Getting to the Pink Picket Fence. How LGB Migrants Negotiate Same-Sex Marriage

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing legalization trend, same-sex marriage remains inaccessible to couples in most countries. Such exclusions, however, can be circumvented by migrants who, in the process, also negotiate diverse and even divergent meanings of marriage embedded in different socio-institutional contexts. This study examines such diverse meanings of marriage among LGB transnational migrants based on biographic narrative interviews with nine individuals married to same-sex partners in Belgium and the Netherlands and coming from Central and Eastern European countries with constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage. The study highlights the negotiations of intimate relationships in the context of the new institutional opportunity of marriage and stresses how the similarities between migrants and non-migrants testify to the strengthening of same-sex marriage as a social institution. Focusing further on migrants' unique experiences of marriage in divergent socio-institutional contexts, this study also shows how same-sex marriage empowers LGB migrants even where it is (still) not available.

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Introduction

In 2001 and 2003, same-sex marriage was legalized in, respectively, the Netherlands and Belgium. Since then, nearly 30 countries worldwide have adopted same-sex marriage (ILGA World et al., 2020). Still, in most countries, same-sex marriage is a recent development (ILGA World et al., 2020). In many more countries, it remains inaccessible, though its growing recognition means that same-sex couples may use international mobility to negotiate legal exclusions (Badgett, 2011; Kassan & Nakamura, 2013) or may navigate particular immigration regimes through family reunification (Stychin, 2000; Chauvin, Salcedo Robledo, Koren, & Illidge, 2019). Nevertheless, such uneven legal developments also mark same-sex marriage as an emerging – and possibly still fragile – institution. Even within the European Union (EU), whose citizens benefit from no immigration restrictions under the Freedom-of-Movement Directive (2004/38/EC), non-heterosexual EU migrants must negotiate diverse marital regimes, from those providing full recognition to same-sex marriage to those constitutionally defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

As a result of these uneven developments, cultural meanings of same-sex marriage are situated in diverse socio-institutional contexts and remain in flux, both in broader society and in LGBTQ*[1] communities. The main proponents of same-sex marriage frame it as an indicator of full equality and/or define marriage as an embodiment of (romantic) love (Kollman, 2009; Kimport, 2013). Within the LGBTQ* communities, the opposition to same-sex marriage stems from a perspective that marriage is a patriarchal and heteronormative institution that further excludes all those deviating from a monogamous couple model (Richardson, 2004). The opposition in broader society, from a religious-conservative perspective, frames same-sex marriage as a threat to traditional ("natural") gender relations. While the most recent articulators of this perspective – the European "anti-gender" activists,

for example (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017b) – do not deny non-heterosexual individuals access to some couples' rights, they still use this view to argue that "marriage" should be reserved for a union between a man and a woman (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017a; Vuckovic Juros, Dobrotić, & Flego, 2020).

These various and sometimes conflicting meanings of same-sex marriage are reflected also among non-heterosexual individuals taking up this new legal possibility. Even more so, this may be the case for migrants. The unsettled nature (Swidler, 2000) of their lives at the intersections of different socio-cultural contexts means that LGB migrants not only negotiate multiple meanings of marriage but also must reconcile sometimes very different expectations of non-heterosexual relationships embedded in diverse socio-institutional environments. Therefore, in the present study, I spotlight how LGB individuals navigate their intimate relationships in the context of a new institutional opportunity of marriage in their host countries. Furthermore, in what is a unique contribution of this study, I also extend my analysis to migrants' negotiations of social expectations regarding (same-sex) marriage in a transnational field encompassing both their host and home countries. To this purpose, I use a case study of Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants from EU member states with constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage who are married to same-sex partners in Belgium and the Netherlands as a critical case of post-migration experiences that are characterized by a profound change in both symbolic and legal status of same-sex marriage.

Theoretical Framework

Motives and Meanings of Same-Sex Marriage

While the Netherlands and Belgium number around two decades of allowing same-sex couples to marry, most other countries have adopted same-sex marriage, as opposed to a civil or registered partnership, only in the mid- or late-2010s (ILGA World et al., 2020). In consequence, some early marriage studies have, in fact, examined civil partnerships – as

these have been, by these studies' participants, often construed as marriages (Smart, 2007, 2008; Heaphy, Smart, & Einarsdottir, 2013). Indeed, motives for the formalization of same-sex relationships identified in these studies are similar to those specified in later research on legal marriage. These include a mix of practical and romantic reasons (from legal and economic protection to expression of love and commitment), often underlined by a desire for political or social affirmation (Badgett, 2009; Ramos, Goldberg, & Badgett, 2009; Kimport, 2013; Ocobock, 2013; Richman, 2013; Lannutti, 2014).

Meanings of same-sex marriage are most often categorized very similarly but are nevertheless a broader (Lannutti, 2018) and a more fluid category. In line with Swidler's (2000) cultural repertoires approach that informs the present study, available meanings of marriage include even those interpretative frameworks that are challenged or dismissed, such as the perceived (hetero)normativity of marriage or its designation as a "natural" heterosexual union. Then, how individuals use diverse (and not necessarily complementary) meanings of marriage to make sense of their lives and their relationships also depends on their experiences and contextual situatedness (Swidler, 2000). Therefore, meanings of same-sex marriage cannot always be anticipated from motives for marrying and may further shift with changing experiences and perspectives.

In the emerging research on same-sex marriage, mostly situated in the US,[2] two patterns noted among individuals marrying after a legal change testify to the complexity and fluidity of meanings of marriage. First, while some same-sex partners jumped at the opportunity to legally marry, often identifying it as a natural progression of their romantic relationship, others found their perspectives conflicted (e.g. Richman, 2013). For some, the friction was caused precisely by the romantic conceptualization of marriage symbolizing enduring commitment (cf. companionate model of marriage in Cherlin, 2004; Swidler, 2000) as opposed to a more individualized view of marriage which does not assume its enduring

character (Badgett, 2009; Hoy, 2019). For others still, especially women, the political objection to the perceived (hetero)normativity of marriage competed with the practical (economic and legal) benefits of marriage (Badgett, 2009; Richman, 2013; Kimport, 2013; Lannutti, 2014). In some cases, marriage was taken off the table for such political reasons, but sometimes this negotiation was resolved by a resisting partner reframing their political positionality to perceive same-sex marriage as affirming the equality of same-sex couples' rights (Badgett, 2009; Richman, 2013).

The second pattern signaling fluidity of meanings of marriage is a surprisingly strong emotional impact experienced even by those who felt like married before the legal ceremony (Kimport, 2013; Richman, 2013). Likewise, some individuals reported feeling more committed or secure in the relationships after the marriage (Ramos et al., 2009; Richman, 2013; Kimport, 2013; Lannutti, 2014) or they felt that the others treated them differently, even if the couple was previously in a civil or registered partnership (Richman, 2013). In other words, regardless of different and complex motivations for getting married, and even when fully expecting that marriage would increase the stability of their relationships or bring greater affirmation by a broader society (Lannutti, 2005; Shulman, Gotta, & Green, 2012), individuals in these studies did not anticipate how personally transformative their marriages would feel like. Even more unexpected was the feeling of empowerment (Lannutti, 2018), a new sense that – following a legalization of same-sex marriage – respect for their same-sex relationships can now be demanded and expected as their due in the context of marriage (Ocobock, 2020).

LGB Migrants and Same-Sex Marriage

For migrants, some other issues are at play as well. Foremost among them is the immigration status which makes the option of same-sex marriage in another country, or a family reunification through marriage, less accessible to the less privileged non-heterosexual

migrants.[3] Even those migrants who more easily navigate restrictive immigration regimes

(due to their class, race or national origin) experience professional and personal costs when

pursuing international mobilities in order to regulate their same-sex relationships (McDevitt-

Pugh, 2011; Badgett, 2011; Kassan & Nakamura, 2013; Nakamura & Kassan, 2020).

Furthermore, in the context of meanings of marriage for LGB migrants, tying family

reunification to same-sex marriage also pressures same-sex couples into a culturally-specific

and gendered, racialized and classed performativity of "romantic love" (Stychin, 2000;

Simmons, 2008; Wilkinson, 2013), one similarly experienced by heterosexual marriage

migrants who have to prove to the immigration officers that their marriages are "genuine"

(Wray, 2006; Longo, 2018).[4] Likewise, one partner sponsoring another through marriage may

create a power differential between same-sex partners of unequal legal status (Chauvin et al.,

2019) or raise the "authenticity" of feelings questions by the family or friends of the

sponsoring partner (Heaphy et al., 2013).

        While the research on same-sex marriage migrants navigating immigration regimes is

only just emerging (Chauvin et al., 2019), examining how migrants negotiate meanings of

same-sex marriage following mobilities that made this institutional option accessible is

relevant even when immigration-status burdens are not in focus, as in case of intra-European

LGB migrants now benefiting from the EU Freedom-of-Movement directive. In particular, in

the case of transnational migrants, who are embedded in social, economic and emotional

networks and practices across both the home and the host countries (Waldinger, 2013), such

examinations can illuminate how LGB migrants draw on diverse meanings of marriage to

negotiate their relationships and social acceptance both in their host country and the country-

of-origin. In addition to expanding understandings of negotiations of intimate relationships in

the context of same-sex marriage as a new institutional option, such an investigation, which I

pursue here, can also shed light on broader effects of same-sex marriage, regardless of its

relatively recent emergence and still very uneven spatial distribution.

The Study

Data and Participants

In this paper, I draw on the material collected in 2017-2018 in a larger study (TransNorm) on

transnational families of LGB migrants living in Belgium and the Netherlands and originally

from five CEE countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). These five

countries are historically and socio-culturally diverse, and they also differ in the level of

protection for LGB rights and the recognition of same-sex unions (from no recognition in

countries such as Poland to almost-like-marriage recognition in Croatia). Still, these CEE

countries are jointly characterized by the constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage.

Within the common EU framework, this sets these countries – when contrasted specifically to

Belgium and the Netherlands – as the cases of the most divergent socio-institutional contexts

regarding the practical and the symbolic status of same-sex marriage. Therefore, although

country differences matter, both between Belgium and the Netherlands and between these

five CEE countries, in this study I approach these two clusters of countries as critical cases

(Patton, 1990), where they are contrasted on one dimension only: status of same-sex

marriage. Within this framework, Belgium and the Netherlands extend the institution of

marriage to same-sex unions, whereas the participating CEE countries represent contexts with

active and relatively successful religious-conservative (anti-gender) mobilizations against

same-sex marriage (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017b), supported also by the public opinion that is

still more homonegative than in Belgium and the Netherlands (Takács & Szalma, 2020).

I draw on biographic narrative interviews, conducted in English or my native

Croatian, with nine cisgender LGB migrants who married their same-sex partners after

coming to Belgium or the Netherlands. Although these migrants originate from different CEE

countries, they share a post-migration experience of a profound change in the social climate

and the institutional access to same-sex marriage. This sample included four women and five

men between their early 30s and early 40s. They mostly met their partner after the migration,

although three participants migrated together with their partner. All participants are highly

educated and work in professional positions. Therefore, they are a homogenous group in

terms of social class, similar to other samples in studies on same-sex marriages (e.g. Badgett,

2009; Richman, 2013; Kimport, 2013; Lannutti, 2014). Finally, these participants are also

transnational migrants, meaning that they sustain cross-border interactions with their families

and friends in their countries-of-origin.

The participants were recruited through snowballing originating in the researcher's

networks and the advertisements in Belgian and Dutch LGBTQ* and rainbow families'

associations seeking migrants from select CEE countries with a specific family status

(married and/or raising children with a same-sex partner). Only two participants, both

ciswomen, recruited in such a way were unmarried; they were excluded from this analysis.

The specificity of the targeted population predictably resulted in a small sample size.

However, this specificity also allows for an in-depth approach to the strategic "critical cases"

that are rich in information because they "can make a point quite dramatically" (Patton, 1990,

p. 174), as it is indeed the case for transnational migrants managing contrasting legislative

and normative expectations regarding same-sex families and marriages.

The study received ethical approval and, to protect the participants' confidentiality, I

present the data using pseudonyms, although not the same I used in other published work. I

also do not specify the participants' countries-of-origin nor any other possibly identifiable

information not necessary for the understanding of findings.

Method and Analysis

I obtained the data presented in this paper through a biographic-narrative-interpretative

method (BNIM) which follows a two-part structure of interviewing (Wengraf, 2001). In the

first part, the participants were asked only one question, to tell the story of their life in the

context of the research on same-sex families. There were no interruptions, not even to ask for

clarifications. In the second part, I followed up on the told story by probing deeper on the

issues of interest – but, following the BNIM precepts, my probes were structured closely

following the words and the order of topics as initially presented by the participant (Wengraf,

2001). As a result, not all participants were consistently asked about their marriages, and this

issue was followed up in greater detail only among the participants who made it more central

to their life stories. The weaknesses of such an approach notwithstanding (e.g. missing out on

elements not mentioned by the participants initially or not raised through follow-up

questions), its strengths lie in preserving the gestalt of the participants' meanings and in

allowing participants to preserve a greater control over the narrative that we are

collaboratively constructing (Wengraf, 2001). This method also acts as a corrective against

the interviewer introducing one's assumptions too strongly into the interview (Wengraf,

2001), a concern that is particularly important in outsider research.[5]

My analysis started with a thematic narrative analysis (Kohler Riessman, 2008) of the

marriage narrative of one study participant, Sara. This narrative was selected for its richness –

in the story of how she negotiated marriage with her partner, Sara raised most themes

appearing in previous research on motives and meanings of same-sex marriage (Badgett,

2009; Richman, 2013; Kimport, 2013; Lannutti, 2014). In the next step, I compared the main

themes of Sara's narrative with those appearing (or not) in interviews of other study

participants. Following this comparative strategy, I found it particularly illuminating to

contrast Sara's narrative to two other cases, the stories of Daniel and Martin. Nonetheless, the

findings of this study are informed by all the participants' stories, and I take special note of

the patterns that I identify across several participants. At the same time, however, I recognize

that the unique or rare appearance of certain patterns is to be expected in a small study

focusing on only nine cases. Rather than dismissing their epistemological value, I approach

such context-dependent patterns as an opportunity to reflect on how they can illuminate (or

complicate) the understanding of the issue at hand – which, indeed, is a strong suit of the

qualitative (case study) research (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Gobo, 2008). Therefore, my interpretative

work – which is situated into my developing understanding formed both by the previous

research and my data – prioritizes the meanings of patterns, rather than their frequency or

prevalence (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This includes both the meanings that can be explicitly

identified from the participants' words and those that I identify by situating the participants'

accounts in a comparative framework signposting both the silences and broader implications

of the participants' accounts (cf. semantic and latent themes in Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Regarding validity, this study is concerned solely with the narrative truth of the told

stories (Kohler Riessman, 2008), though situating the participants' accounts into a

comparative framework may be seen as a type of data triangulation (Atkinson &

Hammersley, 2007). Such an interpretative work includes also heightened attention to

negative cases that challenge the dominant interpretations or specify them further (Rizzo,

Corsaro, & Bates, 1992; Patton, 1990). Finally, as appropriate for qualitative case studies, I

do not claim a (probability-based) generalizability of the findings to the LGB population or

even to the CEE middle-class married LGB migrants. Nonetheless, by taking a closer look at

strategically chosen cases, I aspire to theoretical generalizability, that is, the identification of

the general patterns highlighted by the specific (Wengraf, 2000; Gobo, 2008).

Same-Sex Marriage and Migrants: From (Re)Negotiated Relationship
Expectations to Transformed Societal Expectations

Nine CEE LGB migrants in this study married in Belgium or the Netherlands, but their paths

to this outcome varied. Three were part of (cross-cultural and co-national) mobile couples

who migrated together and then married. The other six started relationships in their host

countries and married their new partners, both native-born citizens and foreign nationals.

Almost exclusively, the study participants migrated as EU citizens under the Freedom-of-

Movement Directive or had professional positions granting them residence rights even before

their CEE home countries joined the EU – and their foreign-national partners were similarly

among the more privileged categories of immigrants. As a result, in only one case does the

issue of immigrant status emerge as part of the marriage negotiations. Still, I include this case

in the analysis as a necessary reflection on the role of legal frameworks in negotiating

intimate relationships and meanings of marriage in the post-migration contexts.

Such negotiations are the focus of the first part of the analysis presented below. In this

section, organized around the stories of Sara, Daniel and Martin, I highlight how access to the

new institutional option of same-sex marriage shapes its meanings among mobile couples and

those who started their relationships in migrants' host countries. In the second part of the

analysis, I spotlight the role of socio-legal validation for LGB migrants' meanings of

marriage in a transnational context. In this section, returning to the story of Sara, I highlight

how the socio-legal affirmation and empowerment experienced by migrants in same-sex

marriages extend even to those contexts in which same-sex marriage is still unavailable.

(Re)Negotiating the Marriage Expectations

Sara's Story: Mobile Couples and Commitment, Benefits and Politics

Sara, a woman in her thirties identifying as a bisexual lesbian, moved to Belgium following

her partner who accepted a professional position. Both Sara and her partner originally came

from (two different) CEE countries with no recognition of same-sex relationships. Soon after

their arrival, they registered as legal cohabitants. Still, the question of whether they would

marry in Belgium created a problem in their relationship arising from the couple's different

perspectives on marriage. Thus, Sara, who at the very beginning of her life story defined

herself as a feminist and a fighter for equality, introduces her marriage narrative with her

initial resistance. This was countered, by Sara's partner, with insistence on marriage as a

pragmatic choice.

> *I didn't want to get married. My wife wanted to get married. And she kept trying to convince me. She is a true economist, so she kept focusing on the facts. And at the end, finally, she convinced me in the sense that, you know, it's just for our future [...] We were already legal cohabitants. We became legal cohabitants shortly after I moved here just to make sure, make it easier for me when looking for jobs and so on. And for her to get benefits for me. And then [...] we got married [..] she convinced me that it's better for, I mean, for our security in sense of if something happens to her, we are married.*

In negotiations with her partner, Sara's perspective shifted. This shift was multifaceted,

negotiating several meanings of marriage. Seemingly central were the political (ideological)

resistance to marriage vs. practical security provided by its rights and benefits. However, in

the second part of the interview, Sara reveals that it was also the symbolic security, connoted

by the romantic conceptualization of marriage, that fueled her resistance to marrying.

> *(B)ecause I think that in her head marriage also represents security in a sense that, you know, we are gonna be together forever. And I never wanted to commit to that [...] the concept of marriage as such. But, for me, the feeling that somebody might feel like we are gonna be together forever, and I said: 'I'm not gonna commit to that'. Like, I can commit to the fact that I <u>hope</u> we will love each other forever, and I <u>hope</u> we will stay together forever, and I promise to you to, you know, work hard to have that, but I cannot promise you that, I cannot make a promise that I will love and stay with you because I don't know! I mean, nobody knows what's gonna happen. Five years, ten years, twenty years - people break up, people change and so on. So I had a really hard time with doing that.*

It was this romantic view of marriage as an enduring commitment that Sara detected as the

undercurrent of her partner's pragmatic arguments – and this view clashed with Sara's more

individualized view of marriage where its duration is contingent on the couple's developing

relationship and happiness (cf. Cherlin, 2004; Hoy, 2019). This unease about marriage

remains visible even when Sara eventually accepts the practicality argument, as she then also

demands her partner to explicitly acknowledge that their marriage (as separate from their

relationship) is about the rights and the benefits provided by the "paper", not about any

promise of lifelong commitment.

> *And there is a legal thing that acknowledges it, so is not just, you know, us making*

> *a fuss about it but I think legal recognition. If something happens, if we buy a house, if ever we have kids, that we don't have to worry about other things. So the practicality in it won me over. The fact that I felt like I can define it myself. As long as I felt that she understands what it means for me, and that nothing really changes, except of the paper, that makes, that made it kind of possible. Because I just, I hated the concept of 'the wife'. [laughing] Look at me now! Married with a child. So traditional.*

Nonetheless, the practical appeal of the rights and benefits alone was not sufficient to push Sara into marriage – particularly as, in the Belgian context, they could receive almost equivalent protections by same-sex registered partnerships (Waaldijk et al., 2017). Therefore, despite Sara's insistence on the rationality of the decision to marry, this pragmatic decision became possible only when it was further situated into her continuing resistance to the romanticized conceptualization of marriage and the personal reframing of the political positionality. The latter is expressed not only in Sara's statement that same-sex marriage is something Sara can define but also in her explicit claim that same-sex marriage is acceptable where different-sex marriage would not be:

> *I don't think I would have gotten married, maybe, if I was in a straight relationship. Probably not. It was more the fact that it gives me something I otherwise don't automatically have. That I, that we could've married.*

Same-sex marriage as a problem of discrepant expectations. Situated more broadly, Sara's story evokes many of the frictions between romantic, pragmatic and political meanings of marriage identified also among same-sex couples contemplating marriage after a legislative change in one Dutch (Badgett, 2009) and several US studies (Richman, 2013; Kimport, 2013; Lannutti, 2014). Both for Sara and non-migrants in other studies, the "problem" emerges because the relationship was formed under a different set of expectations on what signifies a commitment to the same-sex relationship. For non-migrant couples, these expectations shifted with the legalization of same-sex marriage, whereas Sara and her partner's expectations – formed in countries in which same-sex marriage was not part of the imaginable relationship trajectory – became unsettled with their migration.

While aspiring migrants are aware of the possibility to marry in specific prospective host countries (the same way non-migrant same-sex couples may be aware of the legislative change in the works), this is not quite the same as experiencing and *expecting* this possibility at a deeply personal level. Paula, a lawyer who knew very well that she was migrating from a country with constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage to a country recognizing same-sex marriage, vividly illustrates this point as she reflects on truly comprehending that "in this country, it would be possible for me to have […] a normal life, getting married, having kids" only after her arrival. Previously, in her country, that just "wasn't really a reality". This new reality containing the previously unavailable option to marry, for the mobile couples who previously imagined their relationships to develop differently and whose perspectives on (same-sex) marriage are unaligned, can be disruptive as it upsets the expectations on the future of the relationship in ways not fully anticipated before.

The accounts of Andrea and Maria who also migrated already partnered reveal similar tensions in the context of marriage as a new option for the established couple. Andrea, who was the one pushing for marriage in her relationship, presents her desire to marry as motivated solely by the practicality argument, the same as Sara's partner. In this case as well, after some initial resistance, Andrea's partner accepts this argument. However, it is the other story of initial resistance to marriage, shared by Maria, that explicitly defines these marriage negotiations as a "burden on the relationship". "It [marriage] means nothing to me", explains Maria her initial unwillingness. However, she recognizes that "it meant something for her [the partner] and our relationship" and for this reason they reached "that joint decision, in the end, to get married here, because this was possible here".

Therefore, access to new rights and benefits notwithstanding, the new institutional option of same-sex marriage reveals differences in the expectations from the established relationship, that now need to (re)negotiated and resolved in the host country for the

relationship to continue untroubled. Nonetheless, for some groups of LGB migrants, the

negotiations of intimate relationships in post-migration contexts develop along a different

path, especially so if their expectations from the relationship and the marriage are more

closely adjusted to their new socio-institutional contexts.

Stories of Daniel and Martin: New Relationships, Love and Marriage, and Law

In marked contrast to stories of Sara and other mobile couples in this study, all six CEE

migrants who married in the context of their new relationships in host countries were also the

individuals whose narratives reflected a shared marriage perspective with their partners.

Similarly to the accounts of other (non-migrant) same-sex couples in formalized relationships

(Heaphy et al., 2013; Richman, 2013; Kimport, 2013), these participants assumed a

progressive development of their romantic (committed) relationships and omitted or

minimized political or pragmatic interpretations of (same-sex) marriage,[6] even when the latter

mattered for the regulation of parenting rights (as in case of Daniel) or immigrant status (as in

Martin's case). In each of these six cases, marriage was already an imaginable option early in

their relationships, and migrants' marriage narratives betrayed no friction about its various

meanings and different relationship expectations.

     A house, a garden and a dog. Daniel is a gay man in his thirties who arrived in the

Netherlands on a postgraduate fellowship. He started a new career and settled in the country,

also integrating into the local gay community. Even before beginning his current relationship,

Daniel emphatically wanted children and he was already looking into ways to realize his

desire to be a father in his host country. After he met his partner, a native Dutch man,

marriage and family were placed at the table at the very beginning of their relationship.

> *And then a couple of days later we had our first date. […] we met a couple of times and*
> *kind of it felt, it clicked very well. […] very quickly we became very intense relationship.*
> *We would spend a lot of time together. Literally every, literally every day. He would be*
> *at my place or I would be at his place. And, it felt very right. Yeah. And he joked about*
> *marriage. […] He was coming back from a very bad relationship which ended bad. The*
> *relation was bad. Um, and yeah, that's something he wanted in life, as a marriage. And*

in Dutch there's an expression. It's called "een huis, een boom en een hond" which means literally "a house, a tree, also garden and a dog" [laughs]. Yeah, the idyllic picture […] because basically I think, you know, it's functional so of the age and the experience […] when you know, you know. And after […] a couple of times before that [laugh], it's a bit more clear […] what you're looking for and whether that's it.

In this context, when the emotional connection between Daniel and his new partner coincided with a similar vision for the future ("a house, a garden and a dog", or the white picket fence, in an American idiom), the relationship progressed very quickly to the marriage proposal and then, concurrently, to the marriage and children (surrogacy, in this particular case).

Whereas Daniel mentioned the practical issue of the marriage rights and benefits related to the legal protection of children and the regulation of the couple's parenthood status, he did not interpret it as a factor in wanting or deciding to marry. Instead, Daniel's narrative presents both partners implicitly approaching marriage as an assumed next stage of their romantic relationship, in a trajectory where both partners imagined and expected marriage and children.

Love and law. Martin, now in his forties, came to Belgium for university studies as a single gay man. After finishing his studies and working for a few years, Martin met his current partner, a Belgian native. They dated for about a year and then decided to get married, after Martin's residency status came into question. Still, this pragmatic aspect was presented solely as a push that accelerated the already existing relationship trajectory, conceptualized firmly in romanticized terms.

We got married very quickly, after a year. […] At the time, I didn't have a residence permit in Belgium anymore […] At first, I had a plan to open my store here because that was the only way I could've gotten some kind of a right of residence. This then turned out to be a very complicated procedure in relation to that permit of mine. It lasted and lasted and lasted and lasted. […] this relationship of ours was ongoing, and then Gert said: "[…] as far as I am concerned, this will happen sooner or later, we will get married. Now, we can do it now to make our lives easier or we can drag it out for three years or I don't know how long, to make it acceptable to others as some kind of a normal period after which people-, or we are going to do it now". And then we did it like that […] We really got married for love.

Without minimizing the validity or meaningfulness of Martin interpreting his

marriage in emphatically romantic terms, my interpretation extends also to a tone of

defensiveness I identified in Martin's need to emphasize they really got married for love.

While the tone is not easily picked up from the text, it is part of the contextualized

interpretative work nevertheless. In this case, this interpretative work was situated in my

understanding of the sensitivity related to the question of "authenticity" of feelings to which I

was alerted by similar accounts of marriage migrants in other studies (Wray, 2006; Longo,

2018; Chauvin et al., 2019). Then, contrasting Martin's insistence that they married for love

with Sara's and others' argument that practical relevance of same-sex marriage is as or even

more relevant than "marrying for love" exposes the pressure on Martin, an immigrant with a

then-vulnerable legal status, to present "suspicious" elements in ways that fit the normative

expectations of others, and especially the narrative of romantic love (see also Heaphy et al.,

2013; Chauvin et al., 2019).

In this context, similarly to some other LGB migrants whose relationships gave them

access to legal residence rights (Heaphy et al., 2013), Martin defers part of the control over

the relationship expectations to his partner's initiative. Specifically, it is the partner who can

more easily propose the marriage as a "solution" lest the question of marrying (solely) for

immigration rights emerges as a problem in their relationship – or at least as the question

implied in an external gaze (mine included). Moving on from this point, then, Martin's story

is situated solely within the framework of the romanticized conceptualization of marriage as

the next step of a loving committed relationship, an assumption that is verbalized also by his

partner in proposing marriage.

Negotiating Intimate Relationships in the Context of New Institutional Opportunity of

Same-Sex Marriage

These patterns of migrants' negotiations of same-sex marriage in their post-migration

contexts are remarkably similar to those noted in the (re)negotiations of existing and new

relationships after a legislative change introducing same-sex marriage. This includes both

Sara's problem of discrepant marriage expectations among established / mobile couples

facing a new institutional option of marriage together and the shared assumptions about

future trajectories of new same-sex relationships reflected in the stories of Daniel and Martin.

In the first case, the way mobile couples make sense of same-sex marriage after a joint

migration is similar to negotiations of same-sex couples who also formed their relationship

expectations under different socio-institutional circumstances – more removed in time from a

legislative change (Badgett, 2009; Richman, 2013; Lannutti, 2014) or in more ambivalent

legal contexts (cf. study on same-sex marriages contracted in the San Francisco City Hall in

2004 which were known to stand on shaky legal grounds by Kimport, 2013).

The second case of shared expectation in migrants' new relationships likewise echoes

the changing perspectives on marriage among new generations of same-sex couples who, in

wake of legislative changes, express less ambivalence and generally greater acceptance of

same-sex marriage (Heaphy et al., 2013; Badgett, 2009). This suggests that, after a period of

accommodation to the new institutional opportunity of same-sex marriage (among migrants

and non-migrants alike), the option to legally marry – as it had been foreseen (Lannutti,

2014) – introduces specific expectations vis-à-vis the nature and the future of (new) same-sex

relationships. Only those who share similar expectations for a future trajectory – which now

increasingly include marriage – will continue with their relationship. Within this framework,

then, the strong cultural symbolism of romantic love is appropriated as the culturally

privileged interpretative framework for same-sex marriage as well, and other meanings of

marriage become suspect in light of the romantic ideal of the couple relationship.

These patterns shared by the migrants in this study with non-migrants in other studies

suggest that the new institutional opportunity of marriage is transforming imaginable same-

sex relationship trajectories and normative frameworks similarly regardless of whether access

to same-sex marriage is gained through a legislative change or spatial mobility. The only

tangible migrant specificity that I identified in the analysis of the negotiations of intimate

relationships was related to the vulnerability of legal immigrant status, but with this factor

removed, similarities speak louder than differences. Considering especially the different

national and cultural contexts of participants in this study and those in the US-dominated

studies on experiences of same-sex marriage, such persisting similarities testify to same-sex

marriage solidifying as a social institution, modeling ever more forcefully the same-sex

relationship expectations and norms.

Similarities between migrants and non-migrants are reflected also in the next part of

the analysis which spotlights the role of socio-legal validation for migrants' interpretations of

their marriages. However, the subsequent analysis also brings into focus the specifically

migrant experiences of negotiating their marriages in a transnational context.

Same-Sex Marriage and Power of Societal Perceptions and Legal Frameworks

The cultural power of legal same-sex marriages (Hull, 2006) is one of the consistent findings

of the emerging research on same-sex married couples. From individuals describing their

same-sex relationships as being perceived as more "serious" or "real" in the eyes of the others

after marrying (Kimport, 2013; Richman, 2013; Lannutti, 2014) to legal marriages

empowering LGB individuals to demand respect and legitimacy for their same-sex

relationships in their everyday interactions (Ocobock, 2020), these patterns highlight how

meanings of marriage for LGB individuals stem also from societal perceptions and legal

frameworks, in addition to negotiations of their intimate relationships with their partners.

Returning now to Sara's marriage narrative, these elements again come into view.

After describing her initial (and still visible) ambivalence towards marriage and the

negotiations with her partner, Sara continues with a reflection on her marriage in view of

what it represents to others. Immediately, Sara's ambivalence towards same-sex marriage

diminishes as she notes a new type of symbolic acknowledgment she receives in the Belgian

society, where marriage provides "more strength to the relationship, to the outside world".

Sara elaborates on this point in the context of the contact with the authorities, where her

relationship was implicitly reaffirmed by the right to use the language of marriage, expected

to provide recognition of the seriousness of the relationship.

> *(A)t the police station here when we had to come and register, and when they say [...]: "Your partner?", and you say: "No, it's my wife". Just the sound of it kind of makes it more serious in a way that you expect them to treat [you].*

Affirmation and Empowerment in a Transnational Context

However, the empowerment gained from access to rights and language of marriage does not

remain contained to a Belgian context only, which is the one providing same-sex marriage

with legal validity and social recognition. For the migrants in this study, who are all

transnational migrants sustaining interactions and visiting their families-of-origin in countries

where same-sex marriage is emphatically not legally validated nor socially recognized, this

empowerment extends even to these other contexts. In Sara's case, this is identifiable from

the demands she places on her parents despite uncertainty about her parents' reactions.

Specifically, Sara demands more than a recognition of her marriage as a legal union

regulating the couple's rights – she demands her parents' *celebration of same-sex marriage.*

> *My parents were, as I said, by the time I started dating her, they were more or less fine, and supportive. They really like her, they adore her. However, I knew that marriage will be something that... might be more difficult for them to accept. My dad is quite religious. So I wasn't sure how they are gonna take it but, basically, I just went home for Christmas after we got engaged. I took out a bottle of some alcohol, put glasses, and I said: 'We have something to celebrate! I'm getting married!'. And I don't think they had other choice but to be happy. I mean, you know, I kind of made it, forced it upon them to be happy. 'Cause I said: "I expect you to be happy".*

Sara's demand for celebration and happiness for her impending marriage acquires a specific

significance considering that the parents are situated in the context in which same-sex

marriage is actively opposed in the public arena and excluded from the constitutional

definition of marriage. Therefore, Sara's demand for the symbolic recognition of the

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"realness" of her marriage from her parents, even when the parents are not signaled this

message by the society in which they live, testifies to the empowering effect of legal same-

sex marriage spilling over from the context in which it is legally and socially validated.

Like Sara, almost all study participants demanded from their parents some sort of

acknowledgment of their marriage, even when they feared or expected (or ultimately

experienced) negative reactions. Even when the parents were otherwise perceived as

supportive, they were often troubled with the idea of same-sex marriage – not least because

of the anti-marriage discourse they personally adopted or perceived as influential in their

communities (for more on parents' reactions, see Vuckovic Juros, 2020). Still, several

participants reported that same-sex marriage did indeed change how the same-sex

relationship was treated by many of the parents. Ivan, for example, noted the reaction of his

homophobic father: "(U)ntil my wedding, my father would literally say that I was a

degenerate and being gay and stuff, but the moment I said yes and we had, you know, a piece

of paper, he had abruptly stopped". Even in the negative case of Andrea, who did not ask for

a celebration or an acknowledgment of her marriage, she noted a change in the perception of

her relationship: "I think they see my wife as, you know, truly my life partner whom I chose

and I think they understand now that this is it". A similar change in perceptions was also

reported in studies on non-migrant married couples' families-of-origin (Lannutti, 2014;

Ocobock, 2013; Richman, 2013). Although this change of perception did not always occur,

not in these earlier studies nor in this study, it is worthy of note that the growing availability

of legal marriage can, in some cases, strengthen social validation of same-sex relationships

even when same-sex marriage is not yet legal in a particular context.

This is even more visible from the demands for recognition and legitimacy that the

LGB migrants feel empowered to ask not only from family members but also from strangers

in their home countries and elsewhere. Consider, for example, the case of Ivan, who

perceived the legal validation of his marriage in the Netherlands as spilling over to his social

interactions even in the contexts where such a legal recognition was not available.

> *(W)hen you say abroad, for instance in [the home country], that you're married, and
> I'm married to a man, one would not say, "But you're not really married!" "No, I am
> really married." [...] I feel the Kingdom of the Netherlands is backing me.*

Indeed, a similar sense of empowerment by legal validation, even when its limits were in

view, was reported also by LGB individuals marrying after the 2016 US elections (Lannutti,

2018). Faced with a more hostile climate, they suddenly saw same-sex marriage as a more

fragile institution than previously. Nevertheless, making use of the here-and-now opportunity

to marry imbued them with strength and agency to rally both themselves and their families

and friends against any future encroachment on their rights (Lannutti, 2018). Although this is

not quite the same as the experience of migrants in this study who "lose" their married status

every time they visit family in their home countries, the sense of empowerment is similarly

based on the here-and-now legal validation of same-sex marriage. For Ivan, this means that,

once granted, the legal validation gives him strength and agency to demand it even where it is

not granted - and similar empowerment can also be read in Ivan's account of what drives his

(non-migrant) co-nationals to marry abroad, although their marriages will not be recognized

on return: a "hope that one day the critical mass of people who got married abroad will be so

big in [the home country] that government cannot ignore it anymore". Or, as Sara notes

finally, when reflecting on the support for her marriage from her gay friends, legal validation

of marriage matters for more than just one particular relationship, especially when one is

acutely aware that this option is denied in particular contexts: "So if you live in a country that

allows you to do it, then you should do it do just to show that it matters."

Conclusion

Drawing on the narratives of CEE LGB migrants married to same-sex partners in Belgium

and the Netherlands, in this study I examined how migrants from countries with

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constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage negotiated meanings of marriage with their

partners and how these meanings were also shaped by societal expectations and legislative

frameworks validating same-sex marriages in their host countries. In my analysis, I built on

the connections between the research on same-sex marriage after a legislative change and the

emerging studies on LGB marriage migrants faced with diverse emigration regimes to

explore further how migrants negotiate their intimate relationships in the context of the new

institutional opportunity of same-sex marriage. Further, in what is a unique contribution of

this study, I also extended this analysis to highlight how migrants negotiate socio-legal

validation of their marriages in a transnational context.

Some persisting differences between migrants and non-migrants notwithstanding –

such as additional relationship vulnerability and the "authenticity" burdens experienced by

LGB migrants in precarious legal (immigrant) positions (cf. Heaphy et al., 2013; Chauvin et

al., 2019), the similarities between these two groups in negotiating same-sex marriage are the

more notable pattern of this study. These similarities are related both to negotiating the

"problem" of marriage that emerges in light of discrepant expectations on what signifies a

commitment to the same-sex relationship (as, initially, between Sara and her partner

struggling between pragmatic and political perspectives), and the noteworthy absence of such

frictions when partners' expectations align (as in cases of Martin's and Daniel's progressive,

romanticized narratives of marriage). Furthermore, considering marriage not only as a

relationship but also as a social institution (Swidler, 2000), this study's findings highlight

additionally the sense of affirmation and empowerment that legal validation, even when

limited to particular contexts, fosters among individuals making sense of their same-sex

marriages. This is seen, for instance, from Sara's demands that her same-sex marriage

contracted in Belgium is celebrated by her parents even though legal same-sex marriage is

not recognized in their home country. A similar pattern of the legal validation providing

empowerment that spills over to other contexts is also found in Ivan's narrative discussing the reception of his marriage in countries without this option. This finding, which illuminates how transnational migrants negotiate their marriages in divergent socio-institutional contexts, testifies to the key symbolic power of legal marriage, which can sometimes be effected even in countries where the unequal status of same-sex relationships is forcefully signaled by their Constitutions.

This study's findings must be positioned within limitations unavoidably accompanying a qualitative study on a very small, specific and relatively homogeneous sample. Although many of the patterns identified in this study are also observable from other (and some considerably larger) studies of same-sex marriage, these studies are also narrowly situated (mostly in the US context) (e.g. Kimport, 2013; Richman, 2013; Lannutti, 2014; Ocobock, 2020). They further share many of the limitations that characterize this study, most notably the middle-class positionality of the participants which, although I did not specifically address it here, heavily shapes the migrant experiences of participants in this study as well (for more, see Vuckovic Juros, Forthcoming). Therefore, it is conceivable that same-sex marriage would be negotiated differently by migrants from different social locations – this is an especially important limitation in view of Cherlin's argument (2020) that marriage increasingly functions as the cultural capital for middle-class heterosexual couples. Extending this argument to the same-sex couples is beyond the scope of this study empirically, but its consideration indicates a clear limitation to this and similar studies of same-sex marriage based on homogenous groups of LGB individuals, in terms of both class and other specific social locations (e.g. ethnicity/race).

Nevertheless, even though this study's findings are limited and should not be generalized, they still highlight theoretically striking patterns (Gobo, 2008) that can be used to consider some future directions regarding same-sex marriage. One of this, suggested

already by authors noting greater acceptance of same-sex marriage among new LGB

generations (Heaphy et al., 2013; Badgett, 2009), is a shift towards same-sex marriage as a

normalized relationship trajectory, especially as the LGB parenthood is increasingly

becoming an option in the context of established non-heterosexual identities and relations

(Patterson & Riskind, 2010). That the similar shift is also occurring among the LGB migrants

forming their relationships in new contexts supports this generational shift hypothesis, and it

also strengthens the claim that – despite its relatively recent emergence and spatially uneven

distribution – same-sex marriage is solidifying as a social institution. Indeed, this argument is

also supported by the social validation that many married same-sex couples receive from

broader society and families-of-origin, and which spills over even into the contexts in which

same-sex marriage is not legally available. By highlighting these elements, therefore, the

present study has illuminated how the institutional innovation of same-sex marriage works

similarly both across time and space, by shifting and transforming imaginable (same-sex and

different-sex) relationship expectations and normative frameworks about marriage and

family. This, in turn, contributes to the work in both LGBTQ* scholarship and in the general

family scholarship that is concerned with understanding how socio-institutional forces are

shaping today's families.

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Footnotes

[1] I use LGBTQ* as an umbrella term to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other non-heterosexual or non-binary identities. Otherwise, I use more specific terms such as LGB to indicate lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals.

[2] While the US legalized same-sex marriage at a federal level only in 2015, some states have a longer history of this institution. Among them are, notably, Massachusetts and California, and it is the experience of couples in those US states that currently dominates the research on same-sex marriage (Ramos et al., 2009; Richman, 2013; Kimport, 2013; Lannutti, 2014; Ocobock, 2020; for an exception including experiences of Dutch couples, see Badgett, 2009). Though a fuller understanding of experiences of same-sex marriage would necessitate situating them in diverse national and cultural contexts, until such research becomes available, the US case will have to serve a reference point – with all due caution stemming from its particularity.

[3] "Non-privileged" typically refers to "non-desirable" classed and racial categories of immigrants (Simmons, 2008). Such migrants often cannot gain entry into the country independently of their partners. As a result, the unavailable or failed family reunification may contribute to detrimental effects of a forced long-term separation on long-distance relationships (Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013), to the stress of living undocumented or with uncertain legal status when following the same-sex partner (Kassan & Nakamura, 2013; Nakamura & Kassan, 2020), to the subjugation of sexual identities in cases of opposite-sex marriages of convenience for immigration purposes (Acosta, 2007), or to the frequently traumatic experiences of prescriptive and prohibitive procedures for LGB asylum-seekers (Llewellyn, 2020).

4 Even though these evaluations of "genuine marriage" are sometimes applied differently to same-sex than to opposite-sex couples, the former having to perform their "proper" sexualities as well (Fassin & Salcedo, 2015; Chauvin et al., 2019).

5 As a cisgender heterosexual woman, I did not share with my participants one of the key experiences structuring my research topic, even though we shared some other characteristics (class profile, the CEE migrant and family status).

6 Notably, five of these six participants were also men. While discussing this pattern is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth reflecting further in light of noted gender differences in privileging a romanticized perspective on (same-sex) marriage (see Kimport, 2013).