



# Relationship satisfaction of European binational couples in the Netherlands



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we focus on relationship satisfaction of European binational unions. Although such couples can be considered icons of European integration, little is known about these partnerships as well as the factors affecting relationship satisfaction. We base our analysis on the Dutch data of the EUMARR-project, a unique data set on European binational unions ( $n = 898$ ). We reveal that Europeans in binational unions report higher relationship satisfaction compared to Dutch individuals in binational European and unibinational partnerships. Furthermore, our analysis shows that married individuals are more satisfied compared to cohabiting individuals. Finally, having children is negatively and the availability of social support positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. The presence of children shows to be especially challenging for Dutch people in binational unions.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, the freedom to move across international borders within the European Union is considered one of the fundamental rights of European citizens. With the abolishing of internal borders within the EU, European citizens now have increasing possibilities of establishing and maintaining European transnational social ties. As such, it can be argued that the partner market of European citizens also considerably enlarged (Haandrikman, 2014; Nedomysl, Östh, & van Ham, 2010). Recent studies into migration motivations of intra-EU movers apparently support this idea, as social and cultural reasons, including love and relationships, show to be important drivers of mobility within the EU (see for example Gilmartin & Migge, 2015; Santacreu, Baldoni, & Albert, 2009; Verwiebe, 2014). Santacreu et al. (2009) and Verwiebe (2014), for example, indicated that family and marriage-related reasons figure among the most prominent reasons for intra-European mobility.

Despite the apparent importance of love as a driver of intra-EU mobility and migration, it has been shown that the number and share of European binational marriages remains remarkably stable in most European countries (de Valk & Díez Medrano, 2014). Furthermore, much remains unknown on the dynamics of intra-EU mobility and migration in general, as most research tended to focus on migration from non-European towards European countries. Particularly studies into intra-European love migration and its effects on the individual level only recently emerged (Braun & Recchi, 2008; Díez Medrano, Cortina, Safranoff, & Castro-Martín, 2014; Gaspar, 2008, 2012; Koelet, de Valk, & Willaert, 2011). We address this gap in the literature by studying relationship satisfaction of European binational and native Dutch couples in the Netherlands. Gaining a more thorough insight in the factors affecting relationship satisfaction of these couples is relevant, as such knowledge

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allows, for example, to indicate whether they are beacon lights of the European integration process in the form of durable unions. After all, it has been suggested that people who have routine interaction with individuals from other European countries are 'most likely to come to see themselves as Europeans and involved in a European national project' (Fligstein, 2008: 126). As European bi-national couples are exposed to European 'otherness' on a daily basis, they potentially contribute to the establishment of a European society 'from below' (Van Mol, de Valk, & van Wissen, 2015). Existing research into the links between relationships of individuals of different groups and relationship satisfaction mainly focused on the North American context. Also in this setting, knowledge on the differences between mixed and non-mixed couples as well as the interpersonal and contextual factors affecting these partnerships remained relatively limited (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008). Furthermore, the majority of studies focused on interethnic marriage, neglecting other forms of official and unofficial bonds such as cohabitation. Nevertheless, these union forms have become increasingly common and relevant in the European context (Hiekel, 2014; Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011). Therefore, we extend previous arguments on mixed marriages to the EU-context and cohabiting couples. Instead of focusing on rather broad race categories, we use nationality as a distinction criteria as this 'captures the more fine-grained group boundaries in the Netherlands in comparison to pan ethnic concepts of ethnicity' (Smith, Maas, & van Tubergen, 2012: 1127).

We rely upon a unique dataset on European binational couples, collected in the framework of the international research project EUMARR. Our paper aims to extend prior research in three ways. First, we extend research into mixed marriages and relationships towards the specific context of intra-European mobility, investigating whether relationship satisfaction differs between binational and uninational couples. Second, we explore whether there are differences between married and cohabiting individuals in these partnerships. Third, we examine couple characteristics that might affect relationship satisfaction.

## 2. Background and previous research

### 2.1. Binational relationships and relationship satisfaction

According to homogamy theory (see Kalmijn, 1998), which postulated that individuals have a preference for forming unions within their own social group, partners might experience binational relationships as more challenging compared to uninational relationships. In such unions, partners bring different cultures into the household, and they might hold different perspectives and understandings of household and relationship arrangements, possibly invoking conflicts. Research showed, for example, that a lack of cultural understanding, racial pressure, and social support of friends and family leads to greater marital conflict and adversely affects relationship functioning and satisfaction (Fu, Tora, & Kendall, 2001; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Rauer, Karney, Garvan, & Hou, 2008; Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006). Given the increased likelihood of conflicts within interethnic partnerships, it has often been argued that such relationships are more likely to end in a divorce compared to mono-ethnic ones, especially when they are culturally distant (Smith et al., 2012). According to homogamy theory, higher divorce rates can then be attributed to differing preferences as well as the disapproval of the relationship by third parties such as the family and/or the community, who might consider the interethnic union as undesirable behaviour in terms of maintaining group boundaries (Smith et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, the connection between forming part of a mixed union and relationship satisfaction is not as straightforward as homogamy theory would predict. Studies into relationship satisfaction of partners originating from different cultural, ethnic, racial and/or religious groups were inconclusive. Whereas some studies suggested that such couples are less satisfied with their relationship (e.g. Fu et al., 2001; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Sinning & Worner, 2010), others concluded there are no differences (Negy & Snyder, 2000; Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998; Troy et al., 2006, study 2; Weller & Rofé, 1988), or even reported higher relationship satisfaction (Troy et al., 2006, study 1). Furthermore, gender differences have also been observed: in interracial unions, women tend to report lower marital happiness compared to men (Fu et al., 2001). The vast majority of these studies, however, focused on partners that are considered to originate from relatively distant cultures, ethnicities or races. Research into relationship dynamics of EU-couples, where cultural distance might play a lesser role, however, remains very scarce to our knowledge. In this paper, we therefore investigate whether differences in relationship satisfaction exist between binational and uninational couples in the Netherlands, taking into account a variety of factors that have been documented to affect relationship satisfaction.

### 2.2. Differences in satisfaction among cohabiting and married couples

Research into relationship satisfaction of cohabiting and married couples is still scarce in Europe, as most research has been carried out in the United States (Tai, Baxter, & Hewitt, 2014; Wiik, Keizer, & Lappegård, 2012). The majority of studies concluded that married people as well as cohabiters entering marriage or having definite plans to do so, report greater relationship seriousness and satisfaction compared to cohabiters (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996; Hansen, Moun, & Shapiro, 2007; Nock, 1995; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004; Tai et al., 2014; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009; Wiik et al., 2012). This gap can be explained from different angles. People engaging in different types of unions might have different background characteristics, as marriage expectations show to be linked, for example, to the socioeconomic position of individuals (Huston & Melz, 2004; Manning & Smock, 2002). Cohabitation can then be the result of economic uncertainty, as a lack of economic resources needed to afford a traditional wedding ceremony 'forces' some couples to cohabit (Huston

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