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The Paradox of Choice:

Partner Choices among Highly Educated Turkish Belgian Women

Sinem Yilmaz, Bart Van de Putte & Peter AJ Stevens

Abstract

Although research suggests that higher education leads to higher levels of ethnic inter-marriage, there is little research that describes and explains the variability of partner choice options for highly educated ethnic minority women. Using data from semi-structured interviews with thirty highly educated second-generation Turkish Belgian women, this study explores inductively the kinds of partner choice options experienced by these women and the conditions and social processes that stimulate them to (not) choose particular options. The results suggest that the relationship between education, inter-marriage and fuller integration is tenuous and needs further analysis.

Keywords

Turkish Belgian, second generation, women, partner choice, education

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Although research suggests that higher education leads to higher levels of ethnic inter-marriage, there is little research that describes and explains the variability of partner choice options for highly educated ethnic minority women. Using data from semi-structured interviews with thirty highly educated second-generation Turkish Belgian women, this study explores inductively the kinds of partner choice options experienced by these women and the conditions and social processes that stimulate them to (not) choose particular options. The results suggest that the relationship between education, inter-marriage and fuller integration is tenuous and needs further analysis.

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The offspring of the first-generation Turkish migrants constitute a growing percentage of the young population in Europe. Their structural and social integration have been studied from different angles, including marriage patterns. Their family formation choices have received considerable attention from researchers due to their growing numerical presence and their role on the demographic future of European societies (Lucassen & Laarman, 2009).

The classical marriage pattern of Turkish migrants in Europe has been characterised by low ages at marriage (Lodewijckx, 1994), and high rates of intra-ethnic marriages with a partner from the country of origin (Lievens, 1999). Existing studies observe a divergence from this classical marriage pattern in second-generation Turkish Belgians with a decline in transnational marriages (Van Kerckem, Van der Bracht, Stevens, & Van de Putte, 2013), an increasing age at marriage and com-

paratively high levels of inter-ethnic marriages (Dupont, Van Pottelberge, Van de Putte, Lievens, & Caestecker, 2017). In addition, girls from Turkish origin seem to outperform boys at school and high education rates appear to result in more individualised decision-making processes about life course events (Timmerman, 2006). Related to this, the role of parental involvement seems to weaken (De Valk, 2006). In addition, quantitative studies on partner choices of Turkish immigrants associate higher education with a higher likelihood of having an interethnic union compared to lower educated immigrants (Huschek, de Valk, & Liefbroer, 2012; Hartung, Van-dezande, Phaet, & Swyngedouw, 2011; Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2006). These studies, at the same time, highlight that even though there is a positive correlation between educational level and likelihood of inter-ethnic marriage, high education is very often not followed by inter-ethnic marriage.

The literature suggests that second-generation Turkish women – especially higher educated ones – experience a transition and a cultural shift regarding their marriage patterns (De Valk, 2006). These women are assumed to develop more inter-ethnic contacts through their high level of education and this might reinforce inter-ethnic marriages (Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2006). However, this transition is not always straightforward. We argue that a processual approach of this transition, in which modern and traditional cultural and structural forces might interact in shaping marriage behaviour for these women, may better explain the situation of highly educated Turkish Belgian women.

Hence, we suggest that the link between education and inter-ethnic marriage is not linear, at least not for Turkish Belgian women. Moreover, there is a tenuous relationship between inter-ethnic marriage and a better integration into society. Although existing research suggests that partner choices for second-generation Turkish women are complex, very few studies have inductively explored the difficulties that these more highly educated women experience in finding a suitable partner, and the strategies they consider and employ in choosing a partner. In addition, little is known about how variability in these women's partner choices can be explained by the social context in which they are embedded. For these reasons, through a qualitative study involving thirty highly educated Turkish Belgian women, we explore this population's range of choices, which is more complex than what is usually argued, and focus on the individual/family processes and conditions that make them opt for a particular one.

Demographic Transition in Marriage Behaviour

Marriage patterns have changed dramatically across Europe since the late 1960s. This change has been mainly characterised by a fall in marriage and remarriage rates, high rates of divorce and separation, increasing age at marriage, postponement of childbearing, and increase in cohabitations (see Kuijsten 1996: Lesthaeghe and Moors 2002: Prioux 2006). Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa jointly formulated the “second demographic transition” in 1986 to refer to these interrelated changes in family

arrangements. This idea of transition has been closely linked to various structural (e.g. modernisation and expansion of higher education), cultural (e.g. secularisation and individualisation), and technological changes (e.g. modern contraception techniques) (Van de Kaa, 1994).

The applicability of the components of this transition to non-European populations and migrants in Europe has become a question of debate among researchers. Research shows a significant change between first- and second-generation Turkish migrant women in Europe (De Valk, 2006; Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2006). Increasing level of education and female employment might be explained with the structural changes specified in second demographic transition. Moreover, De Valk (2006) observed an increase in individualisation among migrant groups. Related to female emancipation through education and employment, unbalanced gender role divisions seem to be challenged (Koelet, Hermans, Torfs, Vanvoorden, & Timmerman, 2009). All these indications are assumed to result in more “modern” attitudes towards marriage behaviour with a high rate of inter-ethnic marriage and less parental involvement and social control. However, research suggests that cultural approval of new and more individualised behaviours do not come automatically (Lesthaeghe & Vanderhoeft, 2001). Hence, women who are likely to be potential trendsetters of demographic changes in their ethnic community may not experience these changes as straightforward.

Research also suggests that second-generation women seem to redefine components of Western modernisation and keep different and contrasting value systems together. For example, they express a strong adherence to both individualism and family values (Pels, 2006). In addition, more and more highly educated Muslim women experience female emancipation together with a strong religious commitment (Vanderwaeren, 2005) and they develop strategies to deal with social control and prioritise their personal choices (van Kerckem, 2014). Based on existing research, we suggest that this demographic transition might create challenges and tensions for educated second-generation Turkish women as a result of contrasting value and structural systems.

Determinants of Partner Choices

Partner choices of people with a migration background are generally categorised as either inter- or intra-ethnic marriages. These subdivide further into: (1) second-generation co-ethnic partner; (2) native partner from host country; (3) first-generation partner from the country of origin, and; (4) second-generation partner from another migrant group (Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2006; Hartung et al., 2011; Huschek et al., 2012).

Previous research has highlighted structural features, opportunities, third parties, individual preferences, and human capital as main factors affecting marriage behaviour (Kalmijn, 1998; Rother, 2008). The following sections critically discuss literature on different factors that affect partner choice and how these factors can influence marriage behaviour of Turkish Belgian women.

Structural Conditions

Blau suggests two main structural features – group size and heterogeneity – that either inhibit or create opportunities for intergroup contact (cited in Muttarak & Heath, 2010). According to this theory, if the size of an ethnic group is small, the opportunities to meet with outsiders are higher and if the group is heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, and socioeconomic status, it presents greater opportunities for intergroup relations. However, according to structuralist theory, even when the group size is balanced, it can still be difficult to find a partner if the number of potential partners with similar characteristics is small (Lewis & Oppenheimer, 2000).

Related to this, a perceived shortage of appropriate partners, due to low educational attainment among Turkish Belgian men in the local marriage market, seems to discourage Turkish Belgian women to opt for second-generation co-ethnic partners (Neels, 1999; Wets, 2006). Moreover, these women consider the local Turkish men as traditional and irresponsible (Timmerman, 2006; Van Kerckem et al., 2013). This suggests that some women have concerns about gender equality and their individuality, and as a result they appear to avoid second-generation co-ethnic partners.

Although comparatively less popular, the rate of transnational marriage is still very high among second-generation Turkish Belgian women. Recent research displays an increasing awareness about the risks of transnational marriages, including: (1) exploitation of women by partners who see marriage as an opportunity for migration (Charsley, 2005); (2) dependence on the wife due to the lack of knowledge of the local language (Dutch or French) and problems to find employment, which leads to changes in traditional gender role patterns (Gallo, 2006); and (3) a lack of time to know one another due to fast marriages that occur during summer holidays (Van Kerckem et al., 2013). Related to these factors, research shows a high rate of divorce risk in transnational marriages for Turkish Belgians (Eeckhaut, Lievens, Van de Putte, & Lusyne, 2011). As a result, we can expect Turkish Belgian women to strongly reconsider in-group partners from both Belgium and Turkey due to a perceived shortage of appropriate partners within the Turkish community in Belgium and a realisation of the risks related to transnational marriage.

In addition, research suggests that some better-educated immigrants might have less positive attitudes towards the native population due to perceived (Turkish minority) group discrimination (ten Teije, Coenders, & Verkuyten, 2013). According to the study conducted by ten Teije et al. (2013) in the Netherlands, discrimination and experiences of social exclusion of higher educated immigrants despite their successful integration and efforts may draw them away from the majority population. Moreover, studies show that highly educated members of the majority groups tend to have less contacts with immigrants (Martinovic, Van Tubergen, & Maas, 2009). Some immigrants may be more sensitive towards discrimination to their own ethnic group and be aware of the more vulnerable position of their ethnic group (Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1994). These findings suggest that inter-ethnic marriage is not

a one-sided story, involving only interactions between minority members. The experiences of discrimination by the majority population may also influence these women's choices.

Third Parties

Marriage is not merely about the decisions of two partners, it is also influenced by outsiders (Kalmijn & Tubergen, 2006). The family system, religion, traditions, and norms are presented as components of third parties (Kalmijn, 1998; Çelikaksoy, 2006). According to a study conducted by Lucassen and Laarman (2009) in Western Europe, if the religious faith of a migrant group is not common in the country of destination, the rate of out-marriage is fairly low.

The effect of parental involvement in children's marriage decisions is lower compared to first generation, but it is still a significant factor in terms of shaping marital behaviour (de Valk & Liefbroer, 2007; Milewski & Hamel, 2010). Studies that investigate parental expectations regarding partner choices of Turkish immigrants in Europe suggest that parents either discourage particular union formations or encourage other partners. For example, The Integration of the European Second Generation (TIES) survey results regarding France indicate that half of the young adults experience family pressure in the sense of encouragement and discouragement (Milewski & Hamel, 2010). It is presumed that parents adopt different strategies to direct their children to Turkish partners they favour, rather than imposing one. Research also shows gender differences in parental involvement, as women experience much more social pressure, since they are seen as the transmitters of culture and religion in patriarchal family systems (Kalmijn & Tubergen, 2006; Lucassen & Laarman, 2009; Phalet & Schonpflug, 2001).

The Role of Education in Partner Choice

The relationship between educational attainment and intra-ethnic marriages (or the lack thereof) has been studied, albeit to a much more limited extent, to understand marriage behaviour of ethnic minority groups (Lucassen & Laarman, 2009; Chiswick & Houseworth, 2011; Furtado, 2012; Furtado & Theodoropoulos, 2011; Lewis & Oppenheimer, 2000). It has been suggested that education decreases intra-ethnic marriages in low education ethnic groups, while it is the opposite in high education ethnic groups (Furtado, 2012). However, education might not lead to inter-ethnic group marriage even in poorly educated ethnic groups when the above-mentioned individual/family processes and conditions are very effective in shaping marriage behaviour. Lucassen and Laarman (2009) explain this with contact and barrier theory. People from different groups meet at places such as schools, neighbourhoods, work environments, and social gatherings, and this affects their chances to intermarry. However, they also reflect that religious authorities might put up barriers to discourage marriage across religious and national lines. These religious and cul-

tural values are not homogenous and static, but their (in)direct influence cannot be underestimated (Grillo, 2008).

This linkage between education and more modern attitudes towards marriage behaviour has also been fed by the relationship between education and agency development – especially for women. Some researchers question the idea that the modern education system empowers women and helps them resist cultural, religious and familial “limitations” (Burke, 2012; Korteweg, 2008; Mahmood, 2001). They object to associating agency only with free will and resistance. Ahearn (2001), for example, argues that conceptualisation of agency may differ from society to society and may be shaped by socio-cultural conditions. Moreover, Meyers (2000) emphasises the importance of one’s process of deciding rather than the outcome and the action decided upon. It raises the question whether educated women whose decisions might be influenced by above-mentioned third parties lack power to exercise agency in choosing their partners. Sahu et al. (2016) examine this link and suggest that it is much more complex than a straightforward relationship. Their study follows Ahearn (2001) and argues that there might be different forms of agencies between victimisation and resistance.

Hence, indications in research suggest that there is a tenuous link between education, agency and inter-ethnic marriages. Rather than being victims of cultural and religious expectations or destroying family relations with radical changes, there might be possibilities for women to steer their way around these expectations to find in-between decisions.

The literature, on the other hand, shows that educated people are forerunners who will discontinue the practice of transnational or intra-ethnic marriage and be more open to other groups. However, we have doubts about the applicability of this theory to Turkish Belgian women because we suggest that a processual approach, in which modern and traditional cultural and structural forces might interact in shaping marriage behaviour for these women may better explain the situation of highly educated Turkish Belgian women. Therefore, we argue that qualitative data is needed for a deeper understanding of the complexity of highly educated Turkish Belgian women’s partner choices.

Based on previous discussions, the research questions to be examined through a qualitative analysis are:

- (1) What are the partnership options for educated Turkish Belgian women?
- (2) What are the factors that inform or limit partner choices of these women?

Methods

The study uses data from semi-structured interviews with thirty second-generation Turkish Belgian women in Flanders to understand their marriage behaviour. The study was limited to highly educated Turkish women with at least a tertiary

education to investigate the determinants of partner choice among highly educated Turkish Belgian women. The case of Turkish women in Belgium is theoretically interesting for other national contexts, because they do not seem to follow the predicted pattern in terms of partner choice, which begs the question: what choices do they have and what informs their partner choices? A qualitative research approach was adopted because of our focus on understanding participants' personal experiences, perceptions and choices. Furthermore, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to build rapport with the respondent and develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena step-by-step, which is arguably appropriate in discussing a sensitive topic like partner choice.

All participants belong to the second generation, either because they were born in Belgium to at least one Turkish parent or because they had moved to Belgium before the age of six. The interview sample shows variability in terms of age, educational level, occupation, marital status and marriage type (table 1). The sample did not intend to imply only men as partners, but we did not reach same sex partners, possibly because of cultural and religious rules and limitations in this community although this would need to be further investigated. The respondents were between 27 and 55 years old at the time of the interview. The study consisted of semi-structured, digitally recorded interviews which lasted from 41 to 180 minutes and were conducted between 2014 and 2016 by the main researcher. Participants were reached in the Flemish region of Belgium through a variety of techniques, including e-mail, telephone, and social media contacts. The principal researcher contacted some migrant women organisations that focus on activities related to women with migration background to reach educated Turkish Belgian women through their newsletter advertising. Sampling was also done with the help of the "snowball" technique (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981).

We obtained informed consent, which ensures the participant is voluntarily involved in the research and has accurate information about the research process (Lewis, 2003). We used pseudonyms and removed personal information that might expose their identity. During the semi-structured interviews, key topics which were discussed included their family background, criteria for potential partners, profile of partners, social control mechanisms, difficulties they experience about partner choice, and strategies in dealing with contradictory sources of influence.

The data was analysed by adopting a Grounded Theory approach, which aims to develop a theory inductively through a constant comparative approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Data analysis started with reading over the entire interviews after which a first series of codes were attached through NVIVO software. We initially identified recurring themes based on related concepts referred to in other studies and participants' own statements. We coded criteria for partner choice, the choices women make, and impacts of family and society as preliminary codes that could guide the analysis. In the following stage, we further analysed these codes inductively and divided them into categories or sub-categories by comparing and contrasting the codes to find the relations between categories. We identified partnership

Table 1. Interview sample

Interviewee	Age	Education level ¹	Marital Status	Marriage age	Marriage type	Partner's education level
Hülya	42	5	Married	30	Transnational	4
Canan	45	5	Married	29	Transnational	4
Sevim	37	4	Married	25	Transnational	4
	35	5	Married	23	Transnational	5
Öznur	35	5	Married	24	Transnational	3
Deniz	34	6	Married	25	Transnational	3
Arzu	55	4	Divorced	19	Transnational	2
Leyla	30	5	Divorced	26	Transnational	0
Melek	41	4	Remarried	18-31	Transnational 2nd generation co-ethnic	3
İpek	42	5	Divorced	30	2nd generation co-ethnic	5
Ceyda	30	4	Married	23	2nd generation co-ethnic	6
Ebru	31	5	Divorced	25	2nd generation co-ethnic	5
Lale	27	4	Married	26	2nd generation co-ethnic	3
Meral	31	5	Married	26	2nd generation co-ethnic	5
Hatice	32	5	Married	26	2nd generation inter-ethnic	5
Aylin	35	5	Married	32	2nd generation inter-ethnic	5
Sibel	39	5	Married	28	2nd generation inter-ethnic	5
Ceren	28	6	Married	22	In-between co-ethnic	5
Oya	30	5	Married	27	In-between co-ethnic	4
Selma	37	5	Married	29	In-between co-ethnic	5
Esra	44	6	Married	27	In-between co-ethnic	4
Melisa	30	5	Married	28	In-between co-ethnic	4
Songül	32	5	Married	27	Native	6
Mine	42	5	Divorced	30	Native	5
Nehir	32	6	Single			
Yasemin	41	5	Single			
Belgin	40	6	Single			
Demet	39	4	Single			
Gamze	34	5	Single			
Hilal	30	5	Single			

1 Educational levels have been classified based on International Standard Classification of Education.
0: Pre-primary education
1:Primary education
2:Lower secondary education
3: Upper secondary education
4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education
5:Tertiary education
6: Upper tertiary education

options whenever they referred the choices they made or would like to make and driving factors where they talked about structural or familial constraints as well as limited social networking opportunities.

Understanding Partner Choices of Highly Educated Turkish Belgian Women

Women's Marriage Model

Considering the criteria for partner choice, our findings show that most women conceive socio-economic status as a key factor for selecting a partner. We found that most of them would like to choose highly educated partners with prestigious jobs. Both highly educated women and their families prioritise socio-economic status since they experienced various challenges in the course of upward social mobility. Therefore, they appear to think that they deserve partners from similar socio-economic situations. A similar level of education is perceived to enable a common worldview which is likely to be helpful in finding compromise about important life course decisions. Furthermore, if the potential partner has a higher socio-economic status, his adaptation problems due to lack of proficiency in the local language and knowledge about Belgian culture seem to be less important for some women. However, being educated is not the only criterion for many women in our sample. Other criteria might come into play. For example, Ceyda (30) would prefer a Turkish Belgian man educated to high school level with a good job to a highly educated partner from Turkey. Moreover, similarities in family structure as well as ideological and cultural similarities were also regarded as important.

With regard to the formation of criteria, a crucial observation is that some informants seem to state their individual preferences about partner choices, while others talk about criteria influenced by family expectations. Possible partnership options mentioned by informants include second-generation co-ethnic partner, first-generation partner from Turkey, and second-generation (Muslim) partner from another ethnic minority group. Although limited, a Muslim Belgian, Italian, African, or Moroccan seem to be other options with some negotiation to convince families. Only a few women expressed the possibility of non-Turkish and non-Muslim partners for themselves. In addition to these theoretically mentioned partnership options, some women mentioned that they chose in-between co-ethnics and differentiated them from transnational Turkish partners, while some others favoured Turkish expats as dream partner options.

Gender equality seems to be a common concern for many informants when choosing a marriage partner. Growing up in families where most of them expressed to see traditional gender role divisions appears to make them be more "careful" about their choices. Being respectful towards women, their career, and freedom were mentioned among some of the criteria that informants look for in potential partners.

Factors Influencing Women's Marriage Decisions

Based on the qualitative interviews and existing literature, we discern some factors informing or limiting educated Turkish women's partner choices. These factors include individual processes, structural conditions, opportunities in marriage market, family barriers, societal pressure, and experiences of extended family members and friends.

Individual Processes and Structural Conditions

Firstly, being a highly educated woman with a professional career seems to influence the marriage decisions of our informants. Most of them look for partners who will respect their freedom in personal life (e.g. clothes, lifestyle, friends) and professional life (e.g. working hours, travels, relations with colleagues). The role of religion on their socialisation as children appears to inform their criteria and actual choices. Women who are likely to be raised in families where religious values and practices were important mentioned that they try to live according to religious limitations. Therefore, they stated that a non-Muslim partner is not an option not because of family restrictions, but because they believe in it themselves. Moreover, two informants mentioned the possibility of discrimination in case of having a Belgian partner. For instance, Belgin (40) said: "I have to think about the possibility of being discriminated by a Belgian partner or his family. This can be the case". Apart from these two women, no one directly referred to a potential Belgian partner's discrimination towards them during the interview. However, most of them stated that "it is always good to be together with your own people in any case. You can feel safe and secure". This supports the argument of ten Teije et al. (2013) who state that some better-educated immigrants prefer to have less contact with majority population due to perceived group discrimination.

Furthermore, some women mentioned the very low parental human capital as a "barrier" limiting their opportunities to meet like-minded people. It appears that their family social networks do not provide suitable partners for these women. Almost all informants grew up in Turkish-populated neighbourhoods where they were among a limited number of educated people. Nevertheless, our findings show that these women spend most of their time with Belgians both at schools and working places in the later years. However, most of them do not seem to consider Belgians as marriage partners due to their individual preferences or lack of social support from their families. Informants did not mention social media or online dating sites as tools to look for partnership opportunities. A few of them stated that they met their Turkish Belgian partners through social networks in the university and ethnic student associations. Others mentioned that their school was mostly Belgian-populated and that they barely encountered Turkish men within their Belgian working environment:

I am more aware of it now. Sometimes I do not see any Turks in a day. The working environment is entirely Belgian. School was already like that. I ask myself where I am going to find a Turkish man, because he must be Turkish in my case (Ebru, 31).

This example shows that close inter-ethnic relationships do not always form positive partnership outcomes for highly educated Turkish Belgian women if they are not interested in an inter-ethnic marriage.

Opportunities in Marriage Market

Our findings show that the most commonly mentioned barrier is the shortage of appropriate partners in the local marriage market. The women we interviewed gave two reasons for this shortage: (1) low levels of education of Turkish Belgian men, and (2) the perception that Turkish Belgian men are “narrow-minded” and “too traditional”. Many women in our sample mentioned that an educated second-generation co-ethnic partner would be an “easy” and “practical” option in terms of marriage process, having similar experiences, language, and working opportunities. General expectations from second-generation co-ethnic partners are that they are respectful to their wives, have a sense of responsibility towards family life, be educated, and have modern attitudes. However, most women think that the number of highly educated Turkish Belgian men is very low, and this assumption makes it difficult for these women to find like-minded partners among them. Like most women in our sample, Arzu (55) said: “Educated options are very limited here. You want him to be educated, Turkish, and to know the culture of Belgium. But finding this is very difficult.” Some others think that even being educated is not enough since they see Turkish Belgian men as “old fashioned”.

These constraints in the local marriage market encourage a transnational marriage for some women, but another difficulty arises, since they are increasingly aware of the risks of transnational marriages. One of the risks mentioned by women is men’s integration problems due to the lack of language proficiency and inability to find a proper long-term job. This makes men dependent on women and creates a double burden for these women who have to fulfil the responsibilities of both partners in the family. In relation to these, it was reported that traditional gender role patterns are disrupted within these families. Supporting this, Demet (39) said: “For me there is a difference between women’s and men’s coming here through marriage. Woman can stay at home and give birth to children, but the man has to work”. This passage exemplifies a situation in which many transnationally married women have found themselves. Also, some of them told the interviewer that they see transnationally married people as “bad examples” since most of them experience big problems. Ceyda (30), for example, shared her reasoning of not choosing a transnational partner: “My older siblings were all married with partners from Turkey and they all had problems. Maybe that is the reason why I made a choice from here”. In general, there is a negative image of transnational marriages among highly educated women. Oznur and Yasemin said: “either lower educated people or old maids bring their partners from Turkey”.

Contrary to these negative statements, a few women mentioned transnational marriage as the second-best option, since they could not find a suitable partner in the local marriage market. For example, Hulya has a partner from Turkey even though she was against transnational marriage before. However, she mentioned that

she could only find a “like-minded” partner from Turkey even though she experienced difficulties due to her husband’s “adaptation problems”. Another observation is that some single informants seem to idealise men in Turkey and see them as “more educated and responsible” compared to Turkish Belgian men. Informants who have close relations with Turkey through friends, family, and holiday visits are more likely to think about a transnational partner as a second choice.

Third parties

We distinguished two main factors which exemplify how third parties are effective in informing or limiting partner choices: (1) parental interference, and (2) societal pressure. Our data suggested that some families impose religious, cultural, and social norms directly or indirectly. Women reported two situations in which their parents seem to interfere: (1) close inter-group contacts, and (2) marrying down in terms of socio-economic status. In the first case, close contacts with other ethnic communities in schools and work environment seem to make some families more anxious in case of an inter-ethnic marriage possibility. Meral (31) said:

There was an extra social pressure since we were going to school. When I registered for the university, people said ‘she will have her nose in the air and will not like us anymore. She will not marry after all. If she does, she will not choose a Turkish man’.

Although many women argue that the limit should be being a Muslim, they mentioned that most families object to a marriage outside the ethnic group and insist on Turkish grooms. Hatice (32), who is married to a second-generation Moroccan, told the interviewer:

I explained it to my mother, they underestimated it at first . . . after two years we went through big family crisis. They did not accept it on any account . . . I experienced limitations I had never had before. My father said ‘they are all thieves and polygamists, you will see in a few years’ . . . I could not convince them . . . so I left home without their consent.

Hatice did not see her family for two years. They still think that it would be better if she was married to a Turkish man because such a crisis would have been avoided. Songül’s (32) family, on the other hand, still does not talk to her because of her non-Muslim Belgian partner. Contrary to this, Mine’s (42) parents accepted her Belgian partner more easily since they are not a religious family. Of course, these women should not be considered as the victims of families and social norms. Our analysis suggests that women respond to family interests differently. For example, negotiation processes through the mediators in the family were reported to be a common strategy to convince families for inter-ethnic marriages. It seems that these negotiations did not work in Hatice’s and Songül’s case and they preferred to insist

on their decisions and married their non-Turkish partners. However, Yasemin (41) and Belgin (40), who reported that they had marriage proposals from Belgian men, could not persuade their parents and did prefer not to marry, since they did not want to risk losing family social support. These observed differences show that constraints do not necessarily determine women's choices. This also suggests the existence of different types of agencies women exercise in important life decisions. Some women choose to insist on their decisions despite unfavourable consequences, while some others choose to give up their preferences for the sake of family expectations.

Regarding the second case, some women reported that their families do not want them to marry poorly educated men due to status differences. A few women, on the other hand, mentioned that their parents did not prefer transnational marriage since "their older children who had transnational partners experienced some problems". Aside from parental interference, societal pressure becomes effective through social and religious norms in different ways. When a woman does not marry someone who is on equal footing in terms of educational and socio-economic life, societal pressure about the supposed mismatch seems to be reflected in gossip. Leyla (30) married a poorly educated man and she said that her choice was criticised by people around her. When she realised that she was unhappy with that man, she did not divorce immediately because she thought that she would "prove them right". Öznur (35), on the other hand, had so much difficulty to gain social approval for her lowly educated husband from her extended family. Secondly, this pressure can aggravate pre-marital relationships for women. For example, Mine (42) reported having to marry her boyfriend sooner than she had wished, because people in her neighbourhood created a pressure on her since they saw her boyfriend come to her place.

These mechanisms also affect the way in which women develop relations with men. Depending on the job, developing a relationship with men can be a problem for Turkish women. For example, Belgin (40) told the interviewer that she can easily develop a relationship with women, but there is always a distance with men. Lastly, we inferred from the findings that social norms about traditional gender roles seem to make some educated women "unfavourable" as marriage candidates because of their roles in society. Thus, we consider name this particular female "visibility" as an obstacle to marriage for these women.

Women's Partner Choices

Findings show that some women's partner choices are in line with their expectations, while the gap between real partner choice and expectation seems to be bigger for some others. Results show that there are nine transnationally married women in our sample. We found that explaining their transnational marriages is more complex. Some reported that they initially decided to move to Turkey to live with their husbands, but they could not execute their plans and continued living in Belgium. On the other hand, Canan's (45) narrative about her marriage suggests that her transnational marriage was a "by-product of the limited opportunities" in Belgium.

In addition, six women have second-generation co-ethnic partners. Meral (31) did not want to marry a Turkish Belgian thinking that they are too traditional, but when she met her future husband she thought that he was different from other Turkish Belgians. However, we found that marriage with a native Belgian partner was the least frequent marriage type compared to marriage with someone from another migration background. There were only two women who chose native Belgians as partners and one of them was divorced. There are three women who are married to second-generation partners from another ethnic minority group and they all reported experiencing difficulties. Lastly, six women reported to be single at the time of the interview. They appear to have difficulties in finding suitable partners in the local marriage market. Some changed their criteria and decided to be more flexible thinking that marrying would be more difficult at a later age.

Hence, we observe more complexity in their choices with our sample of highly educated women who live in a poorly educated ethnic group characterised by strong social pressure. The findings demonstrate that their choices do not always reflect their preferred options and the choices that are cited in the literature as the most likely are not favoured by these women. More specifically, our findings show three additional theoretical partner-choice options for Turkish Belgian women: (1) in-between co-ethnics; (2) Turkish expats, and; (3) reverse transnational marriage.

In-between co-ethnics

The definition of in-between co-ethnics in our sample is related to the 1.5 generation but we focus more on the concept of “in-betweenness” rather than demographic criteria. Consequently, the in-between generation can be defined as those: (1) born in Turkey and migrated after the age of six (Worbs, 2003); (2) who know the local language and have received a considerable amount of education in Belgium, and; (3) from, in some cases, the second generation who have moved between home and host country due to parents’ returning plans (for the Netherlands, Crul & Doornik, 2003; for Belgium, Timmerman, Vanderwaeren, & Crul, 2003).

In-between co-ethnics are likely to be seen as an alternative to transnational partners since parents cannot take a very active role in the organisation of the marriage and women can be more independent with a longer pre-marital relationship. All women who are married to in-between co-ethnics made clear distinctions with transnational marriages. Despite her negative opinions about transnational marriages, Oya (30) chose a partner who grew up in Turkey but moved to Belgium for university education:

He knows perfect Dutch and has a good job. Generally, I have been opposed to marrying someone from Turkey but since he is compatible with me in terms of status, education and language he is a good match. If he had been from here, I do not think that I would have been as free as I am now. He has a broad vision.

Our data implies that it is important for marriage-pattern research to differentiate between the second and the in-between generation and analyse to what extent the latter might be a new opportunity for the former.

Expats

Our findings show that Turkish expats are also quite appealing, given their high educational qualifications and prestigious international jobs. Expat is the label assigned to highly skilled temporary migrants. They are to be a “distinctive group” (Van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015) and their movement is differentiated from classical (permanent) migration (Favell, 2008). Our results show that educated Turkish Belgian women differentiate expats from first-generation migrants and these Turkish expats in Belgium seem to be the new desirable partner choice for them.

Despite popularity of potential expat partners among some women interviewed, no woman in our sample is married to an expat. They expressed that they do not have any connection with these men since they work in the local environment, not in an international one like expats. This suggests that some women idealise Turkish expats in their imagination. This might raise the question of dreams that are (re)shaped through a variety of factors in migration context (Chamberlain & Leydesdorff, 2004). Structural conditions, limitations, and horizons of educated Turkish women appear to be important parts of their imaginaries and dreams. In this case, previous examples of transnational marriages for residence in Europe, limited opportunities in local marriage market, and low popularity of inter-ethnic marriages seem to direct educated Turkish women to dream about expats as the most ideal option. For example, Oya (30) who is married to an in-between co-ethnic partner explained that she would prefer a partner from Turkey on the condition that he would have a high social status like expats. Our results show that women do not prefer men coming from Turkey for marriage. Therefore, marriage opportunities with an in-between co-ethnic or expat who already live in Belgium seem to ease their decisions.

Reverse transnational marriage

We found that some married women thought about moving to Turkey with a marriage partner before. Some transnationally married women told the interviewer that they planned to move to Turkey with their husbands but they had adaptation problems. On the other hand, Lale (27) who is married to a second-generation Turkish man said that if her husband was from Turkey and had a good job there, she would move to Turkey with him.

Aside from these examples, we observed that some single women also prefer reverse transnational marriage and anticipate a movement to Turkey if they find a suitable partner there. Some believe that it will be easier for them to adapt to Turkey rather than their partner's adaptation to Belgium and they can avoid the complexity between men's and women's roles in the family. It seems that moving to Turkey for marriage is not a popular first choice, yet higher age and constraints in the local marriage market seem to stimulate these women to see reverse migration as a second

(best) option. These results show that qualifications educated women have also make them more independent and, therefore, they can think about moving to Turkey with their (future) partners. In our study, we refer to this kind of marriage as reverse transnational marriage and our data show that it can be seen as an alternative to transnational marriage.

Conclusion

Using data collected through semi-structured interviews with educated Turkish Belgian women, our study examines the variability in these women's marriage behaviour and identifies and describes the social processes that inform these choices. While previous research suggests that higher educated women are more likely to change their marriage behaviour and be more open to inter-ethnic marriage, our discussion illustrates that higher education does not always lead to inter-ethnic marriage. Furthermore, this paper adds to the literature by examining the complexity of partner choice for these educated women. In addition, the suggestion that inter-marriage leads to fuller integration has not been supported in this research, because the relationship between these two is tenuous and needs further analysis. This paper also suggests that intermarriage is not a standard integration or assimilation path for some immigrant groups in Europe.

The findings demonstrate that transnational marriage is still the most common trend for women, while choosing for second-generation co-ethnic partners is not a popular option for educated women. Furthermore, our analysis shows that the least chosen option is inter-ethnic partnership, with natives and second generation from another migrant group. The data implies that, for highly educated Turkish Belgian women, educated in-between co-ethnics and expats as dream partners are becoming more attractive because of their accumulated knowledge about the language and the system of the host country.

This research presents a range of interacting factors influencing the marriage behaviour of these women and the feasibility of mentioned options. Structural barriers such as a limited pool of partners with similar educational and socio-economic status within the ethnic community explain why second-generation co-ethnics are not seen as a reasonable choice. Negative examples and potential conflicts related to transnational marriage make some women eliminate the once-popular choice – first-generation co-ethnic partners. However, some others emphasise the positive aspects of transnational marriages in finding like-minded partners. Although limited, perceived group discrimination also discourages inter-ethnic marriage for some women. Religion, parental involvement and social norms are still highly pertinent for educated Turkish women whose close contacts with natives and other groups can be seen as a threat by families. Hence, these constraints discourage women to consider a marriage with someone from another ethnic group. In addition, our study suggests that all these factors put women who cannot find a “right” partner in a difficult position because marriage or having a partner seems to be the preferred option for most women in our sample. This may be shaped by societal norms about marriage and family life.

Our results also suggest that the choices women make (or would like to make) are not only rational, but also seem to be geared towards avoiding potential conflicts to maintain cohesion and stability. It can be deduced that they have a long-term view on marriage. To avoid conflicts, they want to marry someone who has similar values, the necessary work and language qualifications, a similar socio-economic status, and someone whom their family will approve of. It shows that they really think about the risk factors and look around for examples before choosing a partner. A crucial observation is that some women do not prefer having non-Turkish partners independent from family expectations and limitations. This calls for thinking about the relationship between education and inter-ethnic partnership in much more complex ways, because the suggested relationship may undermine individual preferences. On the other hand, our study suggests that upward social mobility can make partner choice harder for some other women since families are not open to choices that are out of box. As trendsetters in their society, these educated Turkish Belgian women will probably have more difficulties to balance their own preferences and familial expectations that limit their social networks.

The theoretical implications of this study are twofold. First, our findings show that higher education may not lead to inter-ethnic marriages and can make partner choice more complex and even restrict options in some ethnic groups. Two, we discern new partnership options such as in-between co-ethnics, expats and reverse transnational marriages along with the existing theoretically mentioned options.

Potential limitations of this study are the small sample size, the retrospective rationalisation of choices, and the absence of other voices such as partners, parents, or low socio-economic status women in the analysis. Due to small sample size, the aim of this study is not to make generalisations about the community, but to draw attention to potential challenges educated women in low education ethnic groups might experience. Future qualitative studies can analyse theoretically interesting new research questions by applying these results to different contexts among different ethnic groups or with different comparison groups. Furthermore, future quantitative research can provide us with deeper insights by differentiating for different realised and preferred choices with larger samples.

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