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Bordering through genetics

DNA testing, family reunification and Swedish migration control

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Abstract
After people flee to Sweden and are granted asylum, their family members must apply to the Swedish migration authorities in order to be reunited with their loved ones in Sweden. As part of this process, some applicants must prove their relationships through DNA analysis. In such situations, 'family' is conceptualised as meaning only genetic parent-child relationships and couples who have a child to whom they are both genetically related. This contrasts to more varied constructions of family in other contexts, not least compared to queer family and kinship practices. In this thesis, I analyse the use of DNA testing in family reunification in Sweden, its consequences, as well as how 'family', 'migration control' and 'knowledge' are constructed in this practice. Drawing on postcolonial and queer feminist theorising, as well as feminist science and technology studies, I examine the interrelatedness of power, body, scientific knowledge production, experience, and critique. I interrogate the use of DNA tests in migration control through an ethnographic study consisting of interviews and observations, as well as policy and published material. The study involves people who have applied for family reunification, civil servants at the Swedish Migration Agency, officials from the Migration Courts, staff in laboratories analysing DNA, representatives from migrant rights organisations and lawyers.

When DNA tests are used in family reunification proceedings they come to function as the ultimate arbiter of who counts as 'family', and are a determining factor in whether family reunification is granted. I argue that this is based on hierarchical valuations of different knowledges. It also relies on a combination of racialised and heterosexual schemes of (un)intelligibility that shape which families, relationships, and lives are thought of as deserving protection or family reunification. My analysis of how DNA is analysed and constructed as knowledge demonstrates the gradual reduction of ambiguity and corollary stabilisation of meaning this process involves. This occurs within the laboratory processes themselves, and then when test results are subsequently used within the legal system. Despite the contingencies of these processes of production and interpretation of knowledge, DNA analyses are constructed as unchallengeable; they are seen as providing clear-cut answers as to who is family. I contend that DNA testing in migration control reproduces an epistemic order in which migrants' accounts are devalued and treated with suspicion, and where technoscience assumes the function of a producer of facts and truth. I argue that the use of a form of knowledge that is constructed as objective, neutral, and reliable leads to migration control itself being constructed as neutral, and as characterised by administrative justice. Through the example of DNA testing, this thesis claims that racialised and sexualised discourses in combination with the mobilisation of what is considered infallible knowledge function to legitimise and naturalise migration control.

Keywords
DNA, family reunification, migration, borders, biometric technology, science, knowledge, feminist theory, queer, postcolonialism, ethnography, Sweden

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