In Dialogue with Self and the World: Cape Verdean Migrant Pregnancy in Portugal

Abstract

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.

Key words Cape Verde; Motherhood; Migration; Students; Subjectivity; Empowerment
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 and Chapin, 2010:327-8) 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 et al, 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. Keanne (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 et al, 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 (Liamputtong, 2007; Moro et al, 2008; Griffith, 2015), migrant and transnational care relations and the socially defined moralities underlying public narratives of ‘good mothering’. (Parreñas, 2005; Akesson et al, 2012; Drotohm, 2013; Locke et al, 2015). 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, caring for children or the elderly have constituted the main outlets of work (Grassi and 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 bilateral 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. 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 - 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).

1 Data obtained during interviews in local councils in Cape Verde in 2012 and in the Cape Verdean embassy in Lisbon in 2013.
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 24. (INE, 2012:32). Secondly, unequal gender relations made it hard for young women to negotiate with their sexual partners. Other reasons include the shortcomings of public policies on sexual and reproductive health in Cape Verde and the influence of their local cultural context. Most of the school board members interviewed in the study viewed adolescent pregnancy as a problem, perceiving adolescent women as incapable of embracing motherhood mentally, physically, emotionally and economically. (ICIEG, 2010:19, 45-6). It is within this context that the local councils which sent pupils to study in vocational colleges in Portugal obliged the women to take pregnancy tests before their departure. Some women arrived in Portugal already unknowingly pregnant, undetected by the tests.

The degree to which teenage pregnancy lessens the educational prospects and economic opportunities for young women has been the subject of much debate, in academic and policy studies (Brady, 2014; Salusky, 2013; Kane et al, 2013; Coyne and D’Onofrio, 2012; WHO, 2011; Edin and Kefalas, 2005). Salusky (2013) claims that there is a dominant global discourse on the negative educational and economic outcomes of adolescent motherhood and very little research has been carried out on the mothers’ own perspectives. Her analysis of the narratives of marginalized adolescent mothers in the Dominican Republic elucidates the benefits of young motherhood as a meaningful life project. A statistical study of the consequences of adolescent motherhood on educational outcome in the United States also draws attention to how focusing exclusively on women who become pregnant as teenagers conditions the
sample, by failing to provide comparative data on the years of education lost by their peers for other reasons. Teenage pregnancy is consequently artificially isolated from a range of other factors that influence educational outcomes. The authors also question how they should conceptualize ‘early motherhood’: ‘Is a “teen” birth, in and of itself, problematic? Or, is simply transitioning to motherhood before the normative age at first birth consequential for young women?’ (Kane et al, 2013:2147). By drawing attention to how life stages are normalized and institutionalized (Johnson-Hanks, 2005), this is a very significant question which, for the purposes of this article, could be altered to asking whether it is transitioning to motherhood before completing education, rather than their actual age, that is consequential for young Cape Verdean women studying in Portugal.

The data analysed in this article derives from intermittent periods of fieldwork that span over three years in the northern city of Porto (from July 2008 to September 2011) and one year in a smaller northern town which I shall call Maminha (from April 2012 to May 2013). The method of snowball sampling was used to identify Cape Verdean mothers. The fieldwork consisted of interviewing and accompanying pregnant women and young mothers to their appointments with doctors, nurses, social workers and other state officials. These appointments are discussed elsewhere (XXXXX 2012a). Informal interview techniques were also used, such as chatting with women in the waiting rooms of health centres, hospitals and at birthday parties. I introduced myself as a researcher interested in what it was like to be a Cape Verdean student mother in Portugal. The ways women introduced me to each other revealed different unspoken assumptions regarding my role and the expectations that these created. In some cases, they were not interested and unavailable. For others, I was a welcome companion so women did not have to go alone to medical appointments. At times, this also created
high expectations which then led to frustration when I was unable to make their
appointments. I have discussed at length elsewhere the implications of my ambiguous
position which I describe as one of ‘estranged intimacy’ (XXXXX 2012b), since I
became intimately involved with women with whom I did not have a close relationship.

All of the interviews were open-ended, beginning with a simple invitation for the
women to tell their story, starting before they left Cape Verde. In the majority of cases, I
did not need to ask many questions. Similar to the research conducted on the pregnancy
of first time mothers in the UK, the women’s experiences were ‘already “storied” prior
to the interview’ (Thomson et al, 2011:27) as part of a personal process of making
meaning.

The Making of Meaning

Research which engages with subjects at a personal level faces the challenge of
reconciling intimate engagement with the academic distance required for making
contextual sense of the data. If, on the one hand, submersion into the subject’s
phenomenology may produce too close a focus on the individual and thus obscure the
wider context, on the other hand, the ‘external gaze’ risks distortion (Bourdieu, 1990)
and/or betrayal. Keane argues that, when analyses of power turn away from self-
interpretation towards larger forces to be ‘captured by an observer’s independent
categories of analysis’ (2003:238), the meanings social actors attribute to events are
stripped of any material or causal value. In other words, the researcher only appreciates
self-interpretation out of an aesthetic interest and the result is to deny the individual any
agency or exercise of power. This brings us back to the need to engage with people’s
subjectivities. Indeed, Keane argues that understanding personal experience requires a
constant shifting between ‘epistemologies of intimacy and of estrangement’ (2003:238).
Crucial to Keane’s argument is that estrangement does not always have to result in
betrayal or reification, since objectification results from the human capacity for self-
reflection and is not, in itself, inherently alienating (2003:239).

For a health professional to tell a pregnant girl that she was irresponsible is very
different to Linda, for example, a 21 year old vocational college student mother telling
me, during the course of a prolonged conversation, ‘I was irresponsible’. In this
instance, we may be catching a glimpse of self-objectification at work, in the ‘inner
conversation’ (Archer 2000, 2003). However, processes of self-reflection always occur
in dialogue with and about the world. It could be argued that Linda was reproducing a
dominant ideology regarding irresponsible sexual behaviour, evident in the ways in
which some Portuguese social workers spoke to the mothers (XXXXXXXXX, 2012a).
Yet, ideologies are not imposed upon passive individuals as meanings. They only
become meaningful for individuals once they have been selected, reproduced and
articulated in such a way that they fit in with individuals’ worldviews (Warren
1990:602-3) which are themselves also constantly subject to review. As Blumer
(1986:5) points out, meanings are social products or ‘creations that are formed through
the defining activities of people as they interact.’

Yet, individuals may also hold genuine inner conversations with themselves
(Archer, 2003:121). Consider the following statement made to me by Isandra: ‘I cried a
lot during the pregnancy because it wasn’t what I had expected. Then I asked myself,
“Where is that strong, motivated, talented Isandra?”’ Here we see an example of Isandra
engaging in an epistemology of estrangement, objectifying herself and asking after the
past self that she once knew herself to be. Self-objectification may, in this case, be
interpreted as a strategy for self-empowerment.

**Dealing with the Uncertainty of Unexpected Pregnancy**
None of the women interviewed claimed to have become intentionally pregnant. The causes of unplanned pregnancy reported were forgetting to take the pill, the bursting of a condom, use of the withdrawal method and taking a risk in the belief that nothing would happen. ‘We don’t lack information’, said one mother, ‘accidents happen.’ ‘It was just one of those things that young people do”, explained another mother.

Access to contraception in Portugal was generally deemed easier than in Cape Verde, due to the anonymity of the services provided, far from the gossip of their local communities. Separation from family and local communities was experienced, in this respect as enabling, since it granted them more sexual freedom. Abortion, on the other hand, had only recently been legalized in Portugal in 2007, following a referendum.

The decision of whether to proceed with an unexpected pregnancy in Portugal was affected by a number of inter-related factors, including: the degree of support received from or pressure exerted by family, professionals and boyfriends; religious or moral concerns; the illegality of abortion and its associated health risks and the revelation of the baby’s sex through ultrasound scans. References to studies, to financial difficulties and to a general feeling of not being prepared for motherhood were made by many women. Despite this, the data discussed below reveals how most of the women interviewed were able to turn the uncertainty and disorientation of unexpected motherhood into a meaningful project.

Global Overview of the Data

The data refers to a total number of thirty-four women, twenty-four of which were interviewed whose names have been changed and whose ages ranged between nineteen and twenty-six. Ten were university students and sixteen were vocational
college students in Porto and the remaining eight women were vocational college students in the district of Viana do Castelo. Interviews were also recorded with four fathers, all of whom were university students in Porto.

Abortion is a difficult topic to broach and in most cases I consequently only addressed the issue if the women themselves brought it up. Five of the women claimed to have been put under pressure to abort; two when abortion was illegal in Portugal, before 2007, by a mother and by the father of the child, and three when it was legal, by an older sister (in France where abortion was also legal). The last two cases claimed to have been put under pressure to abort by vocational college staff\(^2\). Three openly claimed to have tried to abort before 2007. The number of those who attempted or at least considered abortion before 2007 is likely to be higher, as triangulation through the observation of casual conversations revealed.

Three out of the university students claimed that the financial support they received from their fathers in Cape Verde was cut off or reduced as a form of punishment whilst they were pregnant. The vocational college students were entitled to small subsidies for subsistence, accommodation and transport and so the majority did not receive much if any money from their parents. The angry family responses they reported, also common amongst the university students, included the refusal to talk over the phone, often for many months. In nearly all of the cases, financial, emotional and moral support was re-established at some point after the baby was born. This temporary suspension of support reflects a traditional practice that has continued in some areas of

\(^2\) Although I did not pursue this matter in any depth, I was aware that this was a serious allegation especially since the two women claimed that a number of students had committed abortion due to the influence of vocational college staff.
rural Cape Verde, where pregnant daughters are temporarily thrown out of their parents’ home.

Twenty-eight out of the thirty-four women were in relationships with the fathers of their children, all of whom were Cape Verdean, when they became pregnant. After the baby was born, only eleven lived together and seventeen lived apart, either because their partners were living in Cape Verde or elsewhere in Portugal or because the women couldn’t afford to leave their joint accommodation with other students. Fellow female students were also more likely to help with childcare.

To quantify and compare the degree and continuity of the fathers’ support for their children is too complex to capture in numbers since circumstances kept changing. Maria for example, who became pregnant through a casual encounter, claimed that ‘For nine months he went missing in terms of giving any emotional support. He needed time to digest things and reach his own conclusions.’ They were now living together as a family and in 2015 are expecting their second child. Katia’s partner, on the other hand, who provided intense support during the pregnancy and birth in 2007 and first four years of their daughter’s life, began a relationship with another Cape Verdean woman and Katia eventually returned alone to Cape Verde with her daughter in 2013 without completing her studies.

The following sections address the issues of abortion, gender and empowerment through an analysis of extracts from the interviews conducted.

The Issue of Abortion

Whilst religious/moral values were important for some women, they were drawn upon selectively in the women’s decision making processes and could not be separated
from other issues, the most influential of which was their kinship relations. Abortion
was not an individual decision.

Nineteen-year-old Jasmine, a vocational college student, attempted to abort
before 2007. The father of the baby, also a vocational college student, was working in
France at the time, staying with family during the holidays. Her account below
demonstrates how she altered her intentions in accordance with changing circumstances:

I didn’t want to have the baby, I wasn’t ready and the father didn’t want it either.
So I decided to have an abortion; only abortion wasn’t legal then. I bought a pill
from the Angolans, it cost me fifty Euros. I went with a friend. We tried; hers
came out and mine didn’t ... I was in a lot of pain. When I went to the hospital
they asked me why I wanted to abort and then they said I should have the baby
and then I could give it up for adoption. I thought, “If I had managed to ...
continue with the pregnancy ... I wasn’t going to inform God that I let the child go
after nine months in my tummy. I wasn’t going to give it away to someone else. I
would look after my child”. Then I had an ultrasound scan and they told me it was
a boy … it was always my dream to have a boy – everything changed.

Jasmine’s moral reasoning indicates how abortion was more acceptable to her
than giving up the baby for adoption. Several mothers exclaimed that ‘it was not the
baby’s fault’ that they had become pregnant. The two mothers, who claimed to have
been put under pressure to abort by college staff, after the 2007 legalization in Portugal,
consulted their mothers and one also made reference to her religious values. Yet, as
shall become apparent below, the embodied experience of suspected pregnancy could
also change religious or moral attitudes towards abortion. In another case, it was the
student’s own mother who put pressure on her to abort. The student mother claimed
their relationship was never the same since. This contrasts with the experience of Jasmine whose mother transformed the news into a welcome act of kinship-making that contributed to the family tree:

She told me not to cry because it was a most natural thing to happen at my age.
My mother started earlier, she became pregnant at sixteen ... she only had three children. Diogo was the extra son she always wanted to have.

The importance of the family as ‘a site of belonging’ (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff, 2004:233) and the discovery of the foetus’ sex as determining factors are elucidated in the case of Elsa, a twenty-year-old university student mother of two children:

When Luís broke the news of to his mother [resident in Lisbon], she told us to keep the baby because it was her first grandchild and she had lost her husband not so long ago ... my mother [resident in Cape Verde] wanted me to keep the baby and she said if I couldn’t ... then I could send it to her. My mother doesn’t have any more children, just me ... Then when I was four months pregnant, Luis knew, but he was a bit annoyed, because he didn’t want [another baby], “No, I’ve already got one, it is not possible and with college as well it is difficult” [he was studying and working part time]. I knew it was difficult, but even so I was stubborn and said “no, I want to keep my baby because I am sure it is a girl”.

Elsa’s account challenges traditional Cape Verdean gender relations that are governed by performances of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), in which men assert their authority over women. It contrasts with the following claim, made by a male student: ‘At the beginning, I thought it was not possible, with me as a student, but then, when I found out it was a girl; it was me who decided that we would keep the baby.’
The influence of the sex of the foetus on the decision to abort or not testifies to the importance of gender identifications in Cape Verdean society. The significance attributed to gender was also corroborated in the claims made by two couples that the parent who shared the same sex as the newborn baby would be the one to choose the name.

Gender Issues

Fear of informing parents of their pregnancies constituted a common experience for the women. The men’s positions were easier since they were all supported by their parents. João, a vocational college student told me that his parents reacted well and he added that men’s parents always react better. ‘Of course,’ replied Idalina his partner, ‘because the responsibility falls upon the mother; if the father decides to go away then she is left with the baby’. This reflects the experience of Jasmine whose partner arrived back in Porto at the end of the summer to discover that she had not had an abortion. Like the women, he too expressed concern regarding the reaction of his family:

When he saw me I already had a large tummy. He couldn’t believe his eyes because he thought I had had an abortion ... Then he said it wasn’t his child. I said we would prove that it was. That is when the fighting started. He said he couldn’t accept the child because his parents had separated and were helping him to study. I told him my family may have been happy in part, but it wasn’t what they wanted for me either. Just as it hurts his family, it also hurts my family too, but that doesn’t mean he should run away from his responsibilities. And so that was when he disappeared ... and I had the baby.

The situation of unexpected pregnancy precipitated the end of their relationship.

Conjugal relations in Cape Verde are far less stable than mother – child relations and
this is reflected in the way women usually refer to their partners as ‘father of child’ (pai di fidju). The refusal to assume paternal responsibility with accusations of infidelity could also intersect with racism.3

Linda, the twenty-one-year-old vocational college student referred to above, had left Cape Verde on 28 September 2009, unknowingly pregnant, to study accountancy in a vocational college in Porto. She complained, while we waited for an antenatal appointment, that the baby’s father (aged forty-two) had stated that if the baby were born black or born in May, then it could not be his son. Once the baby was born, she would have to do a DNA test before registering the baby in his name. Linda stated she would not do the test because she had no doubts. Linda explained that her partner was nearly white: ‘He has Portuguese nationality. His father is from Portugal, his mother from Cape Verde. He is more Portuguese than Cape Verduan’. ‘He is ignoring the month of September in his calculations,’ she added. ‘When he said this I cried and cried and cried. He has hurt me. He has no respect.’

Gender relations in Cape Verde are nonetheless changing as women’s increased access to economic and educational opportunities also increases their negotiation power (Massart, 2013). When I asked João and Idalina about this, João said men used to have lots of women and now women would not accept this and Idalina commented that women want their independence, they want to work too. Yet, as the following section illustrates, the women’s sense of empowerment cannot be read from a detached analysis of their circumstances.

Experiencing Empowerment

3 For a discussion of issues of race in Cape Verde see (Meintel 1984) and for Cape Verduan students in Portugal see (XXXXXX 2012c).
Mothers expressed surprise, not only at their ability to cope but also, at how their lives had been changed for the better, even though in some cases they had abandoned their studies. A nineteen-year-old student, for example, who gave up her university course after she became pregnant, claiming that she had never really liked it, moved in with her twenty-four-year-old boyfriend who had finished his course and had started working. Her father refused to talk to her and stopped sending money:

At first, I felt insecure. Am I ready for this? Will I be able to rise to the occasion? I was full of fear. Now, a thousand wonders! I don't feel it was a mistake and I don’t feel limited.

Jasmine claimed that rather than interfering with her studies, becoming a mother had turned her into a more conscientious student:

My life was worse, it wasn’t better, as it is now. When I didn’t have a child, my life was just college, clubbing, and those kinds of things. Before, I didn’t go to college, I didn’t care about exams. But afterwards, I thought more about me and about my child. I studied more and my professors commented to me that I had changed for the better, that I was more mature.

The women who felt empowered, tended to live with and/or have supportive partners, or, as in the cases of Elsa and Jasmine, to have an extended network of female friends who helped them with their mothering, such as by baby sitting, so that they could attend classes. Some students also mentioned the help they had received from vocational college and university staff, social workers, nannies and highlighted the importance of the financial assistance in maternity and other benefits from the Portuguese state. Other students stressed the hardship and isolation they experienced when mothering without extended family support. One mother told me she missed lots
of classes because her baby was constantly sent home from the nursery ill and she kept
crying down the phone to her own mother in Cape Verde who eventually came to fetch
the baby.

Sending babies back to be cared for by grandmothers or other carers was a
socially acceptable practice in the same way as emigrating and leaving children behind,
in order to increase children’s access to economic welfare, is valued in Cape Verde
(Akesson, 2004:124). Leaving babies with family in Cape Verde was also a means of
preserving the women’s newfound autonomy in Portugal. A mother whose twins, born
in Portugal, were cared for by her mother in Cape Verde, chose not to return at the end
of her course and was living in a friend’s flat unemployed and looking for work in
Lisbon. She confided to me that she could no longer live under the controlling eye of
her father. Fortes (2011) reports similar findings of increased autonomy amidst Cape
Verdean university students in Lisbon.

The Embodied Experience of Suspected Pregnancy

Religious/moral issues, kinship and gender relations all exerted an influence
upon the women’s decision making processes, producing both constraints and
enablements in different contexts and moments of time. Conducting interviews provided
a window into the nature of the mothers’ ‘inner conversations’, engaging them in a
dialogue that reflected with hindsight upon their lives. The case discussed below
provided a rare opportunity to share in the spontaneous twists and turns of a young
woman’s ‘inner conversation’ in response to suspected pregnancy and to the imagined
reactions of family and acquaintances. Her words elucidate how the issues discussed
above all come together to bear on the women’s decision-making processes. The case
also demonstrates how the ‘inner conversation’ is influenced by an individual’s real and
imagined interactions with others (Mead, 1934) and provides a good example of the
nature of the ‘body-self dialogue’ that develops in response to unexpected pregnancy

After accompanying Sara, an expectant mother, to a doctor’s appointment, we
returned to her flat in Porto. There was a frantic knocking at the door. Sara disappeared
and came back with a young woman, Ana, who followed her into the kitchen talking
enthusiastically. Upon seeing me, she stopped talking. We were introduced to each
other and, speaking in Portuguese, discovered that we had a mutual acquaintance:
another Cape Verdean mother who studied in Ana’s college. I joked that maybe one day
Ana would enter my study. She laughed loudly and said no, she couldn’t afford to be
pregnant! After discovering that I spoke Creole⁴, she opened herself up totally,
revealing she suspected she may actually be pregnant. Ana spoke loudly, passionately,
giving out cries, grasping my hands, my arm, laughing and then looking deadly serious.
Our words were not recorded, but since both women knew I was conducting research, I
openly scribbled down what I could.

The constant oscillating between rejecting and accepting the consequences of
Ana’s suspected pregnancy provides an ethnographic example of how structures are
reflexively mediated, through the ongoing evaluation and comparison of conflicting
subjective concerns. This process takes place in social interaction with real and
imaginary others. Whilst Ana weighed up the pros and cons, it was not society that
spoke through Ana – that would be determinism - but rather her ‘inner conversation’
that spoke about society (Archer, 2003:119):

I can’t afford to have a baby, I’m a student. I’m poor. To have a child I have to
give it everything. Imagine my child asking me to buy this and that and me not

⁴ Although Portuguese is the official language in Cape Verde, Creole is spoken in everyday social
interactions.
being able to afford it! I’m desperate … I’m going to have an abortion … I’m
against abortion. I told a friend of mine who became pregnant in Lisbon that if
she had an abortion, I wouldn’t speak to her again. I said “If you have one, you
can forget it because you are killing an innocent being”. Now look; I am
thinking of having one. I am ashamed to talk to her.

Ana mentioned the memory of witnessing the end result of her cousin’s abortion
practised at home in Cape Verde, which affected her profoundly. This was one of the
reasons, she told us, that she was against abortion. Yet, her fears of being unable to
correspond to Cape Verdean norms regarding a ‘good’ mother made her consider
abortion. The tension between Ana’s moral values with regard to abortion and her fear
of taking on the responsibilities of motherhood surfaced through social interaction, not
only in conversation with Sara - who told her she should take responsibility for her
actions - but also in imagined dialogue with her family and with imagined others, whose
responses she began to anticipate:

If I have the baby my grandmother will die, my parents will separate. I’m a
catechist; everybody is going to talk about me. They help me in the Church. The
landlady is a very religious person, what will she say? No-body will believe it. My
father didn’t want me to come and study because he said “You mustn’t go because
you will become pregnant; that is what happens because you have no one to guide
you”. My mum said “No she won’t do that. She is sensible”. I told my mother I
would finish my course first and then come back to Cape Verde with a baby and
my studies completed at the age of twenty-five.

Ana’s exaggerated claim that family members would separate or die to hear the
news of her pregnancy illustrates how important Ana’s family was for her self-identity
and sense of belonging. Her account may be seen as a ‘borrowed story’ (Warren, 1990) from her local cultural context where girls are expected to complete studies before transitioning to motherhood:

We often see that these are, in fact, borrowed stories when we become disillusioned with them; we find the story, along with its associated demands, coercions ... and rewards, so constraining that we see that the lives that we actually lead do not fit neatly with the roles through which we have defined our self-identity. Only during such times of disorientation, even crisis, do we see the extent to which our identities depend on the narratives others impose on us (Warren, 1990:622).

It is significant how the thought of her own mother giving birth to her provided Ana with a new trigger to reject abortion once more and to reproduce the traditional gendered expectation that she alone would take responsibility for the baby:

I’m desperate. I’m going to have an abortion ... If I am pregnant I have already lost my mother, I have already lost my father; I can’t have this child, no ... If my mother had had an abortion, I wouldn’t be here now ... I love babies, holding them in my arms, looking after them ... If I do keep the baby ... I will look after it on my own. Its father ... he is no good for this. He is eighteen-years-old. He is very childish. He won’t accept it; his head is not ready for this. He likes his music, his things.

The father of the baby was reduced to a foil to contrast with Ana’s maturity and capabilities. Yet, the suspicion of pregnancy also caused a questioning of self. Various
times throughout our conversation Ana asked: ‘Me, with a baby? Who/What am I?’ In her research on unexpected pregnancy, Marck (1994:99) talks of the transition from ‘a daily communion between self and body that is understood and taken for granted to a changing dialogue that is full of unknown possibilities between self and other.’

**Conclusion**

The experiences of unexpected pregnancy discussed in this article constituted periods of transition, heightened reflexivity and decision-making, further intensified by living away from home for the first time, when everything – self, body, society – was called into question. My analysis of the women’s dialogues about self and the world elucidate how the experience of unexpected pregnancy may result in both a strengthening and a threat to the self (Marck, 1994). They also provide a window into the women’s agency. Yet, agency is not a form of individualistic freedom. Abortion was not an individual decision and empowerment was not a solitary achievement. The dialogues reveal how the woman’s subjectivity was located within the influences of wider structures. Their ‘inner conversations’ were not a looking inwards, but rather a looking outwards into the world. Their maternal identity was affected in particular by the norms and expectations embedded in kinship and gender relations, which included ideas regarding the appropriate sequencing of the women’s life stages. Age, in this respect, was less important than completing studies since the main responsibility for childcare fell upon the women.

The data illustrates how the women’s sense of empowerment cannot be adequately captured from an analysis of their external circumstances alone, since the

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5 Ami ku bebé? Ami è kuzé? ‘Kuzé’ translates literally into ‘what’ which implies Ana experienced potential pregnancy as a sense of alienation ‘a state of physical awareness that estranges a woman from herself’ (Marck 1994:97).
meanings that they attributed to their transition to motherhood can only be understood through intimate engagement. These meanings – which were also subject to change – ranged from shame, self reproach, doubt and inadequacy to taking pride in their maternal identity and mothering practices as evidence of increased maturity and autonomy and of valued kinship making.

The women’s experiences of empowerment are relative and contingent upon support from others. Parents and partners both gave and withdrew support according to changing circumstances. Separation from family and local communities was also experienced as both enabling (more autonomy) and constraining (lack of support in childcare). Relevant here is the point made by Gedalof (2009:88) that the ‘question is not only how migrant mothers are constrained by pre-existing structures in their agency, but also, how can we understand both structures and agents of belonging as messy and dynamic entanglements of constraint and enablement, being and becoming …’ These entanglements are evident in the narratives examined in this article which has focused primarily on the processes of becoming, rather than being, a mother within the context of migration. The data elucidates the influence of gender identifications in the decisions to abort or not as well as the tensions that arise as gender norms are drawn upon and challenged. It also draws attention to the central role that grandmothers play in the women’s decision-making processes, especially in relation to abortion.

In the literature on transnational mothering the main focus on grandmothers has been on their role as carers of minor-age grandchildren left behind. This article highlights the significance of a less researched phenomenon: the long-distance mothering that continues into the adult lives of migrant children when they themselves become mothers. More research is needed on these chains of mothering across generations within mobile life worlds.
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