

Making and Unmaking Migrants' Family Relationships in Finland: A Study of Nordic Welfare State Population Registration and Statistics Production



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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Nordic welfare states produce knowledge about migrant family ties through registration and the register-based production of statistics. States govern migrants through this knowledge: their eligibility for social rights is based on register entries, and migration and foreign policies are based on register-derived statistics. By analysing how familial relationships are made and unmade in the registration of and production of statistics about foreign nationals, we show how migrant (family) lives are made 'legible'. Drawing on multi-sited state ethnographic fieldwork conducted at service locations of the Finnish government's registration agency and at Statistics Finland, we show that documents, DNA tests and personal narratives play different roles as 'evidence' in registration decision-making processes that endorse the (heteronormative/homonormative) nuclear family model. Registration relies heavily on documents provided by 'reliable' public authorities. In the move from registration to statistics, family relationships that are missing from the register are suddenly made visible and reorganised according to nuclear family norms. We conclude that the process of state knowledge production about migrant populations is contingent and arbitrary, but also strategic: a (bio)politics that aims to know all and a form of border control and care for some more than others.

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses registration and register-based statistics production regarding migrant family ties. Population registers and register-based statistics are characteristic of Nordic states. Historically, the establishment of centralised population registers was part of the institutionalisation of Nordic welfare states (Alastalo 2009; Bauer 2014). In Finland, it arguably constitutes the state's basic infrastructure (Pursiainen 1993).

We consider population register-keeping and statistics production to be *modes of state knowledge production*, as theorised by Desrosières (1998) and Curtis (2001). That is, modes whose ultimate aim is to govern people through that knowledge. Like personal identification numbers, birth certificates, identity cards, passports, visas and social insurance numbers, register-keeping is a state infrastructural device, one of the ways that (especially Nordic) states attempt to make populations legible and thus governable (Scott 1998). Such register systems are common to the Nordic welfare states, yet, unresearched (although see Burrell & Schweyher 2021).

Legibility and governance are not straightforward with migrants. State policies and administrative measures are taken, and technologies (such as DNA tests and document legalisation) are deployed in order to 'read' migrant lives and bodies (Dijstelbloem, Meijer & Besters 2011) and include or exclude them from registers and statistics (Alastalo & Homanen 2018). In other words, the population that is visible in registers and statistics is shaped by prevalent power relations (Curtis 2001).

Finland's population register, officially called the 'population information system', is a centralised national register of information about people, land, buildings and apartments, as well as administrative and other regional boundaries. It is supposed to include basic information about all Finnish citizens and foreign nationals residing permanently or temporarily in Finland. Public administration and private businesses use the register. Moreover, in Finland and other Nordic countries, population statistics are based on register data rather than on a census. The register system is often invisible to Finnish citizens, whose information is registered automatically when they interact with the authorities (e.g. at marriage, divorce or having children).

For migrants, inclusion in the population register is important for two reasons. First, for the individual, population registration means visibility to the public administration. The register is legally defined as reliable. This means that public authorities make decisions about individuals' eligibility for social rights, services and benefits on the basis of register entries. Second, register entries have population-level consequences for migrants because register data is widely used in knowledge production, including population statistics. Authorities use these statistics for a wide range of purposes, including estimating the need for public services and employment-based immigration, planning and executing related policies, compiling population projections and informing wider public discussions. Register-based population statistics were previously quite comprehensive, but cross-border migration has challenged this. For example, population statistics are known to fall short with regard to labour migration from the European Union (EU) (Sorainen 2012).

We have written elsewhere about how migrants who reside legally and more or less permanently in Finland encounter difficulties in obtaining permanent resident status (i.e. registration with a 'municipality of residence') in the population register. This leaves them outside both municipal services and statistical visibility: regardless of one's de facto duration of residence in Finland, permanent resident status is a prerequisite for

welfare services and benefits as well as for statistical recognition. Asylum seekers from outside the EU face particular inequality when they are not granted permanent resident status in the population register (Alastalo & Homanen 2015).

Consequently, population registration can be viewed as a border control governance practice insofar as borders are not fixed to geographical places such as physical states. Rather, borders are practices where belonging, citizenship rights and resident status are granted (or not) (e.g. Alastalo & Homanen 2015; Mountz 2010; Nyers 2006; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2018) and where families are constructed, reconstructed and performed as legal, administrative, social and biological entities by authorities.

We draw from and contribute to prior studies exploring (state) knowledge production about migrant family relationships and the control and management of migrants and migrants' rights that knowledge production implies. Such research (at least in the affluent parts of the world) has largely focused empirically on family reunification practices. That is, on how and through what kinds of (knowledge) practices migrants' relatives manage to migrate to and obtain residence permits and affiliated rights in particular countries (e.g. Heinemann & Lemke 2014; Helén & Tapaninen 2013; Rose 2007; Tapaninen & Helén 2019; see also Scheel, Ruppert & Ustek-Spilda 2019; Vähä-Savo 2020). Some research suggests that an interplay of different forms of 'evidence' of family relationships is involved in immigration authorities' decision-making (Cooke 2022; Heinemann, Naue & Tapaninen 2013; Helén & Tapaninen 2013; Tapaninen & Helén 2019). Documents (or their absence), personal narratives, DNA and other forensic medical tests often play different roles and carry different weights in decision-making processes regarding family reunification.

The use of tests, documents and migrant interviews modifies and even makes up families, rather than rendering them 'truly known', as immigration authorities would have it (Hacking 2002; Helén & Tapaninen 2013; Tapaninen & Helén 2019). Further, authorities often strategically mobilise different forms of 'evidence' to diminish rights and control borders rather than to grant permissions and rights. This applies to migrants from less valued places of origin and with lower migrant status, such as asylum seekers from outside the EU in the case of Finland (Heinemann & Lemke 2014; Ustek-Spilda & Alastalo 2020).

This article sheds light on which familial relationships authorities enter into Finland's population register, which they omit, and how all this is done. We also explore how familial relationships are represented in population statistics and on what grounds. Thus, in this article, we focus on the make-up of families at two interconnected sites and scales of population-making. Additionally, we ask what discriminatory consequences and violence these bureaucratic practices might have for immigrant families and populations (cf. e.g. Leinonen & Pellander 2020; Näre 2020).

As forms of state knowledge production, registers make some people and populations visible but not others. Bureaucratic registration and statistics production practices make individual people and population look different through different ways of making them 'legible'. In these practices, the diversity of human life is strategically produced in a simplified manner, and some people are effectively excluded not only from measurement but also from social rights (Alastalo & Homanen 2018). The register/statistics production apparatus is thus *performative* of populations and social relations. Social realities and relations are enacted rather than merely described (Law 2004) – in our case, in line with immigration policy, red-tape bureaucracy and cultural norms regarding the family. State knowledge about immigrant families

is *made* and *unmade*, depending on the site of observation. As state knowledge impacts families through social rights and policy, simultaneously, families are in a way made and unmade. We must therefore study the practices of both registration and statistics, because Nordic government authorities' information is register-based and the information used for governmental decision-making and planning derives from register-based statistics.

We show that various forms of evidence, such as documents, DNA tests and personal narratives, serve distinct roles in the adjudication of registration decisions that uphold the paradigm of the (heteronormative/homonormative) nuclear family. However, the registration process heavily depends on official documents from 'reliable' public authorities. As data moves from registration to the statistical office, familial connections absent from the register are abruptly brought into visibility and then restructured in alignment with the norms of the nuclear family. In our conclusion, we assert that the formation of governmental knowledge concerning migrant populations is not only subject to chance and randomness but also displays strategic intent.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO GOVERNMENTAL PRACTICES

Our central research goal is to track how statistical knowledge about migrant populations is formed in the register-based statistical system in line with qualitative prior studies on knowledge production described above. Our methods to study this knowledge formation draw from multi-sited (Hine 2007; Marcus 1995) and state ethnography methods (Mountz 2010; Sharma & Gupta 2006). We have interviewed authorities and observed registration practices and everyday bureaucratic encounters at the Digital and Population Data Service Agency (DVV) service locations and statistical officers at Statistics Finland. In this article, our objective is to describe and understand the whole process of knowledge production as it is crafted in the legislation and policy that guides the practices and processes, and the actual face-to-face and statistics compilation practices at both the registration and statistics levels.

Our analysis is based on field notes, interviews, recordings and documentary material. Our fieldwork in its totality was conducted between 2012 and 2022. While most of the fieldwork was done in 2012–2016, we collected follow-up data by email and telephone interviews in 2017–2022 due to continuous legislative and organisational changes. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in a Kone Foundation funded project, 'Mobile People – Challenging the Population Statistics and Projections' (2012–2016).

We conducted fieldwork at three DVV service locations in 2012–2014, for 1 or 2 weeks at a time, according to the staff's wishes. All three service locations were in large or medium-sized cities, with various educational institutions and reception centres in the vicinity. The fieldwork focused on registration work in a broad sense: meeting clients, entering information into the population information system and making decisions in challenging situations. In the spirit of ethnographic research, our aim was to see the registration work as a whole and client cases as processes rather than one-off visits.

We recorded a total of 104 instances of registration. Our recordings documented situations where different matters concerning registration were discussed, including the entry of familial relationships into the register. Additionally, we interviewed a total of 16 officers at the service locations and five officers from the Population

Register Centre (now part of DVV). Our documentary material on registration includes legislation, recommendations and guidelines. This documentary material was used in many ways by our informants in registration work.

The material we collected at Statistics Finland consists of field notes on observations of the handling of population register data and five interviews conducted in 2013–2015. We also gathered documentary material on statistics, including statistical legislation, standards for producing statistics, statistical metadata (e.g. on data content and collection methods) and published statistical releases. We used this material to understand statistics production. We acquired formal ethical permission from the Register Offices' Steering and Development Unit and Statistics Finland. We subsequently obtained consent from the staff in each institution. The migrants we observed together with the registration officials at the appointments were individually asked for consent for observation and audio-recording before their appointments.

REGISTER-KEEPING AND STATISTICS LEGISLATION AS IMMIGRATION POLICY

In this section, we describe the legislation concerning state knowledge production. This legislation is an integral part of understanding registration and statistics production practices because it guides them strictly. We show how the law is part of the implementation of Finnish immigration policy. The complex bureaucratic system is almost designed to foil migrant people's attempts to have their residency and family relationships registered and thus acknowledged in official statistics. However, state register-keeping and statistics institutions are in no way officially acknowledged as immigration authorities.

The DVV is part of the state administration. Information about a foreign national who has moved to Finland is entered into the population information system at a local service location. Service officers meet clients, assess the authenticity of their documents and scan them into the case management system's queue for registration. Register officers, then, make the registrations based on the scanned documents.

The registration of foreign nationals is regulated by two laws: the Act on the Population Information System and the Certificate Services of the Digital and Population Data Services Agency (661/2009) and the Municipality of Residence Act (201/1994). Population register entries are also regulated by laws concerning familial relationships, for example, laws on marriage, maternity and paternity. The Population Information Act sets out the conditions required to register migrants and issue them with personal identity codes. This act also describes how the registering of familial relationships requires original and, in many cases, legalised documents.

The Municipality of Residence Act defines when an immigrant can have their municipality of residence registered. Municipality of residence can be granted to a Finnish citizen; a person with an extended or a permanent residence permit: an EU citizen who has registered their residence in Finland: a person who is related to someone who already holds municipality of residence in Finland; or a person with a temporary residence permit for at least 12 months who plans on staying in Finland permanently.

When a person moves to Finland, the DVV service location is often their second point of contact with the authorities, after they have either applied for a residence permit or registered their EU residency with the Finnish Immigration Service. Before

or during their first visit, they must fill out the Registration information of a foreigner form (hereafter the registration form). Its required fields include name, address, date of birth, country of birth, nationality, profession, first language, familial relationship information, and place of residence in Finland. Over the last decade, other public institutions have been empowered to enter a foreign national's basic information into the population information system. Nevertheless, migrants must still visit a DVV service location. Since the bureaucratic system is complex, we assume that many people fail to understand that they need to attend a service location for a 'second registration'.

The law requires officers to check the immigration case management system. Officers must then ask the Finnish Immigration Services for a decision if the person's information is not found on the system or if the information on the registration form differs from that stored on the system. In a smaller and less official capacity, the DVV may also consult other national and international organisations, for example, Nordic population registrars and foreign embassies. According to our findings, consultation with other authorities often requires legalised documents in order for register entries to be made. Thus, the DVV works as part of a network of authorities that implement Finnish immigration policy, even though they are not officially regarded as immigration authorities.

Like all population statistics, familial statistics only cover those who reside permanently in Finland. Permanent residence in statistics is regulated by the EU's regulations, which define key concepts in population statistics, such as 'resident population' and 'permanent domicile' (EUR-Lex 2007; 2008; 2010; 2013). In statistical legislation, the minimum for permanent residence is 12 months, as it is in registration legislation. In effect, the statistics cover only those who are registered in the population information system with a municipality of residence.

NORM-ABIDING FAMILIES ENACTED BY RED TAPE

The nuclear family model has historically permeated Finnish legislative and authority views of familial relationships (Fingerroos, Tapaninen & Tiilikainen 2016; Tapaninen & Helén 2019; Vuori 2012). Registration practices and authorities are no exception. The nuclear family consists of parents and their minor children. Other relationships, such as extended family, are secondary from the authorities' point of view. Nordic countries' welfare systems characteristically base their social policy on the model of two breadwinners and caregivers. In most other countries, notions of family, marriage and partnership are more inclusive (Davydova-Minguet & Pöllänen 2020; Turtiainen et al. 2020; Vuori 2012: 243–244).

The Finnish system that migrants face has been described as red tape (Hirsiaho 2010). The time-consuming acquisition, completion and submission of official documents are the system's heart. Indeed, the European system in general is document-focused. Migrants encounter this when they try to make a life within the borders of the state to which they have migrated (Khosravi 2013). Historically, the DVV has acted as a state bookkeeper whose decisions are not based on what the people in question tell it: the majority of Finnish citizens' and residents' register entries are made on the basis of what other authorities say or do, usually in the form of documents (Alastalo & Homanen 2015).

A juridical professional culture prevails in DVV service locations, and registration revolves around (legalised) documents. These are especially required to register family relationships—or rather, nuclear family relationships, that is, relationships between

married people and parent–child relationships. Cohabitation is not recognised as constituting familial relationships or a (common law) marital status in the registration world of the juridical document bureaucracy.

Officers enter migrants' familial relationships into the register if they can establish that all the criteria for entry have been met. However, the familial relationships that migrants themselves write on their registration forms do not constitute sufficient grounds for registration. Except for residents of other Nordic countries, who are not required documents, meeting the criteria for entry means providing the necessary official documents from one's country of origin, such as identity documents or certificates of marriage, birth or adoption, with official translations and legalisations.

A document's legalisation by a foreign authority gives it the necessary legal status in Finland (there are exceptions for Estonian migrants). Legalisation ensures that whoever issued the document had the legal right to do so, that it was issued with the correct information, and thus that it is a valid legal document in the foreign country in question. Legalisation is done in one of two ways, depending on whether the foreign country has signed the 1961 Hague Convention. A document issued in a signatory country must be legalised with an 'Apostille' certificate or stamp. A document sent from a non-signatory country must be legalised as follows: first, the issuing country's ministry for foreign affairs legalises the document by certifying that the correct authority issued it; then, the country's Finnish embassy legalises the document by attaching a certificate proving the right of the foreign official in question to issue such certificates (DVV n.d.).

The acquisition of various documents and their translation and legalisation is a bureaucratic jungle. We observed registration officers having to explain the intricacies to migrants repeatedly and at great length. Consider this ethnographic snapshot from a registration encounter:

A Spanish man has come for a first-time registration. He and a service officer are going through the man's pre-filled registration form. For the item on familial relationships, the man has entered information about being married and filled in personal information about his wife. The officer asks if the man has their marriage certificate and where they got married [in order to establish what kinds of document are issued in Spain and what type of legalisation will be needed]. The man mentions the 'family book' [the register where Spanish authorities enter information on marriages and children]. The officer asks if the man knows about the legalisation process. The man says he does not understand what it means. The officer explains: 'It means that all the documents that are brought from abroad need to be legalised so they can be accepted. So if your marriage has been entered in the family book, it needs to be legalised. Do you have it somewhere?' The man suspects he has a copy. The officer gives him an information brochure about Apostille legalisation, as Spain is part of the Hague Convention, and explains that the couple will also need to get their child's original birth certificate legalised if the child is moving to Finland [the man has filled in their child's information on the form]. Next she reminds him that the original documents will need to be translated from Spanish, and the translations will also need legalisation unless they are by an authorised Finnish translator. 'So the thing you need from Spain is the Apostille stamp on the original documents'. The man is puzzled

and asks what an Apostille stamp is. The officer explains: 'That is what the procedure is called. Certain countries have agreed on a way in which documents are legalised. So all the signatory states use the same kind of stamp, which we recognise. I can show you what it looks like'. The officer shows him the stamp and describes in detail the elements it must include. The man wonders where to get such a stamp. 'From Spain', advises the officer. Before the appointment ends, the man and the officer return twice to go over legalisation and the delivery of official documents to the DVV.¹

While the fieldnote extract above does not portray the most complex possible case, the officer still has to explain at length about documentation and legalisation and return to the subject many times. Our fieldwork revealed that migrants often have to visit service locations several times because their documents are not up to standard the first time they come to register.

During our fieldwork, it quickly became clear that the DVV considers documents from EU states to be more reliable than from those considered 'Third World' countries. Officers have been widely reported as particularly suspicious of documents presented by asylum seekers since the arrival of Somali refugees in Finland in the 1990s (Keskinen 2014; Tapaninen & Helén 2019; see also Tyler 2013).

It is not always possible to acquire and/or legalise documents at all from some countries outside the EU. The situation is most difficult for asylum seekers fleeing war or persecution, who may not have official identification or travel documents. Migrants from the poorest countries are in an unequal position: people fleeing from the poorest or most politically unstable regions are frequently required to provide the most documents and legalisations – the very things they lack. Reaching their nearest Finnish embassy might require travel to another country, and acquiring and legalising documents in chaotic regions takes a long time. Consider the experience of this Iraqi couple:

An Iraqi married couple has come to register permanent residence for the wife [the husband already has permanent residence]. It soon becomes clear that the couple and the officers know each other from before. Everyone is very jolly about the situation, smiling, and I am told that 'finally both have municipalities of residence!' I ask the officers about the background. They tell me that the husband has resided in Finland for a while, and his Iraqi wife joined him later. They had to wait *18 months* for the legalisation of their marriage certificate to arrive from Iraq. The situation was especially unfortunate because the wife had been ill, and the Finnish social insurance institution did not grant her public health insurance. Without the required marriage documentation, the officers saw her as not having the right to a municipality of residence. During the visit I observed, the couple's marriage was registered, finally granting the woman a municipality of residence. (Fieldnotes)

According to the officers, registration processes lasting several years are not uncommon in the cases of some countries. One can imagine the countless impossible situations the documentation requirements can create. Moreover, documents and

1 As of February 2019, Apostille ceased to be required from EU citizens (see https://e-justice.europa.eu/content_public_documents-551-en.do).

legalisations cost money: there are fees for authorities to make them. All this is an effect of the quest for *reliability*.

A 2014 amendment to the Population Information Act (661/2009, Section 19) states that if

a document, document's legalisation or proof of origin [...] cannot be obtained due to poor security or the human rights situation in the state concerned [...] the DVV can also accept other reliable accounts as the basis for the information entered into the population information system. The person requesting the information be entered into the system must account [...] for the reasons why the acquisition of the document, legalisation or proof of origin is impossible. After receiving this account, the DVV can, if necessary, request a statement from the Finnish Immigration Service or ministry for foreign affairs confirming that it is impossible to acquire the document, legalisation or proof of origin from the given country.

This amendment somewhat improved asylum seekers' situation. In practice, we were told, the countries where it is regarded as impossible to obtain documentation are those from which people are normally granted asylum, such as Somalia and Libya. One registrar told us that the amendment largely constituted a belated legal recognition of what had been de facto practice since the 1990s.

In Finland, and in the affluent countries more widely, the prevailing discourse and public discussion about documents particularly question the genuineness of asylum seekers (Keskinen 2014; see also Tyler 2013). Even the amendment quoted above puts the onus on migrants to explain why it is impossible for them to obtain a document, legalisation or proof of origin. Furthermore, after receiving this explanation – except in the case of quota refugees – the DVV can request an opinion on the situation in the country in question from immigration services or the ministry for foreign affairs. Authorities are more trusted than migrants, and this has devastating impacts on migrant (family) lives.

DNA TESTING: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK?

During our initial fieldwork, one service location accepted the results of DNA tests as proof of mother–child relationships in the absence of legalised birth certificates. Later, DNA tests for both maternity and paternity were accepted where it had been established that the migrant's country of origin would not provide or legalise documents. A register officer described the procedure to us:

The impossibility of attaining reliable documents has to be established first before we can base register entries on another type of reliable account, like a DNA test. [...] So yes, in these child-parent relationships the DNA test works.

Initially, it seemed to us that an epistemological break was occurring in juridical state knowledge production practices. Historically, these practices only recognised a family relationship if it was based on and according to administrative documentation. By epistemological break, we mean that a new way of knowing family relationships and parentage has emerged. The new way of knowing through DNA tests, a relatively new method that emphasised biological and genetic 'facts'. The historical way of

knowing has been bureaucratic practices around documents and documentation that emphasised the role of the authorities as the producers of 'true' knowledge about family relationships (Helén 2014).

DNA tests and other forensic medical tests have been used in family reunification practices in Finland since the beginning of this century (Helén 2014; Helén & Tapaninen 2013). However, they were only adopted in population registration some 15 years later, albeit for the same reasons: for cases where people do not have the required documents or where the documents they do have are deemed unreliable. The reason for the 15-year delay may lie in this professional culture's prevalent discourse, which treats registration work as a type of governmental bookkeeping regulated by specific legislation.

The argument for DNA tests was that the DVV wanted to prevent situations where an underage child would be entered into the population register without a legal guardian, since this might create problems with regard to child welfare, schools and social services. It might also affect the family's eligibility for family related services and benefits. Even where a child is born and receives a birth certificate in Finland, the registration of the child's relationship with the mother can be difficult if the mother herself does not have a municipality of residence.

At first, we considered the implementation of DNA tests to be bringing registration practices up to date with current realities and an attempt to change practices in line with international human rights treaties that are binding on Finland. Indeed, when DNA testing was first implemented for family reunifications in Finland, it was promoted in terms of human rights and specifically children's rights, including their right to family life. Amid a general atmosphere of suspicion, where neither the immigrant's word nor their documents (if there were any) were trusted, DNA tests offered a decisive alternative (Helén & Tapaninen 2013). Children have less say on migration than adults (Tyler et al. 2014). It is also cruel to exacerbate their situation by demanding original documents and legalisations that are difficult or impossible to acquire, not just because of politically unstable conditions, but also because some countries do not use official documents for identity and relationships (Heinemann & Lemke 2014). During discussions with us, however, DVV staff did not justify the use of DNA tests on the basis of human rights, although the child's best interests were behind one local service location's decision to start accepting DNA.

Testing can secure the rights and benefits of the most vulnerable people, that is, refugees. But it can also be used as a mechanism for exclusion and inequality: only a biological relationship can lead to a positive decision, and testing is strategically aimed at people fleeing the Global South (Helén 2014; Helén & Tapaninen 2013; Olwig 2022). Thus, DNA testing can make, unmake or modify family relationships and diminish social rights (Heinemann & Lemke 2014; Rose 2007). In practice, DNA tests have never been sufficient grounds for family reunification (Tapaninen & Helén 2019).

Both the discussion among expert registrars at the DVV and the eventual acceptance of DNA testing itself were surrounded by concerns about the procedure's reliability. Authorities questioned its reliability because variations in laboratory practice might lead to discrepancies in results. Similar doubts rose earlier in the case of family reunification amongst migration authorities. Because of such doubts, Finland's Immigration Services started to centralise the arrangement of DNA tests (Helén 2014; Tapaninen & Helén 2019). Another concern for DVV was who would pay for the tests if the procedure was accepted.

We later discovered that one of the service locations that used DNA testing in fact only accepted tests that had been ordered and paid for by the Finnish Immigration Service (for family reunification) or the district court. The officers told us that the idea was only to accept tests that had been arranged by another public authority. In other words, practices concerning DNA testing turned out to be in line with immigration services' family reunification practices.

At present, DNA tests may in principle be conducted in any place that is deemed 'reliable'. A register officer told us during a phone interview:

As evidence [of a family tie] we can accept a DNA test arranged by a public authority or the client themselves. However, the reliability of the test-making agency needs to be something the DVV can confirm.

Thus, only tests conducted in public establishments actually qualify. In the words of one DVV lawyer,

it would be very difficult to evaluate that reliability if it was a private provider. [In practice] tests used in register work tend to be conducted at the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare [DNA tests conducted by the institute are ordered by Finnish Immigration Services].

Overall, although there had been a change in the juridical bureaucracy and the logic of knowledge production about families, the change was not as great as it first appeared. The primary importance of documents written by governmental authorities, and of communication between authorities about client cases, remained unaltered despite the entrance of DNA tests as a way of knowing family relations. De facto, only tests from a laboratory where Finnish authorities have centralised their DNA testing are accepted as proof of relationships. Furthermore, the nuclear family norm was enforced, as were exclusionary norms regarding the biogenetic family ties determined by DNA tests.

FAMILY STATISTICS (RE)MAKING FAMILIES SEPARATED BY POPULATION REGISTRATION

Population and family statistics are a central form of knowledge through which state authorities, administrators and citizens encounter foreign nationals living in Finland. For many citizens and authorities who do not work with migrants, official statistics and publications based on them are among the few ways to 'know' immigrants – not as individuals, but as generalised within the whole population.

Family statistics are drawn exclusively from population register data, and as said, they include only permanently registered people like all population statistics. The criterion for permanent residence in statistics is permanent resident status (i.e. registration with a 'municipality of residence') in the population register. The statistical classification of families recognises the following types: married or cohabiting couples without children, married or cohabiting couples with children and single-parent families. Thus, unlike the registration practices, the family statistics recognise cohabiting couples as families, because the family statistics are based on (co-)dwelling and make families of people who live together. As one statistical officer put it:

As I said, we are here now [refers to the family definition of the current moment in the family statistical practice], if you think that we are in a statistical family. And we always discuss what that family is [referring to reflection on the how to statistically define it]. We are here. This is now a kind of co-housing-based [system].

In addition to family statistics, family relationships are also described in database tables of *population structure statistics*, which show the population by marital status. Population statistics categorise foreign nationals living in Finland by citizenship, country of birth and language. Otherwise, they are covered by statistics in the same way as Finnish citizens. Family statistics also categorise the citizenship, country of birth and language of the spouses and cohabiting partners of Finnish citizens and persons born in Finland.

Although family statistics and population structure statistics are based on the population register, the data in the register is not used as such. Rather, the statistical officers transform the register data into statistical data by checking, cleaning and curating before storing it in the statistics office's database (for details, see [Alastalo & Homanen 2018](#)). For instance, at the end of 2021, there were 91,900 persons whose marital status information was missing in the register data. Practically all were foreign citizens. Their marital status is not registered, at least in part because of the DVVs document requirements and the difficulties migrants have in providing documents. In the statistical office's data curation practice, they are deduced – or made – a marital status in the following way: a person is coded as unmarried if they have no children according to the population register. If a person has children in the register, they are coded as divorced. Because of this practice of deducing marital status, everyone has a marital status in the state knowledge of statistical tables.

A statistical officer described to us the practice of compiling family statistics as follows:

And then we have the old family program from the early '90s, in other words, the programmed reasoning rules. And then it's run.

The 'family program' (a computer program logics) creates statistical families from the population register's data on co-dwelling. Thus, the family statistics unite (i.e. deduce) the families of people who do not have registered relationships with their spouses or children in the population register entered by DVV officers. The marital status variable, deduced marital statuses, is used when family statistics classify families into married or cohabiting couples with or without children. In this way, foreign nationals with a deduced unmarried status in the statistical data end up as cohabiting couples in family statistics if they live with their partner.

However, the statistics do not create families out of all people who live together – only those whose age and gender conform to a certain couple-normative logic. Deducing family relationships based on co-dwelling is congruent with the two-generation family model enforced by legislation and established in administrative practice. The two-generation statistical family consists of parents and their children. This statistical (hetero)normative nuclear family model separates three-generation families into two families, or one family and one person living alone. The statistical deduction rules do not recognise same-sex cohabiting couples 'unless the household-dwelling unit consists of two women who are the biological mother of the child living in the same dwelling and the second mother confirmed for the child' ([Statistics Finland n.d.](#)). Further, cohabiting minors, people with an age difference of 16 years or more, and people living in institutions do not constitute families.

For foreign nationals residing in Finland, the most important practices in (family) statistics are those of deducing a person's marital status and uniting families, including families who have not been able to 'prove' their family relationships with documents at a DVV service location. By taking people who are separated by the register and uniting them in the eyes of the law and the authorities, family statistics hide the fact that Finland's administrative authorities do not recognise those people's family relationships. The statistics thus not only describe but also organise social relations (Curtis 2001: 33) and rights.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has shown how family relationships are made, unmade and remade in Finnish practices of registration and statistics compilation. These Practices in general constitute the second step for migrants and migrant families in the process of being awarded (or not) social rights and incorporation into the welfare state. Such administrative registration and state statistics-building systems are common to Nordic welfare states, but little research on them exists (although see Burrell & Schweyher 2021). Our aim has been to explore state knowledge production practices and processes in the registration and statistical compilation of migrant family relationships and to see what the state's knowledge/power to make migrant family ties 'legible' does. We have been interested in not just how the ties are constituted and ordered, but also across different scales of administration and policy. In other words, we have explored the consequences for migrant families at both an individual and a population level.

The conceptions of families that are realised in these knowledge production practices affect, in the eyes of the authorities, who can form a family and how that family is structured. As forms of governmental gatekeeping, registration and statistics have concrete and even violent impacts on the lives of migrant families – as does bureaucracy generally (e.g. Leinonen & Pellander 2020; Näre 2020). Our ethnographic perspective on the everyday work of government bureaucrats has enabled us to recognise the governmental red tape normative family logic. Through this logic, the state both knows about foreign families and governs and excludes some of them from the welfare system in a way that produces inequality.

Encounters with authorities at DVV service locations endorse the heteronormative/homonormative nuclear family model. This model is known through official documents provided by public authorities, and it is deeply rooted in legislation, bureaucracy and immigration policies and authorities. As Heinemann and Lemke (2014: 491) write, this produces a double standard of family recognition for native citizens and migrants. For instance, while welfare institutions recognise variety in ethnic Finns' family relationships, such as common-law partnerships, migrants are required to fit a narrower juridical idea of the family. This is out of line with Council Directive 2003/86/EC (EUR-Lex 2003) – the EU's most important legal document regarding migrant family reunification and rights – which leaves considerable room for interpretation regarding the concept of the family, the ages of minors and spouses, and the status of marriage as a prerequisite. This European legal framework should apply to *all* border-making welfare institutions.

The importance of officially authorised documents, combined with a general atmosphere of suspicion among immigration authorities, results in a situation where the immigrant's word and even (depending on their place of origin) their

documents and legalisations are easily mistrusted. Thus, our research confirms other studies' findings that there is an administrative and political ethos of generalised suspicion across different institutions (e.g. Andersson 2014; Keskinen 2014; Khosravi 2013; Tapaninen & Helén 2015; Tyler 2013). The authenticity of documents from unprivileged parts of the world is treated as the most suspect. People fleeing war and persecution in the poorest regions are required to provide the most documents, which are extremely difficult and complicated to acquire and legalise (also Heinemann & Lemke 2014: 491–493). This not only requires excessive amounts of time, effort and money, but it also delays the registration of family relationships and the municipality of residence. This, in turn, can prevent migrants from receiving healthcare, benefits and social services.

How does the new practice of DNA testing help to constitute families in investigation and decision-making during registration? Prior research, which has focused primarily on family reunification, has found two coexisting rationales: human rights and border control (Heinemann & Lemke 2014; Helén 2014; Olwig 2022; Tapaninen & Helén 2019). This dual logic is also apparent in registration practices. First, the acceptance of DNA tests as proof of parent-child relationships and the easing of documentary requirements both indicate that Finland's population information register authorities have the capacity to update registration practices in line with international human rights treaties. Second, if the DNA results deny any genetic parent-child tie, the rather narrow use of DNA testing in register practices potentially easily leads to restrictions on legal claims and rights and endorses a biological conception of the (nuclear) family.

This atmosphere of institutional mistrust is in no way fading. The discussion and acceptance of DNA testing in DVV service locations is defined by officers' suspicions of the test process's reliability, resulting in their only accepting tests arranged by another authority. Contrary to first appearances, then, DNA testing has not meant a break in the acquisition of documentary evidence from other authorities regarding family relationships.

However, it does complicate the interplay between different forms of evidence in decision-making about register entries and thus in social rights linked to family ties. Tapaninen and Helén (2019) point out that Finnish Immigration Services are characterised by a particular ambiguity with regard to the use of DNA tests in decision-making about family reunifications: test results may be taken as only a partial answer to the question of existing family ties, or they may be ignored altogether in light of migrants' narrative or documentary 'evidence'. In the case of registration, we see an interplay of different documents: DNA test result documents and legalised certificates of birth, adoption, marriage and partnership. Because these documents reflect different understandings of family ties at their origin, 'decisions are left undetermined and open to restrictive trends in migration policy at large' (Tapaninen & Helén 2019: 382). Suspicion easily wins the day.

In the shift from service locations to register-based family statistics, family relationships that are missing from the register are suddenly foregrounded, made visible to the state and reorganised according to the heteronormative nuclear family model. The information in the population register is managed in a way that not only makes families visible but even produces new family units from inferred marital statuses and family statistics based on co-dwelling. Although these 'reassembled' or even created families are not recognised by the Finnish administrative authorities, they are visible to the state on account of statistical practices. They therefore impact on the development of social welfare policy in the form of official Finnish statistics – that is, as state knowledge about populations residing in Finland.

Overall, in the process of state knowledge production about migrant populations, migrant families are recognised differently at the levels of individuals/administration and populations/statistics. This reveals a process that is contingent and arbitrary, but strategic: a (bio)politics that aims to know all, as well as border controls and care for some more than others.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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