

«If you break up with your family over love, you break up with everyone!»

Intercultural couples and their «chosen» networks of support in Italy

Abstract

This paper questions the belief that intercultural romantic relationships are the primary path to integration in Italy. I use the paradigm of intergenerational solidarity – bonds of affection, association and mutual assistance that bind different generations of a family – as a heuristic device for ascertaining a broader understanding of intercultural couples' lives and their family relationships in everyday settings. Drawing on narratives collected from ethnographic interviews and hand-drawn personal networks in the metropolitan area of Milan (2018-2020), this paper explores intercultural couples struggling with families' prejudices and expectations, in contrast to their own feelings of true love. Social discrimination and a lack of support from one's social network – especially parental rejection – are among the factors that explain why friendship bonds are becoming more important than relationships to (nuclear) families for both well-being and lifelong support in Italian mixed couples. Establishing distance from unsympathetic families functions to reclaim the intimate and independent dimension of intercultural loving. The article considers how agency comes into play as the couples take risks and venture beyond their given families for a public affirmation of «families of choice».

Keywords: mixed couples, social support, personal networks, intergenerational relationships, multiculturalism, Italy

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«Kumail: You know what we call arranged marriage in Pakistan, Emily? Marriage. Okay? We just call it marriage. There's another type of marriage. It's called love marriage, and that's bad. My cousin Rehan married an Irish woman and he was kicked out of the family. Nobody is allowed to talk to him.

Emily: Why didn't you tell me any of this?

Kumail: Because I didn't think you'd fucking understand, and I was fucking right.

Emily: You don't think that I could fathom your life in any fucking way?

Kumail: Oh, you think you could understand me? I'm fighting a one thousand four-hundred-year-old culture. You were ugly in high school. There's a big fucking difference. I'm sorry. I can't lose my family.

Emily: Can you imagine a world in which we end up together?

Kumail: I don't know».

1. Introduction

The quote in the title made by a research participant and this opening passage, taken from one of the most highly acclaimed American films of 2017¹, epitomize the voices of intercultural couples struggling with their families' prejudices, expectations, and true love feelings. Social discrimination and a lack of support from one's social network – particularly in the form of a rejection of the intercultural union – are among the factors that explain conflicts with one's parents, extended family members, relatives, friends and community (Chen, 2002; Rodríguez-García *et al.*, 2016).

Intergenerational support is still relevant nowadays, especially in the Italian context where the state provides very limited direct help to youth, and families are mainly responsible for the provision of care and financial aid to their adult children (Rosina, 2019)². However, despite evidence of extensive kinship networks in Italy (Barbagli *et al.*, 2003; Saraceno, 2003), little attention has been paid to determining whether this intra-family solidarity has remained an important source of support for those in mixed unions. Because of the fact that social support for young adults is so important, those in intercultural couples often seek communities or form their own personal networks where they may find support (Gaines, Ickes, 1997; Johnson, Warren, 1993), shifting between relationships that are «*given* [primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, through kinship ties] and relationships that are *chosen* which, again, may include both kin and non-kin» (Pahl, Spencer, 2004, p. 201). This article consequently analyzes how intergenerational support develops within so-called «mixed» couples in Italy.

In the literature, mixed unions are considered a key indicator of a (decreased) social distance between various groups in an increasingly multi-eth-

¹ «The Big Sick», directed by M. Showalter.

² Southern European countries use a form of supported familialism to sustain younger adults (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996). Indeed, a similar investigation on support between generations conducted by the author from 2013 to 2014 in Milan, revealed that kin dominate personal networks of young adults in endogamous unions, i.e., relationships in which both partners are Italian natives (Manzo *et al.*, 2019).

nic society (Song, 2016), a phenomenon which suggests a two-way process of cultural change and inclusion (Alba, Foner, 2015) in that those engaged in a romantic relationship³ with natives seem to be able to successfully participate in society (Rodríguez-García, 2006; Song, 2009). However, recent studies conducted in France (Safi, 2008), Spain (Rodríguez-García *et al.*, 2015), and the United Kingdom (Song, 2009) have also questioned whether such couples consistently result in wholly positive outcomes – such as inclusion in social networks and acceptance by the partner’s family and friends – for minority partners and their children (Torngren *et al.*, 2016).

A significant body of research exists that confirms the complexity of the relationship between mixed couples and social inclusion (Marcson, 1950; Rodríguez-García, 2006; Santelli, Collet, 2012; Song, 2009). Indeed, Rodríguez-García *et al.* (2016) argue that this relationship is multidirectional and segmented and thus relevant to some aspects of it, such as the learning of official languages, but not to others, such as migrants’ greater social participation. The idea of intercultural love as «the ultimate boundary breaker» (Rodríguez-García *et al.*, 2016, p. 522), a panacea for social harmony and cohesion, seems too simplistic. The link between mixed unions and migrants’ social inclusion is still unclear, «and in many cases we are not sure whether “marital assimilation” is a cause or consequence of immigrant integration, or even what is meant by this concept» (Rodríguez-García *et al.*, 2015, p. 224). Furthermore, we have yet to understand the impact of these unions in the following generation: the romantic relationships between majority individuals and the children of migrants remain understudied.

Hence, this work calls into question the belief that intercultural romantic relationships are the primary road to the inclusion of migrants in the Italian context, where such unions are perceived ambivalently (Parisi, 2015; Peruzzi, 2008). In their research conducted in Spain, Rodríguez-García *et al.* (2016) found that members of mixed couples suffer not only social discrimination regarding the crossing of ethnocultural borders (particularly from their respective family members in the form of a rejection based on negative stereotypes), but also preconceptions linked to their partner’s origin, phenotype or ethnocultural characteristics, such as their religion, in intersection with their gender. Following their suggestions, I use the paradigm of intergenerational solidarity (Szydlik, 2008) – bonds of affection, association, and mutual assistance that bind various generations of a family – as a means of characterizing the degree of closeness and support between parents and adult children engaged in romantic intercultural relationships in Italian society. Moreover, although

³ In *The transformation of intimacy*, Anthony Giddens (1992) described the radical change in contemporary Western societies of the «romantic» love model. Giddens discussed the ascendancy of «pure relationships» that were more egalitarian than traditional romantic ones, producing greater happiness for partners, and that fostered a greater sense of autonomy. In this work, we refer to relationships as being «romantic» where: «a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it» (Giddens, 1992, p. 58).

intermarriage is a well-established concept in the literature, I prefer to think of these unions in terms of intercultural «mixedness», a more encompassing concept that refers to partners from diverse migratory backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions (Karis, Killian, 2008). I have limited this study to heterosexual couples.

This study aims to analyze a space of daily interactions in affective relationships and their emotional, symbolic and practical aspects, by reflecting upon the complexity of living together in the context of increasing global interconnectedness. This perspective focuses on how young adults construct the category of intercultural couple, what elements they consider relevant in defining equality and difference and what situations they consider favorable or problematic in a loving relationship with someone who is considered – by themselves or by their social context – as «other». In this way, it aims to provide the empirical basis for a necessary, pressing and informed debate about the kind of future society they want to construct (and that young people are already actively constructing), taking into account how cultural differences have become increasingly complex (Tasan-Kok *et al.*, 2013; Vertovec, 2007) and a structural element of contemporary global societies (Wise, Velayutham, 2009). The intensification, on a global scale, of «complex connectivities» (Tomlinson, 1999) is profoundly transforming our social experience, and shows its effects even in the most intimate and everyday aspects of experience. Concepts such as belonging, difference and equality take on more complex and nuanced meanings, and the categories inherited from modernity that we use to make sense of our experiences require adjustment and redefinition as we increasingly occupy «translocal» spaces, i.e., relational environments in which the local is inevitably intertwined with the global (Brickell, Datta 2011; Levitt, Glick Schiller, 2004; Massey, 2005). The space of intimacy, family and friendship does not escape these transformations (Bauman, 2003; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2013).

Ultimately, this article takes into account a «multicultural» understanding of family bonds in everyday settings (Colombo, Semi, 2007), including a consideration of support in practice, which has both a material component, in the sense of giving and receiving, and a non-material or normative dimension (Finch, Mason, 1993). In order to fill a gap in the existing literature on mixed unions, it explores the topic of intergenerational support from the perspective of young adults. The methodological innovation is to use couples' hand-drawn personal networks as stimuli for narration to gain in-depth insights into otherwise-hidden dynamics of social inclusion (Knox *et al.*, 2006).

In order to address these questions, the remainder of the article is organized as follows: first, I will introduce the research context and describe the design and methods used, including the personal network narrative strategy; I will then present the results, paying attention to specific cases which I believe best exemplify the overall findings. In the following section, I will discuss the results and reflect upon the significance and limitations of the study.

2. The Italian context

According to the most recent national statistics, there are just over 5.1 million registered residents in Italy who do not possess Italian citizenship (ISTAT, 2020). The ISMU Foundation estimates that this figure exceeds six million when non-residents are included (ISMU, 2021). If we were to take into consideration naturalized citizens (Italians by acquisition) and the children of mixed couples, we would have to raise the figure by another two million or so, bringing the non-native Italian population or those with a migratory family background to over 12% of the total national population.

In this context, let us now try to consider the statistical-quantitative dimension of mixed unions within the Italian panorama, in order to situate – at least partially – an increasingly growing and evolving phenomenon (Tognetti Bordogna, 2019). Statistical sources, in fact, account for only a portion of intercultural unions formed in Italy: they exclude both marriages celebrated abroad, at consulates or Islamic centers, and the whole sphere of «*de facto* families», that is, common-law relationships not formalized by a marriage contract. According to data from the latest national statistical report (ISTAT, 2019) on marriages and civil unions in Italy, in 2018, 33,933 marriages were celebrated with at least a non-Italian citizen partner, constituting 17.3% of the total number of marriages, a proportion that increased slightly compared to the previous year. This proportion is notoriously higher in areas where migrant settlements are more stable and rooted, such as in Northern Italy. In this part of the country, nearly one out of four marriages has at least a non-Italian spouse. Lombardy alone accounts for the 19.2% of the total number of mixed marriages celebrated in Italy⁴.

Adopting these points as premises, the research uses the metropolitan area of Milan, which seems to be an adequate urban context, to explore the meanings and practices of young adults' intercultural love experiences in urban contexts characterized by an increasing degree of ethnic and socio-cultural diversity.

3. Research design and methodology

Conducted in the metropolitan area of Milan between 2018 and 2020, this study was part of a larger research project that involved 106 participants and sought to explore the meanings and representations of the romantic relationships of young adults (aged eighteen to thirty-five) where one member of the couple is a foreigner (Colombo, Manzo, 2021; Manzo, 2020). The project was designed with a constructivist perspective that considers cultural difference and the idea of interculturality not as *a priori* data, but analyzes the meaning that individuals attribute to these terms and how this orients their practices and the meanings they attribute to the situations in which they find themselves acting. Adopting an intersectional approach (Colombo, Rebughini, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989), the research examines attitudes and practices toward intercultural love without considering young adults as a monolithic category but instead analyzing how

⁴ Source: author's elaboration on ISTAT 2018 data, online at: <http://dati.istat.it/>.

different social backgrounds, defined by the intersection of gender, education, ethnicity and life stage affect the ways in which young people interpret and use cultural difference in the relationships as couples, in their relationships with their surrounding relational circles and with the communities in which they live, expanding or restricting their agency and ability to construct new forms of sociality. The study comprised two different phases. In the first phase, which ran from 2018 to 2019, we carried out 13 focus groups with 102 young adults where we explored more generally young adults' attitudes towards intercultural romantic relationships. In the second phase, which ran from 2019 to 2020, we conducted an in-depth ethnographic investigation of intercultural couples' experiences with fourteen young adults in exogamous unions (heterosexual marriages and common-law relationships between native Italian individuals and the children of migrants). For the purpose of this article, I will focus only on the second phase.

Participants in the ethnographic study were recruited during the initial focus groups or through personal connections, social networks, and third sector research partner contacts in the metropolitan area of Milan. The participants with a migratory background were selected from a wide variety of countries of origin, as I was interested to explore the commonalities and specific variations of intergenerational support experienced by intercultural couples in Italy⁵. A study of this scale is not designed to reach statistical representativeness (Bott, 1957); rather the aim was to explore in detail everyday experiences and decision-making within the intercultural romantic relationship. The total duration of the seven couples' participation in the study ranged from six to twenty-three months, and sometimes took place over two or three periods lasting three to four months and separated by intervals of around four months⁶. During these intervals contact with participants was maintained using written and oral methods (e-mail, text messages, telephone and video calls) or in person (during public events or informal meetings).

The methodologies applied a mixture of traditional and innovative ethnographic techniques. This included interviews with couples, observations of their everyday activities (both at home and/or outside, e.g., during mealtimes, children's playtime, *apéritifs* with their friends, outdoor walks or more formal cultural events involving mixed couples); and participatory tasks (e.g., sketching and discussing personal networks and narrated family photo albums). Researchers who use ethnographic interviews are both participants and observers. This method highlights the ways in which the interview situation constitutes a site of meaning construction that emerges out of the immediate interaction, but also of the on-going relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Concern with this relationship

⁵ Previous research on mixed or intercultural couples in the Italian context has tended to focus on unions formed by the majority population and a single country of origin, and/or ethnic group or religious background, predominantly Black/White or Catholic/Muslim (Bertolani, 2001; Cerchiaro, 2019).

⁶ See the work of Hall (2016) for a similar approach on ethnography with families.

«Emphasizes the time invested in developing, through repeated contacts and multiple interviews over time, a genuine relationship involving mutual trust among the participants and mutual interest in the research project» (Sherman Heyl, 2001, p. 379).

Furthermore, I interviewed each couple together⁷. Though aware of the limitations involved in terms of positionality and couple dynamics, I believed that observing the couple in a joint interview was appropriate, since decisions about family support are usually reached at the household level.

Regarding the couples' characteristics, in four cases it was the woman who had a migrant family background, while in the other three it was the man⁸. Four out of seven couples had children, while most of the partners were university graduates (nine out of fourteen). Finally, the average age of the participants was thirty-one years old.

The interviews covered the biographical and partnership history of each intercultural couple, the intentions of having a first (or an additional) child and the experiences of parenthood. They also gathered details about daily life practices, family-related attitudes, general values and life goals. Most important for my purpose here, the interviews explored the respondents' social relations in depth and collected information on kin, friends and acquaintances considered significant for the couple. The term «significance» was specified in relation to the intergenerational support exchanged with the couple. Using a think-aloud technique during the interview, I asked the couple to clarify ways in which their network members provided support at a practical level (*assistance in everyday life*), emotional level (*assistance when feeling troubled*) or economical level (*assistance when in need of financial help*).

The interviews were conducted during different sessions at the participants' homes⁹ and took, on average, eight hours. They were recorded in their entirety, fully transcribed and analyzed with the Atlas.ti software package. An information sheet and a consent form were given to participants prior to conducting the interview, and anonymity was guaranteed.

In an effort to collect richer data on the dynamics of intergenerational support for intercultural couples, the study also combined interviews with the collection of personal networks using paper-and-pencil techniques (Hogan *et al.*, 2007; McCarty *et al.*, 2019). Network methods are used as tools to answer social and anthropological questions (Sanjek, 1974), as metaphors for understanding forms of social relations (Knox *et al.*, 2006). Personal network analysts usually study small samples to elicit information about network members and their ties

⁷ Interviewing household members together offered an opportunity to observe how members of a couple negotiate and produce their collaborative account for the interviewer, which can provide insights into the dynamics of the household that would be otherwise difficult to identify in a one-to-one interview (Valentine, 1999).

⁸ Overall, the countries of origin were China, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Egypt, Cameroon and El Salvador.

⁹ During the first phase of the Covid-19 lockdown in Milan, two interview sessions were conducted online through Zoom video conferences.

to the respondents. Although these analyses can be wide ranging¹⁰, what is crucial for this study is that they provide a way to show how social support flourishes in personal communities, to provide important network capital through specialized ties (Wellman, 2007, p. 350). While network maps are usually used to present data findings, an alternative use in data collection applies real-time, rather than *ex post*, visualization by asking respondents to directly draw a map, freely or in some structured way (Hollstein *et al.*, 2020). A personal network sketching activity was then organized to provide the couple (*ego*) with a cognitive resource to recall data (*alters*) on their relationships. According to Hollstein *et al.*, visual interfaces that assist participants seem to be promising tools when used in qualitative research and can serve as a «narration generator» (2020, p. 2) and a «trigger for reflection and discussion» (Dobbie *et al.*, 2018, p. 212) regarding relationships to alters (Bernardi *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, such visual forms of methodological inquiry (Reyes, 2016) have also been appreciated as empowering participants to reveal what is hidden in embodied knowledge and thus taken for granted (Manzo, 2019). In practice, I asked couples to visually represent themselves at the center of a blank sheet of paper. The only instruction provided was to position more important persons supporting them closer to the center and less important persons further away. I also brought a variety of colored pencils and sticky notes to facilitate their creative expression. The drawings led the couples to explain in detail the significance of the previously indicated persons. Used in this way, the emerging personal network generated narratives in an unstructured manner, allowing participants to follow their own system of relevance.

In terms of positionality, my public reputation associated with the recognition of the urban citizenship rights of the children of migrants at the city level, and particularly, my involvement as an activist in campaigns against the stigmatization of the Milanese Chinese community (Manzo, 2017), was central to the ethnography, in terms of gaining access to the couples' homes and, subsequently, providing a prolonged insight into their intimate lives. All the families acknowledged feeling comfortable with my presence, specifically as an adult woman, in their homes. This comfort and trust formed a degree of reciprocal care and concern that served to strengthen our relationship. This often extended to our own children playing together while we were engaged in conversations about childcare (from when to stop breastfeeding, weaning strategies or educational methods) or about a variety of other diverse topics from the latest ethnic restaurant in the city to a recent film at the cinema, from buying a family home to perspectives on future careers. Even though becoming a family member was almost impossible as an «outsider», this level of intimacy helped the couples «to place me in their lives» (Hall, 2014, p. 2180), and served to balance out the power relationships (Moss, 2002).

In the following section, I will present the results from the study, paying particular attention to those cases that I believe best exemplify the significance of the research.

¹⁰ The purpose of this Special Issue is to shed more light on this.

4. Understanding intercultural couples' networks of support

In order to reflect on the most relevant research outcomes of the intergenerational dynamics of support for intercultural unions, I have selected three couples¹¹ and will analyze the ethnographic accounts of their personal networks. First, I introduce them by putting to the test the unconditional love and enduring solidarity that commonly characterize family bonds, that is, by examining the moment in which they «reveal the truth» about their intercultural romantic relationships to their respective parents. Second, parental prejudice/rejection or acceptance of the intercultural couple is then discussed with reference to the narratives of couples' networks of support.

4.1. How I told my parents about my romantic intercultural relationship

Despite the fact that intercultural couples are a global phenomenon (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2013), it can still be hard for the families of those in intercultural relationships to accept something that is so different to them. The impact of mixed unions, in fact, does not only affect the couples' parents, but also their extended families, peers, friends, and community of reference.

This is the case of Jin and Davide. Jin is thirty-five years old and organizes events for an Italian-Chinese institution. She was born in China, and at the age of three her parents brought her to Milan, where she attended school and earned a university degree. At the age of twenty-three, she left her parental home and went to live with a friend because:

Jin: «I couldn't take it anymore [...] with my parents, with my family of origin, with my culture of origin!».

Eventually, in a local coffee shop, she met Davide, born and raised in Milan by a Neapolitan family, and now thirty-nine years old and running a tobacco shop, and they have remained together ever since. Jin tells me about how her ethnic community sets specific expectations for women:

Jin: «Until eighteen, you absolutely cannot be with boys; you have to study. After 18, you have to immediately get married, try to be fertile, and have children. At twenty-five then, with your Chinese husband (preferably from the same area as your family), you can open a business – any business – and become rich. Social redemption. And then you can send your children to the best schools in Italy, even if we don't know where these are, but whatever. So these are pretty specific steps. Later on, the couple breaks up, and at 35 the man finds himself a lover. This is a bit of a pattern for a lot of my cousins».

¹¹ A «diverse case» method selection strategy was employed to access the maximum number of networks of support variance among the seven participating couples (Seawright, Gerring, 2008).

Jin smiles, admitting that the description is a bit stereotypical but hinting at how common it is for many children of Chinese descent. Being thrown out and losing familial love were also common fears and experiences among partners who belong to a minority ethnic community, as Jin explained:

Jin: «It's not only the father. It's a whole patriarchal, male, chauvinist social system brought over from China [...] If you break up with your family over love, you break up with everyone!».

As parents communicate prejudice against intercultural relationships, their negative opinions produce constraining tensions for the couples (Bell, Hastings, 2015). They create anxiety for both partners; they heighten «ethno-cultural» difference and position intercultural romances as tainted with stigma:

Jin: «There's a real lot of prejudice, especially among the [Chinese] community towards the outside, not only Italians towards Chinese but also Chinese towards Italians. So many Chinese girls of my age, in their thirties, who are married to Italian guys have had to struggle, some a little more and some a little less»

Interviewer: «What was wrong about Davide for your family?»

Jin: «Well, he wasn't Chinese for a start. My family always thought, and still thinks, that he doesn't understand me or that anyway he doesn't want to understand. They don't accept us. And this comes from the fact that, basically, my family feels inferior because they are part of a minority community in Milan. What's more, he doesn't speak Chinese. There are facts, concepts, and means of communication that don't get understood»

Disclosing their intercultural love story to their family members tended to bring «choice» to the center of awareness:

Jin: «It's like a life choice: "I don't want to follow in my parents" footsteps. I want to find another way».

Joris and Valeria, on the contrary, represent a very different story of family inclusion. Joris is thirty-five years old and arrived from Cameroon when he was seventeen. Initially, he lived in an institution for non-accompanied migrants that allowed him to learn the Italian language and receive a professional education. For a few years, he fulfilled his dream of working as a professional soccer player, but he now works as a project manager. His partner, Valeria, thirty-five years old, is from Milan and works as a filmmaker. They have been together for fifteen years and have a three-year-old son. They tell me that they met at McDonald's, when Joris worked there, and that they met again by chance in a Milanese club in the early 2000s, where they danced to hip hop. It was there that they got to know each other for the first time and decided to get together. Valeria's family has always accepted him without any issues, even though she admits that if he had been Muslim, they might have encountered more problems:

Valeria: «It took me a while to introduce him, but my parents already knew that I was dating this guy and then he came home. But I knew it would not be a problem. I mean my family is an open family from this point of view. To be honest, it might have been a problem, if he had been Muslim, but not so much for religious reasons, more for the way women are treated in Muslim culture, or at least what we know and imagine this to be».

Joris seemed to share this feeling of inclusion:

Joris: «Yeah, I'll tell you the truth, I never thought I was different. Her mom never made me feel different, so I always really got along with her family, her friends, and that was it, basically. We really did a lot of things together!».

Finally, Tarik and Serena offer another perspective. Tarik is twenty-eight years old and arrived with his family from Bangladesh when he was eleven. He has been together with Serena for more than four years and about a year ago they moved in together. Both graduated and met during a tutoring project at the university. At the beginning of their love story, Tarik hid their relationship from his family based on the apprehension that rejection would have followed its disclosure:

Tarik: «I would often have to change direction or hide myself when I saw some other Bengali who surely knew my father [...]. Which is to say that I've only got one Bengali friend [...]. In actual fact, as he had also grown up in Italy, he accepted immediately the thing [the relationship], unlike the other Bengali adults. I feared their judgment the most because they tend to gossip and talk behind my back. They immediately think in a negative way, so I hid Serena a bit at the beginning. I didn't want to be seen!».

The opposition of the family of origin to the intercultural relationship of the children can take many forms: from maintaining distance to the attempt to procure alternative partners, up to and including a genuine refusal of any form of relationship. Listening to the experiences of the couples interviewed, it would seem that one of the parents' greatest fears is represented by the collective pressure of the communities of reference that contribute precisely to reify the mechanisms of the production of (ethnic and socio-cultural) difference. Tarik explains to me how much his parents value respect for their ethnic community:

Tarik: «I mean, this image of respectability is lost if word gets out that I am with an Italian girl [...]. Everybody knows everybody. Everybody knows everybody's business, and so there is also psychological pressure from the Bengali community: "Ah, look I saw your son hand in hand with a white girl. Make sure your son doesn't get ruined". And my father, practically every day would hear these comments from people coming to the store. And more and more relatives would say, "Hey, when will you marry your son? I have a

proposal. I know a good Bengali girl, she's religious". And then my mother would say, "Look, I found you a good Bengali girl, she's religious". And so it is difficult to keep going. I had a hard time resisting all this pressure from my parents, from the community, and from relatives».

Despite this social pressure, Tarik tells me that, at some point, he decided to «stop playing» and confront his parents, who nearly disavowed him:

Tarik: «They took it a bit hard, and even now, after four years, they are still struggling to accept the idea. But [...] my mom, in the beginning, thought it was a joke. But when she realized I was serious, she started screaming and crying. She told me she couldn't believe it. She said she hadn't raised her son like that: "You've let me down!"».

Serena had also been afraid, albeit less severely, to reveal her romantic choices to her parents. She recounts that she and her two sisters had spent their adolescence listening to their parents' «educational mantras»:

Serena: «You can bring home to us anyone, everyone, except a Muslim».

Women are usually subject to much more oppressive and intrusive forms of control over their dating choices by family and friends than it is the case with their male peers. As evidenced by the outcomes of the first phase of this research through focus groups, our young participants believed that relationships in a mixed couple were more problematic for girls than for boys. This was justified through a supposedly «natural» tendency of parents to be more protective of their daughters, who were implicitly considered weaker and less equipped to deal with problematic situations generated by a partner or his family that tended to impose its own rules and values (Colombo, Manzo, 2021). Interestingly, however, Serena's family, after an initial prejudice, operated a «normalization» of the figure of Tarik based on a «scale of diversity» (Varro, 2003) that re-categorized his religion (Muslim) and skin color (he is not African) as something less dangerous or disconcerting:

Serena: «I told them right away that I was with a guy who wasn't Italian but was Bangladeshi. "Ah, so what's his religion?", "Muslim", "Hmm, okay. Well, not to worry". Then they started saying, "Well, at least he's not Middle Eastern. He's not African. All in all, it's a sure thing!". It was a bit comical, but it made me think».

Similarly, Serena strategically used to her advantage the fact that Tarik presented himself as a typical Western guy, but more importantly that he had a medical degree and would soon become a physician, substantially ameliorating the parents' initial feelings of dismay:

Serena: «Anyway, he dresses like an Italian and speaks the language very well. So when you meet him, you can only think well of him. However, at the end of the evening, after the shock, they were able to say, “If you’re happy...When are we going to meet him?”. So, let’s put it this way, there was a bit of a twist».

The impact of these intercultural love disclosures to parents calls into question the enduring solidarity usually associated with family relations. As I will discuss in the following section, encountering social disapproval from one’s family can strengthen the intercultural relationship against discrimination and may ground the couple’s personal network of non-kin relationships, which are guided by feelings of affection and shared history.

4.2. Grounding personal network in (intercultural) love

«Intergenerational patterns of assistance flow mostly from older generations to younger generations within a family» (Bengtson, 2001, p. 7). However, the same cannot be said about the narratives of the exogamous/intercultural couples interviewed. Bringing relatives, partners and friends¹² together under a single concept offered intercultural couples a way to build their network of support by crossing kinship lines. Intercultural couples who were distant from their families of origin chose to model their personal network of support based on relationships of love and affection. For example, the drawing in Figure 1, showing Jin and Davide’s personal network (depicted in the center as a sofa), visibly represents their intention to put a clear distance between their respective families (Jin’s parents are further away from everyone in the lower right corner; Davide’s mother is a little closer), while Jin’s sisters and one of Davide’s aunts are very close. Marta, positioned in the upper right corner like a planet with a dotted orbit, is Jin’s best friend and has always supported their love story emotionally and materially. When Davide asked Jin to marry him seven years ago during a vacation in Bordighera on the Ligurian coast, they were staying at an apartment Marta had lent them. Three years later, when their son was just five months old, she gave them the apartment again to allow them to spend a summer together with the baby. They call this apartment «the house of love» because, although it is not their property, it is a place that has held many happy moments:

Jin: «It’s my best friend’s house, it’s a family home».

Family opposition to mixing sometimes decreases over time, as in the case of Jin’s Chinese parents, who gradually showed a degree of acceptance of the relationship after their first male grandchild arrived:

Jin: «On Saturday afternoon, I’m at work, so we go to my parents’ house for lunch with the baby. I leave him there and go to work. I come back, and so

¹² Defining the concept of «friend» gives rise to an important empirical challenge. For the purpose of this study I decided to use the definition of my participants (Bott, 1957, p. 294).

we end up having dinner together [...]. I avoid going to my parents' house too often, partly because the wounds still remain. Until recently, if my father raised his voice, I would have moments of... I go back [to when I was] ten years old... and then because it's good to see them but only in small doses, once a week!».

On the other hand, their son negatively restructures the couple's relationship with Davide's Neapolitan family:

Jin: «My solution was to erect a wall. You know why? My view of his family changed. Before, for me, it was the perfect, ideal family that I absolutely wanted to be part of! [...] Until the pregnancy, my mother-in-law was always very nice, and I thought "Finally, I've arrived in a family and can say that I'm... one of the family". [...] I have to say that the demonstrations of affection struck me very much. The Chinese are never very... open. They don't externalize feelings»

Davide: «Let's say that my mother, as a good Neapolitan, is very suffocating at a family level, very suffocating...»

Jin: «But, you know, Italian suffocation and Chinese suffocation are two very different things. I mean Chinese suffocation is very obvious. It's direct. You have to do this; you don't have to do that!»

Davide: «The Italian one is more devious»

Jin: «The Italian one is more devious, yes, it's true»

Interviewer: «How is the Italian one conveyed?»

Jin: «It works through... affection, the blackmail of affection, like: "if you don't do this, I'll die!"».

Even though Jin and Davide have not been fully «kicked out» by Jin's Chinese relatives, their experience of parental rejection has involved the withdrawal of family support. Jin was denied her dowry when she married an Italian man, which is unusual according to the norms of the intergenerational transfer of assets among Chinese families and which she continues to recall with resentment during our discussion.

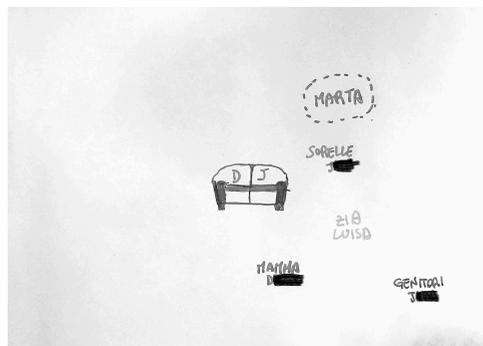


FIG. 1. Personal network map hand-drawn by Jin and Davide.

Source: Author.

On the contrary, as highlighted in Figure 2, Valeria and Joris' personal network clearly represents a rich combination of family ties. Interestingly, without any suggestion from me, they adopted a convoy model (Kahn, Antonucci, 1980), mapping their network in a concentric-circle diagram. They described this as a planetary system containing various orbits (they represented themselves as «Mother Earth» at the center of the sheet, in reference to the spirituality that Joris practices). Their closest and most important persons were positioned in the inner circle. Here we find the sisters of Valeria and Joris, who provided significant and consistent emotional support to the couple, but especially Valeria's mother. She has been the greatest source of support for the couple throughout the years, offering practical support by hosting them in her apartment for an extended period when they could not afford anything else, thus facilitating their saving, and by babysitting their son every afternoon after school. She offered financial support as well, gifting them money when they needed financial assistance and helping with the deposit and mortgage repayments on their current apartment. Finally, she offered moral assistance by expressing consistent support for the well-being of their relationship.

Similarly, Valeria's father helped the couple financially, while her brother employed Joris when he was out of work. The geographical remoteness and financial situation of Joris' family of origin in Cameroon did not allow him to position himself «close» to them in terms of practical day-to-day or financial support, yet a fair number of friends are in the second «orbit», where they are remembered for a form of practical support related to moving, decorating, and furnishing their home and lending money in case of emergency.

As we have seen, kin and non-kin relationships provide different structures and functions for individuals. Kin relationships are generally more stable across the life course and more strongly motivated by normative expectations for contact, affection, and assistance (Finch, Mason, 1993). However, intercultural couples who, in light of their romantic choices, lack kin-based support networks, may choose to privilege non-kin ties in order to maintain autonomy. This was the case with Tarik and Serena, who considered kinship an extension of friendship rather than viewing the two as opponents. They chose friends with whom they shared similar couple histories, practical or emotional support, and other means of enduring solidarity. The narratives of their personal network centered people who are «there for them», friends they can count on practically and emotionally. Such friends express their care for the couple materially, in the form of financial support or other services such as preparing meals, lending clothes or books, moving furniture, and offering nonjudgmental emotional support:

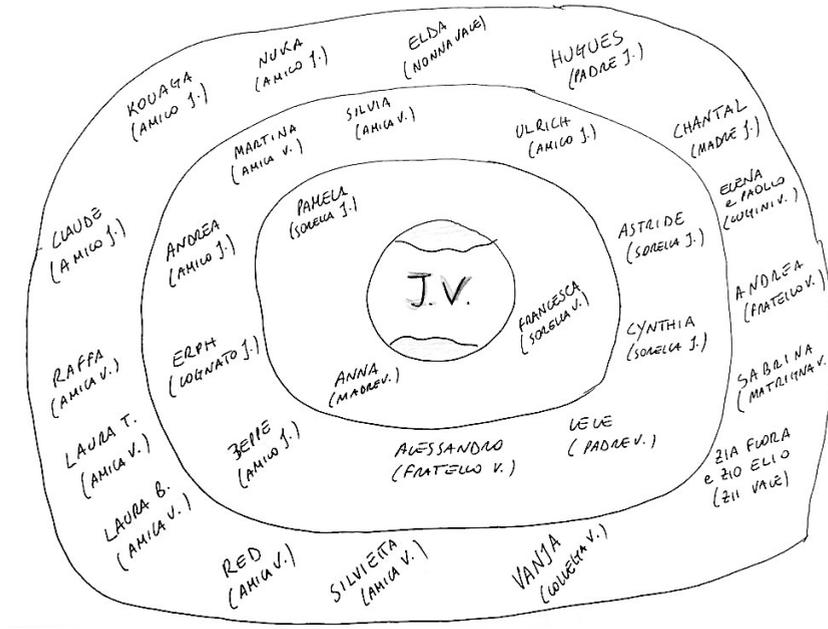


FIG. 2 Personal network map hand-drawn by Valeria and Joris.

Source: Author.

Serena: «My roommates were there for me through and through. They were very supportive. Chiara was my roommate, and we had an agreement that she would leave when Tarik came over... and we wrote our thesis at the same time and we helped each other a lot. Rudi was the person who took care of me the most. He used to cook for me, for example. Nina is my friend from Barcelona, and she is a very open person, very welcoming, and I always felt like I could confide in her about everything!».

On the margins of their drawing, we find their two families of origin, both positioned as significant but not all-important. This conceptual distance aligns with the couple's choice to live in a different city from those of their respective parents.

Serena: «We needed to see what the relationship looked like from outside all these logics and dynamics, that is, to see what being alone together looked like, because in the lead up to moving away, it had got to the point we were just thinking about relationships and families and nothing else: in short, we were getting a little lost»

Tarik: «Yes, at a certain point, I said, "Enough, I can't live like this anymore" [...]. It felt like we were on Big Brother, like we were being constantly observed. And I would come home and start arguing with my parents – almost every night! So I decided I'm going to another city to finish my medical studies and

we're going to build our future there... and leave all this stress behind. We kind of ran away»

Interviewer: «And how is it going?»

Serena: «Very well!».

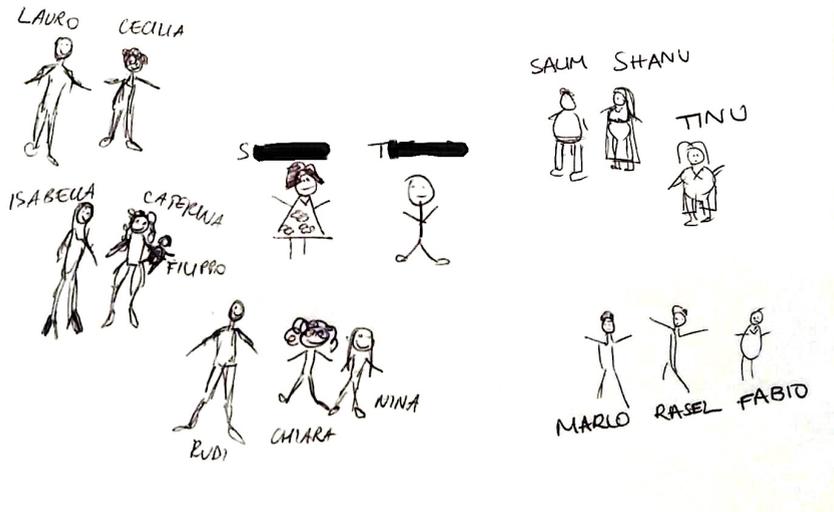


FIG. 3. Personal network map hand-drawn by Serena and Tarik.

Source: Author

5. Conclusions: families of choice in the globalization era

One of the most profound effects of globalization is that people from everywhere are falling in love with people from everywhere else. Increasing migration worldwide has facilitated a greater number of unions among people from different countries, religions, ethnicities and, presumably, cultural backgrounds. Such unions are often celebrated as an emblem of social inclusion. However, as we have seen in the ethnographic account discussed above, the classic assimilation theory no longer suffices as a response to the growth of large cities, which are witnessing unprecedented levels of diversity. Intercultural couples and their intimate lives serve as focal points where the various aspects of the globalized world become embodied (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2013). They represent a form of resistance to parental objections or hostile social reactions towards what is out of the «ordinary» and they create a space where young people can be taken «seriously», starting with their words, everyday practices and experiences (Uyangoda, 2021).

On the doorstep, Jin tells me that, unlike some friends with a Chinese family background who bowed to the will of their parents, she chose love and did not abandon her dreams of «happiness» as they did. «I can say I live the life I wan-

ted. We are poor maybe by some standards, but you can't have it all, right?! At least we are free to be happy!» (Fieldnotes written after the interview with Jin).

At the end of the interview, Serena and Tarik tell me about their love story as an odyssey «in search of happiness». They explain to me that they both grew up with the idea that they had to think about the good of the family (of origin) first and that they were made hyper-responsible. Tarik tells me that he did not enjoy his adolescence as much as his other peers did; he was dealing with bureaucracy, often visiting an accountant because his parents «were completely dependent on me for so many things». Serena also explains to me that she, as the eldest of three daughters, had to take care of her sisters as they grew up and that now it was time to think about their history, «because you don't have to feel guilty about being happy!» (Fieldnotes written after the interview with Serena).

These relationships may represent a «quiet revolution», which re-envision the «us *vs* them» dichotomy and challenges what it means to inhabit multiculturalism in one's everyday life (Colombo, Semi, 2007). But how are people inside a family to withstand, negotiate, and survive the pressures that separate whole worlds from one another? From the perspective of a personal network – a set of people who are considered meaningful to an individual that enables the mobilization of a variety of support resources – acceptance or rejection from one's social network affect the course of love over its various developmental stages, including its initiation, maintenance and termination. Considering the experiences of young people, parental approval of intercultural romantic relationships remains controversial and deserves more attention.

This article has explored the relational dynamics of intergenerational support for young adults engaged in intercultural romantic relationships in Italy. I considered three cases in which support is exchanged and described the meanings and negotiations it entails, demonstrating the creative ways in which intercultural couples extend family bonds of affection and support through the creation of kin-like relationships. As we have seen, conflicts complicate the couples' decisions about the degree to which they will include family in their support networks. According to Domínguez and Watkins:

«Several factors shape the exchange of resources among families and friends, including physical distance, the ability to generate balanced reciprocity and the capacity to respond to interpersonal tensions while trying to make the best use of very scarce resources» (2003, pp. 119-120).

The intercultural couples that participated in the research were often embedded in a highly complex assemblage of intimate relations, including combinations of kin, friends and acquaintances (neighbors, workmates, and other fellows) shaped by the life course and intergenerational relationships, memories and past experiences. Although there is still only very modest empirical research available to strongly support the shift *from given to chosen kin*, friendship bonds

are becoming more important than relationships to (nuclear) families for both well-being and lifelong support in Italian mixed couples. Taking distance from unsympathetic families functions to reclaim the intimate and independent dimension of intercultural loving. It makes perfect sense that couples «when they have a choice in the matter, remain bonded to those who tend to make them feel good about themselves» (Pangborn, 2021 in this issue). We are witnessing how agency comes into play as the couples take risks and venture beyond their given families for a public affirmation of «families of choice» (Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Weston, 1991).

This study has a number of strengths and limitations. The strengths include the use of a qualitative methodology to allow for the examination of intercultural couples' networks of support. It is the first study in Italy to have used hand-drawn personal networks to conceptualize such kin and non-kin relationships. It is also important to recognize that these maps not only engage participants but also serve as «cognitive aids, helping in recalling alters and maintaining an overview of relationships» (Hollstein *et al.*, 2020, p. 23), thus acting as narrative generators. The limitations included the small sample size and the fact that an ethnographic approach does not enable us to make generalizations about the family of origin's opposition towards mixed unions (both Italian and migrant families), just as it does not allow the investigation of the consequences of this rejection upon material aspects (financial or logistical) and life choices, if not through a larger-scale qualitative research specifically focused on these dimensions. While the focus on the emotional dimension is a key feature of the article, at the same time, it represents one of its limitations. Future research could also examine the gendered construction of intercultural romantic relationships to observe commonalities and differences in women's and men's perceptions and experiences of their respective families of origin and those of their partners. It has recently been suggested that gender plays an important role in mixed unions in influencing whether Italian families are willing to accept a «foreigner» from a non-Western background for their daughter or for their son (ISTAT, 2019). Furthermore, studies could examine the friendship networks of intercultural couples and how they may intersect family structures, including the impact of different cultural contexts upon the social support provided.

In conclusion, attending to the intergenerational relations of intercultural couples strengthens the analysis of how support and solidarity unfold in practice, the forms of inclusion and exclusion produced and the ways in which cultural difference is ultimately constructed, and it encourages a deeper understanding of young adults' experiences with romantic relationships in a context of increasing global interconnectedness.

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