

Special Issue Introduction: Intimate Belongings—Kinship and State Relatedness in Migrant Families in Denmark

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1. Introduction

Anthropologists and sociologists have paid increasing attention to how states and families entangle in modern societies. A dominant debate within these new anthropologies concerns how states, or statehood, and family systems are intimately intertwined as well as mutually transformed (Thelen and Alber 2017). This Special Issue of *Genealogy* contributes to the debate by proposing a perspective on intimate belonging as a prism to explore novel forms of state and kinship relatedness in migrant families in Denmark. Focusing on social and institutional landscapes where families and state professionals are brought closely together, the articles explore the ways in which belonging plays out in an intimate register of practices and activities: in upbringing, child- and eldercare, marriage and divorce, and in practices of protection and/or control of various risks.

In recent decades, anthropologists have questioned the basic assumption that the state exists as a separate entity seemingly above and beyond society (Vollebergh et al. 2021), proposing to understand the state as a hybrid and relational construct enacted in everyday life and across the private–official divide (de Koning et al. 2020; Thelen et al. 2014). In the context of European welfare states, this research has shown the development of novel policy paradigms that place the state in proximate relation to various subpopulations, producing intense, local state presence and intimate state–client relationships. In Denmark, such intimate modes of governance include interventions that aim at socializing families into certain ways of living and to creating “good” kin relations, which pushes the state–client relation into the realm of kinship and family life (Johansen 2020a; Gilliam and Gulløv 2017; Olwig et al. 2012). State actors are interweaved into kinship dynamics through strategies and programs that revolve around mundane family activities (Thelen and Alber 2017). The proximity of Danish welfare state governance directs our attention to the ways in which the state is enacted in and through its relations, when state actors connect with, and are tied into, family networks as one formation among others within a wider set of relatedness.

The intimate entanglement and mutual transformation of contemporary state and kinship structures has also been subjected to extensive debates within new kinship studies, for example in research on changing marriage and migration patterns that redefine local state structures, kinship images, and family arrangements (Carsten 2004, 2020; McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Lambek 2013). On a more general note, the new kinship studies have consistently moved beyond biological determinism and the genealogical model (Bamford and Leach 2009). Highlighting the creative energy of making kinship, through studies of adoption, gay and lesbian kinship, and artificial reproduction (Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Carsten 2004; McKinnon 2017), the new kinship studies have demonstrated that kinship relatedness emerge through genetic and blood connections, but also through the sharing of food, land, a shared history or nation (Carsten 2004). Critiquing classic understandings of kinship as a unified biological ‘whole’, the new kinship studies have explored new forms of family relatedness that may also include non-biological relations—including state and semi-state actors who may be placed in kin-like positions (Thelen et al. 2018). Howell’s (2006) conceptualization of the term ‘kinning’ describes the inclusion of non-biological



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kin into permanent family positions in the context of international adoption. A number of studies have proposed to study kinning practices across the state-family divide, for instance the kinning of migrants into the realm of the nation (Rytter 2010), or the kinning of care-providing state actors into the realm of family life (Thelen et al. 2018, p. 112).

A dominant discussion within these new state and kinship anthropologies concerns the boundary work that takes place when norms, values and cultural ideals must be negotiated in inclusionary practices across the private–official divide (Gal 2002). Often boundary work is based on gendered, racialized, and classed understandings of social life (Vollebergh et al. 2021), and imbued with interpersonal forms of exchange and affects (Marchesi 2020; Fortier 2010), morality (Weiss and Gren 2021; Zigon 2007) as well as imagistic notions of care (Mattingly and Grøn 2022) or control that flourish in families and the state. Thus, the boundary work that unfolds on the backdrop of state-family entanglements is based on multiple forms of belonging, and kinship belonging becomes nested within other forms of belonging, e.g., to the state, the nation, communities, or society at large (Gammeltoft 2018).

In this Special Issue we extend these recent explorations further by proposing the notion of “intimate belonging” as a fruitful analytical heuristic for understanding modalities of relatedness between migrant families and the Danish welfare state. With this concept, we refer to the complex ways in which belonging unfolds through intimacy, not as a sexual affinity, but as a social dynamic of state and kin proximity across social, institutional, and relational fields, highlighting how the Danish welfare state is deeply immersed in what we would often think of as family matters. Given the welfare state’s declared dedication to care for its most vulnerable citizens: children, the elderly, the socially vulnerable, or the deviant, this comes as no surprise. However, the extent and outreach of the state’s presence, and how it penetrates and breathes into the innermost corners, sentiments, embodiments and concerns of family life is demonstrated persuasively in the articles of this volume. In joining the notions of intimacy and belonging, we carve out the multilayered character of belonging (Gammeltoft 2018; Wright 2015; Mattes and Lang 2021) and offer a nuanced understanding of how political, social and affective forms of belonging entangle in family life and forms of relatedness (Hage 2002, 2009).

2. The Perspective on Belonging of Migrant Families

It is important to note, however, that the concept of belonging has also gained a firm foothold in Danish immigration policies during the past decade (Johansen 2020b). The term has become a political indicator of successful integration and a legal notion applied in the granting of permanent citizenship in Denmark. As noted by Modest and de Koning (2016), questions of belonging are indeed central to current European nationalistic immigration policies and revolve around fears about the intrusion of “strangers” in what is imagined as a racial and culturally homogeneous national space (Modest and de Koning 2016, p. 99). We seek, however, to engage with how belonging is experienced and practiced among migrant families themselves in relation to their family and the Danish welfare state.

The articles are based on ethnographic fieldwork and/or qualitative ethnographic interviews with migrants about their family life and/or with migrants and state actors who interact on the basis of welfare programs or specific rules and laws. The focus on migrant families provides us with a privileged empirical site through which to explore intimacy and dynamics of belonging in the intertwining of state and family relations, especially how this relation unfolds across generations and within the scope of extended family systems. Research has pointed to the extremely high levels of trust in the welfare state in Danish majority population, showing the state’s role as a central national identity marker (Olwig and Paerregaard 2011), and public imaginaries about the state as “the good neighbor” (Jenkins 2011) and “what we are all about” (Johncke 2011). However, this research also underlines that migrants—across the age-span and generational divide—may have radically different experiences of the state and its welfare institutions than majority society (Olwig et al. 2012).

The perspective of migrant families—whose “outsider” position to the state and majority society articulates acute tensions, as well as emerging potentialities, in negotiations about where to belong, who to belong to, and what belongs to whom and why—accentuates the compelling nature of state and kinship proximity. While relations and sentiments of belonging can be compelling, offering a vehicle for safety and embeddedness as well as innovation and positive change, they may also be compelled in the form of governmental or kinship constraints, which may fixate the family in social or institutional ties of belonging (see [Jensen and Hapal 2015](#)). The latter points to the, sometimes, claustrophobic proximity that migrants live in, with a strong co-existence of state and family relatives who do not necessarily agree upon what constitutes a legitimate space or relation of belonging ([Johansen and Jensen 2017](#)). Currently, this conflict is explicitly at play between welfare institutions and religious institutions, each of which may constitute vital positions in migrants’ lives ([Suhr 2019](#)).

The perspective of migrant families thus demonstrates the intense presence of the state in the lives of marginalized populations, especially those living in so-called high-risk areas and migrant ‘ghettos’, where the state is constantly re-founding its mode of order and lawmaking ([Das and Poole 2004](#); [Fassin 2013](#); [de Koning 2017](#)). However, a focus on migrants’ relatedness in-between state and kinship takes us beyond state-centered studies of racialized welfare governance and family-centered critiques of exclusionary practices, generating new knowledge on the dynamics that unfold in the less formal, everyday relations between kin, as well as between kin and state professionals. It, instead, highlights the negotiated, ambiguous, and sometimes fragile nature of attempts at creating a sense of belonging in-between social and institutional worlds.

3. Precarious Belonging and the Effects of Integration Politics

We also draw on anthropological studies of the social effects of Danish integration and migration politics, which have documented the othering of those considered non-native and who’s belonging to Danish state and nation is constantly up for discussion ([Rytter 2019, 2010](#); [Shapiro and Jørgensen 2021](#); [Hervik 2018](#)). A strong body of Danish research has documented the exclusionary, segregated, racialized, and punitive character of integration and identity politics aimed at the migrant Other ([Johansen and Jensen 2017](#); [Hervik 2011](#); [Jensen et al. 2017](#); [Kublitz 2020](#); [Schierup 2012](#); [Rytter 2019](#)). Critical scholarly work has brought insight into how migrants at various levels of the welfare system are subjected to institutionalized forms of ‘civilizing’ and domesticating practices that reinforce experiences of otherness, marginality, race, and inequality ([Gilliam and Gulløv 2017](#); [Bregnbæk 2019](#); [Padovan-Özdemir and Øland 2017](#)). Some of this research has also pointed to the intimate character of the welfare state, demonstrating how the state intervenes into the innermost private routines of everyday life through a strong embeddedness of order enforcement in migrant communities ([Larsen 2011](#); [Linde-Laursen 1993](#)).

This research has shown the uneasy forms of family arrangements and ambivalent senses of belonging that political and social othering may produce, especially when norms and standards of the state and the family stand out as contradictory or irreconcilable ([Johansen 2020a](#)). Our focus on the intersection between state and kinship as an arena for negotiations about issues of belonging thus draws attention to the profound ways in which politics of belonging are tied to intimate social and relational dynamics in the interplay with specific institutions, places and social environments. This dynamic may be of a particular kind and nature. It may entail ambivalence, uncertainty and exclusion, and emerge in the form of both fragile and intense efforts to be part of society ([Gammeltoft 2018](#), p. 77) and it may be highly ambiguous and precarious when related to issues of citizenship ([Thelen and Coe 2019](#)). The interlocutors of the collection of articles represent a spectrum of such political citizenship positions: from not-yet citizens, over possible to-be citizens, to citizens, and expelled possible citizens. A constant struggle to belong as well as an accompanying fear that this struggle might not be successful is one of the most prominent features of this

precarious situation. As such, it may be fraught with dilemmas, concerns and conundrums on the part of both migrants, their relatives and the state.

4. The Relational State

The contributions of this Special Issue also speak to recent anthropological studies that have taken a relational approach to understanding the state, which highlight the increasingly networked and multi-sectorial modality of governance that mark contemporary European welfare states. A growing body of literature on the ‘pluralization’ and ‘hybridization’ of welfare states has addressed how the co-existence of a wide range of state and non-state actors has activated changing patterns of welfare provision and governance ‘beyond the state’ (Loader 2000; Jones and Newburn 2006; Gressgaard 2016). Extending from this, ethnographically informed scholarship has bridged a divide between the study of welfare governance conducted by cross-institutional state agencies and governance conducted through community building, activated citizenship and proximate state–client relationships (Duyvendak et al. 2016; Van Houdt et al. 2011). Focusing on the local level, this research has shown how local communities have turned into dense institutionalized landscapes comprising networks of state agencies, authorities, civil organizations, community associations, and variously positioned publics and activated citizens who all engage in the governing of the social. Within these landscapes, citizens are often placed in hybrid, in-between positions, as they are both part of the targeted community and themselves carrying out governmental tasks, involving standards, rules, norms and values of the state. In a similar vein, state actors may also be placed in hybrid positions as they become locally embedded through these new relational modalities. Working in welfare programs that place them physically in the family or neighborhood environments of their clients, state actors sometimes take up roles that are modelled around family images and positions. Many local welfare programs engage state actors in increasingly personalized forms of relationships with their clients, in which they invest heavily in affective labor to gain trust and demonstrate responsiveness.

This form of “state-mediated” intimacy entangle state actors in the sociality they wish to create (Vollebergh et al. 2021), and imply forms of exchange that bind both citizens and professionals to welfare programs through informality and affect. Such informality, however, may also have a darker side as state actors are simultaneously obliged to act upon the precious lives of their clients on the basis of information gained through proximity and/or on the basis of legal orders that may put their clients in unsafe or even harmful situations. The hybrid roles of state actors and citizens thus imply intense boundary work, which engages both parties in transgressing, transforming or reaffirming boundaries between the domains of the family and the state.

5. Belonging as Nourishing and Poisonous

Zooming in on state and family relatedness, all the articles in this Special Issue explore how state-based politics, policies or discourses of belonging are intimately enfolded into everyday practices in homes, neighborhoods or institutional spaces. However, in the context of everyday life, belonging is not necessarily positive or productive, nor is it simply negative or constraining. From previous studies of domestic intimacies, we know that spaces of belonging arise through diverse sets of circumstances, emerging in multiple incarnations and generating a wide range of affects and affinities (Goodfellow and Mulla 2008). From the new kinship studies, we know that relatedness and belonging can be established through avoidance, distance, difference, and exclusion as well as through contact, proximity, sameness, and inclusion (Stasch 2009; Candea et al. 2015; Strathern 2020; Grøn 2020). We also know that relatedness is not in itself benevolent or malevolent for that matter (Das 1995; Geschiere 1997; Peletz 2001; Lambek 2011), and in fact, the same relational act can be equally and simultaneously nourishing and poisonous (Meinert and Grøn 2020). In a similar vein, we see that the domestic is not necessarily a space of safety

and belonging (Das et al. 2008), nor is the institutional necessarily (or entirely) a space of othering, domestication, unfamiliarity, or unsafety.

Taken together, the articles in the Special Issue seek to bring nuances to established geographies of theorization, moving beyond normative definitions of state or kinship relatedness—as good or bad, benevolent or malevolent, strong or weak—in order to highlight the considerable tensions, clashes, and ambiguities, as well as new possibilities, potentialities, and trajectories that characterize relatedness in between state and kinship networks. Some articles show that tensions and creativities in intimate forms of belonging are most acutely felt in times of crisis, when kinship becomes unsettling, troublesome, or perceived as a risk, and state professionals intervene or are called upon. In some cases, dilemmas are propelled by migrants' and state actors' hybrid or in-between positions in a landscape of relationality that encompasses complex institutional and social worlds. The in-between position of migrants also point to the darker sides of belonging—namely that of non-belonging—in situations when people feel out of place in state or in kin relations, or when the inclusion into one domain, e.g., that of the family, leads to profound senses of exclusion, distance or alienation in another domain, e.g., that of the state. Some of the articles show how such tensions (as well as potentialities) of belonging also emerge with intergenerational changes, when kin at various generational levels are straddling, diverging, sometimes contradictory, norms and values relating to the family and state. To belong, in this respect, relates to the possibility of becoming rooted and sharing the history, values and practices of the surrounding society, and most importantly, to be morally recognized as member of that society (Mattes and Lang 2021). In this way, the articles document the intense labor of belonging (Grey 2010) that migrants invest in and how it affects their relation to close kin or state actors on an everyday basis.

6. The Articles

The articles in this Special Issue all focus on intimate belonging among migrants in vastly different political, social, and familial positions and contexts, exploring clusters of concerns related to practices such as upbringing, crime and safety, eldercare, divorce, and citizenship. While the themes mentioned above reappear across the articles, there are also specific analytical and empirical contributions in each of them.

Mette-Louise E. Johansen's article gives a phenomenological account of a Danish gang exit program, and the social de- and re-embedding of defecting gang members through which such programs seek to operate in the welfare state. It takes the existential need for being 'hinged' (Guenther 2013) to others through intimate, *embodied intersubjectivity* as its analytical vantage point, and links this to practices of kinning and de-kinning (Howell 2006) at the interface of family networks and the state. The article shows that the exit program operates through a process of spatial and social isolation. As gang defectors enter the program they are required to 'cut' their relations with kin and friends, as well as with the spatial environment in which they were brought up, leaving them feeling socially 'unhinged' and like 'ghosts'. In order to 're-hinge' gang defectors to new social relations, in particular with Danish majority society, police officers offer themselves as 'hooks' by engaging in 'personalized policing'. What makes police officers persuasive 'hinges' is this personalized approach, which leads police officers to share in moments of 'mutuality of being' with gang defectors against a backdrop of violence and threat. Protecting gang defectors from immediate, very real physical harm, police officers engage in and become part of gang violence in a way that resonates with what to gang members are crucial modes of relatedness and care. As a result, the relations to police officers come to feel like a replacement of the 'cut' or otherwise fraught relations with kin and neighborhood friends, and may come to function as potential 'avenues' to new social worlds and belongings.¹

Anika Liversage's article also takes up the discussion of *cutting and creating* relations of belonging between family networks and the state, but while Johansen's article points to the trust placed in state actors who work to secure the safety of their clients, Liversage points to the way in which state actors may also become unreliable allies of migrants because

they work on the basis of paradoxical legal state orders. Drawing on [Johnson-Hanks's \(2002\)](#) notion of 'vital conjunctures', the article argues that the Danish state has a Janus face when it comes to supporting immigrant women in situations of divorce. While the Danish government supports immigrant women economically, legally, and through social work in leaving unwanted marriages, it may turn them towards a worse situation regarding their residence in Denmark, even much worse than in the time of the marriage. Caught in a double-bind between two legislative systems, social workers and migrant women may have to negotiate rules that, on the one hand, support women in leaving abusive marriages and, on the other hand, that may lead to the deportation of divorced immigrant women. The latter occurs when women's residency rights are based on the legal status of their husbands, and thus depend on their marriage status. As a result, social workers may end up endangering the lives of the women whom they seek to support, and immigrant women may end up staying in abusive and violent marriages because of the fear of deportation.

Fear is a central feature in Susanne Bregnbæk's article, which explores migrant parents' exasperations with Danish child authorities and fears of losing their children to forced removals if they fail to live up to Danish standards for proper upbringing. This article also provides an intimate account of the *affective and existential ramifications of state proximity* in the life of migrants in precarious citizenship positions. It examines the intimate way that day-care institutions and social services intervene into the private domain of family life among refugee families who live in a context of radical uncertainty, since they hold temporary residence permits in Denmark. The article argues that the state takes on a family-like resemblance, which causes ambiguity for families who, on the one hand, appreciate protection and care from the state but on the other hand fear its repercussions and sometimes feel that the family private space is invaded. Inspired by [Gammeltoft's \(2021\)](#) and [Desjarlais' \(2018\)](#) work on spectrality, Bregnbæk uses the notion of the 'spectral state' to account for not only the tangible and manifest but also the latent and subdued dimensions of this family–state relationship. The article shows the deep anxieties that are animated by refugees' fundamental lack of belonging as well as by images of child removals that are haunting the parents in their everyday practices and interactions with the state. The haunting images of child removals that follow the state's interferences into parenting practices only reinforce the parents' experiences of not being at home in the world.

Mikkel Rytter and Sara Lei Sparre continue the focus on *spectrality and haunting* in their discussion of dilemmas involved in eldercare arrangements in Danish municipalities, in which migrants take employment as self-appointed helpers of family relatives. The eldercare arrangement places the self-appointed helper in a dual role as both caring, loving family member and professional care worker. Exploring the interplay between state-based protocols and standards related to municipal eldercare and family-based practices of care, Rytter and Sparre argue that the relation between self-appointed helpers and municipal care managers is based on a 'silent agreement'. The silent agreement implies that potential failures to comply with the standards and legislation of the state remain unspoken or invisible. However, if the silent agreement breaks down the relationship changes and is haunted by destructive stereotypes of Muslim immigrants as welfare scroungers. Taking up [Desjarlais' \(2018\)](#) notion of phantasms, Sparre and Rytter show how the negative specter of 'the immigrant' looms in the background of the work arrangement, only to be let on the loose when this arrangement breaks down. The dilemmas involved in self-appointed helpers' care for elderly kin arise with the blurring of boundaries, for instance when expectations and requirements of care in the family lead to poor working conditions for the caregiver. In such cases, we see that the hybrid role of the self-appointed helper transforms into a fixed and oppositional role of the migrant other in the state-margin.

Birgitte Romme Larsen's article takes up the discussion about haunting stereotypes from a very different angle, focusing on the way that migrant parents seek to keep negative stereotypes at bay through *tangible time management and consumption practices*. Larsen initially set out to conduct interviews about time and money expenditure, but found that the answers she received were all about integration. She thus argues that Danish policy

and public debate on immigrant “integration” comes to shape the quotidian organization of family life and its intimate relations directly and in detail, translating into an utterly concrete daily concern and “integration attentiveness” among migrant parents. Not only does this attentiveness towards the Danish public integration debate haunt the parents’ sense of self, but it proves to materialize and routinize down to everyday intergenerational resource management of time and money, and to the everyday future strategies for the next generation’s belonging in Denmark. With inspiration from Robbins (2019), the article views the “inmost” private space of family life as a certain space of intimacy, where its members recognize one another for who they “really” are, i.e., beyond the various social categories and typifications that may otherwise structure migrants’ daily lives. Paradoxically, however, when seen from within the quotidian orchestration of this “space of intimacy”, this inside space of family intimacy proves to center around how to keep dominant outside typifications of “foreigners”, “refugees/immigrants” and “Muslims” at bay.

Finally, Laura Gilliam’s article about generational changes in parenting practices among migrants shows the crucial importance of considering the *historical context that also shapes dynamics of belonging* within a given society. Taking a ‘figurational approach’ (Elias 1994), the article illuminates the historical changes in and current characteristics of the relationship between state, school, children and parents, which shape the Danish ‘state-school figuration’. Gilliam convincingly demonstrates how a paradigm of ‘intensive parenting’ has come to dominate Danish schooling discourses and practices. As second-generation immigrant parents grew up with the Danish school system, they feel intimately shaped by Danish state and society and engage heavily with the paradigm of intensive parenting. At the same time, they feel a strong imperative to protect their children from social exclusion and discrimination. In order to do so, they use their intensive parenting to both distance themselves from and act as cultural brokers for first-generation parents and at the same time use their insider “Danish” knowledge to protect their children against negative influences and stigmatization. The article shows how migrants’ ambiguous in-between position is sometimes valued, since it makes it possible for them to contest their own and their children’s vulnerabilities within both the realm of kinship and state. On the other hand, it also produces a fragile and uncertain experience of belonging and points to the immense efforts involved in migrants’ attempts to become rooted and recognized in Danish state and society.

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Note

- ¹ I thank the first reviewer for their valuable review of this article. I have used several of the reviewer’s formulations and sentences to present the article in the best way in this section of the Special Issue introduction.

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