



Politics for Exclusion and Strategies for Inclusion: A Scoping Review of Nordic Family Reunification Policies, Practices, and Impact on Refugees

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, Nordic countries have seen a general move towards stricter migration policy, including in the area of refugee family reunification. While the body of literature on family reunification in these countries is growing, we lack a broad overview of research on policy and practice, as well as the impact of policy on refugee wellbeing. We conducted a scoping review of the academic literature on family reunification policy, practice and impact on refugees in the Nordic countries. The objective of this study was twofold: to collect and review academic literature on family reunification policy in the Nordic countries and on the experiences of and strategies used by refugees to navigate this process. We used a key concept in the theory of salutogenesis, a sense of coherence, to frame the analysis of refugee experiences. The findings of the review indicated that there is an uneven coverage of the Nordic countries in the literature, both in terms of geography and thematic focus. Much research reports on the negative impact on refugee wellbeing, but qualitative approaches allow for more nuanced insights into refugee experiences and responses. The use of a sense of coherence helped identify refugee use of resources and strategies in the literature.

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Family reunification is one of the policy areas most affected by the general move towards stricter immigration policy in Nordic countries (Eggebo & Brekke 2019). Efforts to curb the further inflow of migrants include placing increasingly strict eligibility requirements for family reunification on those who have already arrived (Bratu et al. 2020; Emilsson 2020; Hiitola 2019). The impact of the stricter family reunification regulations on refugees' ability to integrate into the host society is contested: on the one hand, decision-makers see family reunification as hindering integration (Eggebo & Brekke 2019), but on the other hand, family reunification improves the physical and mental wellbeing of refugees, thus promoting their integration (Löbel 2020). While there is a growing body of literature addressing the topic of family reunification in Nordic countries, we lack a broad overview of the field, showing what has been done so far, where in the Nordic countries the research has been conducted, and what research gaps exist. Phillimore et al. (2023) in a recent review of family reunification policies, identified that very little is known about how these policies impact the lives and wellbeing of the resettled refugees. The objective of this paper is to collect and review, firstly, literature on the evolving family reunification policy and practice context in Nordic countries, and secondly, literature on how refugees in Nordic countries experience and respond to the process of seeking to reunite with family members abroad.

CONCEPTUALISING FAMILY

There is no universal definition of family; definitions vary geographically between countries, but also socially, legally and politically within countries (Löbel 2020). One of the most common distinctions is that between *nuclear family* comprising spouses or partners and their biological children and an *extended family* where other relatives are included, such as the spouses' parents and siblings, nieces and nephews (the children's grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins) (Löbel 2020). Several authors note that the nuclear family is typically the definition used by Western state and non-governmental bureaucracies (Balakian 2023; Löbel 2020; Phillimore et al. 2023). In the global south, the definition of family is much broader and more flexible, and kinship norms may include temporarily or permanently fostering the children of one's siblings; in general, the responsibility for child rearing is spread across kinship and community networks (Balakian 2023). How family is defined is central to determining who is eligible for reunification.

REFUGEE FAMILY REUNIFICATION AS FRAMED BY LAW AND RIGHTS

There is no general international agreement specifying the right to family reunification for migrants and refugees; in practice, agreements refer to the rather vague 'right to respect for family life' (Palander et al. 2023). The legal framework includes many references to the right to family life and to family unity based on international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2018). In international human rights law, the family is recognised as a fundamental unit of society and as entitled to protection and assistance (UNGA 1948 art. 16; UNGA 1966a art. 23; UNGA 1966b art. 10). On the basis of these provisions, a person in search of safety who has successfully been granted refugee status in one of the Nordic countries is eligible to be reunited with their immediate family members. In international humanitarian law, the Fourth

Geneva Convention includes mechanisms to enable family communication and, if possible, reunification (UNHCR 2018). Initially, there was a willingness among the signatories to increase the responsibility to facilitate family reunification in every possible way (UNHCR 2018). However, over the last decade, there has been an increase in family reunification regulations. In response to the rapid increase of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015, all the Nordic countries introduced further restrictions on family reunification procedures. The official objective was to control the number of arrivals to help the integration of those already in the country. However, according to the UNHCR, this may have been counterproductive, as when families are separated, refugees often find it more difficult to integrate into their new society, including finding employment, education, language and social integration and inclusion (UNHCR 2018).

Once a person who has applied for asylum is granted refugee status and is resettled in the Nordic host country, family reunification may be possible subject to time limits and income requirements. The procedure varies across the Nordic region. In Sweden, for example, the resettled refugee acts as a sponsor and applies for reunification on behalf of family members abroad, but in Finland, since 2011, it is the family member abroad who must make the application (Palander et al. 2023). Processing the applications takes time, requires interviews and the gathering of information and evidence, including DNA testing (Palander et al. 2023). If the application is successful, the family member may move to the Nordic host country and be reunited with the refugee.

METHODS

This review follows the methodological framework for scoping studies developed by Arksey & O'Malley (2005) and advanced by Levac, Colquhoun & O'Brien (2010). Their methodological guidelines from Arksey & O'Malley (2005) for conducting a scoping review are based on five stages:

- Stage 1: identifying the research question
- Stage 2: identifying relevant studies
- Stage 3: study selection
- Stage 4: charting the data
- Stage 5: collating, summarising and reporting the results

Structured searches were conducted in four relevant databases: Web of Sciences, PsycINFO, Medline and ProQuest. Publications since 2001 were included¹ and all are in English except for a single publication in Danish (Zand 2006). Additional academic sources were collected through citation searches and hand-searching of key journals. Three central elements to guide the database search were identified: refugees, family reunification and Nordic countries. Based on these elements, synonyms, related keywords and relevant subject headings were identified. Within each element, keywords were grouped with 'OR' (or, in some cases, 'NEAR' or 'ADJ' for proximity searches), and elements were subsequently grouped using 'AND'. The database search generated a total of 150 results, after which duplicates were removed and abstracts were screened for eligibility. Papers were uploaded into NVivo 12, where

¹ In 2001, Denmark elections were won by the Danish People's Party, which campaigned on restricting immigration, especially family reunification (Østegaard-Nielsen, 2003). Denmark was the first Nordic country to introduce stricter family reunification policies, hence the start date for the search.

abstracts and subsequently the full paper were coded. Studies were excluded from the review primarily on the basis of lacking on one or more of three criteria: being centred on one or more of the Nordic countries (e.g. lacking in [Phillimore et al. \(2023\)](#)), having family reunification as a central object of analysis (e.g. absent in [Adamo \(2022\)](#)), or including refugees as participants or in the policy analysis (e.g. not in [Bratu et al. \(2020\)](#)). Papers excluded from the review may still be referred to in the introduction or discussion. In addition, papers that met all three requirements but were not peer-reviewed were excluded (e.g. commissioned report by [Brekke & Grønningsæter \(2017\)](#)). As recommended by Levac, Colquhoun & O'Brien (2010), study selection was treated as an iterative and collaborative process, which finally resulted in a total of 28 studies included in the review (see [Table 1](#)).

In summarising and reporting results, studies were loosely grouped into two general categories: firstly, policies and processes, focusing on policy development and administrative processes surrounding family reunification in the Nordic countries; and secondly, impacts, focusing on the experiences and responses of refugees seeking family reunification. These categories were not treated as mutually exclusive; instead, overlap between them was deliberately allowed (see the last two columns in [Table 1](#)). [Table 1](#) shows that 10 papers overlap the two categories: an additional 11 refer exclusively to policy context (total 21) and an extra seven deal exclusively with refugee experiences (total 17). The policy context papers were largely based on policy or process analyses, document or discourse analyses, or analyses of court decisions. Those papers that included overlap with impact on refugees include interviews with immigration stakeholders such as immigration officials, lawmakers and geneticists ([Helén 2014](#); [Lee & Voigt 2020](#); [Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019](#)). The study by [Hvidtvedt, Petersen & Norredam \(2022\)](#) is based on registry data and is the only quantitative research included in this review. The remaining papers on refugee experiences report in-depth qualitative research with asylum-seekers, refugees and unaccompanied minors (UAMs) as well as those in state and civil society who work with refugees.

THEORETICAL FRAMING OF REFUGEE EXPERIENCES

As mentioned above, [Phillimore et al. \(2023\)](#) identify that very little is known about the impact of family reunification policies on the lives and wellbeing of resettled refugees. To frame our examination of this gap in the literature, refugee experiences and responses, we use the theory of salutogenesis, a robust theory that examines what enables people to move towards health and wellbeing ([Antonovsky 1996](#)). One of the theory's key concepts is 'Sense of coherence', which is defined as 'a global orientation that ... things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected' ([Antonovsky 1979](#)). The strength of an individual's sense of coherence will influence whether they are able to move towards healthy outcomes (as opposed to anxiety and mental disorders) when dealing with the process of family reunification. A sense of coherence has three dimensions: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Comprehensibility is the belief that the challenge is understood ([Antonovsky 1979](#)) and is related to a consistent and stable environment, something that refugees are unlikely to experience; they are especially likely to experience inconsistency between expectations from their new host society and their original community ([Slootjes, Keuzenkamp & Saharso 2017](#)). Manageability is the belief that resources necessary to cope with stressors are available ([Antonovsky 1979](#)). A good load balance (i.e. sufficient resources to cope with stressors experienced) contributes

Table 1 Publications reviewed.

AUTHOR(S) AND DATE	TITLE	COUNTRY/ COUNTRIES OF STUDY	POLICY CONTEXT	REFUGEE EXPERIENCES
Adamo (2007)	The legal position of migrants in Denmark: Assessing the context around the 'cartoon crisis'	Denmark	Human rights	Requirements are difficult to navigate
Andreasson & Herz (2022)	Family practices, deportability and administrative violence: an ethnographic study of asylum seekers family life in the Swedish migration context	Sweden	Welfare context Human rights	Mental health stressors
Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen (2017)	A 'civic turn' in Scandinavian family migration policies? Comparing Denmark, Norway and Sweden	Denmark, Norway, Sweden	Civic integration, welfare context	'Double conditionality'
Bech & Mouritsen (2013)	Restricting the right to family reunification in Denmark	Denmark	Welfare context Human rights	–
Borevi (2015)	Family migration policies and politics: understanding the Swedish exception	Sweden	Welfare context Human rights	–
Emilsson (2020)	Continuity or change? The Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Swedish Political Parties' Migration Policy Preferences	Sweden	Welfare context Human rights	–
Gammeltoft-Hansen (2017)	Refugee policy as 'negative nation branding': the case of Denmark and the Nordics.	Denmark and some references to Sweden, Norway	Aim and timing of stricter requirements	–
Gustafsson (2022)	Collectivity in waiting: transnational experiences in Swedish family reunification	Sweden	–	Time and mental health stressors
Hagelund (2020)	After the refugee crisis: public discourse and policy change in Denmark, Norway and Sweden	Norway, Sweden, Denmark	Policy pathways consistent or not	–
Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela (2019)	Where's the well: DNA evidence, personal narratives and unpredictability in Finnish family reunification	Finland	DNA	Requirements difficult to navigate
Helén (2014)	Biological citizenship across borders: Politics of DNA profiling for family reunification	Finland	DNA	–
Helén & Tapaninen (2013)	Closer to the truth: DNA profiling for family reunification and the rationales of immigration policy in Finland	Finland	DNA	Credibility questioned
Hernes (2018)	Cross-national convergence in times of crisis? Integration policies before, during and after the refugee crisis	Denmark, Norway, Sweden	Policy path dependency	–
Hiitola (2019)	Locating Forced Migrants' Resources: Residency status and the process of family reunification in Finland	Finland	–	UAM, changing expectations. Economic and social resources needed
Hiitola (2021)	Everyday (in)security and transnational family relationships in the lives of young forced migrants	Finland	–	Time stressors

(Contd.)

AUTHOR(S) AND DATE	TITLE	COUNTRY/ COUNTRIES OF STUDY	POLICY CONTEXT	REFUGEE EXPERIENCES
Hiitola & Vähä-Soro (2021)	Genres of departure: forced migrants' family separation and personal narratives	Finland	–	Using narratives to cope
Hvidtfeldt, Petersen & Norredam (2022)	Waiting for family reunification and the risk of mental disorders among refugee fathers: a 24-year longitudinal cohort study from Denmark	Denmark	–	Poor mental health Time stressors
Hyökki (2019)	The EU and Human Rights as Institutional Facts in the Finnish Political Discourse on Family Reunification	Finland	Human rights	Financial burden Time stressors
Lee & Voigt (2020)	DNA Testing for Family Reunification and the Limits of Biological Truth	Finland, Germany, USA	DNA	–
Leinonen & Pellander (2020)	Temporality and everyday (in)security in the lives of separated refugee families	Finland	Human rights	Mental health and time stressors Credibility questioned
Olwig (2022)	The right to a family life and the biometric 'Truth' of family reunification: Somali refugees in Denmark	Denmark	DNA	Definition of family
Palander et al. (2023)	International human rights frameworks in relation to national family reunification policy and administrative practice	Sweden, Finland Plus other countries	Welfare context	–
Sourander (2003)	Refugee families during asylum seeking	Finland	–	Poor mental health
Staver (2015)	Hard work for love: the economic drift in Norwegian family immigration and integration policies	Norway	Income requirements	–
Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää (2019)	Mobile lives, immutable facts: family reunification of children in Finland	Finland	DNA	Definition of family Mental health and economic stressors
Tapaninen & Helén (2020)	Making up families: how DNA analysis does/does not verify relatedness in family reunification in Finland	Finland	DNA	Requirements are difficult to navigate
Zand (2006)	En kamp imod vejrmøller [A struggle against windmills] [Nonclinical Case Study].	Denmark	–	Changing expectations Poor mental health
Østergaard-Nielsen (2003)	Counting the cost: Denmark's changing migration policies	Denmark	Welfare context	–
Total	28 publications (10 overlap in both categories)		21 publications	17 publications

to manageability, while overload (experienced when too much is required) can lead to insecurity, and underload (when too little is demanded) can undermine motivation (Slootjes, Keuzenkamp & Saharso 2017). Meaningfulness is the motivation to cope and is shaped by participation in socially valued decision-making (Antonovsky 1996), which Slootjes, Keuzenkamp & Saharso (2017) contend is frequently impossible for migrants hence, they identify multiple other ways of contributing to a sense of meaningfulness such as developing a coherent life narrative or a sense of belonging.

FINDINGS

THE EVOLVING POLICY CONTEXT: FAMILY REUNIFICATION IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

In this section, we give a descriptive overview of changes in family reunification policies across the Nordic countries. In addition, we describe some of the issues, like the introduction of DNA testing, that have been highlighted in the reviewed literature.

Coverage of the Nordic countries in the reviewed literature on family reunification policy is relatively uneven. We found numerous publications on family reunification policies in two of the countries, namely Denmark (Adamo 2007; Bech & Mouritsen 2013; Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017; Olwig 2022; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003) and Finland (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Helén 2014; Helén & Tapaninen 2013; Hyökki 2019; Leinonen & Pellander 2020; Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019; Tapaninen & Helén 2020). Five out of the seven studies on Finland (plus Lee & Voigt (2020), mentioned below) explore specifically the use of DNA testing to verify family ties in connection with family reunification applications (discussed below). Only one study focuses exclusively on Norwegian policy (Staver 2015) and three on Swedish policy (Andreasson & Herz 2022; Borevi 2015; Emilsson 2020). No studies of Icelandic policy were identified. Five studies adopted a comparative approach (Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen 2017; Hagelund 2020; Hernes 2018; Lee & Voigt 2020; Palander et al. 2023). The early literature appears to focus mostly on Denmark, with literature on other Nordic countries starting to emerge from 2013 onwards.

The three Scandinavian countries, which share many similarities in terms of culture, language, politics and demography, have differed quite substantially over time when it comes to policy regarding family reunification. Denmark is generally portrayed as having adopted the sharpest restrictions and requirements for family reunification and having done so comparatively early (Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen 2017; Bech & Mouritsen 2013; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). Gammeltoft-Hansen (2017), taking a longer historical perspective, contends that this was deliberate use of indirect measures to discourage immigration by 'negative nation branding' intended to shift the financial burden of asylum seekers onto other countries in what he calls 'beggar-thy-neighbour' policies. Sweden, on the other hand, is often described as having retained by European standards relatively liberal policies and generous support for family life (Andreasson & Herz 2022; Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen 2017; Borevi 2015). However, in 2016, in response to the increase in asylum seekers, Sweden introduced a temporary 3-year law to decrease asylum immigration, granting only temporary residence permits to asylum seekers (Palander et al. 2023). The temporary law was extended to 2021 when the restrictive changes were made permanent in a new migration law (Palander et al. 2023). This was such a radical departure from Sweden's previous approach that several authors label it as 'path-breaking' (Emilsson 2020; Hagelund

2020). Some studies suggest that the historical policy discrepancy between Denmark and Sweden in the family reunification area has caused migrants to leave Denmark for Sweden (Bech & Mouritsen 2013) – the ‘beggar-thy-neighbour’ policies identified above (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017). Norway is generally characterised in the literature as falling somewhere in between its two neighbours (Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen 2017). Furthermore, Norway has relied comparatively less on civic integration requirements and more on income requirements (Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen 2017; Staver 2015).

Another strand of the literature on family reunification policy in the Nordic countries concerns DNA testing to evaluate family reunification applications, which has increasingly been employed in Europe since the 1990s (Lee & Voigt 2020). Olwig (2022) states that DNA analysis for assessment of family reunification applications was first introduced in Denmark in 1997 and was there seen ‘mainly as a mode of exposing fraudulent family claims and, thus, controlling immigration, rather than as a course of action safeguarding individuals’ right to a family life’. Similarly, Lee & Voigt (2020) argue that DNA testing ‘belongs to the politics of exclusion rather than a technology of belonging’, and generally works as an obstacle rather than a helpful tool for refugees seeking to reunite with family members. The topic of DNA testing for family reunification is explored most extensively in the Finnish context (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Helén 2014; Helén & Tapaninen 2013; Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019; Tapaninen & Helén 2020), where it has been employed since the early 2000s and appears to have specifically targeted refugees and asylum seekers, who frequently lack official documentation from their home countries, which can be used to prove family ties (Tapaninen & Helén 2020). According to Tapaninen and Helén (2020), the purpose of DNA testing in Finland is twofold: to safeguard the human rights of applicants, but also pre-empt fraudulent applications. However, multiple scholars note that DNA testing is grounded in an attitude of suspicion towards applicants for family reunification and their claims regarding kinship (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Helén 2014; Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019; Tapaninen & Helén 2020). In this view, the increasing use of DNA testing for family reunification can be seen as consistent with the general move towards more restrictive immigration policies in Nordic countries (Helén 2014). Verification of family ties through DNA testing in Finland is often not in itself sufficient to be granted family reunification, but the ‘immutable fact’ of DNA also has to be supplemented by evidence of ‘genuine, permanent family life’, which is obstructed by lengthy bureaucratic processes (Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019).

A recurrent topic in the policy literature is the relationship between generally stricter requirements and restrictions on family reunification on the one hand and international human rights commitments on the other. When stricter regulations of family reunification have been proposed, these have often been criticised by opposing political parties and human rights organisations on the grounds that they represent a transgression of human rights, specifically the right to family (Adamo 2007; Bech & Mouritsen 2013; Hyökki 2019). Human rights and international commitments featured prominently in the political discussion of a proposed law amendment relating to family reunification in Finland in 2015 (Hyökki 2019). Similarly, family reunification policy in Denmark continuously needs to be legally adapted to meet the obligations of international human rights conventions (Adamo 2007). This underscores how family reunification policy through its intersection with human rights issues is not solely a domestic matter but needs to be understood in the context of international commitments (Adamo 2007). The different relationships the Nordic countries have with

the European Union (EU) appear to be especially important in shaping their migration policy, including in the area of family reunification (Adamo 2007; Bech & Mouritsen 2013; Hyökki 2019). Denmark, for instance, has a reservation on the Justice and Home Affairs area in the EU and therefore is not legally bound by the EU Directive on family reunification (Adamo 2007). In Finland, on the other hand, the same Directive has been shown by Hyökki (2019) to be frequently invoked in the political discourse around family reunification policy. Meanwhile, Norway, which is not an EU member, is a party to the EEA Agreement and has implemented the Citizens' Directive, and EU citizens moving to the country are thus entitled to family reunification (Staver 2015).

REFUGEE EXPERIENCES AND RESPONSES

In this section, we review those papers that report on how refugees experience the family reunification process and how they respond to regulations and requirements. We frame the presentation of findings in this section according to the three dimensions of sense of coherence.

Comprehensibility

Comprehensibility refers to the belief that the challenge is understood and often relates to the consistency of expectations in the country of origin and in the new host country.

One of the major inconsistencies experienced is how family is defined. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of Somali refugees in Denmark, Olwig (2022) argues that DNA testing, which limits family reunification to the biologically defined nuclear family, has been criticised for being at odds with the broader Somali conceptualisation of family as mobile, wide-ranging and inclusive with frequent fostering of children to achieve the best use of resources. Adding to the complexity and inconsistency in how family is conceptualised, DNA testing adds a biogenetic aspect to the definition of family connections (Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019). Some authors have explored refugee responses to these different definitions of what comprises family. Olwig (2022), in particular, has looked at 'double-edged kinship' – where the responsibilities and obligations to family members in the country of origin may become a heavy burden on refugees settled in Europe. She found that the DNA definition of family connectedness has to some extent allowed Somali refugees to renegotiate the meaning of family life and has become an acceptable reason to focus on the core family in Europe, reducing moral obligations to family in the country of origin.

One other aspect of comprehensibility is 'realistic expectations' – those with a high sense of coherence are more likely to adjust their expectations to the reality of the host country and hence integrate better. This is well illustrated in the study by Hiitola (2019), where she describes (former) UAMs in Finland as highly unlikely to succeed in family reunification as they simply do not have the financial or social resources to achieve it. Many of them were illiterate on arrival but receive schooling as part of the process of resettlement; they then adjust their initial expectations of bringing their family to Finland and achieving a high education for themselves – and instead work to earn money to provide the best possible lives for their parents and siblings where they are living (Hiitola 2019). Zand (2006) also mentions the importance of adjusting expectations to reality in order to integrate well; he mentions, in particular, how unsustainable is the expectation of refugees that once they have arrived in the host country all their suffering is over.

Manageability

Manageability refers to the belief that the resources needed to cope with the stressors faced are available. When considering how refugees themselves experience the family reunification process, the majority of articles we found focused on stressors and overload, resulting in negative impacts on health and wellbeing and increased risk for poor mental health outcomes (Andreasson & Herz 2022; Hvidtfeldt, Petersen & Norredam 2022; Sourander 2003; Zand 2006). We present the findings in this section in two categories: stressors and resources. We divide the *stressors* mentioned into three groups: stressors related to the requirements of family reunification; emotional stressors and time stressors.

Stressors related to requirements are dominated by the frequent changes in regulations and the ambiguity in the law. Adamo (2007) notes that, in Denmark, the system is fragmented with regulations attempting to combine international and national laws as well as EU law. Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen (2017) contend that complexity in Scandinavian countries is increased by 'double conditionality' applied to both the resident and the incoming family member. In Finland, since 1984, the law 'has been amended over 30 times' increasing complexity in the process of achieving reunification (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019). Several authors note that DNA testing does not simplify procedures (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Tapaninen & Helén 2020), but in fact makes it less likely to lead to a successful appeal (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019). Rejections are frequently attributed to inconsistencies in details in stories rather than DNA (Tapaninen & Helén 2020). We found one case where ambiguity in the law led to some members being granted reunification, while others in the same family were rejected (Zand 2006). In addition to financial stressors for the sponsor in the host country, there is also the financial burden of providing for the family still abroad – and paying for their required documentation and travel (Hiitola 2019; Hyökki 2019). Meeting all the requirements in a consistent and believable manner is further complicated by all the language and cultural translation required in the processes between family members, embassies, officials, courts and the police (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Tapaninen & Helén 2020).

Emotional stressors such as depression, anxiety and distress are caused by long separation and concern for family members abroad, living with uncertainty, fear of deportation and the burden of responsibility (Andreasson & Herz 2022; Gustafsson 2022; Hiitola 2019; Hvidtfeldt, Petersen & Norredam 2022; Sourander 2003; Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019; Zand 2006). Many families originate from areas of conflict and have personal histories of chaos and trauma that contribute to emotional stress (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Sourander 2003). Suspicious officials, official statements that assume fraud on the part of the applicant, and official procedures that shift the goal posts to confuse applicants all have a negative impact (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019). In some cases, the burden of justifying that they are not illegal immigrants adds to applicants' fear of deportation (Andreasson & Herz 2022; Sourander 2003), and the separation of family members under questioning increases stress and the likelihood that minute details of narratives will be inconsistent (Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019; Tapaninen & Helén 2020). Stereotyping and other negative attitudes of the host population can also contribute to anxiety and distress among applicants for family reunification (Sourander 2003; Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019; Zand 2006). While many studies identified emotional stressors, only two studies – by Hvidtfeldt, Petersen & Norredam (2022) and Sourander (2003) – described outcomes

that were entirely pathological for the participants. The former was a statistical study based on registry data, and participants in the latter were seeking asylum and had not yet been granted refugee status.

Time can add specific stressors or contribute to existing stressors. Time may be seen as a bureaucratic tool of control over migrants (Gustafsson 2022), in some cases through imposing short deadlines if monetary penalties are to be avoided (Leinonen & Pellander 2020), and in other cases through extending waiting times. UAMs who apply for family reunification may turn 18 while waiting for a decision and are then 'no longer a child in need of custody' and may lose other rights too (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Hiitola 2021). Another specific stressor that time brings is that some family members may die or disappear; families may lose contact and rupture (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019); in other words, there is a *collective* dimension to the waiting (Gustafsson 2022). Time can also exacerbate other stressors, particularly financial stress. The sponsor who has applied for family reunification may use up all economic resources while waiting for a decision, both through funding themselves in the host country and providing for their families abroad (Hiitola 2019; Hyökki 2019). Other sources of capital may be lost or devalued over time, such as social capital when social networks feel they have helped for long enough or cultural capital when knowledge becomes out-of-date (Hiitola 2019). Time may also undermine memory of events that family members are questioned about during interviews or conditions may have changed as time elapses (Tapaninen, Halme-Tuomisaari & Kankaanpää 2019). Registry data show an association between time waiting for family reunification and increased mental health problems (Hvidtfeldt, Petersen & Norredam 2022).

Resources used are also divided into three groups: strategies to deal with requirements; resources used in the host country; and resources and strategies used to support family abroad. We found very little research on resources and strategies, and, in some cases, we discuss indirect references to strategies.

Strategies to deal with requirements have changed since the introduction of DNA testing. Several authors refer to methods used to bring in family members who might be socially rather than biologically linked – before DNA testing was introduced. For example, Olwig (2022) mentions how Somali families brought in foster children or children of relatives who had died or who had contributed to the costs of their travelling to Denmark. Those children would be included in the family and referred to as their own children, though this might require changing their birth dates if several of the children were roughly the same age. When DNA testing was brought in, they might respond by saying they had changed their plans; those who had acquired Danish citizenship could move to other EU countries (without DNA testing) and apply there (Olwig 2022). Even after the introduction of DNA testing, there were strategies to get around the rules. Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela (2019) refer to the use of an 'anchor child' sent in as a UAM, who would then apply for family reunification to bring the rest of the family to Finland. The authors note that this is the perception of the authorities rather than a strategy communicated by refugees. Also after the introduction of DNA testing, in response to a negative judgement on family reunification, some sponsors requested DNA testing as a chance to support their kinship claim with a biometric test (Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019; Tapaninen & Helén 2020). These findings illustrate the double-edged nature of DNA testing in family reunification cases, whereby on the one hand it can give applicants a chance to demonstrate the credibility of their claim, while on the other

hand, it can be argued to add another layer of uncertainty and non-transparency to the process of applying for family reunification, as the significance of the results of DNA testing for the immigration authorities' decision largely remains unclear (Helén & Tapaninen 2013). Others in Finland, on receiving a negative decision, have appealed to the Human Rights Court, but in no case has this changed the decision (Hyöki 2019).

Resources used in the host country: Hiitola (2019), who is the only author who actively explores the use of resources among applicants for family reunification in Finland, concludes that the key factor in success (especially when a long wait is involved) is residency status, rather than any other single resource. There are four types of residence status for forced migrants, but only one – refugee status – exempts the migrant from the strict income requirements, which Hiitola (2019) contends make family reunification virtually impossible. Economic resources are also important – especially if it takes time to process the application for family reunification and the sponsor is required to support the family abroad (Hiitola 2019; Halme-Tuomisaari, Tapaninen & Aunela 2019). Cultural resources have also been highlighted – high levels of knowledge and education help an applicant navigate rules and regulations in the host society and Hiitola (2019) contends that the significance of social resources (or social networks) is one of the most researched areas related to family reunification. Some refugees acquire resources in the host country; for example, UAMs often arrived illiterate and gained education and other cultural resources through schooling (Hiitola 2019).

Resources and strategies used to support family abroad include economic resources for providing accommodation and basic needs during the waiting period; and also social resources – drawing on social networks like extended family or friends to help provide support (Hiitola 2019). These resources suffered depletion over time – linking to the stress time can cause if the reunification process is prolonged. The use of communication technology can enable reciprocal emotional support (Gustafsson 2022). Hiitola (2019) also discusses resources used when family reunification is not possible, such as UAMs trying to provide financial resources for siblings to acquire schooling or practical training.

Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness refers to the motivation to cope. Different narratives help refugees seeking family reunification to cope with the stresses involved, to bring understanding and meaning to their experiences (Hiitola & Vähä-Savo 2021). This applies not only to what they call 'salvation narratives' for those who achieve family reunification, but also to other narrative genres like 'fractured tragedies' for those who give up the hope of ever being reunited, but the narratives nonetheless help the person make sense of their experiences. In a different paper, Hiitola (2021) notes that participation in meaningful activities increases the sense of security for UAMs. She links the 'existential security' of young migrants to having purpose and meaning in life, which were integrally connected to values and faith. Gustafsson (2022) explores the *collective* perspective through having common, future-oriented goals while waiting for family reunification – '... a joint project aiming at a future imagined together'. As long as there is hope for reunification, there is motivation to get through the waiting period (Leinonen & Pellander 2020). While the literature we have reviewed here does show the motivation of refugees to keep trying to achieve reunification, there is very little on participation in decision-making or other measures of meaningfulness. It does not mean it is lacking, simply that it was not explored in these studies.

The objectives of this article were to collect and review literature on (1) the evolving family reunification policy and practice context in the Nordic countries, and (2) how refugees in Nordic countries experience and respond to the process of seeking to reunite with family members abroad. The first objective essentially addresses the gap in the literature that provides a broad overview of research on family reunification across the Nordic region. From a geographic perspective, the coverage of the Nordic countries in the literature on family reunification policy is uneven. Denmark and Finland appear to have received the most scholarly attention, although the literature on Finland is disproportionately focused on the practice of DNA testing. A few identified studies adopt a comparative perspective of policy in Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Bech, Borevi & Mouritsen 2017; Hagelund 2020; Hernes 2018), and another study includes Sweden and Finland in a comparison with many other countries (Palander et al. 2023). Denmark stands out among the Nordic countries as having adopted what are arguably the most restrictive and controversial set of policies around family reunification relative to its Nordic neighbours. In addition, Denmark was relatively early in starting to introduce more restrictive policies, doing so already at the start of the millennium, and this is confirmed in the literature beyond the review (Adamo 2022). The many articles focusing on Denmark thus could be seen as resulting from the adoption of strict policies on family reunification in the country at a time when such policy development was widely regarded as controversial. This had implications for the other Nordic countries, such as an increase in the number of asylum seekers choosing Sweden rather than Denmark (Bratu et al. 2020; Eggebø & Brekke 2019). The other Nordic countries subsequently followed Denmark and moved towards stricter policies of their own. The lack of, or relatively few, studies of family reunification policy developments in Iceland, Norway and Sweden indicates an avenue for future research.

This review has also illustrated the multifaceted and complex nature of the topic of family reunification policy and practice. Requirements for eligibility for family reunification are imposed not only on the prospective migrant, but also on the sponsor and on the relationship between the two. In addition, hard policies can be difficult to distinguish from bureaucratic and administrative practices, which are not always applied consistently. Different authors have labelled this ‘... non-transparent and unpredictable administrative practice’ (Adamo 2007) or ‘administrative violence’ (Andreasson & Herz 2022; Leinonen & Pellander 2020).

The second objective was to explore how refugees experience and respond to the process of family reunification, a gap in the literature identified by Phillimore et al. (2023). In order to explore the impact of reunification policies on refugee wellbeing in particular, we chose to frame our analysis of refugee experiences and responses using the dimensions of Antonovsky’s (1996) sense of coherence. This framing has highlighted that the majority of authors focus on barriers, challenges and stressors during the family reunification process, and consequently, they find that refugees experience pathological outcomes (see, e.g., Hvidtfeldt, Petersen & Norredam 2022). When the three dimensions of sense of coherence (SOC) (comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness) are strong, they enable the effective use of available resources, and movement towards a healthy outcome is facilitated (Antonovsky 1996). Only one author, Hiitola (2019, 2021), directly considered availability and use of resources, and interestingly, she found that some of her participants changed their expectations, developed strategies to cope with stressors,

and found new meaning through particular narratives – all of which enabled a move towards greater wellbeing and healthier outcomes. Hiitola & Vähä-Savo (2021) note that those who achieve family reunification may develop ‘salvation narratives’ while those still waiting or who have given up have either fractured tragedies or absurd stories of incomprehensibility – yet these narratives still contribute to coping. Some authors indirectly referred to strategies adopted by those seeking family reunification to get round the obstacles they faced, and in some cases, the refugees were able to achieve the family reunification they sought – or they adjusted their expectations to reality. In these cases, an outcome of wellbeing is not necessarily mentioned, but nor was there evidence of mental disorders (e.g., Olwig 2022). This theoretical framing opens up a particular direction for research: to focus on the resources and strategies of those who successfully achieve family reunification. Alternative theoretical approaches may well give insights into different aspects of family reunification experiences.

One final comment relates to the nature of the research we have reviewed. Of the 28 studies reviewed, only one was a statistical study based on registry data, and the findings of this study were entirely pathological (Hvidtfeldt, Petersen & Norredam 2022). The other studies used a range of qualitative research methods, such as document and discourse analysis and in-depth interviews with immigration officials, asylum-seekers, refugees and UAMs. Among the in-depth qualitative studies, only one, the study by Sourander (2003), had overwhelmingly negative outcomes. The study was conducted in an asylum centre, and participants had not yet received a decision on whether or not they would be granted refugee status (Sourander 2003). Zand’s (2006) study involves a single in-depth, longitudinal case study where the outcome of the family reunification application was mixed (some of the applicant’s children were granted reunification while others were not), and yet the study is able to explore nuances that illustrate both positive and negative aspects of the process and the applicant’s response. Olwig (2022), in her ethnographic study, was able to identify a range of strategies and responses among Somali families, reflecting different conceptualisations of family, in response to changing regulations on family reunification in Denmark. In general, we found that in-depth qualitative research reveals not only challenges and stressors experienced by refugees seeking family reunification, but also strategies and resources used in coping with the process. These studies are trailblazers and indicate a highly fruitful direction for future research.

Before concluding, we identify some methodological limitations. Firstly, the database search was limited to academic, peer-reviewed literature and did not include grey literature that, if included, could potentially have nuanced or otherwise added to the findings of this review. This was particularly applicable regarding Norway, where several reports that were not peer-reviewed were excluded and only a single relevant peer-reviewed study exclusively on Norway was found. Relatedly, while efforts were made to include all relevant synonyms and subject headings in the database searches, the variation in terminology used by different scholars in the field means that we cannot exclude the possibility that some relevant keywords may have been overlooked. Finally, study selection was complicated by the fact that in much of the identified literature, family reunification features only marginally or is mentioned in passing. In some instances, this led to doubt over whether a study should be included in the review or not. For the purpose of this review, however, we have excluded literature that does have refugee family reunification as a central theme.

CONCLUSION

The objectives of this review addressed two knowledge gaps in the literature on family reunification in the Nordic context, firstly, the lack of an overview of research on the policy and practice, and secondly, refugee experiences and responses to family reunification policies. Although Nordic countries may be regarded as similar in terms of culture, demography and politics, a review of research on their family reunification policies has not enabled a neat and systematic comparison. Researchers have focused on different issues; for example, DNA testing in Denmark, and especially in Finland, but not in the other countries; different applications of membership in the EU or human rights conventions in Sweden and Denmark. Policies and practices regarding family reunification differ between Nordic countries, in some cases substantially and in other cases in a more nuanced way. When considering the experiences and responses of refugees to family reunification, the overwhelming focus of research is on negative experiences and outcomes, which seem comparable across the Nordic countries. Frequent changes in regulations, the emotional stress involved in applying for reunification, and the time taken in the process can often result in mental health challenges. By framing the analysis using the dimensions of sense of coherence, the dearth of research on refugees' use of resources and strategies emerged; the nuanced findings of the few papers that did focus on more positive aspects give direction for future research.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors were involved in planning the paper, deciding the objectives and reviewing and discussing the written version. MD conducted and updated the search, analysed the data, constructed the Table, wrote the theory section and findings and discussion on Outcomes and completed the final edit of all sections. ØS wrote the section on Refugee Family Reunification as framed by law and rights.

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