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In dialogue with self and the world: Cape Verdean migrant pregnancy in Portugal

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SYNOPSIS

The voices of Cape Verdean migrant student mothers in Portugal are examined in the light of Archer's (2003) theory on the "inner dialogue". The article frames the mothers as complex social actors who respond to the uncertainties surrounding unplanned pregnancy through self-reflection and dialogue with and about the world, turning the disorientation of unexpected motherhood into a meaningful project. The analysis reveals how the women's agency is located within the wider influences of kinship and gender norms and how these are already negotiated in the case of unconfirmed pregnancy.

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Introduction

Mothering is a contested practice. It is constantly called into question through expert advice, consumer culture and alternative practices which become particularly salient for women within migration contexts. The theme of this Special Issue is to examine the impact of migration on the experiences and practices of mothering. Yet, a dominant focus on how mothers care for their children – either directly or at a distance – may reduce the mothers to "objects of children's needs or conduits of cultural values," instead of recognizing them as "complex actors" (Barlow & Chapin, 2010: 327–328) in their own right.

The aim of this article is to contribute to the debate on migrant mothering from a complementary perspective which examines how the transition to motherhood and the embodied experience of suspected pregnancy impact upon the lives of migrant women. Placing actual and imagined motherhood within the same analytical framework helps to view migrant women as complex actors. The article examines a specific group of migrant student mothers from Cape Verde whose unexpected transition to motherhood occurred at a time when their main aim was to pursue education in Portugal. Motherhood was thus experienced as an unexpected "bodily and biographical situation" (Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield, & Sharpe, 2011: 6) that caused them to reconfigure plans, relationships and identities. This case study consequently provides an important contribution to

the recognition of migrant mothers as subjects in their own right. Nonetheless, reproduction cannot be dissociated from kinship and gender relations and these, together with the issues of contraception and abortion, constitute the main themes addressed. How did kinship and gender relations influence their attitudes towards contraception and abortion? What factors influenced their decisions to proceed with or terminate their pregnancies? How did they respond to the (potential) moral judgments of others? Did the women feel empowered or disempowered by their experiences?

These last two questions raise the thorny issue of agency. Keane (2003) and Warren (1990) critique the tendency (in anthropology) to locate agency within a free-standing subjectivity of pre-existing individuals who are up against oppressive structural forces. They argue that subjectivity should be seen as located within, rather than separate from wider structures. To approach migrant mothers as subjects consequently entails addressing the debate on the relationship between structure and agency. The article does this through a discussion of Archer's (2000, 2003) theory of the mediating role of the "inner conversation".

Archer argues that it is the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their involuntary placement in the world and to construct their own personal projects in the light of the external factors that affect them that provides the key to understanding agency (2003: 93). Structures do not impact directly upon individuals;

this would be determinism. Rather, they are reflexively mediated via each individual's subjective concerns. These concerns are often in conflict with each other and so decisions are made, separating primary from secondary concerns. This decision-making process takes place in the "inner conversation" (2003: 132–139) which is also influenced by social interaction (Mead, 1934). Although direct access to the private workings of the Cape Verdean women's inner conversations is not possible, the sharing of their thought processes in interviews and in informal conversations provided a window into how the women made their decisions.

The case study also provides an original contribution to the debates in the literature on adolescent pregnancy by giving voice to both adolescent and older student mothers in order to elucidate factors beyond that of young age which may render the transition to motherhood problematic (Kane, Morgan, Harris, & Guilkey, 2013). It also provides an original contribution to the literature on migrant motherhood and transnational mothering which tends to take motherhood for granted as a relatively stable self-identity from which to negotiate other issues. These include integration, citizenship (Castañeda, 2008; Erel, 2011), the provision of culturally sensitive care (Griffith, 2015; Liamputtong, 2007; Moro, Neuman, & Réal, 2008), migrant and transnational care relations and the socially defined moralities underlying public narratives of "good mothering" (Åkesson, Carling, & Drotbohm, 2012; Drotbohm, 2013; Locke, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2015; Parreñas, 2005). Madianou (2012) has addressed the issue of how maternal ambivalence (Parker, 1995) may be accentuated through migration, as women are pulled between their roles as mothers and their identities as women. By focusing on the uncertainties created by unexpected pregnancy, this article draws attention to another aspect of migrant women's experiences which is under researched in the literature: how women themselves feel about the unexpected transition to motherhood within the context of migration.

Fathers were less available for interview; especially those who had become estranged from the mothers. Another difficulty encountered in the research was that of making systematic comparisons between the women's experiences. This was because the fieldwork was carried out during different periods of time in the mothers' lives. Whilst in some cases it was easy for me to stay in contact and register the changes that occurred in the women's biographies, in other cases the women "disappeared" so that I never knew, for example, if they had completed their studies. Their constant changing of telephone numbers to take advantage of free promotions added to the difficulty of staying in contact. Having retained my number, I am still sometimes surprised by mothers who contact me after several years of "silence". The recent changes in their lives, referred to when appropriate, have brought to light the contingent nature of their experiences and the provisional nature of conclusions that may be drawn in relation to any single case.

The following sections discuss the research context and methodological challenges. This is followed by an examination of how the women dealt with the uncertainty of unexpected pregnancy through a quantitative view of the data, followed by an analysis of narrative extracts by addressing the issues of abortion, gender and empowerment. The next section elucidates how the issues discussed bear on the women's decision-making processes through an examination of the embodied

experience of suspected pregnancy. The article concludes with suggestions for future research.

The research context and methods

Cape Verde, situated off the west coast of Africa, gained political independence from Portugal in 1975. Its poor natural resource base and arid climate have contributed to the islands' long history of migration which dates back to the colonial period and continues to the present day. Although, traditionally, it was mostly unskilled male labourers who emigrated, in the last few decades, growing numbers of women began to migrate, especially to Southern Europe. Cleaning jobs and caring for children or the elderly have constituted the main outlets of work (Grassi & Évora, 2007), as well as working in restaurants and cafés.

Portugal was also a destination for the Cape Verdean elite during the late colonial period to pursue higher education. Following independence, the signing of bi-lateral agreements made it possible for more Cape Verdeans to study in Portuguese universities and, from 1995 onwards, male and female students also came to acquire technical qualifications in Portuguese tertiary vocational colleges. Between 2009 and 2012 nearly 3600 vocational college students came to study across different regions in Portugal.¹ Some local councils in Cape Verde responsible for sending these students required the women to take pregnancy tests; if they were positive, the women stayed behind. This questionable measure – given the sexual and reproductive rights issues it raises – emerged from a context of high rates of teenage pregnancy in Cape Verde and government measures to reduce them.

In the latest nationwide study on reproductive health in Cape Verde which covers the period 2003–5, the fertility rate for adolescent women between fifteen and nineteen-years-old was 9.2% (INE, 2008: 46) compared to that of 1.95% for women of the same age group in the same period in Portugal (INE, 2005: 20, 2007: 75). Lack of knowledge about contraception does not offer a satisfactory explanation for these rates, since the study on reproductive health claims that nearly 100% of the women interviewed had knowledge of at least one method of contraception. Yet only 22.6% claimed to be using or planning to use contraception in the future (INE, 2008: 59–60).

In Cape Verde abortion has been legal since 1986. Yet, clandestine abortions, especially amongst young women, are common, estimated in a study commissioned by the association for the protection of the family, VerdeFam, to be between 7000 and 7500 per year, seven times more than legal abortions. The reasons suggested include shame, the moralizing attitudes of health professionals and lack of trust in the confidentiality of health services (Afrosondagem, 2012).

In the school year 2001–2, the government passed a controversial measure to temporarily suspend pregnant pupils from secondary school. The effects have been criticized in a study which found that between 2002 and 2008, nearly 68% of the cases of suspension due to pregnancy resulted in school dropout or failure (ICIEG, 2010: 42).

The study suggests a number of reasons for high teenage pregnancy rates. Firstly, motherhood was valued as a meaningful life project in response to the failure of schools to encourage future life projects for their pupils, faced with high youth unemployment rates – 32.1% in 2012 for people under

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