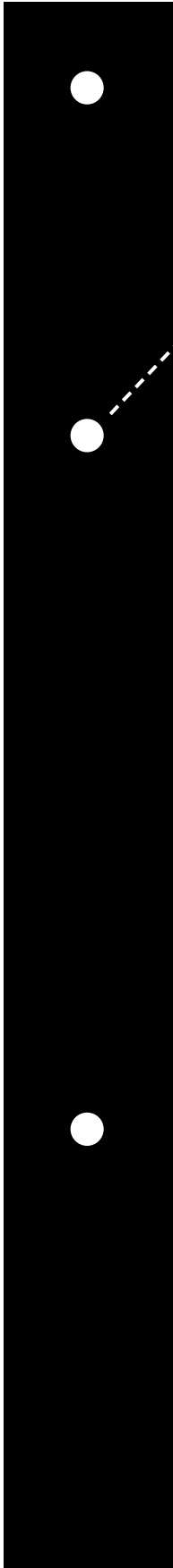Rik Huizinga and Helga de Valk

Between self, family and society: Syrian male perspectives on intimate partner relationship negotiation in The Netherlands.

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Between self, family and society: Syrian male perspectives on intimate partner relationship negotiation in The Netherlands

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to advance understandings of young Syrian men in forced displacement in relation to the frequently partial and ambiguous position of immigrant men in societal debates on gender- and partner roles, debates in which immigrant men frequently find themselves as static agents. Such debates often produce and reinforce one-sided accounts of husbands, partners or potential partners whose relationship's attitudes, traditions and behaviours seem to abide by fixed blueprints. Earlier studies, however, emphasise nuanced and plural understandings of immigrant men and call attention to men as agentic individuals who actively negotiate emotional, economic and political hardships (Charsley, 2005; Gallo, 2006; Huizinga and van Hoven, 2020). Moreover, Hyman *et al.* (2008) and Shirpak *et al.* (2011) illustrate experiences of intimate partner relationships after migration to be both positive *and* negative, depending on the agentic capacities of immigrant men to adapt to new circumstances.

Indeed, international migration can coincide with rapid social change and, depending on the type of migration, migrants may not be familiar with the culture in the country of settlement, its institutional regimes, and everyday life practices (De Valk *et al.*, 2011). The Syrian men in this study experienced dispersal within (Western) Europe as well as within Dutch borders, significantly changing everyday spaces and routines (Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018). Darvishpour (2002), for example, illustrated similar processes for Iranian migrants in Sweden showing how they seem to have not only travelled in space, but many experienced this move as a migration in time too. Such timespace movements posit new challenges and opportunities, not the least for partners' renegotiation of intimate relationships and couple identities (Hyman *et al.*, 2008; Shirpak *et al.*, 2011). This may in particular be the case when migrants come from traditional, patriarchal societies to more secular and egalitarian societies. Researchers have additionally documented how welfare states' asylum systems deprive refugees of a sense of agency (Ghorashi, 2005), and how gender-blind integration policies in the country of resettlement may reinforce existing partner dependency relations (Ruis, 2019).

Migration studies, then, are often having a destination country bias in which the focus is on positions of migrants after migration (Wingens *et al.*, 2011). Studies on relationships therefore risk to neglect the multiple dimensions of partner relationships in Syria, but also trivialise the formative, life changing experiences, growing capacities and renewed aspirations that result from the refugee journey (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015). Processes of relationship renegotiation are thus complex and multidimensional, in particular in forced displacement, as they remain subject to life course biographies and individual investment choices in a restrictive host society (Esser, 2004). Indeed, in order to capture

all dimensions of the refugee experience, life stories and agentic actions of refugees are necessary to locate past social positions in the present (Ghorashi, 2007).

Hence this paper asks, if and how Syrian male refugees in the Netherlands renegotiate attitudes, traditions, and behaviours in relation to intimate partner relationship formation and negotiation? We apply a life course perspective to identify life course events and subjective turning points that indicate important markers for respondents to understand and evaluate post-migration intimate partner relationships. In line with more recent calls to use more general social theory in migration research (Bakewell, 2010; Castles, 2010; de Haas, 2010), we study intimate partner relationships positioned in multiple contexts and cultures, and among plural actors, drawing from sociological-, social psychological- and cross-cultural psychological theory. The paper's main argument is that bringing together different theoretical angles in studying lived experiences of forced migrants, it provides a more nuanced and much needed contribution regarding the role of agency and structure in migration, and as a result, emphasises relationship attitudes, traditions and behaviours after forced migration as plural and complex.

2. Theory

To get a comprehensive insight in and an answer to our research questions, we turn to knowledge from sociology, social psychology and cross-cultural psychology. These disciplines allow to explore and understand respondents' views on intimate partner relationships from both an individual perspective as well as wider units of analysis, such as the family and society. The study is further embedded in life course theory, highlighting its principles of *linked lives*, *agency*, and *time and place* in order to explore divergent experiences of forced migration (Wingens *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, individual attitudes, aspirations and actions towards gender- and partner roles do not subsist in a vacuum. Evidently, the event of migration is a prime example of life transitions, and is assumed to have profound implications regarding linked lives, i.e. migrant's social and familial relationships (Choi, 2019; de Valk *et al.*, 2011). It also influences the migrant's capacity to act and make decisions in response to perceived opportunities, desires and constraints (Wingens *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, migration accentuates and changes migrants' attitudes, traditions and behaviours as products of the intersections between agency and the social structures, personal biographies and socio-cultural defined settings (Bakewell, 2010; Castles, 2010; de Haas, 2010).

2.1   Self, family and society

To understand the nature of close, satisfying and adaptive intimate partner relationships, intimacy should be conceptualised as an interpersonal and transactional process (Reis and Shaver, 1988). A process in which self-revealing disclosure and perceived partner responsiveness are important components of how

intimacy within intimate partner relationships is perceived (Rusbult, Agnew and Arriaga, 2012). Intimacy influences more general perceived relationships qualities such as relationship satisfaction and trust (Giddens, 1991; Laurenceau *et al.,* 2005). Furthermore, intimacy is found to prosper in relationships where "mutuality of emotions is celebrated with partners' free will and consent" (Rizkalla and Segal, 2019, p.2; Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999). Intimacy is embedded in interactions, dialogues and reflections of intimate partners and, therefore, should not be considered as something static, but as an ongoing process in which partners continuously shape and redefine their selves in relation to intimate others (Laurenceau *et al*., 2005). In the event of war, then, deteriorated intimacy has stress- and harmful consequences to intimate partner relationships (Rizkalla and Segal, 2019).

Intimate partner relationships "have a particular significance both for the individual and for society" (Jamieson, 1999, p.3). Opportunities for and challenges to these relationships are therefore embedded in everyday practice as well as being subject to social change (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999). In Western societies, such as the Netherlands, contemporary intimate partner relationships are claimed to be linked to processes of individualisation, increasing social change, and growing levels of uncertainty (e.g. Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Key argument in this line of research is that individuals are no longer socialised to follow predefined pathways. Consequently, life courses are becoming increasingly conditional and dependent on agentic behaviour (Wingens *et al.*, 2011).

Indeed, following Giddens' concept of a 'pure relationship' (1991, 1992), recent work suggests intimate partner relationships increasingly revolve around fluid experiences of love, intimacy, sexuality and companionship (van Houdt and Poortman, 2018). Individuals choose to partner with others for their unique qualities and "recognise that the development of their separate potentialities is not a threat" (Giddens, 1992, p.189). They are assumed to make autonomous decisions with whom to partner and acknowledge partners or potential partners as autonomous decision makers too, "in a manner fully compatible with democracy in the public sphere" (Giddens, 1992, p.3). Consequently, intimate partner relationships are argued to become less dependent of external social or economic conditions, making intimate partner relationship formation and/or dissolution less sensitive to any collectivistic or familial pressure (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Kağitçibaşi, 2005). Indeed, joint lifestyles, lifestyles in which partners arrange their lives around common aspirations, interests and social networks, seem to foster intimate partner relationship stability (van Houdt and Poortman, 2018).

As mentioned before, dimensions of intimacy in relationships remain fluid, and at times contradictory, as many romantic partners shape their relationships through more practical forms of sharing, caring and loving (Jamieson, 1999). Furthermore, the constructions of personal biographies are affected by uneven distributions within different contexts of material, educational and social resources. Power relationships between heterosexual partners, for example, have been argued to closely resemble gender positions in societies (Hesse-Biber and Williamson, 1984). Moreover, confluent love can only be strived for by those able to escape the emotional, economic and identity ascribing certainties of the

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'traditional' life course (Mulinari and Sandell, 2009). Challenges in intimate partner relationships are gendered, classed, but also linked with sexuality and religion. Although individuals have the agentic capacity to overcome such challenges or constraints, one's life story remains "guided by institutional standards, models, and social relationships" (Heinz, 2016, p. 23).

These societal standards, models and social relationships, however, are culturally defined. Concomitant forms of self and intimate others depend on culturally informed "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986, p.273). To advocate for healthy 'other' self-other relationships, Kağitçibaşi (1996) proposes a model in which she includes self, society *and* family. In collective societies, during childhood and adolescence in particular, the family is centre stage in nourishing cognitive competence, and the development of culturally defined attitudes, traditions and behaviours in the context of social change. Indeed, cultural influences on agentic behaviour and decision making interact with changing social structures (Swidler, 1986). Kağitçibaşi (1996), then, distinguishes material- from emotional interdependencies as material interdependencies become less relevant with increasing welfare and societal change including urbanisation and industrialisation. Intimate familial interdependencies though remain evident as they are not incompatible with social change. Hence, Kağitçibaşi (1996; 2005) proposes a dialectical synthesis of interdependence and independence, within a family model of emotional/psychological interdependence, i.e. the autonomous-related self that adapts to particular contextual demands.

2.2   Commitment, investment and bargaining power

Intimate partner relationships are often conceptualised as transactional processes using social exchange theory. A prime example is Rusbult's investment model of commitment (1980). This model allows a cost-benefit analysis of the complexities behind and temporal changes within intimate partner relationship stability. It ties in with the concept of pure relationships as "a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals" (Giddens, 1992, p.3). The model uses commitment and underlying causes of commitment to explain perceived positive qualities of relationships as well as behaviours to remain in relationships perceived as negative, i.e. irrational persistence (Rusbult *et al.,* 2012). Commitment, then, as a predictor of relationship stability, is defined as a subjective, lived experience opposed to dependence as a structural state (Agnew *et al.,* 1998). Committed partners tend to act to the benefit of relationship continuance in case of challenges and events that might endanger the relationship. Since experiences of intimacy are subject to change, the model is not a static one (Rusbult *et al.,* 2012); one is inclined to continue a relationship "only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens, 1992, p.58). To explore these satisfactions in the context of social, economic, legal and material arrangements, the investment model of commitment rests on three pillars, namely satisfaction, quality of alternatives and investments (Rusbult, 1980).

Relationship *satisfaction* is a product of the exchange value of rewards and costs, set against the comparison level an individual developed over the years. Examples of subjective attributes of satisfaction can be physical appearance, sense of humour, sex or intelligence (Rusbult, 1980). Second, an individual will not end a relationship if she or he does not perceive any adequate alternatives, whether it is now or in the future, whether solitary or with a different partner. Darvishpour (2002) suggests the *quality of alternatives* seems to increase moving from traditional, religious and collectivistic views on gender and partner roles, to societies more modern, secular and egalitarian. Third, size of *investments* in a relationship matters in terms of perceived costs of terminating a relationship. Hence, investments can function as an incentive to maintain the relationship. Rusbult (1980) distinguishes two types of investment that would be lost in case of ending a relationship. Intrinsic investments refer to resources such as invested time, emotional effort, money or self-disclosures. Extrinsic investments are "initially extraneous resources that become inextricably connected to the relationship", such as houses or furnitures, mutual friends, or shared histories based on memories and experiences (Rusbult, 1980, p.102). Investments should yield dividends, and can therefore be planned as well (Goodfriend and Agnew, 2008). Lastly, *social support* or *social networks* have been introduced as a fourth factor to the investment model of commitment (Rusbult *et al.*, 2012). Considering Kağitçibaşi's family model of emotional interdependence (2005), the role of social networks in other cultural contexts might play a more prominent role. In terms of our respondents' relationships, a decision to be with someone is not solely between two individuals, but is often made by the constituency of parents and the family.

Intimate partner relationships, in conclusion, are therefore inherently linked with power, or rather the distributions of power between partners (Lennon *et al.,* 2012). Different dimensions of dominance within relationships – financial, physical or social – may be exercised in changing capacities, influencing relationship commitment, satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investments (Lennon *et al.*, 2012). The greater the (perceived) resources, the more bargaining power one perceives in a relationship (Hesse-Biber and Williamson, 1984). Increased relationship bargaining power after forced migration, however, does not automatically translate into egalitarian relationships (Calderón *et al.*, 2011). (Re-)Negotiating intimate partner relationships in forced displacement therefore remains a complex configuration of challenges, and opportunities (Darvishpour, 2002).

3. Methods

Data collection involved ten in-depth interviews conducted by the first author of this paper between December 2019 and March 2020[1] [2]. Most interviews were conducted at respondents' homes, however,

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[1]   Interviews in March were conducted before restrictive measures regarding fieldwork were in place in the Netherlands due to Covid19.
[2]   This research is approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Spatial Science, University of Groningen.

at the request of respondents, three interviews took place in public places. The main language spoken during the interviews was either Dutch or English. Respondents were between 20 and 36 years. All but one self-identified as Muslim. Family status among respondents varied. Nine men were in an intimate heterosexual relationship of which seven were married. Four men were in a relationship with one or more children. At the time of interviewing, they lived in the Netherlands for four to six years. Four of the men were employed, three of them were studying, and the remaining three were unemployed. Names that appear in the paper are fictitious.

The interview design aimed to establish a "narrative stimulus" with the respondent (Hollstein, 2019, p.2). Respondents were asked to fill in a life trajectory worksheet prior to the starting question to identify life course transitions deemed relevant in the eyes of respondents. Next, substantial emphasis was placed on the starting question to have the respondent narrate his own biography without any restrictions regarding time, content or order, i.e. a subjective account of one's life events and history. In telling their own stories, people often draw on public stories to reinterpret and make sense of their own life (Jamieson, 1999). Of specific interest were subjectively defined turning points as they "become a means of bridging continuities and discontinuities in a way that makes sense to the individual" (Clausen, 1995, p.370). They alter personal trajectories and stretch from the past to the future, only to be identified retrospectively (Wingens *et al.*, 2011) and are therefore crucial components of how one orders one's own life cognitively and emotionally to identify "subjective causality" (Heinz, 2016, p.22; Schütze, 2008).

Following Schütze's (2008) threefold narrative interview method, the "primary narrative phase" (Hollstein, 2019, p.2) described above was followed up by respectively a narrative questioning phase, and a descriptive and argumentative detailing phase. The former allowed the interviewer to clarify or pick up on aspects or topics that emerged during the narrative. The latter part of this design gave the interviewer the opportunity to scrutinise motives and reasoning behind certain attitudes, actions and decisions expressed or observed throughout the interview. The idea here is that the respondents' narrative touches upon a more 'objective' life story, whereas the descriptive and argumentative parts are highly influenced by current social, cultural, economic and political conditions, not in the least the interview setting (Eastmond, 2007). Consequently, by means of comparison between the two, the researcher is able to distinguish and make up for respondents' reinterpretations of life history experiences and events (Schütze, 2008).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and analysed using NVivo software together with field notes and life trajectory worksheets. To identify views on intimate partner relationships in relation to linked lives, the sequential and structural features of respondents' life stories were explored using narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993). Although recent work on forced migration emphasises the value of life narratives, it questions ethics concerning representational strategies (Eastmond, 2007; Ghorashi, 2007). In our analysis, then, we focus on agency and imagination, and cherish the subjectivity in the narratives of respondents, i.e. the personal experience rooted in time and

place (Riessman, 1993). Narratives can seem natural, but our analysis focused on the social and cultural contingency of particular events and turning points narrated by the respondent to make sense of his life course. But what is shared is situational and does not reflect equilibrium (BenEzer and Setter, 2015). Past experiences are interpreted and narrated in view of present- and future aspirations (Eastmond, 2007). For example, in case of our respondents, socially desired statements about relationships would at times emerge throughout a research encounter. At the moment of interviewing, respondents often studied for their integration exam, which might have triggered certain statements in relation to the researcher's position (Dutch, white, male). Through reflexive practice between the authors, and the emphasis on narrative accounts and life course, however, relevant subjective values and meanings transpire from the data.

4. Empirical findings

This section explores processes that define who respondents can be under present circumstances, and how such processes shape attitudes, traditions and behaviours towards their roles as (potential) partners in an intimate relationship resulting therefrom. The analysis reveals the most prominent markers of difference within respondents' conceptions are influenced by their social relationships, and the intersections of these social relationships with other principles of the life course. The findings are therefore organised based on the principle of linked lives, and focus on socialisation by parents and family, the influence of local social networks, and the impacts of parenthood.

4.1   Linked lives I: Intergenerational socialisations

In 'doing' intimate partner relationships, the data illustrate how respondents' attitudes, traditions and behaviours in the Netherlands continue to be influenced by linked lives with those back in time in Syria. In the interviews, many referred to observations and experiences of how such relationships were performed by parents, grandparents and extended family members, in particular during the formative years of their childhood. Such reflections proved important markers of continuity and change for our respondents, and shaped the divergent attitudes, traditions and behaviours respondents develop and maintain in the Netherlands regarding intimate partners relationships. In this section, we demonstrate how respondents negotiate family-adopted attitudes, traditions and behaviours in the Netherlands; we illustrate how respondents' obedience orientation influences decision-making processes in the Netherlands; and highlight how formative childhood experiences shape relationships over the life course including after migration and settlement in the Netherlands.

It was common for our respondents to live together with nuclear- and extended family, either in one house or in the same street. Whereas respondents from rural parts moved away from family to study in Syria's larger cities, respondents in urban areas did not move out the parental home prior to leaving

Syria. Respondents in the latter group appeared more inclined to stick with familiar family patterns. Although family life to them was not subject to any material dependencies, emotional dependencies between family members remained strong, and highly influential in shaping respondents' attitudes, traditions and behaviours. Haitham, for example, remembers his grandparents and parents would often point out to him that meanings of intimacy were different before in Syria,

"Yes, yes! I said to you, the society and religion has changed in the past fifty or seventy years, we have a different society now [...] my grandmother said to me, formerly, in cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, there were many women without 'doekjes' [veils] and, for example, in a short skirt. Bare legs!" (Haitham, 35, married in Syria, technical university degree)

The quote emphasises the formative role of family in shaping attitudes, and how such attitudes might oppose contemporary social and political structures. It further emphasises how intimate partner relationship attitudes are fluid processes influenced by space and time, showing that static gendered stereotypes and discourses do not represent the lives of actual people in Syria. Haitham, then, feels the post-migration context did not change his attitudes related to gender- and partner roles, and maintains the dynamics between him and his partner did not change. Rather, he finds his more egalitarian attitudes reflected in the host society of the Netherlands.

Our data further suggest respondents tended to follow family patterns regarding intimate partner relationship formation. In such contexts with strong emotional family bonds, for our male respondents, the role of fathers in everyday life seemed quite potent. For Ali, family life revolved around his father's business and career. Whereas his mother carried out domestic work as a stable constituent of the family, his father was the main breadwinner of the family. He says,

"I am not that person who likes to go travelling and experience a lot of new things here and there you know. I would like to have a more stable life. The idea of getting married within a young age is also in my family. My father and mother got married when she was eighteen, my father was nineteen. And they got me directly when they were twenty." (Ali, 26, married in the Netherlands, university degree)

In the Netherlands, Ali's personal attitudes on gender- and intimate partner roles do not seem to resonate with women he was in a relationship with. He mentioned to have had relationships with Dutch women around his age, but these women were not in for 'a more stable life' yet. They had other aspirations regarding satisfying intimate relationships. Despite the financial and legal uncertainties of acquiring a refugee status, Ali wanted to settle down and start his own business. Encouraged by his father to continue the family tradition, Ali had a strong motivation to exercise a breadwinner role, a role that became even more pronounced in the context of forced displacement, and which resonated more with his current Syrian wife.

For other respondents, then, the forced migration experience brought about a clear transformation in attitudes, traditions and behaviour. Aatef, for example, was sent by his parents to Damascus for studies. He did not appreciate city life. He was eager to return to his family's village after he graduated from university. When Aatef moved back after university, his trajectory was decided upon by his family. He started working as a teacher in his family's village, and married just before the civil war. He mentions,

"Our tradition is that when someone is above twenty-five, he must marry [...] because marriage is part of life. In our culture, it is part of life. Everybody has to do this part [...] actually, my wife is a relative of mine. It is the daughter of my aunt." (Aatef, 33, married in Syria, university degree)

Aatef's quote illustrates the traditional approach within his family in terms of life course advancement and collective decision-making. His broader narrative suggests he developed an obedience orientation. He followed the predefined pathways designed by his family, and maintained a tendency to return to that what is familiar. Interestingly, in the Netherlands, and away from his family and family-in-law, his obedience orientation plays out differently. Based on the interview, Aatef seems highly sensitive towards what he thinks people and society expect of him. Triggered by 'Dutch norms and values' he was taught in integration courses, he frequently asked the first author during the interview for confirmation or feedback. As his wife worked several days a week, Aatef noticed he felt more dependent in their relationship. Her work schedule and growing social network determined the daily rhythm of their relationship. Although hard, he seemed motivated to transform the former hierarchical relationship between them into a more egalitarian relationship.

Lastly, frequently mentioned turning points that defined how respondents approach intimate partner relationships were experiences of conflict management between parents, or, ultimately, divorce. Throughout all interviews, divorce was often described as a shameful event and disruptive to a family's reputation. In our respondents' social networks, the decision to stay in a relationship was often made by the constituency of family. The divorce of Hamid's parents, though, was initiated solely by his mother, something the in-law family and her own family never forgave her. She fled to Egypt, but since Hamid is living in the Netherlands, he is back in contact with his mother, and they frequently discuss development in his current relationship. Hamid mentions,

"Well, at this moment I can.. look, back then it was all really negative. But now I don't think about it in that way anymore. Then, it was a very emotional moment, but this moment had a positive effect I think. Because now I am very serious about my relationship with -name wife-. *I learned a lot from those quarrels between my father and mother [...] my mother is younger than my father. Fourteen years younger. And my father is higher educated, my mother not really. She didn't have a job."* (Hamid, 24, in a relationship, primary education)

The quote suggests that the formative experiences of living in a strong patriarchal family in Syria have made Hamid more aware of the relative power resources women might experience in the Netherlands. Reflecting on his parents' relationship, he witnessed how gendered power hierarchies might influence relationship satisfaction and -commitment. Raised by his father, Hamid now seeks to renegotiate his attitudes, traditions and behaviours, in part because of the talks with his mother. In his relationship, then, such as transformation is hard to establish. According to Hamid, their relationship rests on values of love, equality and companionship, but the associated everyday practices to maintain such relationships are often hard to keep up among family and friends.

4.2   Linked lives II: Social support or social control?

The data further emphasise how respondents shape and maintain intimate partner relationship attitudes, traditions and behaviours in relation to local social networks. For some respondents, family networks were geographically close, for others, such social networks referred more to an Islamic or a Syrian network. For most respondents, family remained in other countries (mostly Syria, Lebanon or Turkey), or respondents and family members got dispersed between European countries or within the Netherlands due to dispersal policy. Hence, a phrase often voiced by respondents was 'we are in it together'. Couple identity, however, remained intertwined with local social networks. In this section, we discuss perceived couple autonomy of respondents and its influence on relationship commitment and satisfaction; we illustrate the ambiguous relationship respondents maintain with local social networks that provide support *and* exercise control; and we show how respondents capacity to actively shape such networks.

Depending on the social environment in the Netherlands, and individual attitudes and behaviours developed over the life course, respondents perceived both challenges to and opportunities for satisfying intimate partner relationships as a consequence of social isolation. Having lost familiar everyday spaces in relation to their pre-migration life, such as the work space or public spaces, the men in our study were bound to home in the Netherlands. Respondents inevitably spent more time together with their partner, which for respondents, as well as their partner, was a new experience. Mustafa (30) remembers,

"What is different too, you know in Syria we had many friends. When I was bored, I had much possibilities. But here I have no friends, no family […] so if we are bored we only have each other, so we have to be really patient, because we are always together, always us two." (Mustafa, 30, married in the Netherlands, primary education).

The quote illustrates the impact of social isolation on intimate partner relationships after migration and the implications that migration might have on doing intimate partner relationships. Indeed, respondents frequently spoke about relationship stress and –conflict, and the efforts they and their partner make to

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build satisfying relationships. Being patient – as the capacity to accept or tolerate despite experiencing difficulties and without complaining or becoming annoyed – was an omnipresent learning element for respondents. Some respondents mentioned to struggle to develop themselves as responsive partners, as for some the belief the other's feelings, emotions and actions matter equally in a relationship was new. However, by remaining patient with their partner, respondents experienced acts of solidarity as they were confronted with more realistic expectations from their partners regarding relationship satisfaction and partner responsiveness, and a more lenient approach to communication issues.

Moreover, respondents felt an increase of commitment to their relationship as respondents and their partners bounded over shared emotional experiences. The data provide examples of traumatic events such as experiences of mental and physical impairment caused by the hardships of war, miscarriage as a result of the refugee journey, and for the men, often the primary movers, up to years of solitude awaiting a residence permit and family reunification. Many respondents accumulated more stress in the Netherlands due to status loss, discrimination and legal uncertainties. For some respondents, shared experiences of trauma between couples became emotional investments in commitment to their relationship. At the same time such experiences lead to tension in everyday practices of intimacy. Many respondents noticed not being able to give as much to their relationship as they would like, or what they felt is expected from them as a partner or husband in the current circumstances. Haitham acknowledged his mental health at times hinders a successful relationship with his partner, but both experience difficulties to address the conflict.

"And, just like others.. my old life passed away. I have a past life, and naturally this past life affects my life now. We come from war, we have a different life. I said maybe it is the life in a different society, but everyone needs help. Everyone [...] but we are not used to go to a specialist. Only sick people go to a specialist. Or crazy people.." (Haitham, 35, married in Syria, technical university degree)

Many respondents indicated they never really learned to discuss feelings of intimacy, irritations or issues directly with their partner. When discussing relationship conflict management, the men in our study would often emphasise the supporting and mediating role of father, family(-in-law) or social networks. "*In Syria, the parents come to solve the problems between men and women. And if the problem is solved they move on with their lives. But here nobody comes. Here, the problem stays big*" (Haitham, 35). Intimate partner relationships for our respondents have a more interdependent character, in terms of formation as well as continuation, compared to social conventions on relationship management in the Netherlands. Respondents were used to rely on family intervention at times to maintain relationship satisfaction, implying a higher sense of obedience towards other family members.

Other respondents, then, experienced opportunities to practice or reconfigure their intimate partner relationships because everyday life in the Netherlands is less intertwined with family- or other social networks. In their social environments in Syria, they often felt constrained by social conventions

to organise their relationship the way they wanted to. In most cases, such constraints involved narrowly defined gendered patterns, or traditions that restricted respondents to engage together in activities. Amin, for example, remembered that,

"at parties, almost all Syrian people sit separately. If I visit someone, then I sit among the men. And - name of wife -, she sits among the women in another room. I think that's really silly! Not only here in the Netherlands, but also when I was in Syria." (Amin, 36, in a relationship, university degree)

The quote does not imply all respondents lived this experience. The experience Amin described is intrinsically linked to his pre-migration social context that did not match his ideas on how to 'do' relationships. Respondents like Amin experienced an increase in couple autonomy and opportunities to engage in joint lifestyles as a couple in the Netherlands. By engaging in shared activities or by not facing any gender divide in everyday life, these respondents noticed, either with themselves or with their partner, that their relationship grew stronger. They experienced a renewed interest in exploring modes of companionship, bringing new dimensions of intimacy to the fore in their relationship.

Nevertheless, to different extents, respondents were frequently confronted with the constraints of local social networks, by some described as the 'eyes of the community'. Given the age category of our respondents, some developed a more lenient or progressive approach regarding attitudes, traditions and behaviours compared to respondents' family, or within local Islamic or Syrian social networks. Although many witnessed more possibilities to act autonomously, in terms of 'doing' intimate partner relationships, respondents were still hindered to go on dates, or to be seen together in public without any seal of approval by the community. For example, although Hamid renounced his faith, these contextual social structures in the Netherlands required him to sign a *nikah* contract in order to practice intimacy with his partner.

Frequently, respondents therefore emphasised during the interviews how their relationship is different from other Syrian intimate couples, often implying a certain perceived superiority over how other couples organise practices of intimacy within their relationships. Through such practices of *couple othering,* respondents seemed to strengthen, and, in case of pre-migration relationships, recover relationship intimacy or couple identity in a host society that frequently questions reciprocity within Syrian refugee intimate partner relationships. *"Perhaps we lost our identity […] are we Dutch or are we Syrian?"* (Amin, 36, university degree). By stating "*we are not like that*" respondents found mutual commitment with their partner in relation to other Syrian couples, and elicited pro-relationship behaviour of respondents to maintain a vital intimate partner relationship.

4.3   Linked lives III: Parenthood

This final section explores how attitudes, traditions and behaviours towards intimate partner relationships are shaped in relation to having children and experiences of parenthood. Four respondents had one or more children, who were all aged under ten years old. The data illustrate how the presence of children as an emotional or symbolic investment increased couple intimacy and -commitment with respondents. Parenthood also proved a site of struggle within couple relationships as children take up new positions in Dutch society in relation to gender- and partner roles. Consequently, as responsible fathers educating their children, respondents were stimulated to reconsider their own attitudes, traditions and behaviours towards intimate partner relationships and how such relationships should be done in the context of the Netherlands.

During many of the interviews at home, children of respondents were also present. The men scheduled the interviews when their partners were out, for language classes, studies, internships or work. Most men mentioned this situation was a new experience for them; they remembered a strong presence of family (aunt, grandmothers) during their own childhood, or relied on parents for the care of their own children back in Syria. Some respondents looked to be a bit uncomfortable and sometimes clumsy around their children, yet all seemed very compassionate towards their children, and proudly spoke about the children's achievements. Such experiences of parenthood in the Netherlands often seemed to evoke intimacy within intimate partner relationships. Aatef (33), for example, remembers being present during the birth of his third child in the Netherlands,

".. and so I was there too in that room. The system here is very different than in Syria. There nobody remains in the room. Only doctors. But here, I held my child. When he came out of the belly of the mother, I held my child in my hands and I was there the whole time! He was born next to us." (Aatef, 33, married in Syria, university degree)

Parenthood in the context of the Netherlands opened up new avenues for the respondents to explore their relationship and, in the absence of family, discover new roles as partners and carers. Furthermore, whereas respondents experienced their lifeworld in the Netherlands mostly in a state of limbo, the children did not appear to have any issues to develop their lives in the Netherlands, nor did they seem to experience setback in their development. Parenthood, consequently, brought respondents together with their partners ("*the children make our love very strong*"). Furthermore, fathering provided respondents with a sense of purpose in their relationship, in particular because partners of the men in our study often had paid jobs or did internships. This seemed to help respondents in coping with perceived change in gender- and partner dynamics. Hence, for these men, children seemed to be a shared investment and a materialisation of future plans, expanding the situational structures of an unsettling environment in which respondents make choices regarding their relationships.

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Parenting, then, was keeping the men in our study quite occupied. Most respondents said to encourage their children to develop an independent mind, but concomitantly voiced concerns their children might develop conflicting perspectives on intimate partner relationships in comparison with their own ideals, or those of family. Female partners, however, often remained more progressive in terms of gender- and partner roles. Respondents therefore did not always agree with their partners on how to educate their children, and clearly struggled to define what attitudes, traditions and behaviours they want to pass on to their children. Their personal ideas on relationship formation and renegotiation appeared a reflection of the familial and societal context in which their own relationships in Syria had developed. However, at the same time, they start to question their own views due to encounters with and observations of social conventions in the Netherlands. Haitham illustrates:

"Here, everybody is an individual after eighteen, nobody can constrain him. Independent. You can live wherever you want and do whatever you want. You don't consider your father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, sister or brother. Truly independent. But in Syria, no.. everybody in every society and every city, everybody is a piece. A piece of a family, a piece of a society [..] I am thinking about this a lot. I want my daughter to be happy. I said to my daughter, you can get acquainted with boys, ok? You have to choose independently. But, if you choose, know that you do not only choose on behalf of yourself, you choose on behalf of your parents, your grandparents, uncles and aunts." (Haitham, 35, married in Syria, technical university degree)

The quote touches upon a recurrent theme that emerged from the interviews. As with ending a relationship, relationship formation for most respondents was not an autonomous decision. Although the findings suggest new dimensions of intimacy were found after migration, some respondents did not partner because of love, sexuality or companionship. For most, this was due to the non-existence of dating as a concept, at least not without accompanying family members. Although Haitham displays a clear belief of family as an unity, where decision-making processes are intertwined with familial expectations and conditions, he seemed to want to work towards a more hybrid approach concerning his daughter. Despite the difficult relationship many of the respondents maintain with local social networks and social control, as we have described above, they consent to a different approach for their children.

5. Discussion

In light of the research question - if and how Syrian male refugees in the Netherlands renegotiate attitudes, traditions, and behaviours in relation to intimate partner relationship formation and negotiation? – our study shows how respondents engage with intimate partners in nuanced ways. The findings emphasise the role of life course trajectories and linked lives in defining respondents' attitudes, traditions and behaviour. The migration experience, then, stimulates, accentuates or dismisses modes of

thought depending on contextual demands and agentic behaviours of respondents. We identify two lines of contributions the paper makes to existing academic debates in migration research.

First, this qualitative study fruitfully brought together theoretical perspectives from different disciplines to capture and make sense of divergent attitudes, traditions and behaviours in relation to intimate partner relationships after forced migration. Following Bakewell's (2010) call to deepen analysis into the prevalence of agency and structure after migration, as well as De Haas's (2010) call to include general social theory in migration research, the findings demonstrate the complementary value of such an interdisciplinary approach, as lived experiences of migrants exceed static, rigid and culturally defined models too often used in isolation of each other. The four main theoretical elements of this study - 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1992), model of family change (Kağitçibaşi, 1996; 2005), investment model of commitment (Rusbult, 1980) and sociological life course theory (Wingens *et al.,* 2011) – provide a framework useful in migration research to explore autonomy and social change in different contexts, as well as interpersonal and personal dynamics of intimate partner relationship negotiation. Consequently, we argue these disciplines should engage more to understand also processes and consequences of migration for (intimate) relations.

Second, the paper enriches debates in refugee and forced migration studies by presenting a more refined understanding and an increased awareness of refugees' agency within a new social, cultural and institutional context. Although forced migration studies tend not to focus on individual decision making, this study has sought to find balance between agency *and* structure, without undermining any legitimacy of respondents' claims on refugee status (see Bakewell, 2010). The findings emphasise respondents consciously negotiate their contextual position as intimate partners, husbands and fathers in relation to linked lives (De Valk *et al*., 2011), family (Kağitçibaşi, 2005), refugee journeys (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015) and structures within a restrictive host society (Ghorashi, 2005). Additionally, respondents shape and reinforce the nature of their contextual settings in unsettling times to facilitate or accentuate personal or collective aspirations (Kağitçibaşi, 2005; Swidler, 1986), for example by engaging in *nikah* marriage to reassure local Islamic communities, or by maintaining emotionally strong transnational family connections.

Hence, the paper offers a more detailed and overarching contribution to existing studies on intimate partner relationships after forced migration. It also enriches earlier work that explores men's agency in negotiating changing family circumstances after migration (Choi, 2019). By scrutinising the experiences of men in relation to their life course, our study challenges one-dimensional representations of immigrant Muslim men as oppressors in intimate or familial relationships and supports studies that accentuate respondents as actors negotiating emotional, economic and cultural stress as a consequence of societal change (Charsley, 2005; Gallo, 2006; Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018; 2020). Despite experienced relationship stress in light of the forced migration, a shift in perceived bargaining power between partners, and socialisation in different societal contexts with specific communication- and conflict management styles, most men in this study experienced an increase in couple autonomy,

mutuality in decision-making and solidarity of partners (Hyman et al., 2008; Shirpak et al., 2011). Intimate partner relationship satisfaction for these men was further strengthened through practices of couple othering and perceived couple superiority compared to other Syrian couples (Rusbult et al., 2000), increased relationship commitment on the basis of shared future plans between partners (Agnew and Goodfriend, 2008), and opportunities and freedom to pursue joint lifestyles (van Houdt and Poortman, 2018).

At the same time the data show some respondents also seem to maintain more rigid divisions of gender- and partner roles. Their attitudes, traditions and behaviours towards intimate partner relationships seem to follow familiar traditional patterns observed among parents or grandparents, highlighting the importance of linked lives, emotional ties to family and early childhood socialisation (Kağitçibaşi, 1996). For these men, Giddens' (1992) notion of 'pure relationships' does not provide an adequate framework. Rather, and perhaps reinforced by the everyday constraints of refugee status, their attitudes and behaviours seem to comply more with practical everyday forms of loving and caring as described by Jamieson (1999). This is in line with recent studies that suggest local governments unintentionally reinforce a traditional gender- and partner roles within refugee families (Huizinga and van Hoven, 2020; Ruis, 2019). Our respondents, and Syrian men in the Netherlands, were often the primary mover (Lubbers and de Valk, 2020). Consequently, Syrian men might take an advantageous position compared to their partners so that an increase in perceived bargaining power by partners does not automatically lead to change in intimate partner relationships (Calderón *et al.*, 2011).

The findings illustrate dimensions of intimacy embedded in Giddens' (1992) proposed shift to 'pure relationships' already influenced, at least in part, attitudes, traditions and behaviours in the pre-migration context. This can be explained as most of our older respondents are higher educated, and, although higher education could not be achieved because of the war, younger respondents grew up in middle-class families, families in which autonomous decision-making of children seems less of a threat to family livelihood (Kağitçibaşi, 2005; Mulinari and Sandell, 2009). Moreover, respondents mostly originate from urban areas in Syria, or moved to urban areas in a later stage of life, away from more collectivistic structures. These circumstances might have stimulated respondents to make more autonomous and independent decisions with regard to intimate partner relationships, which might have led to a more stable relationship in the context of forced migration. Future studies should aim to better understand for whom and under what conditions forced migration may be linked to intimacy loss, conflict or intimate partner violence (e.g. Calderón et al., 2011; Rizkalla and Segal, 2019). Insights from the life course paradigm focusing on agency and context over time may be a fruitful way to advance our knowledge.

Finally, our study offers relevant policy implications and insights that might help to broaden perspectives on 'Muslim men in Western Europe' and immigrant intimate partner relationship formation. This paper calls for and offers avenues to reconsider stereotypes of young Muslim men. Consequently, intimate partner relationships in Syria, too, are plural, complex and subject to ongoing

processes of change. Policymakers and social workers should remain critical to neither assuming immigrant men being traditional and dominant in relationships neither immigrant women perceiving an increase in power resources. Migration may open up opportunities for both men and women that are related to their earlier life course experiences and satisfaction with relationships already in the country of origin (Darvishpour 2002). Similarly, also in more economically developed societies (like the Netherlands), intimate partner relationships remain shaped by emotional connections to family (Kağitçibaşi, 1996) and everyday choices people make are linked to uneven distributions of social, educational and economic resources (Jamieson, 1999).

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This paper seeks to disentangle gendered perspectives on intimate partner relationships after forced migration. It targets lived experiences of young Syrian men in the Netherlands (18-35 years old) and explores the extent to which attitudes, traditions and behaviours in relation to gender- and partner roles are contested, re-produced or transformed in the context of societal change. The study employs a qualitative life course perspective, using interdisciplinary social theory to flesh out the interplay of relevant micro- and macro processes in which intimate partner relationship attitudes, traditions and behaviours are defined. We draw from narrative interviews, themed around core life course principles such as *agency, linked lives, and time and place*, and use narrative analyses. The paper offers two main contributions. First, we demonstrate that intimate partner relationship negotiation after forced migration is a nuanced, complex and ambiguous process, conditioned by intersections of self, family and society, personal biographies and culturally defined agentic behavior. Hence, the paper stimulates incorporating interdisciplinary social theory in migration research to more adequately capture intercultural experiences of migrants. Second, by scrutinising divergent experiences and strategies, we challenge one-sided, static accounts of immigrant men, and emphasise respondents are active agents that negotiate their contextual positions in the Netherlands as intimate partners, husband and fathers.

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