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INTRODUCTION

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Contesting categories: cross-border marriages from the perspectives of the state, spouses and researchers

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ABSTRACT

Marriages that involve the migration of at least one of the spouses challenge two intersecting facets of the politics of belonging: the making of the 'good and legitimate citizens' and the 'acceptable family'. In Europe, cross-border marriages have been the target of increasing state controls, an issue of public concern and the object of scholarly research. The study of cross-border marriages and the ways these marriages are framed is inevitably affected by states' concerns and priorities. There is a need for a reflexive assessment of how the categories employed by state institutions and agents have impacted the study of cross-border marriages. The introduction to this Special Issue analyses what is at stake in the regulation of cross-border marriages and how European states use particular categories (e.g. 'sham', 'forced' and 'mixed' marriages) to differentiate between acceptable and non-acceptable marriages. When researchers use these categories unreflexively, they risk reproducing nation-centred epistemologies and reinforcing state-informed hierarchies and forms of exclusion. We suggest ways to avoid these pitfalls: differentiating between categories of analysis and categories of practice, adopting methodologies that do not mirror nation-states' logic and engaging with general social theory outside migration studies. The empirical contributions of the Special Issue offer new insights into a timely topic.

Introduction: scholarly problematisation of a political issue

Marriage has always implied some sort of mobility, either for the spouse who moves to the location of his or her partner, or for both spouses when they choose a new residence. In the last few decades in Europe, as well as in other countries of the Global North, one particular form of marriage mobility, that which involves the crossing of national borders, has become the target of increasing state controls, an issue of public concern and the object of scholarly research. This Special Issue examines the politicisation of cross-border marriages in Europe and focuses specifically on how states' concerns over cross-border marriages have impacted the research agenda of migration studies and more fundamentally the way migration researchers approach this social phenomenon. Beyond a critical discussion of the subject, this introduction also proposes alternative ways to understand and

analyse cross-border marriages. It serves as a reflexive opening piece to the rich empirical contributions that constitute the Special Issue. Each article discusses a specific aspect of the dichotomies European nation-states and their agents use to categorise marriage migrants and their loved ones. But contributions also illuminate how the couples who are concerned react to these hegemonic categories: they talk about people who may find themselves reproducing, ignoring, or contesting categories. The Special Issue not only critically scrutinises categories, it also brings new insights into the timely topic of cross-border marriages.

Originally, the regulation of cross-border marriages in many European states focused on unions between Europeans and 'natives' in (former) colonies and their prospective migration to the European metropoles (Stoler 2002; Van Walsum 2008). In Europe, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, governments realised that many 'guest workers' had not left and instead had started bringing their spouses and other family members. Another new concern emerged at that time among European states, when it appeared that some of the children of guest workers and other post-war migrants were seeking a partner in their parents' country of origin. State authorities interpreted this trend as an indication of failed integration and therefore a threat to national cohesion. By the early 2000s, family-related migration, either to join a family member or to create a new family, had become an important reason for migrants to enter European states.[1] Obviously, this trend is related to European countries' introduction of highly selective migration policies, which are based on skills (and asylum) and deter the migration of most third-country nationals (de Haas, Natter, and Vezzoli 2018). Family migration is one of the few remaining channels for those who do not fit into the privileged categories of mobility, and some states have reacted by introducing a number of measures to restrict migration through marriage, including stricter income, age and language requirements (Wray, Agoston, and Hutton 2014; Block 2016).

While interest in family migration to Europe was only emerging in the early 2000s (Kofman 2004), it has since become a major focus in migration studies. Migrant and transnational family dynamics (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010; Baldassar and Merla 2014; Mazzucato et al. 2015) and cross-border marriages (Williams 2010; Charsley 2013) have become increasingly popular subjects of inquiry. Scholars' endeavours to investigate this politicised field are often motivated by the wish to contest exclusionary processes and challenge racialised or ethnicised narratives. When scholars study phenomena such as 'cross-border marriages', 'transnational marriages', 'bi-national relationships' and 'mixed couples', we construct a field of research that parallels political debates on the regulation of marriage migration. The issues that are scrutinised and the ways they are framed are inevitably affected by states' concerns and priorities. The consequence is we often inadvertently reinforce boundaries, particular forms of exclusion and hierarchies and contribute to the reification of state categories, even when we mean to be critical of state policies.[2] Our responsibility to be reflexive also relates to the fact that some of our studies are rightfully used – sometimes commissioned – by state authorities, for instance to develop informed but also more effective migration policies.

In order to understand why cross-border marriages have become a key site for contemporary forms of migration control (Bonizzoni 2018), we need to analyse nation-states' politics of belonging vis-à-vis both migration and marriage. For Yuval-Davis (2006), the politics of belonging refers to 'specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging

in particular ways to particular collectivities' (197): it exists only when boundaries are challenged and threatened. The relatively recent politicisation of cross-border marriages in many European nation-states reveals the extent to which these marital unions challenge boundaries between 'us' and 'them' in at least two different ways: established definitions of both the 'good and legitimate citizen' and the 'good family' (Schmidt 2008; Bonjour and De Hart 2013) are under threat when citizens and residents marry 'outsiders'.

First, these marriages involve the migration of at least one person who is not part of the imagined national community (Anderson 1991). Through marriage to someone already living in a European state (either a citizen or a legal resident), non-citizens become part of a legally recognised family unit: on the basis of human rights laws that protect family life in all self-proclaimed democratic states, they obtain the right to enter and settle in the national territory. Cross-border marriages challenge the boundaries of the nation by enabling non-members to enter and reside in the national territory without having been invited to do so.

Second, cross-border marriages also threaten the normative vision of the 'good family' as the social institution that produces and raises the new members of society and the new members of the nation. Cultural reasons are increasingly proffered to highlight supposedly unacceptable ways of 'doing family' (Strasser et al. 2009) within migration populations, with gender and intergenerational relationships often at the heart of the constructed dichotomies (Fischer and Dahinden 2017). So-called 'forced', 'arranged', 'sham' and 'grey' marriages threaten the supposedly love- and consent-based relationships that are the foundation of 'modern families' in 'modern societies' (Bonjour and De Hart 2013).

This introduction outlines the ways in which this entanglement of migration and marriage with the logic of the nation-state leads to particular challenges when doing research in this area. We argue for an in-depth and critical examination of how scholars, including ourselves, have used these categories in relation to the two facets of the politics of belonging mentioned above. Our title, 'Contesting categories', expresses these aims. It has a double meaning: first, it refers to the critical examination of the categories used to regulate and/or analyse cross-border marriage. Second, it refers to the dynamic interaction between categories of practice and categories of analysis.

We first discuss the state-induced category of 'migration' involved in cross-border marriages. We then critically examine ideas of marriage, and kinship more generally, that underlie analyses of these specific unions. Finally, we propose epistemological, methodological and theoretical options to tackle these challenges. The contributions in this Special Issue offer insightful and novel empirical analyses based on different parts of the European continent. All articles further engage with social theory outside migration studies, such as feminist studies, class theory and the anthropology of kinship.

The 'border' in cross-border marriages: migrants, non-citizens and other cultural 'others'

The consequences of borders: migration and the politics of belonging

In this first section, we address the 'cross-border' nature of the marriages under study. Rather than considering marriages involving partners separated by borders as inherently different from other marriages, we argue that it is the consequences of the 'cross-border'

dimension that matter. By crossing one or many borders, one of the spouses becomes a 'migrant', and this new state-imposed status has enormous implications (Gillespie, Howarth, and Cornish 2012; Hui 2016).

Concretely, nation-states produce a series of categories to justify the mechanisms of (differentiated) inclusion and exclusion they implement through laws, policies and practices. In the logic of the nation-state, migration is problematic because it blurs the supposedly cultural and ethnic homogeneity of the people who live within a given national territory (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Nation-states establish boundaries between those who do and do not belong and in the process produce various dichotomies: 'citizens' versus 'foreigners' and the 'imagined national community' versus 'ethnic or religious others', but also the national community of solidarity (through the welfare state) versus those who cannot claim (full) access to it (Wimmer 2002). The category 'migrant' only makes sense in dialectic with 'non-migrant'. The category 'people with a migration background' reveals the long-lasting effect of migration-related labels: even though migrants' descendants are usually citizens of the state in which they reside, they are often still excluded from the national imagined community (Elrick and Schwartzman 2015).

When people cross national borders to join their spouse, they become 'marriage migrants'. Through this attribution, both spouses – whether citizens or not – confront the state apparatus in ways other couples do not. Because they live (or used to live) across borders, the right of these couples to live together is imperilled and their intimate life comes under scrutiny from state agents (Maskens 2015; Bonizzoni 2018; De Hart and Bonjour, forthcoming). In other terms, we see here not only how migration is produced, regulated and governed by borders, but also that borders 'make a world' rather than divide an already-made one (Paasi 2009; Wilson and Hastings 2012). Following Mezzadra and Neilson (2012), we propose examining how state-centred institutional regimes and capitalist conditions create and reproduce categories such as 'migrants' and 'refugees', and how these categories affect the lives of those who fall within them (see also Hess et al. 2015), for instance when it comes to cross-border marriages.

Bordering practices regarding cross-border marriages take place both inside the territory of the nation-state (for instance, when the aliens police visit the home of a couple to determine whether their relationship is 'genuine') and outside (in consulates and embassies where applicants for family reunification are interviewed, or in the language schools that are commissioned to offer pre-entry language tests). So-called 'marriage migrants' therefore confront bordering practices from the moment they start envisaging joining their spouse abroad and continue even after they cross the physical border.

But borders and bordering practices not only regulate mobility within and beyond national territories physically, but also structure how we think. They facilitate the creation of the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', enabling nation-states to construct, stabilise and normalise categories to differentiate between those who are and those who are not permitted to enter their territory, and to endow individuals living within their territory with different rights and degrees of membership (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012; Anderson 2013; Dahinden 2014). This logic is crucial when it comes to marriage migration. When people marry across borders, it is not only the migrating partner who is concerned with a state's categories: the partner who is not moving, who has been living in the country and who is in many cases a citizen of that country is also strongly impacted by this logic, its politics of belonging and the boundary-making processes it implies. The new couple,

because it marries across national borders, often becomes suspicious in the eyes of the nation-states' institutions and agents.

Considering migrants as inherently different from the supposedly legitimate population, dominant culturalist discourses legitimise different rights for and treatment of non-citizens (Bonjour and Block 2016; Ghorashi 2017; Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018), but also some citizens, where it becomes normal for the state to control their personal lives and ways of 'doing family' (Strasser et al. 2009), a point that will be developed later.

Reproducing states' categories of 'migration'

The logic of the nation-state influences how cross-border marriages are framed, discursively constructed and politically controlled. It seems problematic when we study these unions using the same logic and reproducing the related categories, a criticism that was first raised more than a decade ago (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Some scholars working on migration or ethnic and racial relations have become increasingly reflexive in how they frame their object of study. These scholars point in particular to the need for researchers not to take states' categories for granted; to constantly reflect on the constructed character of these categories, which sustain given policies; and not to contribute to the reproduction of those categories themselves (Favell 2007; Bakewell 2008; Dahinden 2016; Hui 2016; Horwath, Amelina, and Peters 2017; Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2018). Dahinden (2016), for instance, argues that migration and integration studies could only emerge in a context where states were developing a strong migration apparatus and a corresponding discourse to normalise migration-related differences. In other words, the close link between states' development of migration legislation and policies, on the one hand, and the institutionalisation of research on migration, on the other, enhances the risk that migration scholars reproduce not only normative categories, but also the mechanisms of exclusion and power inherent to these categories.

In studies on 'cross-border marriages', research focusing on the normative mechanisms behind legislations and policies are almost by definition reflexive regarding the categories institutionalised by states. Studies focusing on couples' experiences, however, are not always as reflexive. Prioritising the role of ethnicity, religion or culture in these marriages is one way in which we, as researchers, may mirror and reinforce nation-states' concerns. Research designs in migration studies sometimes select their unit of investigation along ethnic – and, increasingly, religious – lines. Similarly, studies exploring cross-border marriages often focus on whether or not migrants and their descendants marry within or outside the ethnic group. They build on early assimilationist assumptions that inter-ethnic marriage rates are the ultimate indicator of migrant groups' (collective) integration into a society (Gordon 1964). Since then, the causal links between a supposed lack of integration and cross-border marriages have been challenged (Song 2009; Bonjour and Kraler 2015; Charsley, Bolognani, and Spencer 2017). In the same vein, studies on 'mixed' or 'bi-national' couples may assume that national or ethnic differences between the two partners – and not, for instance, the differences in their legal status – are the central elements worth studying (De Hart and Bonjour, forthcoming). Research designs relying on ethnicity as units of analysis and investigation are not problematic per se, but they become so when ethnicity is not taken as an empirical question, because such a view implies that the ethnic affiliation of the spouses can explain social processes a priori and is the only

parameter worth studying, at the expense of others, such as social class, legal status or gender (Moret 2016).

Beyond the focus on differentiated populations within nation-states, migration research in general, and research on cross-border marriages in particular, tends to treat the colonial legacies of a world organised in a logic of 'the West and the rest' with insufficient reflexivity (Nader 1989; Lutz 1991; Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015). In other words, the seemingly natural organisation of the population into separate 'cultural groups' within nation-states cannot be understood without also understanding the concomitant process through which populations, categorised along the lines of nationality, ethnicity, race or religion, are hierarchised at the global level. The hierarchies that sustain global power relations inform who is and who is not permitted to cross which borders. Such politically and economically loaded representations can be seen for instance in the non-reflexive use of terms such as 'importing' a (generally female) partner and 'forced marriages', or in the consideration of 'modernity' as the prerogative of 'Western' family models. They can also be seen in the dimensions that are silenced, omitted, neglected and taken for granted, as when research focuses on people in the country of immigration at the expense of those who live across the border (in particular the partner and his/her network), or when research neglects topics such as how transnational couples negotiate their new place of residence, assuming preferences are necessarily for the most powerful nation-state.

The 'marriage' in cross-border marriages: the 'good family' in the making of the nation

Marriage, family and the politics of belonging

The second facet of the politics of belonging that we would like to discuss is the normative construction of a 'good' marriage as the basis of a 'good' family. Defining and controlling the family, in particular through the institution of marriage, constitutes a fundamental dimension of the processes through which nation-states reproduce themselves.

Although marriage, as a socially recognised institution, existed *before* the state and may continue to exist *without* it, the state plays a hegemonic role in determining acceptable forms of marriage and family and how citizens should behave towards each other in the intimate context of their home. The power of the state to recognise as marriage certain unions (e.g same-sex relationships) and ban others (e.g. polygamy, marriage involving minors below certain age) determines the legal rights and obligations of the spouses and, to a certain extent, the possibility of them living together and establishing a family.

But how do European states frame what a 'good' marriage and a 'good' family are? Why does the state regulate marriage migration differently from other types of family mobility ('family reunification' with children and transnational adoption, for example)? To answer these questions, it is important to understand two ways in which kinship and state politics are closely linked: in the nation's self-representation as a family, and in the importance of the family as central to the cultural reproduction of the nation and the making of good citizens.

In the introduction to his seminal book on nationalism, Anderson (1991) noted that nationalism shares more similarities with kinship than with political ideologies. Although

kinship and nationality have been considered different modes of political organisation in the social sciences, both of them are forms of membership based on 'diffuse, enduring solidarity' (Schneider 1977), at least at the normative level.[3] In national discourses, the nation is often referred to as a family (Rytter 2010) and the state as a home for the family of the nation (Duyvendak 2011; Andrikopoulos 2017). Imagining the nation in terms of kinship may have very real effects in national politics and how people experience their participation in the national community. Migrants and their families are usually cast out of the national family, but some of them, due to their common 'ancestry', 'origin' or 'blood', are included in the national family and home without even being labelled 'migrants' by the state. For example, Germany and Greece did not categorise as 'migrants' those who relocated to their territories from the former Soviet Union and shared a 'common origin', and instead created new categories – *Aussiedler* and *pallinostountes*, respectively – that did not imply a lack of belonging.

The family is not only important in state politics as an idiom for national representation and a model for social organisation. The nation also reproduces itself through the families of its members. This point is particularly relevant in explaining the logic of controlling family and especially marriage migration. The nation-state relies on specific, gendered visions of kinship relations in order to reproduce itself physically and culturally. Nations construct themselves by delineating who does and who does not belong (Yuval-Davis 1997). The redefinition of kinship norms and the organisation of kinship relations has particular outcomes for the social reproduction of a national 'we'. Marriage in particular, as Carsten (forthcoming) argues, 'involves a creative and dynamic vision of a shared future'. Control over women's bodies is an important aspect of the reproduction of the nation, and it goes hand in hand with specific notions of the family.[4] Heterosexual marriage and monogamy (at least on the woman's side) ensure paternal filiation and the legitimacy of children (Delaney 1995). Control over women's sexuality thus ensures the biological and symbolic reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). On the one hand, women are biological (re)producers of the 'national stock' (ibid), and it is therefore important that they give birth to new members who fit the ethnicised, racialised and even classed representations of the nation. On the other hand, women are considered 'symbolic border guards' whose responsibility as intergenerational cultural transmitters is important to regulate. The family, therefore, is the cell of the nation in which parents not only give birth to new members of society, but also socialise them as 'proper' national citizens.

However, the question remains: why has cross-border marriage become the target of stricter state control than any other type of family-based migration?

In Euro-American conceptions of kinship, marriage is one of the few possible ways to establish a kinship relation with an outsider. Schneider (1980) referred to the two cultural orders of American kinship, which are arguably similar to kinship systems in Europe: the order of nature, according to which relatives are connected by blood; and the order of law, according to which relatives are connected by law and a code of conduct. Marriage falls into the second and becomes the basis for producing the first. Although the state regulates both types of relations, control of cross-border marriages becomes particularly important because marriage forges kinship relations with persons who have not been kin and enables them to become *citizens* as well. Through cross-border marriages and transnational adoption, previously unrelated individuals can become citizens by becoming kin. Interestingly, however, the state does not scrutinise cross-border marriages and transnational adoption

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in the same way. Indeed, the state does not even consider transnational adoption as 'migration' (Weil 1984). In transnational adoptions, underage children become the object of 'kinning' (Howell 2006) and their adoptive parents, often native middle-class citizens, take care of their socialisation. In cross-border marriages, the migrant spouse and their partner, as potential parents, are the active agents who will raise their children without necessarily providing them with the proper (national) upbringing.

In cross-border marriages, the state not only assesses the relationship itself (as it does with DNA tests for 'family reunifications' involving children, for example) but also the *quality* of the relationship. The state employs a number of categories, such as 'marriage of convenience', 'grey marriage', 'forced marriage' and 'arranged marriage', to evaluate whether the content of the relationship between two spouses complies with its own ideal of a good and acceptable marriage.

Furthermore, defining what a true and good marriage is activates definitions of what it is not. These dichotomies, in today's Europe, mostly take place through culturalisation processes and discursive hierarchies between 'their' marriages, i.e. those of certain migrant groups and their descendants, and 'ours', i.e. those of the natives (Bonjour and De Hart 2013). Further, such dichotomies are strongly gendered, with women often regarded as victims in need of state protection (Constable 2012; Maskens 2015; Pellander 2015). Gendered ideas of (marriage) migrants in relation to the welfare state also inform policies, for instance when spouses are prevented to enter because they are seen as potential future 'burdens' to the state (Eggebø 2010).

These dichotomies are also classed, with poorer migrants given even less rights to family reunion, notably through income requirements recently implemented by several European states (Kofman 2018). Linking the negative versions of family and marriage to specific national, ethnic, religious or classed groups helps justify restrictive immigration policies. The focus on illegitimate ways of 'doing family', which are portrayed as being built on patriarchal relationships, coercion and instrumentality, reinforces the moral superiority of Europe vis-à-vis outsiders and rationalises exclusionary policies (Strasser et al. 2009). These definitions are based on Western-centric ideas of romantic love, gender equality, individual autonomy, sexual self-determination and a lack of ulterior motives for marriage (Giddens 1992).

Simultaneously, in many European nation-states, the definition of marriage and the family has recently been widened to include same-sex couples. These marriages may not be as important as heterosexual marriages for the physical reproduction of the nation. Nevertheless, same-sex marriage and LGBT rights in general have been symbolically instrumentalised by European nations to construct an image of a liberal and progressive national self, opposed to a patriarchal, homophobic and backward national 'other' (Mepschen and Duyvendak 2012).

Reproducing states' definition of 'family'

The regulation of cross-border marriages is thus tightly related to national politics. We, as researchers, need to be aware of the multiple definitions of marriage and the family. This lack of reflexivity applies even to the very definition of marriage, which often appears to be a self-evident term in migration studies. However, there is no consensus about what marriage is. Scholars across different disciplines, such as anthropology and

sociology, have used the term 'marriage' to refer to a wide variety of relationships, including love marriages, religious marriages, civil partnerships, same-sex marriages, arranged marriages, polyandry, polygyny, ghost marriages, marriage by capture and many other social relationships. A universal definition of marriage would unavoidably exclude many social relationships that scholars have described as marriage (Borneman 1996; Mody 2015). The number of spouses, the gender of spouses, the scope of marriage, the degree of spouses' consent, the parties united through marriage (individuals, social groups), the spouses' place of residence before and after marriage, the rights and obligations stemming from marriage and the norms and morality that regulate the marital union differ across types of marriage. Given the multiple forms of marriage, it is surprising that the problematisation of the term has never been a central issue in the study of cross-border marriages. Indicative of migration scholars' reliance on states' definition of marriage is the fact that only after the institutionalisation of 'marriage equality' in many countries has there been a gradual increase in the number of studies on same-sex marriage migration (Chauvin et al., 2021). Nevertheless, cross-border same-sex couples existed before and managed to live together by following non-family-based migration channels.

Migration scholars may also tend to use commonly accepted categories unreflexively even when we aim to criticise state practices. For instance, research contrasting 'love' with 'arranged' and 'forced' marriages may be informed by states' definitions rather than by more complex realities (Grillo 2011). With regard to 'forced marriages', for example, researchers may attribute the lack of free choice of one of the spouses to 'backward traditions' rather than to the role of modern states: the suffocating conditions of marriage experienced by some migrants are related to the fact that their legal status is based on marriage and they are afraid of being deported if they dissolve their marriage (Riaño and Dahinden 2010). Similarly, the uncritical use of categories such as 'love marriages' and 'marriages of convenience' often builds on the distinction states make between 'sham' and 'genuine' marriages, leaving the conditions of such marriages and the reasons people engage in them unexamined. The uncritical use of these categories reproduces the assumptions upon which these distinctions are based: that interest and emotions are separate and unrelated domains, an assumption that is disputed by the research (see Andrikopoulos, 2021).

States' definitions, although not static over time, remain important in imposing legitimate forms of 'doing family' (Strasser et al. 2009). The politicisation of cross-border marriages can only be understood in light of this second aspect of the politics of belonging, i.e. the processes through which nation-states reproduce themselves by regulating both the nation as a family and the families of the nation.

Beyond state categories: alternative epistemologies, methodologies and theories

How can we concretely keep studying cross-border unions and producing new insights without contributing to the reproduction of the normative assumptions and politically loaded dichotomies they entail, assumptions and dichotomies that are often based on the logic of nation-states? We suggest doing so in at least three ways: by reflecting on the epistemology of the concepts used, by employing methodologies that help us avoid

the state's lens and by resorting to conceptual and theoretical frameworks from outside migration studies. The contributions in this Special Issue showcase innovative ways to understand cross-border marriages.

What is at stake in all papers is what Charsley and Bolognani (2021) call *marriageability,* a notion we want to extend by highlighting the hegemonic role played by states in creating a normative framework. With this term, we refer to the regulatory interventions by the state to, on the one hand, control who is eligible to marry whom and, on the other, determine how marriage and conjugal life should be. *Marriageability* becomes an empirical question in all the contributions to this Special Issue: all actors – state representatives, spouses and their relatives and researchers – mobilise, reproduce or contest specific categories that delineate who is and is not eligible to marry whom and how their marriage and family life should be. Whether based on nationality, legal status, ethnicity, race, religion, age, gender, income or educational level, ideas of who is suitable exist at the level of the individuals (spouses' personal preferences), at the level of their surroundings (families' and friends' ideas of who fits), at the organisational level of religious institutions and at the level of state actors who write and implement laws and policies designed to regulate marriageability. However, nation-states' moralities, as we argue, become a fundamental reference against which everyone needs to position themselves, in particular when migration is involved. In fine, conforming, to a greater or lesser degree, to the state's expectations is increasingly part of the cost of being able to live together in its territory.

Epistemologies: categories of migration and family as 'categories of practices' for state agents and spouses

Researchers cannot completely stand free of normative categories, but we can at least try to acknowledge them as constructions and reflect on the power relations that sustain them. Adopting some distance from states' categories does not mean ignoring them, but avoiding taking them for granted. Based on Bourdieu's theory of practice (2000 [1972]), some scholars make a useful distinction between 'categories of practice' (or 'common sense categories') and 'categories of analysis'. Various terms that inform migration policies have been scrutinised using such a distinction, in particular culture (Baumann 1996), ethnicity (Wimmer 2009), identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), integration (Korteweg 2017) and migration (Dahinden 2016). The same holds true for all categories related to family and therefore marriage. Together with Yanagisako and Delaney (1995), 'we think that what constitutes kinship and any other cultural domain must be discovered rather than assumed' (12).

The power of states' 'categories of practice' comes precisely from the fact that, by becoming common sense, their legitimacy is reinforced. In this sense, 'cross-border marriage', rather than an administrative category based on people's legal relationship to the state (both their citizenship and their civil status), comes to be considered as essentially different from other types of marriage. The political goals behind legislation and policies targeting these couples – which increasingly consist of trying to prevent them from existing – become concealed under the naturalised image of essentially different (read: problematic) marriages. Studies on cross-border marriages, rather than either reproducing or ignoring these categories of practice, need to take them as objects of study.

To be sure, 'categories of practice' and 'categories of analysis' inform each other in complex ways. Yet as scholars, we need to acknowledge the distinction between them, but also the potential effects of their related hierarchies on those labelled. All contributions in this Special Issue reflect on the categories that are used, clarify who uses them and with what effects and emphasise the competing definitions that may exist. While legislation and policies are treated as one possible – yet powerful – way to define people and families, social actors' discourses and practices are considered as at least partially constructed in response to these hegemonic definitions. Based on various and rich empirical data, the contributions in the Special Issue thus highlight the reactions of couples who necessarily confront such categories when they decide to marry across borders and become objects of restrictive policies.

Andrikopoulos (2021) discusses the distinction between 'genuine' and 'sham' marriage and the underlying assumption that love and interest are separate and hostile domains. Studying relationships between African male migrants and (non-Dutch) EU female citizens in the Netherlands, he demonstrates that these relationships are embedded in wider affective circuits in which resources such as love, money and papers are exchanged. Charsley and Bolognani (2021) examine marriages of British Pakistanis which both state authorities and scholars would categorise as 'intra-ethnic' or 'ethnically endogamous'. They demonstrate that ethnicity is not always what brings the two spouses together, and that in some cases shared ethnic background is either irrelevant or less important than other shared characteristics. Block (2021) carefully analyses how German legislators and policymakers mobilise gender equality and women's emancipation in the construction of 'good' and 'proper' marriages, scrutinising cross-border marriages to make sure that they are not 'forced' or 'arranged'. Leutloff-Grandits (2021) demonstrates that imaginaries of cross-border marriages as potentially patriarchal neglect the fact that marriage migrants are often men whose power in marriage is undermined: in contrast to the common rhetoric that women are subordinated in cross-border marriages, she shows that it is the migration experience itself and the restrictive state regulations involved that impact gender relations in marriages between men from rural Kosovo and their wives living in Europe. Jashari, Dahinden, and Moret (2021) document the impact of state categories on the positioning of so-called third-country prospective migrants waiting to receive their family visa to join their spouse in Europe: the authors show how, for instance, these prospective migrants build on alternative class hierarchies to counter national (and culturalist) categories that legitimise the hurdles they encounter. Other articles illuminate the salience of categories related to social class in marriage migration. Based on a study in France, the Netherlands and the United States, Chauvin et al. (2021) show that higher-income same-sex couples have more chances to live together than poor couples, without necessarily having to use family-reunification channels. Wray, Kofman, and Simic (2021) show that British people with low incomes but high cultural capital are able to strategically play with legal categories and relocate to another EU country with their non-EU spouse, taking advantage of the more generous rights secured by the EU for its citizens. Finally, Pellander (2021) demonstrates how income requirements are entangled with emotional proof of 'genuine' relationships in Finish institutions regulating marriage migration. Being poor and non-citizens makes it harder for spouses to

adequately demonstrate their emotional attachment, as a result of which they are at greater risk of being denied a residence permit.

Methodologies: designs and methods to distance researchers from states' concerns

Such epistemological standpoints require the development of specific research designs and methodologies that do not necessarily correspond to states' views, concerns or priorities. Concretely, research designs can avoid focusing on ethnically or religiously delimitated groups, or include people generally not investigated under the light of marriage or migration. Wray, Kofman, and Simic (2021), for example, employ such a methodology in their study of highly educated British citizens. We further maintain that the study of cross-border marriages can benefit from research on policy-irrelevant topics (Bakewell 2008) that may not produce directly policy-relevant results. Researchers can, for instance, focus on aspects of cross-border marriages that are important for those involved in these unions but not necessarily for the state. Ethnography – such as that by Andrikopoulos (2021) – offers an opportunity for such innovative insights into cross-border marriages.

Longitudinal analyses of individual or family trajectories – which are rare within migration studies – are an important means to illuminate the complex and dynamic categories that inform people's practices. Transnational couples' relationships themselves transform over time (Statham 2019). Charsley and Bolognani's (2021) analysis of three pairs of siblings who have made different marriage choices points to the importance of individual biographies and family trajectories: initial choices or the choice of one sibling may influence future decisions or the decisions of another sibling. In a similar vein, historical analyses of how states' representations of migration and/or family have changed over time and informed state policies also reveals the constructed character of norms regulating 'good citizens' and 'good families' (see, for instance, Fischer and Dahinden 2017, for the case of Switzerland).

Furthermore, there is a need for both 'decentred' research on cross-border marriages and multi-sited research. When research explores the situation of people living in European countries but neglects the experiences of those who live across the border (the partner and/or his or her networks, for instance), it contributes to the reproduction of states' hierarchisation of the world (Dahinden 2017). Building on a multi-sited methodology, the contributions by Jashari, Dahinden, and Moret (2021) and Leutloff-Grandits (2021) focus on the experiences of the spouses who confront the European states they want to enter and their own place within global gendered and classed hierarchies. Studies such as these reveal the global reach of European border regimes (see also Gutekunst 2015).

Theories: concepts and insights from beyond migration studies

Finally, scholars of cross-border marriages can engage more closely with theories and approaches outside the field of migration studies (see also Castles 2010; Dahinden 2016). Concepts from sociology of the family and anthropology of kinship can help migration scholars distance themselves from states' concerns and priorities, because

they are used to analyse families and couples beyond the politicised context of migration (see, for instance, Cole and Groes 2016; Drotbohm 2018). Andrikopoulos (2021) and Pellander (2021) both build on such fields to analyse cross-border marriages and states' practices to define and control them.

Theories of nationalism and ethnic boundary-making can also provide useful conceptual tools to understand the processes at stake. Charsley and Bolognani (2021) use concepts borrowed from such literature to illuminate the multiple and intersecting hierarchies that are activated or blurred when people marry.

Concepts from gender and feminist studies provide us with important means to approach cross-border marriages, whether from the perspective of the states' representatives or the persons concerned. In state discourses, non-acceptable forms of marriage ('forced', 'arranged', 'sham') are generally portrayed as dangerous for women. Engaging with feminist literature on love, Andrikopoulos' (2021) analysis of ethnographic material shows that love, which is supposed to protect against such marriages, can also disadvantage women, especially when love is conceived as unrelated to material interest. Block (2021) also shows how restrictive, exclusive policies that are supposed to empower migrant women in fact build on extremely conservative views of the family that they otherwise critique: the focus on women's compromised ability to be good mothers raising (future) good citizens is an example of such tensions.

The literature on transnational social inequalities is also useful in addressing the global context in which people living in countries with different degrees of economic and political power position themselves. One's social status in one place may translate into a very different status elsewhere (Nieswand 2011; Moret 2018). Chauvin et al. (2021) dissect how these diverging social statuses play out in cross-border couples' ability and decision to move or not move, and in what direction. Jashari, Dahinden, and Moret (2021) further demonstrate the effect of transnationalised discourses on future marriage migrants in their country of origin and how these migrants develop counter-narratives in their attempts to meet European standards. More generally, theorisations of social class cross other contributions (Pellander, 2021; Wray, Kofman, and Simic, 2021), illustrating vividly how categories intersect in the policing of cross-border marriages and in the strategies couples develop to pursue their ambitions.

We believe that the empirical examination of cross-border marriages in light of general social theory provides valuable new insights for migration scholars, but also for wider theoretical debates outside the field of migration studies. But we are also convinced that the reflexive distance to states' categories that we call for does not equate to a blunt critique of states and their representatives. We are aware of the perhaps paradoxical dimension of our discussion: the categories we wish to distance ourselves from remain the focus of all the contributions in this issue. This is because these categories, although constructed, have real effects on the people involved, in particular on less privileged social actors. This justifies our wish to demonstrate the power of hegemonic categories. When scholars reproduce nation-states' representations, they risk losing not only credibility, but also innovative power. The alternative epistemologies, methodologies and theories that we suggest for the study of cross-border marriages all aim to shed light on dimensions of these unions that have largely been ignored or hidden. We hope for a world in which policymakers will benefit from such new insights, which may cause them to think in new

directions and consider creative ways of addressing and dealing with politicised issues such as cross-border marriages.

Notes

1. According to Eurostat, accounting for a quarter to a third of all entries: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Residence_permits_statistics&oldid=410577. Accessed on 27 April 2019.
2. We have chosen not to cite names in our critique of the scholarship mentioned in this introduction. This is so because we see social science as a process where thinking evolves rather than a battlefield with enemies to be pointed out. In any case, the authors of this introduction and other contributors of the Special Issue have also demonstrated insufficient reflexivity in some of our past work in the field of marriage and migration.
3. At the level of practices, however, both are at least as much about exclusion, hierarchy and conflict (see Andrikopoulos 2018).
4. Queer studies offer critical insights about the normative construction of the family and the ways the state and hegemonic ideologies have contributed to the naturalisation of the family in relation to gender and sexuality (Butler 2002).

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