Case presentation. Ayse is a 37-year-old Turkish woman. She has been living in the Netherlands since she was four years old. Ayse was born into a large Turkish family and has six brothers and three sisters. Many relatives are strong-headed, but the family is very close. Most of them manage their lives well, but some of the brothers do so in a criminal way. Ayse differs from the rest of the family, because she is quite sensitive and vulnerable. Perhaps the reason lies in her childhood; her father sent her back to Turkey when she was fifteen years old to take care of her grandmother. At that time she lived for several years separated from her parents and siblings. After the death of her grandmother, Ayse gave birth to a son from a failed relationship and after many problems she returned to the Netherlands. Back in the Netherlands, she found herself in the position of a scapegoat. All the aggression and frustration of this large family, and that was quite significant, was directed at her in the form of serious violence from her brothers, and also from her mother. I came to know Ayse, because in depressive periods she came back again and again to our institute and so, from the periphery, I have known this family very well. What struck me was her unconditional loyalty to this family, but also periods of joyfulness, if all was going well. If things went well, there were long periods when we didn’t see each other. Ayse was not an assertive woman, so she was not able to stand up for herself in this atmosphere of domestic violence. To answer the violence with more violence was not her style. If she could have done this well, she probably would never have come to us and she would have survived better in this family. But she wanted to talk, she gave her opinion in a direct way, she wanted for things to go differently or to be solved. If it absolutely didn’t go well for her, and her problems got worse, she had hallucinations, voices, and spiritual sensations, which gave her much strength. At such moments, the family understood that she wasn’t doing well, but it also became clear to the family that she was someone special. There were times, when the brothers were so violent towards her and her parents did not protect her, that together we seriously discussed the possibility of a definitive break with the family. On the other hand, we both knew that this would never be an
option. ‘It is impossible to cut off your own leg’, she would say. A break with the family would be unbearable; she could not do without them. They also could not do without her.

What can we say about such a case? It is possible to look at such a case from various perspectives: the violence, the family and the role of my female client.

In a Dutch family, a pattern of such violence would be sufficient to break all ties forever. From the perspective of ‘striving for personal autonomy’, the bond of an individual with such a family is seen as unhealthy, masochistic or dependent and often work is done in treatment to sever the relationship with such a violent family.

Violence in a family, regardless of cultural origin, is commonly layered and can only be understood if it is analyzed as having various levels of meaning. In all these levels of meaning, the cultural background of the family also plays an important role, a large role. In general, we can say that from a feminist social perspective much violence against women is encapsulated in social structures that justify violence in various ways, no matter what country one lives in (Richters, 1994). From that perspective, we can see the violence of the brothers to Ayse as gender-related, from men to one woman. However, in some cases, the mother supported the violence of her sons towards Ayse.

At the level of meaning for the family, we see the changing dominance of men in families that are in transitioning processes, is often expressed by revenge violence against one or more women or children in the family. The violence is a sign that at this level, intensive change processes are occurring. Important perspectives must shift in short time periods and also continue to shift. This leads to significant uncertainties and various changes in the relationships within a family. Not only does the power of men and women in the family or household alter, but also the authority of the parents and children.

The striking thing about these families in transition is the great loyalty and commitment to each other. The process that have taken place, have occurred with each other and has also involved the family in the home countries. In an acculturation process, the various family members usually take differing positions, but despite the large individual differences there is a joint family process. It is understandable that it takes a great deal of individual effort, to bring everyone ‘on board’, including family members from several generations, each one in a distinct phase of the acculturation process and living in separate places. The violence may be one of the means used to maintain homeostasis (i.e. balance) to preserve the system and/or to
hold the system together. The phenomenon of küsmek in a Turkish family has the same function. In such cases, family members no longer speak with each other because there is a serious conflict, but the relationship between the angry family members is not broken. They attend the same family gatherings, but do not talk to each other. The survival of the family is more important than the individual feelings of anger or being hurt.

For a family, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Aristotle), or the family has meaning that goes beyond just the sum of its members; and all these meanings are the reason and necessity for its survival. It is striking that in many immigrant families, unlike many Western families, members are subordinate to the larger family system. The importance of the individual is subordinated to the interests of the larger family system. Being born into a family gives the family members their identity. The land, the place where you were born says many things about you, ‘you are one of them’, and this distinguishes you from others. Your birth into this family is an intersection of time and place. This moment is decisive for the rest of the life that is coming. Therefore, in India when a baby is born a horoscope is drawn.

Aside from many other functions, the family has the important function of acting as the channel for cultural norms to be passed on. For example: being born into a family has rights and obligations. Right to aid, the certainty that others will help you to survive, with food, money, a roof over your head; but there is also a duty to help other family members, to do the same for them as they would do for you. In many cultures, the duty to be accountable to those with whom you are connected is a personal social duty, from which you cannot withdraw. Therefore, Ayse cannot break contact, she is not only a victim, but she is also a part of the family and she feels and takes on this responsibility.

In a family there are not only rights; there are also obligations. As a result of obligations that clash with one’s own personal wishes, there is much internal stress and mutual tension in the family. The involvement of the (Turkish) family as a whole moves back and forth on a sliding scale from social support to social control (Thomaes, 1994). The extended family requires a fair amount of creativity and social skills to solve all the challenges. With shifting perspectives, family rules must often adapt and change quickly. The woman of the house is ‘the thermometer of the family’, she usually knows exactly what is going on and therefore she absorbs all the tension. Sometimes this makes women and other vulnerable family members sick. From the perspective provided by the women’s movement, we have know for a long time that such problems and/or violence against women can lead to various complaints, including depression, among others.
Thus, the family can be both a source of power, as well as a major source of stress.

In therapy, it is important to help migrant women discover negotiating skills that they can use in their family to make constructive changes possible. It is mainly at the level of the family that negotiation for changed behaviour can happen and, and it is the family that is the source of legitimation for such changes in behaviour. In this process, it is important that women learn to recognize and utilize their pivotal role. Culturally sensitive work by health workers is hereby important. It is necessary to attempt to avoid breaking up systems of meaning, in which the women take part, because otherwise they may lose important parts of their identity or even lose themselves. But we need to find ways to further help the others in the system, men and children. An example: if a Turkish or Moroccan woman really wants to divorce, this is often quite a complicated matter. If it is not possible to prevent the divorce, it is important that the woman learns to make clear to her husband that she does not want to deprive him of his paternity. A divorce between partners does not mean separation as parents, and the rest of the family can also be allowed to continue to play a role. Everyone, the woman, the children and the man benefit when the husband remains a father to the children. Providing support and guidance during a separation process may in that sense offer a form of therapy for the whole family – a complex process in which all those involved must learn new behaviour, a process in which the woman works on her own autonomy-in-connectedness (Boedjarath, 2011). The strong suit of women lies in their communication skills. In therapy it is important to help women further develop their talents to bring the complex process of their families transition come to a successful conclusion. Through this process, perspectives may slowly shift. The underlying idea behind this is: by being a part of a larger whole, a whole from which people derive their meaning, people can continue to grow, there is less chance of being derailed or getting sick for all the family members involved. To guide these processes requires a great deal of creativity and perseverance from intercultural workers.

Studies in children of migrants worldwide have shown that the children who are most successful, are those who take the best from the two distinct cultures in which they have grown up. To be allowed to be loyal to the old culture as well as the new, is good for the wellbeing and healthy development of these children. The same is true for migrant women in a process of empowerment. The great art, also for the women in such families, is that it must also be possible for them to take the best from the two cultures in which they live. In an emancipation process, during which immigrant
women seek the greater choice and autonomy available to women in a Western society, it is essential that they can preserve other important aspects of their own culture.

As we wrote here above, in many non-Western cultures it is important that people take responsibility on a directly personal level for the people whom they know and with whom they feel connected. Such social ‘duty’ threatens our market economy, which mainly involves ‘every man for himself’, and falls increasingly into the background. But why should this apply only to migrants – that it is good to take the best of multiple cultures to create your own?? This perspective, ‘to bear the duty of direct personal responsibility for those with whom you feel connected’ is a perspective that helps people bound together in systems to cooperate for survival, and should not only hold for non-Western cultures.

References
Boedjarath, I.
2011 Cultural Awareness assistance: Knowledge, attitude and skills together. In R. Borra, R. Verboom & R. van Dijk (Eds.), Culture and Psychological assessment. Working with professional psychological tests. Houten: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum

Richters, A.

Sloterdijk, P.
2011 You must change your life. About anthropotechnick. Amsterdam: Tree.

Thomaes, K.
1994 Turkish women are speaking: An investigation into health care seeking behavior and statements on mental health among Turkish women in Maastricht. Maastricht: Mental Health Centre Maastricht.