



Charsley, K. A. H., & Liversage, A. (2012). Transforming polygamy: migration, transnationalism and multiple marriages among Muslim minorities. *Global Networks*, 13(1), 60-78.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00369.x>

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[10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00369.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00369.x)

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# **Transforming polygamy: migration, transnationalism and multiple marriages among Muslim minorities**

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27/01/2011

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*Abstract:* In Europe, polygamy is often portrayed as emblematic of unchanging patriarchal traditions among Muslims. In contrast, based on research with Pakistanis in Britain and Turks in Denmark, this paper explores ways in which polygamy is transformed in the context of migration and transnationalism. Migration-related polygamy features in accounts of the pioneer generations of Pakistani and Turkish migrants to Europe, but there is also evidence of great variety in contemporary practices of multiple marriage, and new permutations of polygamy arising due to the specific conditions of transnational migration. Coexisting legal systems within and between nations; the opportunities of spousal settlement; multiple marital aspirations; and both transnational connections and geographical distance combine to create opportunities and motivations for a range of polygamous situations, including some in which ‘technical’ polygamy masks monogamy in practice.

In the European public eye, immigrant family practices are often regarded as ‘traditional’ imports from countries of origin, some of which may be viewed as incompatible with the values of the ‘modern’ West. Among these, polygamous marriage is perhaps one of the practices considered most deeply deviant. In this paper we argue that many contemporary forms of polygamy practiced by Muslims in Europe are not simply age-old patriarchal traditions, reproduced in countries of settlement. Instead, we argue that polygamy encompasses a broad range of family practices, some of which are new constructions arising due to the specific conditions of transnational migration.

Simultaneous relationships of course also occur among ethnic majority populations in Europe, but in the polygamous marriages we describe, these relationships have at least some form of legal recognition, be it from state or religious authorities. Marriage to a European resident is a primary route to immigration or settlement for many migrants, but polygamous unions have more complex relationships with immigration regimes which take monogamy as their matrimonial model. Migrant lives lived in multiple locations may create new opportunities for parallel partnering, and plural legal systems both within and between nations contribute to the variety of polygamous possibilities, creating a situation in which multiple marriages are shaped by and respond to legal opportunities, immigration regimes, and the experiential tensions of transnational living. Whilst Islamic laws permitting only men to have

more than one spouse create a gendered imbalance in access to this possibility, and while there are continuities with polygamous practices in sending countries, an explanatory focus on male power and cultural continuity would obscure the ways in which geography and immigration status may nuance and sometimes even subvert domestic relations of power.

We base our discussion on empirical material from research using semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with two ethnic/migrant groups<sup>1</sup>: Pakistanis in the United Kingdom and Turks in Denmark (with additional fieldwork in Pakistan and Turkey). The material presented here was not gathered with a focus on polygamous marriages in particular, but is derived from projects on other aspects of kinship practices (Charsley 2005a & b, 2006, 2007; Liversage 2009, forthcoming a; Liversage and Jakobsen, 2010). In addition to differing migration histories between the two populations; there are significant differences in cultural practices surrounding marriage, such as the greater frequency of consanguinous marriages among British Pakistanis. Transnational marriage has been common in both cases, but the more restrictive Danish family immigration regime has resulted in lower levels of spousal immigration from Turkey to Denmark in recent years.

Despite the different ethnic and national contexts, both authors were struck by similarities in the forms of polygamy encountered during their research. Here, we bring this material together, in order to contribute to the developing understanding of the roles of migration, transnationalism, and legal pluralism in family practices among migrants and ethnic minority groups in Europe (e.g. Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002, Yilmaz 2002, Harriss & Shaw 2008). The cases of polygamy explored here, we suggest, illustrate the importance of transnational connections, but also national borders and geographical distance in what Carling (2008) has called the ‘human dynamics’ of transnationalism.

### **Defining polygamy**

As the terminology used to describe plural marriage is varied and definitions contested, some discussion of our understanding of the term ‘polygamy’ is required. Most (but not entirely all) of the cases we discuss in this article concern men having more than one wife rather than *vice versa* (polygyny rather than polyandry). Most examples also involve only two wives, but we avoid the term ‘bigamy’ which can be used not only as a simple descriptor of the custom or state of having two spouses, but also to denote criminality where only one spouses is

permitted by law. Our use of the more neutral term ‘polygamy’ reflects the fact that whilst the marriages described here are distinguished from other forms of multiple relationships in having some simultaneous recognition under an official or unofficial legal systems, they often avoid illegality by virtue of creative use of transnational or plural legal contexts.

From a global perspective, White observes that polygamy ‘is not a single syndrome but is produced by diverse strategies under a range of different conditions and comprises different systems of meaning and function’ (White 1988: 558). Polygamous practices vary considerably, creating debate over the delimitation of the term. In the narrowest definition, polygamy (or polygyny/polyandry where the gender of the spouses is specified) implies concurrent legally sanctioned marriages to more than one spouse. Some, however, have argued for the extension of the term to include situations which fall outside this strict definition as they do not involve multiple formal marriages, but result in ‘marriage-like’ domestic arrangements (Zietzen 2008:17). Lang & Smart, for example, refer to Chinese men having simultaneous long-lasting intimate relations with more than one woman, involving financial and (where children result) parental responsibilities, as polygyny, even where one such relationship is not recognized as a marriage (Lang & Smart, 2002: 547). Given considerable global variation in the ‘bundle of rights’ which constitute marriage (Leach 1961), however, judgments over whether a relationship is sufficiently ‘marriage like’ are likely to be problematic, particularly in contexts of migration spanning cultural environments. For these reasons, we assume a middle ground in defining polygamy as being simultaneously married to more than one spouse, but as religious marriage often extends the range of marital options available for Muslims in Europe, we include marriages solemnized by religious as well as state sanctioned ceremonies. At times we also mention adjacent cases involving long-term unmarried relationships where this enhances discussion, but do not class these as polygamy.

### **Islam and polygamy**

In 1967, George Murdock estimated that 85% of recorded societies permitted polygamy, though the global incidence of the practice is quite low (Zeitzen 2008: 14). The highest occurrence is found in Sub-Saharan Africa with, for example, an estimated 44% of married women in Mali being in polygamous unions (Coulibaly *et al* 1996, in Sargent and Cordell, 2003: 1962). Polygamy also occurs in some Christian populations, and in the US, polygamy

amongst Mormons has attracted considerable attention (White, 2009). In the European imagination, however, polygamy is often associated with Islam (Chamie, 1986).

One verse of the Koran is commonly interpreted as permitting polygyny; a man being allowed up to four wives, each of whom should be treated equally. Some Islamic scholars, however, argue that (among other reasons) the impossibility of the latter condition means that polygamy is not actually religiously sanctioned (Mashhour 2005; Abbott 1962). The frequency of polygamous marriages varies widely throughout the Muslim world: while almost 20% of Saudi Arabian marriages are polygamous, the practice is rare in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country (Sigman, 2006, p.158).

In Pakistan, a man may have up to four legally recognized wives. Second marriages require court permission, taking the views of the existing wife into account. However, second marriages occurring without the first wife's consent have been considered legally valid (Yamani 1998: 156). The practice is more common in rural areas, and varies between regions<sup>2</sup>, but less than 5% of women in a 1990-91 national survey reported being in polygamous marriages (Sathar & Ahmed 1992). In Turkey, polygamy has been outlawed since 1926, but multiple marriages still exist, and are more common in eastern regions, where approximately one in ten married women are in polygamous marriages (Ilkcaracan, 2001). Whilst no reliable statistics exist on rates of polygamy for Muslim populations in Europe, the situations described in this paper are also relatively infrequent, so should not be regarded as representing the norm in kinship practices among British Pakistanis and Danish Turks.

### **Polygamy and the Migration Process**

The separation of labour migrants from their original conjugal household through migration can create opportunities and motivations for plural relationships and polygamy. Among the estimated 100,000 Hong Kong factory managers in Guangdong province in China, some reportedly form 'second families' (without polygamous marriage) with female factory workers, whilst continuing to return regularly to established families in Hong Kong (Lang and Smart, 2002). Ethnographic examples of migration-related polygamy include Mozambiquan men whose migration to South Africa with the encouragement of their first wife was reportedly motivated by the desire to finance a second marriage to boost the family's standing. As their migration became more prolonged, however, some men married in South Africa, reducing the flow of remittances to their wives in rural Mozambique. This new

‘transnational polygamy’ means that for such men (if not their wives), “‘total social lives” in [Mozambique] and South Africa are not mutually exclusive options’ (Lubkemann 2000, cited in Pessar & Mahler 2003: 827). In Senegal, some rural-urban migrant men jokingly refer to having a *femme de cour* (farm wife) running the rural homestead, and a *femme de coeur* (love wife) in town (Zeitzen 2008, 153).

Multiple relationships, sometimes taking the form of polygamy, crop up fairly frequently in accounts of the initial migrant generations of both Pakistanis and Turks in Europe. In the late 1960s and 70s, the constellation of Turkish men leaving wives and children behind in Turkey, engaging in relationships with European women, and only years later bringing their ‘real’ families to live with them, was not uncommon (Brouwer and Priester, 1983). Similarly, Shaw writes of Pakistani wives whose eventual migration to Britain in the mid 1960s was triggered by rumours or concerns, perhaps occasioned by a drying up of the flow of remittances, that their husband may have married or be having a relationship in the UK. One woman Shaw describes arrived to find her fears confirmed, and lived for a year in the same house as the English wife, until the latter’s departure (2000: 55). In such cases, polygamy appears as a transitory phase in settlement, often brought to an end by the reunification of the original couple.

Settled ethnic populations have developed in Denmark and Britain as a result of this transformation of temporary male migration to the settlement of families, and the arrival of new generations born in Europe. Migration from Turkey and Pakistan continues, however, producing more recent versions of such inter-ethnic polygamy. For many, marriage is the sole possible legal route to settlement in Europe, so in Denmark, cases of Turkish immigrant men marrying Danish citizens, but later divorcing them and bringing their original wives from Turkey to join them, have commonly been suspected by the Danish immigration authorities of being a form of immigration fraud: the so-called ‘Turkish trick’ (Henriksen & Frich, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

We learned of one such case from Zeynep. Married in Turkey, she and her husband lived a hard life as members of the Kurdish minority population in Eastern Turkey. Zeynep’s husband fled to Denmark in 1986, where he unsuccessfully sought asylum as a political refugee. Then, Zeynep reported, he ‘found a woman to marry – a Danish woman. In order to stay and get a residency permit... I got very upset about it. It was a difficult time.’ Three years later, having gained a Danish residency permit, Zeynep’s husband divorced and returned to Turkey to bring her and their two children to Denmark.

It was thanks to her that we came here. And in Turkey it was hard to get by. The material situation is much better here than in Turkey. That is why I wanted to meet her. She had married my husband and my husband had come here and got his residency. And then we could come. So we owed her our destiny.

Zeynep never found the woman and assumes that, as she was a heroin addict, it is likely that she may have died.

Migration may thus create new motivations for multiple marriages: as a response to the emotional or practical needs of migrants separated from their families, or as part of attempts to circumvent restrictions on migration through other routes. In both cases, the physical distance created by migration may facilitate the concealment of a pre-existing or new marriage from the other spouse, or from the relevant authorities.

### **Danish and British legal contexts**

Marriages judged to be *pro forma* for purposes of immigration are not considered valid grounds for entry or settlement in Britain and Denmark, but given the inherently private and culturally variable nature of marriage, establishing the genuineness of a marriage is a problematic task (Wray 2006a; Eggebö 2010; Institut for Menneskerettigheder 2004; Pöyry 2010). In 2000, the Danish government introduced the ‘combined attachment requirement’ to restrict marriage-related migration. Under this regulation, couples have to demonstrate that their attachment to Denmark is as strong (and since 2002, ‘stronger’) as to any other country (Bak-Jørgensen, forthcoming; Rytter 2007). It is now difficult for someone who enter Denmark through marriage to later facilitate the entry of another spouse from their country of origin, as they will often be judged to have greater ‘attachment’ to their homeland than to Denmark, a judgment made more conclusive where a couple has been married prior to one spouse’s migration to Denmark.<sup>4</sup> Such tightening of Danish immigration law has effectively removed the possibility of the ‘Turkish trick’ and has made spousal migration to Denmark more difficult than to Britain in recent years.

Polygamous marriages are not considered valid under English law if either spouse is domiciled in the United Kingdom. After a legal case in 1982, marriages contracted between British women and men living in countries which recognized polygamy were considered



potentially polygamous and therefore invalid, but in 1995 this was restricted to include only actually polygamous marriages. Where both spouses are domiciled overseas in a country where polygamy is legally recognized, a polygamous marriage is recognized as valid by UK law, but does not entitle all spouses to immigration rights, as a second wife will not be given entry clearance if, since their marriage, another wife of the same man has ever been in the UK (even as a visitor).<sup>5</sup> The non-recognition of polygamous marriages also means that previous divorces may come under scrutiny as, if the divorce is not recognized as valid under UK law, the second marriage may be considered polygamous (Clayton 2010: 319-20).

In Denmark, regardless of whether polygamous marriages are legal in the country of origin, only one spouse can gain family reunion as a marriage migrant, (Institut for menneskerettheder 2004). However, in 2007, a case in which a man had legally entered Denmark with two wives attracted media attention. He was an Iraqi translator, who gained asylum with his family after aiding the Danish armed forces in his home country (where polygamy is legal). After considerable debate, the Danish authorities demanded that he divorced one of his wives. Instead, the whole family left the country (Søndergaard, 2008). After a 2009 report highlighted the existence of other polygamous marriages in Denmark (Magaard 2009), the Minister of Integration also promised to tighten regulations to enable the deportation of migrants discovered to be in polygamous marriages (Integrationsministeriet, 2009). As most such marriages are consecrated under Islamic law, and as such are not considered legally valid by Danish civil law, however, this legal measure to combat them has a limited reach.

### **Polygamy and legal pluralism**

This legal pluralism further complicates the debates outlined earlier concerning what ‘counts’ as polygamy. Classic plural legal situations are found in colonial and post-colonial contexts where new laws were superimposed on pre-existing practices (Fuller 1994). Here Ghana provides a good example, with three official forms of marriage: marriage under ‘Ordinance’ (monogamous, contracted either in church or by a registrar), marriage under customary law, and Islamic marriage (in both of which, polygamy is permitted) (Zietzen 2008). Whilst neither the UK nor Denmark has a plural legal system in an official sense, Islamic law is an important point of reference for many British and Danish Muslims, leading some commentators to write

of a situation of ‘new’ or *de facto* legal pluralism (Merry in Fuller 1994; Yilmaz 2002; Mehdi 2007; Pearl & Menski 1998). Thus, Yilmaz writes:

Although English Law remains the official law of England, it is not the sole one which singularly governs and regulates all legal sides of familial relationship and other legal relations... Muslim law is still superior and dominant over English law in the Muslim mind and in the eyes of the Muslim community; and many Muslim individuals follow Muslim law by employing several strategies in England (2002: 343).

The relationships between Islamic and civil law vary between the two contexts of our research: Although a *nikah* (Islamic marriage ceremony) carried out in Pakistan would be accepted as a valid marriage for immigration purposes, Islamic marriage conducted in secular Turkey holds no such legal status. Within Britain and Denmark, religious marriage and divorce can take place independently of civil procedures or statuses. Given the importance of religious law, it is rare for a British Pakistani or Danish Turkish couples to have a civil marriage without a religious element<sup>6</sup>. The reverse, a religious marriage without a civil ceremony is, however, not infrequent. This *de facto* legal pluralism gives rise to one opportunity for polygamy among European Muslims, as one wife may be married under civil law, and another married by religious *nikah* only.

One Turkish woman interviewed in Denmark found herself in such an arrangement unintentionally. Raised and married in Denmark, Dilek divorced in her late twenties. Living alone with her two children, she became socially isolated, not an unusual situation for divorcees with a Turkish background, as divorcing is a breach of Turkish social norms (Liversage, forthcoming a; Akpınar, 2003). Although the stigma of divorce is shared with Pakistanis in Britain, a significant difference in practices of divorce exists between our two populations. In Britain, although lawyers may argue that a judicial divorce also dissolves the marriage under religious law, British Pakistani couples may not be considered by the Muslim community, or consider themselves, fully divorced (and so the woman free to marry again) unless a religious divorce has also been obtained (Carroll 1997). Among Turks in Denmark, there appears to be far less stress on the importance of a religious divorce.

Through her work, Dilek met a Turkish man. Against her initial judgement, he convinced her ‘...that he was the right one for me. I also got somewhat worried about if he might spread rumours about me if I was to back out [of their budding relationship]’. As intimate relations outside marriage breach social norms, the relationship had to be institutionalized if it was to continue, so the couple wed in a religious ceremony.

The relationship was, however, a bit ‘strange’, as Dilek’s new husband never really moved in with her. ‘He was a veeery busy man’, who made repeated ‘work trips abroad’. Over a year into their marriage, Dilek discovered that her husband had never divorced his first wife but was sharing his time between two households, which immediately led her to break off their relationship. While Dilek’s experience of unknowingly becoming a second wife parallels stories of the ‘travelling salesman’ who has two wives, unbeknownst to them both (Schwartzberg, 2004), both marriages had been sanctioned by religious authorities, and the first marriage furthermore by the Danish state. Thus a *de facto* legal pluralism enabled the polygamous arrangement.

### **Dual Marital Aspirations**

Our research in both the UK and Denmark suggests that cross-border polygamy is not merely the preserve of an older or migrant generation. Among young Danish Turkish and British Pakistani men, born or raised in Europe, we encountered cases where young men accepted marriages overseas, whilst also retaining long-term relationships with women living in Britain or Denmark (of either ‘native’ or migrant backgrounds). Elsewhere, we have written of the shock of a Pakistani/Turkish wife arriving to find her new husband living with his white British/Danish partner (and, in the British case, their children) whilst the arriving wives found themselves having to live near or with their mothers-in-law (Charsley 2005b, Liversage 2009). In such cases, geographical distance can again facilitate the concealment of other relationships from a potential spouse, even where close bonds of friend- or kinship exists.

In the cases above, the husband’s partnership had not been formalized by marriage, allowing them to sponsor the immigration of their brides – although this would have entailed concealing the fact that they did not intend to live with them.<sup>7</sup> Another woman, Bilqis, remained in Pakistan for 10 years following her marriage to a British cousin, before her husband’s divorce from his British wife and his decision to bring Bilqis to Britain.

One possible interpretation of these situations is that these young men are attempting to fulfil *dual marital aspirations* – for a ‘love match’ of their own choosing, but also to please their family and fulfill filial duties by marrying the spouse selected for them (cf. Mirdal, 1984 for the Turkish case). Hence, in another Pakistani family, the first marriage was a love match and was a religious *nikah* only, with no civil ceremony. A few years later, the husband married a cousin in Pakistan, who then came to Britain, although his furious first wife insisted that they live in separate households, and he now divides his time between the two.

In another case, a young couple – Asiya and Jamal – were just about to reveal their relationship and intention to marry to their families, when Jamal went on holiday to Pakistan. When he returned, he told Asiya that he had been pressured into marrying a cousin<sup>8</sup>. Jamal was reliant on a family business for his livelihood, which may have added to the pressure to accept the marriage, and which constrained his ability to divorce. He suggested polygamous solutions to the problem: if he brought this wife to Britain, would Asiya still be willing to marry him by *nikah* only? If not, could he and Asiya get married, and leave his wife in Pakistan, but not divorce her, as this would cause conflict in his family? Ending the relationship at the cost of much personal distress, Asiya rejected these options, both because she found the idea of sharing a husband repugnant, and because she thought her parents would refuse the suggestion that their only daughter become a second wife, or have anything less than a fully and publically celebrated marriage. ‘I wish he’d never gone to Pakistan’ she said, ‘Last year everything was great – I knew who I was going to get married to’.

The degree of reluctance with which these men have entered into the marriage favoured by their parents varied and was sometimes hard to ascertain. By employing the term ‘dual aspirations’ we do not mean to deny the possibility of coercion in these decisions, but where it is exerted, such pressure often rests precisely on the issue of filial duty. Such intergenerational tensions have often been viewed as between the traditions of migrants or ethnic minority communities, and the practices of the ‘modern’ Western majority, so there is some irony that polygamy (an archetype of ‘tradition’) appears to be employed by some men in negotiating their desire for a romantic partnership of their own choosing.

### ***Polygamy, Family Needs, and Divorce***

As these examples suggest, motivations for polygamy may include consideration of the interests of wider family. Marriage is highly valued among both Pakistani and Turkish

families, and divorce often viewed negatively. In this context, a second marriage may be an arrangement to keep a first marriage from breaking up, even when there are long-lasting problems. Polygamy may thus be an alternative to divorce. Furthermore, as the social status of divorced women are low, and as the status of 'second wife' is not an attractive position, it may be offered to divorcees who hold diminished value in the marriage market (cf. Timaerus and Reynar, 1998 on Sub-Saharan Africa). One divorced Turkish marriage migrant with two children, Ceylan, told of having been asked by a married Turkish man to become his second wife. He told her that '...his wife had been ill for many years, so they could not be together. And that it was fine with her if he found himself a second wife.' Ceylan considered the offer, but declined after negative reactions from married female Turkish friends (cf. Magaard, 2009).

Another case of using a second marriage to solve a problem in the first concerned Ahmet, a Turkish labour migrant, who came to Denmark in the early 1970s. His wife later joined him, but they found that they were unable to have children. Children are highly prized in Turkish families (Kagıtcıbası 2005) and infertility – frequently attributed to female biological deficiencies – may lead the man to divorce in order to find another woman to bear his children (Van Rooij *et al*, 2009). To avoid divorce, another solution is for the man to take a second wife (cf. Shaw 2000 on British Pakistanis).

As Ahmet had already brought one wife to Denmark, his second – religiously wed – wife could not gain entry. With irregular migration to Denmark constrained by an effective population monitoring regime, the second wife remained in the village in Turkey. Ahmet visited her on holidays, and over the years she bore him three boys. When the children reached school age, they moved to Denmark to live with their father and his first wife, gaining the prospect of a better future.

We learned of this case during an interview with the wife of one of these sons (i.e. Ahmet's daughter-in-law). After marrying, she did not – as she had expected – leave her village to join her husband in Denmark. As Ahmet's second wife in Turkey had become ill, the young bride was told to move to her aging mother-in-law's house to care for her. Over the next eight years, she saw her husband only during his holiday visits to Turkey.

Thus Ahmet enacted his duty of care for his second wife through the labour of his daughter-in-law, who became part of his extended family upon marriage. Complicated by immigration regulations and geographical distance, however, Ahmet's polygamous marriage

was stretched across space, with one woman bearing the children in Turkey, and another woman (and their father) bringing them up in Denmark. While this presumably was not an easy fate for the second wife in Turkey (or the daughter-in-law who was separated from her husband), this arrangement seems to have prevented the problems of rivalry that often arises between co-habiting wives (Ilkaracan, 2001; Sargent & Cordell, 2003).

During our British fieldwork, we learnt of another polygamous marriage which arose in response to transnational care needs when a South Asian community group held a meeting to discuss a perceived problem of older men returning to the subcontinent and marrying a younger woman. During this meeting, Tarifa, a British-born woman in her thirties, described her father's polygamous family: his first wife in Pakistan developed arthritis and was unable to look after the children, so she accompanied her husband when he asked for the hand of his second wife (Tarifa's mother). When her father migrated to Britain, he brought Tarifa's mother, together with some of the children from the first marriage. When her father's health deteriorated later in life, he was advised that a warmer climate could help, but by then the children were in school so Tarifa's mother remained in Britain with them. In Pakistan, Tarifa's father had a maid to look after him, but concern that there would be gossip about his living alone with a young woman prompted Tarifa's mother to suggest he married again. Although Tarifa remembers her mother sulking when she was left out, she describes the three wives as having had a good relationship, 'like sisters'. Here, again, we see how the distances and separations involved in transnational living may provide motivations for polygamous marriages.

### ***Polygamy and Marital Conflict***

Although some women may have reasons for accepting a second wife, the contracting of a second marriage is commonly a source of marital conflict, particularly where it is done without the knowledge, or against the wishes, of the first wife (cf. Zeitzen, 2008). However, second marriages may also be contracted as a response to conflict. Sumera, who was born in Britain, married Tariq, her aunt's neighbour's son from Lahore, who joined her in the UK. After several years of a marriage which Sumera reports were always troubled, Tariq went to Pakistan by himself for a holiday. Sumera's cousin was also in Pakistan for a family wedding, and was tasked with collecting the wedding video. When the man employed to make the film

mentioned that he had also recently filmed Tariq's wedding, the cousin was shocked – and it turned out that the new bride's family was unaware of his other wife in Britain.

When Sumera heard the news, she ended the relationship. Some women friends advised her not to divorce, as that would leave Tariq free to bring his new wife to the UK, something they viewed as an injustice. Eventually, however, on the suggestion of her mother, Sumera reluctantly accepted a short-lived marriage with a temporary migrant.<sup>9</sup> Sumera and Tariq eventually got back together, and he now blames his family for interfering in the first marriage and pushing him towards the second. Sumera did not think it fair to ask him to divorce the other woman, an innocent party in all this, so the second wife lives with Tariq's family in Pakistan, and he remits money to support her.

Another British Pakistani woman, Parveen, reported that her sister's husband had also married again in Pakistan without giving her warning. Parveen described this short lived marriage, which ended when his first wife refused to take him back unless he divorced the other woman, as 'like a fling' intended to punish his first wife and her family for not treating him well enough. Parveen said that these events were kept quiet, so not many people outside the family knew about the second marriage.<sup>10</sup>

Iqbal told a similar story – he and his wife had problems, and he objected to what he saw as her neglect of her domestic duties.

I reckon girls brought up here don't think differently from men... Back home they are trained differently – to look after the house and not work. Here they train them that there are no differences between boys and girls. Who is going to look after the house? Angels? [The woman says] 'I'm tired – let's get takeaway... I'm tired, I can't clean the house – you clean it.' How, if you've done 16 hours work?

He used to tell his wife he would go to Pakistan and get married again, but by the time she realized he was serious, it was too late: the marriage had already been arranged and to cancel it would be a cause of great shame for the bride-to-be. Iqbal acknowledged that it is better to get a first wife's permission before marrying again, but argued this was not necessary in his case, as his wife was not acting like a wife. He had told a friend in his home town in Kashmir that he was looking for another wife, and the friend suggested a much younger women, whom Iqbal had viewed with affection when she was a teenager, but not until then thought of as a

potential bride.<sup>11</sup> They married, and she now lives with her in-laws and has had their first child.

Iqbal's justification of his decision to marry again was complex. He said he thought it would push his first wife one way or another: either it would be the end of his first marriage; or it would make his first wife realize that his complaints were serious, and so bring her back into line, in which case he could have kept both of them. But he also suggested that his wife's behaviour had at some level been designed to push him towards a second marriage, so that she would be seen as justified in leaving him and the family would blame him for the marriage failing.<sup>12</sup> His first marriage ended after his wife 'kicked him out' when he returned to Britain a month after the wedding – although he says the *talaaq* (divorce pronounced by the husband) was not 'from the heart' and so might not be valid. The civil divorce will take longer – and Iqbal thinks his wife is delaying the process in order to 'give me a hard time': to prevent him bringing his second family to Britain.

### **'Technical' Polygamy**

In contrast to the *de facto* polygamy practiced by marrying a second wife in Britain by Islamic *nikah* only, Iqbal's current situation appears to be one of *de jure* polygamy but of religious and *de facto* monogamy. Both his marriages are legally valid in the countries in which they were contracted, but (unless his musings about the invalidity of the *talaaq* prove correct) in practical and religious terms, the first marriage ended with the Islamic divorce.

Similar types of apparent or 'technical' polygamy resulting from multiple systems of marriage or divorce may occur within national borders. Elsewhere (Charsley 2006), we have described how one British Pakistani couple took advantage of the flexibility of the plural legal situation: the man's divorce from his non-Pakistani first wife was not yet final, so the couple had a *nikah* ceremony after which they could 'date' without community approbation, although they did not cohabit until after their eventual civil marriage and full wedding celebrations.<sup>13</sup>

We encountered several cases of *de jure* or *technical* polygamy, even though the individuals concerned were monogamous in practice. This 'technical' polygamy occurred in two forms. One form was due to the parallel existence of religious and civil marriages and divorces, and another to the involvements of transnational marriages in the legal systems of two nation states.



One case was Ali, a marriage migrant, who separated from a Danish-Turkish woman after a decade of marriage. Only a few weeks later, Ali was offered another marriage...

... to a woman who was from our village, who was also recently divorced in Denmark... My sister recommended it. And I was still in shock [from the divorce]. I had not pulled myself together... I think it was because I had always been married, and people thought that I would not be able to live alone. ... In fact, we were not sweethearts. I just met her [the second wife] and I married her almost the next day. And the day after that, I thought: Why did I get married?

As divorce – and the ensuing single living for adults – is considered anomalous among many Turks, a swift re-marriage, perhaps to another divorcee with limited alternative marriage prospect, can remedy the situation. With single men and women having limited options to meet each other, friends or family members – such as Ali's sister – may step in as match-makers. Ali's second marriage occurred before either Ali or his new wife's civil divorces had been finalized. As their wedding was only a religious *nikah* performed by an imam, however, the lack of civil divorce was not an impediment. Although the two forms of marriage thus overlapped, the actual relationships did not, rendering them monogamous in practical terms. However, until their civil divorces were finalized, both the husband and wife were in one sense married to two people simultaneously (see Mehdi and Rasmussen, 2002, for similar Danish-Pakistani cases).

A final example highlights the importance of geography in transnational gendered relations of power surrounding 'technical' polygamous marriages. At 18, Lale had an arranged marriage to a young man living in Denmark. The wedding was held in Turkey, and the papers later transferred to Denmark. The husband was not satisfied with the match, however, and after a year he returned Lale to her parents in Turkey. The 'no-fault' divorce he filed for and gained in Denmark was, however, not valid in Turkey.<sup>14</sup> Lale would not accept having been – as she perceived it – unrightfully 'dumped' back in Turkey, and filed for compensation in exchange for accepting the divorce. For this Turkish court case to be finalized, however, Lale needed her (ex)-husband's cooperation, which she was unable to obtain. She hired a lawyer, who sent letters to her husband in Denmark, with the following disheartening result:

He skips off. He changes his address. The letters I send are returned. In reality, he is not at the address where he is supposed to be. So the judge cannot come to a verdict... I am trying to get my right for these ten years. But he will not give it to me.... It is his fault that I ended up in this situation. I was young when I married him. Maybe I could even have gone to university. [Now] he is married again to another woman. He has been so for three years... It is a bit messy, all of it.

Due to the protracted court case, Lale and her husband were still married according to Turkish law, and thus – on paper – she now had a co-wife in Denmark. In practice, however, her marriage had ended a decade earlier. This ‘technical polygamy’ was the result of the non-commensurability of the two national systems of family law – where a divorce valid in the country of settlement does not automatically dissolve the marriage in the country where it was formed. While disgruntled wives holding European residency or citizenship could wield much more power over their (ex)husband’s future family life, as Iqbal asserts his first wife is doing in delaying their civil divorce, Lale’s similar refusal to divorce did not impede her (ex)husband’s remarriage in Denmark. This points to the complex ways gender and power are interrelated across transnational spaces (Liversage, forthcoming b).

According to several informants, the expense of obtaining a Turkish divorce also means it is not uncommon for Turks to divorce only in Denmark. The costs are incurred by initiating the Turkish court case, so both spouses may wait for the other to take the lead. Furthermore, unless they need to marry again in Turkey, getting this divorce may be of little consequence.

The problems that can arise from one country not accepting divorces conducted elsewhere have also been reported for Iranian refugee women whose Swedish divorces are not valid in Iran. If they remarry, they risk severe punishment in Iran for bigamy, which may keep them from returning to the country of their birth (Darvishpour 1999). Men do not experience similar problems as they are permitted more than one spouse.

### **Transforming polygamy: migration, transnationalism, and distance**

As this article shows, parallel religious and civil marriage statuses within and across nations can create both opportunities for polygamous marriages, and the appearance of polygamy where relationships are monogamous in practice. As the meeting point of national systems of

family law, transnational marriage adds to the complexity of the situation. More than this, however, we would argue that the logics of migration and transnationalism may create both opportunities and motivations for polygamy.

Distance and barriers to mobility remain crucial in understanding transnational dynamics (cf Levitt 2001:159). At a practical level, living in another country may facilitate concealment of the cause of marital problems or existence of a first marriage, or hide a planned second marriage from a first wife until after the fact (although such deception is also possible within national borders). But equally important, we would argue, are the emotional logics of migration and transnationalism, and what Jorgen Carling (2008) calls the ‘human dynamics of migrant transnationalism’. Emotions, writes Skrbiš, ‘should not simply be seen as a convenient and occasional resource called upon to explain certain peculiarities of transnational family life but they need to be seen as constitutive part of the transnational family experience itself’ (2008:236). The bonding role of emotion has most frequently been addressed in studies of transnational kinship (see review in Skrbiš 2008; e.g. Shaw & Charsley 2006). Here, however, we stress the emotional realities of the parallel ‘total social lives’ enabled by transnationalism.

In terms of lived experience, where a second marriage takes place overseas, far from the first wife and family, this distance may be crucial in understanding and humanizing such men’s decision to take a second wife (cf. Charsley 2005a). For Jamal, the young man who lost his girlfriend after marrying in Pakistan, the implications of the decision to agree to marry his cousin might well have been more stark if it had all taken place in Britain. For a stressed migrant man on a break back home, encountering a young woman willing to marry him may provide welcome contrast to the pressures of his other life. The continuities of transnational social fields are important in understanding many of the examples of polygamy presented here, such as the intergenerational implications of transnational marital responsibilities borne by Ahmet’s daughter in law. But it also seems likely that the *discontinuities* may make marrying again feel more possible or reasonable that might otherwise be the case.

Transnationalism thus produces conditions, opportunities and motivations for multiple marriages to occur. In this complex situation of coexisting legal codes, networks and aspirations, polygamy becomes one of the grounds on which intergenerational relations and ‘gendered geographies of power’ (Pessar & Mahler 2003) are negotiated. As Carling observes, the geographical distance between migrants and non-migrants, and sending and

receiving countries, has social and imaginative parallels resulting from asymmetries of information and resources, so that ‘the solidarity of transnationalism is mixed with frustrations and conflict’ (2008: 1452).

Current Danish immigration regulations have restricted the ability of Danish Turks to obtain reunification in Denmark with a Turkish spouse, introducing a significant difference between the British and Danish cases. As a result, rates of transnational marriage among Danish Turks (and other ethnic minorities) have fallen (Schmidt et al 2009). As the rules are tied to the spouses’ age, however, it remains to be seen whether some are merely postponing a transnational marriage until later in life. Our Danish material also includes some cases of recent transnational marriages in which the Turkish wife remains in Turkey, whilst their husband maintains a relationship or engages in affairs (usually with non-Turkish women) in Denmark. This situation is both reminiscent of the earlier ‘batchelor’ years of male labour migration, and suggestive of new possibilities for young Turkish Danes to negotiate the dual aspirations discussed above, and perhaps new opportunities for polygamy.

The kinship practices which develop as a result of these processes of transnationalism, legal pluralism and adaptation to changing legal frameworks may, however, be poorly understood or tolerated by legal regimes, creating new risks for those involved. Polygamy is often presented as inherently dangerous or oppressive to women (Zeitzen 2008; Hassouneh-Phillips 2001) and the configurations of polygamy documented here present new dangers, the best known example of which is probably the lack of legal recourse after divorce for women married by religious *nikah* alone. Immigration regulations permitting only one wife to join a migrant husband, such as in France where work permits may be withdrawn from polygamous migrants, may lead to abandonment and hardship (Zeitzen 2008: 165).

In the majority of practices, using polygamous marriages to one’s own ends remains a male domain, underscoring the continued existence of gender asymmetries. Women may, at most, delay a civil divorce to prevent her husband bringing a second wife to Europe, an example which nevertheless shows that the intervention of immigration regulations in transnational polygamy can (in some configurations of gender and geography) undermine conventional understandings of gendered power relationships surrounding polygamy.

Moreover, real or *de jure* polygamy may create new kinds of risks for the men involved. Where their first marriage has ended with a religious divorce, even men who would not have considered polygamy may see no reason to wait for the decree *nicii* before contracting a

second marriage, often overseas. Such an arrangement may make sense for a man eager not to have an extended bachelor existence imposed upon him by immigration requirements – he can then start the process of bringing his new wife to join him as soon as possible. However, in the context of both hostility to polygamy displayed anew in recent newspaper coverage<sup>15</sup> and suspicion of marriage-related immigration fraud in both Britain and Denmark, such practices may leave these men vulnerable. In a recent consultation on marriages to spouses from overseas, the UK Home Office raised the suggestion that residency rights could be revoked if a husband later ‘abandoned’ his wife and evidence came to light that the marriage had been contracted for immigration purposes. It is not inconceivable that an apparent rush to bring over a second wife, or revelations of actual or ‘technical’ polygamy, might be employed as evidence of such original intentions – but the cases above suggest that this would by no means always be an accurate interpretation.

Our material demonstrates that polygamy is not simply an ‘old-fashioned import’ from immigrants’ countries of origin. Polygamy encompasses a variety of different practices, some of which arise due to the context of transnational migration, where different and distant aspirations, practices, and individuals are brought together in a single, if disjointed, social field. Coexisting legal systems within and between countries, norms surrounding marriage and divorce, tensions of competing marital aspirations, and the distance created by migration, all combine to create situations where men (and, to a much lesser extent, also women) are, in one form or another, married to more than one person at the same time. Multiple or overlapping relationships are of course common occurrences irrespective of ethnic or religious group, but the possibility of solemnizing more than one relationship in marriage adds to the complexity of issues at play in understanding changing family practices among Muslim minorities in Europe.

## Notes

1. By this we denote not the conflation of these two terms, but that the research included both European people of Turkish/Pakistani ethnic background, and migrants from Turkey or Pakistan.
2. Lowest in Punjab (<3%), highest in Balochistan (>12%).
3. Similar concerns were expressed by the British government in a 2002 immigration White Paper (Home Office 2002: 98-99). Elsewhere, we discuss some British Pakistani women’s concern that even a cousin might view transnational marriage as simply an opportunity for migration (Charsley 2006).

4. In 2010, the Danish Supreme Court ('Højesteret') judged in favour of the Ministry's practice in a Turkish case (see [www.domstol.dk](http://www.domstol.dk), case 248/2009).
5. On the changing regulation of polygamy among immigrants to Britain, from questioning the validity of marriages contracted in countries permitting polygamy, to preventing the immigration of multiple spouses, see Shah 2008.
6. In Britain and Denmark this may be on the same occasion if the mosque is registered for civil marriage, or as a separate event (Yilmaz 2002).
7. See Wray 2006b on increasing focus on 'intention to live together' in evaluating spousal immigration applications. See Pöyry (2010) for evaluations in the Danish context.
8. He also said that he had not been intimate with this other woman. Men forced into matrimony may be more able to resist consummation than women in similar situations (Das 1973: 34). However, the woman (described above) living alone near her aunt gave birth to a son conceived in Pakistan, suggesting some men who do not intend to live with their new bride may still consummate the marriage.
9. This turned out to be fortuitous, as under an Islamic divorce rule which many interpret as warning against casual divorce, a man who has divorced his wife cannot remarry her unless she has since been married to another.
10. In the Danish material, there were also examples of second wives being compared to secret mistresses, but we did not encounter the argument that taking a second wife was intended to punish the first.
11. In Lahore, second wives (in polygamous or serially monogamous marriages) are often selected by husbands-to-be rather than by their families, and a close friend's sister is a common choice for such 'love' marriages (Fisher 1991: 102).
12. This was another consanguineous marriage, so they had many relatives in common. See Charsley 2006 for a more detailed discussion of the uses of *nikah* and divisibility of Pakistani weddings.
13. The story of Su (Liversage 2009) is a similar case from Turks in Denmark.
14. See Carroll (1997) on how British courts have dealt with transnational Islamic divorce. See Mehdi (2007) for a Danish case.
15. In 2007, British newspapers reported estimates of 1000 'valid' polygamous marriages, in addition to 'unauthorized' Muslim *de facto* polygamy, as a problem of the exploitation of women and a fraudulent burden on the social security system (Kennedy 2007).

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