but that they can also hear in their husbands' voices that this is not always true. As it is a common phenomenon of transnational family members to use the distance to distort truth and thereby cause uneased communication, family members begin to read between the lines and listen to the tone of voice (Baldassar 2007) as two women explained: 'Even if he is sick, he does not say anything. But I hear his voice and I know when he is not doing well'; 'Usually he tries to keep it as a secret for him but I can feel when he is angry of the routine day. So I know what he is thinking about.' However, only rarely would the husbands admit to the families' suspicions. Even though the emotional and informational filters share the basic motivation to conceal information, the difference lies in the fact that family members were much more likely to find out about the deception of one's real emotional state than hiding the truth about

one's everyday life and livelihood.

5.4.2 Absorbing the Family's Anxiety

Regardless of the success in deceiving the family about one's true emotional state, the frequent communication between separated family members made this coping strategy even more exhausting as the male migrants regularly needed to actively turn their emotions upside down in order not to unsettle their families. In line with the uniform agreement not to share their actual emotions, all male migrants described the feigning of happiness as very exhausting as Hayyan put it: 'It is exhausting for me to pretend that I am happy. But of course I do not want them to suffer more. They already suffer enough.' According to Hayyan, the feigning of happiness was thus not a result of unwillingness to discuss emotions and feelings but rather a mechanism to prevent the family's wellbeing from suffering. To better understand how migrants protect the family from any stress by absorbing it alone, one has to remember that families may be looked at as a set of gendered interpersonal relationships (Landolt & Wei Da, 2005) but also as a unit which, even if separated, that maintains a certain emotional connection (Skrbis, 2008). Following the family unit perspective, responsibility and emotional connectivity are shared among the kin and therefore hardships and bright moments significantly affect the family members' feelings, actions, and thoughts (Collins, 1998). Emotional connectivity can be best described by family members living under the same emotional skin (Kerr, 2000).

However, just as the positive factors can be soothing and comforting among family members due to the emotional connectedness, in situations of heightened tension, anxiety can spread infectiously. It is very likely in these situations that the people that absorb the most anxiety to reduce tensions in others ends up most vulnerable to problems such as alcoholism and depression as well as feeling overwhelmed, out of control or isolated (Kerr, 2000). As a result trying not to cause unease, migrants intended to maintain the functioning of the family at the cost of one's own wellbeing (Kerr 2000). This fits well to some of the harmful and maladaptive coping strategies of many migrants as Hayyan who explained in the few German words he knew what helped him to feel better when he feels too much pressure: ‘Always thinking makes you crazy, but sometimes music, learning, drink beer, drink vodka, forget.’

Resulting from the overexposure to transnational family pressures, migrants might undergo the additional risk of social exclusion in the host country (Boccagni, 2015). Looking at isolation, it is important to bear in mind that support networks reach beyond the family structures as friends or other persons also qualify as sources of social support (Schwarzer et al. 2003). In the case of the migrants, there was a wide reluctance to speak to anyone about one's family situation and the

concerns attached to family separation. Whereas three of the informants spoke openly about their worries with friends, the majority chose not to speak with anyone about their situation, as Tarek said: ‘I do not like to talk about it. I become more obsessed.’ Others like Nizar agreed and spoke of trying to forget about this problem: ‘If I talk I will remember everything and it will be only worse.’ Not wanting to share their worries and feelings with their families nor with friends since being reminded simply hurt too much, many migrants chose to go through the painful experience of family separation all by themselves as their emotional coping, namely concealment, did not allow the families or others to console them directly or allow for other means of emotional support (Lepore et al., 1996).

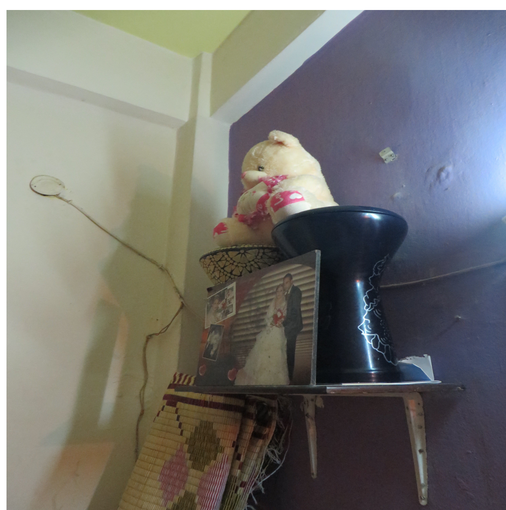
5.4.3 Mothers as Linking Bridges between Children and Migrant

In contrast to the men, most women explained that even though they might keep some incidents to themselves, the threshold to speak openly about their emotional wellbeing was lower compared to their spouses. At the same time most families also expressed that their husbands were actually doing worse as they were far away from the family and all alone. Even though women stated that they felt fragile due to the large increase in responsibilities and that they were more supported than the other way around, this does not mean that they did not provide any emotional support at all (Boccagni, 2015). Instead of direct emotional support to the husband, often obstructed by the migrants' emotional filters, the mothers' emotional support took the form of functioning as a bridge between father and children in their strive to maintain a healthy relationship (Mazzucato, 2011).

According to Baldassar, the exchange of emotional support between parents and children at distance is the cornerstone of transnational family life as it reflects the commitment and endeavours to stay in touch (2007). In this sense, staying in touch does not only refer to the open channels of communication but also to emotional connection – to maintain a “sense of family” across distance (di Leonardo, 1987, p. 443; in Baldassar, 2007). Apart from keeping the migrant updated about every day events, mothers were very much worried how their children experienced the absence of the father, as some children's behaviour had changed after the father's migration and the mothers were not able to fill the emotional gap of the father's absence as key sources of social support are not simply interchangeable (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988). The pressure to maintain the family relationship was further aggravated by the fact that many mothers believed that the children's experiences of war and family separation had a tremendous effect on them. Not wanting to portray all children as heavily traumatized victims, it is of importance to highlight that the children's prior experiences aggravated the situation and most significantly the pressure on the mothers while trying

to ensure their wellbeing. In order to look at the children's experiences of separation, let us turn to the individual explanations of separation and how family separation can also be understood as changing personal relationships (Landolt & Wei Da, 2005).

Parents often stated how difficult it was to answer the children's frequent question when the whole family will be together again. One mother was even so tired of not being able to give her children a good answer that she bought two big suitcases which she slowly started to pack in order to give hope to her children that they would be leaving soon. What struck the parents the most though, were the explanations of the children and how they made sense of the family's separation (Baldassar, 2008). Nour heard her children ask their father '"Are you coming back to us? Or did you die in the sea?" Sometimes they say their father died in a car accident.' These thoughts hit her husband very hard and he explained to them that he made a plan, but there were some mistakes in the plan which he had to take care of first. He told them once he finished 'repairing the broken plan', he would come to take them. It was only some weeks after that, one of Nour's sons asked, '"Dad, are you lying to us? Are you doing anything? You are not repairing anything!"' This was not a unique case as similar stories were recounted like for example a daughter who woke her mother up in the middle of the night wishing to call her dad. After having listed all the nuisances and problems she told her father "You promised us in less than a month you will take us but nothing happened. Do you not want us anymore?" Frustration and anxiety is thus not only reserved for the adults involved but also takes a heavy toll on the children as they vividly experience the boundary ambiguity of an ambiguous loss (Boss 2009). Unsure how to deal with this situation of loss and aberration, significant disruptions in the relationship to the father might be caused as interpersonal bonds are rewoven in discontinuity with altering representations of the self, the family and the social world (Rousseau et al., 2004).



Picture 8: Bana's wedding picture leaning on to her husband's drums.
Her son always wants to play with them.

At the same time, the precariousness of experienced displacement rendered family relationships even more meaningful: In a disintegrated environment where everything is turned upside down, the family serves as a crucial anchor and is often the only unshaken social structure (Jastram & Newland, 2003; Staver, 2008). Since there was often only a relatively short-time between taking the decision and actually leaving, often only less than two months, many mothers said that their children were not able to process why their father was with them all the time and then suddenly gone, especially the younger ones. Most children came to see a riddle of abandonment in the absence of the father. While the absence of the father itself is not necessarily to be experienced as problematic or traumatic, most children deemed the absence only acceptable as long as the missing parent maintains a strong economic and social presence through regular remittances or periodic visits (Olwig, 1999). However, in the context of forced migration and the blocking of certain functions of tangible and affective support, children struggle to understand the motives of family separation as eventually provided commodities are not sufficient markers of love, the extent of the parent's efforts are being questioned, and the children face difficulties to understand the sacrifices made by the parent as they rarely recognise separation as necessary (Parreñas, 2001). This increased the pressure on the mothers even more as they were aware of the importance of family unity in times of turmoil and found difficulties convincing their children that all will be well as they had to absorb the children's anxiety while there was no end of family separation in sight (Kerr, 2000).

There was a common tendency amongst the mothers to keep the children busy by making them spend more time with other children or to distract them in any other way – 'so they do not think about this.' Regardless of the success of the mothers' efforts to distract their children from the family's separation, the women unanimously spoke of how exhausting it was to care for the children's emotional wellbeing as Aseel explained:

> *'Normally, if a child cries and you cannot make the child stop crying, you give it something so the crying stops. But what do you do if you do not have anything to give in order to stop the crying? It is very hard for me to comfort my children, very exhausting.'* (Aseel)

Even though women showed enormous resilience in taking care of the family's wellbeing, there were moments when mothers spoke of the anxiety and nervousness growing so intense that they had troubles dealing with the situation. One mother spoke of hitting her children which she had never done before and another mother would not allow her kids to speak to their father on a daily basis anymore since the children often turned very sad after the talks and it was emotionally too

demanding for her to console them after every talk. Coming back to Hobfoll's idea on loss spirals, the parents' migration thus does not only cause difficulties in maintaining a stable and healthy relationship with the non-migrants but also puts pressure on the emotional relationships between those staying behind (Hobfoll, 1989).

At the same time it was not only the children that had to be comforted and distracted, as many fathers broke out into tears when hearing their children's versions on separation. The mothers felt like it was in their hands to maintain a healthy relationship between the father and the children: 'Him being away and them being young, it feels like my responsibility to keep their relationship going even though he is physically not here. I have to fill the gap between them'.

The emotional support of the mothers is thus not only taking care of the husband and his wellbeing but rather trying to uphold the whole family's stability. Nevertheless, the assurance of a migrating parent, that the children are being taken care of in difficult times and knowing that there is a trusted person helping them to maintain the best possible relationship with the children is a big relief and often the only reason why migration can take place (Mazzucato, 2011). Non-migrants are thus also an important social resource and not only a source of costs and obligations (Boccagni, 2015) as feeling cared about from afar is a an asset that should not go unnoticed – irrelevant of the chosen channels of display – since it counters the social isolation often associated with migrants leaving family behind (Shutes, 2012).

To conclude, migrants relied on the exchange of affection to show a degree of emotional involvement and presence in the family. However, it was a somewhat controlled exchange of emotions, as migrants frequently feigned happiness or used emotional filters to conceal their inner emotional state. This coping strategy did not only cause uneased communication but also caused the migrant to absorb all the stress as neither family nor other potential support networks were able to help the migrants as most chose to deal with their troublesome situation alone. Albeit quite hurtful for the parents, the children expressed their affection to the migrant when bluntly asking for the reasons of family separation and what was being done to end it. Noticing the implications for family separation on the children, mothers had to show great resilience and provided emotional support as it was their perceived responsibility to maintain stable and healthy relationships between the migrant and the children.

6 Conclusion

Family separation was experienced by all family members as an immense pressure. In contrast to the initial expectations about quick and guaranteed family reunification, the recent changes in the German legal context and asylum decisions obstructed the families to estimate when and if family reunification would occur at all within the official channels. As a result, the migration of the parent turned from a temporary absence into an experience of ambiguous loss characterized by uncertainty and powerlessness (Boss, 2004). Even though all families struggled as a whole to arrange to the protracted family separation, the migrants' absence was by no means experienced uniformly. Since families consist of inter-personal family relationships that shape role identities and social support functions, there were significant differences in the family members' perceptions and experiences of separation (Landolt & Wei Da, 2005).

While migrants suffered from a loss of control over the family and steady worries about their wellbeing, it was especially male migrants who found additional unease in the incapacity to take up the role of the family's provider. In contrast to the migrants' experience of a role strain, those staying behind constantly referred to a role overload. Migration caused an immense surge in responsibilities for those left behind as the needs of the children grew while the family's support structure was significantly weakened. For many children, especially the younger ones, the parent's departure reflected a riddle of abandonment as many had trouble grasping the necessity of separation and wondered whether the parent was still alive, trying to get the family together or had actually abandoned them.

Since transnational families do not experience separation as detached individuals but rely on transnational social ties to maintain familyhood at distance (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, Boccagni, 2010) there was an awareness amongst the family members concerning the potential difficulties experienced by the loved ones and different functions of social support allowed to provide comfort at distance – at least to a certain extent (Baldassar, 2007; Wills & Shinar, 2000). Concerning instrumental support it was essential not merely to focus on what kind of support was received but also to look closely at the limitations of support provision. Due to the geographical separation and employment restrictions in the asylum-system, migrants were not able to offer hands-on assistance and protect or support the family financially. In a situation where full affection meets absolute impotence, the resulting helplessness often culminated in regret and anxiety (Boccagni 2010). For families, the parent's departure did not only result in economic strains and increased insecurity but also other far-reaching consequences in the form of loss spirals as the loss of a key provider of support could not be easily offset (Hobfoll, 1989). While these loss spirals occurred more frequently

amongst mother-children households, many families tried to buffer the effects of the migrant's absence by moving in with extended family. Even though these social networks were often beneficial, they were not only of a supportive nature as different forms of debilitating dependencies were established (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1988).

As the interviewed families were not able to offset the migrant's absence by economic support or return visits like many other transnational families, communication was of great importance to bridge the separation gap and be assured of each other's well-being. However, in the context of powerlessness and absence of temporal horizons, the frequent contact was ambiguously and best described as a hurtful but necessary ritual. Even though relieved to hear the voices of the beloved others, families were reminded of their troublesome and uncertain situation as not all questions could be answered (Boccagni 2010). While communication was used to create a sense of proximity at distance, the geographical separation also allowed both parties to manage truth and distance as informational filters were applied in order to hide unsettling news (Baldassar 2007). It follows that families were not double nor equally embedded in the local contexts but rather separately embedded, dependant on the families' willingness to also exchange unpleasant information (Glick Schiller et al. 1995).

In line with informational support, the exchange of affection was the most promising means to show emotional involvement and to maintain familyhood (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002). However, just like information was filtered, migrants frequently feigned their good moods to conceal their emotional state – replacing tears with laughter. Apart from this coping strategy being highly exhaustive, many migrants also chose not to speak with other support networks about their emotional wellbeing. Blocking any outlet to speak about the emotional hardship, many emotionally isolated themselves to a certain degree as families were not able to provide any emotional support while the migrants continued to absorb the family's anxiety. Nevertheless, it was not only the migrants who were absorbing stress, as the mothers noticed the implications of separation on the children and saw it as their burdening responsibility to maintain a stable and healthy relationships between the migrant and their children. Refuting the notion that those staying behind are only passive receivers, mothers were proactive providers of support as their resilience dictated the degree of family unity in times of aberration and separation.

Coming back to the introductory quote of Amira describing her head being in two places with her mind thinking here and there, this study looked at the experience of separation, the interconnectedness between separated family members, and what coping strategies are relied upon to ensure each other's wellbeing. While separated refugee families awaiting family reunion share some features of transnational families, their experiences differ to a significant degree as

helplessness, uncertainty, and the rigid asylum system leave little leeway for action and predictability. As a consequence, manifold classical coping strategies of other transnational families are not at hand and force separated refugee families to rely on other exhaustive and partly even self-harming coping strategies while trying to maintain familyhood. It follows that separated refugee families are not only in a particularly vulnerable situation due to the aspect of forced separation but also the surrounding implications make it more difficult to appropriately deal with the burdening absence of the other.

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Appendix

Overview of informants

Name / Age / Sex	Location: Migrant / Family (who?)	Age of children (in years)	Living situation	Time since family separation	Residence permit?	Expectation of family separation (before arrival/now)
Akram/ 37/ male	Berlin / Syria (wife & all children)	7; 5	Alone in shelter	10 months	No	1 year/ don't know
Hayyan/ 31/ male	Berlin / Syria (wife & all children)	5; 3; 2	Alone in shelter	8 monhts	No	4 months/ 1 or 2 years
Tarek/ 28/ male	Berlin / Turkey (wife & only child)	4 months	Alone in shelter	8 months	No	6 months/ don't know, thinking of going back
Elias/ 36/ male	Berlin / Syria (wife & all children)	6; 4; 1; 6 months	Alone in shelter	9 months	No	6 months/ don't know; thinks of getting them another way
Sami/ 40/male	Berlin / Turkey (wife & all children)	17; 16; 8	Alone in shelter	5 months	No	6 months/ don't know thinking of going back
Nizar/ 28/male	Berlin / Syria (wife & all children)	6; 3	Alone in shelter	9 months	No	3 months/ one year
Sayid/ 25/ male	Berlin / Lebanon (wife & only child)	3	Alone in shelter	9 months	Yes	5-7 months/ don't know
Majid/ 60/ male	Berlin / Syria (wife & one daughter)	16	In Shelter with son & daughter	10 months	No	6 months/ minimum next year
Amira/ 33/ female	Berlin / Syria (husband)	Her son with her (2 years)	In Shelter with father, brother & her son (2 years)	8 months	No	7 months/ don't know how
Rasha/ 35/ female	Berlin / Syria (husband)	Her son with her (2 years), husband shall bring his two daughters from first marriage (10 ,13)	In Shelter with her son (2 years)	8 months	Yes	8 months/ maybe a bit more than one year

Name / Age / Sex	Location: Family / Migrant (who?)	Age of children (in years)	Living situation	Time since family separation	Migrant received Residence permit?	Expectation of family separation (before arrival/now)
Bana / 26 / female	Beirut / Germany (husband)	2	With Step family (10 people)	8 months	Yes	4 months/ more than one year
Yana / 31/ female	Chatila / Germany (husband & one son)	13 (Germany); 15; 14; 5	Alone with children	7 months	No	Don't know
Zeinah / 43 / female	Bekka Valley / Germany (husband)	10; 8; 6; 2	With brother an his family (14 people)	11 months	Yes , embassy appointment in 8 months	6 months/ 2 ½ years
Nour / 20 / female	Bekka Valley / Germany (husband)	7; 5	With own parents & grandmother (6 people)	6 monhts	No	3 months/ 2 years
Hanan / 34 / female	Mount lebanon / Germany (husband)	3; 6	Alone with children	6 monhts	No	1 year 2 months/ I don't know
Aseel / 38 / female	Chatila / Germany (husband)	18; 17; 13	Alone with children	1 year	Yes	3-6 months / waiting for mail to get appointment
Aya / 34 / female	Bekka Valley / Germany (husband)	5; 2	With parents & uncle (6 people)	3 years	Yes, embassy appointment in two months	6 months / a few months
Haya / 33 / female	Chatila / Netherlands (husband)	8; 7; 5; 2	Alone with children	8 months	Yes	1 year/ still one year, maybe a bit longer
Burhan / 48 / male	Damascus / Germany (wife and two sons)	23 & 15 – in Germany; 18	Alone with one son	7 months	No	7 months / afraid it wont happen before son turns 18

Interview Guidelines

Semi-structured interviews: informants have the possibility to elaborate on aspects he/she might deem relevant. Special interest in certain topics. Not all of the listed questions were asked. They served only as a checklist which questions might be interesting to ask. No strict chronological order of the questions or themes apart from the opening questions.

1. Introduction: Me, research project and my motivation (eventually interpreter)
2. Emphasis on nature of project: University related, not able to fasten family reunification process
3. All data will be anonomyized
4. You can always interrupt, me or translator if you want to add something. The goal is not for me to ask all my questions, but that you feel like you said everything that is important to you.
5. We can stop or take a break whenever you want. It might be a difficult subject for you to talk about so please let me know when you feel uncomfortable.
6. Any questions about me?

Berlin

Opening questions

1. Name, Age, where from?
2. When did you arrive in Germany? When did you leave your family?
3. Did you already receive the residence permit?
3. Which family members (age?) do you wish to bring and where are they now?
4. Please describe your every day life, what do you do?

- Coping mechanisms and waiting
  - Do you think there is anything you can do to bring them to Germany faster?
  - Do you sometimes try not to think about your family? Do you try to distract yourself?
  - What helps you to feel better?
  - Do you talk with other people about your family?
  - Do you feel a lot of pressure on you?
  - How can you support your family?
  - What are the biggest problems for you here, in Berlin?

  - How are you doing without your family close to you? What are the most difficult problems when being away from the family for such a long time?
- Expectations
  - Before leaving home, how long did you think you will be seperated from your family before leaving?
  - And now, how long do you these days think it will take before seeing the family again?
- Family situation
  - What does their everyday routine look like?
  - What are the biggest problems for your family, there? Problems spouse, problems kids?
  - How is your family doing? Do you think they are safe?
  - How does your family live: with who? Do they get support from other family members, friends?
  - How did their situation change since you are gone?
- Decision-Making
  - Why did you leave the family at this moment? Why not earlier/later?
  - Why did did you take the decision to arrive alone? What did your family say about the decision?
  - On what money does your family live (savings, borrow money etc.)?
  - Could you already send them money?
- Communication
  - Do you speak to your family?
  - How and how often do you speak to them (Skype, Whatsapp, phone etc.)?
  - When you speak to your family, what do you talk about (news on family reunification, small-talk)?
  - Does your family ask a lot when they can come to Germany?
  - Does it make you happy to talk to your family?
  - When speaking to your family, do you freely speak about everything or do you keep some things for yourself?
  - What do you say to your spouse or children to give hope?
- Bringing the family together
  - Do you still have hope to bring your family the legal way? Did this hope change over time, when lose it?

- Did you already think about getting them to Germany by telling them to come also by the sea?
- Did you already think about going back to them?
- Did your family tell ever tell you that you should come back?
- What stories/rumours did you hear about family reunification?
- Do you know the rules of family reunification and how it works?

Lebanon

Opening questions

1. Name, Age, where from?
2. How many children do you have (age)?
3. When did spouse leave? To where? Alone?
4. Did the spouse already receive residence permit?
5. Please describe your every day life, what do you do? What do the children do?

- Family situation
  - Who do you live with?
  - What is good and bad about your living situation?
  - On what money does the family live?
  - Do you feel safe?
- Support
  - Who helps and supports you?
    - Spouse, neighbors, family, organisations etc?
  - Could your spouse already send you some money?
- Decision on separation
  - How did you make the decision that your spouse leaves? Together? Why not earlier, later?
  - Did you agree to the decision that your spouse left? Do you think it was a good idea?
- Separation
  - What changed after your spouse left?
    - money, security, food etc.
  - What is the biggest problem for you since your spouse has gone?
  - How about the children. What is most difficult for them?
- Expectations

- When he left, how long did you think it will take before the family will be together again?
- And now: how long do you these days think it will take before the family will be together again?

- Coping mechanisms and waiting
  - How do people react when you say that your spouse left to EU?
  - When speaking to your spouse or thinking of your spouse: how does his situation affect you?
  - What helps you to feel better?
  - Do you think there is anything you or he can do to get to EU faster?
- Communication
  - Do you speak to your spouse?
  - How and how often do you speak to them (Skype, Whatsapp, phone etc.)?
  - What do you talk about (news on family reunification, small-talk)?
  - Do you ask when you can come to Germany?
  - What is the answer?
  - Does it make you happy to talk to him?
  - Do you always say the truth or do you sometimes try not to talk about problems? How about your spouse?
- Bringing the family together
  - Do you have hope to go to EU via family reunion? Did this hope change over time?
  - Did you already think about going to Germany the illegal way? Did your spouse mention it?
  - Did you ever ask your spouse to come back to you?
- Family reunion
  - Do you know the rules and the procedures of family reunification?
  - Do you have the documents needed for family reunion (birth certificate etc)?