DATING SECRETLY
The Role of the Internet in Shaping Transnational Couple Formation in the Kurdish Diaspora

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Drawing on twenty-one in-depth interviews, this article discusses the Internet's role in the formation of transnational marriages among migrant Kurds who live in Finland. In contrast to what is presented in the European media, my findings suggest that transnational couple formation among migrants should be seen as highly diverse and more than just practices that maintain and preserve "traditional" marriage customs. Transnational online dating practices make visible how young adult Kurds actively engage in partner formation and spousal selection. Online dating enables individual autonomy by widening the circle of potential partners outside familial circles and offers a private social space in which people can create relationships on their own terms and evade social monitoring and possibly harmful rumors.

Keywords: online dating, transnational marriage, Kurds, couple formation, ethnography

Introduction

In the field of migration studies, it has been typical for researchers to make a distinction between different types of cross-border marriages: transnational versus non-transnational, intra-ethnic versus interethnic. In definitions of cross-border marriage, the notions of transnational and non-transnational are usually separated by the logics of how marriages are created across nation states (see also Körber & Merkel 2014). Transnational marriage is understood here primarily as a phenomenon in which migrants marry partners from their families' country of origin or from the same cultural or ethnic background within the diaspora[1] (see Williams 2010, 2012; Charsley 2012). Multicultural or interethnic cross-border marriages are not taken into closer discussion here, since their social and cultural contexts are considerably different.

A clear, univocal definition of the concept of transnational marriage is still missing from the research literature, and the term is used in numerous ways. However, many scholars studying marriage migration agree that cross-border marriage alone does not signal transnationalism.[2] In order to qualify as transnational, there should be elements of pre-existing and relatively enduring transnational connections (e.g. kinship ties, social networks, visits or reciprocity across borders), a sense of transnational or diasporic community, and a shared identity. This transnational sense of community may con-

tain a shared imagination of an original homeland which in different ways affects migrants' and their descendants' social practices and informs their relationship to both their country of residence and their country of origin (see Williams 2010: 99–101; also Vertovec [1999]2010, 2009 on transnational social morphology).

Most of the research on transnational marriages within Europe, both qualitative and quantitative, has concentrated on fairly few migrant groups, which have a longer labor and marriage migration history to Europe, particularly Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Turkey[3] and Morocco (e.g., Lievens 1999; Shaw 2001; Straßburger 2004; Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Schmidt 2008; Timmerman 2006; van Kerckem & van der Bracht 2013; Carol, Ersanelli & Wagner 2014; Liversage 2014; for an exception, see Schmidt & Jakobsen 2004). These studies offer important insights into partner selection, motives and strategies for transnational marriages, gendered power structures in marriage migrant families, and the unexpected or unwanted consequences of state legislation on marriage migration and migrants' everyday lives. However, marriages within other refugee communities, including that of the Kurds, comprise a relatively unexplored field (Williams 2010: 141).[4] In addition, little attention has been paid to the role of the Internet in this process (for exceptions see Schmidt 2008; Kibria 2012).[5]

Ethnological research into transnational online dating practices reveals a much more diverse picture of the marriage practices of migrants than those depicted in the European media. In public discourses and in media images, Muslim migrants' marriage customs have often been depicted as traditional, monolithic and oppressively patriarchal, while the marriages of ethnic Norwegians, Swedes, Finns and Danes have appeared modern and liberal, based on individual autonomy and mutual love (see, e.g., Andreassen 2005; Keskinen 2009). Transnational marriages are in political and public debates also seen as an "easy" route for migrants originating in the Global South to migrate to Europe. While discussions in other Nordic countries have concentrated on issues of migrants' transnational marriages, in

Finland the focus has until recently been on families formed through marriages between Finnish citizens and spouses from the Global South (Leinonen & Pellander 2014). Issues such as forced marriages in Norway and "honor killings" in Sweden have attracted much attention and media visibility in recent years (Bredal 2005), and Finnish media has followed these trends with some delay. For example in the spring of 2014, Finns could watch news on the Internet and a documentary film shown on television related to forced transnational marriages and honor-related violence experienced by Kurdish women.[6]

At the core of the stigmatization and stereotyping of transnational marriage is a notion of essential cultural difference, especially between Muslim migrants' marriage patterns and European/Nordic/Western marriage practices (Kibria 2012). From this perspective, the practice of transnational marriage stands in contrast to the prevailing values of marriage and partner selection in contemporary Nordic societies. In these cultural representations of the "other" there is little space left for individual subjectivity, agency or resistance. Examining transnational marriage practices through a focus on online dating, on the other hand, provides a different angle on the issue of transnational matchmaking.

Touching on questions of gender, generation and individual autonomy, in this article I discuss the Internet's role in shaping transnational dating and couple formation among young migrant Kurds who live in Finland. In global marriage markets, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have a quite recent role in enabling contact between individuals (and families) across nation states, as well as in creating new ways of searching for and finding a spouse, for example via various online dating websites (e.g., Constable 2003; Venables 2008; Kibria 2012). However, the role of the Internet is not always a straightforward one, and neither are the attitudes towards cross-border marriages created via the Internet. The Internet as an intermediary in the creation of marital unions may arouse suspicion regarding motives in the eyes of immigration authorities and among migrant families themselves. In this article I examine 1) which features characterize

transnational online dating, 2) what makes online dating an attractive option for couples, and 3) how it both challenges and adapts itself to marriage norms and practices prevalent among Kurds.

Research Data and Methods

I base my discussion on empirical materials gathered largely in 2011 and 2012. My material consists of thematic in-depth interviews and informal discussions with single and transnationally married Kurds who live in Finland. All of them have moved to Finland from Iran, Iraq or Turkey when they were children, adolescents or young adults. Eleven of them consider themselves either religious or secular Muslims, and eight of them self-identify as agnostics, non-religious or as belonging to a religious minority group. I have conducted twenty-one interviews with nineteen persons, both couples and individuals who had either married or dated transnationally. I have interviewed nine informants two or three times, and have maintained contact with some of them continuously during the research process via email conversations, phone calls and regular visits.[7]

My approach to the interview material is social constructionist, in other words, I examine how people talk about, conceptualize and verbalize lived and experienced social life as collaboratively (re)constructed by the interviewee and the interviewer in interview narratives. This is not to say that reality outside the human mind does not exist, but rather that understanding of that reality is constructed locally, in particular situations and in interaction with others. I also view what is said in interviews in terms of social action and performance. As Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey (2001) put it, "actions, we argue, are understandable because they can be talked about." According to Atkinson and Coffey, narrated accounts, including those told during interviews, are actions. In recognizing the performative qualities of social life and narration the researcher avoids juxtaposing talk and events as if they occupied different spheres of meaning (Atkinson & Coffey 2001: 801; see also Riessman 1993). Every speech act can thus be seen as a performative act, which brings into being the social systems of a community through utterance. Normative values and social practices surrounding marriage and gender, for example, enter into personal narratives and discourses.

For my methodology, I utilize the *narrative ethnography* approach, exploring narrated experiences and practices in their socio-cultural and discursive but also in their experiential and material contexts (Gubrium & Holstein 2008). I focus on one particular case at greater length. The advantage of concentrating on a few cases is that fragmentation and depersonalization are avoided, which could come about when a researcher makes cross-cutting thematic analyses of qualitative material (Riessman 1993). This strategy enables the researcher to scrutinize the context, particularities, possible contradictions and situated nature of narratives, discourses and practices. Avoiding depersonalization is an ethical decision as much as an analytical strategy: interview citations that are detached from their contexts easily represent those under study as faceless and powerless.

Transnational Marriages among the Kurdish Population in Finland

Transnational marriage immigration is a more recent phenomenon in Finland than it is in many other Western European countries. In recent decades, it has involved primarily immigrants from the Middle East, the Indian continent and Northern Africa (see Martikainen 2007; Säävälä 2013; Häkkinen 2014). As a matter of fact, Kurdish migration to Finland reflects recent Finnish migration history in general: in the 1980s, Finland went from being a country of outward emigration to a receiving country for immigrants due to Finnish returnees from the former Soviet Union/Russia. At the beginning of the 1990s, the number of immigrant refugees (e.g., Somalis, Kurds and former Yugoslavians) began to rise in Finland (Söderling & Korkiasaari 1998). Like most of my interviewees or their parents, many Kurds began to arrive in Finland at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s either as quota refugees with their families or as asylum seekers, and more recently also as reunited family members (Wahlbeck 1999). Thus, Finland's Kurdish population

differs markedly from that of many other European countries in which a clear majority of the Kurdish population originated in Turkey as a result of labor migration taking place in the 1960s and the 1970s and later via family unification (Ammann 2000; van Bruinessen 2000). Instead, Kurds from Iraq and Iran comprise the majority of the Kurdish population in Finland (Wahlbeck 1999; see also Statistics Finland 2014). Currently, Kurdish speakers form the sixth largest foreign-language group in Finland, numbering slightly over 10,000 individuals in 2014 (Statistics Finland 2014). Nevertheless, the number of Kurds in Finland is small in comparison to other Nordic countries and especially to Germany, which according to current estimates has almost one million Kurds (European Commission 2006).

The Kurdish population in Finland is young: three-fifths (57%) were under 30 years of age in 2014. Or put differently, among the adult Kurdish population two-fifths (38%) were young adults (20–29 years) (see Statistics Finland 2014). Scrutinizing the Kurdish second generation in Finland for example, in 2010 only one person was married (Statistics Finland 2012). This means that the question of marriage will become relevant for a considerable group of individuals in the near future as the children of Kurdish migrants approach marital age. It also appears inevitable that transnational marriage will play a part in future marriages among Kurds who live in Finland, since there exists significant pressure to marry a person from the same ethnic background and the number of individuals in Finland who could be considered potential spouses (who belong to the same age group, speak the same Kurdish dialect, share the same stance toward religion, have similar socio-economic backgrounds, share family/social contacts etc.) is very limited (about spousal preferences among Kurds in Finland, see Häkkinen 2014).

How common are transnational marriages among Kurds? According to statistics, two thirds (63%) of marriages within the Kurdish-speaking population in Finland registered in 2000–2012 were transnational.[8] The proportion of transnational marriages is the same for both men and women, and it has remained relatively unchanged during this time period (Statistics Finland 2013). Statistics do not tell us much about the nature of these marriages. Transnational marriages described in my ethnographic material were highly diverse. They varied from self-initiated/self-organized[9] to assisted and arranged marriages, and there were marriages both among kin (between cousins, second cousins or other distant relatives) and outside of the kin group. Marriage practices could also vary within the same family: some siblings had married a Finn, others a co-ethnic in Finland, a Kurd from "home" or from the diaspora. Similarly, some of the marriages within one family could be characterized as arranged and some as self-initiated/self-organized. What is noticeable is that semi-arranged and arranged marriages among interviewees were not always consanguineous, and conversely, some self-initiated marriages took place within the kin group.

Transnational marriage practices and ideas of marriage undoubtedly reflect changes taking place not only within diasporic communities but also in countries of origin. There have been evident generational changes in marriage practices and ideals (see, e.g., Hart 2007; Kibria 2012; Grabolle-Çeliker 2013: 175; van Kerckem & van der Bracht 2013): one common story I heard about interviewees' parents' marriages was that they were married or betrothed to a person whom they did not know, or whom they had no possibility to meet before the wedding. Some of them were also married off at a very young age.[10] Nowadays, the variety of ways in which young Kurds find their spouse seems to be more diverse than in their parent's generation, also in cases of arranged marriages. The role of parents in arranged marriages may actually be nothing more than suggesting a suitable partner, with the rest depending on their son's or daughter's own interest in the suggested person.

Previous research literature has also shown that higher rates of transnational marriages exist among migrants and their children who come from countries with a large Muslim majority population (see, e.g., Lievens 1999; Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Carol, Ersanelli & Wagner 2014). Even though most Kurds are Sunni Muslims,[11] transnational marriage is not limited only to those who consider themselves to be reli-

gious or secular Muslims, but also take place among other Kurdish religious groups and atheist Kurds. In the case of Kurds, according to my interview data, the ethnicity of the spouse is at least as important as membership in the same religious group or sharing the same stance on religion (see also Straßburger 2002: 215). The point I seek to make here is that the form of online dating discussed in this article is not necessarily attached to the question of religion or shared Muslim identity as such, but that transnational online dating practices are complex and multi-dimensional.

Online Dating in the Context of Transnational Marriage Formation

The mediatization[12] of life worlds and societies has an impact at the global level on transnational network and partner formation, for example via different Internet practices. In addition to being widely used for maintaining ties with relatives, friends and larger social and virtual communities that might be scattered around the world (e.g., Vertovec 2009; Mainsah 2010), the Internet is also used for maintaining transnational contact with potential marriage partners, especially in situations in which a personal link already exists or has been created via shared social (kinship) networks. In such cases, the Internet serves merely as a tool for communicating across nation-state borders alongside other types of information and communication technologies such as the mobile phone. This was common among my interviewees regardless of whether marriages were self-initiated or arranged.

This article, however, focuses not on the Internet's role in maintaining relationships, but in initiating first contact between potential spouses. Here, the distinction needs to be made between 1) online dating websites, such as Muslima.com, SingleKurds. com or Match.com, which are designed particularly for searching for a partner, and 2) social networking sites such as Facebook, (e.g., Turkish, Kurdish) chat rooms, blogs and online game environments, which can serve to create diverse forms of contact between individuals, and not only for matchmaking (see also Daneback 2006; Whitty, Baker & Inman 2007).

In her comparative study of Bangladeshi Muslims in the USA and Great Britain, Nazli Kibria (2012) found that online dating sites were used by her interviewees and their families in order to find a suitable partner from their country of origin. Searching for a spouse via matchmaking websites was a new form of arranging transnational marriages that was more a family project than merely an individual initiative (see Kibria 2012). For example, the online dating site SingleMuslim.com, developed to help search for a similar-minded Muslim partner, encourages "you to involve your family – their support and guidance will be invaluable and important in building your own family." On the same website it is also mentioned that "[y]ou can also register on behalf of your son, daughter, brother, sister or any other family member." In this context, online dating sites are adjusted to meet the current marriage practices of a particular social group, and by including parents in the process, they become more acceptable in the eyes of parents. However, online dating sites also simultaneously transform matchmaking practices, not least by increasing the individual autonomy of the younger generation to influence spousal selection while reducing parents' role in choosing a spouse for their child (see Kibria 2012).

The Internet can be creatively used in the realization of both parents' and children's agency by supporting cultural continuity in marriage practices and simultaneously by supporting cultural change reflecting more heterogeneous attitudes towards marriage and more diverse means of finding a spouse. In the Kurdish diasporic context, transnational online dating seems to reflect more individually motivated endeavors to find a suitable partner instead of being primarily a family project or a new form of arranged marriage. A growing number of online dating sites aim to help users find specifically Kurdish partners,[13] a development that signals both a need for this alternative to more common ways of finding a partner via social networks, and the fact that ethnicity plays a crucial role in partner selection. Such dating sites appear to be more secular than those sites specifically for

finding a Muslim partner. For example, they do not highlight religious aspects as a central criterion in partner selection. Instead, these websites market their matchmaking services in romantically and individually oriented ways: "Find a Kurdish soulmate and experience the love you've been dreaming about forever" (Kurdishdating.com) or "[f]ind your Kurdish partner for Life, Love and Marriage" (Kurdishdate.net). These websites guarantee the privacy and anonymity of their users and the possibility "to meet online in a safe environment" (e.g., Singlekurds.com). Many dating sites use English as a lingua franca, and their services are clearly directed toward people who live in the diaspora, and are seeking a partner within the diaspora or from a previous homeland.[14]

What makes *social networking* sites different from the use of online dating sites is that individuals might not always be actively searching for a partner while visiting these sites or web communities, and the first contact between the two may be accidental. A partner found via a social networking site can be a stranger, but there might also be a social link (but not necessarily a currently maintained one) between the two, for example the couple might be distant relatives, family acquaintances, or ex-neighbors in the country of origin. It is easier to take the initiative to start a relationship on a social networking site than it is to register for a dating site, which means actively and openly searching for a partner. This might be the reason why the transnational online dating cases (13) of which I was informed were all formed via social networking sites. Eight out of thirteen cases involved a young Kurdish woman who lived in Finland and had a relationship with a Kurdish man from her country of origin (Turkey or Iraq), and four cases involved a relationship with a Kurdish man from elsewhere in the diaspora. Four women also moved or planned to move back to their home country after marriage. There was also one case in which a Kurdish man living in Finland had created a contact via the Internet with his female relative who lived in the diaspora.

Is the Internet an Appropriate Way to Find a Suitable Partner? The Case of Bênav

Bênav, a young single woman in her early twenties, arrived from Turkey to Finland with her family when she was a teenager. In an interview, Bênav shared the fact with me that she has a Kurdish boyfriend from her hometown in Turkey, whom she met through the Internet. The young couple has been dating for a year, and has secretly been in daily contact with each other via Messenger, Facebook and cellphone, sharing some photos as well. They have plans to marry and find a future home in their hometown in the Kurdistan area of Turkey. Most members of Bênav's boyfriend's family are aware of their dating because of information leaks regarding their relationship on Facebook. Bênav's boyfriend's family in Turkey has accepted their long-distance relationship. However, Bênav's parents are unaware of the relationship and the question is how the couple should go about telling her parents about the relationship and their plans for marriage, since they met in a chat room. Bênav is certain that her mother would not approve of the way the couple have started their relationship, and fears that her parents will not allow them to marry. She is also uncertain about whether her parents will agree to her moving back to Turkey. According to Bênav, she and her boyfriend must make their relationship appear socially more appropriate, which means that they must invent another story of how they possibly could have met each other. This could be, for example, at the wedding of a relative or common acquaintance or through some other common link between the two families. Bênav has planned to tell her parents about her interest in this man on their next trip to Turkey, since at that time there would be a better possibility for the families to meet each other and for the boyfriend's family to make an official marriage proposal to Bênav's parents.

In Finland, as in many Western countries, online dating has become a socially accepted and even mundane way of searching for a partner (Monger 2013: 500). However, only fifteen years ago when online matchmaking was a relatively new phenomenon, there was a highly negative stigma attached to

online dating relationships in Finland. This stigma was connected to the imagined attributes of online daters as desperate, lonely and anti-social, based on the presumption that only people who had problems finding a partner in face-to-face situations would use the Internet for matchmaking. People were skeptical as to whether a relationship started in the Internet could really endure. In public discussions there were also concerns raised about the potential safety risks of online dating. However, despite negative images, people continued to get involved in online relationships – many successfully so (see, e.g., Wahlström 2004; Hamari 2011).

The question arises of why the Internet is perceived to be a less appropriate means of finding a spouse especially among the older generation(s) of Kurds. Is it due to the same stigma that earlier existed in Finnish society towards online dating, because it is a new and less familiar way of looking for a partner? Or are the reasons more complicated and also connected to migration and cultural issues particularly? I suggest that the context of migration, cultural expectations regarding how young people should meet each other, and modes of interaction considered acceptable prior to marriage, all play an important role here. The dubious nature of the Internet is intertwined with contradictions that are at play in today's marriage practices, which are currently changing in transnational social spaces. These are in turn centrally connected to the issue of sexuality and premarital relationships among Kurds.

Although there are considerable differences across families in the extent to which they become involved in or control their children's partner selection, marriage is by many Kurdish families still understood to unite families and not merely individual partners. Because the reputation of the partner and his or her kin group affects the reputation of the whole family, parental approval (even a nominal one) for marriage is still important for many parents (see also Yalçin-Heckmann 1991; Ammann 2000; Grabolle-Çeliker 2013). When considering prevailing marriage patterns among Kurds (see, e.g., Smits & Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003; COSIT 2005; Grabolle-Çeliker 2013), there seems to be no legitimate place for premarital

dating, although it does exist. On the one hand, premarital relationships are becoming more common among Kurdish youth, but at the same time, female reputation and the guarding of female virginity are still seen to be very relevant issues in Kurdish communities in Finland. Premarital relationships threaten prevailing norms of sexuality and especially female honor and virginity (see also Mernissi 1982). Because of this, premarital dating usually takes place in secret. Women's behavior in the domain of sexuality comes under scrutiny by the community especially in situations in which an ethnic group such as the Kurds has historically confronted, and still continues to confront ethnic cleansing, genocide and continuing threats to its existence. Thus, women's actions and sexual morality have symbolic value and they are seen to have implications for the reproduction of the entire ethnic group, their culture and identity over time (Yuval-Davis 1997; Nagel 2003; Alinia 2013). In this context, it is not a surprise that dating is a delicate issue in the Kurdish diaspora as well.

Where the issue of female virginity is especially sensitive, premarital dating is much easier to organize and conceal from public view, thus avoiding harmful rumors when there is a concrete distance between the two persons involved. This makes transnational dating in many ways an attractive option. The Internet and particularly different online media platforms such as Facebook and chat rooms not only facilitate networking among individuals and groups, but also create spheres of invisibility and concealment. In cases similar to that of Bênav's, which are characterized by conflicting expectations regarding premarital relationships across generations and cultures, considerable tensions can arise within the family. One way to navigate between differing expectations and protect family relations is concealment and various forms of deception (Liversage 2014). In the case of Bênav, this has meant keeping hidden from her parents the way in which she met her boyfriend and inventing a more appropriate first meeting. This makes transnational dating in many ways an attractive option.

Because the Internet allows people to engage in

premarital relationships that would be difficult to engage in offline (see also Daneback 2006; Wheeler 2006; Schmidt 2008; Pearl Kaya 2009; Christensen 2011), it could be assumed that the Internet can solve most of the problems related to dating among Kurds. Yet online dating can still threaten female reputation via information leaks. Private photos and gossip may spread easily via the Internet. This may be one reason why Bênav's boyfriend's parents have accepted his online relationship more readily than Bênav believes her parents would, if they knew of it. According to Bênav, her boyfriend's family members had congratulated him on having a girlfriend. I interpret this as a gender-related issue in which online dating by women is more likely to cause tensions in the family, since female honor is at stake even in online environments.

The fact that one can potentially date anyone via the Internet makes online dating appear particularly questionable in the eyes of parents. Especially in the context of migration, and when the potential partner is a stranger to the family, parents may have doubts about whether the partner is interested in a real marriage with their child or whether he or she is just using marriage as a means to migrate to Europe.[15] If the family does not have any social link to the partner's family, they may find it difficult to evaluate the background of the potential spouse and his or her family (cf. Charsley 2010). Distrust is also heightened by the fact that the online world can be relatively unfamiliar to the parents' generation. However, parents have their own strategies for seeking to prevent the misuse of marriage as merely a ticket to Europe:

Bênav: My parents will probably ask a lot of money or gold from him.

Anne: Aha. [sounds surprised]

Bênav: For me, not for them. My mother, her idea is, if he is a stranger, she will ask for lots of gold, because if this man is being serious [about the marriage], of course he will buy [gold]. If he is not serious, and if he wants to use me and wants to just come to Europe, and always parents think these kinds of things, then he won't buy [gold]. […] That's why my mother thinks that she will ask for a lot of gold.

Anne: How much, do you think, would it be?

Bênav: Well, let's say at least twenty, thirty thousand euros.

In this citation, Bênav is referring to the practice of bride price which has been traditionally paid to the bride's family and has been a common practice among Kurdish communities at least in rural areas of Turkey at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s (see Smits & Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003; Ertem & Kocturk 2008). However, according to Amid Hassanpour (2001: 243), this practice is virtually absent among the Kurdish urban middle classes. Instead, the families of the marrying couple agree on an amount of gold that the husband must pay to the wife in case of divorce (ibid. 2001: 243). It seems that Bênav is referring to the latter type by emphasizing that the money her parents might insist upon will be intended for Bênav, not for her parents. Its purpose will be to support Bênav in case of a divorce, or merely as a deterrent to divorce. By asking for a considerably large amount of money from a potential spouse, parents strive to ensure that the partner comes from a wealthy family. However, the idea of bride price takes on new meanings and functions in the migration context. It is also used by parents to ensure that the partner's motives for marrying are proper: if he is only interested in Bênav for the residence permit he would obtain by marrying her, a high bride price will make it more likely that he will consider the stratagem too costly (also Timmerman 2006: 135).

Individual Autonomy and Partner Choice in Online Matchmaking

When examining individual autonomy in the choice of partner in online dating, it is important to take into account parents' criteria for their child's future spouse. The question of individual autonomy, how-

ever, should not be seen as something that a person either has or has not, but something that is negotiated with others and that varies in different situations. When Bênav considers a potential spouse for herself she also tries to meet her parents' standards as much as her own.

Anne: What kind of marriage or spouse would your parents want you to have?[16]

Bênav: Well, my mother talks a bit more about that thing, that she would like him to be someone who is familiar to us. They wanted that I would marry a cousin. For example, I have cousins in Finland, whom I could marry, but never,[17] I could never think about it, because I have told them "you are my cousin, you are my brother, you are my uncle." […] Marriage is a bit different thing, there has to be love or some emotion. Then we [she and her sister] have said "no close relatives." Then [my mother] finds a far far far far far relative: "There is this kind of a relative." But then you cannot marry them if you don't know them. […] I will never marry for example a cousin or a distant relative which I don't know. And my sister does not want anything like that [to marry a relative]. At all.

In Bênav's case, it seems that the scope of suitable partners is quite limited. However, it should be noted that Bênav is talking about the preferences of her parents, especially her mother, rather than any obligation to marry from her own kin group or from the familiar family circle. She also mentions that her parents have not discussed much about marriage with her, since they want her to focus on studying and educating herself. In the eyes of parents, a relative represents a person who is a more trustworthy marriage candidate since his background and his reputation can be more easily ascertained (also Charsley 2010).

There are some contradictions between Bênav's and her mother's ideas of a proper partner, particularly their views regarding marriage to a close relative such as a first cousin. Nevertheless, she still tries to find common ground with her mother. Bênav, unlike her sister, does not totally reject the idea of marrying a relative, but there does not seem to be any potential relative whom she might accept – the possible candidates being either total strangers or too close to her, like brothers. She is not convinced that marrying a relative would automatically lead to a good match and an enduring marriage. In her statement she makes a distinction between "love marriages" and "cousin marriages," even though in practice they can be intermingled (see Hart 2007). By making this distinction, she defines partnership and the idea of a good match somewhat differently than her parents, highlighting mutual affection over the decision to marry. On the other hand, it seems very important to her to receive her parents' approval for her marriage. The Internet widens the circle of possibilities for finding a suitable partner, at least a partner who would meet Bênav's own criteria and fulfill her ideals. Online dating also enables participants to get to know each other and communicate privately in ways that may not be possible for them in face-to-face situations. What is noticeable is that the idea of love as a criterion for marriage now becomes more nuanced in her answer in the same interview:

Anne: Well, what kind of things do you see as important in your future husband, what things are important to you, what makes him a suitable spouse for you?

Bênav: Well, I have had boyfriends before. I always wanted that kind of a person whom I would love. But then it was always a wrong option, because when I loved them, it felt like they loved less, and the respect and all feelings were less than my own. Or I felt that way, and then I wanted to end a relationship. But then this boy, he loved me and I did not love him. And he tried very much that I would trust him and love him and he did a lot and he always respected me very much. Even if I said something stupid he accepted it. That's why, and he was studying then and he believed in God. Then he is from [my] hometown. When I was small, and we listened to young people's talk

sometimes, […] these young people were so interesting and so lovely. I had this lovely feeling about these girls and boys when I was small, and then this boy is just like them, because he is from [my] hometown. […] And I felt that I knew him, he is not a stranger, he understands me. […] This boy thinks in that old way, what is the right culture [taps her fingers simultaneously on the table]. Many young people go to other cities to study and then they forget everything from their own culture there and then when they come back on holidays to their own village, own home, then they don't accept the old culture anymore. They don't respect it anymore [taps her fingers on the table]. No religion, no Kurdish culture, nothing. […] Many people think that way, but my boyfriend does not. He thinks just the right way according to the culture [taps her fingers on the table]. And I felt because of that, that he is very close to me and very intimate. That's why I accepted him.

Bênav's reply to my question concerning her criteria for a suitable partner is multifaceted. I do not suggest that this is a typical answer, but it does demonstrate that the reasons for choosing a marriage partner are very complex, as are the questions of individual autonomy in partner selection. In this narrative, Bênav presents the decision as her own personal choice, by detailing how she had carefully considered and rationally reasoned out what kind of a person she would want to marry. She presents herself in the narrative as a person who has considerable power over her boyfriend, including the right to decide whether to continue or break up with him. She also challenges the idea that romantic love is the best or only indicator of the quality of the relationship. In her interview, she emphasizes that mutual respect comes before romantic love. However, as her narrative reveals, her decision has not been based on merely rational choice but has also been affected by emotional considerations.

Bênav's narrative is also highly nostalgic in its tone. The fact that her boyfriend feels familiar to her even though he does not belong to her kin or circle of family acquaintances is important to her. The familiarity she feels toward him is connected to their shared origins (being from the same village), as well as a shared world view and values. By emphasizing the (ethnic) identity, roots, religion and culture she shares with her boyfriend, Bênav stresses not only their importance to her but also that she misses particular aspects of Kurdish culture, those which are "right" and "old," in other words, vanishing or vulnerable to change. These aspects of Kurdish culture were familiar to her in her youth, but are now, according to her, rare among the younger generation, not only among those who live in Europe or in Finland but also in her hometown itself.

This criterion of shared identity, culture and roots, which is central to the notion of transnational marriage, is especially evident in Bênav's story, whereas the criterion of pre-existing transnational connections in the form of social ties between potential partners is missing. In research literature on transnational marriages, the role of pre-existing social networks has usually been highlighted in the process of couple formation (see Straßburger 2002; Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Charsley 2012; Williams 2012). This is probably the most conspicuous difference between marriages arising from transnational online dating and other forms of transnational marriages (especially arranged ones, but also self-organized marriages). Particularly in the case of transnational online dating, it is more likely that social links are missing or that their role is less important in couple formation.

The case of Bênav illustrates the complexity of transnational online dating and its connection to religiosity. It is important to note that Bênav did not find her boyfriend through religious forums on the Internet. The issue of her partner's religious affiliation is a tricky one in Bênav's case, even if it is only one (however meaningful) attribute of a suitable partner in her opinion. Bênav considers herself a devout Muslim despite the fact that she does not cover her head with a veil or pray regularly. It is worth noting that while her mother is also a devout Muslim, her father and sister are not particularly religious according to Bênav. Because her father is not religious, the religiosity (or non-religiosity) of

Bênav's future spouse is probably not the most important criterion for her parent's acceptance of her marriage. However, she considers it an asset that her future husband believes in God rather than being merely a secular Muslim or an atheist Kurd. Moreover, in Bênav's narrative, belief in God and shared religious commitment are connected to the imagined high morality of her boyfriend: "I wanted the kind of person who believes in God, even if just a little bit, because, if you don't believe at all, you can do whatever you want. But this boy believes, […] I know some things about the Quran; that you really have to respect one's life, other people, love, you cannot hurt the other." From this perspective it is not merely a question of shared religion, but the implicit idea that her boyfriend would treat her well and be a better husband if he follows the Quran (see Karlsson Minganti 2016).

Conclusion: Online Dating and Transnational Marriage Practices in Transition

While there is no clear or single definition of transnational marriage, it has been common to highlight the role of existing transnational social ties between families and individuals in its formation. Especially in cases of arranged marriages, this social link can usually be traced with relative ease, but in the case of transnational marriages that have started online, the relationship is not necessarily based on a prior social link between the couple. On the other hand, if the criteria of pre-existing transnational connections is understood in a broader and more general sense, referring to visits to the country of origin or any pre-existing social ties a person may have to the country of origin or within the diasporic community, then online dating and marriage meet the definition of transnational.

Transnational marriages are more than just practices that maintain and preserve "traditional" marriage customs among migrants. An examination of transnational dating online offers a different picture of transnational marriage than that familiar from the media in which transnational marriages are presented as merely arranged or forced, or as used by those seeking to immigrate to Europe. It is clear that

through online dating, young adults actively engage in transnational partner-formation practices in order to find a suitable spouse. Transnational online dating also reflects more heterogeneous attitudes toward marriage and couple formation among the younger generation of Kurds than among previous generations.

What makes transnational online dating an attractive option for young Kurds is that it widens the circle of potential marriage partners which can be quite limited, as for example in the Finnish context: finding a partner through social networks or via social gatherings (weddings etc.) can be challenging in Finland due to the small number of potential partners in the same age group. In addition, Kurds are not a socially, linguistically, religiously or politically homogenous group in Finland (or elsewhere), which exacerbates the perceived scarcity of suitable partners.

The other feature that makes online dating an attractive option is that the Internet offers a private social space in which subjects can create relationships on their own terms, evading power structures, social monitoring and possibly harmful rumors (also Wheeler 2006; Schmidt 2008; Pearl Kaya 2009; Christensen 2011). The Internet may therefore enable individual autonomy in partner formation that is not possible elsewhere.

However, online dating does not entirely liberate persons from the social restrictions existing in the offline world. Normative expectations of the co-ethnic community as well as family and social relations in the country of origin are not rendered meaningless by the Internet. The case of Bênav in this article illustrates how transnational online dating is not yet widely accepted in the process of couple formation among Kurdish migrants. The Internet as a tool for finding spouses creates distrust because it is a less familiar means of seeking a partner, but also because it challenges sanctions against premarital relationships (even when there is physical distance between the partners) and the role of social ties in partner selection. Additionally, online dating does not entirely mitigate the risks to female reputation. Finally, online dating raises doubts in parents' minds regarding

the motives of the partner who would migrate from the country of origin. However, if both parties are already living in the diaspora, especially if they both already have official residency or citizenship in Europe, there is less fear of questionable motives.

The process by which plans to marry are realized involves either confronting or adjusting to prevailing norms and existing power structures outside the virtual world (Schmidt 2008: 18). This means facing up to social pressure and expectations according to which some aspects of the couple formation is inappropriate. Because of its questionable status as a meeting place for young persons, relationships created via the Internet will probably be disguised at least to some degree as relationships whose origins are more appropriate and socially acceptable. One way of bypassing and adjusting to prevailing marriage norms is to invent a social link between the couple *after the fact*. In the long run, successful and unsuccessful stories of transnational marriages with online origins will undoubtedly shape both positive and negative images of this mode of first contact between potential marriage partners. The more successful and enduring the marriages are that were initiated via the Internet, the more socially acceptable online dating and resulting marriages might become.

Notes

1 In this paper, I use the term "diaspora" to refer to diverse Kurdish communities that live outside a collectively imagined homeland, Kurdistan. By using this term, I want to bring to the fore particular dimensions such as diasporic consciousness – the awareness of being part of a globally dispersed community and the desire to identify with a Kurdish community – as well as transnational social networks and activities within the diaspora and between the country of origin and the country of settlement (see also Brah 1996; Wahlbeck 1999; Toivanen 2014).

2 In its most reduced form, marriage is defined to be transnational if a migrant living outside his or her country of origin marries a partner still residing in the same country of origin. The problem with this definition is that it leaves out marriages between couples who live in different countries in the diaspora.

3 Those studies that examine Turkish marriage migration to Europe treat migrants from Turkey as a rela-

tively homogenous group, and rarely address Kurds separately. This is due to the population register systems used in many European countries: people are not registered in the statistics according to their mother tongue (Finland is one of the few exceptions). Kurds thus comprise a vast, invisible group within Europe. Qualitative studies of marriage migrants from Turkey do contain interviews with Kurds as well.

4 There are several exceptions that partly deal with either transnational marriages or spousal issues among Kurds in diaspora (see Ammann 2000; Gran 2007; Eliassi 2010). However, the focus of these studies is not particularly on transnational marriages.

5 There are several studies that take the role of the Internet in global marriage markets into account (e.g., Constable 2003; Johnson 2007; Venables 2008), but even though the online dating and marriage practices they describe take place across nation-state borders, they cannot be considered transnational per se, since such marriages are made across, rather than within, ethnic communities (e.g., Vertovec [1999]2010; Williams 2010).

6 The documentary film "Vuorilla olen vapaa" ("In the mountains I am free") was shown on television by the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE on May 15, 2014. In addition, the semi-tabloid newspaper *Iltalehti* ran a story on May 31, 2014, of a Kurdish woman who lived in Finland and had experienced considerable social control and threats by her family and thus had to escape from home to be able to live the life she wanted. Especially in the documentary, Kurdish women were represented as being generally oppressed, and all problems such as violence in the family and forced marriages were represented unproblematically as caused by Kurdish culture.

7 All names of interviewees used in this paper are pseudonyms. I have also used approximations of age and have changed some minor details related to personal information in order to make it more difficult to identify the participant.

8 Statistics do not reveal the number of those transnational marriages in which a person has moved from Finland to another country. This means that the actual percentage of those having a transnational spouse is probably much higher than what register data can reveal.

9 I prefer to use the term "a self-initiated or self-organized marriage" instead of "a love marriage" as it better describes the process of finding a spouse in this context (see also Bredal 2006).

10 I was also told about "love stories," but these cases were presented as quite exceptional, something that was contrary to the norm.

11 It has been estimated that the majority of Kurds (75%)

are affiliated with Sunni Islam, while about 15% are Shi'a Kurds and the remainder belong to other religious groups, for example Ahl-e Haqq/Yarsan, Yezidi, Alevis, Christians and Jews (McDowall 2004: 10–13).

12 Here mediatization refers to the increasing cultural and social significance of mass media and other forms of technically mediated communication (Väliverronen 2001: 159). It also characterizes changes in practices, cultures and institutions and denotes transformations of these societies.

13 E.g., SingleKurds.com, Kurdishdating.com, Kurdishdate.net (launched in August 2014, also on Facebook).

14 There are also a few sites whose target group is singles in Kurdistan, for example Mingel2.com.

15 The problem of marrying purely to get a residence permit in Europe does not apply only to online marriages but also other types of transnational marriages, and is recognized not only by parents but also by young Kurds themselves (see also van Kerckem & van der Bracht 2013; Karlsson Minganti in this issue).

16 I asked this question just after Bênav spoke of the marriages of her cousins, and of how her parents tend to indirectly express their expectations for Bênav's future spouse when talking about other people's marriages.

17 Emphasis in original.

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