

The breakup of binational couples: Analyzing the importance of cultural dissimilarity in the couple well-being

Laia Folguera^a, Jordi Roca^b, Flavia Verónica Anzil^c, Jordi Caïs^d

- a. Universitat de Barcelona. Departament de Sociologia. laiafolguera@ub.edu
- b. Universitat Rovira i Virgili. Departament d'Antropologia, Filosofia i Treball Social. jordi.roca@urv.cat
- c. Universitat Rovira i Virgili. Departament d'Antropologia, Filosofia i Treball Social. veronica.anzil@urv.cat
- d. Universitat de Barcelona. Departament de Sociologia. jcais@ub.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the characteristics, causes and consequences of the breakup process of binational couples. Previous research found significant differences in the separation processes of binational couples and usually conclude that they are at greater risk of separation. But most studies attempting to explain relationship breakdown processes are based on statistical data and therefore do not reveal the complexity of the decision process. In our study, based on interviews over a 12-year period, we analyze the importance and centrality of "cultural dissimilarity" to explain the separation processes of mixed couples. The data obtained allow to establish the significance of certain elements that add nuance to the theory of homogamy/heterogamy by showing how the 'cultural distance' is not a central argument in most breakup experiences but that it helps to shape the discourse.

Keywords: breakup, divorce, binational couples, cultural dissimilarity, love.

INTRODUCTION

As Illouz tells us, "'unloving' means a great deal from a sociological perspective as it is about the unmaking of social bonds, which [...] we have to understand as perhaps the central topic

of sociological inquiry” (2019: 3). Breaking up is a pivotal moment in the life of a couple. It offers a space to reflect on how the relationship evolved and, usually from the romantic love perspective and the ideal of the ‘forever’ couple, for the partners to analyze what failed, what factors led to its ending, and how it could have been avoided, if they had so wished. Breakups also prompt partners to reflect on their present and future situation, and how the challenges to their life expectations and possible frustrations affect their impending decisions.

One of the reasons why it is relevant to approach breakup through the lens of binational couples is that it offers a way to study power relations in couples living in transnational social arenas, where the individuals may find themselves conditioned by the dynamics of their country of origin or the receiving country, and competing between them. From a western perspective, a central criterion for female autonomy is a woman’s capacity to leave an unsatisfactory marriage (Amato 1999; Darvishpour 1999). Similarly, divorce also offers a way to obtain information on gender relationships and the changes that take place in them in the frame of binational couples, as well as the agency that individuals have in these matters.

Studies attempting to explain the characteristics and causes of relationship breakdown processes from statistical data will obviously uncover nuances and corrective variables and do not reveal the complexity of the insights in the decision process. This article aims to explore, from a qualitative perspective, the characteristics, causes and consequences, as perceived and experienced by the social actors involved, of the breakup process of binational couples in which one member is Spanish and the other is not. To this end, we consider the various theoretical perspectives that refer to cultural difference that have attempted to explain the factors in play in the breakup.

THEORETICAL FRAME

Although marriages have always occurred between people from different cultures and/or origins, it was not until the end of the last century, in the context of accelerating globalization, increased mobility, and the rise and standardization of information and communication technologies, among other factors, that the phenomenon of what are known as transnational, mixed or binational marriages or partnerships (to mention just a few of the used terms) appeared in force.

The scale of the phenomenon soon attracted academic research attention, which focused on different aspects.¹ One of the numerous dimensions examined in research on binational couples is relationship dissolution, through divorce in the case of married couples. Various studies find significant differences in the separation processes of binational couples. The trend identified in this literature, although underpinned by different variables, is that binational couples are at greater risk of separation (Neyrand & M'Sili 1998 for the case of France; Kalmijn et al. 2005, Smith et al. 2012, Fresnoza-Flot 2017 and 2019 for the case of the Netherlands; Dribe & Lundh, 2012, for the case of Sweden; Feng et al., 2012 for the case of England; Lainiala & Säävälä, 2013 for the case of Finland; Milewski & Hill 2014 for the case of Germany; and Domínguez 2014 for the case of Spain). Another stream of research examines whether relationship and marital quality is lower in interethnic and interracial marriages (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato 2008; Maneker & Rankin 2010). In addition, multiple studies have confirmed and argued that transnational couples can be more 'dysfunctional' than those of the same nationality, and that conflict in these relationships is more likely to lead to marital dissatisfaction or divorce (Durodoye 1994; Falicov 1995).

¹ For an extensive overview see: Constable 2003; Williams, 2010; and Charsley, 2012.

Smith et al. (2012) explained divorce patterns in the Netherlands using statistical data from the national register between 1995 and 2008. These authors find that the greater the cultural distance, the higher the risk of divorce, controlling for ‘religion’ and ‘degree of individualism in the country of origin’. They also took into account two notable factors in determining cultural distance: the size of the immigrant community in the destination country (they consider that cultural minorities are more affected by the dominant culture) and whether the immigrants are ‘first’ or ‘second generation’ (due to their experience of a consistent socialization process). Their study found that binational couples are 41% more likely to separate, after taking into consideration the following control variables: wife’s age at marriage, having children under the age of six at home, having a registered partnership (as opposed to a marriage), difference in age, and marriage duration. Moreover, couples from countries of origin with different predominant religions are 27% more likely to divorce than those with the same prevailing religion. Dominguez (2014) analyzes the case of Spain using statistical data from the National Register between 1995 and 2011 and the results are very similar to those of the Netherlands. In Spain, in the case of couples with children, in the fifth year of union, 7.6% of binational marriages have separated or divorced compared to 4.3% of marriages where both spouses are Spanish.

Analysis of the explanations for the trends and possible reasons attributed to binational couple divorce has prompted various theories. Most of them start from the concept of “transborder intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1990; Fresnoza-Flot and de Hart 2022). Intersectionality refers to the understanding that gender, “race,” and social class are interconnected. An intersectional approach allows to explore how ethnicized social class and gendered categories work together in the process of divorce of transnational family members. Another contribution is that of Ferreira et al. (2016) who develop a theoretical classification defining two major theoretical frameworks used in the literature: “Homogamy/Heterogamy theory” and “Convergence

theory”.

Homogamy/Heterogamy theory explains the likelihood of divorce in terms of increased cultural distance between partners (Smith 2012) or differences in certain sociocultural aspects (Kalmijn et al. 2005; Dribe & Lundh 2012). Cultural distance is understood in relation to language, religion or values. Therefore, having a different sociocultural background, with different socialization patterns, increases the likelihood that preferences, values and norms will also be different; this results in less time spent doing activities together and increases sources of conflict. This theory is explored in various studies, mainly examining the influence of religion or ethnicity (Kalmijn et al. 2005; Dribe & Lundh 2012; Feng et al. 2012). This theory holds that there are two main reasons why binational couples have a higher risk of divorce. The first concerns disagreements over important issues such as raising children, ways of seeing the world, and of sharing interests and activities (Kalmijn et al. 2005; Zhang & Van Hook 2009; Smith et al. 2012; Quah 2020). The second reason is related to the influence of external agents (friends and/or family seeking to maintain group cohesion) who introduce various kinds of pressure, challenge the relationship's stability, and suggest negative outcomes can be explained by cultural differences (Kalmijn, et al. 2005, Quah 2020).

Convergence theory explains marital dissolution trends among binational couples in terms of the influence beliefs about divorce have on a certain culture. The underlying idea is that the greater the divorce rate in the culture of origin of the wife, the higher the risk of divorce. This theoretical perspective holds that divorce rates among mixed couples will fluctuate between the divorce rates of the couple's groups of origin (Jones 1996; Zhang & van Hook 2009; Milewski & Hill 2014). Hence, “migrant/native marriages should not necessarily increase divorce levels in destination societies; if immigrants come from societies in which divorce is less common than in the destination society [...], then the divorce levels in destination societies may even decline because of intermarriage” (Milewski & Hill, 2014: 91).

Compared to other migrants, ‘love migrants’ tend to become incorporated into the destination society more quickly because of the spouse’s family and social network, but in turn, this incorporation is dependent on the local spouse, which creates a situation of social, economic and emotional dependence on the local partner. In the case of separation or divorce, for example, this can make them more vulnerable and insecure than their compatriots who migrate for other reasons. In the migration decision process, the idea of return may arise prior to migration. But the dissolution of a romantic relationship is not normally something the migrant thinks about at the start of their journey and at the same time, it is something the couple decides together. Aspects of return migration have been studied from different perspectives, such as that of deported migrants (Mestries 2013), the return of undocumented migrants (Nurick & Hak 2019), the influence of return on family life cycle care and tensions in the context of creating a family (Fahy, 2019), or the differences in the determining factors and consequences according to gender (Roer-Strier & Ezra 2006; Ortiz 2009; Padilla 2013; Vega 2013). Nevertheless, the migration literature has barely touched the question of return motivated by the end of a romantic relationship. The dissolution of these relationships, particularly if one partner has migrated for love, becomes a factor in the migration decision process with particularly harmful consequences for the migrant partner.

METHODS

Data gathering techniques and analytical approach

The data in this paper originate from three large studies, under the Spanish National R+D+I Plan, on gender relationships and the management of interculturality in heterosexual binational couples with one Spanish partner and one partner with a different nationality, conducted over

a 12-year period (2008–2019) by the authors of this article.² This studies applied qualitative methodology as their objectives were to contribute descriptive information on processes and on evaluative and motivational aspects based on the actors' perspectives. Data for these projects were mainly gathered through in-depth interviews conducted by the authors of the article.³

After three projects exploring different typologies of mixed couples (Spanish men with non-Spanish women; Spanish women with non-Spanish men; and mixed couples residing in the country of the non-Spanish spouse), we saw the opportunity to analyze the causes and consequences of the processes of separation experienced by the mixed couples interviewed, after a second or third round of interviews. From an initial base of more than 125 interviews, we were able to carry out 34 second interviews (and in some cases also third interviews). These interviews allowed us to revisit the subjects and explore both their evolution as a couple and, where appropriate, the process of breaking up the relationship. Of the 34 people interviewed for the second time, 11 cases had separated from the partners they were with at the time of the first interview.

This article is based on these second and third interviews with 11 members of mixed couples who have gone through a marital separation process (10 women and 1 man). The interviews were conducted by the authors of this article between 2016 and 2019 with informants who had previously been interviewed by us between 2008 and 2015. The information saturation criterion allowed us to verify that 11 interviews were sufficient for the study since redundant

² First project: "*Amores transnacionales: constitución y desarrollo de parejas mixtas en España*". Spanish *Plan Nacional de I+D+I* 2008-2011 (CSO2009-10187).

Second project: "*Parejas mixtas residentes fuera de España: relaciones de género, dinámicas sociales y conexiones transnacionales*". Spanish *Plan Nacional de I+D+I* 2012-2015 (CSO2012-33565).

Third project: "*Roles de género e interculturalidad de las parejas mixtas en España: una investigación cualitativa longitudinal*". Spanish *Plan Nacional de I+D+I* 2016-2018 (CSO2015-65531-P).

³ The sufficiency criterion was used, seeking the maximum variety of participants and contexts (Seidman 2013).

information was already obtained in the last interviews (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006, Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi 2017).

The interviews were all recorded, after the interviewee had given their permission and signed an informed consent form. The final analysis is the outcome of a process of coding which aimed to identify the subject positions being constructed by participants, and the cultural resources which participants are drawing upon to construct these subject positions. Table 1 presents some basic characteristics of the informants interviewed who had experienced separation. All interviewees are given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Ethical considerations

All informants completed and signed an informed consent each time they agreed to conduct an interview for one of our research projects. In these consents they agreed that the information provided was used for the purposes of the investigation, including "possible publications that may derive from it", among others. Before they agreed to be in the sample, all the participants had been informed of the overall objectives of the study and the procedures that would be followed. The researchers then requested their voluntary participation, clarifying that they could withdraw at any moment they wished. The individual interviews were conducted with the participants' verbal and written consent. Nobody chose to withdraw. Anonymity was also guaranteed in the transcripts and texts of the interviews.

Table 1. Characteristics of the separated couples in the follow-up process

Pseudonym (age at last interview)	Interviewees' nationality	Partners' nationality	Formalized union/Duration	Age gap	Educational level	Children in common	Informant's current situation	Gap between 1st and 2nd-3rd interview
1.Blanca (45)	Spain	1-Italy	No, 5 years	She is 8 years older	Homogamy	No	Single	6 years
		2-Italy	No, 4 years	She is 4 years older	Homogamy	No		
2.Charity (54)	Spain	1-UK	Yes, 9 years	Same age	Hypogamy	Yes	New partner	5 years
		2-Argentina	Yes, 19 years	He is 10 years older	Homogamy	Yes		
		3-UK	No, 2 years	He is a year older	Homogamy	No		
3.Charo (54)	Spain	Morocco	No, 4 years	She is 25 years older	Hypogamy	No	Single	5 years
4.Corina (39)	Romania	Spain	No, 2 years	She is 3 years older	Homogamy	No	Single	5 years
5.Juanjo (46)	Spain	Brazil	Yes, 5 years	He is 15 years older	Homogamy	No	New partner	4 years
6.Marisa (59)	Peru	Spain	Yes, 7 years	He is 11 years older	Hypogamy	No	Single	10 years
7.Marita (27)	Spain	1-Dominican Rep.	No, 4 years	He is 6 years older	Hypogamy	No	New partner	6 years
		2-Dominican Rep	No, 1 years	Same age	Hypogamy	No		
		3-Colombia	No, 1 year	He is a year older	Hypogamy	No		
8.Nelly (37)	France	1-Spain	No, 2 years	He is a year older	Hypogamy	No	New partner	3 years
9.Nieves (43)	Spain	1-Guatemala	Yes, 10 years	He is 8 years older	Homogamy	Yes	New partner	7 years
		2-Guatemala	No, 1 year	Same age	Hypogamy	No		
10.Sonia (45)	Peru	1-Spain	Yes, 5 years	He is 2 years older	Hypogamy	No	New partner	7 years
		2-Spain	Yes, 6 years	He is 2 years older	Hypogamy	Yes		
11.Valeria (27)	Spain	1-Brazil	Yes, 6 years	He is 3 years older	Hypogamy	No	Single	4 years
		2-Brazil	No, 1 year	She is a year older	Homogamy	No		

Source: “Amores transnacionales: constitución y desarrollo de parejas mixtas en España”. Spanish Plan Nacional de I+D+I 2008-2011 (CSO2009- 10187).

“Parejas mixtas residentes fuera de España: relaciones de género, dinámicas sociales y conexiones transnacionales”. Spanish Plan Nacional de I+D+I 2012-2015 (CSO2012-33565).

“Roles de género e interculturalidad de las parejas mixtas en España: una investigación cualitativa longitudinal”. Spanish Plan Nacional de I+D+I 2016-2018 (CSO2015-65531-P).

RESULTS

In the results section we will see if the interviewed individuals consider cultural differences to have been relevant in explaining their separation process. In the first section we present the statements of the majority of testimonies that maintained that cultural differences were not a relevant reason for the breakup of the couple. In the second subsection, we provide an in-depth explanation of the only two cases in our study that acknowledge cultural distance factors as the main trigger for the breakup of the relationship.

When testimonies affirm that cultural difference is not relevant

The vast majority of our informants (9 out of 11) believe that the reasons leading to the separation of the couple are typical of any romantic relationship and have nothing to do with disagreements of a cultural nature.

Charity, a Spanish woman who had been in two mixed relationships (with a British man and with an Argentine), explained in the first interview that, apart from his lack of commitment to housework and the deterioration of the relationship associated with the day-to-day routine, she separated from Peter (British) because she had met and fallen in love with someone else. When she brought Marcos (Argentine) into the account of the breakup with Peter, she defined him as “Someone with other things in his head... he’s an artist... he speaks beautifully... Argentine... What more do I need to say!”.

For Corina, a Romanian woman who had been in a relationship with a Spanish man, the deterioration of the couple's relationship was solely due to the passage of time. As she recounts, she missed the initial spark that had ignited their relationship. In her own words: "Our relationship was bad and slipping away. Bad in the sense of being boring, or as the Spanish say, 'the spark had gone'"

Marisa, a Peruvian woman who was in a relationship with a Spanish man, explains that their relationship began to unravel when she no longer desired to have sex with her partner. When she conveyed this to him, the relationship quickly cooled off and eventually ended: "I loved him right to the end, eh, and one day I realized that I didn't want [sexual] relations with him, I mean, I cooled right down! Then one day he wanted to touch me and I said, look, no, I don't want to anymore [laughing]. But why? Because no. Just that's that, you sleep on one side and me on the other and that's that [laughing]. And well, he was really surprised by this, and it was like a slap in the face for him. I think he fell out of love... yes, I think it was over for him because we were like two strangers. There was no longer that thrill, I don't know, of doing something, maybe it had already become a routine. It was like a routine."

For Sonia, another Peruvian woman who had been in a relationship with a Spanish man, the separation occurred because her partner met another woman while she was away: "I visited my country on vacation with my son so that my family could meet him, and when I returned, he had met another person on the Internet... [...]. The truth is that we were very different. Not in ways related to me being a foreigner... [...] It was that we didn't have, there wasn't, how do you say? the same kind of feelings."

While, for Blanca, a Spanish woman who was in a relationship with an Italian man, the separation occurred because the relationship had stagnated. Unlike her partner, she was not interested in marriage and having children: "What reason can I give you for why we split up? Well, I couldn't see any future, and I had... I suppose he wanted to get married, have children... and at that moment I couldn't give him that."

When the testimonies consider that the cultural dimension comes in between

In our study, cultural differences were identified as the primary cause of relationship breakups in only two cases: those of Charo and Nieves.

Charo, a Spanish woman, had been in relationships with men from various nationalities, including French, Guatemalan, Venezuelan, Moroccan, and Brazilian. During the first interview, she was with a Moroccan man, and by the follow-up interview in 2017, she recounted their breakup. In this case, cultural differences became significant because he struggled to explain their relationship to his social circle, as she was not an Arab woman. Charo explained, "We split up because of something that happened that was to do with... the relationship had already changed a lot but I realized that not even his closest friends knew about our relationship."

Charo's case aligns with many of the elements identified by Lainiala & Säävälä (2013) that can differentiate mixed marriages: age at marriage (younger age correlates with a higher likelihood of separation), age difference between partners (larger differences increase the likelihood of separation), and educational and economic disparities (lower levels increase separation risk). Charo is a declared atheist with a Muslim partner whose religious traditions run deep. She is a teacher and is comfortably off, whereas he has no educational qualifications and insufficient economic resources. She is 25 years older than him and they have few interests in common. His family's strong adherence to Muslim traditions and his own character led him to conceal their relationship. Charo remarked, "I truly believe he loved me deeply, but it's such an unequal relationship!" Despite the social, economic, and cultural disparities, she noted a balance between his youthfulness and the standard of living she provided. This reflection showcases her ability to rationalize and analyze the situation with the perspective gained over time.

Nieves, a Spanish woman married to a Guatemalan man with whom she had a daughter, specifically cited cultural differences as a fundamental reason for their separation. Her narrative illustrates the theory of heterogamy. In the first interview in 2010, Nieves had been living with her husband in Guatemala for seven years. By the 2017 interview, she provided a thoughtful

account of the factors leading to their breakup, primarily his sexist behavior and cultural differences. When discussing their daily life and parenting, cultural differences emerged as a source of tension. Nieves noted, "I felt that I was in a 'machismo' situation, it was a cultural issue that ended up being the subject of tension." Nonetheless, by the second interview, Nieves was in a new romantic relationship with another Guatemalan man.

DISCUSSION

In discussing the interview results, it is crucial to note that while reasons related to "culture" as triggers for couple breakups were in the minority, aligning with Breger and Hill's (1998) or Novara, et al. (2020) observations that differences in "cultural background" are not a significant source of conflict in mixed marriages, the accounts indicate that cultural differences can indeed serve as potent symbols of domination or resentment.

The reasons for the breakup of the interviewees that refer directly or indirectly to cultural aspects were also framed in a hierarchy that varies according to the sociodemographic characteristics of its members, their migratory trajectories and their respective origins. These results reaffirm the concept of "transborder intersectionality" (Crenshaw 1990; Fresnoza-Flot and de Hart 2022) which refers to the understanding that gender, "race," and social class are interconnected.

The interviews with informants revealed that various migration-related factors (such as reasons for migrating, and economic or social instability in the country of origin) can contribute to vulnerability and marital instability, increasing the likelihood of relationship breakups. Additionally, the experience of daily life in a foreign country can leave a lasting impact on individuals, potentially causing them to reconsider their intentions (Hosnedlová 2020: 117). Studies of mixed couples have underscored the importance of maintaining one's own social network, rather than relying solely on a partner's, to reduce feelings of loneliness

and disorientation (Koelet & de Valk 2016). Social networks play a crucial role in social integration (Rodríguez et al. 2014). However, disparities in social class and wealth between the countries of origin and the host country can create unequal power dynamics within the couple. In some instances, the local spouse pressures the immigrant spouse not to associate with their compatriots. This pressure can lead to self-censorship by the foreign partner, who may come to believe they should not mix with "labor or economic" migrants from their own nationality. This occurs because their migration for love is viewed as fundamentally different from economic migration, making such associations seem inappropriate, whether or not influenced by their partner. However, once the couple separates, the immigrant spouse is confronted with the stark realities of a labor immigrant. In numerous instances, following a divorce, the immigrant is left without legal protection and, at times, without the possibility of accessing public services (López 2015, Moret 2021).

Living the daily life experience in a foreign country always has an impact, even when the other spouse comes from a country with similar economic development. Our informant Nelly, a French woman married to a Spanish man, explained that the context of each spouse's country and their initial circumstances influenced the type and stability of their relationship. "I think that's why it's so important that the relationship is based on deep respect and deep love, because the context can damage—or maybe not damage, but change—the way you see that person," Nelly said.

However, the impact of migration is even stronger on individuals from less economically developed countries, potentially altering how they express their personalities, desires, and shared activities (Sportel 2022). For informants who met their future partners online, their courtship was conducted remotely through technology (dating sites, Skype, telephone, WhatsApp, etc.), and one partner subsequently migrated. In these cases, the realization that

"they weren't the person I thought they were" often played a significant role in the distancing or dissolution of the relationship.

In Marisa's case, a Peruvian woman married to a Spanish man, the first three years of her relationship with her future husband, Julián, took place entirely online, without any in-person contact. Like many others, Marisa migrated for love, moving to her partner's country. They settled in a city near Tarragona in northeastern Spain after their marriage. Upon migrating, Marisa missed her family and social network in Peru. This situation highlights the contrast between the idealization of a partner, an imagined love nurtured by distance, and the reality she faced when they began living together (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012, King-O'Riain 2016). Ten years later, when we conducted a follow-up interview, Marisa and Julián had separated. Despite losing her family network, job stability, and status she had in Peru, and having a daughter from a previous marriage, Marisa chose to stay in Spain. She cited cultural and character differences as reasons for their breakup, while avoiding mention of Julián's controlling and macho behavior: "Yes, in some way the culture had an influence, because of the different cultures, but maybe it's not the cultures, it's the characters... [...] maybe here love doesn't matter, does it? For the man, I mean. It's not love that matters, but the desire to... to have sexual needs satisfied, isn't it?".

After their separation, Marisa considered returning to Peru but decided to stay in Spain to find stable employment, and her 17-year-old daughter also preferred to remain in Spain. The idea that life satisfaction is a significant factor in intentional migration (Schiele, 2020) intersects with motivations of love. Marisa explained: "I left everything behind for love. Because I told him: 'look, if you doubt that I love you, well you're wrong because a woman who didn't love you would never cross the ocean and leave everything behind'. Because for me, it was crazy, wasn't it? Having a secure job, because I worked in the education system... I left everything for love, you've got to be really crazy, haven't you?".

In Juanjo's case, a Spanish man who lived in Spain with his Brazilian wife before moving to Brazil for love and eventually returning to Spain after their separation, migration played a role in their breakup. Migration highlighted lifestyle differences, leading to changes in their personalities and a lack of mutual understanding. Although Juanjo came from a wealthier country, the migration process reversed their roles, empowering his partner. Juanjo described: "She started working, picked up her friendships, and felt welcomed again." This upset him both professionally and personally, revealing their incompatible lifestyles. These differences, amplified by their age gap (she was 15 years younger), led him to associate her youthfulness with constant partying. According to Juanjo, the change of context and her regained social capital drove them apart. He did not attribute the breakup to cultural reasons but to changes in their relationship dynamics brought about by migration: "My character changed, her character changed. We had a fantastic relationship in Spain, but there we stopped understanding each other. It was a quick process; a relationship might suffer from wear and tear over the years or routine, but we drifted apart too quickly. You're someone who, well, 'you aren't what I thought you were'." Despite this, Juanjo viewed his migration as an enriching experience and held no resentment against Rachel: "For what I lost by going to Brazil [...] Sometimes you have to weigh up life differently. It was then I became aware of the quality of life we have here, which I hadn't appreciated... but it's true that when I came back, there was that feeling of failure."

After their breakups, more than half of the informants in our sample began relationships with someone of a different nationality. In many cases, these new partners shared the same nationality as their former partners. For instance, Nieves had two Guatemalan partners, Charity had two men from the United Kingdom, Blanca had two Italians, Marita had two men from the Dominican Republic and one Colombian, Valeria had two Brazilians, and Nelly, a French woman, had two Spanish men, as did Sonia, a Peruvian woman. However, it is

important to note that "repeating" the same nationality is not always due to an attraction to the cultural traits associated with that nationality. Instead, it often reflects the "marriage market" available to the immigrant partner after separation, especially when they choose not to return to their country of origin.

Lastly, having children can either trigger a breakup due to disagreements on their upbringing or consolidate the union. This factor, highlighted in various studies (Rodríguez 2004, Aleman & Lana 2013, Gaspar 2022), should be considered in studies on this topic. Among the cases analyzed, three women—Charity, Nieves, and Sonia—had children with the men they separated from. Although children can influence the separation, it is not due to culture shock. In Sonia's case, her daughter seemed to trigger a routine that led to separation. In Marisa and Julián's case, both had children from previous relationships, which Marisa believes played a role in their breakup. They were afraid to have children together, and Julián's frequent visits to his ex-wife's house to see his children possibly contributed to the breakup: " Julián had a son the same age as my daughter and an older daughter. His ex-wife called him for everything, and I always asked him why he went to his old house so much. He would get nervous and angry and didn't want to talk to me. I guess he wanted to see his children."

In summary, although most of our informants stated that the factors leading to their divorces were related to personality traits and typical relationship dynamics, regardless of the individuals' ethnic or cultural-national backgrounds, it is important to recognize that certain issues may sometimes arise from the mixed nature of these relationships. Specifically, their potentially greater heterogamy and the unique type of migration experienced by the foreign partner can be contributing factors.

CONCLUSIONS

The data we obtained allow us to understand certain elements that, for instance, qualify the theory of homogamy/heterogamy by showing that 'cultural distance' is not a central argument in most breakup experiences. However, it does serve, to some extent, as a justification for the reasons behind the breakup or deterioration of the relationship. In couples of the same nationality, breakup reasons are understood within the dynamics of the relationship itself. In mixed couples, however, cultural distance is often used in the social imagination to justify the separation.

We analyze the data and present the results in three dimensions that highlight these nuances. First, we consider reasons that are part of the logic of any intimate relationship, focusing on individual characteristics and personality. Second, we examine the reasons related to “cultural distance” and their perceived importance. Third, we explore the changes implied by migrating for love. Across these aspects, we show that despite having different geopolitical contexts, the influence of diverse values and worldviews within the relationship remains secondary in breakup narratives.

The majority of reports from our informants did not significantly reference the two main points that explain breakups in the theory of homogamy/heterogamy: (a) disagreements on crucial issues such as child-rearing, worldviews, and shared interests or activities, and (b) the influence of external agents (friends and/or relatives) who question the relationship's stability and attribute negative outcomes to cultural differences.

The presence or absence of children was mentioned by our informants as both a trigger for separation and a reason to stay together. The role of children in transnational couples should be further investigated. As Gaspar et al. (2022) suggest, gender roles might be central for decision-making in parenthood during trans-national divorce.

The discursive reality is diverse and plural to the point where the same cultural differences sometimes cited as reasons for separation are, in other cases, seen as an extra motivation to seek a partner of a different nationality, as cultural differences can make the relationship more interesting. The influence of external agents questioning the relationship's stability was only mentioned by Charo, a Spanish woman with a Moroccan partner. Her story frequently referred to the assumption that her partner's family would not accept the relationship due to their different religious affiliations. She explained that her partner always hid the relationship from his social and family circle. However, according to Charo, the decisive element was her being 25 years older than him, which she believes was the difference her partner wanted to hide from his family and friends, not the religious differences.

In most interviews, the factors leading to breakups are related to the dynamics of the couple's relationship and the personalities of the spouses, regardless of their ethnic or cultural-national backgrounds. When cultural factors are mentioned, they are usually seen as secondary reasons for the breakup or as reflections after the separation that reinforce the decision.

However, the interviews also revealed that various migration-related factors—such as reasons for migrating, economic or social instability in the country of origin, and social class or economic wealth—can contribute to vulnerability and marital instability, increasing the likelihood of breakups. Additionally, the separation of binational couples is generally more harmful for the immigrant than for the local partner. In this context, we have observed that, as suggested by the theory of "transborder intersectionality," migration for love highlights the interplay between ethnicized social class and gendered categories.

However, it is important to exercise caution and consider that the shared characteristics and divergent specifics reported by our informants are ultimately influenced by the manner in which they narrate their experiences. This narration is affected by various factors such as their emotions during the interview, their current material living conditions, and their

reflections and analysis after the entire process—from their life with their partner, to the breakup, and the subsequent sexual and emotional experiences post-divorce. This contextual backdrop undoubtedly molds the discourse, rendering it coherent, congruent, and/or plausible, employing various rhetorical strategies. Ultimately, it creates a mosaic where different kinds of 'truths' intertwine. Rather than evoking skepticism about the apparent 'subjectivity' of the narrative, this diversity enriches it, offering a textured portrayal of the plurality and diversity inherent in all human experiences.

REFERENCES

- Amato, P. R. (1999). The Impact of Divorce on Men and Women in India and the United States. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 25, 207-21.
- Alemán, J., & Lana, L. (2013). Las relaciones de poder en parejas multiculturales y sus efectos en el contexto familiar. *Intervención psicoeducativa en la desadaptación social*, 6, 55-67.
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2012). *Amor a distancia*. Paidós.
- Breger, R., & Hill, R. (1998). *Cross-cultural marriage: Identity and choice*. Oxford Berg.
- Charsley, K. (ed.) (2012). *Transnational marriage. New Perspectives from Europe and Beyond*. Routledge.
- Constable, N. (2003). *Romance on a global stage*. University of California Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Darvishpour, M. (1999). Intensified Gender Conflicts Within Iranian Families in Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Woman's studies*, 7(1), 20-33.
- Domínguez, J. (2014). La ruptura de matrimonios entre españoles y extranjeros con menores: Una estadística comparada. *Papers*, 99(2), 213-234.
- Dribe, M., & Lundh, C. (2012). Intermarriage, value context and union dissolution: Sweden 1990–2005. *European Journal of Population*, 28(2), 139–158.
- Durodoye, B. A. (1994). Intermarriage and marital satisfaction. *TCA Journal*, 22(1), 3-9.
- Fahy, D. (2019). Transnational families negotiating migration and care life cycles across nation-state borders, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 1-23.

- Falicov, C. J. (1995). Cross-cultural marriages. *Clinical handbook of couple therapy*, 231-246.
- Feng, Z., Boyle, P., van Ham, M., & Raab, G. M. (2012). Are Mixed-Ethnic Unions More Likely to Dissolve Than Co-Ethnic Unions? New Evidence from Britain. *European Journal of Population*, 1-18.
- Ferreira, A.; Ramos, M., & Gaspar, S. (2016). Marriage and Migration in Portugal: Exploring trends and Patterns of Divorce in Exogamous and Endogamous Couples. In M. Grassi & T. Ferreira (Eds.), *Mobility and Family in Transnational Space* (pp. 79-99). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Fresnoza-Flot, A. (2017). Why do some 'mixed' couples break up? Unequal power relations in the intimate sphere. Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen. <https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/230328/230328pub.pdf?sequence=>
- Fresnoza-Flot, A. (2019). Interacting legal norms and cross-border divorce: stories of Filipino migrant women in the Netherlands. *Migration Letters*, 16(4), 521–529.
- Fresnoza-Flot, A. and de Hart, B. (2022). "Divorce in transnational families: Norms, networks, and intersecting categories." *Population, Space and Place*, 28(5).
- Gaspar, S., Ramos, M., & Ferreira, A. C. (2022). Transnational divorce in binational marriages: The case of Portuguese-Brazilian and Portuguese-Cape Verdean couples. *Population, Space and Place*, 28(5).
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field methods*, 18(1), 59-82.
- Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Marconi, V. C. (2017). Code saturation versus meaning saturation: how many interviews are enough? *Qualitative health research*, 27(4), 591-608.
- Hohmann-Marriott, B.E., & Amato, P.R. (2008). Relationship Quality in Interethnic Marriages and Cohabitations. *Social Forces*, 87, 825 - 855.
- Hosnedlová, R. (2020). El proceso intencional/decisorio migratorio, *EMPIRA. Revista de Metodología de Ciencias Sociales*, 46, 115-145.
- Illouz, E. (2019). *The end of love: A sociology of negative relations*. Oxford University Press.
- Jones, F.L. (1996). Convergence and divergence in ethnic divorce patterns, a research note. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58, 213–218.
- Kalmijn, M., De Graaf, P., & Janssen, J.P. (2005). Intermarriage and the risk of divorce in the Netherlands: the effects of differences in religion and in nationality 1974-94. *Population Studies*, 59(1), 71-85.

- King-O'Riain, R. C. (2016). Enduring or crossing distance for love? Negotiating love and distance in the lives of mixed transnational couples. *Sociological Research Online*, 21(1), 151-160.
- Koelet, S., & de Valk, H. (2016). Social Networks and feelings of social loneliness after migration: The case of European migrants with a native partner in Belgium. *Ethnicities*, 0, 1-21.
- Lainiala, L., & Säävälä, M. (2013). Intercultural marriages and consideration of divorce in Finland: Do value differences matter? *The Population Research Institute*, 4.
- López, J. L. (2015). "Impossible Families": Mixed-Citizenship Status Couples and the Law. *Law & Policy*, 37(1-2), 93-118.
- Maneker, J. S., & Rankin, R. P. 2010. Correlates of marital duration and black-white intermarriage in California. *Journal of Divorce*, 11(2), 51-57.
https://doi.org/10.1300/J279v11n02_04
- Mestries, F. (2013). Los migrantes de retorno ante un futuro incierto. *Sociológica*, 78, 171-212.
- Milewski, N., & Hill, K. (2014). Mixed Marriages in Germany: A High Risk of Divorce for Immigrant-Native Couples. *European Journal of Population*, 30(1), 89-113.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-013-9298-1>
- Moret, J., Andrikopoulos, A. and Dahinden, J. (2021) 'Contesting categories: cross-border marriages from the perspectives of the state, spouses and researchers', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(2), pp. 325-342.
- Neyrand, G., & M'Sili, M. (1998). Mixed couples in contemporary France. Marriage, acquisition of French nationality and divorce. *Population*, 3, 385-416.
- Novara, C., Serio, C., Lavanco, G., Schirizzi, M., & Moscato, G. (2020). Identity, couple and intergroup dynamics in intercultural families: implications on life satisfaction of partners. *Family process*, 59(2), 709-724.
- Nurick, R., & Hak, S. (2019). Transnational Migration and the Involuntary Return of Undocumented Migrants across the Cambodian–Thai Border. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(16), 3123–3140.
- Ortiz, D. (2009). Dinámicas recientes del retorno de colombianos. Aproximaciones a una mirada de género. *Diálogos migrantes*, (4), 4-51.
- Padilla, B. (2013). Género y Migraciones: Nuevas reconfiguraciones y protagonismos de las mujeres latinoamericanas. *Anuario Americanista Europeo*, 11, 1-9.

- Quah, S. E. (2020). *Transnational divorce: Understanding intimacies and inequalities from Singapore*. Routledge.
- Rodríguez, D. (2004). Inmigración y mestizaje hoy. Formación de matrimonios mixtos y familias transnacionales de población africana en Cataluña. *Migraciones*, 16, 77-120.
- Rodríguez, D., Solana, M., Lubbers, M. J., & Luken, V. (2014). Immigració, unions mixtes i integració sociocultural: cap a una anàlisi complexa multi mètode. *Documents d'anàlisi Geogràfica*, 60(3), 627-657.
- Roer-Strier, D., & Ben, D. (2006). Intermarriages between western women and palestinian Men: multidirectional Adaptation Processes. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 41-55.
- Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smith, S., Maas, I., & van Tubergen, F. (2012). Irreconcilable differences? Ethnic intermarriage and divorce in the Netherlands, 1995–2008. *Social Science Research*, 41.
- Sportel, I. (2022). Stories of conflict: Ethnicity, social class, and difference in transnational divorce narratives. *Population, Space and Place*, 28(5).
- Vega, M. (2013). Con la esperanza de volver: mujeresmigrantes de retorno a El Salvador. *Anuario Americanista Europeo*, 11, 165-177.
- Williams, L. (2010). *Global Marriage: Cross-Border Marriage Migration in Global Context*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zhang, Y., & van Hook, J. (2009). Marital dissolution among interracial couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 71(1), 95–107.