

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Never enough: neoliberalizing Namibian middle-class marriages

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Abstract

Neoliberal ideologies have not only transformed the Namibian economy but also reconfigured some of the most intimate domains of everyday life. In the course of the last forty years, marriage in Namibia has changed from a widespread and affordable life transition to a costly celebration of middle-classness. To be married today is a sign of middle-class achievement, lifestyle and prosperity. The downside of these accomplishments is the middle classes' fear of failing, especially through divorce. Although Namibian divorce rates are low, most middle-class couples interviewed in 2015–16 in Windhoek were anxious about such an end to marriage. In order to prevent divorce and the loss of a middle-class lifestyle, middle-class couples neoliberalized their marriages. With often cruel determination, many worked as hard as they could to optimize themselves, their marriages and their kin relations. They trimmed their bodies, enhanced their communications skills and supported their kin. As it remained unclear, however, how much optimizing would indeed be enough, their attempts at self-formation had a Sisyphus-like quality. This article builds on the growing literature on the lived experiences of the African middle classes, focusing on how the neoliberalization of Namibian marriages is shaping a new ethics of personhood.

Résumé

Les idéologies néolibérales ont non seulement transformé l'économie namibienne, mais aussi reconfiguré certains des domaines les plus intimes de la vie quotidienne. Au cours des quarante dernières années, le mariage a évolué en Namibie, passant d'une transition de vie courante et financièrement accessible à une célébration coûteuse du « classe-moyennisme ». Être marié aujourd'hui est un signe de réussite, de style de vie et de prospérité de la classe moyenne. L'inconvénient de ces accomplissements est la peur de l'échec des classes moyennes, en particulier par le divorce. Bien que le taux de divorce soit faible en Namibie, la plupart des couples de classe moyenne interrogés en 2015 et 2016 à Windhoek se disaient anxieux à l'idée que leur mariage finisse en divorce. Afin d'éviter de divorcer et de perdre un style de vie de classe moyenne, les couples de classe moyenne ont néolibéralisé leur mariage. Avec une détermination souvent cruelle, beaucoup ont fait tout leur possible pour optimiser leur mariage, leurs relations de parenté et eux-mêmes. Ils ont soigné leur ligne, perfectionné leur aptitude à communiquer et soutenu leurs proches. Ne sachant clairement quel niveau

d'optimisation serait suffisant, leurs tentatives de s'auto-former avaient une qualité sisyphesque. Cet article contribue à la littérature croissante consacrée aux expériences vécues des classes moyennes africaines, en se concentrant sur la manière dont la néolibéralisation des mariages namibiens façonne une nouvelle éthique de la personnalité.

Introduction

Divorce was not on my mind when I started fieldwork on married middle-class urbanites in Windhoek in 2015. In rural Namibia, where I had previously done research on weddings and marriage, no one had ever approached me to talk about divorce. I was thus surprised when, in 2015 and 2016, people repeatedly raised the topic and expressed their concern about it. Sam, a twenty-seven-year-old statistician working for a government office, told me in January 2016: 'Namibia's divorce rate is high. Maybe 70 per cent to 80 per cent.'¹ If Namibia had had a divorce rate of such magnitude, it would have been among the top divorcing countries in the world. The demographic data on divorce in Namibia indicate, however, that rates are comparatively low.² Why, then, were these urban middle-class couples so worried about divorce, clearly perceiving it as both a personal and a societal threat? In this article I argue that the fear of divorce expresses more general anxieties connected to the rise of neoliberalism in Namibia.

Over the last twenty-five years, neoliberalism has become the central topic for an increasing number of anthropological studies (Ferguson 2010; Ganti 2014; Gershon 2011a; Hilgers 2011; 2012). Neoliberalism can be briefly described as those economic and social transformations aimed at fostering so-called free markets. It is understood as a specific form of capitalism that emerged during the 1940s, with a worldwide accelerated spread since the 1970s (Hilgers 2011: 352). Central elements of neoliberal policies are deregulation, entrepreneurship, optimization and competition. Anthropological studies stress how pervasive neoliberal policies and ideologies have transformed all aspects of life, going well beyond the economic (see, for example, Freeman 2014; 2020; Gershon 2011b; Martin 2000). Neoliberalism has been researched in diverse fields, and different attempts at classification have been made (Ganti 2014; Gershon 2011a; Hilgers 2011; Stasik 2015; Wacquant 2012). Here, I am concerned with a theoretical perspective on neoliberalism that builds on the seminal work of Michel Foucault (2004) and is often summarized as 'neoliberalism as governmentality' (Hilgers 2011: 358; Wacquant 2012: 70). The focus lies on ideological dimensions of neoliberalism and how these translate into technologies and practices of self-making and self-optimizing (Ganti 2014: 96).

¹ All of my interlocutors were multilingual. During our meetings, they most often used their 'Western' names, for which I am here using pseudonyms.

² According to the 2011 national census, only 2 per cent of the population described themselves as divorced or separated. The 2013 Demographic and Health Survey, based on a representative sample, distinguished between the two categories. Among women aged fifteen to forty-nine years, 1 per cent said that they were divorced. The number for men was even lower, at 0.8 per cent. However, I was not able to obtain the crude divorce rate, the refined divorce rate or a marriage:divorce ratio for Namibia. In the two most important demographic papers on trends in marriage in Namibia, these numbers are also not given (Pazvakawambwa *et al.* 2013; Indongo and Pazvakawambwa 2015).

Only recently has a literature on neoliberal techniques of self-optimizing and self-governing taken shape within African contexts (Hannaford 2017; Mupotsa 2014; Spronk 2020; Van Dijk 2017; Vorhölter 2019). In 2010, James Ferguson still sceptically remarked that ‘the development of new technologies of government, responsabilized prudential subjects, and so on (all the things that Nikolas Rose and other “Anglo-Foucauldians” tend to emphasize) was very limited’ in Africa (Ferguson 2010: 172; see also Hilgers 2012; Stasik 2015). I suggest that one reason for the recent emergence of neoliberalism-as-governmentality approaches in African contexts is the parallel increase in studies on the so-called rising African middle classes (James 2019; Kroecker *et al.* 2018; Lentz 2016; 2020; Melber 2016; Ncube and Lufumpa 2015; Southall 2016; Spronk 2012; 2020; Sumich 2018).

Southall (2020: 542) observes that ‘in a significant number of African countries, neoliberalism, promoted by institutions such as the World Bank, has fostered the growth of middle classes as an accompaniment to structural reforms away from state-led development to market-led growth’. This economic formation of middle classes strongly varies between and within African countries. The aspirational character of the category further complicates any definition of ‘middle class’.³ In their study on middle-class identities in Soweto, South Africa, Phadi and Ceruti (2011) describe striking economic differences between those who identify as middle class. It is thus insufficient to reduce a definition of the middle classes to simple economic measures, for example a specific range of daily per capita consumption in US\$ per household (Mercer and Lemanski 2020: 430). Middle-class belonging is a fluid and aspirational category, based on some kind of relative and context-dependent prosperity, and on ‘having accumulated qualifications, travel, jobs, incomes, houses or cars’ (*ibid.*: 432). These accumulations signal middle-class status through their mobilization in ‘bundles of discourses and performances’ (Lentz 2020: 459) in specific situations of ‘doing being middle-class’ (Lentz 2020).

Very often, such performances of middle-classness are accomplished through conspicuous consumption, especially through housebuilding (Durham 2020; Gastrow 2020; Mercer 2014; Ndlovu 2020) and the celebration of lifecycle rituals (Pauli 2011; 2018; Solway 2016; Van Dijk 2012; 2017). Lentz (2020: 453) interprets these middle-class consumption practices as ‘typical of the era of neoliberal globalization’. Neoliberally informed discourses of self-optimization and deservingness (Burchardt 2020; James 2019; Spronk 2020; Van Dijk 2017; Vorhölter 2019) complement these globally inspired consumption practices. Comparison with others is crucial within these conceptualizations (Phadi and Ceruti 2011: 100–1): to compare one’s efforts with those of others legitimizes class privileges. Thus, through these discourses and performances, a new ethics of middle-class personhood is taking shape, building on conspicuous consumption and neoliberal ideas of self-optimization and deservingness.

The contributions to a recent special issue on the lived experiences of Africa’s middle classes (Mercer and Lemanski 2020) demonstrate the precariousness and ambiguity of these reconfigurations for these emerging classes. Belonging to the middle

³ Because of the heterogeneity of the living circumstances summarized by ‘middle class(es)’, it has been suggested to either drop or replace the term with concepts such as ‘middle classing’ or ‘middling’, better grasping the term’s fluid and aspirational character. I will nevertheless continue to use the term here because almost all of my interlocutors used ‘middle class’ in their self-descriptions.

classes is very often a fragile and transient achievement, depending on and threatened by unstable political economies (Hull 2020; Southall 2020). Consequently, the commitment of the middle classes to neoliberal self-formation also leads to tensions with their less affluent kin.

In her study of three generations of middle-class Ghanaians, Rachel Spronk (2020: 476) observes that her interlocutors preferred loans from non-kin, fearing that borrowing from kin came with too many expectations. Julia Vorhölter (2019: 202) notes a similar move away from kin when facing life problems and towards self-managing in her study of upper-middle-class Kampalans in Uganda. How kin relations frame, foster or hinder the formation of neoliberal subjectivities in African contexts remains, however, largely unexplored. Neoliberalism-as-governmentality approaches often concentrate on optimizing individuals (King *et al.* 2019; Urciuoli 2008). This article begins with the individual but also scrutinizes how neoliberal concepts influence the relationships of couples and of their wider kin networks.

This brings me back to the anxieties about divorce of my middle-class interlocutors that opened this article. While status anxiety has often been noted as a characteristic of middle-class identities (Lentz 2020; Mercer and Lemanski 2020), the fear of divorce is specific to the Namibian middle classes. In the course of the last forty years, marriage in Namibia has changed from a widespread and affordable life transition available to almost everybody into an exclusive and very expensive middle-class institution, the costs of which can be mustered by only a small minority of the population (Pauli 2019). Accordingly, marriage rates have declined steeply in Namibia, and throughout Southern Africa (for an overview, see Pauli and van Dijk 2016). Today, marriage, like being middle class, is an aspirational category associated with certain desired consumption habits and lifestyles, often summarized as ‘the good life’ (Mupotsa 2014; 2015). Berlant (2011) suggests thinking of desire for an object that is actually an obstacle to one’s flourishing as a relation of ‘cruel optimism’. ‘The good life’ and the way it is related to marriage in the Namibian context is such a relation of ‘cruel optimism’. It works not only through aspirations and imagined rewards – being married and having ‘the good life’ – but also through anxieties of losing it all through a divorce.

I suggest that, in order to prevent divorce and the loss of the ‘good married life’, my interlocutors are neoliberalizing their marriages. With sometimes cruel determination, many work as hard as they can to optimize themselves, their marriages and their kin relations, for, as some of them have commented, the end of a marriage in divorce has to do with a lack of effort: a person has not put enough time, work or care into himself or herself, the couple or the kin group. But when is it enough? The neoliberalizing of marriage opens up this ultimately cruel and unanswerable question. As it remains unclear how much would indeed be enough, attempts at self-formation and optimization have a Sisyphus-like quality. In the following, I analyse perceptions and practices of optimizing the self, the couple and the kin group. By focusing on these neoliberally informed practices and perceptions of Namibian middle-class urbanites, my article adds to the growing literature on the multiple ways in which neoliberalism is changing conceptualizations of the self and of others in intimate relations.

Neoliberalizing Namibia

Namibia's political economy continues to be strongly shaped by the long-term effects of colonialism and apartheid. After more than 100 years of exploitation by different colonizers, the victory of the liberation movement, the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), and independence in 1990 did not bring the hoped- and fought-for economic change: 'Namibia still ranks among the most unequal societies in the world' (Jauch *et al.* 2011: 161). Large parts of the population in the rural areas and the former urban 'townships' have experienced little economic improvement. In contrast, most Namibians of European descent continue to enjoy economic prosperity. Only a small 'black' middle class has emerged in Windhoek and other urban areas (Melber 2014), a 'middle-income group' (Neubert and Stoll 2020: 149) consisting of approximately less than 10 per cent of Namibia's population.⁴ Similar to the middle classes in neighbouring South Africa (Hull 2020; Ndlovu 2020; Phadi and Ceruti 2011), Botswana (Durham 2020) and Angola (Gastrow 2020), the Namibian middle class is a heterogeneous category, covering a range of occupations, consumption habits and lifestyles. Those Namibians who perceive themselves as belonging to the middle class build their self-making on material, personal and professional accomplishments. These include, among other things, being married, owning a house and having a white-collar occupation.

It has been argued that SWAPO's turn from socialism towards capitalism and neoliberal policies is the central reason for the small size of the Namibian middle class and the persistence of dramatic economic inequalities in the country (Amupanda 2017; Dobler 2012; Fumanti 2016; Jauch *et al.* 2011; Koot *et al.* 2019: 345; Melber 2011). During its liberation struggle against apartheid, SWAPO followed a socialist ideology; after independence, its ideology became increasingly neoliberal and market-friendly. In a seminal paper, political scientist and activist Job Shipululo Amupanda (2017) unravels how the drafting and finalization of Namibia's post-independence constitution was framed by 'white', Western interests that SWAPO later adopted to consolidate its political power. Thus 'post-independence Namibia witnessed a radical manifestation of neoliberalism' (*ibid.*: 113). Along similar lines, Jauch *et al.* (2011: 224) observe that 'Namibia's economic policies followed largely the neo-liberal dogma and were shaped by the desire to accommodate foreign investment'. Despite this massive influence of neoliberal policies and ideologies since 1990, little research on Namibia has paid in-depth attention to neoliberalism. Some has addressed the effects of neoliberalism on the crucial land question (Koot *et al.* 2019; Silva and Motzer 2015), but the ways in which neoliberalism affects the marital and intimate lives of Namibians have not been researched.

The beginning of the transformation of Namibian marriage predates the rise of neoliberalism in the country. When the decline of marriage commenced in the late 1970s, it was triggered by apartheid and the establishment of homelands. For the rural community of Fransfontein – where Michael Schnegg and I have been conducting fieldwork since 2003 (Pauli 2019; Schnegg 2016) – then part of the newly established 'Damaraland', the emergence of a rural elite working in the new, ethnically defined homeland bureaucracy reconfigured weddings and marriages (Pauli 2011; 2019). With their increasingly more conspicuous and costly weddings, blending 'white weddings' with local wedding

⁴ 'Less than 10 per cent of Namibians are middle class', *The Namibian*, 11 May 2015.

customs, the new homeland elites wanted to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population (Pauli 2011). The elite's intentional change in the ways in which weddings were celebrated made it increasingly difficult for most people to marry. The rural majority just could not afford the new ways of celebrating weddings and largely stopped marrying at all.⁵ Although marriage rates have dropped sharply throughout Namibia, the value of weddings and marriage has not. Marriage has changed from an inclusive institution into a costly class investment. Today, these neoliberalized marriages are important indicators of middle-class status, connected to imaginations of a comfortable lifestyle and 'the good life' (Pauli and van Dijk 2016). For many, marriage, like house-building, has become a hard-to-achieve aspiration, nevertheless inspiring 'hopes of a better future' (Archambault 2018: 692; Pauli and Dawids 2017).

To understand how marriage has changed into a performance of middle-classness, an institution of 'doing being middle class' (Lentz 2020), I interviewed middle-class couples in Windhoek in 2015 and 2016. The majority of my interlocutors were between twenty and fifty years of age. I collected information on nineteen more recent middle-class marriages that had taken place between 2000 and 2015. These marital histories were further supplemented by forty-four narrative and semi-structured interviews on marriage, class and kinship with the same couples, whom I had interviewed together, as well as other middle-class urbanites I encountered in institutions frequented by middle-class Namibians, such as private schools, the university and health clubs. I transcribed all interviews and thematically coded them with ATLAS.ti.

These narratives are the focus of my analysis. My concentration on narrative discourses rather than practices I have observed myself results from two specificities of my research. First, due to the urban setting and the challenges of in-depth observation of busy middle-class urbanites, I had to rely on recommendations for interviews and the practice of 'anthropology by appointment' (Hannerz 2006: 34). This sharply differs from the methodological approach I have used in my previous ethnographic fieldwork on marriage in rural Namibia (Pauli 2019; Schnegg 2016). Second, I suggest that the narratives I have collected are also performances of 'doing being middle class' (Lentz 2020). Additional to practices such as going to the gym, consulting a marriage counsellor or buying a house, talking and thinking in specific neoliberally informed ways about one's life produce middle-classness.

Although all of my married interlocutors had a joint household income that was above the average, their economic backgrounds were quite diverse.⁶ While Don and his wife Dina had to live from a joint monthly household income of N\$8,500⁷ in a small

⁵ In the Fransfontein region, only 23 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men born in 1965 or later were married in 2004, the year of our census data, compared with more than 60 per cent born before the mid-1940s (for further statistical details, see Pauli 2019: 168–70). Mark Hunter (2010: 92) describes a decline from 60 per cent of Africans who were married in the 1960s to only 30 per cent in 2001 in South Africa (see also Claassens and Smythe 2013; Mohlabane *et al.* 2019: 157; Pauli and van Dijk 2016; Reece 2019; Rudwick and Posel 2015; Solway 2016; Van Dijk 2012; 2017). There was also no avoidance of 'white weddings' to reduce costs, instead marrying 'traditionally'; rather, all weddings from the 1970s onwards combined different wedding traditions, a practice that considerably raised costs (Pauli 2019: 185–95).

⁶ According to the *New Era* government newspaper of 1 June 2015, in October 2014 the average monthly income before deductions was N\$6,626.

⁷ During the time of my fieldwork, the exchange rate was roughly €1 to N\$15.

house in the former Windhoek township of Wanaheda, investment banker Jana and her husband Paul, employed in the telecommunications business, lived in a mansion in the upper middle-class neighbourhood of Dorado Park, enjoying a joint salary of more than N\$90,000 a month. Other dimensions of diversity among my interlocutors include ethnicity (with most of the people I talked with perceiving themselves as Damara or Ovambo) and regional belonging (mainly from northern 'Ovamboland' and north-western 'Damaraland' regions). Despite these variations, all of my interlocutors perceived themselves as urbanites and belonging to Christian denominations (Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Pentecostal).

Divorce and other intimate anxieties

Although my middle-class interlocutors clearly enjoyed their economic standing, often proudly showing me proof of their success – for example, photographs of smartly dressed children, their weddings, cars and houses (Durham 2020; Gastrow 2020) – they also expressed anxieties during our conversations (Mercer and Lemanski 2020: 433; Ndlovu 2020: 580). It was especially the imagined epidemic spread of divorce that worried my married interlocutors. 'Divorce is there. There is a lot of divorce going on,' emphasized Emma, a twenty-five-year-old secretary on parental leave. Thirty-year-old single mother Mara stressed that 'people are divorcing quite a lot now', and Telsa and Carl, both in their twenties, said that 'there are a lot of divorces, a lot'. Finance officer Karin, in her early thirties and just married, was convinced that 'tradition is dying out' and people were not marrying any more, only divorcing. References to decay and death were very prevalent. Titus, a police officer in his early fifties, used an epidemiological metaphor to highlight the danger that divorce posed: 'Divorce is a disease, especially if you have got children together. It's dangerous.' Similarly, thirty-six-year-old Don thought that divorce had spread like an illness. He explained these changes in marriage with the general transformations Namibia had gone through since independence: 'If you can check back to, let's say, before independence, I didn't hear about divorce, I didn't hear.' Some couples linked the assumed spread of divorce to changing lifestyle habits, transforming gender relations and new forms of consumption. Lotte and Lester, both in their mid-thirties, criticized what they perceived as a 'consumer mentality of marriage'. They told the story of a friend who, after marrying a woman whom he did not know well, began to think of divorce only a few months after their expensive wedding. Lester stressed that marriage was not like shopping but a challenge one had to work at.

When analysing other people's marriages and the end of these marriages, couples tended to be rather outspoken. Their narratives were also performances of their own class belonging, creating a habitus of constant optimization and hard work. The couples listed how others had failed in putting sufficient care, work and communication into their relationships. They also gave me detailed descriptions of how they themselves worked on themselves as individuals, on their relationships with each other, and on those with their wider social networks, especially their kin relations. These descriptions varied in tone. Some were self-confident, expressing the conviction that the intimate work was paying off. Others were more troubled, doubtful about their own actions and uncertain whether these were enough to make things last. In what follows I first take a closer look at the interlocutors as individuals and how they tried

to optimize themselves and then turn to the level of the couple to investigate the use of neoliberally informed concepts in intimate relationships. Finally, I expand these insights by examining the couples' interactions with their kin.

Optimizing the self: make yourself presentable

'Marriage is about happiness,' Sam told me.⁸ This happiness, he felt, was not something one got for free: one had to put hard work into one's body and appearance. Sam and his wife Irene were chatting with me over a late lunch in downtown Windhoek. Sam smiled at Irene, saying, 'Flat tummy, so sexy.' Irene chuckled, telling me how difficult it had been to get rid of a small belly after she had given birth. She joined a fitness gym, working out several times a week, and she kept a strict eye on her diet. Today, she had ordered only a small salad. But the couple planned on having another child and Irene was unsure whether, after the second birth, she would again manage to get back in shape. She wondered whether it would be as hard as the first time and asked herself whether a second return to fitness, sexiness and happiness was possible.

Most of my interlocutors agreed that physical attraction – what they called 'the looks' – was particularly important for the working of an intimate relationship. Dante, an athletic and good-looking man in his mid-twenties, linked looks to lifestyle and care of oneself: 'You need to make yourself presentable. You have to be you in a very presentable manner.' He emphasized that this did not mean looking like Kim Kardashian or buying expensive clothes. Instead, he felt, regular workouts would do the trick. And yet, he observed, 'Sometimes, people get married, have kids and then let go of themselves.' When this happens, he considered, it is not only the problem of the undisciplined partner, but 'it somehow also becomes your problem'. Dante seemed uncomfortable when he explained this and then reassured me: 'This is just the honest truth. Your partner becomes less attractive.' He went on to describe the marital consequences of such a loss in physical attraction: 'The person might love you but that sense of arousal, it isn't there any more.' He then concluded: 'So it is pretty important to always take care of yourself and even to talk to your partner and ask whether the person is still comfortable with the way you look.' Like Dante, Ronda, a delicate and slim woman in her early twenties, explicitly connected a happy relationship with the optimizing of the body: 'You should take care of yourself. You cannot just think, "Now, I'm having this guy, I don't have to take care of myself."' For her, one outcome of not taking care of oneself was to gain weight: 'You become fat and that can cause the guy to leave you, now that you're no longer taking care of yourself.' Emily Martin (2000: 582) points out that the quintessential foundation of neoliberal selfhood is the perception that people are 'a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed'. Most of my interlocutors were actively investing in their bodily selves. The 'care' of the body was a way to manage and invest in it, keeping it slim, fit and sexy. Fitness and sexiness were crucial for being 'presentable', as Dante stressed.

Carla Freeman (2014: 172–7) describes how middle-class Barbadians follow comparable neoliberal logics when working on their bodies and selves. She highlights the

⁸ Eva Illouz (1997) has extensively researched how the imperatives of romance and happiness have dictated people's lives (see also Berlant 2011; Cabanas and Illouz 2019).

peculiarity of these practices, exercising and working out in gyms, in a society in which physical labour has 'long been associated with the sweat and toil of the slave-based sugar plantation' (*ibid.*: 172). A similar argument can be made for the Namibian situation. Until quite recently, heavy physical labour was linked to the exploitative structures of colonialism and apartheid. Thinness was negatively associated with being worn out by hard labour, the opposite of the contemporary appraisal of the slim and fit body by the urban middle classes. During the fieldwork Michael Schnegg and I conducted in rural Fransfontein in 2003 and 2004, at the height of the AIDS pandemic, most people commented that a healthy and beautiful body was not a thin but a fat body. In contrast, working out and staying thin were widespread techniques of self-improvement among my middle-class interlocutors in Windhoek. Other optimizing activities were the use of makeup and the purchase of 'sexy' clothes.

While marriage counselling was widespread among my sample, also fostered by the spread of Pentecostal churches in Namibia and beyond (Burchardt 2020; James 2019; Van Dijk 2013), other forms of counselling and therapy were still quite rare, differing from what Vorhölter (2019) finds for Uganda. Instead, my interlocutors read a lot of advice and self-help literature, both online, especially on Facebook, and in books and magazines. Many middle-class couples were devoted buyers of magazines, such as the South African version of *Good Housekeeping*, which informed them how to optimize their domestic selves. Although reading this kind of literature did provide advice for some, it also caused irritation. The sheer amount of information made it difficult to decide what was truly important. In addition to their jobs, their children and the management of the expectations of their extended kin, this investment in a perfect home was exhausting for many of my female interlocutors (see also Freeman 2014: 179). Vera King, Benigna Gerisch and Harmut Rosa (2019: 1) show how optimization leads to 'tensions between the claims of perfectionism and the impossibility of actually achieving perfection', possibly resulting in frustration, stress and exhaustion. The work on an optimal self was an open-ended and multiplex project for my interlocutors, much like Sisyphus pushing his immense boulder up the hill. Not all of my interlocutors, though, felt constantly exhausted by the demands of self-optimization. Irene proudly presented me her flat, sexy tummy, expressing pride and satisfaction.

Optimizing the couple: growing together

The couples' neoliberally informed reasoning about their and other people's marriages focused on three themes: planning, growth/development and communication. Investment banker Jana and telecommunications manager Paul outlined how they had developed a proper working plan for their marriage. Paul explained that many people were not truly aware of the challenges of managing a marriage: 'This will actually lead to divorce because there is not really a proper plan.' He stressed that one had to focus on the long-term goal of staying together. To have a stylish wedding, he said, and to impress people by spending a lot was alright. But, in the end, 'there has to be a targeted way of how are you gonna do your marriage'. Paul's planned approach to marriage resembles the management of a joint venture with two enterprises, a husband and a wife, coming together.

Most couples expressed that, in order to stay together and not divorce, it was important that there was ‘growth’ in the relationship.⁹ Both partners had to develop themselves, help the other partner grow and work on the development of the marriage. Kaylee and Adam, both in their early thirties, were in the seventh year of their relationship when they married in October 2015 at a lodge outside Windhoek (see also Pauli forthcoming 2022). They were saving money to buy a house in the new middle-class neighbourhood of Rocky Crest. Kaylee explained that the bigger home was an investment in their future. The couple worked for insurance companies, enjoying their good salaries. Like many other middle-class couples, Kaylee perceived her marriage as something needing constant effort in order to grow. Because of Adam’s love of sports, she organized weekend trips filled with physical activities in the countryside. Kaylee also enjoyed sports but commented that other activities had to be added to these so that their marriage could grow: ‘I don’t want to be stuck with always doing sports and outdoor things. I want to advance our relationship.’ To develop further as a couple, they invested in the ‘consumption of the romantic utopia’ (Illouz 1997; see also Thomas and Cole 2009: 20–4) by going on date nights and buying special gifts for each other. Kaylee came from a middle-class academic family, while Adam had been raised by an impoverished single mother of five. Adam had excelled at school, receiving several scholarships to study in South Africa and Europe. Kaylee was very enthusiastic about Adam’s development: ‘That’s why I love him so much. He decided, despite his background, that he would still excel and grow himself.’

Many couples narrated their marriage as a tale of successful growth. Telsa, in her late twenties and about to get married, told me how she and her husband-to-be had developed together: ‘In our case we started off down there, we started together and now we are middle class together. We were first lower class; we were in a one-room [flat]. We only had a small space to move around.’ She then pointed out the difference from her current life: ‘Now we have a two-bedroom house, kitchen, everything.’ To explain this positive development, Telsa highlighted the importance of working together as a couple: ‘I think we have built each other in a way that one would not feel inferior/superior but we feel we have done it together and we will remain together.’ Several of the couples told me comparable growth stories. Paul, who earned by far the highest monthly income in my sample, stressed that his marriage brought economic success: ‘And most of the things we are accumulating now, it’s after we’ve gotten married. You can see that it’s easier for us to build up something together than being alone.’ Paul warned against marriages based on economic inequality. He especially criticized women who, according to him, only went after the husband’s money. He explained that to have a long-lasting marriage one had to know what kind of person the partner really was. By seeing a spouse in times of hardship, Paul felt, one could see the ‘true person’. Narrating the story of his marriage with Jana, he commented: ‘I think I would have found it difficult to get a woman who is going just to love me because of who I am. Which she has. She saw me when I didn’t have anything.’ For Paul, everyone had an authentic self (‘who I am’), which the spouse had to know if the marriage was going to work. This self was disconnected from wealth and class. It became visible through jointly experiencing hardship, mastering the

⁹ Julie Livingston (2019) has pointed out how capitalism in Botswana (and elsewhere) fetishizes growth, often leading to ‘self-devouring growth’.

challenges and then growing together. The metaphor of growth is thus tightly connected to ideas of success (see also Spronk 2020).

The third theme these neoliberally inspired couples reasoned about was communication. 'Good communication' was perceived as the key to successful planning and growth in marriage. My interlocutors were almost obsessed with communication. There was not a single interview without a lengthy reflection on how important communication is in marriage. 'Communication is everything. You cannot have a healthy relationship without communication,' Michael, an electrical engineer in his mid-thirties, stressed. His pregnant wife Gisela went on to explain: 'If you don't communicate and don't know what he likes and dislikes, you are out of tune.' Communication was perceived as the most important way to gather information about the partner. This information, my interlocutors argued, is necessary for a vital relationship. It helps to solve problems and work on a successful future. For these middle-class couples, communication was a skill to be worked on, very much following the neoliberal logics that Urciuoli (2008) describes for 'soft skills'. That communication has become so important in marriage is also connected to the spread of marriage counselling. All of my married interlocutors had done religious marriage counselling before their weddings. Regardless of whether they were Lutheran, Roman Catholic or Pentecostal, they all stressed that communication was strongly emphasized during marriage counselling (Van Dijk 2013). The counsellors had warned them that if they did not take communication seriously, divorce would be right around the corner. Additionally, communication was also promoted as the road to a successful marriage in the advice literature (magazines, books, the internet) consulted by the couples.

With their neoliberally inspired meritocratic tales of marriage optimization, the couples also performed their middle-classness narratively, legitimizing their privileged position vis-à-vis their not so fortunate and often unmarried kin. Because the couples had struggled so hard for the 'good married life', their reward – a lasting marriage and economic success – was deserved (Burchardt 2020: 174; James 2019). These legitimizations of privilege also helped the couples react to the demands made on them by their often less affluent kin.

Optimizing kin relations: never enough

It is remarkable that, in their narratives, the couples hardly ever mentioned the help of kin on their way to prosperity (Spronk 2020; Vorhölter 2019). Quite the contrary: the role of kin in these narratives was often one of hindrance and obstacle, slowing down the energetic couple on their way to middle-classness. The role of kin in the meritocratic tales is thus at best ambivalent, at worst a severe problem. This perception also reconfigures the meaning of marriage in the region. For a long time, research on Southern African marriage stressed that marriage is not about the couple but about two kin groups coming together (Comaroff 1980; Krige and Comaroff 1981; Kuper 1982). Yet, for the middle-class couples I interviewed, it was not the exchange between kin groups that lay at the heart of marriage; it was the joint rise of a couple from poverty to wealth (see also Solway 1990; Van Dijk 2017). The strong emphasis on coupledom as a way to a successful marriage also meant that support by kin was not as readily available. While I had previously observed that many marital crises in rural Namibia were managed through the help of kin, urban middle-class couples tended to

consult their pastors, work colleagues or friends (Solway 1990). This does not mean that middle-class couples did not experience tensions between ‘self-development and developing social connection’ (Durham 2020: 490), as are often pointed out in research on African kinship and personhood (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Durham 2020: 502; Hull 2020: 561; Van Dijk 2017). Webs of kinship were central in my middle-class interlocutors’ lives, especially relations with their rural relatives.

The urban middle-class couples I met in Windhoek still felt strongly connected to what they considered their rural homelands. Most of them ‘commuted’ between their urban middle-class lives and their rural homes (Pauli 2020). During weekends and holidays, they checked on their livestock, visited their kin and country homes, and celebrated important lifecycle rituals, especially weddings and funerals (Coe and Pauli 2020; Pauli 2019). They were involved in a multiplicity of exchanges with their rural kin, including gift giving, sending remittances, caretaking of houses and livestock, and fostering children (Greiner 2011). Maintaining their rural belonging secured them against possible economic crises and provided them with a place for retirement (Kroeker 2020; Ferguson 1999). The kin groups of my urban middle-class interlocutors were thus geographically stretched, connecting rural and urban lifeworlds (Porter *et al.* 2018). Additionally, they were also economically diverse, incorporating kin with very different economic standings (Pauli 2018; 2020). While in precolonial times economic stratification was mainly based on generational differences, since colonial times, and even more so since apartheid and independence, families have become increasingly heterogeneous in economic terms. Living in ‘multi-class households and families’ (Lentz 2020: 460) is now the norm. To level these economic differences, urban middle-class couples often strongly invested in their kin relations, trying to optimize them as well as possible. The interaction between the middle-class couples in focus here and their kin was thus complex and contradictory.

For some couples, such as Kaylee and Adam introduced above, this led to quarrels about how best to deal with their kin. Adam supported his impoverished mother living in rural northern Namibia with visits and a monthly allowance, something Kaylee felt very ambivalent about. She feared that his mother’s demands could interfere with the quality of their own relationship. ‘I will tolerate it,’ Kaylee said, ‘as long as it does not influence our future and our growth as a married couple.’ Couples were thus torn between their own desires for self- and couple-optimization and the optimization of their kin relations.

Jocoline and her husband, both born in rural Namibia, had only married civilly in Windhoek and were saving for their ‘big wedding’. Jocoline told me at length about the many problems she had with her own and her husband’s kin. She did everything to accommodate her in-laws when they came to visit them. She redecorated the room, prepared all the meals and bought the beer they liked. ‘As far as I’m concerned, I am giving an excellent impression,’ Jocoline summarized her actions. Although Jocoline and her husband were struggling financially, as they were saving money for their wedding, they did not let the families know; in fact, they occasionally even supported their kin. But in the end, ‘it is never enough’, as Jocoline said with tears in her eyes. Nothing satisfied their kin and none of their efforts were ever acknowledged: instead, their kin suggested that what they did was but little.

During weddings, optimizing kin relations became especially challenging. To meet all expectations, some couples went into debt or celebrated several weddings

in different locations (Pauli 2020: 129). Celebrating multi-sited weddings was demanding and costly. Iris and Peter married in September 2014. I met them through the recommendation of another couple, Gisela and Michael, whom I had interviewed. Iris and Peter described in detail the many troubles they went through with their kin because of their wedding. They celebrated their wedding at four different locations: first, a civil marriage in Windhoek; then a Pentecostal wedding in Oshakati, the capital of Oshana region and more than 550 kilometres from Windhoek, followed by a celebration at Iris's rural family home in a village 70 kilometres outside Oshakati; and, finally, a celebration at the village of Peter's kin another 100-kilometre drive away. Iris and Peter had both finished university and were working in well-paying jobs. However, their funds were not enough for such a multiplicity of wedding celebrations. The optimization of their kin relations exhausted and even frustrated them.

Iris and Peter had fallen in love five years earlier when they joined the same Pentecostal church. Peter's parents were pleased to see how the church changed him. Before joining, Peter said, 'I was a naughty boy. I used to drink, to smoke, to do everything bad. But I changed. My parents were happy because I had become a good boy.' In contrast, Iris's parents and kin, all belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Namibia, openly criticized Iris for joining a Pentecostal church. When, in 2013, Iris introduced Peter to them, announcing their wedding plans, her kin rejected the plan outright. The couple felt deeply insulted. But the quarrels, Iris explained, were not only about religion: 'My unmarried relatives are envious about my marriage.' Most of her family members – her siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles – were not married. She emphasized that some of them had money and drinking problems and did not work hard enough towards marriage and what Iris considered a better life. Iris's wedding was thus part of her boundary work (Lentz 2020), her performance of middle-classness, distinguishing her from her not so disciplined kin. Nevertheless, in the ensuing months, Iris did everything to calm down the tensions, by sending remittances, visiting her rural kin and bringing them gifts. But, no matter what she did, it was not enough, Iris said with a deep sigh.

Iris's attempts to optimize her kin relations and her kin's rejection of all of her efforts clashed openly during the wedding celebrations. While the civil marriage in Windhoek went smoothly, the celebration at Iris's rural family home was a disaster. Going into great detail, Iris described her shock upon her arrival when she realized that her family had prepared absolutely nothing for her wedding. 'On Friday, one day before the celebration at my family's house, my family were asking if I had done any shopping? If I bought food for the wedding? I was so surprised. Normally, when weddings are taking place in our house, the family contributes, meets and contributes money. They buy the food.' Iris rushed to the store to buy at least some food and drinks.

One of Iris's maternal aunts had agreed to decorate the compound where the celebration was to take place. Iris had paid her to do that. When the couple arrived from Oshakati after their Pentecostal wedding and entered the wife's family compound, they were speechless. Iris said, 'I was so shocked. There was no food on the table, nothing. The drinks were very hot. They had not put them in the fridge. I don't know if they meant to disappoint me, I don't know. The way my aunt had prepared the decor it was like what a five-year-old child would do.' Iris and several of her sisters

and female cousins started crying, shocked by the insult. One cousin commented that this was revenge for going ahead with the marriage.

The next morning, the wedding party headed towards the husband's village. His kin had erected a tent (Van Dijk 2017). It was a very costly celebration, with more than 800 invited guests. Although everything went much better than with Iris's kin, the event was nevertheless marked by tensions. Peter's kin wanted to include customary rituals into the wedding celebration. Peter argued with his kin, pointing out that they should acknowledge that it was already a big concession to celebrate his wedding in the north, notwithstanding any customary rituals. His kin were not convinced and stressed that the concession was important but not sufficient.

Listening to Iris and Peter's troubled recollections of their marriage process, I asked the couple why they had decided to hold rural celebrations at all. Iris's answer highlighted the challenges of belonging most urban middle-class couples I interviewed experienced: 'The whole family is there in the north. If we marry here in Windhoek, it's just for friends, for only few people.' Although exhausted and frustrated, Iris and Peter tried to bridge the geographical, religious and economic distances between themselves and their kin. Despite the humiliations inflicted on them before and during their wedding, they also felt satisfaction in having accomplished celebrating four times. They reassured each other that this was the reward for their joint struggles and for having worked so hard. The neoliberally informed idea of overcoming crisis through investment, optimization and growth thus also informed the couple's reasoning about the events. They hoped that one day their kin would acknowledge these tremendous efforts. Still, a feeling of 'not enough' and a fear that despite all their struggles their kin remained unimpressed and unsatisfied pervaded their wedding memories and overshadowed their kin relations.

Not all couples I met were as willing as Iris and Peter to go such a long way in maintaining and optimizing their kin relations. When confronted with choosing between 'self-development' and obligations towards their kin (Durham 2020), several couples decided against their rural ties. Iris and Peter's friends Gisela and Michael celebrated only one wedding in Windhoek. After many months of conflict between the couple and their kin about where and how to celebrate, Gisela and Michael decided to stop investing in and optimizing their rural kin relations, at least for the time being. Gisela remarked that she had had enough of the struggle and the little reward she received from her kin. The investment did not pay off. Being pregnant, she now needed to focus her attention on providing the best for her baby, investing and optimizing there. Other research from Southern and West Africa indicates comparable shifts in kin investment, away from extended kin relations and towards the nuclear family and children (Alber 2018; Durham 2020; Hull 2020; Spronk 2020). Gisela's reasoning thus suggests that neoliberalization alters not only marriages but also parent-child relations.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism has not only affected the Namibian economy but has also transformed some of the most intimate aspects of everyday lives. Focusing on middle-class urbanites living in the country's capital Windhoek, I have analysed how neoliberal ideologies of self-formation and optimization have changed the meaning and practices of

marriage and intimate relationships. Instead of understanding marriage as a process of kin formation, marriage is now an accomplishment of a couple's middle-classness. The couple's meritocratic marriage stories were narrative class performances in which they constructed themselves as hard-working subjects, constantly optimizing their bodies, selves and relationships. Because of their dedication, their good planning and their communication skills, the middle-class couples perceived themselves as 'growing together'. Their joint growth was expressed through specific forms of performative consumption, especially housebuilding, homemaking and weddings. This neoliberalization of Namibian marriage has to be understood against the background of the wider transformations of Namibia's political economy. While the economic promises of independence have still not been fulfilled for most Namibians, members of the emerging black middle classes have moved from economic precarity to prosperity. The middle-class couples justified their economic ascent vis-à-vis the not so fortunate majority through neoliberally framed ideologies of deservingness and reward. In their 'doing being middle class' (Lentz 2020), they applied neoliberally informed techniques of self- and couple-making as boundary work, distinguishing themselves from others, especially their non-affluent kin. Because they optimized so hard, they deserved the 'good married life' and did not have to fear divorce or poverty. Neoliberal ideologies thus helped them deal with the demands of others and their own fears.

Yet, many of my interlocutors also expressed exhaustion and frustration about the constant pressure for optimization, doubting that their efforts would ever be enough. To interpret this exhaustion, I have referred to Sisyphus and his never-ending task of rolling a huge boulder up the mountain. Additionally, the habitus of my middle-class interlocutors was not yet stable but still in the making. This caused stress and anxiety. They were 'recent social climbers' (Lentz 2020: 460), realizing the fragility of their upward move. Many felt insecure about the permanence of their new class status (Mercer and Lemanski 2020), especially when confronted with their non-affluent, often unmarried kin. Performances of their middle-classness, especially during their weddings, were aimed at convincing kin of their class achievements. Their fear of divorce can thus be read as a more general anxiety of losing their hard-won middle-class accomplishments. The neoliberally framed struggle for optimization that my interlocutors described in their self-making, couple-making and kin-making projects thus clearly included 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) and endless Sisyphus-like labour.

At the same time, and despite their exhaustion, most couples did express pride and satisfaction in their accomplishments and the way they lived. Reflecting on the Caribbean, Freeman (2020: 84) asks whether 'neoliberal capitalism is opening possibilities for an emotional self-actualization that was not present in the early post-plantation world'. This, she continues, then 'casts optimism in new light, one that is not only/inevitably cruel' (*ibid.*: 85). Rachel Spronk (2020: 482) has also stressed the complexity of neoliberal transformations, cautioning against too general and morally charged judgements. Many of my Namibian interlocutors welcomed the neoliberally framed possibilities that were available to them (Mercer and Lemanski 2020; Spronk 2020). Married women expressed deep satisfaction about being able to shape their bodies and minds in ways they, and not their kin, felt were right.

I conclude with a brief reflection on how the emerging neoliberal ethics of optimizing the self and one's social relations are spreading beyond the middle classes. The middle-class boundary work I have described here is also being appropriated by those not yet, but aspiring to be, middle class. When middle-class urbanites, for example, visited their homes in Fransfontein, their rural kin closely observed their appearance and behaviours. During a brief visit to Fransfontein in 2015, I was surprised to learn that, among younger villagers, especially young women, dieting had become fashionable. Similar to the reasoning of my urban middle-class interlocutors, these women stressed the importance of optimizing themselves in their attempts to move forward in life. At the same time, they realized how difficult this was for them. Their 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2013) was much more restricted than for my urban interlocutors. The young women lacked money, time and possibilities to self-optimize, a situation that stimulated new forms of anxiety about unfulfilled aspirations of marriage and partnership. Their hopes and fears demonstrate the myriad ways in which neoliberal ideologies are transforming self-making, personhood and intimacy in Namibia. Not only in Namibian middle-class marriages has neoliberally inspired optimization become the way to live; beyond marriage, intimacy in general is being neoliberalized.

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