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Functioning of Polish Women in Binational Relationships—An Outline of the Issue against the Background of Migration in the Interpreted Paradigm

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to describe the functioning of Polish women living in Britain and the USA who have entered into formal or informal relationships with foreigners. The analysis of the literature has shown that research which helps to understand the specifics of how binational relationships work is still scarce, so researchers are encouraged to conduct more studies in this area. The analyses presented here are based on individual semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted among 21 women (N = 21). The research has shown, among other things, that the migration of Polish women is strongly correlated with living conditions and the economic situation in the country. The stories of the women interviewed about leaving Poland clearly show the changes in migration patterns developing in the 21st century.

Keywords: women; migration; cultural differences; binational couples



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1. Introduction

Binational relationships are relationships entered into by citizens of two different countries. They are heterogeneous in terms of nationality, race, and/or religion of the partners. Other terms found in the literature include “bicultural”, “biethnic”, and “interethnic” couples. In a binational couple, at least one partner is an immigrant in the country where the marriage was entered into. Partners in binational relationships act as intermediaries between different cultures for each other and their family members; each partner gains access to the history, traditions of social norms, and consumption habits of the country from which their partner comes. If the couple lives in the home country of one of the partners, knowledge of the cultural context becomes especially important for the immigrant spouse [1]. Entering into relationships with people from other cultural groups can be explained in the light of status exchange theory, according to which, individuals seek partners who will consolidate or improve their social status. However, according to homogamy theory, partners choose each other based on similarities in ethnicity, race, religion, education, and interests. In the context of binational pairs, status homogamy directly indicates the degree to which members of two different social groups accept each other as equals in a hierarchical society [2]. The popularity of binational unions and marriages has only begun to rise in recent decades, as a result of the general increase in mobility due to migration and the development of new information and communication technologies, especially in countries with large immigrant populations [3]. Marriages between representatives of different social backgrounds are regarded as one of the best indicators of integration, and also as a manifestation of the disappearance of social distance [4]. The literature on binational couples focuses primarily on aspects such as integration processes, identity, and relationships in such unions; gender relations, power, or visibility of mixed couples. Research on binational couples comes mainly from the conventional immigration countries, such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, and from Northern and Central European countries, primarily Great Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands [5].

Nowadays, in addition to studies on formal relationships, there are also new studies on cohabitation relationships and friendships between members of minorities and the host society [4]. In this paper we would like to present the perspective of Polish women who have emigrated to England and the U.S.A. and who have entered into formal or informal relationships with foreigners. Emigration, as one of the key elements of the biography of the examined women, serves as a background to the discussed experiences.

1.1. Background and Previous Research

Issues related to mixed marriages are an interdisciplinary area of many scholarly studies. Research on marital selection is considered in the context of several trends. They relate to the demographics, which is concerned with knowing the criteria, patterns of marital selection, and the laws that govern the marriage market [4]. Binational couples, or binational marriages, are not easy, and can often lead to various conflicts [6]. Conflict occurrence in such relationships

“is high and tensions between their members stem from different styles of communication, languages, religious practices, level of adaptation of the migrating partner, social networks, cultural differences in parental styles, social roles and gender practices, habits and traditions” [7] (p. 6).

Nahikari Irastarza states that due to cultural differences, binational couples are more likely to divorce or separate than couples in which both partners come from the same country [8]. Additionally, as Sofia Gaspar points out, marriage between two European Union citizens is much simpler because it does not require being subjected to legal and security procedures that apply to non-EU or non-European spouses. Furthermore, unions formed by two nationals of member states are more likely based on personal motives, such as love and affection, rather than the legal and economic factors that may be implicit in other types of mixed marriages [3].

Studies on mixed marriages mainly focus on the difficult nature of intercultural relationships and adaptation strategies of migrant spouses [9–12] and as N. Irostash notes:

“appeal to cultural differences to explain the higher divorce rates of binational couples but they omit the potential effect of migration or that of environmental factors such as immigration policies and attitudes towards migration and intermarriage” [8] (p. 649).

Currently, an increasing number of researchers see cross-border love as a transformative space where original forms of dialogue are constructed and different social identities are shared, in an individual context [3,13]. Mixed couples become valuable cases to study and illustrate the dynamics of cosmopolitanism and globalization at the micro level.

The reasons for entering into relationships with foreigners include, primarily, the feeling of loneliness, the need for help or the need to start a family, the emerging feelings of love between two people [10,14–17], as well as the feeling that the person met is the one and only right person with whom you want to spend the rest of your life. In the case of minorities who are discriminated against or rejected, the “Romeo and Juliet complex” may be relevant, where love is more intense when the partner is discriminated against because of their background, or their legal or social situation is unstable [15]. It also happens that the marriage is somehow forced by the birth of a child and the desire to provide him or her with appropriate conditions for proper development, including the presence of two parents. When entering into a relationship with a representative of another nationality, the selection criterion is also based on emotional and psychological factors, which include character, similar views, physical appearance, country of origin, and religion. Just as in any relationship or marriage, it is especially important for mixed couples to accept and understand each other and be able to compromise and give way to the other person. Numerous differences in cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and daily lifestyles present additional obstacles and difficulties in a relationship with a person of another nationality [18]. Moreover, as research has shown, having children, counterintuitively, does not solidify such a relationship, but rather

reduces the level of happiness and satisfaction achieved in the union [19–21]. However, it is worth noting that “the marital stability of binational couples can be affected not only bicultural factors but also by the migration and environmental factors” [8] (p. 650).

1.2. Context of Migration and Binational Relationship by Polish Women

In Poland, the formation of binational couples and marriages is a demographic and social phenomenon and is the result of a high cross-border mobility of Poles. In the 1980s, migration was a rather rare phenomenon for Polish citizens, and couples or marriages formed with foreigners were very random [22], this situation has now changed dramatically due to Poland’s political transformation and alliance and community relations. Undoubtedly, we can distinguish several periods in the history of Poland that contributed to the surge in migration and intercultural relationships entered into by Polish citizens. The first such period was the fall of the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) on 19 December 1989. The second was Poland’s accession to the European Union on 1 May 2004. The EU countries, due to their closer geographic location, have become more competitive with the United States and Canada, which were immensely popular destinations in earlier years. Despite this, the U.S. has become a fixture in Polish migration history and U.S. citizens are among Poland’s favorite nations. Additionally, Poles make up one of the five largest ethnic groups in the U.S. alongside German, Irish, British, and Italian citizens [23]. Since Poland’s accession to the European Union, mass emigrations of Poles to the United Kingdom have begun. According to the British Office for National Statistics, there are currently about 1 million Poles living in the U.K. [4]. Still open is the question regarding the situation on 11 November 2019, when visas for Poles to the U.S. were abolished, and how Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union will translate into the directions of Polish migration and relationships. The analysis of migration trends indicates that Poland is transforming from a typical emigration country into an emigration–immigration country [24].

It is estimated that currently about 2.3 million Poles stay abroad for longer than 3 months, while about 80% of those 2.3 million Poles live abroad long-term, i.e., for more than one year [25]. At the end of 2020, about 2,239,000 permanent residents of our country were temporarily living outside Poland. About 1,973,000 people were staying in Europe, most of them—about 1,339,000—resided in EU member states. Among the EU countries, the largest number of Polish emigrants lived in Germany, the Netherlands, and Ireland. The main reason why Poles go abroad is the desire to find employment. Among persons whose departure abroad was reported in municipal population registers, the group comprising 30–39-year-olds was most numerous in 2020. In contrast, 10 years earlier it was the group made up of 20–29-year-olds. Therefore, it can be assumed that a significant number of people who went abroad in the first years after Poland’s accession to the EU have remained abroad until now [26]. In 2019, women accounted for 50.5% of permanent emigrants, with Italy (66.3% of emigrants were women) and Germany (52.9%) being the dominant destinations. Among emigrants going to the Netherlands (49.5%), Ireland (48.8%), and the United Kingdom (46.3%), less than half were women. Among those emigrating to Canada and the U.S. in 2019, women accounted for 52.9% and 50.4%, respectively [24].

Long-term stay abroad leads to a change in the migrant’s life situation and forces him/her to establish new interpersonal relations with other migrants and citizens of the host countries. It can, therefore, be presumed—especially given the fact that the majority of this population is relatively young—that many formal and informal relationships of Polish citizens have been formed outside Poland. Migrations, not only the definitive ones (and therefore intended to be permanent), but also temporary ones, lead to the meeting of people from different countries and to the formation of longer, intimate relationships between them, often ending with the decision to get married [25].

Since 1996 Polish Central Statistical Office has been collecting data on unions of Polish men and women with citizens of foreign countries. However, it should be remembered that marriage licenses and censuses do not reflect the full scale of this phenomenon (it is impossible to determine more accurately the number of migrants and the number of informal

unions). The number of binational marriages between Poles and foreigners accounts for a small (about 1–2%) portion of all registered unions [27]. In 2019, 5900 marriages between Poles and foreigners were registered [28]. Most binational marriages are those by Polish women with residents of other countries (on average, Polish women marry foreigners three times more often than Polish men marry foreigners). However, the number of Polish binational marriages cannot be reduced to their less than a few percent share in the total number of marriages registered in Poland. There are at least one million “Polish” binational marriages abroad. Every year 3–4 times more of such mixed marriages are registered abroad than in Poland [25,29], which means that nearly 20,000 more such marriages should be included in the statistics.

The research conducted so far, showing from which countries the partners of Polish citizens come most often, features a high variability of regions [30–34]. These results confirm the variability in the migration directions of Polish women and men. The most noticeable tendency is the easier travel around Europe, which has contributed to the diminished importance of the areas in the Central and Eastern Europe, both in terms of the direction of migration and attracting partners from these regions. As far as the nationality of the spouses is concerned, among the total number of binational marriages the dominant type of unions are still marriages of Polish women to inhabitants of Western Europe and unions of Polish men to citizens of former Soviet Union countries [25,35]. Polish women and men are attractive for citizens of exotic countries (e.g., Vietnam, Armenia, Nigeria) because such a relationship may come with the right to obtain a permanent residence permit in Poland and in European countries, and while the Polish partner market has expanded significantly over the past few decades, Americans are still valued partners because of the mental and cultural proximity. Research shows that Polish women often seek to marry foreigners from economically stable countries in order to raise their social and material status [4,25,34,35].

1.3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the experience of Polish women living outside of Poland who entered into formal or informal relationships with foreigners. To this end, a qualitative research methodology was adopted as an exploratory tool. Through this exploration of Polish women’s experience, the study sought to understand how subjects understood and interpreted the societal reality they lived in.

2. Materials and Methods

The research presented in this paper is qualitative, following the tenets of social constructivism, and thus operating with idiographic explanations. This approach stems from the exploratory purpose of the research, which was to capture “how the subjects understand and interpret the social reality in which they live” [36] (p. 8). The research uses a case-study method. The strong point of this method is the frequently asked questions, beginning with “how” and “why” [37], which are relevant to understanding the phenomenon under study. Obtaining answers to these questions facilitates a better understanding of complex situations [38], which in this context concerns the issue of how binational relationships work. At the same time, the case study method examines phenomena in their actual context, especially when “the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly visible” [39] (p. 2), and also considers “major competing interpretations” [40] (p. 24). The research used an individual semi-structured in-depth interview, conducted with prepared general dispositions, during which we tried to understand the world from the point of view of the female respondents in order to develop a sense of their experiences, and to uncover the world they experience prior to scientific explanation [41].

2.1. Participants

Given the purpose of this research, purposive sampling was used, “defined as the selection of subjects (e.g., individuals, groups, or institutions) for specific purposes related to answering the research questions posed” [42] (p. 77), using snowball sampling, which is

a non-random selection of respondents for a research sample [43]. This type of selection method often acts as an efficient chain and is very helpful when conducting large-scale studies in populations that are difficult for the researcher to access. Twenty-one women (N = 21), between the age of 24 and 40, participated in the study. The average length of time the female respondents had been living in exile was 6 years. The study group varied by type of formalization, length of relationship, and nationality of the partner. The dominant types of unions were informal relationships (14 couples), in which couples had been together for 2 to 5 years (17), had no children (15), and were not racially diverse (18). In 5 cases, the partner was not from England or the US. All couples communicate with each other in English, while Polish women who have children speak to them in Polish. The demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants’ demographics.

Participant(s)	Age	Relationship Experience	Partner’s Nationality	Kids	Type of Relationship	Place of Residence
Participant 1	25	3	American	no	Informal	USA
Participant 2	24	4	Spanish	no	Informal	USA
Participant 3	22	1	American	no	Informal	USA
Participant 4	26	4.5	American	yes	Informal	USA
Participant 5	27	5	Indian	yes	Informal	USA
Participant 6	20	2	American	no	Informal	USA
Participant 7	24	2.5	American	no	Informal	USA
Participant 8	27	4	American	no	Informal	USA
Participant 9	29	3	American	no	Informal	USA
Participant 10	29	3	American	no	Informal	USA
Participant 11	31	6	American	no	formal	USA
Participant 12	26	3	American	no	informal	USA
Participant 13	40	7	American	yes	formal	USA
Participant 14	36	5	American	yes	formal	USA
Participant 15	22	4	Briton	yes	informal	UK
Participant 16	27	4	Briton	no	formal	UK
Participant 17	23	2	Briton	no	informal	UK
Participant 18	33	5	Turk	yes	formal	UK
Participant 19	31	4	Briton	no	formal	UK
Participant 20	36	5	Italian	no	formal	UK
Participant 21	22	1.5	Nigerian	no	Informal	UK

2.2. Interview Procedures

The interviews had the format of a spontaneous and free expression of thoughts, during which respondents were minimally guided to specific narrative topics in order to deepen the themes addressed. The questions addressed to the respondents were open-ended. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and then transcribed. During the research process the so-called ad hoc notes were created on an ongoing basis, which served as an aid in grouping the obtained data, combining them into broader categories, and also determining the basis for interpretation of the identified phenomena [44]. In accordance with APA Ethical Guidelines for Research [45] women received *Women Consent Forms* with information about the purpose of the study, the procedure, voluntary participation, privacy

and confidentiality, and risks (there were no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life). Each interview lasted from 40 to 50 min.

The following aspects were referred to in the interview:

1. Motivations that prompted the respondents to leave the country.
2. Decision to enter into a relationship with a foreigner—expectations and concerns of respondents.
3. The most difficult elements of functioning in a mixed relationship.
4. Reconciliation by couples or a conflict of two different cultures and traditions, e.g., during holidays.

2.3. Analysis

In accordance with the assumptions of Miles and Huberman, the data were segregated into particular problematic categories (motivations that prompted the respondents to leave the country, the most difficult elements of functioning in a mixed relationship, reconciliation or conflict of two different cultures and traditions) and within those categories particular problems, contexts of perceived reality, as identified by the respondents, were defined. Based on these, preliminary claims were made about the slice of reality studied [46] women’s functioning in binational relationships. A two-step process was adopted to analyze the data obtained, where firstly, an internal case analysis was performed, during which each case underwent a comprehensive and exhaustive reconstruction [37]. Secondly, a cross-case analysis of the collected cases was conducted, which involved looking for leading thematic issues that emerged from the collected biographies. The analyses presented here are the result of subjecting the received statements to structural description and division into coherent segments (problem fields). This meant that in the analyses presented here, not all the statements received were recalled from the interviewed Poles, but only those that most closely fit the scope of the information sought. As envisioned by Uwe Flick [46], sampling extended to the research findings presentation stage. The aim was not so much to know and understand an individual case, but to help understand the problematic functioning of Polish women in a particular social space.

3. Results

Based on the analysis, three major themes emerged, which include: (a) Emigration-related expectations and experiences of living abroad; (b) Relationship with a foreign partner; (c) Cultural difference and the functioning of mixed couples. These themes emerged out of the significant overlap in responses, which all pointed to similar ideas while still retaining individualistic views (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Main Themes and Subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
Emigration-related expectations and experiences of living abroad	Financial expectations Fascination with a new culture The perception of the host country as one with greater prospects
Relationship with a foreign partner	Loneliness Love Fascination
Cultural differences and the functioning of mixed couples	The positives and negatives of a relationship Tensions in a relationship Biases

3.1. Emigration-Related Expectations and Experiences of Living Abroad

Most of the respondents began their emigration adventure during their high school or college years, while on vacation trips to visit family, or as part of youth exchange programs. The motivations cited most often referred to the desire to see the “big world”,

and experience a “different life” while at the same time being able to bolster one’s budget. Only four respondents migrated purely for work (respondents had previous migration experience from other countries), while one respondent followed her partner to England. Respondents decided on long-term migration most often as a result of a combination of the following factors: difficulty in finding a job or lack of job prospects in Poland, low wages and the possibility to take up employment abroad, and having migrant friends satisfied with life in the destination country or having family there:

The prospects were such that I could work (in Poland—author) in a restaurant, in some fast-food place, so when the possibility of working as an Au Pair appeared . . . of course I decided to go for it . . . I bought a plane ticket and off I went . . . It was simply a tempting offer (Participant 1)

When Karolina (a friend of the respondent—author) told me about earnings in the U.S., it was an impulse to act, and later it was difficult for me to switch from the reality in California to the Polish reality (. . .) In The Netherlands I was picking strawberries so it was nothing special, now I work in a hotel, I have contact with people, I do not suffer from sunburn (laughs). The American Dream (Participant 3)

After the initial difficulties associated with adaptation (confusion and fear and language problems), most respondents (16) experienced a phase of fascination associated with discovering a new culture and adjusting to the living conditions in the host country. Only one respondent planned to return to Poland in the future. Other respondents were satisfied with their position at work, felt acclimated to the local community, and often had a relationship with an American or an Englishman, which dismissed or negated any thoughts of re-emigration:

I think I have fully acclimatized to this country. I feel safe here, I have more opportunities for professional development, and I do not feel the need to return to Poland. (Participant 17)

I miss my family but not the place they live in. I think if I could get them all here, it wouldn’t be a problem . . . Poland didn’t offer any opportunities. (Participant 12)

At this stage, the respondents also stressed that “life is easier here” (14 respondents), “it is better than in Poland” (6) and people are more open (5).

3.2. Relationship with a Foreign Partner

The respondents most often met their partners at work (13) or through friends (4). From the respondents’ accounts, it is possible to identify several types of motivations that led them to engage in a relationship with a person of a different nationality:

Loneliness

You know how it is when you leave, you are alone and here you have someone close to you after all, I live far away from my family, you need this close relationship, something different than work relationship, a personal bond. I think it was a kind of substitute for my mom, my dad, all those people close to me (Participant 3)

Love

It wasn’t a decision to have a relationship with a foreigner, but with a person, it wasn’t important, he was just a cool guy (Participant 1)

When I met him, I felt that he complemented me (Participant 5)

I don’t think it was a matter of some deep thinking, the heart was stronger than any thoughts and reason (laughs) (Participant 12)

Fascination with otherness

As I said before, I had always dreamed of it and fell in love with him so I decided to take the risk even though I knew it might not work out. I've always been a thrill-seeker, looking for something new, something different from the people around me. (Participant 18)

There is something exotic about such relationships, there is something different (. . .) with my husband we learn something new about each other every day (Participant 13).

Such a cultural mishmash, it is both difficult and cool, when you combine these two cultures something new and cool is created, but it is not always easy (Participant 4)

One respondent decided to have this relationship as a result of becoming pregnant.

What Polish women value in foreign partners, regardless of their nationality, is being responsible (18), giving a sense of security (11), and understanding (10), and among the disadvantages, they mention excessive commitment to work, often at the expense of family (6), less often messiness, lack of punctuality, or jealousy. The majority of respondents (15) report that they and their partner run a household as equal partners.

We have a very collaborative, partner-like approach, we share responsibilities, I clean the rooms, Marco does the dishes, but usually when I ask him to do something he does it without many complaints (Participant 12).

My husband cooks and I clean, or vice versa, so there is a division of responsibilities (Participant 13)

The traditional model is pursued by women who have decided to give up a professional career to raise children (5) or who work at home (4). The majority of families (16) approached their daughters' partners with reservation, fearing the language barrier and the general sense of otherness. The initial reluctance often passed when the family realized that the relationship was not a short-term fling (5 respondents):

The family did not accept our relationship at first. My parents advised me against marrying my husband, but after getting to know him and visiting him a few times in Poland, they have a positive attitude towards him, and I think they believe our relationship will survive (Participant 21)

The respondents themselves declare that they are comfortable in contacts with their partners' families, believing that this is mainly due to a different mentality and greater openness of the nations from which these partners come.

3.3. Cultural Differences and the Functioning of Mixed Couples

On the one hand, exogamy provides mixed couples with a perspective of integration and various habits and traditions, which can make life more fascinating and enhanced with emotions [47]. However, apart from fascination of cultural differences, national or religious diversity in such relationships can result in a need for everyday negotiations when creating a common model of living [48]. Constant clashing of cultures is quite a burden for marriage and family life as well as a serious source of conflicts and tensions.

Pros and cons of being in a mixed relationship

Binational relationships undoubtedly have many advantages: a person learns tolerance, can get to know the language, another culture (12):

Another advantage is learning about the culture, real, in-depth learning, and seeing everything from two points of view. (Participant 2)

According to the respondents, the word "compromise" (18) has a special meaning for such couples:

The advantage of being in a bicultural relationship is that you have to master the art of compromise, I don't see any particular disadvantages. You just have to stop thinking of it as a mixed relationship. It's a relationship between two people and that's it, because if we try to justify every fight we have because someone is from another country, it doesn't make sense anymore. (Participant 1)

As the most burdensome barriers, respondents listed language difficulties first (11), followed by religious differences (5), and temperamental differences (4):

Sometimes there is a problem with communication, I want something, he does not understand or vice versa and there can be some clashes . . . but not always, sometimes it is interesting and funny (Participant 14).

Linguistic misunderstandings can have unpleasant consequences (Participant 3).

For us, the hardest part is reconciling religious issues. Because we are both believers and practicing believers (Participant 18).

And the disadvantages are the quarrels that are dictated by the different temperaments, because Spaniards are very loud (Participant 2).

In most relationships there is a daily intermingling of cultures, traditions, and customs. According to the respondents, in the case of relationships between Polish women and Americans or Europeans, cultural differences may cause tensions, but they are not so great that they negatively affect the relationship:

The religion is the same, the traditions are quite similar, so we don't have viewpoints quite different from each other, there is no big problem with that. (Participant 1)

The most difficult thing is that we have different customs, our culture is different, and it is deeply rooted in us, and everyone tries to pull the other to their side. Everyone would like to celebrate as they are taught, but most of the time we manage to reconcile different approaches, for example, on Christmas Eve I eat fish and Marco eats his turkey. (Participant 12)

In only one case did religious differences cause strong tensions:

When it comes to religion in my relationship, biases are confirmed [. . .]. The holiday season is always a sad time for me because my husband does not want to participate in the festivities in any way. For him, this is a normal day. I, on the other hand, try to take a positive approach to his holidays (Ramadan). (Participant 18)

With the exception of two respondents, both Polish women and their partners were enthusiastic about learning each other's customs and traditions typical of their cultures. Polish women have taken a liking to the 4th of July holiday (10), its joyful and, in contrast to the Polish Independence Day, not very pathetic character, and to certain eating habits, such as having lunch. Their partners, on the other hand, are eager to adopt typically Polish traditions connected with holidays: sharing the wafer, sprinkling water on Easter Monday (*śmigus-dyngus*), and painting Easter eggs. In the case of mixed partners, knowledge about the other culture is acquired faster and more intensively than in other migrant groups. The level of communicative competence of the foreign partner also increases, as a result of the constant confrontation with both the foreign language and culture at levels that are less or not at all accessible to other migrant groups. However, even such intense contact with a foreign language and culture does not preclude barriers or tensions.

Biases

Respondents were asked if they had ever faced prejudice about being in a binational relationship. Most of the respondents declared that they had not experienced a bad reception of their relationship, while those respondents who had faced prejudice talked about behaviors from compatriots:

When friends here in the UK heard that I married a British man, it was usually pointed out that I did it for the money (Participant 15).

In my neighborhood (in Poland—authors) I was said to be with my partner for citizenship (Participant 11).

When my boyfriend and I came to Poland for Christmas, I heard on the streets that he was asphalt, coon, monkey (Participant 21).

A friend didn't give me a wedding gift because she said I was about to get divorced anyway (Participant 18).

While the rise in the number of mixed couples may suggest that the prejudice against such unions is fading, research shows that mixed couples, especially interracial couples, still elicit disgust and antisocial reactions from the society [49].

4. Discussion

In this article, we aimed to advance our knowledge on relationship satisfaction among mixed couples by focusing on Polish women in binational relationships. Migrations being dynamic and diverse phenomena are one of the most important and, at the same time, most common socio-economic phenomena in the world. They foster the formation of mixed couples and contribute to a more liberal view of them. The stories of the women interviewed about leaving Poland reflect the changes in migration patterns developing in the 21st century. Apart from economic migrations, there are also cognitive migrations, related to tourism and curiosity about the world, educational migrations (improving language skills), and investment migrations, aimed at capitalizing on individual projects, such as buying your first car or paying for university tuition with the money saved [50]. It can also be seen that the migration of Polish women is strongly correlated with living conditions and the economic situation in the country.

Both the United States and the United Kingdom are countries of great cultural diversity. For generations, the U.S. has been luring migrants with the myth of freedom, equal opportunities, and the possibility of rapidly improving economic status and a higher standard of living [51]. This myth can be clearly visible in the statements of female respondents in phrases like “a different life” and “the American dream.” The United Kingdom, on the other hand, takes the first place in the statistics of Polish migration within Europe, mainly due to a strong currency, territorial proximity, and lower travel costs. Those emigrating to the U.K. are also primarily hoping to improve their economic situation and raise their standard of living. Interestingly, J. Fomina's research shows that Poles are more open to interactions with the English, that is, members of the host society, than they are interested in building ties with other Polish immigrants [52]. However, it is noteworthy that many of the women we surveyed left the country at a very young age, many of them had incomplete education, lacked professional experience, and had not participated in the labor market before, which may expose migrant women to the risk of abuse [53], make it difficult to regulate the migration status, or cause dependence on the partner for at least the first few years [54]. It can be assumed that getting married/entering into a relationship with men from more developed Western societies is a way for Polish migrant women to achieve a kind of social mobility [55].

Despite the different cultural backgrounds, the women interviewed did not notice significant differences in the expectations of family functioning and structure, or roles assigned to women and men in the two countries. Their relationships seem to be characterized by mutual tolerance for their partner's cultural differences, although the respondents emphasize the need to negotiate solutions related to living together on a daily basis. Research conducted by Buler and Pustulka has shown that the attitudes of spouses towards gender and gender stereotypes shape the degree of cultural diffusion in interethnic couples formed by Polish women. According to the researchers, the adoption of specific social roles in personal and family life is less related to ethnicity, and to a greater extent reflects the previous preferences of migrant women for the traditional or egalitarian model. Therefore,

migrant women remain key actors in maintaining or rejecting Polish heritage and practices in everyday life, deciding on the degree and shape of intra-family cultural diffusion [55].

Such couples are more likely to have conflicts based on different habits and cultural differences. They result mainly from the partners' upbringing in different cultures, the experience of migration, the need to develop a model of the relationship, contacts with the community, and the perception of exogamous relationships by the society. Research shows that while being in a binational relationship alone is not a significant predictor of divorce, factors such as religion, family values, and family perceptions of the relationship are significantly related to the stability of a binational marriage. Moreover, being in a relationship in which both partners were born abroad reduces the risk of divorce of such a marriage [56]. Research conducted by Van Mol and de Valk shows that people who are in binational relationships report higher satisfaction with relationships compared to other types of marriages. Importantly, the reported satisfaction was related to the status of the relationship (married people were more satisfied than those living in cohabitation) and the social support experienced. On the other hand, having children was negatively associated with the reported satisfaction, which suggests that the presence of children poses a challenge for binational couples [57].

5. Conclusions

This research—like most that relate to binational relationships [58]—addresses the concepts of intercultural marriage [59], intercultural relationship [60], intercultural marriage [61], and/or bi-cultural partnership [62]. Mixed couples face not only the difficulties of cultural differences, but also the social pressures on them. The analysis of the literature showed that the studies on the understanding of the specifics of the functioning of binational relationships are still scarce; therefore, it is postulated that more researchers conduct studies in this area. Moreover, most studies focus on interethnic marriages, neglecting other forms of formal and informal unions, such as cohabitation. It is noted that forms of binational relationships have become increasingly common and relevant in Europe [63].

6. Limitations

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 regarding one of the partners, which might affect the perspective on relationship happiness. Future research would benefit from couple-level data allowing for the examination of relationship histories and background characteristics of both partners. Secondly, within the framework of a qualitative approach, we did not intend to discover any “ultimate truth”—neither about reality, nor about people, nor about the phenomenon we were studying. Thirdly, in studies such as this one, based on deliberate sampling, the generalizations are not valid. The image of the studied phenomenon that emerges from the analyses is fragmentary and refers to the observations of merely twenty-one respondents. The results of the study are not representative of any whole population, nor can they be generalized; the knowledge obtained concerns merely the analyzed phenomenon in the specific context and it cannot be “transferred” [64].

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