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Binational marriages in Europe

ABSTRACT:

Today, in the era of post-modernity, the ethnically, racially, religiously, culturally or nationally mixed marriages are more and more frequent phenomenon, contributing to the emergence of new types of cultural identity. Nationally mixed marriages (binational) define a new cultural quality when they do not concern only individuals, but when they become a phenomenon which is statistically frequent, and even dominant in a broader social context.

Statistics of the German federal office showed that every ninth marriage in 2014 was binational with an upward trend. Half of all marriages celebrated in Switzerland are binational. In 2005, 43,266 French-foreign marriages were concluded. The number of marriage migrants in Sweden increased substantially in the period 1990 - 2004, and the spatial pattern of the origins of marriage migrants is highly gendered. Mixed marriages represented 1.78% (3,367) of the total number of marriages contracted in Poland. This statistic shows that binational marriages in today's Europe have a tendency to increase.

KEYWORDS: Binational marriages, marriage, family, multiculturalism, Europe

Introduction

Partner choice is generally seen as being determined by preferences, social norms and opportunities (Kalmijn, 1998). From sociological studies, partners have been found to be similar in terms, for instance, of social status, age, geographical origin and cultural resources (Kalmijn, 1991, 1994, 1998). Social and cultural control by parents, family or others from the direct surroundings and the sanctions that might be imposed when partners are chosen from outside the group influence the process of partner choice as well. Also, marriage market opportunities describe the availability of potential partners with desired characteristics.

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Marriage market restrictions substantially influence who marries whom, and these restrictions have decreased very quickly over the last century, particularly in the last decades.

In an age of sweeping globalization and transnational mobility; in an age of blurred borders, the phenomenon of mixed marriages is remarkably increasing worldwide and more people marry across national and cultural boundaries. Mixed marriage is, thus, a by-product of globalization and migration of people. Binational marriage is a marriage between two people from different countries. A variety of special issues arise in marriages between people from different countries, including those related to citizenship and culture, which add complexity and challenges to these kinds of relationships. When two culturally distinct individuals marry, they bring their cultural backgrounds under the same roof, which is the contact zone where these backgrounds either co-exist and cross-pollinate for the benefit of the couple, or grapple and jostle against each other to the detriment of the marital bond.

According to Tadeusz Paleczny,

«one of the elements of Americanization, universalization of the identity of the members of monocentric groups, such as Korean, Japanese or Mexican ones, is the phenomenon of amalgamation. The Europeanization of Poles and Germans will also be fully realized only when there is a new, dominant type of double or polyvalent, multiple identity beyond the ethnic and national boundaries, formed through culturally mixed marriages». (Paleczny, 2007: 55, translation by mgr Bożena Traciewicz)

As a result of the amalgamation, that is a merger of cultural groups following a marriage and the creation of hybrid forms of kinship, a new cultural order emerges.

A successful mixed marriage is one where each member accepts the right of the other to be different, which most marriage advisors see as the nub of the problem. However, many other scientists argue that mixed marriage carries within itself the factors of its failure, irrespective of how long it resists.

Binational marriage - in European research

The term 'binational marriage' means a registered relationship entered into by the citizens of two different countries. Marriages between foreigners are a kind of an indicator of openness of a society to contacts with other countries. They also indirectly indicate the scale of long-term emigration or immigration, which may lead to the possibility of a permanent, intimate bond between citizens of the two states (Szukalski, 2013).

One of the very basic issues of family social sciences is the question of how do the partners experience love (Collet, 2012). In our deliberations we are also interested in motives of a binational marriage. Beate Collet (2012) lists a number of reasons, which, of course, are not exhaustive or exclusive: feeling alone, need for help or assistance and/or founding a family. For people living in a foreign country the motives might be more complex than these. Due to their legally or politically precarious position, they might be searching for a job and social integration, they might not speak the local language, they might feel different, discriminated against and/or even persecuted. She further states that, from the perspective of a local, an intimate relationship with a foreigner, hence a member of a minority group, is in some aspects 'special'. To love the person might be mistaken for caring for the person. The 'Romeo and Juliet complex' might also play an important role, because 'love is more intense' when your partner is discriminated or when the relationship is on unstable ground because it is legally difficult and socially rejected (Collet, 2012).

Initially, research into ethnically mixed marriages was conducted mainly in the United States and other classic countries of immigration. However, in 2006, two Dutch professors, Matthijs Kalmijn and Frank van Tubergen (2006), published the findings of their research on ethnic marriages among the citizens of Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles², Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands. For the authors, it was important to examine from the theoretical and empirical perspective whether the patterns observed earlier in the countries of traditional immigrants would be equally applied in the Dutch social context. In order to obtain a sufficiently large research sample, five representative

² The Netherlands Antilles was the Dutch autonomous territory in the Lesser Antilles (Central America) covering the 5 islands in the Caribbean Sea: Curacao, Bonaire, Saba, St. Eustatius and the southern part of St Maarten, existing in the years 1848-2010.

national groups were selected, among which research was conducted between 1988 and 2002.

Kalmijn and Tubergen (2006) distinguished three major sociological factors affecting the decision to enter into a mixed marriage: individual preferences concerning the features that a spouse candidate should possess, the number of opportunities to meet and the influence of third parties.

Sofia Gaspar (2010) argues that a binational marriage between two EU-partners is a different phenomenon than one between an EU-partner and a non-EU spouse. In an attempt to understand European intermarriages as a social phenomenon in its own right, she undertook a qualitative survey of 30 in-depth interviews with couples in Lisbon. She lists several advantages for couples with European nationality, such as the right of abode, geographical mobility, civil rights, legally guaranteed freedom from discrimination and easier access to employment in comparison to other immigrant groups. She further states that as an EU citizen, marrying someone from another EU country would not require the legal and security procedures that apply for non-EU spouses when pursuing to obtain citizenship and then having the freedom of movement within the EU. Without a detailed explanation she draws the conclusion that «European intra-marriage rather involves personal motives such as love and affection than legal and economic factors that might be hidden in other types of transnational unions» (Gaspar, 2010).

A weak point in Gaspar's (2010) study, which she admits at the end of her study, is the fact that she interviewed highly educated people only. Since any level of educational degree can be found amongst the population of binational marriages, the shortcoming of the foreign towards the native spouse should have been addressed in more detail, as this would probably highlight other yet hidden aspects. Interestingly Gaspar's (2010) distinction between non-EU spouses and EU spouses seems to fit the Polish conception as well. The 'bilateral negotiations' are the source for this harmonisation with inner European movement possibilities. It remains to be seen if 'mass-immigration initiative' and its aftermath will have a negative impact on the relatively facile immigration procedures for EU-spouses.

Binational marriages - in European statistics

In the era of globalization, meeting people from different cultural circles on one's way of life has become a common phenomenon. Statistics of the German federal office³ showed that every ninth marriage in 2014 was binational with an upward trend. German women preferred partners from Turkey, Italy and the U.S. while German men tended to be married to women from Poland, Turkey and other east European and Asian countries. Of the marriages in 2014, 85.9% were between German couples and 14.1% between binational pairs. Divorce rates were higher in German-German marriages than in binational marriages with around 90.5% of divorces being between German couples and 11.4% of divorces between binational couples.

Half of all marriages celebrated in Switzerland are binational. Binational partnerships and families have become an important feature of Swiss society and will continue to grow in number as globalization increases. According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (BFS)⁴, in the year 2007, 49.7% of all marriages celebrated in Switzerland were binational. Swiss female marries non-Swiss male: 20.8%. Swiss male marries non-Swiss female: 22.4%. Non-Swiss female marries non-Swiss male: 6.5%. While 45% of Swiss women marry men from EU/EFTA member countries, 55% marry men from non-member countries. These Swiss women most frequently marry men from Italy, Germany, Serbia/Montenegro, North Africa, Turkey and France. Thirty-five percent (35%) of Swiss men marry women from EU/EFTA member countries, whereas 65% marry women from non-member countries. These Swiss men most often marry women from Germany, Brazil, Thailand, Italy, Serbia/Montenegro and North Africa. Comparing the number of Swiss divorces (11,642) to the number of Swiss marriages (20,406) yields a divorce rate of 57%. In contrast, comparing binational divorces (6,760) to binational marriages (14,910) yields a divorce rate of 45%. Swiss female-non-Swiss male couples are affected by divorce to about the same degree as are non Swiss male-Swiss female couples.

³ The 2014 Migration Report, Date: 22 January 2016, <http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Publikationen/Migrationsberichte/migrationsbericht-2014.html?nn=2006704> (last access: 22.06.2016).

⁴ Familie, households, <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/en/index/themen/01/04.html> (last access: 22.06.2016).

To count French-foreign marriages, we have to look at the number of marriages concluded each year. Annual Report on Immigration and Foreign Presence in France in 2005 published by the Ministry of Labor, Social Cohesion, and Housing (Régnard, 2006) shows that, in 2005, 43,266 French-foreign marriages were concluded. They represented 15.3% of the 283,194 total number of marriages celebrated in France (i.e. 231,348 marriages between French citizens and 8,580 marriages between two foreigners of different nationalities). Mixed marriages are concluded somewhat more by French men (55.6%) than by French women (44.4%). The proportion of mixed marriages concluded every year remains high compared to the number of marriages between French citizens. Concerning the national origins of the foreign spouses of couples married in 2005, 56.9% had arrived from the African continent, mostly from North-Africa. 67% of foreign men married to French women came from Africa, whereas only 33% of foreign women married to French men did. The second most important group of foreigners married with French citizens in 2006 are Europeans: 24.8%. For this group, foreign women married to French men are more numerous than foreign men married to French women (57% vs. 43%).

Thomas Niedomysl and colleagues (2009) focused on marriage migrants, or those immigrants who moved to Sweden and got married to a native within a year of arrival in Sweden. They found that the number of marriage migrants increased substantially in the period 1990 - 2004, and that the spatial pattern of the origins of marriage migrants was highly gendered. Female marriage migrants mainly came from Southeast Asia and other parts of Asia, Eastern Europe and Russia, and South America, while male marriage migrants (making up 42% of all marriage migrants) were mainly from Western Europe, Africa and the Middle East, North America and Australia. John Östh and others (2009) found that men who married marriage migrants were higher educated. Regarding population density, a U-shaped effect was found, i.e. men and women in the most rural and the most urban areas had the highest odds to recruit a partner from abroad, with the effect being greatest for those recruiting a partner from a poor country.

Additionally, after joining the European Union, Poland has become a 'matrimonially' attractive country for non-EU citizens who may acquire Polish citizenship through marriage. The processes of entering

into intercultural relations in the territory of Poland will intensify. We could say that in Polish society a significant social change is taking place, a change from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from unity to diversity. Demographic yearbook of Poland prepared by Central Statistical Office (Szałtys & Stańczak, 2015), shows that, in 2014, 188,488 marriages were concluded. They represented 1.78% (3,367) of the total number of marriages contracted in Poland. Mixed marriages are concluded somewhat more by Polish women (2,599) than by Polish men (768). Exact figures are shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 - *Marriages contracted by foreigners by country of residence before marriage in 2014*

	Males	Females	Total
Albania	17	-	17
Algeria	16	-	16
Argentina	5	-	5
Armenia	11	7	18
Australia	22	5	27
Austria	27	-	27
Bangladesh	11	-	11
Belgium	40	-	40
Belarus	10	61	71
Brazil	11	8	19
Bulgaria	11	5	16
Canada	16	-	16
China	5	7	12
Colombia	6	-	6
Croatia	9	-	9
Czech Republic	35	10	45
Denmark	17	-	17
Egypt	20	-	20
Finland	7	-	7
France	108	7	115
Germany	368	34	402
Greece	12	-	12
Georgia	7	-	7
Hungary	29	-	29
India	34	-	34
Indonesia	-	5	5

Iran	5		5
Ireland	133	12	145
Italy	169	-	169
Kazakhstan	-	5	5
Latvia	-	10	10
Lithuania	9	21	30
Macedonia	12	-	12
Mexico	10	-	10
Morocco	17	-	17
Nepal	7	-	7
Netherlands	86	7	93
New Zealand	5	-	5
Nigeria	27	-	27
Norway	26	-	26
Pakistan	38	-	38
Peru	5	-	5
Philippines	-	7	7
Portugal	20	-	20
Romania	30	9	39
Russia	24	101	125
Serbia	14	-	14
Slovakia	32	10	42
South Africa	9	-	9
Spain	99	5	104
Sweden	24	-	24
Switzerland	33	-	33
Tunisia	19	-	19
Turkey	56	-	56
Ukraine	81	299	380
United Arab Emirates	5	-	5
United Kingdom	608	38	646
United States	42	7	49
Uzbekistan	-	5	5
Vietnam	6	-	6
Other countries	94	83	177
	2,599	768	3,367

Source: Based on data from the Demographic yearbook of Poland, Central Statistical Office, Warszawa 2015, pp. 233-237.

Polish women preferred partners from United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and France while Polish men tended to be married to women from

Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. In 2016 Ewa Sowa-Behtane (2016) published the findings of her research on binational marriages among the citizens of Poland and foreigners living on the entire territory of Poland. The research was concluded on a sample of 40 people (10 binational marriages and 10 Polish married couples). The research shows that decision-making processes of people entering into binational marriages are different from the decision-making processes of people entering into mononational marriages. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, binational marriages are mostly homogeneous marriages. In binational marriages problems often arise due to cultural diversity of the spouses. Among the adaptation strategies aimed at dealing with cultural differences, the most commonly used by spouses are a strategy of compromise and a coexistence strategy. National origin will be a factor highly unfavourable for the implementation of the partnership model of marriage.

Completion and conclusions

There is a large need for research on married binational couples. The justification for tackling the problems of binational marriages is that the results of the research will provide knowledge that will, in turn, contribute to the development of sociology discipline. On the other hand, based on the knowledge across the discipline, including the research on binational marriages, we can create a set of good practices or official documents of legislation. Research is also necessary in order to complement the theoretical knowledge with subsequent conclusions. It would be worthwhile to present an in-depth portrait of binational marriages, analyzing their values, ideologies, opinions and goals in life.

Research on binational marriages will give new arguments for the international discussion on the nature of the changes taking place in modern multicultural societies.

Binational couples have to overcome a number of social, cultural and financial obstacles. There is a need to form organizations which can assist such couples by:

- personal counseling;
- advice and support for further problems such as bringing up children or a falling out between partners, etc.;
- information and education pertinent to the legal/formal aspects

of a marriage, rights and duties of the partners according to the laws of their respective countries of origin, pointing to possible discrepancies concerning the partners' culture, religion, language or upbringing;

- helping a couple-to-be prior to marriage, or before starting life as an unmarried couple, to make this important decision in full awareness of the situation the couple may find itself in, and to help them openly discuss all aspects that may lead to serious misunderstandings;
- diagnosis of problems arising between partners having their possible origin in different cultural backgrounds, with the possibility of passing on those dealt by organisations specialised in family mediation, family counseling, family therapy, etc.;
- in cases of separation or divorce, providing information on pertinent foreign legal aspects with a special eye on guaranteeing the well-being and rights of the couple's children;
- networking/cooperation with additional counseling units/call centers for binational couples;
- setting up and maintaining a website in conjunction with additional organisations active in the field.

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