

Marriages and Transnationalism

One of the most popular topics in migration studies recently has been transnationalism. The concept of transnationalism has been variously defined and its precise parameters debated, but it generally refers to migrants who “build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement.” (Schiller 1992). Several studies have explored the relationship between migration, transnationalism, and marriage. This paper will seek to explore two kinds of marriages — transnational endogamy and intermarriages — and their effects on migrants’ transnational activities.

The first type of marriage, transnational endogamy, also called family forming migration (Lievens 1999), refers to a migrant “importing” a marriage partner from his or her country of origin. This trend is especially prevalent among non-European, non-Christian migrants in Europe, such as Turks and Moroccans in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands (Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Lievens 1999; Straßburger 2004).

Intermarriage, on the other hand, refers to a migrant marrying a partner from dominant culture of the host country.

Traditional assimilationist theory holds that migrants gradually come to abandon the cultural practices, language, and values of their home countries, and that successive generations eventually lose their cultural distinctiveness and become incorporated into the mainstream society. Intermarriage is often seen as a benchmark for assessing the

level of assimilation achieved by different ethnic groups (Zhou 1997). This theory, however, fails to take into account the increasingly heterogeneous nature of modern societies and the possibility of the creation of new, transnational identities based not in one country or another, but both simultaneously.

Cataloging Marriages

As Beck-Gernsheim (2007) points out, it is very difficult to collect and analyze marriage statistics. This is due to several factors, including the complications that arise from marriages taking place in different places (for example, if a migrant and an ‘imported’ partner decide to get married in the country of origin instead of the host country, their marriage will not be recorded in the marriage statistics of the host country). Another factor that complicates matters is the fuzziness of categories: marriage partners cannot easily be categorized as belonging to either the host country or the country of origin due to the increasingly heterogeneous character of modern societies. In addition to either a “native” from the host country or a “native” from the country of origin, migrants may choose to marry someone from the ethnic migrant community (i.e., someone whose family originates from the same culture but who already has citizenship in the host country), or someone from a different migrant community. The existence of mixed families further blurs the lines between “us” and “them”.

Reasons for Transnational Endogamy

Despite the difficulties with categorization mentioned above, it is abundantly clear

that there is a strong and persistent trend among some immigrant groups to import marriage partners from the country of origin. Lievens (1999) estimates, using Belgian census data, that 74.7% of Turkish immigrant men and 68.7% of women married a partner imported from Turkey. Among Moroccans in Belgium, rates were 57.1% for men and 56.8% for women (Lievens 1999). Straßburger (1999) estimates that over 60% of Turkish immigrants in Germany did the same. Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands marry partners from the home country about two-thirds of the time (Bijl et al. 2005).

Arranged marriages are often thought of as “traditional”, while individualism and the choosing of one’s own spouse is considered “modern”. It is important to note, however, that transnational endogamy is not necessarily a reversion to traditional behavior. Lievens (1999) notes that since the trend of importing is not dying out (i.e., it is just as common in the second and third generations) it cannot be considered traditional. Importing marriage partners can also satisfy modern goals such as “opening doors” of opportunity (Lievens 1999).

Several researchers have attempted to answer the question of why the trend of transnational endogamy is so dominant. Beck-Gernsheim (2007) points to the creation of what she calls “transnational social spaces”. These spaces offer advantages to both migrants and those who remain in the country of origin. Migrants can fulfill kinship obligations while maintaining ties to family and friends back home, while those in the country of origin can achieve improved status and possibly an opportunity to migrate.

The prosperity gap that exists between First and Third World countries provides

an obvious economic incentive for people to migrate to more prosperous regions. With increasingly strict immigration laws and the creation of so-called Fortress Europe, family reunification is often the only legal path to immigration. Therefore, marrying a partner who has already successfully migrated can be quite an effective migration strategy.

Beck-Gernsheim also notes the role of the media in creating an “age of migration dreams” in which people develop, based on images in television and movies, positive and often unrealistic ideas about life in developed countries and aspire to moving there.

Slightly more complicated are the reasons that established migrants have for importing marriage partners. Beck-Gernsheim (2007) and Lievens (1999) both mention the primary importance of family and kinship ties in many cultures, including the Turkish and Moroccan cultures that are the subject of their studies. Hannah Cameron (2006) emphasizes that family ties (“biraderi”) are also very important in understanding the transnational endogamy practices of migrants from the Indian subcontinent who have settled in Britain. By marrying someone from the country of origin, migrants can fulfill kinship obligations and remain in contact with their extended family. Marriages are very often arranged in these cultures, and transnational marriage is seen by many concerned elders as a form of “cultural rejuvenation” for their sons and daughters who, having been raised in Britain, may have weakened ties to their heritage (Cameron 2006).

Gender relations and transnational endogamy

Gender relations are also important in understanding migrants’ motivations for

importing marriage partners. According to Beck-Gernsheim (2007), both women and men have reason to believe that marrying someone from the home country will shift power relations in their favor. Men who are concerned that women in the host country are too independent, too assertive, or too “modern” may prefer to marry a more “traditional” woman from the home country who is assumed to be more submissive. Migrant women, likewise, may recognize their presence in the host country as an advantage—their acquired status and knowledge of the language and culture of the host country will make their potential imported husbands dependent on them, and not the other way around. Furthermore, a woman who imports a husband will not be subject to the same level of control by her husband’s family due to their distance from the couple. For these reasons, Lievens (1999) observes that Turkish and Moroccan women who are highly assimilated to Belgian culture have a strong preference to import husbands whereas the same is true for Turkish and Moroccan men who are *less* assimilated.

Transnational endogamy and Assimilation

Many consider transnational endogamy to be a barrier to integration in the host country, and therefore a threat to social cohesion. Cameron (2006) claims that “Transnational marriage often has the effect of ‘short-circuiting’ the generational integration of immigrants into society.” She suggests that this leads to the creation of a segmented society and is therefore dangerous, citing lack of receptivity in the host country as well as traditional cultural values as reasons for the insular nature of

immigrant communities. According to Rodríguez García (2006), socioeconomic status is more important than ethnicity or cultural origin in determining patterns of endogamy and intermarriage. Thus, the solution to the problem of social segmentation must lie in the guarantee to immigrants of equal rights of citizenship and their structural integration into the host economy.

Intermarriage and Assimilation

Intermarriage with the dominant culture has often been strongly associated with acculturation and used as a benchmark for gauging the level of assimilation achieved by a particular group of immigrants (Zhou 1997; Gordon 1964). As opposed to assimilation, a complete, one-way movement of minority groups into the mainstream, integration refers to a process of mutual accommodation between majority and minority groups (Rodríguez García 2006).

The connection between intermarriage and integration into the host society may be supported by empirical evidence. As compared to Turks, Moroccan immigrants were observed to have a “higher orientation towards Belgium”, which is thought to contribute to their higher rates of intermarriage and lower preference for importing marriage partners (Lievens 1999). However, as Rodríguez García (2006) points out, “hybridity does not mean a lack of ethnic and racial prejudices, or political and socio-economic structural incorporation”. The most important factor in successful social integration, he argues, is the guarantee of equal rights of citizenship.

Creating New Transcultural Social Spaces

In his study of Senegambian-Spanish couples in Catalonia, Rodríguez García (2006) considers the creation of complex, transcultural spaces that involve much negotiation and the formation of hybrid identities, especially when children are raised in such mixed families. This hybridity, though, is not necessarily indicative of structural integration into the host society.

All of the studies mentioned thus far deal with non-European, mainly non-Christian groups that have migrated to Europe. The considerable “otherness” of these groups make intermarriage considerably more problematic, not only due to what are perceived as great cultural and religious differences, but also for legal reasons. As pointed out by Lauth Bacas (2002), immigrants’ legal status in Greece is completely different according to their country of origin, and “The difference between EU migrants and non-EU migrants is striking.” This is due to laws that restrict immigration from non-EU countries as well as policies that give EU citizens a considerable advantage (such as permanent residency permits.)

In her study of Greek-German couples in Athens, Lauth Bacas (2002) illustrates that, although there are cultural differences which must be negotiated and dealt with, the integration of German spouses into Greek society is relatively easy. Families are willing to accept the foreign partner as “one of us” following a marriage ceremony. Integration, however, does not necessarily mean assimilation; the subjects of the study were observed to maintain close contact with Germany and to participate in cultural activities with the

German migrant community in Greece. Various “transnational families” associate with one another in public and private and create a “Greek-German in-between space” that allows for cultural exchange (Lauth Bacas 2002).

Conclusions

As Rodríguez García (2006) states, it is important not to make “a priori assumptions about the goodness or malice of the different options with regard to processes of endogamy and exogamy”. Transnational endogamy cannot be considered a purely traditional behavior that is detrimental to the host society, nor can intermarriage be considered an easy solution to the successful integration of immigrants. Both types of marriages, however, increasingly lead to the creation of new identities and transnational social and cultural spaces. The goal of host countries should be to accommodate and integrate these new identities, providing all with equal rights of citizenship rather than demanding their assimilation into the dominant culture.

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