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## **Relationship satisfaction of European binational couples in the Netherlands**

### **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 uninational 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.

### **Keywords:**

Relationship satisfaction, Binational union formation, Intra-European mobility, European integration, The Netherlands

### **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 considerable enlarged (Haandrikman, 2014; Niedomysl, 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, 2013; 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 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.

## **Background and previous research**

### *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.

*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, Moum, & 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 & Melz, 2004). Furthermore, it has been reported that individuals opting for cohabitation without marriage expectations or plans are often less committed or attached to their relationships (Nock, 1995; Tai et al., 2014), which can in turn explain differences with married couples concerning relationship satisfaction. In addition, the expectation of marriage may result in greater relationship satisfaction among cohabiters who may then subjectively perceive the union as a more ‘secure, long-term and less normatively sanctioned’ partnership (Tai et al., 2014: 76). Nonetheless, it has also been suggested that attitudes towards cohabitation moderate discrepancies in happiness: where cohabitation is socially accepted and institutionalised, differences are less pronounced or even reversed (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009;

Tai et al., 2014; Vanassche, Swicegood, & Matthijs, 2013; Wiik et al., 2012). Whereas in the Netherlands cohabitation is socially accepted and institutionalised (i.e. formally recognised), we still expect to find lower levels of relationship satisfaction among cohabiting versus married individuals given the fact that cohabiting partners might be less committed and attached to their relationship.

#### *Couple characteristics influencing relationship satisfaction*

For the United States, it has been shown that interethnic couples are often less educated and have lower incomes compared to same-ethnic couples (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008). These background characteristics also impact on their happiness in a relationship (Fincham & Beach, 2010). With the absence of financial constraints, higher-income couples might experience less stress in their relationship, dispose of a broader budget for leisure time activities, and have more possibilities for contracting ‘resources that help resolve conflicts, such as couples therapy or housecleaning services’ (Hardie, Geist, & Lucas, 2014: 729). Furthermore, gender differences are also reported. Married women in full-time employment, for example, report lower levels of general happiness (Treas, van der Lippe, & Tai, 2011), and men in full-time employment show to be happier compared to those who do not have a regular job (Lee & Ono, 2012; Vanassche et al., 2013). In addition, the employment status of an individual’s partner also plays an important role for satisfaction with a relationship. For example, men show to feel happier when their partner stays at home, whereas for women the opposite effect has been detected (Tai et al., 2014; Vanassche et al., 2013).

Having children also shows to play a role. An abundant body of research concluded that the presence of children at home reduces relationship/marital happiness and satisfaction (Brown & Booth, 1996; Brown, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2006; Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Glenn & McLanahan, 1982; Lawrence, Rothman,

Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008; Mitnick, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2009; Sinning & Worner, 2010; Tai et al., 2014; Wendorf, Lucas, Imamoğlu, Weisfeld, & Weisfeld, 2011; Wiik et al., 2009). This reduction in relationship satisfaction has been attributed to the redistribution of roles and responsibilities in the household that follows the birth of a child (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Dew & Wilcox, 2011). This seems to be especially true for women engaged in full-time employment, who report lower levels of wellbeing compared to working fathers (Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005). The presence of children might complicate binational or intercultural partnerships even more, as partners can hold different perspectives on childbearing and rearing (Negy & Snyder, 2000; Usita & Poulsen, 2003).

Relationship satisfaction also shows to be affected by relationship duration. Whereas some studies did not find a correlation between relationship duration and satisfaction (Theiss, Estlein, & Weber, 2013), the vast majority of studies concluded that there is a higher probability of being satisfied in earlier phases of partnerships (Nock, 1995; Stafford et al., 2004; Teichner & Farnden-Lyster, 1997; Wiik et al., 2009) and that marital happiness declines over time (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001; Wendorf et al., 2011). Umberson et al. (2005: 504) showed, however, that this is partly attributable to the effect of growing older, as age shows to be ‘more strongly and consistently associated with relationship quality than marital duration’.

Finally, age differences between partners can also influence relationship satisfaction. Several studies indicated that the greater the age difference between both partners – generally exceeding five years –, the higher the probability a partnership ends in a dissolution (Cao, Fragnière, Gauthier, Sapin, & Widmer, 2010; Mäenpää & Jalovaara, 2014). Furthermore, relationship satisfaction also showed to be correlated with age differences between partners (Wiik et al., 2009). The greater the age difference between both partners, the higher the likelihood they hold different expectations and perspectives on the union, as ‘each



generation's experience of life leads to different values and expectations' (Strong & Cohen, 2014: 285). Lower levels of relationship satisfaction among heterogeneous couples in terms of age can thus result from this generational gap.

## **Method**

### *Data and sample*

The analyses are based on the EUMARR survey data. This international research project collected data between 2010 and 2012. The project aimed to measure trends in binational marriages between citizens of the European Union and examined the extent to which European mixed couples have a different lifestyle and worldview. The research project was not limited to marriages, but also included cohabitation as unmarried cohabitation is preferred by 27.6 per cent of binational couples in the Netherlands. The survey was directed towards men and women forming part of a European binational couple, as well as a control group of individuals in a uninational (Dutch) relationship. Binational couples were defined as couples consisting of two partners of a different nationality.

The data was collected through an online questionnaire in two major Dutch cities: The Hague and Amsterdam. Couples were sampled through the municipal population register GBA (Gemeentelijke BasisAdministratie) of both cities, as in this register, for each individual registered at an address the first- and surname, birth date, place and country of birth, nationality, information on parents and children, and marital status is recorded. For each sampled address that fulfilled the sampling criteria (including specific European nationalities and age range), one person in the couple was randomly chosen as our (potential) respondent. This could be either the European or Dutch partner in the couple. Finally, a control group of uni-national Dutch couples that fulfilled the age range of the sampling design was randomly sampled as well. The two biggest binational groups were the Dutch-German and the Dutch-

UK couples, followed by Dutch-French, Dutch-Belgian, Dutch-Spanish and Dutch-Italian couples, which is in line with the overall composition of European binational couples in the Netherlands. Ninety-three per cent of the respondents completed the questionnaire online. The remainder used the paper questionnaire that was sent to them on request. Respondents could answer the questionnaire in three languages: Dutch, English and French. The overall response rate was 37.1 per cent ( $n = 946$ ), which is in line with response rate levels of this type of surveys in the Netherlands (e.g. Groenewold, 2008; Groenewold & Lessard-Phillips, 2012), as well as across Europe (e.g. Feskens, Hox, Lensvelt-Mulders, & Schmeets, 2006). The surveyed men and women and their partners were all aged between 30 and 45 years, with an average age of 38.9 years. This age criterion was applied for securing a homogeneous sample including respondents who started their unions in a unified Europe where the abolishment of internal borders started to be effective, in line with the overall aim of the EUMARR-project. The under age limit was established as this is the age when most young adults have entered a stable union with a partner. Including younger respondents in the sampling frame would have covered many who have not yet started a union and/or joint household with their partner. We filtered respondents with a non-European first nationality out, as well as respondents that were not eligible because they accidentally did not fit the age-criterion of 30-45. As a result, the final sample for our analyses consists of 898 cases.

*Dependent variable: Relationship satisfaction*

We used an often used indicator of relationship satisfaction. Respondents were asked the following question: ‘Overall, how would you describe your relationship with your partner/spouse?’, with an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10 (0 = *not good at all*, 10 = *very good*). This single 11-point measure is frequently used for assessing marital satisfaction (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Stafford et al., 2004; see for example Tai et al., 2014; and Wiik et

al., 2012). There is a very low percentage of respondents that responded on the low ends of the scale, which logically reflects attrition of unhappy relationship through dissolution (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). Furthermore, negative skewing is rather the rule than exception in satisfaction research (Diener & Fujita, 1995). We take this into account in our analytic strategy.

### *Independent variables*

As we aim at comparing Dutch-EU couples and Dutch couples, we constructed two dummy variables, distinguishing the three different combinations of our sample (Dutch – Dutch / Dutch – EU / EU – Dutch). The distinction between Dutch nationals that partnered with an EU-national (Dutch-EU) and EU-nationals that partnered a Dutch national (EU-Dutch) is made as there might exist differences between both groups in terms of relationship satisfaction. The Dutch nationals that partnered an EU-national, for example, are still exposed on a daily basis to the dynamics of their home country outside the household, potentially influencing their reported relationship satisfaction. The Dutch national couples are used as the reference category, as they were defined as the control group in the research design. Exploring the correlation between couple type and satisfaction, a significant correlation is detected ( $F(2,877) = 6.34, p \leq .01$ ).

Based on the literature review, several variables representing current union characteristics were included. First, we constructed two dummy variables representing marital status, distinguishing between three groups of respondents, namely those who are married, those who married after a period of cohabitation, and those who are cohabiting. The last group is used as the reference category. Second, we included a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent has children with their current partner (0 = *no children*, 1 = *children*). Third, a measure on social support was included, more specifically a restricted sumscore five-

point Likert scale based on five statements that measured available support from family and friends in the Netherlands. These five statements were ‘There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems’, ‘There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems’, ‘There are many people I can trust completely’, ‘There are enough people I feel close to’, and ‘I can call on my friends whenever I need them’ (1 = *No!*, 5 = *Yes!*). Fourth, we included a continuous indicator of relationship duration (in years). Lastly, we included a dichotomous variable on age heterogamy (0 = *0-4 years difference*, 1 = *5 years difference or more*). We considered other cut-off points, such as 3 and 7 years, as well. However, these other codings did not change the obtained results.

#### *Control variables*

First, gender is included as a dichotomous variable (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*). Second, we used two variables capturing the occupational status of both the respondent and her/his partner (0 = *unemployed*, 1 = *employed*). Third, as we did not have reliable information on respondents’ household income, we included the subjectively assessed social position of respondents in the Netherlands, based on the question ‘When you consider your household income from all sources and the wealth you and your partner may have accumulated, could you tell on which step you would place yourself’, ranging from 0 to 10 (0 = *lowest level*, 10 = *highest level*). Fourth, we included respondents’ education as well as their partners’ education, measured by an ordinal level variable ranging from 1 to 9 (1 = *less than primary*, 9 = *doctoral or equivalent*). We recoded this variable into three categories, based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011), namely a low (ISCED level 0-4), medium (ISCED level 5-6) and highly (ISCED level 7-8) educated group. The three categories were transformed into two dummy variables, with the low education group as the reference category.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Our analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we compared the variables of interest across the uninational and binational couples. Second, a stepwise ordinary least squares regression analysis was conducted, with relationship satisfaction as our dependent variable. Given the skewed nature of our dependent variable, violating the assumption of normality, our analysis is based on robust estimations. More specifically, we applied bootstrapping to the regression estimations. The bootstrap method provides estimates of the standard error, confidence intervals and distributions if the normality assumption does not hold. Although the method is relatively easy to implement today, it is still computationally intensive (Hammarstedt & Shukur, 2006: 299). The number of bootstrap samples used in our study is 5000. At stage one, we introduced the dummy variables on the respondent's relationship. At stage two, we add the union characteristics. The control variables are introduced at stage three. Finally, we ran various models including interaction effects. Bivariate correlations between variables were examined and only weak correlations between the independent variables were found. Subsequently, we tested for multicollinearity diagnostic statistics. Acceptable tolerance (ranging from .368 to .915) and VIF values (ranging from 1.087 to 2.721) indicated no multicollinearity between the variables.

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics on our sample and dependent and independent variables are presented in table 1, revealing that most respondents are satisfied with their relationship, with a mean score over all groups of 8.78. The mean duration of partnerships ranges from 11.72 for the binational to 13.06 years for the uninational group. Most respondents report rather high levels of social support, reflected in a mean score of 4.01 for the binational, and 4.22 for the

uninational group. Furthermore, the subjectively assessed social position of our respondents in Dutch society has an overall mean score of 6.86 for all groups. It can also be observed that the vast majority of our respondents first cohabited with their partners before engaging in marriage. Considering age heterogamy, only one quarter of respondents differs five years or more. In addition, the vast majority of respondents have children, are employed and have a medium to high level of education, as well as their partners.

In a subsequent step, we compared the mean scores of uninational and binational couples, revealing significant differences between the groups on the measures of relationship duration ( $F(1, 886) = 11.09, p \leq .001$ ), social support ( $F(1, 842) = 11.25, p \leq .001$ ), and social position in society ( $F(1, 824) = 7.56, p \leq .01$ ). Compared to their counterparts in uninational unions, the surveyed individuals in binational relationships are involved in relationships that were on average 1.4 years shorter at the time of surveying, show to have less social support, and they generally assess their subjective position in society lower. Mann-Whitney tests (exact version) were used to investigate whether any differences between both groups could be detected considering the ordinal variables. This analysis revealed significant differences considering the educational level of the partner ( $U = 62138.00, p \leq .001$ ), with the surveyed individuals in a binational relationship disposing more often of a highly educated partner.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics on Variables Used in the Analysis by Union Type, Mean Scores and Percentages (n = 898).

Variable	Uninational		Binational		Range
	M	SD	M	SD	
Relationship satisfaction	8.75	1.12	8.79	1.41	0 – 10
Relationship duration	13.06	5.52	11.72***	5.05	2 – 29
Social support	4.22	0.72	4.01***	0.83	1 – 5
Social position	7.11	1.27	6.78**	1.52	0 – 10
Variable	%		%		
Marital status					1-3

Married	6.8	8.4	
Cohabitation-Married	69.5	72.2	
Cohabitation	23.6	19.4	
Gender			0-1
Male	45.1	45.4	
Female	54.9	54.6	
Children			0-1
No	18.5	22.2	
Yes	81.5	77.8	
Age Heterogamy			0-1
No	80.8	74.6	
Yes	19.2	25.4	
Employment			0-1
Unemployed	9.1	12.7	
Employed	90.9	87.3	
Employment partner			0-1
Unemployed	12.0	12.0	
Employed	88.0	88.0	
Education			1-3
Low	18.8	16.6	
Medium	35.0	29.7	
High	46.2	53.7	
Education Partner			1-3
Low	25.3	17.9***	
Medium	39.8	33.1***	
High	34.8	49.0***	
<i>n</i>	224	674	

\*\* Difference between uni-national and binational couples is statistically significant at  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

A stepwise OLS regression analysis with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable is presented in table 2. The results from the first model, including only the dummy variables on couple type, show that the surveyed EU-nationals in a binational relationship are more satisfied with their relationship compared to Dutch nationals, irrespective of the couple type they are in. Introducing the union characteristics in the second model, this relationship persists. Furthermore, in line with our expectations, cohabiting individuals report less relationship satisfaction compared to those married and those who entered marriage after cohabitation. In addition, having children is negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, and the availability of social support positively. In the third model, we controlled for gender and social position, as well as occupational status and education of both partners.

**Table 2.** Step-wise OLS regression on relationship satisfaction (n = 772).

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Intercept	8.77***	0.80	7.72***	0.31	7.30***	0.45
Couple Type (ref: Dutch-Dutch)						
Dutch-EU	-0.12	0.12	-0.19	0.12	-0.22	0.12
EU-Dutch	0.23*	0.11	0.27**	0.11	0.28**	0.11
Marital status (ref: cohabitation)						
Cohabitation into Marriage			0.50***	0.11	0.48***	0.11
Marriage			0.63***	0.19	0.63***	0.19
Children			-0.45***	0.10	-0.47***	0.10
Social support			0.29***	0.06	0.29***	0.06
Duration relationship			-0.02*	0.01	-0.02	0.01
Age Homogamy			0.01	0.11	0.06	0.11
Gender (ref: male)					-0.03	0.10
Employment Status (ref: unemployed)					-0.06	0.15
Employment Partner (ref: unemployed)					-0.03	0.14
Social position					-0.07*	0.04
Education (ref: low)						
Medium					-0.05	0.17
High					0.07	0.17
Education partner (ref: low)						
Medium					0.02	0.15
High					0.17	0.15
$R^2$	.01		.10		.12	
$F$ change for $R^2$	5.38**		12.00***		1.72	

*Note:* Reported values are bootstrapped coefficients based on 5000 bootstrap samples, with standard errors between parentheses.

\*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .



The previous found effects remain in this model as well. Net of the controls, the surveyed EU-nationals scored 0.28 higher on the satisfaction scale compared to individuals in a Dutch-Dutch relationship. Cohabitors who entered marriage scored 0.48 and married people 0.63 higher on the satisfaction scale compared to cohabiting couples. The combined independent variables account for 12 per cent of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

In a final analytic step, we investigated potential interaction effects. For these analyses, we used again bootstrapping based on 5000 bootstrap samples, and all analyses are controlled for the variables listed in table 2. First, we investigated the interaction between couple type and marriage status. Second, we looked into the interaction between couple type and having children. Third, we investigated the interaction between couple type and social support, as the descriptive statistics showed that individuals in binational relationships dispose of less social support in the Netherlands. Fourth, a three-way interaction between couple type, social support and having children was included as the need for social support might become especially pressing when couples start to extend their family. For this interaction, the social support measure was inversed, with the highest score indicating lowest support received. Fifth, we looked into the interaction between couple type and gender. Sixth, based on the reviewed literature, we investigated the interaction between gender and employment. Seventh, we investigated the interaction between gender and employment of the partner, as it can be expected that women place higher emphasis on the employment status of their partner. And lastly, we investigated the three-way interaction between gender, employment and children, as it can be expected such combination will lead to lower levels of relationship satisfaction for women.

The interaction analyses only revealed that individuals with children in binational unions are less satisfied with their relationship compared to their counterparts in Dutch-Dutch unions ( $B = -0.48$ ,  $SE B = 0.25$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). This correlation, however, is only statistically

significant for Dutch individuals in a binational partnership. All other interactions terms in the analyses did not prove statistically significant (results can be obtained from the first author on request).

## **Discussion**

The vast majority of research into relationship satisfaction of couples from different backgrounds has been conducted in the context of the United States, or considered unions between natives and individuals originating from relatively distant (non-European) cultures. In this paper, we aimed to advance our knowledge on relationship satisfaction among mixed couples by extending the focus towards European binational couples. Relying on a unique dataset on European binational couples in the Netherlands, we intended to advance scientific understanding in three ways. First, we examined whether relationship satisfaction differs between binational and uninational couples. Second, we explored whether any differences between married and cohabiting individuals could be detected. Finally, we investigated couple characteristics that might affect relationship satisfaction.

The results revealed that EU-nationals in a binational union report higher relationship satisfaction compared to individuals in a uninational union. Interestingly, Dutch nationals in a binational relationship did not report higher satisfaction levels compared to those in uninational unions. Albeit statistically not significant, these individuals report even lower satisfaction levels compared with individuals in a uninational relationship when controlling for confounding factors. The findings on EU-nationals are thus in line with the strand of academic literature that concluded that individuals in mixed marriages report higher levels of relationship satisfaction, whereas those on the native Dutch are in line with the literature suggesting that no differences exist between mixed and non-mixed couples. This satisfaction gap can potentially be explained by the specific profile and experiences of intra-EU movers.

After all, compared to the local population, migrants have been reported to have a different personality profile characterised, for example, by different attachment styles (Polek, Van Oudenhoven, & Berge, 2011), higher achievement and power motivation, and lower affiliation motivation and family centrality (Boneva & Frieze, 2001). Therefore, compared to Dutch nationals, EU-nationals in binational unions might be more inclined towards the seek of novelty and attraction to difference, exemplified by their relocation to the Netherlands. Moreover, intra-EU movers are continuously exposed to difference because of living abroad, whereas for Dutch nationals in a mixed union such exposure might remain limited to the private sphere. Furthermore, it is possible that Dutch nationals in mixed partnerships receive more negative feedback on their relationship from ‘third parties’ such as family, friends and community members, altering their levels of relationship satisfaction. Although statistically not significant, the negative coefficient in the comparison between Dutch-EU and Dutch-Dutch couples potentially points in this direction. In addition, research showed that migration can increase happiness (Nowok, van Ham, Findlay, & Gayle, 2013), and that personal well-being is connected with relationship satisfaction as well (Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). As such, the reported higher relationship satisfaction of EU-nationals can be connected to their migration trajectory too. The fact that we did not find such satisfaction gap between Dutch individuals in binational and uninational partnerships supports this idea.

A complementary explanation, however, can derived also based on theories of cultural distance. Unfortunately, we were not able to take cross-national variation in relationship satisfaction into account, as the sample sizes per European nationality were insufficient. However, an exploratory one-way independent ANOVA, whereby we grouped nationalities in larger European regions, revealed that the Dutch respondents do not significantly differ from Eastern European respondents, but they do report significantly lower relationship satisfaction

compared to respondents from Great Britain, North-Western Europe and Southern Europe ( $F(4, 875) = 2.94, p < .05$ ). Therefore, diverging cultural links and practices across Europe, as well as possibly differing attitudes towards marriage, family and gender roles might also play a role. Future studies could shed light on this issue that is highly relevant also in terms of European solidarity. In any case our findings point to the influence of place, personal history and personality on relationship satisfaction.

Our analyses strongly support previous research, indicating that married couples as well as couples that enter marriage after a period of cohabitation are more satisfied with their relationships compared to cohabiting couples. This holds both for uni- and binational couples. This could indicate that both unions are qualitatively different. After all, it has been amply demonstrated that cohabiters are less attached and committed to their relationships. Marriage, in contrast, might be perceived as a more durable union, providing a feeling of security on long-term commitment on part of both partners. Furthermore, higher relationship satisfaction of married individuals could also be the result of ‘the norms and values associated with the institution of marriage: not only the wedding ceremony but also several rituals and practices remain reserved for marriage’ (Wiik et al., 2012: 396).

Investigating which couple characteristics are related to relationship satisfaction, our analyses showed that particularly the presence of children is negatively, and the availability of social support positively related to reported levels of relationship satisfaction. Our analysis shows, in general, that the presence of children in the household is connected to lower relationship satisfaction, which might be attributed to changing roles and responsibilities in the household after childbirth. Furthermore, investigating the interaction effect of couple status with children, our analysis revealed that individuals in binational unions with children are less happy compared to those in unibinational relationships. This shows to be especially true for native individuals in such partnerships. For binational unions, having children might thus

be even more challenging compared to the native population. This could be explained by possible conflicts concerning the visions on and attitudes towards childbearing and rearing in binational relationships. Furthermore, the fact that this correlation is only statistically significant for native people in binational partnerships can possibly be explained by a comparison mechanism. Native people in binational relationships might compare their childbearing/rearing practices with those of surrounding family and friends and perceive differences. It is also possible that they receive more negative feedback from their family and friends on the way they raise their children, if they consider such practices deviant from the general 'Dutch' norm. EU-partners might be less exposed to such negative due to the geographical distance with their relatives and friends in the home-country.

Although our study revealed interesting insights into the dynamics of binational unions, it is important to consider some of its limitations as well. First, we relied on self-reported data of only one partner. As a result, we lack important information of the partner that might affect relationship happiness. Future research would benefit from couple-level data allowing to examine the relationships histories and background characteristics of both partners. Second, regrettably our analysis was limited to the single-country case of the Netherlands because of data limitations. Nevertheless, future analyses could take into account EU couples living in other European countries, as well as EU-EU dyads, who were not captured by our research design. Such analysis would also provide the possibility of taking into account differences in general wellbeing levels between European countries, as marital quality and subjective well-being show to be related (Proulx et al., 2007). In addition, analyses comparing EU and non-EU nationals in a binational union with a European native might also reveal interesting insights in the specific profile of intra-European migrants. Third, our data only allowed to use a single indicator for relationship satisfaction. More diverse measures of this concept, such as the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT, see Locke & Wallace,

1959) or the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Hendrick, 1988), however, should be used in future research for improving our understanding of relationship dynamics among mixed couples in Europe. Finally, we only disposed of cross-sectional data, which does not allow us to map changes in relationship satisfaction over time. Such longitudinal analysis, however, would be highly relevant for grasping how specific life events such as the birth of children or relocation to another state or country influence relationship satisfaction of binational unions. In addition, studies whereby both partners are situated within a wider network of social relationships also have the potential to untangle how relationship satisfaction is embedded within a wider web of social relations.

Despite these limitations, we showed that relationship satisfaction is influenced by a variety of factors. It is interesting, however, to observe that all explained variance refers to social relationships, transgressing the boundaries of the romantic relationship as well. The presence of children, for example, is negatively related to relationship satisfaction, and the availability of social support from the wider familial and friendship network positively. Our study thus adds more generally to the literature by showing that not only interpersonal dynamics *within* the relationship are related to relationship satisfaction, but that the embeddedness of individuals in their broader social environments is important as well. Relationships with others *outside* the romantic relationship are important as well for relationship satisfaction. Finally, this idea is also supported by the observation that socio-economic variables such as employment status of the interviewed individual and his/her partner, or educational level, which are often a solid ground for explaining a variety of social dynamics, did not show significant in the presented models.

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