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Published online: 11 Sep 2020.

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Copious relationships: transnational marriages and intimacy among Moroccan couples in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore how intimacy is constructed and experienced among couples formed through transnational and arranged marriages, between Morocco and Italy. The analysis, conducted with a qualitative approach, begins by retracing the process of couple formation and the role that kinship plays in facilitating this transition in migrants' life courses. I then consider how love and intimacy are intertwined with the wider effort of family settlement in the Italian context. The investigation is developed in dialogue with the literature on the detraditionalization of intimacy, on one side, and transnational marriages, on the other. I argue that these couples achieve intimacy by pursuing *copious relationships* resulting from their ability to navigate among family extension and nuclearization, independence and reciprocal commitment, kin expectations and self-determination.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the topic of marriages across migration, with a focus on conjugal formations between individuals of the same nationality or the same national ancestry, connected through kinship or community ties. These unions are what scholars more specifically define as *transnational marriages* (Charsley, 2012; Williams, 2010) and have been acquiring increasing research importance given that they represent a substantial component of contemporary family migrations. Specifically, my analysis aims to offer an understanding of the processes underlying these kinds of conjugal and family formations and the way intimacy is constructed and experienced among such couples. This line of inquiry assumes further relevance considering that, as several scholars have observed, transnational marriages are often arranged, inviting both migration and family studies to problematize the ways kinship, family relations, and subjectivity are intertwined in times of global mobility. Building on this perspective, I focus on transnational marriages in light of the debate on personal relationships in late modernity so as to contribute to questioning the hypothesis of intimacy detraditionalization.

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My main argument is that transnational marriages are not the result of customary, remote family norms surviving from the past. Rather, they represent a socially regulated opportunity thanks to which migrants are able to forge a sphere of care and love in displacement. I argue that, in this way, these couples subsume the complexity and contradictions of their globalized existences by cultivating *copious relationships*, that is, relationships characterized by their being embedded in family and kinship-based spheres of belonging. I show that intimacy among these couples is engendered by their ability to successfully navigate among family extension and nuclearization, independence and reciprocal commitment, kin expectations and self-determination. They pursue this effort consciously in that the opposite possibility of cultivating 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1991, 1992), free of any external bond, is understood as tantamount to uprooting themselves and losing their social and symbolic capital.

Based on a qualitative research approach and conducted among Moroccan families resident in Italy – as I explain in the following methodological section – my analysis begins by reviewing the literature on transnational marriage and that on intimacy and personal relationships. Drawing on the data collected through fieldwork, I then consider how transnational marriages between Morocco and Italy are set up, retracing the process of couple formation and the role that family and kinship play in this transition in migrants' life courses. Secondly, adopting the viewpoint of couples already married for a number of years, I explore what family configurations they shape, how intimacy is experienced and represented by the partners, and the practices, rituals and patterns that dot their daily lives.

Methodological note

The study I present here analyses qualitative data collected between October 2013 and November 2014 with 50 Moroccan families with children living in Italy. The objective of the study was to reconstruct their trajectories and associated settlement process in Italy with a focus on the interrelation of migration, marriage and births (Decimo, 2019). This fieldwork was based in the city of Bologna and the province of Trento, where the high natality and fertility of immigrants comprised significant research contexts. The investigation was conducted by adopting grounded theory (Dey, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Wengraf, 2001) and employing a biographical approach (Bertaux, 1981; Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; Bornat, 2004, 2008; Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Plummer, 2001). Specifically, grounded theory oriented the sampling process and interpretation of the data, while a biographical approach guided the research questions and fieldwork. Narrative interviews were the main research tool (Wengraf, 2001, p. 111); however, the fieldwork also involved several moments of observation and ethnographic note-taking. Interviews and observations were conducted by myself in collaboration with two researchers,[1] with the team meeting periodically to discuss impressions, findings, adjustments, and opinions regarding the progress and content of the inquiry.

The sample was constructed step by step with the aim of diversifying the voices collected in the fieldwork and avoiding the risk of redundancy or involuntary selectivity in the sampling. To this end, the families were contacted through a variety of channels, using the snowball sampling method to only a very limited extent. We instead preferred to work in different districts in Bologna and municipalities in Trentino in cooperation with a heterogeneity of brokers, both Italian and foreign (public office workers, imams, associations, social workers, teachers, intercultural moderators, volunteers). In this way,

diverse cases were assembled in keeping with the different research questions that arose during the course of the investigation.

The research was carried out through recorded, unstructured and in-depth interviews involving mainly wives, sometimes both partners together and in a few cases only husbands.[2] The interviews began by inviting the subjects to reconstruct their life courses, from their main experiences in Morocco to their decisions to migrate and the evolution of their trajectories in Italy. No specific, pre-determined questions were posed, although the narrative was structured so as to cover key biographical themes (Bornat, 2008; Plummer, 2001), specifically regarding the interviewees' family of origin, couple formation and settlement in Italy, birth events, gender roles, and family relationships and organization. The interviews were conducted in Italian and took place mainly in the families' homes, where we participated in a few hours of their everyday domestic lives. The interviews were fully transcribed, taking note of non-verbal expressions and any events that occurred during the conversations.

Grounded theory was necessary and significant in the interpretation of the data, since the theme of intimacy in transnational marriage has been covered only partially by the literature or considered through a narrow lens, as I make evident in the following pages. In view of this lack, we were driven to set aside any deductive approach and adopt an inductive method of constantly comparing intra-cases among the collected life-stories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Wengraf, 2000). Specifically, the empirical analysis I present here is based on the parts of the interviews regarding the formation of the couples and how relationships between the spouses and with their children have been shaped across time and places. The life stories, particularly those relative to these points, have been read and re-read, cross-compared and linked in terms of similarities and differences. Several passages from the interviews have been selected as key texts in the interpretative process, and will be presented in the following empirical sections. In so doing, the understanding I propose of the way these couples experience intimacy has been guided by an analysis of individual trajectories and the way each life story informed the comprehension of others, allowing a common interpretative framework to emerge.

Intimacy in transnational marriages: bridging theories and debates

Family migration and transnational marriages represent interrelated phenomena that are acquiring increasing relevance in academic investigations as well as public discourse. Such phenomena raise issues of gender equality, self-determination, and cultural diversity, carelessly framed by the media and political debates through the tropes of *our* advanced, liberal emotional lives as opposed to *their* tribal, constraining family norms.[3]

Observed as aggregated data, transnational marriages reveal the reference group in spousal choice among minorities and, as such, are frequently adopted as an indicator of social and cultural assimilation (Baykara-Krumme, 2017; Zantvliet et al., 2014). Transnational marriages also constitute a significant feature of migrant networks: they bridge countries of origin and destination, creating and consolidating kinship relationships – that is, ties conceptualized as being at the core of ethnic belonging (Wimmer, 2013). Furthermore, these marriages are frequently arranged or sponsored by parents and kin. Depicted in these terms, transnational marriages are easily understood as evidence that traditional and obsolete ethnic customs are persisting in multicultural contexts

(Hooghiemstra, 2001), imbuing postmodern societies with pre-modern institutions. Such a view has inevitably amplified the politicization of migrant families (Grillo, 2008) and arranged marriages in particular, making it easy to conflate 'arranged' with 'forced'.

However, empirical research has scrutinized the wide range of practices and processes through which transnational marriages are formed, revealing a picture which is quite dynamic and not necessarily predictable. The main conclusion these studies reach is that transnational and arranged marriages do not proceed by silencing individual needs, desires and agency, or by denying the importance of emotions, love and romance. Indian and Pakistani people in the UK are among the minorities that have been most exhaustively investigated in terms of this kind of conjugal union, since they also have the highest rates of arranged marriages, often between consanguineous spouses (Ballard, 1990; Charsley & Shaw, 2006; Shaw, 2001; Werbner, 1990). This field of research has given rise to some key insights, revealing that there is not one rigid trajectory but rather multiple, diverse practices and discourses leading from the couple's arranged meeting to their marriage (Pande, 2016).

Moreover, many scholars, particularly feminist ones, have dedicated their attention to exploring the strategic use of marriage and the way individual choice is enacted. This perspective enables us to recognize the agency of women and move beyond representations of them as the passive victims of kinship plots (Bertolani, 2017; Pande, 2015) while also revisiting male roles and emotions as well (Charsley, 2005). Adopting the point of view of the spouses from the country of origin, the appeal of transnational marriages lies in a cultural logic of desire (Constable, 2005) and its global geography, that is, in the chance to fulfil and concretize a yearning for mobility and hypergamy.[4]

Issues of individual agency, mobility and desire in relation to transnational marriage assume further significance in light of the global enforcement of migratory policies. Contemporary border control measures between the global North and South have conferred new political value on family migration in general and cross-border marriages and reunification specifically. In this context, indeed, what is at stake is the very opportunity to migrate as a family member, with the chance to consolidate a sphere of care, love and reproduction in displacement becoming limited or altogether unavailable (Bonjour & de Hart, 2013; Bonjour & Kraler, 2015).

In such a scenario, transnational marriages may represent a decision aimed at securing closeness, trust, and protection against the perils involved in physical and social distance, thereby demonstrating intergenerational affection and emotional involvement (Shaw & Charsley, 2006). Most importantly, individual preferences along with desire, love and romance are asserted by both parents and future partners as the necessary element for achieving a good, long-lasting and happy marriage (Qureshi et al., 2014). Rather than attesting to the constraining logic of kinship politics, by extending beyond the usual, local spheres of belonging (Beck-Gernsheim, 2011; Shaw, 2001) these networks of relatives and marriageability clearly show how politics of borders and institutional boundaries become entangled with the intimate lives of families and individuals (Decimo, 2015; Decimo & Gribaldo, 2017).

Overall, these findings from empirical research suggest that our understanding of transnational marriages be reframed as: (a) a revisited practice that is consistent with a context of global migration; (b) a choice consciously adopted by individuals in order to achieve mobility, personal fulfilment and social belonging; and (c) a

life-course event through which migrants aim to establish a sphere of intimacy, love and family life in displacement.

At the same time, however, this fruitful array of research seems to suspend the fieldwork literally on the day of the wedding, leaving unexplored what these couples go on to experience beyond the front door of the house and over the course of their family stories. These studies, in fact, tend to neglect an investigation of the way intimacy is actually represented and practiced by these transnationally married couples, overlooking the ways gender roles are performed as well as the rituals and dynamics through which personal relationships are consolidated in daily life. Above all, the insights stemming from the inquiries reviewed above display few connections with debates over the transformation of personal relationships focused on the notion of intimacy.

Indeed, the notion of intimacy has been at the centre of an intense debate in the last decade, stimulated by the argument proposed by scholars of late/post modernity that the self and personal relationships in Western societies are undergoing significant transformations (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991, 1992). Specifically, the hypothesis of intimacy detraditionalization posits that couple formation has been – or is destined to be – disengaged from the roles and commitments that customary spheres of belonging (family, kinship, community) have long placed before individual needs and desires. The intense social changes characteristic of the contemporary moment have detached individuals' destinies from the institutional spheres of identity. This entails not only leaving it up to individuals to decide on their own how they will live their personal lives, but also prioritizing the need for self-realization over the need for care and love in intimate relationships. Specifically, Giddens (1991, 1992) uses the well-known notion of 'pure relationships' to cast intimacy as a sphere of mutual disclosure that only responds to reflexive selves, destined to last until expressive wishes have been fulfilled and not weighed down by any further responsibility.

Yet, the notion of detraditionalized intimacy has also been subjected to extensive critique by various scholars (Cherlin, 2004; Green et al., 2016; Gross, 2005; Jamieson, 1988, 1999). Jamieson (1988) in particular provides an exhaustive discussion of each of the dimensions that allegedly drive the transformation of personal relationship across modernity, dismantling the unproven assumptions and selective use of references underlying such arguments. This critical view shifts the focus back to power and diversity, calling into question how inequalities are played out in personal relationships. Above all, as argued by a wide range of studies, there is no evidence that 'pure relationships', established to fulfil only the reciprocal needs of understanding and knowing, are actually supplanting that mix of love, care and dependency that continuously distinguishes personal involvement in intimate bonds (Jamieson, 1988, 1999).

To conclude, in light of this critical review of the detraditionalization hypothesis, transnational marriages may be adopted as an emerging analytical perspective more than an object of investigation in itself, that is, as a key research field for the study of postmodern personal relationships. As suggested by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010), in times of intense social change and increased inequality, intimacy and global mobility intersect at a profound level. Building on this approach, a distinctive set of research questions may be raised: How stratified are people's chances of experiencing intimacy, love, and care across times and places? How do class, nationality, religion, and race intersect in

enhancing or inhibiting individuals' emotional and familial fulfilment? How is intimacy achieved, experienced, and represented in displacement?

Family matter(s): marriages, kinship and subjectivity between Morocco and Italy

Transnational marriages between Morocco and Italy have been woven more and more frequently during the course of the last few decades in keeping with the general transformation of the migratory flow, with the proportion of women and families growing as compared to single male individuals. This transition has been made possible by the diffusion of a culture of migration (Massey et al., 1993) based on marriages between migrants and mates from the same home country (Lievens, 1999), as the high numbers of spousal reunions make evident.[5] In this scenario, marriages are often facilitated, sponsored, or arranged by families, relatives, friends, or neighbours. In practice, individuals looking to find the right spouse can count on a specific form of social capital, that is, a set of relationships and expertise aimed at facilitating the formation of couples, in recent times reformulated in the direction of global horizons (Decimo, 2019). Even when marriages are chosen independently by individuals, however, the role of family and kinship is far from irrelevant, as I seek to make evident in the following analysis.

When asked to reconstruct the events surrounding their marriage from the first encounter to the wedding, the men and women involved in this research made reference to a main, immediate distinction, that between 'traditional' and 'modern' matchmaking.[6] Sticking to the common understanding of these categories, 'traditional' marriages – enacted by more than half of these couples – are those induced or arranged by parents and kin. The partners may never have met before and, in some cases, they were not asked to give their consent; in the majority of the cases, however, the spouses already knew each other through kinship or neighbourhood relationships, including long-standing ones. 'Modern' marriages are instead those initiated by the partners after having met autonomously. A little less than half of the couples described their marriages as representing this type.

Alongside this distinction, however, the accounts I collected also repeatedly described a tapestry of rules, subjectivities and norms in terms of the role relatives play in individual decisions. Specifically, it appears that 'modern' couples also needed to secure parental and family agreement to move ahead after the first moment of contact. Indeed, marriage is not considered a private, individual institution (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 58, 2008) among the interviewed subjects; they instead consider it self-evidently appropriate and reasonable to involve their parents and kin, to varying degrees, in the choice of a spouse. In this framework, there is no sharp distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' marriages, that is, between the autonomous choice of partners and arranged marriages. These are instead represented as various outcomes occupying different positions along the same continuum of possibility.

Rather, the relevant point that several of these migrant couples raised concerns the way the critical conjuncture between family norms and roles, on one side, and the potential spouses' desires and wishes, on the other side, comes into play. Some cases of independent choice, running counter to mainstream expectations, are particularly telling in relation to this conjuncture. I focus on three of these to further clarify how the social regulation of

transnational marriages described thus far operates, and how diversity, conflict and potential deviance may be normalized and incorporated by these flexible family and kinship norms.

Mohammed's case shows that is possible to make an independent spousal choice without any familial approval. At the same time, his narrative insistently points to the relevance that this approval holds in the decision process. The story of his engagement dates to a difficult period in his life following an accident he suffered during a summer holiday in Morocco that prevented him from returning to Italy for quite some time. In these critical circumstances he met Aneesa, a woman who was particularly supportive of and tender towards him. They fell in love and decided to marry. As customary, the couple needed their parents' approval to follow through with their plans. However, due to some negative gossip that was circulating about Aneesa's family, Mohammed's relatives refused to give their approval:

> Because for us, for tradition, the first thing is who you have to talk to, and that is your father and mother. He said: "yes, I know that you are the last one not yet married, if you want I'll look for (a wife) for you", and so on, because he already knew who she was and wanted me to change my mind. But I said "okay, dad, listen, I didn't call you to ask you to find me a woman, I have a woman. Look, I'm still in love with her, I'm going to marry so-and-so, I'm fine with her, I liked her from that moment that I was having that crisis" and he told me: "okay, talk to your brothers and sisters, if they agree, I agree too". They did this talking to each other but they all expressed a big "no", they didn't want it, none of them … So I started calling them, one after the other, and asking "what do you think?" and everyone "no, I'm sorry, maybe you can find another woman". […] I went to my dad's again and I brought him two people he respects, in short, people he can't say no to, and he always said the same thing "I'm not saying he can or can't marry, he lives his life, but I don't approve". And at that point I really started to get angry.
>
> […]
>
> We had a small wedding, I was really pr-ou-d to do it! I thank God that they all didn't agree, so we could have a wedding like that, where we didn't spend thousands of euros that then you have to go back and pay in instalments! And then everyone changed their minds, they all approved! […] A great point of pride for me is that really, I have nothing, I have only these three people (wife and two children), but everyone really respects me now. (Mohammed)

In the end, Mohammed was able to bring his family around to a positive view of the union, as described in the final part of his story. The relational struggle that he waged to achieve this result and the words he uses to describe his satisfaction clearly convey the social value of the marriage, as symbolic capital and as a crucial node in his concrete network of belonging.

A different perspective is offered by Nawar and Kameela, two women who both found a new partner after a previous experience of conjugal failure and divorce. Nawar's case is the potentially more deviant one: her first marriage was to an Italian man, conducted against the will of her parents. The relationship did not work out, so she decided to divorce. Some time later, while in Italy, she met a man who was from the same village as her. They began to date and, when they decided to become engaged, they announced their decision to their respective families by phone. The families gave their approval for the betrothal at a distance, celebrating it publicly in the village in the couples' absence. Another celebration

took place in the Italian town where several kin from the groom's side were based. An actual wedding did not follow because Nawar became pregnant and caring for the baby absorbed most of the couple's attention. However, being married or not does not make a difference in their case, as she asserts. Evidently, the ritual held to legitimate this union involved the kin and local community more than the individuals. Social norms are flexible enough to allow her to introduce herself after the fact, just 'because people had to know who the lady is', as she says:

> We were in Italy and his family went to my parents' to get the consent. Then they held the engagement without us. We didn't go, we didn't have time. The official marriage is another thing, there you read from the Koran between two (Fetiha) and my father gave consent to his father in front of all the men. But I didn't want to go through with the marriage act … I wanted to do everything slowly, but then the child arrived! On that day, we exchange rings just like you do here … but I have not exchanged any rings! I put the ring here and took it over here [moving an old ring from one finger to another].

> Then I went (to Morocco) because people had to know who the lady is, why not let us see her, she's a bit ugly. Then afterwards we did one in Arezzo, too, so this way if I go there, no one will gossip. He wanted to do it, he invited all his family, because he has a large family. We did it and everyone knows that we are husband and wife even if we don't have a marriage certificate. (Nawar)

More classical but analogous is the story of Kaamela: she immigrated to Italy as a child, with her family. When she was 23, on the occasion of the wedding of her sister held in Morocco, she was introduced to her cousin (the son of a paternal aunt), a man nominated and supported by her father as a possible husband. Kaamela agreed and the kin arranged the wedding to be celebrated the year after, again in Morocco. Once in Italy, Kaamela's new husband convinced her to quit her job and move to another town. Now living at a distance from her relatives and unemployed, Kaamela became pregnant and, at the same time, realized that the union had no potential for love or trust. She thus decided to leave her husband and move back to Trentino:

> *Did your family support you?*

> Yes! My dad actually didn't (even) want me to quit my job, he said: "stay at your job".

> *And when you wanted to divorce, your family was on your side?*

> Yes! yes! There were also some serious problems and so even though I was pregnant I had to leave it anyway. Better! After not even a year I returned to Trentino. He was never around, he wasn't there at night, he wasn't there during the day! How could I go on with this man? I don't even know where he works, who he spends time with, I don't know what he does! (Kaamela)

She returned to live with her parents and siblings for several years until she was able to achieve independence and move with her son into a new apartment. Kaamela raised the baby by herself, as the man had disappeared from their life. When the child was 7 years old, she asked him if he would like to see her married and to share their home with a 'new' father. He enthusiastically agreed and so Kaamela, now 35, decided to look for a new opportunity to marry.

> *How did you two meet?*

> Once again in Morocco, we met in our own! That was last time (an arranged marriage), this
> time, no thanks! We met in his city, because my mother is from his city. (Kaamela)

When I met Kaamela, she had been married for approximately three years and had given
birth to a second child in the meantime. I interviewed her at their house, in the presence of
her husband, a dedicated and kind man who took care of the baby so we could have our
meeting. He barely spoke Italian, and when I asked to Kaamela if he was able to find a job
she replied that it was better he stay home to take care of the children since her work sche-
dule was quite inflexible.

In conclusion, the conjugal stories collected through this fieldwork make clear that
transnational marriages may be more or less arranged by parents and relatives but, in
any case, familial approval and involvement do matter in individual spousal decisions,
even in the most deviant or conflicting of relationships. This fact suggests an intriguing
sliding equilibrium between subjects' desires, belonging and social obligations. On one
side, kinship norms, roles and expectations constrain the individuals' will to some
extent, but they do not univocally prevail: as the stories of Mohammed, Nawar, and
Kaamela have shown, relationships with either the family of origin or the partner, or
both, can be completely cut off if they prove to be a source of individual unhappiness
and negative social capital. At the same time, the reconstruction of these three trajectories
indicates that subjects achieve personal, intimate satisfaction by reconnecting their own
choices to the family and kinship network of belonging, rather than by severing this con-
nection. Mohammed does not hide his pride in recounting, at the end of this interview
extract, how his relatives changed their opinion about his wife and citing the social recog-
nition that the couple now enjoy. Nawar left her first, disapproved-of Italian husband and
became engaged to a man from the same small Moroccan village as herself, involving
parents and relatives in this choice and revealing the flexibility of 'traditional' marriage
norms. Kaamela was negatively affected by her father's decision about her first, arranged
marriage, but the same father, together with her mother and sibling, materially supported
her resolution to divorce and to pursue a new, independent life by herself. All of them have
been able to merge the critical conjuncture between self-determination and social rules,
renovating traditions as well as navigating through complex, multiple, and articulated
family and kin relationships rather than dismissing or skipping over them.

Orchestrated households: intimacy and family life across migration

With Kaamela' story, this analysis recognizes the conflictual dynamics that may fray a
marriage to the point of destroying it. This account of conjugal failure, indeed, is not
the only one to have been directly or indirectly collected during the research. At the
same time, it was also Kaamela's interview that opened a window onto a sphere of dom-
estic warmth, allowing us to glimpse how a good relationship is expected to work. Follow-
ing this perspective, with the aim of understanding how intimacy and home are
constructed across migration, in this section I explore the repertoire of affective and rela-
tional modes, practices and meanings that these women and men deploy in anchoring
their conjugal life in Italy.

To grasp the way closeness is experienced among the couples involved in the research,
it is important to consider that, as most research participants reported, a greater degree

of mutual understanding and love is expected to develop after marriage, not before. Two further aspects repeatedly appear among the features of these families once settled in Italy. First, with the only exception being very few households that included the husband's elderly and unwell mother, the couples involved in the research established a nuclear family, avoiding the norm of patrilocality (Lievens, 1999). Displacement and distance from kin are obvious constraints on the formation of extended and multiple households, but the need for private space has acquired value in and of itself in the shape family settlement has taken over the course of Moroccan migration. Secondly, these couples expect to have children, and migration is not perceived as a family cycle event that might jeopardize this aim. On the contrary, Moroccan couples have among the highest fertility rates in Italy and this fact was reflected by the couples involved in this fieldwork, with the majority having had three children and a significant number four, five, or six (Decimo, 2019).

The formation of such nuclear households with children brings the spotlight to bear on the couple and its role as the core of the family organization. Indeed, when elicited to reconstruct the way their daily life is organized, all of the interviewees described the husband-wife and parent–children relationships as acquiring new, unexpected relevance. The following accounts by Muhja, Khalida, and Malika, respectively, describe different forms of marital and paternal participation, starting from the moment of birth:

> The first delivery was a little hard, because it was my first. My husband was there with me, only my husband … with me, always (smiling gently), always with me in the delivery room … (Muhja)

> *How would you describe the division of labour at home?*

> We do everything, he gives me a hand, too. If I'm busy he takes the kids out, when he was not working he always took them. That way he gives me some time to rest a bit and do other things at home.

> *Does he change diapers, too?*

> Yes, yes, he does everything.

> *Giving baths?*

> Yes, yes, he even likes to!

> […]

> *Did he watch all the births? Was he there with you in the delivery room?*

> Yes, all four of them.

> *So, dad has always helped?*

> Yes, he does everything, even though that's not very common with us. Boys work and bring home money and you have to do everything at home … my husband does not agree with that. […] Others are changing, too. They come up with concepts, with ideas and that way, then, over time they change, when they see that both of us need to do all these things having to do with the family, they change their minds, their behaviour as well. (Khalida)

> *Was he there with you during the birth?*

My husband was there, always! […] I think it's better if the husband sees everything, huh! See how his wife is, you know! My husband was always there all the time! I did his whole hand, like this (crushing it)!

After the childbirth, who was there to help you?

Nobody, even my sister was sick in the hospital in that period, no one was there! My husband did all the cooking.

Was he able to? Did he do things?

Yes, yes, first with his mom, because she did not have any girls and so all the boys knew how to cook, everything! (Malika)

As these interview passages suggest, husbands participate actively in every stage of the family cycle, particularly the stages involving children. A highly significant element in this process is the variety of tasks that these men assume, from assisting their wives during childbirth to taking care of new-borns. It has become very common for fathers to be present in delivery rooms, but more generally the interviewed women offered innumerable descriptions of paternal dedication and the men who participated in the research echoed this point. In the absence of the kind of close female figures who would traditionally help during childbirth and puerperium, these couples were driven to develop greater closeness and cooperation than they might have in Morocco, as Khalida explained. In this regard, it is interesting to see how Malika proceeds with the description of her relationship with her husband, as it sheds further light on the deep sense of emotional understanding and intimacy that can underlie these couple relationships:

Do you talk to him?

Yes, yes, he gets it … how I ever found someone who … what's the word …

Understands?

Yes, he understands me so well! Everything, even if there is something inside me that I do not want to tell anyone, he understands that it's there … and I talk a lot with him, I say everything, secrets … he does, too … because I'm not so lucky with people, because I talk, I say everything, I don't hold back, that's just how I am, I say what's inside my heart, and this always causes problems (Malika)

The key point to stress here is that the same requirements of organizing such a complex family life in displacement nourish this closeness of the nuclear family. There is no doubt that orchestrating everyday life was challenging for the interviewees, characterized as it was by intense extra-domestic work schedules, caring for children and managing the domestic environment. Most of the families had a single breadwinner, with the women acting as housewives and viewing the home as their purview and responsibility. They put this view into practice by taking a leading role and delegating various activities to other members of the family unit, as Nada, Ranya and Khalida describe:

Does he help you with the housework?

I personally prefer that my husband not even help me move a glass, because poor thing, he wakes up at 4:00 am while I stay in bed, then comes back from work tired, because selling in the market is a bit difficult.

But beyond housework, if you have worries, thoughts, do you talk with him? Does he help you?

Yes, sure! Yes, yes, for the serious things, the big things, he's there! I do doctors, the mail, groceries, he does all the big things. (Nada)

When he's home he helps me! Then he does things outside the house, bureaucracy … for grocery shopping I have to be there with him. At home for example he moves things … the children help. Even the boys help, they do almost more than the girls! (Ranya)

Now that they are older I wake up in the morning, make breakfast. They (the children) eat breakfast, clear the table and then they make their beds and tidy up as long as they can, then go to school by themselves. (Khalida)

On the other hand, in some cases it was the women who worked. This was true of Haala, who was her family's sole breadwinner during the time of the interviews, and Nora, who described for us the complex juggling of schedules through which their week was orchestrated:

And does he help out with the kids?

Yes … It's just me doing it, just me working (sole household income) … Yes, yes, he is good, he loves him (pointing to their small child). He changes him, feeds him … I leave at 8:00 in the morning! (Haala)

How do you organize daily life?

To adapt his job and my changed schedule, he works (has shifted his hours) from morning till night to be able to. At 2:00 in the morning he finishes work, showers, he arrives home at 3:00 am But then he goes out again to get the kids from school, I work in the morning and finish at 4:30 pm. He starts working at 5:00 pm. Me, from the beginning to now it's always been complicated. We have no other organization. He was glad I found work. For five years, I have been working at the same company, in the canteen. We barely cross paths, except on Saturdays, because I work six days a week, I only have one day off. You have to help the children bathe, do their homework, cook, clean up! (Nora)

These narratives shed light not only on interactions between husbands and wives, but more generally on the key role that the presence of children plays in strengthening both the couple and the affective climate of the family as a whole. Children are clearly the main recipients of the entire household's financial and affective resources as well as sense of identity. They are subject to constant material and immaterial attention and give rise to a relational dynamic alternating between control, closeness and intimate familiarity, often characterized by playfulness and irony. In the following accounts, Nada describes her strategy of maternal control over the boys, while Nihad recounts how she used to joke with her children about another potential pregnancy:

What do they tell you?

For example, if they're late, I ask where have you gone and they tell me to the coffee shop, to the pub … then about the girlfriends I don't know … but I look at their chats, and one of them knows that I looks at their messages and also the photos they take and so he deletes them before entering (the house) … but the other one doesn't, he leaves everything and then he says "I know you've looked, I know you've seen everything … " (laughing)

So, you joke about this? What's the climate like in the house?

They behave with me, because I'm like a friend, because they grew up with me, you know I was 17 when I had my first child … and they talk to me not like I'm their mom, they call me by my name, only sometimes mom … (Nada)

Since I always have this big belly … for months and months my children have been like: "mom, [is it a] boy or a girl?" "Neither a boy nor a girl". "But, really, mom?" I say: "neither a boy nor a girl, this is just bread!" (Nihad)

Such portraits of home and family interactions clearly convey that the large size of these households reinforces the dynamics of nuclearizing domestic life, renegotiating gender roles and valorizing interpersonal closeness, and not the other way around. At the same time, the way intimacy is shaped between partners and in parent–child bonds is quite distinct from the Giddens' model of 'pure relationships'. The reconstruction of these couple' stories conducted so far – from the involvement of family and relatives in the marriage arrangements and approval, to the constitution of prolific households – reveals a different ideal of intimacy that I suggest is based on *copious relationships*: far from seeking satisfaction by enhancing the couple itself as an interpersonal sphere devoid of external bonds or constraints, the migrant couples involved in this research experience love and closeness as inextricably intertwined with familial numerousness, complexity and extension. These women and men are not more interested in self-expression or mutual disclosure than they are concerned about the household's day-to-day organization. Their sense of fulfilment derives from the ability to navigate through their full and lively everyday familial lives without allowing things to become too chaotic or enter into a state of crisis. According to this view, intimacy is related to the experience of belonging, of being at home and part of a family, of enjoying domestic order and warmth, and the satisfaction of having been able to achieve such a goal despite displacement.

This picture assumes further clarity in light of the settlement context of these families and the intersection of several, diverse difficulties that they must face to carry on their daily lives. Many interviewees reported encountering a creeping, lingering Islamophobia in multiple areas of life, at work, when shopping and in interactions with their children's teachers. Some episodes were actually quite fear-inspiring: to provide an idea of the social climate surrounding these family stories, Muhja and her husband, together with the other families living in the same housing complex, were victims of an attempted arson attack by a group of neo-Nazis. However, other aspects also render these households frail: the employment insecurity that, stemming from the 2012 economic crisis, has caused many to lose their jobs and face increasingly precarious and demanding employment; the legal uncertainty generated by legislation that fails to guarantee citizenship to children born in Italy and makes work a prerequisite for residence permits; and the housing issues faced by families unable to access either public housing programmes or the highly segregated real estate market.

It is by recognizing the enduring fragility of their life settings and their contested belonging that we can ultimately grasp how family life confers importance and stability on these women and men's migratory trajectories. From this point of view, it is clear that taking care of oneself and one's spouse, raising and educating the children, and maintaining and supplying the home space all constitute dimensions of life that expand and anchor individuals' private lives. It is from this intimate, individual centre that the construction of life outside the home can be braved, organized, and directed. By granting

primary importance to the family domain as a space of generation, affection, play and caring, these families establish a social order and ethics for their migratory paths which rank other concerns as less of a priority.

Conclusion

With the aim of exploring the processes underlying the formation of transnational marriages and the way intimacy is constructed and experienced in this kind of union, this research has explored the life stories of Moroccan couples who have been settled in Italy for a number of years. In reality, research on transnational marriages has widely considered the logics and range of practices that sustain the formation of such conjugal bonds, particularly concerning agency and self-determination. This is certainly a relevant perspective, as transnational marriages are frequently arranged through and embedded in family and community networks. By adopting this view, however, such research neglects to consider how love and personal relationships are expressed and practiced among these couples, leaving unquestioned the idea that intimacy is negatively affected by interference from kinship relations and roles as well as traditions.

In an effort to disentangle this knot of issues, my analysis has developed along two lines of inquiry. First, I considered the role of family and kinship in transnational marriages as not only social capital. Rather, I reconstructed the value that the subjects attached to their relatives' approval in the making of the marriage decision, focusing on individuals who made independent or conflicting choices in this regard. What emerges are stories of self-determination that result from individual will and the ability to juggle articulated family and kin relationships, not setting them aside. Most importantly, all of the interviewees manifested a genuine involvement in their extended families as an indispensable and irreplaceable sphere of solidarity, identification and belonging.

Secondly, I explored how these couples have shaped their personal relationships by crossing the thresholds of their houses and documenting the way their daily family lives are orchestrated. The analysis has scrutinized how individuals represent a good relationship as such, which dimensions constitute it as nice and satisfying, and what configuration of roles they develop to put their expectations into practice. What appears again and again is a picture of nuclear, prolific households centred on the conjugal couple and its relationship with the children. Wife and husband bonds are described as more close-knit and balanced than they might be if based in Morocco. However, the innumerable demonstrations of intimacy they display were found to be embedded more in the lively schedule of these large-sized households than in a mere couple relationship. These husbands and wives do not represent intimacy as a dimension which is detached from family bonds – that is, as 'pure relationship'. Rather, they pursue what I depict as *copious relationships*, embedded in family and kinship spheres and resulting from their ability to navigate their networks of belonging and the expressive needs of individuals across the times and places of migration. The capacity to maintain this precarious balance together, in agreement, represents a source of fulfilment and gratification that underlies and consolidates these couples as intimate, close, and harmonious. In so doing, they are able to ride the waves of late/post-modernity rather than being pulled under, that is, to circumvent the intersection of several dimensions of disadvantage and the risks of pauperizing family life that come with processes of global

mobility, widespread care drain, and the increased segmentation of reproductive opportunities.

Notes

1. Specifically, I coordinated the research while the fieldwork was carried out in collaboration with Alessandra Gribaldo and with the assistance of Serena Piovesan.
2. All the personal names in the next pages are pseudonyms. The empirical research was conducted in full compliance with the ethical code drafted by ISA: http://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/code-of-ethics/.
3. For a further reflection on this point, see Erel (2011); Grillo (2008); Mai and King (2009).
4. Regarding a similar interweaving of affective and mobility trajectories relative to phenomena such as agency-mediated marriages, sex tourism or mail-ordered brides, see Palriwala and Uberoi (2005, 2008); Constable (2003, 2005); Fan and Huang (1998); Minjeong (2010).
5. Over 80% of the residence permits granted to Moroccan immigrants in Italy in 2018 were for family reasons (ISTAT, 2019).
6. Based on her fieldwork among British-Indian couples, Pande (2016) suggests a similar distinction and the further, intriguing spectrum of possibilities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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