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Western Europe

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# Narratives on Partner-Choice

Young men and women of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands live in a world of many different social groups. Brought up by their parents to be 'good' Moroccans and Muslims, many have – well into their teens – lived with the expectation that their family would some day return to Morocco. From their peers in school and at work, they have learned about Dutch culture, which has also become part of them. Together with Moroccan and other Muslim friends, they seek ways to live in Dutch society with their particular cultural heritage. In the past, these 'second-generation migrants' have often been described as living 'between two cultures'. Analysis of the life stories of highly educated women of Moroccan descent, however, demonstrates that these women are able to creatively construct and combine their multiple social identifications, although their drawing upon multicultural capital to create new strategies of living is not without constraints.

Nezha is a 35 year-old woman of Moroccan descent living in the Netherlands. For the last ten years, she has been happily married to a man of her own choice. Had it been up to her parents, however, she would have married a candidate proposed by them. This is Nezha's story:

'When your parents say yes [to a marriage candidate, mb], that's final. You try to sail around it, but you can't say no. So I made inquiries about the police-school. I was invited for an interview and had to pass some exam. That went fine, so I was accepted. What I figured was that if the candidate would keep turning up and I would be about to marry, then I'd be off to Leusden [name of the city where the police-school is located, mb]. So I phoned him: "Listen, I've got a boyfriend, you should stop seeing me". Haven't heard of him since! I was so relieved! But my family felt that their honour had been damaged. You know: first he drops in all the time, and then he's disappeared all of a sudden. It makes them wonder: "What is wrong with her?" That's the first thing that comes to their mind, you know: "She's lost her virginity".'

Once 'the candidate' has given up, Nezha no longer needs the police-school as an escape from marriage and decides not to go there after all. In the meantime, she has met another Muslim man with whom she enters

into a relationship. After a while the couple decides to ask permission from Nezha's family to marry. Since her boyfriend does not have any relatives in the Netherlands, he decides to contact Nezha's family personally:

'If somebody wants to ask your hand, his whole family should ask. But that was impossible in his case. So he acted alone and bought flowers, like a Dutchman would. And because the first candidate had never called again, my family thought: "Well, fine. Just go".'

The fact that her husband came to ask her 'like a Dutchman would', is not the only example of how he and Nezha improvise on family traditions. Nezha relates with pride how she organized her wedding in such a way that she could comply with the wishes of both her family and herself:

'I organized everything myself. That is so odd, it's really not done, a Moroccan woman who takes care of all that herself. But I phoned the registry myself. I refused to marry according to the Moroccan law, because I had heard all sorts of stories about how impossible it is to get a divorce and so on. But to make it look nice I went to the mosque. So that it looked Islamic, you know, with an imam to read a sura from the Quran for you. Well, the wedding was very nice.'

## Representation of social identity in life stories

Nezha is one of the women who were prepared to tell me their life stories for my research project on young women of Moroccan descent who have university degrees and/or hold positions in which such qualifications are required. I am specifically interested in the representations of various dimensions of social identity by these women. The research focuses on the question of how these 'second-generation migrant' women construct a more or less coherent self-identity out of their shifting, multiple

social identifications. I focus more particularly on the representations in their life stories of ethnic, religious and gender identifications. In analysing the relations between the narrations produced in the interviews, I hope to gain more insight into the question of how these representations of historical events, social relationships and individual action come together to construct social identifications, and how such identifications are transmitted, maintained and transformed.

## Construction of multiple identifications

Here, I restrict myself to the question of what the narratives on partner-choice can tell us about the ways in which the 14 women with whom the interviews have so far been completed construct, maintain, and combine their various social identifications. In the above quotations, we get the impression of Nezha as a woman who, in arranging her own marriage, is creatively drawing upon different cultural resources. She challenges the views of her family, but makes sure not to lose touch with them. This kind of negotiating can be recognized in the stories of all interviewees. Their biographical narrations contain numerous episodes in which they improvise upon and shift the meanings of Moroccan core-values like virginity and obedience to one's parents. They do so in such ways that their identification with certain values that are treasured within the Moroccan community can be combined with, for example, the value of autonomy, which is highly valued within the community of Dutch peers with whom they also identify. Their stories demonstrate once more the inadequacy of the 'between-two-cultures' model of second-generation migrant identity, which suggests too static a conception of cultures as fixed, homogeneous units with clear-cut boundaries, and neglects the open and contestable nature of cultural notions and practices. It also implies a view of these young people as passive victims of their circumstances rather than as actors with a multiple cultural competence.

Instead, the life stories abound with illustrations of the fact that identification does not imply an 'all-or-nothing' attitude towards the groups to which one belongs. People always know more culture than they use, and different group members lay stress on different things. Nezha, for example, identifies with Islam as a source of guidance in her life, but does not agree with the interpretations of Islamic precepts in the Moroccan code of personal law. Also, sharing symbols does not necessarily entail sharing interpretations. The views of the interviewees on the symbolic complex of virginity is a case in point. Although very few women question the value of the symbol of virginity as such, their participation in Dutch peer groups – as well as their holiday experiences in present-day Morocco – have led them to stretch the corresponding rules of what is considered chaste behaviour. Furthermore, they no longer see virginity as a concern of the whole community, but perceive it as a personal responsibility and claim the right of individual privacy over such matters. Unlike her parents, Nezha, for instance, did not think it inappropriate to have a boyfriend as long as she safeguarded her virginity. Also, she was furious about her family's interference with her love life and maintained that

whatever she and her boyfriend agreed upon doing or not doing before marriage was nobody else's business.

## Constraints on using different cultural resources

Of course, drawing upon 'multicultural capital' to create new strategies of living is not without constraints. Time and again, the life stories contain evidence of the fact that the interviewees have internalized norms transmitted to them by their parents to such an extent that they entertain ambivalent feelings concerning their associations with men and their experiences of sexuality and falling in love. Such narrations illustrate that one is neither completely free in choosing one's identifications, nor in improvising upon the meanings attached to a particular group identity. Although Nezha, for example, emphasizes that she has a clear conscience, it hurts her to know that the false rumours about her premarital behaviour have damaged the reputation of her family and herself. She also dreads the day her two daughters will begin to take an interest in boys and acknowledges that she is not sure that she will allow them the same freedom of movement that she claimed for herself.

The individual's freedom to construct multiple identifications is also constrained by the fact that the emphasis on certain elements from a cultural repertoire implies the neglect of others. Not all the women interviewed are as happily married as Nezha. In fact, only four are presently married. The others are either still single or divorced. The price that these Moroccan pioneers with Dutch university degrees and attractive jobs appear to have to pay for the degree of autonomy that in Moroccan circles is, as yet, unusual for women, is that they have an even harder time than their Dutch counterparts in finding a suitable partner who appreciates the merits of a wife with a career. Due to the open and dynamic character of cultural notions and practices, it is, however, not unlikely that what these women are struggling with will prove to be a transitional problem that will decline as more highly educated women of Moroccan descent enter the Dutch labour market. ♦

Scene from a play at the Theater Cosmic, Amsterdam, the theme of which concerned freedom of partner-choice and mother-daughter confrontation. The actresses are all of Moroccan descent.



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