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The study of marriage has been central in the sociology of the family, the anthropology of kinship, and family research in general. In recent decades, however, it acquired a new significance in the field of migration studies. Migration researchers have been increasingly interested in cross-border marriages between residents of a country, either of migrant or non-migrant background, and foreign spouses.

In an era of heightened restrictions to particular types of migration, marriage remains – for those who do not fit in the privileged categories of mobility such as, for example, highly-skilled professionals, investors, or international students – one of the few still existing routes to geographic mobility and migrant legality. Since marriage provides access to citizenship, most European States attempt to regulate spousal migration in their effort to control the access to state membership (Wray 2011; Pellander 2015). Besides civic membership and national belonging, the selection of a marriage partner may also be important for migrants and their offspring when it comes to the making, remaking or blurring of boundaries that are of vital importance in the transnational community building projects (Charsley 2013). These key topics in marriage and migration have been extensively discussed in the interdisciplinary workshop “Cross-Border Marriages: Intersecting Boundaries in Transnational Social Spaces” which took place at the University of Neuchatel on 9 and 10 February 2017.

A Workshop on Cross-border Marriages

The workshop was convened by Janine Dahinden, Joelle Moret and Shpresa Jashari (Laboratoire d'études transnationales et des processus sociaux, University of Neuchatel) under the auspices of nccr – on the move and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). It brought together scholars from many European countries and disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, law, political sciences, and geography. The workshop had a double focus: on the one hand, it focused on state regulations and categorizations of cross-border marriages and, on the other hand, on the practices of cross-border couples and their families. More specifically, a set of papers critically analyzed the state’s perspectives of marriage migration and its attempt to regulate it (papers by Helena Wray and David de Groot); the policy framing of the legal restrictions for cross-border marriages (paper by Laura Block); and the practices of street-level bureaucrats in immigration and civil registry offices (papers of Anne Lavanchy and Saara Pellander). Another set of papers examined the social aspects of cross-border marriages, such as the motivations of citizens of migrant background to marry transnationally (paper by Katharine Charsley); the role of social class in the marital choices of migrants’ descendants (paper by Moret, Dahinden and Jashari) as well as in the ways binational same-sex couples deal with legal barriers (paper by Chauvin, Dahinden and Moret); and how gender relations change in the context of marriage migration (papers by Apostolos Andrikopoulos and Carolin Leutloff-Grandits). Besides the scholarly debates, the workshop program also included a special screening of the film “650 words” (by Martina Priessner) about the struggles of Turkish citizens to pass the
German language test which has recently become a requirement for a family reunification visa to Germany.

Making, Maintaining and Transgressing Boundaries

The aim of the workshop was to examine cross-border marriages in relation to the making of boundaries. Ideologies and practices of endogamy, for example, are important for the symbolic construction of collective identities based on ethnicity, religion, class, kinship and so on that migrants and their offspring may embrace (Alba and Golden 1986; Waters and Jiménez 2005). The marital choices of migrants, however, may transgress these axes of significance and blur boundaries of a collective self. Furthermore, marriage is not only a relation between two individuals or social groups but also a relation between the couple and the State. Through the regulation of marriage migration, the State also draws boundaries between “us” and “them” (Bonjour and De Hart 2013; Block 2014). For instance, the moral panic in many European countries about “forced marriages” and the investigations by immigration authorities of migrants’ marriages – especially those coming from Muslim-majority countries – contribute to the further stigmatization of migrants as oppressive to women and disrespectful of gender equality. At the same time, such suspicions over migrants’ marriages produce an image of the self as democratic, liberal and sexually progressive.

The Regulation of Cross-Border Marriages: Controlling Migration?

Although state's regulation of cross-border marriages aims at controlling migration, the imposed restrictions undermine the rights of its own citizens as well. Many citizens whose spouses are foreigners cannot enjoy the right to family life in the same way as other citizens, married to country nationals. In many European countries, such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Greece, not long ago, women who got married to foreign men lost their citizenship while men with foreign spouses faced no such consequences. Although this discriminatory measure has been lifted, the introduction of demanding requirements and obstacles in the regulation of cross-border marriages renders the right to family life less accessible for women as well as for working classes, ethnic minorities, and younger generations (Leerkes and Kulu-Glasgow 2011). For instance, the income requirement for a family reunification visa to many European countries allows only those who have a full-time job and stable income to reunite with their foreign spouses, -a measure, which indirectly excludes those who have a less privileged position in the labor market.

A Call for a Critical Turn in the Study of Marriage and Migration

Participants in the workshop discussed the latest developments in the regulation of marriage migration in Europe and reflected on how the interests and categories of the State have affected the academic debate on cross-border marriages. Without doubt, the State has a dominant role in the regulation of cross-border marriages and categorizations by the State (for example, “sham marriage”, “forced marriage”, and “marriage of convenience”) are powerful in the framing of these marriages. Nevertheless, it is important for scholars to critically look at the hegemonic role of the State and to carefully treat state categories and conceptualizations of cross-border marriages as well as nation-state centered epistemologies (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Workshop participants pointed out different directions in the study of cross-border marriages that go beyond the agenda imposed by States’ concerns and priorities over immigration. For example, marriage migration scholars need to engage more closely with family research of non-migrant populations and with general social theory. A “de-migranticization” (Dahinden 2016) of the study of cross-border marriages will enable social scientists to critically examine the role of the State without reproducing its categories. In that way, they can question whether, to what extent, and why cross-border marriages differ from other marriages – instead of taking it for granted.

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