

## THE POWERFUL MAP OF TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES: *Marriage, spaces and life trajectories*

### Abstract

Transnational families are, as the term suggests, social structures existing across national borders. Thus, individuals belonging to these families are in geographical terms separated by space. However, the practices of transnational families often provide a sense of proximity and emotional attachment. This article, by seeing space as inherently relational, discusses the fields within which families establish themselves and move transnationally. Transnational family spaces are, for example, arenas where young people meet and where marriages are arranged. This article includes the life and marriage stories of two individuals who have married transnationally, based on their family relationships, and further analyses how these marriages are element in the practices that families engage in to uphold a sense of closeness – an endeavour that is sometimes successful, sometimes not. Finally, the article discusses some elements that challenge the relational spaces that transnational families engage in, particularly the impact of nation states and their regulations.

### Keywords

Marriage • Nation state regulations • Transnational families • Transnational networks • Transnational spaces

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## 1 The Space of the Transnational: Aspects of Family

*Garbi: How close are you to your family in Pakistan? I mean, emotionally and in terms of interaction?*

*Mumtaz: Very, very [close]. Especially to my cousins. I talk a lot with them. About everything. So we have a bond of friendship besides being cousins...*

*Garbi: But I am thinking – they are still far away, aren't they? What is it in the relationship that created closeness? Or how do they become close?*

*Mumtaz: It's the thing about us being a family: we are cousins, we know each others' families, and if there are any family problems, we talk about them. And besides, I visit Pakistan quite frequently... And then you talk about life here, and they talk about their lives there. So...*

*Garbi: But can they relate to your life here when they are so far away?*

*Mumtaz: Yes, somewhat. Yes, they can.*

*Garbi: Have they ever been here?*

*Mumtaz: No.*

This article opens with the life story of Mumtaz, a woman of Pakistani descent who was born and raised in Denmark and who has married a man from her family's country of origin. During our dialogue, Mumtaz and I circled around the theme of closeness and remoteness, especially when discussing how family members consider themselves close when they are geographically far apart. Her statements constitute a useful springboard for understanding the role of the interplay between space and emotional intimacy within transnational families. This article analyses these issues and develops them in accordance with existing research on transnational families, networks and spaces.<sup>1</sup>

A focus on closeness and remoteness ties into larger discussions of how we can understand the family, as well as networks and identities in a transnational context. For example, Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, in their book *The Transnational Family*:

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*New European Frontiers and Global Networks* (2002), define the transnational family as a (relative) structure involving 'the selective formation of familial emotional and material attachments on the basis of temporal, spatial and need-related considerations' (*ibid.*, p.14). Nina Glick Schiller and Peggy Levitt, while not referring specifically to transnational families, call for an understanding of transnational networks as social *fields* (Glick Schiller & Levitt 2004). By describing transnational practices in this manner, Schiller and Levitt show that transnational practices are embedded in a topology where subjects have an established an on-going experience of belonging, contact and closeness, even though, geographically speaking, they are far away from each other. Closeness and remoteness can be, among other things, a consequence of the temporal sequences of transnational family life, the 'ebb and flow in response to particular incidents or crises. A one-time snapshot misses the many ways in which migrants periodically engage with their home countries during election cycles, family or ritual events, or climatic catastrophes...' (*ibid.* p. 1012–1013).

The central question of this article is how emotional proximity, frequently expressed through identification and expressions of belonging, is upheld in a transnational environment. The family as a unit is a good starting point, as we are dealing with a structure that is often associated with emotional support and socialization. However, as families are often associated with closeness, intimacy, frequent communication and trust, families also can fall apart, trust can be broken, and frequent communication can turn into silence. Thus, this article also explores which elements constitute the glue of transnational families, that is, why do they not fall apart when their members are scattered across the globe? What images, events and rituals hold them together? Why do people understand their family as close when they are actually geographically remote? And what is the role of politics – whether we talk about the politics of nation states or the politics of identity – in these processes?

Bryceson and Vuorela describe transnational families as built upon 'temporal, spatial and need-related considerations.' In the conversation with Mumtaz, my starting point was whether (and if so, how) geographical remoteness had any impact on the feeling of closeness (proximity) that people experience within their transnationally located family. Both proximity and its antithesis are based on understandings of 'here' and 'there' and what lies in between. Given that conceptualizing this relationship includes perspectives on location and translocation, we need to focus on one concept as fundamental to our understanding of transnational relations, a concept implicit in the statements of the writers I have been quoting: that of space.

In her impressive book *For Space*, geographer Doreen Massey stresses the relationality that space includes: 'What is always at issue is the *content*, not the spatial form, of the relation through which space is constructed' (Massey 2005: 101). In other words, space is composed of relationships, that is, the crosscutting of individual, personal trajectories (as Andreas Wimmer and

Glick Schiller suggest in their depiction of transnational networks as fields). Similarly, we can say that human relationships include the awareness of their being embedded in space. Space is created by the proximity of agents, and the frequency (ebb and flow) with which their agents seek, experience or reject such proximity. This article seeks to clarify how interactions that take place among individuals in transnational families are also expressions of transnational spatial configurations. Although space is geographical, it is also relational.

My approach to space is also in line with Wimmer and Glick Schiller's warnings against methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). Family processes in an age of globalization are not confined by national borders per se, and distances do not necessarily sever family relations. As Danish anthropologist Ninna Nyberg Sørensen notes in her studies of South American women taking jobs in Western Europe, the unit of the family is frequently what encourages the women to decide to go abroad (Nyberg Sørensen 2005: 74). However – as Nyberg Sørensen also notes – while we must pay more attention to the spaces that transnational families create and within which they move, we must also attend to the effects that national and supranational politics have on the establishment or fragmentation of these spaces. In other words, as much as transnational spaces are relational, they are inherently *political*. Space is, as Massey writes, 'the moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations become fully visible' (Massey 2005: 151, after Laclau 1990: 35). Transnational relational spaces, I argue, are full of such antagonisms, but equally – through various individual strategies – full of attempts at establishing equivalence, at reconciling contrasts. These are the contrasts and processes on which this article concentrates.

The article begins with a short introduction to the study, followed by the life stories of two individuals, Mumtaz and Ali, who have both married transnationally. The next section analyses the two stories by focusing on two questions: first whether (and if so, how) reflections on space can help deepen our perspective on transnational family networks and the individuals situated within these networks; and second whether a focus on space is useful for a deeper understanding of the power relations, politics and possible antagonisms in transnational relational spaces. Space is often used as a locus for identity-defining processes, and is thus, as Massey notes, inherently political (Massey 2005). However, whereas the spatial employment of identity politics is frequently described as including a strategic deployment of identity 'as a form of collective action to change institutions; to transform mainstream culture, its categories, and values, and perhaps by extension its policies and structures; to transform participants; or simply to educate legislators and the public' (Bernstein 1997, also Bernstein 2005), the present article will describe identity politics from another perspective: that of upholding, securing and reaffirming certain values, loyalties and affiliations across sometimes vast distances.

## 2 The study

The empirical data contain two life stories, taken from a study involving eighteen individuals of Pakistani and Turkish descent living in Denmark, all interviewed between the fall of 2006 and that of 2007.<sup>1</sup> By concentrating on two life stories, we can comprehend more directly changes in family preferences, for example, the intensification or neglect of family bonds. This article conforms to ethnographic research that argues that, by focusing on a few individual cases, we can avoid 'the fragmentation and depersonalization that otherwise may occur when researchers make cross-cutting thematic analyses of qualitative material' (Gullestad 1996; also Liversage 2008). Furthermore, since we are looking at individual life trajectories as embedded in transnational networks and spaces, we must also deal with such trajectories in depth.

Mumtaz's and Ali's stories in many ways replicate themes crosscutting the life stories of the respondents who participated in the project, all of whom married a person from their families' country of origin, live either in Denmark or southern Sweden, and talk about family as something implying interaction across national boundaries. However, Mumtaz's and Ali's stories also emphasize the variation across the interviews. Mumtaz is a young, relatively newly wed woman of Pakistani descent who had lived her entire life in Denmark until she married. Ali, a middle-aged man of Turkish descent, came to Denmark as an adolescent, married two decades ago, and is still living in Denmark. Together, these stories allow me to intertwine my focus on space and transnational interaction with issues of generation, gender, length of stay in Denmark and attachment to or detachment from the country of origin.

## 3 The stories

### 3.1 Mumtaz

Mumtaz, a 23-year-old woman, is the child of Pakistani immigrants. Her father immigrated to Denmark in the early 1970s, with his wife soon following. Mumtaz fondly talks about a happy childhood, in which she and her siblings were fully aware of their parents' priorities: the secular education of their children and their learning of Pakistani culture. The children received teaching in Urdu and in the Qur'an. Mumtaz's parents considered language an important means of sustaining the children's ties to Pakistan.

Mumtaz's life cuts across several nations and continents. Like many other young Danish people with immigrant parents who marry someone from abroad before they turn 24, she and her husband moved across Øresund to a village just outside the Swedish city of Malmö.<sup>2</sup> From here she travels every day to her workplace in Copenhagen. Before her marriage, Mumtaz studied biochemistry,

but she had to give up her studies to provide for her immigrant husband. After work she often visits her parents before returning to her husband in Sweden. Thus her daily life includes repeated crossings of national borders.

Besides her parallel lives in Sweden and Denmark, Mumtaz has strong ties to family members in other parts of the world. Some live in the UK, others in the USA, and many in Pakistan. Mumtaz communicates extensively with her cousins in the UK and Pakistan, using the telephone, Internet chat rooms, emails and webcam. When she talks about her communication with her cousins in Pakistan, Mumtaz offers a view of a strong, open relationship via the Internet: '[sometimes] all my cousins gather in the house of one of them, and then we all talk together.' She describes herself as being emotionally close to her family members despite the distances that separate them. Closeness is based on both frequent contact and the strong, shared notion of a common family identity:

*Garbi: I'm thinking, they are still far away, aren't they? How do you perceive the relationship as close?*

*Mumtaz: It's also about us being family: We are cousins so we know each other's families, and if there is any family trouble, we can talk about them. Further, I visit Pakistan quite frequently.*

Mumtaz met her husband in 2000, when she and her family visited Pakistan. Her husband is the son of her father's sister. The close family connection enabled her to discuss her feelings with the female cousins whom she trusts so deeply. Her family's unconditional approval of the young man made her confident in her choice. In addition, the young man fulfilled her expectations of an educated, kind person:

*Mumtaz: I had seen how he was. I know that my knowledge of him was meagre compared to [what young couples] over here know about each other – where people live together and get to know each other. I somehow knew how he was. One of the criteria that I found important was that he had an education and that he seemed nice. Those of my cousins who knew him liked him.*

Although Mumtaz described herself as certain in her choice, that choice also marked a change in her expected life trajectory and life strategies. Among her Pakistani friends she had witnessed young women marry young men from the home country, a choice that she had seen as very unattractive until she fell in love:

*Mumtaz: I used to say, 'No, I am not going to marry someone from Pakistan, because then we have to face all the trouble of his having to learn the language and starting from scratch, and he knows nothing about Danish culture'... But then I met him [her husband], and things changed....*

At first, Mumtaz discussed her interest in this young man with only a female cousin. Although Mumtaz knew that her parents were interested in another candidate, she bluntly refused to marry him and told her mother why. When Mumtaz's mother visited Pakistan later that year, she arranged a meeting with the potential in-laws. After she and her husband had spoken with the family, they gave their approval. The engagement between the couple took place over the telephone.

Mumtaz's husband is now learning Swedish at a language school in Malmö. The couple are considering remaining in Sweden, mainly because they cannot get a residence permit in Denmark for Mumtaz's husband. Furthermore, many of their friends are now other Pakistani–Danish couples who live in southern Sweden due to the change in the Danish laws on family reunification (an aspect that I will deal with in depth in one of the following sections). While Mumtaz is happy about these friendships and her life with her husband, she is sad that she gave up her education to move to Sweden. At present, she has to support her husband financially. She hopes that the situation will change when her husband has learned enough Swedish to find a job with a reasonable income. However, although Mumtaz is obviously unhappy that she has had to give up a promising career, she states that her marriage gives her life important new dimensions:

*Garbi: The fact that he [Mumtaz's husband] comes from Pakistan – has that contributed positively to your life?*

*Mumtaz: That he comes from back home? Yes [his background has attributed positively], both in terms of Pakistani culture and religion. He is quite religious. And the fact that I have established closer ties to my family by marrying him is a positive contribution [to her life].*

### 3.2 Ali

Ali arrived in Denmark when he was 11 years old. He recalls his first years in Denmark as difficult. Everything was strange and foreign, and he did not know anyone other than his parents. Making friends took a long time, progressing only after he learned to speak Danish. He describes his parents as of little help in his efforts to learn the new language, because they spoke very little Danish themselves.

When Ali arrived in Denmark, his parents had been living there for several years, while he had remained in Turkey with his grandparents. Ali's parents had not applied for immediate family reunification with those of their children who had remained in Turkey because they had expected to stay in Denmark for only a short period. However, over the years, returning to Turkey became decreasingly attractive to them, especially as finding relatively well-paid unskilled jobs in Danish factories was easy. While the parents' assets in Turkey were tied to a small piece of land near their village, farming did not allow them to support their family. Thus, working abroad in low-skill jobs was an attractive means of making ends meet. The parents made their decision to stay in Denmark after more than a decade, when family networks and new friendships had grown strong. Moreover, during the same period the situation in Turkey also changed substantially, making their return even more difficult.

Ali has lived in the same town near Copenhagen ever since he came to Denmark. His father died some years ago, and Ali visits his mother several times a week. He says that contacts with the family in Turkey are sporadic. He and his wife also have family ties to other

parts of Europe, notably Germany and Holland. However his family seldom visits these countries, and when they do, they seldom visit family members. Ali likes to use Windows Messenger (MSN) when communicating with friends and family abroad, particularly because MSN allows him to see the person he is talking to. He never uses MSN to mark family events such as birthdays or weddings; instead, his contacts are mainly spontaneous, occurring when he can see that people he knows are online.

The last time Ali had visited Turkey was three years earlier, after his father died. His father's last wish was to be buried in Turkey. Ali, his brother and two sisters followed the coffin all the way to their old village. They were careful to follow the requirements affiliated with a traditional burial, including the serving of food on the first and seventh day after the funeral.

Many people have immigrated from the village where Ali was born to the suburb in Denmark where he now lives. They have established their own club, where they frequently meet. Ali shows up around once a week to play football and talk. He does not see himself as particularly religious, and he is clearly annoyed by recent developments in the club, where some members want to place more emphasis on religious practices. Nonetheless, the club is an important means of maintaining ties to the old village. For example, if someone falls sick back home and cannot pay the medical bill, people in Ali's club collect money to help. Club members also use the Internet to communicate and exchange daily news and gossip. They use both the Danish club's webpage and a similar webpage among villagers living in Germany.

Ali finds getting to know Danes difficult. He is convinced that Danes do not like foreigners. He cites as an example the fact that on trains other passengers choose not to sit next to him. He has had that experience several times. Nonetheless, he still sees Denmark as his home:

*Ali: My sense of belonging is here in Denmark. The place that I came from has changed so much that I am a foreigner there. I cannot feel at home there any longer. Unfortunately, we cannot feel at home here either.*

Ali mentions that two changes in the behaviour of his former countrymen have estranged him from Turkey: they are increasingly focused on religion and less on the cultural heritage that he cherishes. He recalls his childhood, when everybody knew everybody else, and everybody was occupied with 'cultural traditions' such as the now forgotten spring feast, when the entire village went on a picnic. The sense of unity is gone, Ali explains, especially because many people have moved to the larger cities – places he dislikes. Although people in the village who know him know that he has family ties there, those who do not know him call him 'German' or 'European.'

Ali's wife is a cousin on his mother's side. He has known her since childhood because her family lived near his home. During a vacation in Turkey, when he had just turned 19, his parents asked him whether he wanted to marry her. He did not say yes right away

– the entire setup was, in his words, ‘coincidental’. He recalls that until then he had said that he did not want to marry until he was in his mid-20s. The following week the young couple talked and decided to marry. When I ask Ali whether he considered marrying at 19 a big decision, he agrees but adds: *‘That is how we are raised and what our culture is about. Nineteen is a good time for marriage.’* The couple were engaged for a full year, giving them time to get to know each other through letters and telephone calls. Ali’s parents arranged and paid for the wedding party, which was held in Turkey. He explains that since they knew more about Turkish culture than he did, they became the main stakeholders in arranging the wedding.

Ali’s immediate family is the nucleus of his life. He spends as much time as possible with his two daughters and – as he jokingly remarks – if there is any time left, he spends it with his friends. Ali emphasizes that, whenever a meeting takes place at school or in relation to his children’s leisure activities, he has participated. In terms of language, the couple’s first priority was making sure that their children learned Danish first, Turkish second and English third. When I ask him about his children’s relationship with Turkey, he first describes it as detached: they look upon the country as a vacation resort. But then his description changes somewhat: *‘We have a deeper attachment to Turkey than to Denmark...and that is probably our fault. If we had no attachment, they would forget.... They are Turks at the same time as they have family here. Our culture comes from there [Turkey].’* However, Ali stresses that as a family they also shape what he describes as their ‘own’ culture. Culture in that sense is both static and dynamic, affected by geographically distant (yet imaginatively close) and close (yet imaginatively remote) relationships and fields of belonging.

#### 4 The transnational family as relational space

Both Mumtaz and Ali define their family as predominantly involving their immediate kin: parents, siblings, spouses and (in Ali’s case) children. These are the social structures that both respondents stress as particularly important, structures in which they spend most of their non-working time. Which individuals they see as important within the family network partially depends on where in life the respondent is situated: Ali’s priorities are directed mainly towards his daughters and his wife, that is, towards the family cluster he has established. Structurally, he is conscious of his role as a father. Mumtaz – who has no children – visits her parents several times a week after work, although these get-togethers delay her returning to her husband in Sweden. Thus, according to her position within the structure of the family, Mumtaz (still) predominantly plays the role of daughter.

To both respondents, the meaning of family extends beyond that of immediate kin and relationships embedded in geographical proximity. The transnational – spatially defined – implications of

family-hood are prominent in both stories. For Mumtaz, with her close camaraderie with her cousins in the UK and Pakistan, friendships are practised within the family network through frequent Internet communication. The women have established a space of their own where they can share experiences and seek advice without the interference of others. Mumtaz’s contact with her cousins was crucial when she first became interested in her husband. The institution of friendship gave her the space to talk openly without putting her in conflict with the cultural expectations of matchmaking, that is, that young people should not interfere in their parents’ finding a suitable match. Mumtaz’s cousins are likewise happy about the relationship, as they are able to communicate freely with her about all aspects of their lives. The space that the young women share entirely depends on their being family members, a relationship that makes their spending unsupervised time together culturally acceptable. Through and because of this space, the women both uphold and transform family practices.

Whereas Mumtaz’s connection to her distant cousins is characterized by frequency and closeness, Ali’s relationship to his extended family is characterized by coincidence and some disengagement. Although Ali also frequently uses information technology, he does so to stay in touch with people from his village. Any communication with cousins and other relatives outside Denmark is mainly coincidental, for example, when they happen to be in the same chat rooms at the same time. While Ali is not uninterested in his extended family, his particular interest is in people who share his attachment to the same village in Turkey. To Ali, participating in a transnational family network does not promote any sense of closeness or friendship. Instead, he associates those qualities, transnationally, with sharing an attachment to a particular place.

#### 5 Transnational space as politics

Space is relational and therefore political. Chantal Mouffe defines the political as ‘the always-to-be-achieved construction of a bounded yet heterogeneous, unstable and necessarily antagonistic “we”’ (Mouffe 1991: 78; also Massey 2005: 154). The political aspects of space in Mumtaz’s and Ali’s stories are relevant for understanding the frameworks within which these two people define themselves and the ways in which they do so. Not only instability and antagonism, but also stability and agreement in the two life stories are created through structures of power and of spatial confinement.

Spatial confinement is an important aspect of Ali’s marriage. Importantly, although Ali is quite uninformative when he describes his getting married, he is explicit in underlining that marriage marked a shift in his priorities. Before he visited Turkey the summer he was 19, he had no intentions of marrying young. Being in that particular place at that particular time had the effect of constraining the range of his choices. The choices that Ali made highlighted the

connection between space and identity politics. Marrying a woman from 'back home' accentuates certain aspects of Ali's identity and the spaces that he moves within, both locally and transnationally. As an individual, he became enmeshed in a framework of identity politics in which being of Turkish origin became synonymous with marrying someone from Turkey. The identity-political aspect of the event was located in the signal that Ali (and his family) thus sent to family, kin and network in Turkey. By him marrying someone from Turkey, he (and the family who both facilitated and supported his decision) stressed that a Turkish identity and transnational family ties were important elements in his life. As the couple continued their lives together in Denmark, the identity-political dimension of their transnational marriage became even more obvious. Although Ali's wedding took place before the Danish debate over transnational marriages took off, the identity-political content of their wedding underlines a process of change, transformation and (to some undoubtedly) provocation. Although Ali has lived most of his life in Denmark, he did not marry a Danish woman, and he follows strict ways of marrying traditional to his country of origin. In that sense he presents a fuzzy mix of alliances and affiliations that in many ways is in line with his life to come: Ali is both and neither Turkish and Danish, and in his actions (both before and after the wedding) he transforms the content of both concepts.

Ali's story illustrates the alliances and antagonisms that transnational relationships include. People assign resources of time, life and money to uphold networks, but also have certain expectations regarding how these alliances should function and on what norms they should build. Ali's unhappiness with how people in his home village practice their culture and his engagement in networks of people who have all left to live elsewhere underpin some of the conflicts and new alliances established in transnational spaces. In addition to being structures of social engagement, such networks also keep certain strands of shared identity and senses of belonging alive, elements that are frequently assigned to certain spatial frameworks and ideas of the content of particular places (Schmidt 2011b). Keeping such ties alive is a priority for both Mumtaz and Ali. In Mumtaz's case marrying someone from back home (a country she has never lived in) has strengthened her ties to Pakistan. Being a Pakistani is now a priority for her, though this does not run contrary to her Danish identity. However, it is a statement of identity that – not least because one of its products is a transnational marriage – clashes with the Danish family unification rules. Since the late 1990s these rules have slowly become stricter, with the most radical changes taking place in 2002. In that year both the 24-year rule (that a person and her or his partner must be 24 years old in order to settle in Denmark) and the attachment rule (that the couple have to prove that they have a combined attachment to Denmark that is greater than their combined attachment to another country) were ratified. The Liberal-Conservative government, supported by the Danish People's Party, argued for the tightening of the rules as a means to limit immigration and promote the social integration

(particularly in the areas of education and employment) of the already existing immigrant segments of Danish society.

The move undertaken by the Danish government and its most prominent political support in parliament was definitely also an identity-political move in and through space: people living in Denmark had to take on a 'Danish' identity, and outsiders should remain outsiders. Interestingly, as the Danish anthropologist Mikkel Rytter notes, belonging to the Danish nation is frequently described in kinship terms (Rytter 2007, pp. 69ff.). The notion of consanguinity was, for example, expressed in 2002 by the then Minister of Integration, Bertel Haarder, in 2002, when he said that 'Denmark is a tribe, not a country' (Ritzau 2002; Schmidt 2011a). The metaphor of '*familien Danmark*' (literally 'family Denmark') is employed in both popular writings and research (Rytter 2007, pp. 70–72). The idea of the nation as an 'imagined community', 'always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 1991: 7) is also applicable to transnational families (Nyberg Sørensen 2005: 74). The Danish legislation on family reunification shows how these two types of comradeship are understood as contrary within the political system. Thus, as Nyberg Sørensen suggests, if we want to understand the contours of transnational family spaces, we must also include perspectives on national and supranational interference, in this case in the form of legislation.

Although Mumtaz married after the introduction of the 24-year rule, her story shows that marrying someone from abroad remains an option, whether for love, cultural preferences or existing ties with the country of origin. Mumtaz talks about her close and frequent contact with her cousins in Pakistan and how they were a source of information and evaluation when she fell in love with the man who later became her husband. Through her choice of marriage partner, Mumtaz, emphasizes her transnational networks and practices as central aspects of her life. These practices of identity, however, clash with other, nationally defined politics of identity. The attachment rule highlights the clashes: if the individual living in Denmark has a record of several longer trips to the country of origin (e.g. vacations) or if he or she has family in the country that his or her husband comes from, such factors are legally viewed as diminishing the person's attachment to Denmark (Danish Ministry of Integration 2005) and thus their right to family reunification. In other words, transnational family practices have negative effects on the right to have a family life *in* Denmark.

Mumtaz's response to these demands is in line with that of many other young people from immigrant families who married a person from their country of origin after 2002: she and her husband moved to southern Sweden (a reasonable commuting distance from, say Copenhagen). Whereas fewer than a hundred young people whose parents came from either Pakistan or Turkey each year moved to Sweden in 2000, the number was almost ten times as high in 2007 – only five years after the introduction of most of the rules on marriage unification in Denmark (Schmidt et al., 2009). Mumtaz's story thus shows how people can use – or are forced

to use – space strategically to uphold aspects of their identity as transnationals. Such strategies, as the Danish case illustrates, can run contrary to the expectations of the nation state, including the identity-political regimes to which the nation state expects ethnic minority groups to submit.

## 6 Conclusion

Both Mumtaz's and Ali's stories underpin the spatial dimensions of transnational family practices. Space is not solely an obstacle that transnational families and their members struggle to overcome. To understand oneself as belonging to the same horizon of action – across national borders – is also a means through which individuals and collectivities uphold the notion of proximity. Proximity is created through the sharing of emotions (whether leading to marriage or friendship), practices (e.g. the Internet) and the frequency with which such interactions take place. Furthermore, proximity is upheld by people stating and practising a particular cross-border relationship as important – in Mumtaz's case, to the extent that she is willing to move to a third country to marry a person from back home. Ali's story exemplifies how proximity and the sense of belonging can change and diminish over time, as is sometimes also the case in national, localized families (Ottosen 2009). Sharing a biological bloodline does not necessarily guarantee that people stay in touch. In both stories the feeling of belonging is important for the role that transnational family structures play in the life of the individual.

The spaces of transnational family practices are relational and, as Mumtaz's and Ali's stories show, highly (identity) political. Ali's story is an extreme case in the sense that his preference of how 'his' culture is performed and lived in transnational spaces (e.g. on the Internet) is based on his rejection of truly belonging to Denmark as well as his village in Turkey. Ali's family practices focus on his nuclear family, while his transnational practices follow the directions of his cultural preferences. In contrast, Mumtaz's story exemplifies how close transnational family practices have permanent, everyday effects on individual lives, especially if these practices run contrary to national discourses of belonging and loyalty. By marrying a man from 'back home', Mumtaz must uproot herself and move to Sweden, thereby accentuating her identity as a transnational: she

must constantly commute between Denmark and southern Sweden to support her nuclear family.

Ali's and Mumtaz's stories illustrate how the dimension of space is a useful means of understanding transnational processes and practices. Ultimately, their stories exemplify important elements in the construction of families as such, elements that do not necessarily fade away when people move apart and that do not necessarily depend on geographical proximity. As closeness is created on the basis of practice, it is thus deeply dependent on both individual commitment and national consent.

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## Notes

- 1 In the article I make a distinction between place and space. Place implies the empirical surroundings: the village, houses, streets, etc. Space, on the other hand, implies the way that place is represented, understood, told and enacted. Gabriella Ghali Modan writes about space that 'spaces of representation themselves are also shaped by representations of space, and both are shaped – and in turn shape – spatial practices' (Modan 2007: 311).
- 2 Interviews were conducted by the author and Nadja Jeltoft. Nadja deserves credit for her enthusiastic and skilful work, which was indispensable to this study.
- 3 According to the Danish regulations, couples who seek family unification permits must both be 24 years old. The Danish regulations of family and marriage unification are discussed further below.

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