Heterogeneity in Social Change: Turkish and Moroccan Women in Belgium

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Abstract. The data presented here pertain to 850 Turkish and 860 Moroccan women aged 17–49 currently living in Belgium, and interviewed in 1991–93 by native female interviewers. The two surveys cover short migration histories, family formation variables pertaining to nuptiality, endogamy, fertility, contraception, utility of children, gender relation attitudes, residential characteristics, education and female labour force participation, linguistic abilities and opinions concerning religion and politics. A marked heterogeneity is noticed with respect to these variables, with obvious contrasts between first and second generation, but equally striking contrasts between the second generation and the recently “imported brides” who belong to the same age group as the second generation. Furthermore, heteropraxis shows up in the sense that the tempo of the changes are markedly different depending on social domain.

1. Introduction

The main purpose of the article is to document the intergenerational changes occurring among the two most important Islamic communities in Flanders and Brussels. Attention will be directed to the following topics:
i) The demographic aspects of family formation, i.e. partner selection, nuptiality, fertility and contraception.

ii) The changes with respect to sex preference and utility of children, together with those regarding the socialization values for boys and girls.

iii) The attitudes pertaining to gender relations and the roles of women in the family and society.

iv) The religious dimensions related to individual religiosity, observance of rituals, and religion as an element of ethnic community reconstruction.

Our point of departure is that a process of social change does not manifest itself in an even or synchronized way across the various domains of private and public life. One cannot deny that changes in one area are often connected to those in another, but the presentation of these connections as if they were part of a uniform metamorphosis of an entire system is an exaggeration. In this respect we no longer follow the tenets of the classic formulations of functionalism in modernization theory (e.g. Goode, 1963; Inkeless and Smith, 1974), but explicitly recognize the possibility for substantial heteropraxis and hence also for potential conflict: that is, a situation where behaviour is diversified with respect to the various social domains within each cluster of individuals. In this sense, we are once again much closer to the Mertonian reformulation of functionalism (Merton, 1967, 25–46), with its explicit interest in the uneveness of social change, than to the original anthropological or Parsonian versions of it. The latter compares social systems as complex and solid entities, with changes in one domain causing major changes in all the others. The motor of such ‘across the board’ changes is the presumed prerequisite of ‘functional consistency’ between the various social organizational and cultural aspects.

Moreover, we shall not only drop the hypothesis of simultaneous adaptive upgrading or integration, but also recognize that the sequence of changes in the various domains can vary substantially between societies and historical contexts. In the western European experience, for instance, fertility transitions tended to occur in tandem with a pronounced secularization. In the present case, we witness the near completion of a fertility transition and a concomittant contraceptive modernization with only a modicum of secularization. This also reminds us of the fact that a fertility transition equally occurred in the Far East without any nuclearization of the family (e.g. Freedman et al., 1978).

We also wish to stay clear from other monocausal theories and their reference to a single paradigm or dominant mechanism. The neo-Marxist vision, for instance, holds that ethnic minorities can only reproduce themselves as a new proletariat as a consequence of mechanisms of exclusion and deprivation (cf. Castles and Kosack, 1973; Phizacklea and Miles, 1980; Noiriel, 1986). It cannot be our intention to underestimate the social stratification effects or to disregard deprivation, but an overly stringent concentration on these issues leads to the negation of substantial heterogeneity both within and between ethnic minorities.