



BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Sociology and Social Work

Doctoral School of Sociology

The Double Mourning: Negotiating Selves and Reconstructing Identities in Mixed Marriages. A Case Study of Marital Unions between the Israeli Arab Muslim Husbands and the Post-Soviet Slavic Christian Wives living in Israel

PhD Dissertation

Submitted by: Abeer Jiries.

Scientific Coordinator: Prof. Dan Chiribuca

Cluj - Napoca

2024

A Summary of the PhD Thesis

Table of Contents

1. Keywords of research.....	2
2. Exploring Transnational Marriages in Deeply Divided Societies.....	2
3. Overview of the Work.....	3
4. Research Objectives.....	3
5. Research Questions	4
6. The conceptual framework.....	4
7. Assimilationist Paradigm.....	4
8. Palestine and the Soviet Union are both mourning at the same time	5
9. Findings of the research.....	5
10. Concluding remarks	11
11. References	11

1. Keywords of research

Transnational marriages, Immigration trauma, Hybrid identities, Family dynamics, Cultural adaptation

2. Exploring Transnational Marriages in Deeply Divided Societies

Within the context of Israel's complicated sociopolitical environment, this doctorate thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of transnational marriages that take place between Israeli Arab Muslim males and Slavic Christian women from the Former Soviet Union. The study investigates the subjective experiences, causes, and repercussions of these one-of-a-kind marital relationships. It does so by drawing upon a solid conceptual framework and qualitative research technique.

This thesis is about mixed marriages between Israeli Arab Muslim men and post-Soviet Slavic Christian women. Simply put, this research aims to explore their marital life in Israel through understanding their own experience of life in a country considered a “deeply divided society (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2017). To address the experience of those inter-ethnic, or, better, transnational couples, the research interrogates the classic assimilationist paradigm that has dominated the discourse on mixed marriages for a long time and adopts the poststructuralist

notions of social constructionism of acculturation styles, suggested by Berry (Berry, 2009, 2013, 2017), and of biculturalism and hybridization.

The research in the field of transnational marriages between immigrants and natives has consistently shown that exploring the individual experience and agency enables the researcher to find out how those couples manage to survive even in such divided societies while creating their own vectors by constructing their own identities, e.g. (Conrad, 2014) and (Mac Ginty, 2017). In other words, the studies conducted so far intended to determine the factors affecting either success or failure in such cases.

Furthermore, by going and living through the phenomenology of the individual experiences, the researcher learns to identify, locate, and map the strategies of acculturation that help mixed couples survive and get along in deeply divided societies. Identifying the acculturation styles helps detect and define the determinants of quality and stability of the interethnic (transnational) marriage, whereas examining the strategies whereby the mixed couples manage to sustain their relationships within the intricate familial networks helps understand how the partners negotiate their domestic and international living.

3. Overview of the Work

This work's primary objective is to shed light on the complex dynamics that are present in transnational marriages. These marriages include native men and immigrant wives navigating the overlapping layers of culture, religion, and ethnicity that exist between them. Against the background of Israel's severely divided society, which is marked by entrenched ethnic and religious differences, the study strives to uncover the intricacies of married life within the context of these minority-majority dynamics.

4. Research Objectives

Aligned with the research questions, the objectives of the study are threefold: to delineate the intricate processes of identity negotiation within transnational couples, to explore the coping mechanisms utilized in navigating cultural and religious conflicts, and to analyze the sustainability of these marriages within the broader context of a deeply divided society.

The study highlights the relevance of its location within Israel's highly divided society and the peculiarity of its community, which consists of Arab Muslim men and Slavic Christian wives.

This research is both unique and original. This research offers insight into the potential of transnational couples to build new trajectories and identities despite social differences by putting the focus on individual agency within the context of transnational couples. This understanding is reminiscent of the views expressed by Conrad and Mac Ginty (Conrad, 2014) and (Mac Ginty, 2017).

5. Research Questions

The investigation is directed by a series of in-depth questions that are intended to uncover the decision-making processes that are associated with intermarriage, the adaptation strategies that are used to deal with cultural and religious differences, as well as the reactions of families and society to these unions. Additionally, the research analyzes the parameters impacting the quality and durability of transnational marriages in such a complicated sociocultural context.

6. The conceptual framework

This research is based on social constructionism, and it places an emphasis on the fluidity and contextual character of knowledge. In addition, it makes use of ideas of biculturalism and hybridization in order to provide light on the manner in which people traverse and negotiate different cultural landscapes.

7. Assimilationist Paradigm

The study presents a challenge to the traditional assimilation theories by drawing attention to the multidirectional character of acculturation in a multicultural society (Alba & Nee, 2003). The research advocates for a more nuanced concept of cultural integration, which is in contrast to the idea that cultural integration is a process that only goes one way.

Using qualitative research methodologies, the study conducts in-depth interviews with transnational couples in order to reveal patterns of identity negotiation, coping strategies, and problems that are encountered. The findings match the thoughts expressed by (Lijtmaer, 2022) and (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2017). According to the results, there are different degrees of marital happiness, which are impacted by aspects such as autonomy, power balance, and the parenting of children.

A variety of experiences was exhibited among the couples when they were asked to evaluate the quality and stability of their marriage or relationship. On the other hand, some people

reported feeling gratified contentment, while others voiced deep regret and considered getting a divorce. Frequently, dissatisfied couples mentioned difficulties such as inadequate integration of the wife, difficulties in communicating with one another, and resistance to cultural norms. On the other hand, couples who were content with their relationship had many traits, including the ability to communicate in Arabic and Hebrew, integration into the working world, and the readiness of the spouse to compromise and leave their extended family.

All of the couples had difficulties, such as being rejected by their families, experiencing culture shock, and enduring the pain of migrating. It was common for women to be financially dependent and to endure culture shock, both of which contributed to feelings of isolation and alienation. Some people, on the other hand, saw these difficulties as possibilities for personal development and resiliency, something that is similar to the move from culture shock to culture learning.

There was a wide range of acculturation approaches among the women, and none of them felt completely integrated or gave up their ancestral culture. Self-determination, power dynamics, and a willingness to compromise were all factors that contributed to the quality and stability of marriages despite the difficulties that were present. In general, children's education and the creation of their identities were favorable, and the majority of parents allowed their children to have a "deferred choice" about their religious affiliation and the ethnicity of their partners.

8. Palestine and the Soviet Union are both mourning at the same time

Because of the tremendous changes that were brought about by the fall of the Soviet Union, immigrant spouses were left with a feeling of foreignness and an irreversible sense of change. Their participation in the acculturation process masked the intensity of their grief for their own place. Also, Palestinian identity among Israeli Arabs shows a sense of loss and twofold alienation, with a persistent feeling of homelessness and not belonging. This is because Palestinians are a minority in Israel.

9. Findings of the research

The formation of new ethnic and cultural spaces is facilitated by transnational marriages between Arab Muslim males from Israel and Slavic Christian women from the Former Soviet Union. These marriages contribute to multiculturalism and social mobility. However, the marriage between partners who are struggling with a feeling of "homelessness" may cause them

to become even farther removed from themselves and their ethnic identities. Previous research on acculturation patterns, coping mechanisms, and obstacles in transnational marriages among highly divided nations is bolstered by this study, which also prompts further inquiry into multiculturalism and hybrid identities in a society that is more globalized.

To achieve this purpose, I employed the qualitative paradigm with an emphasis on reflexivity. I used in-depth semi-structured interviews with the initial sample of 24 subjects, remaining with 11 mixed couples of Arab Muslim husbands and Slavic Christian wives from the Former Soviet Union living in various locations of Israel. The majority of the research subjects had met during their academic studies in the Former Soviet Union at the end of the last century, registered their marriage in the USSR's registrar office, and subsequently moved to live in Israel. Each husband and each wife were interviewed individually for the sake of unraveling common patterns and themes and achieving a complementary picture without prior coordination between the sides.

The thematic analysis of the findings was performed using NVivo to organize and visualize large amounts of textual data in an orderly way, thereby highlighting the patterns and ordering data in a faster way in meaningful categories; as new interpretations emerge, it is possible to store and change the data easily. The analysis uncovered the elements related to the quality and stability of mixed marriages, thereby surfacing the determinants for the successful outcomes of transnational marriage.

On the whole, the couples' appraisals of their marriages varied between bitter disappointment and gratifying satisfaction. All the spouses confessed having experienced multiple challenges and difficulties at various stages of their marriage – from indignant rejection by the respective parents to adjustment problems and cultural clashes. While some couples had been considering a divorce, others expressed a substantial degree of satisfaction with their marital life, consisting of a high level of intimacy, fine integration into a local community and a larger society, as well as professional accomplishment.

In terms of Collet's model of three main patterns of strategies employed by mixed couples, one can situate the participants across the continuum between the extreme of adopting the husband's (dominant) culture while renouncing the attributes and practices of her native culture and the quest for balance in relationships through making egalitarian exchanges,

thereby constructing other spaces outside the existent venues (Collet, 2015). The other extreme, wherein the partner belonging to the majority adapts to and adopts the culture of the spouse belonging to the minority spouse, was not present. The invariable request that a wife adapt herself to her husband's cultural space and not vice versa has corroborated Collett's suggestion that mixed marriages between immigrants and natives are inevitably marked by inequality (Collet, 2017).

The partners who were disappointed by their marriage also suffered from a lack of mutual understanding due to language problems, with serious tensions and conflicts between the spouses, mostly around socio-cultural and religious issues, poor socializing with the husbands' family, and children's education. In those couples, both husbands and wives expressed their profound disenchantment and reported a low marriage quality, loneliness, isolation, and overall unhappiness. Quite a few wives felt that their dreams and ambitions had been thwarted. The husbands, in turn, ascribed the failure of their marriage to the irreconcilable cultural differences that prevented the post-Soviet women from seeking a balancing compromise and adjusting to a new reality.

All the female participants, including those who managed to maintain their marriage, suffered from the cultural trauma inflicted by immigration. They were unanimous in describing what they addressed as "culture shock," a collision between the imaginary life during the dating period and the harsh reality after arrival to Israel. All of them voiced a sense of bereavement over the lost home country and conveyed a persistent feeling of nostalgia, expressed in constant ruminations about their past life in the Former Soviet Union, restoring and preserving a "Soviet" ambiance and décor in their homes. Many of them felt alienated from their environment. In their turn, the husbands were disillusioned and discouraged by their women's reluctance to learn the language and accept the local culture, customs, and practices. Some of the husbands explicitly acknowledged the absence of a real bond between them and their wives and described the unbridgeable cultural abyss between them. The findings corroborate Bhugra's claim that culture shock, loss, bereavement, a dissonance between hopes and achievements, as well as lack of acceptance by the host nation - all contribute to the subsequent feelings of rejection and alienation (Bhugra, 2004).

On the other hand, some of the participants viewed the cultural challenges as the possibility to grow and eventually thrive, therefore corroborating Lijtmaer's (Lijtmaer, 2022)

suggestion that the experience of immigration is not only about overcoming hardships but also has the potential to build character and resilience; in her words, this experience may add "flavor, complexity, and adventure to one's life".

Furthermore, their successful coping with the "culture shock" supports Pacheco's (Pacheco, 2020) suggestion for a transition from the culture shock approach to culture learning.

In essence, each partner continued to live in her/his own imaginary space, informed by her/his cultural heritage and collective memories related to it, which had shaped their mindset and worldview. Yet, at times, the ethnic and cultural contents of the partners coincided: the post-Soviet women readily accepted the strict and clear-cut role division on a gender basis, characterizing the Arab society in general and the household in particular. Although the Slavic women from the Former Soviet Union had been raised on the Communist values of equality and communality, they were quite comfortable with the patriarchal cultural consciousness and the division of roles. In addition, the overlap between cultural contents left a space for negotiating roles and strategies of adjustment, which facilitated balance and stability in marriages.

On the other hand, the interviews showed that the initial motivation of the partners was mostly centered on physical attraction and economic considerations on the part of the women who sought to leave the post-Soviet space, ravished by economic crises, political instability, and crime. Those considerations may well have affected the reciprocity between the spouses, thereby making their marital union devoid of commonality and mutual trust; the husbands remained quite suspicious about their wives' ulterior motives, inspired by existing stereotypes about "mercantile and calculated Russian women" which undoubtedly contributed to never-ending tensions between the spouses. However, the spouses who initially had common interests and a vision of marital life or worked together did manage to reach an equilibrium between cultural differences and described their marriage as happy and satisfying.

In accordance with Berry's model of acculturation styles, used as a conceptual framework of reference in this study, the immigrant women had employed either separation or bicultural integration styles; still, none of them felt fully assimilated, nor did they renounce their native culture: all of them had a compelling need for a yearly trip to the homeland to "recharge" their energies. The findings are congenial to Abu-Rayya's conclusions (Abu-Rayya,

2007). Those women who adopted a separation style of acculturation had intermediate scores in terms of well-being. In contrast, those who acculturated by integration while retaining their heritage reported satisfaction: in Abu-Rayya's research, those women displayed the highest degrees of self-esteem and positive affect, as well as marital intimacy and satisfaction. On the other hand, those women who had rejected their husbands' Arab culture from the outset, refusing to adapt to the habits and practices of their environment, also expressed a lower level of mental and emotional well-being.

The ability to acculturate by integration required a significant degree of autonomy and independence from both partners. Indeed, the thematic analysis of the participants' narratives showed that the quality and stability of the transnational marriage were contingent upon:

- **Autonomy: separating and distancing from the in-laws**, as well as from the husband's extended family, resulted in the couple's thriving, especially after making a decision to move from a village to a city or the North of Israel or the more advantaged regions, with more work opportunities and fewer prejudices.
- **Power balancing**: The adaptive abilities of wives and their willingness to acculturate, coupled with husbands' flexibility and willingness to compromise, were additional determinants for marriage quality and stability over the years.

As far as the children's education and resulting ethnic identity were concerned, the respondents claimed that their children were "luckier" than their parents and did not undergo the challenges their parents had to undergo. According to the participants, their children felt quite comfortable about their biculturalism and hybrid identities. Even the parents on the brink of divorce expressed pride and satisfaction with their children's upbringing and results. Most parents granted their children a "deferred choice," in Barbara's terms (Barbara, 1994), on the questions of choosing a religious affiliation as well as romantic partners, although some parents objected to their children's inter-ethnic choices, remembering their own bitter lessons. As this research did not focus on the descendants of transnational marriages, learning about their experiences through the parental narratives, additional studies are needed further to examine the dynamics of biculturalism and hybridization as an outcome for the progeny of mixed marriages.

The Slavic women talked a lot about their homesickness. Although the possibility of traveling home every year constituted a mitigating factor in the women's overall experience of otherness and foreignness, one must remember that the "Soviet Union," wherein they had grown up, did not exist any longer; the familiar social and cultural environment, characteristic of the Soviet epoch was no longer there. The dramatic changes that occurred after the dismantling of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in a complete change of the landscape. In fact, with each new travel back to the Former Soviet Union, the landscape was becoming less and less familiar, exacerbating the sense of foreignness and irreversibility. The women's engagement in the adaptive acculturation process did not leave them enough time to mourn over their past, nor did they have time to accept that their motherland – the Soviet Union – had become a phantom pain, different, unrecognizable, and unfamiliar.

The Arab Muslim men, on the other hand, barely voiced their own homesickness, i.e., the longing for the lost Palestine, which was, however, present by its absence. Palestinians, too, did not have an opportunity to mourn and come to terms with the irreversible past (Lacey, 2011). (Qabaha, 2018) reminds us that Palestinian intellectuals see multiculturalism through the prism of loss and double estrangement; they do not speak in terms of connecting and enriching but rather complain about being torn between countries, cultures, and languages. Thus, multiple identities imply the ultimate detachment from the original birthplace, with no possibility to return. 33% of Israeli Arabs report *no clear self-identification*, with 31 percent and 30 percent viewing themselves as Palestinian, respectively, and only 7 percent of them identifying themselves as both Israeli and Palestinian (Telhami, 2010). These patterns of blurred self-identification, along with hybrid self-definition, reveal what I have defined as a sense of perennial homelessness and not belonging; this sense is pervasive in both immigrant wives' and native husbands' narratives. None of the participants felt entirely "at home," constantly seeking a "place" elsewhere to construct a private familial space informed by individual contents.

As a Christian Arab born and living in Israel, I could "hear" that, despite financial success and impressive property, Arab Muslim husbands continue to experience a deeply ingrained feeling of dispossession. Meeting their wives-to-be while "in exile," studying in foreign universities, hoping to return home one day with a prestigious diploma, was a meeting in the space of "nowhere"; meeting with the women, secularized and internationalized by the fallen Soviet regime, who were also situated in the space of ethnic, cultural, and financial

uncertainty. As I have argued in this study, the double mourning is what constituted the “unsaid” bond between the future spouses, which, in essence, cemented their relationships and, in many cases, helped them stay together despite all the challenges.

10. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the research that is presented in this dissertation is a groundbreaking project that investigated the ups and downs of a transnational marriage that is one of a kind between natives and immigrants in a society that is deeply divided. In this society, both immigrants and natives experience a sense of being inherently homeless while their ethnic and cultural identities are being manipulated "geopolitically." It is possible to summarize the findings of the study as having two distinct conclusions: on the one hand, the mixed marriages that take place between Arab Muslim males from Israel and Slavic Christian women from the Former Soviet Union contribute to the advancement of diversity and social mobility by establishing new ethnocultural spaces. On the other hand, the marriage of two partners who are seen to be "homeless" simply serves to double the gap between them and themselves, and it multiplies the disparity between their cultural and ethnic identities.

While the study confirms and reinforces the conclusions of the previous research on the subject by identifying acculturation styles, coping strategies, and challenges, it also poses deeper psychological and sociological inquiries regarding the value of multiculturalism and hybrid identities in deeply divided societies and further interrogates the autonomous quality of one’s ethnic and cultural identity in a post-modern globalized world.

11. References

- Abu-Rayya, H. M. (2007). Acculturation, Christian religiosity, and psychological and marital well-being among the European wives of Arabs in Israel. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 10*(2), 171-190. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13694670500504901>
- Alba, R. D., & Nee, V. (2003). *Remaking the American mainstream: Assimilation and contemporary immigration*. Harvard University Press.
- Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H. A. (1988). Human systems as linguistic systems: Preliminary and evolving ideas about the implications for clinical theory. *Family process, 27*(4), 371-393. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1988.00371.x>
- Barbara, A. (1994). Mixed marriages. Some key questions. *International Migration (Geneva, Switzerland), 32*(4), 571-586. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.1994.tb00172.x>
- Bernstein, E. A. (2015). *The adult children of intermarriage: Memory, identity, narrative and performance*. Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, School of Graduate Studies.
- Berry, J. W. (2009). A critique of critical acculturation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 33*(5), 361-371. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.06.003>

- Berry, J. W. (2013). Research on multiculturalism in Canada. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37(6), 663-675. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.09.005>
- Berry, J. W. (2017). Theories and models of acculturation. *The Oxford handbook of acculturation and health*, 15-28.
- Bhugra, D. (2004). Migration and mental health. *Acta psychiatrica scandinavica*, 109(4), 243-258. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0001-690X.2003.00246.x>
- Collet, B. (2015). From intermarriage to conjugal mixedness: Theoretical considerations illustrated by empirical data in France. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 662(1), 129-147. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/000271621559538>
- Collet, B. (2017). "Conjugal mixedness" or how to study marital norms and inequalities in interethnic relationships. *Studia Migracyjne-Przegląd Polonijny*, 43(4 (166)), 143-161.
- Conrad, H. K. (2014). *A thorn in the eye: Bosnian mixed-ethnicity families in a polarized land*. University of California, Los Angeles.
- Fogiel-Bijaoui, S. (2017). A rising tide? Mixed families in Israel. In (Vol. 36, pp. 103-123): Taylor & Francis.
- Gergen, M. M., & Gergen, K. J. (2016). *Playing with purpose: Adventures in performative social science*. Routledge.
- Lacey, D. (2011). The role of humiliation in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict in Gaza. *Psychology & Society*, 4(1), 76-92.
- Leavy, K. E. I. S. a. P. (2008). *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical Examinations, in Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Lijtmaer, R. M. (2022). Social trauma, nostalgia and mourning in the immigration experience. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 82(2), 305-319.
- Mac Ginty, R. (2017). Everyday social practices and boundary-making in deeply divided societies. *Civil Wars*, 19(1), 4-25. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2017.1343410>
- Pacheco, E.-M. (2020). Culture learning theory and globalization: Reconceptualizing culture shock for modern cross-cultural sojourners. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 58, 100801. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2020.100801>
- Qabaha, A. R. (2018). *Exile and expatriation in modern American and Palestinian writing*. Springer.
- Qian, Z., & Lichter, D. T. (2007). Social boundaries and marital assimilation: Interpreting trends in racial and ethnic intermarriage. *American Sociological Review*, 72(1), 68-94.
- Telhami, S. (2010). Israeli Arab/Palestinian Public Opinion Survey. *Washington, DC: Brookings Institution*. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/israeli_arab_powerpoint.pdf. Tessler, MA (1977). *Israel's Arabs and the Palestinian problem*. *Middle East Journal*, 31(3), 313-329.