Part 1: Multi-ethnic families: negotiating the differences across gender and generations.

'Doing gender' across cultures: Gender negotiations in European bi-national couple relationships.

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Abstract

Based on semi-structured interviews with 32 bi-national couples living in Manchester (United Kingdom), this chapter explores some of the negotiations around aspects of gender in mixed couples. Lacking a shared cultural bedrock (of which gender is constitutive), partners in bi-national relationships face the task of assembling their own hybrid bedrock to cradle their life together. Subsequently, partners embark on an *ad hoc* exploration of the practice of gender in their relationship leading them to reflect on gender performances, gender relations and how they intersect with culture. This leads partners to negotiate and strategise around their practice of gender in their couple relationship. Nonetheless, whilst an increased fluidity in 'doing' gender bears the potential for more democratic relationships, deep-seated gendered practices whereby women deliver the bulk of the emotional labour and care still endure.

Introduction

Formed by two individuals of different European nationalities in which at least one partner is an intra-European migrant, the number of European bi-national couples is on the rise (Gaspar, 2012). These couples tend to be relatively invisible in their countries of residence, and, despite their role in pioneering processes of Europeanisation from below (through notably the development of new family forms and practices, see also Recchi et al., 2006), they remain little studied. Furthermore, and in contrast to mono-national relationships/'non-mixed' couples for which gender is a central theme of study, it is noticeable that the study of bi-national/ mixed

relationships has focussed on questions of ethnicity and ethnic identity somewhat leaving gender aside.

Building on these observations, this chapter aims to explore some of the gender negotiations at play in bi-national relationships. The research questions discussed in the chapter concern more specifically the question of gender and how it intersects with the bi-national/cultural component in bi-national relationships. This chapter is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with thirty-two European bi-national couples living in Manchester (UK). The study area, Manchester, lies at the heart of the Greater Manchester built-up area which is the second most populous conurbation in the UK, after Greater London. Manchester is a major national and European pole of human activity attracting both internal and transnational migrants. In 2013, 25.7% of Manchester's residents were born outside the UK, 26.45% of which were EU-born (Office of National Statistics, 2013). European-born migrants living in Britain have hitherto benefited from free movement and relaxed rights of abode in their country of residence, however, the UK vote to leave the EU (June 2016) created new uncertainties and anxieties for European-born migrants living in the UK – therefore heightening the necessity for researchers and policy makers to gain a better understanding of the needs, opportunities and challenges these sometimes deemed 'invisible' migrants may encounter.

This chapter is structured as follows: the first section reviews selected contributions relevant to the case study and the topic under scrutiny pointing out to gaps in the knowledge this chapter seeks to address. The second section introduces details of the methodological approach chosen. The data collected are analysed and discussed in the third section before final remarks concluding this chapter.

Section 1: Theoretical framework

A - Bi-national couple relationships: at the crossroads of two separate fields of investigation - bringing 'culture' in the study of relationships, bringing 'gender' in the study of mixed couples.

Although still in its infancy, the study of bi-national relationships – and more generally mixed couples - is developing as the number of mixed dyads increases (Kofman, 2004). Research in mixed relationships has originally stemmed from the field of investigation interested in migration, immigration, race and ethnicity (predating the paradigm shift brought by the formalisation of the concept of transnationalism), which has strongly influenced its research agenda, thus explaining an early dominant focus on ethnicity, integration and race relations (Brahic, 2013). It is interesting to note here that interethnic (particularly couples involving Western and non-Western partners, see Cottrell-Baker, 1990, Caballero et al., 2008) and interreligious couples have attracted greater scholarly attention than other types of mixed couples and particularly those that are European and bi-national, despite their number having significantly increased in the EU (Gaspar, 2012). This relative oversight may also be explained by the fact that the latter are deemed unproblematic from a legal perspective (as they benefit from free movement and relaxed rights of residence) and tend to be invisible to wider society (by contrast to some other ethnic migrants).

The shift in paradigm in the study of migration which was brought about by the formalisation of the concept of transnationalism has participated to both the renewal and the dilution of the study of mixed couples. The call for 'bringing gender in' (Kofman, 2000, Mahler and Pessar, 2001; Pessar and Mahler, 2003) has urged transnational studies to take a reflexive turn and has resulted in 'bringing the family in' too. This has contributed to draw attention to transnational family forms/practices (a significant number of which are articulated around mixed couples) whilst diluting the attention given to the 'mixed component' in the couple relationship itself in favour of a focus on transnationalism and the family. Goulbourne et al. (2010) point out that new research is needed on mixed families in the context of transnational migration, and more specifically on the cultural and social capital they generate rather than the constraints and challenges they face.

Learning from some of the debates articulating the study of relationships, personal life and the transformations of intimacy may enable researchers to step away from a focus on challenges and constraints to consider the 'powerful advantages of mixedness' (Goulbourne et al., 2010: 175); it may also allow for a more individual-

centric/subjective understanding of mixed couple relationships. The present chapter mainly draws from on-going debates concerned with the role of romantic love, self-disclosure and reflexivity versus that of love and care in couple relationships (see Giddens' concept of the 'pure relationship, 1992) as well as the significance of intersecting categories of differences (for example gender, class, race, sexuality, see Jamieson, 1998, Klesse, 2007) and external factors in structuring these relationships.

Though bodies of research on transnational families and family studies have developed separately, Heath et al. (2011) suggest these parallel literatures would benefit from entering in conversation and learn from each other. A similar observation could be made regarding the current study of mixed relationships which would arguably benefit from continuing to build upon the research interested in transnational migration whilst drawing from the research interested in the study of relationships, personal life and the transformations of intimacy. Drawing from the literature on relationships and the transformation of intimacy offers additional means to understand the construction of otherness in mixed relationships as not solely based on national and ethnic boundaries but on a range of intersecting variables such as gender, class, age, sexuality and health. Furthermore incorporating debates on romantic love, solidarity and the role of reflexivity, which are at the core of the study of intimacy and relationships but relatively absent in the study of mixed relationships would allow researchers to reflect the some of the complexities at the heart of mixed couples' lives.

B - Contextual background: Manchester, a hitherto attractive hub for European migrants

The study area, Manchester, is the second biggest conurbation in the UK. Over the past two decades, Manchester has successfully attracted companies and businesses involved in the knowledge-based economy (with a growth in banking, finance, health, higher education, information technology (IT), insurance and law). Housing one of Europe's largest student populations, the three universities have played a major part in this economic reconversion powered by innovation and IT. Meanwhile, investing in programmes of urban regeneration and promoting its cultural

and creative industries, Manchester has been eager to discard its traditional industrial reputation and build itself instead a modern 'buzzing' city image. Peck and Ward (2002) note that the city mixes both decline and transformation where successes such as the airport, the redeveloped city centre or the culture-economy are juxtaposed to deprivation, low-paid jobs, and political and social alienation. Since the advent of free movement across the EU and supported by the growth of the British economy (up until the recent economic downturn), Manchester has attracted an increasing number of European migrants. Incidentally, their presence in cities other than national capitals (such as London) has received limited scholarly attention.

More affordable than London, yet economically dynamic and cosmopolitan, Manchester has been an attractive hub for a growing number of European migrants. Recchi et al. (2003) describe the typical European mover to the UK as young, male or female, middle-class, educated and qualified. If many middle-class young Europeans tend to regard moving overseas as 'a shortcut to capital accumulation' (Recchi, 2006: 76), a significant fraction of them seek a chance to live a nomadic and globalising lifestyle (Favell, 2006). The four most recurrent motives of European movers to the UK are as follows: family/love (29.7%), work opportunities (25.2%), quality of life (24%) and study (7%) (Recchi et al., 2006). Interestingly, whilst they benefit from rights of free movement, foreign European residents experience hidden barriers in their access to social and economic participation in everyday aspects of life in the city, such as the housing market, education, welfare institutions, consumer services and political representation, rendering permanent settlement difficult (Favell, 2003). Middle-class movers tend to experience 'a lingering sense of dislocation from the normal patterns of social and family life' (Favell, 2003: 29) – which may be both bettered and exacerbated by the fact that intra-European migrations take place over short distances which can be bridged easily and at a relatively accessible cost. European transnationalism - constituted, amongst other things, by transnational families and bi-national couples, is a social reality for a growing number of individuals, yet, little is known about the lives, experiences, opportunities and challenges of these 'pioneers' of Europeanisation from below (Recchi and Favell, 2009).

Section 2: Description of data and research methods

This chapter is based on a qualitative study exploring the creation, negotiation and sustainment of transnational relationships formed by middle-class European bi-national couples living in Manchester, UK. The data analysed in this chapter was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with forty-two participants (representing thirty-two couples[1]) involved in a bi-national couple relationship in which partners are of different European nationalities – with at least one of them having migrated to the UK as an adult.

All the twenty-eight female and fourteen male respondents were recruited though purposive and snowballing sampling methods. All lived in Manchester, held a university degree, were in paid employment and regarded themselves as middle-class. Forty respondents were involved in heterosexual monogamous relationships and two in same-sex monogamous relationships. Out of the thirty-two couples interviewed, two were separated, five were living under different roofs - none of these couples had children. Seventeen couples were married and twelve were raising children together. British nationals accounted for a quarter of the sample in which another fifteen European nationalities are represented. All the thirty-two non-British respondents spoke fluent English. Interviewing both migrant and non-migrant partners was a deliberate strategy aimed at giving a voice to non-migrant members of bi-national families whose experience remains relatively understudied.

Section 3: Data analysis and discussion

Subjective perspectives on gender relations: from the vanguard of gender equality to the remains of 'old-fashioned gallantry'[2]

[1] The total number of participants (42) is greater than the number of couples represented in the sample (32) as, in ten instances, respondents unexpectedly joined the interview initially set up with their partner. Simultaneous interviews typically occurred when respondents requested to be interviewed in their home and/or in the evening.

[2] Gallantry is understood here as the polite attentiveness, 'the gentlemanliness' some men show towards some women.

This section explores aspects of the subjective experience of gender in European bi-national relationships. Beyond cross-cultural reflexivity, individuals involved in bi-national relationships engage in a reflexive journey on gender relations, gender performance and the impact they may have on personal relationships. Whilst mono-national couples typically rely on a shared cultural bedrock to build their relationship, bi-national couples face the task of assembling their own hybrid bedrock to cradle their life together (Beck-Gernsheim, 1999). Gender (as a social structure and a source of identity which varies across time, spaces and cultures) is constitutive of that bedrock; conscious aspects of partners' experience/performance of gender first need to be deconstructed and evaluated, then picked and mixed/negotiated in order to assemble a hybrid bedrock in which both partners recognise themselves: 'we found a mid-way through our cultures.' (Chiara, female, Italian with a British male partner). 'Bi-nationality '(it) meant that we had to create our own references between ourselves… (…) That was another thing we did not have in common.' (Laurent, male French with a British female partner). Respondents unanimously valued this reflexive process which they understood as an inherent part of their bi-national/mixed relationships; they indeed felt it supported their personal development and arguably contributed to develop the democratic character of their relationships (see Weeks, 1999). Furthermore, the testimonies gathered also suggest that individuals involved in these couples devised strategies for themselves and/or to negotiate their couple relationship using their experiential/reflexive learning on the interplay of gender and culture.

The perceived state of gender relations were discussed at length by the couples interviewed and particularly female respondents. The majority of female participants expressed opinions concerning the quality of gender relations within a comparative framework. Female respondents originating from southern and eastern parts of Europe felt migrating to the UK and being in a relationship with a foreigner had worked in their favour in terms of gender relations. Consuelo (female, Spanish with a British male partner) praises herself for being in an equal relationship, which she felt, would not have been possible had she stayed in Spain.

> The big difference between British men and Spanish men it is that here, it is equal. And I'm afraid that in Spain it is not totally equal yet. My

> generation, men of my generation, they will do things in the house but occasionally but it is not because they do have to do it equally. They can do it, they probably could do it but only if they have to. That's not a given. I am very determined to have an equal relationship. I go to work, he goes to work. We come back home, I do one thing and he is doing the other. (...) It has to be equal.

With her British partner, Consuelo values the fact that tasks are shared equally both within and outside the household. Chiara (female, Italian with a British male partner) made a similar observation regarding (her perception of) gender relations in the UK. She felt British men were more independent than Italian men. The self-reliance shown by her husband was part of her initial attraction towards him.

> I think men in England are a lot more independent than they are in Italy. If they want to, they can cook, they can put a load of washing on, they can do the washing up. In my previous relationships in Italy, this was not the case at all. It was just the woman that should do this and that. I don't know I just liked his open-mindedness really…I found that he was very independent.

As a result, freed from the duties related to caring for men, women could pursue personal goals outside the household. Throughout the interview, Chiara compared her situation with her female friends living in Italy and emphasised how an equal division of tasks (and more generally stepping out of traditional gender roles) benefited her and her career.

Respondents originating from countries where gender relations remain in their eyes more traditional than the UK relished the opportunity to evolve in a society which they regarded as striving for gender equality and democratic relationships. However, these female respondents were envisaging their current situation through the prism prevalent in their country of origin. Their comparative approach meant that years after they had migrated these women did not take gender equality for granted and still described themselves as privileged. As Ilona's testimony (female, Hungarian with a British male partner) illustrates, some female migrants had ambivalent attitudes regarding this issue. Despite valuing the better level of gender equality achieved in the UK, they reproduced traditional patterns of gender inequalities within their household.

> I think eastern European girls – Hungarian girls – are different to British girls. I don't know in what way, or how to explain. In the UK, they have been brought up to have equal rights and all, in Hungary it is the same but it is normal that the woman cooks and the man works. That is what I see from my parents. (…) I think I spoil him a bit. I do more the cleaning and he does the washing up: well, he fills the dishwasher. He goes shopping sometimes for food. Cleaning, not very often but he does different things. He manages the mortgage and financial things. (…) You know he gives me security. I always wanted a partner I can look up to.

As she underlined it in her interview, the division of task and roles in her current relationship matches that of her parents, with one difference: she reproduces a traditional division of domestic labour in a context where there exists a stronger cultural expectation of gender equality. Her and her partner's expectations and experience are discrepant. Drawing from her experience, Ilona suggests that because Eastern European female migrants are more 'docile' and provide more than what is expected of them, they have a comparative advantage over their British counterparts[3] in the UK matrimonial market.

At the other end of the spectrum, British women involved with foreign partners originating from countries where gender relations are organised differently to the UK reported other types of difficulties. Generally, these women expected more independence in their relationship with their partner than he was used to 'grant'. Elisabeth (female, British with a French male partner) and her partner both lived in France and in the UK. This enabled her to compare and contrast the state of gender relations in the two countries and the divergent expectations between herself and her former partner.

> Having experienced so many guys or having been just like a weekend girlfriend, I was much more independent, I was used to be doing my own things during the week, I was having my own friends, my own activities, my own way of doing things... almost like having a separate life, but it's normal to me. That is what I have always done in my previous relationships. You cannot rely on an English guy and I think English girls are a bit more like 'I don't need you to support me' whereas I got the impression from his friends (French friends or couples) like the girl was

[3] In this quote, Ilona endorses the widespread Western European stereotype of 'Eastern European girls/women' (Giabiconi, 2005). Rather than challenging its truthfulness, she uses it to demonstrate the assets of female Eastern European migrants on the matrimonial market in Britain.

> sort of undertone, whereas the boy was the one who was like… I don't know it is strange. Like the girl is the rock in the French relationship and the man is like the show. Like the public thing you know, it was like that with his mother… in public, she is very quiet but in private, she sets all the rules. His best friend and his wife are the same, she was really like laying down the rules. But then down at the pub, she barely spoke, and the guy was funny. For me, it was really strange. It's a more equal thing in my head. I think it irritated him sometimes that I was as forceful as him, especially in front of his friends. I think he wanted me to be a little bit more passive and a little bit more feminine. He used to say 'you're so feminist' and it really pissed him off I think. He wanted me to be calmer, happy and protected by him. Sometimes it was good, but sometimes I just felt so claustrophobic. I couldn't breathe and I just felt spiteful.

Like Elisabeth, women involved in a relationship with a foreigner originating from a country they perceive as less gender egalitarian than the UK did not want to lower their standards to match their partner's expectations, which in turn generated recurrent tensions in their couple.

Some men made comments mirroring Elisabeth's testimony on the state of gender relations in the UK. Jacques (male, Belgian with a British female partner), who moved to Britain in his late forties, was at first worried about the cultural differences between Belgium and the UK. After a few months in Manchester, he realised that he had not anticipated the difference in gender relations, which, in his view, was the most unsettling aspect of his new life: 'It is more macho. Men and women keep separate… (…) Men go out with men only. The same goes for women. In Belgium, men and women socialise a lot more together. For me, that is strange'. Jacques echoes Elisabeth's testimony but gives a different interpretation. Rather than reading gender seclusion as a means to enable greater independence for both sexes, Jacques envisages it as a form of segregation increasing the distance between sexes.

By contrast with the experiences highlighted above, female respondents from Northern European countries did not comment as much on the state of gender relations in the UK. The few who did drew a completely different picture of the state of gender relations in the UK. From their perspective, gender relations in the UK revolved around traditional notions of 'gallantry' which they read as undermining the equality between genders. Frederike (female, Danish, with a British male partner)

remembers opposing the gallantry of her partner who allegedly thought she would appreciate his attention.

> He always refers back to this… when he opened the door for me, I thought it was stupid. I am perfectly capable of opening the door myself and he obviously did that to be polite. We had a few altercations: 'Can you please stop opening the door? I can do that. I am not feeble you know, I can manage!'

Other women like Solveig (female, Norwegian with a British male partner) acknowledged the obsolescence and the ambivalence of gallantry. However, they consciously and purposefully read it as a cultural trait and a sign of appreciation by their British partner which renders it enjoyable.

> I think my husband compared to men I know in Norway, not as partners, they are more sort of gentlemen like, they will take you out for dinner, hold the door for you, not necessarily those things but those kind of actions but I think that's part of the cultural aspects of things. (…) In England, it is much more traditional than in Norway, I am not saying you don't buy flowers in Norway but maybe you'll... but because Scandinavian countries are holding on about equality... if you go out to eat, it's not necessarily appropriate for the man to pay. Both are supposed to pay. Then, you'll do other things, I think it's more common in Scandinavia that your male partner will do more at home, cook dinner, will hang out the washing, vacuum the lounge, things like that which, on the surface, doesn't seem very romantic but can be. (…) I think I grew up in a society where sharing these burdens so to speak are part of showing your appreciation of the relationship, for instance.

Several British men such as James (male, British with a German female partner) felt very positive about their partner's alternative conception of gender relations which, in his view, had liberating repercussions on their everyday life.

> I found *(Sabine, his partner)* different, because she is different to girls I know, to women in this country. There are some expectations here. Generalising in many ways, we are very traditional in Britain in terms of relationship and expecting the man to do certain things and the women to do things. *(Sabine)* was not like that. Many women seem very insecure or even put on this insecurity to make the man feel better about himself, and she never did that and I found that really interesting.

During his interview, Brian (male, British with German female partner) made similar comments and repeatedly praised his wife for not being 'a typical woman': Katrin

honestly spoke her mind and never sent mixed messages. Whereas he interpreted this issue as a gender issue, his wife read this directness as a typical trait of the German character. Katrin and Brian's testimony highlights the way in which/ the basis on which 'otherness' in bi-national relationships is constructed evolves throughout the couple relationship. Typically starting from a construction of otherness markedly based on their different cultural and national identities, partners engage in a process of normalisation of the bi-national element in their relationship to transition towards a construction of their partner's otherness based on gender and/or individual personality (which is perhaps more akin to mono-national couples) of which culture and national differences are understood as one of many intersecting components (Brahic, 2013). This evolution/reformulation of the terms of the construction of otherness tends to be celebrated by couples as sign of intimacy/closeness but can meet resistance and be challenged by family members, friends and individuals outside the couple.

Conclusion

The data collected suggest that the way in which partners 'do' gender (their performance of gender, attitudes towards and practices of gender relations) is constitutive (amongst other elements such as ethnic and cultural identity) of the sense of otherness experienced by partners in bi-national relationships. This chapter explores some of the negotiations around aspects of gender in mixed couples. Lacking a shared cultural bedrock (of which gender is constitutive), partners in bi-national relationships face the task of assembling their own hybrid bedrock to cradle their life together. Consequently, partners in bi-national relationships engage in an *ad hoc* exploration of the practice of gender in their relationship in which they appear to interrogate gender performances, gender relations and gender roles and how they intersect with culture.

The evidence gathered suggests that the learning occurring as part of this exploration process often becomes an asset respondents use to devise strategies and negotiate their relationship with their partner. Respondents valued the reflexive journey they engaged in as part of their relationship, highlighting the democratic potential that often came with it. However, whilst evidence gathered with bi-national

couples point to more negotiated/fluid gender roles/narratives and potentially more democratic relationships, they also suggest the resilience of deep-seated gendered practices whereby women still deliver the bulk of inter-generational care.

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