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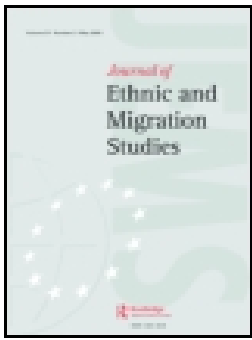
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The bi-directional impact of a mixed union. People without a migration background in a union with a partner with a migration background

Maurice Crul ^a, Frans Lelie ^a and Miri Song^b

^aSociology Department, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands; ^bSchool of Social Policy, Sociology, and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

ABSTRACT

Of the BaM respondents in a relation, no less than a quarter is in a mixed union. We still know very little about the non-migrant partner in unions with a partner with a migration background, including their propensity to adopt the cultural practices of their partner, and their propensity to reach out and embrace ethnic diversity more generally. The growth of intimate relationships between people with and without a migration background in majority minority cities in Europe provides an opportunity to explore the attitudes and experiences of non-migrant individuals in interethnic unions, and what such unions may portend for the wider society. This article makes a critical contribution to the general debate on the assimilation paradigm, which predicts ‘a whitening’ of norms and practices in mixed unions. We will use the BaM data to investigate the potential bi-directional effect of being in a mixed union. Does a mixed union, as assimilation scholars argue, primarily have a whitening impact on the minority partner, or is there also a potential diversifying impact upon the other partner?

KEYWORDS

Mixed unions; intermarriage; assimilation; whitening hypothesis; superdiversity

1. Introduction

Intermarriage has been an important topic in the field of migration and ethnic studies in relation to the academic debate on assimilation and integration. Some have argued that the degree of intermarriage is the ultimate litmus test of groups being integrated into society (Alba and Nee 2003; Kalmijn 1998), while others have been more sceptical about intermarriage being such a reliable indicator of assimilation or integration (Song 2009; Rodríguez-García 2015). Surprisingly little research has been conducted on how a union with a partner with a migration background affects the social circle and the norms and behaviours of the partner without a migration background. By turning the lens towards the people without migration background, like we do in this special issue, we are able to analyse the potential bi-directional impact of being in a mixed union (Vasquez-Tokos 2014).

CONTACT Maurice Crul  m.r.j.crul@vu.nl

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The core idea of the grand assimilation theories, as well as new and segmented assimilation theory, is that over time the people with a migration background change and become similar to the dominant ethnic majority group in a society. There is an assumption in assimilation theory that the confrontation of cultural norms and behaviours in a mixed union result in change in one direction only. This implicitly indicates a hierarchical ordering of norms and behaviours, placing one partner's norms and behaviours above the other. We question the presumed dominance of the norms and behaviours of the ethnic majority group in mixed unions. We argue that the assumption of the uni-directional impact and the presumed dominance of 'white' norms and behaviours in assimilation theory should be tested empirically.

We therefore propose to look, next to what in the literature on mixed unions is called the 'whitening hypothesis' (Vasquez-Tokos 2014), at what we would call the 'diversifying hypothesis' regarding to people without migration background in mixed unions.

The assumption that minority people who marry majority people – White people in the case of the United States and North Western Europe – effectively become 'White' and value 'whiteness' is based on the idea of assimilation pressure. Assimilation theory (and its variants) assume that migrants gradually shed their ethnic distinctiveness, as they become less culturally dissimilar from mainstream society (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).¹

But is assimilation pressure still working to the same extent in the highly diverse environment of today's cities? Part of the reasoning of assimilation scholars about the uni-directional impact of a majority culture (and hence the integration of the minority partner) stems from the idea that numbers and power count. If a small minority group lives among a large majority group, in a situation where that group is dominant, assimilation pressure can be assumed to be big. However, in many cities around the world the historically dominant ethnic group is becoming a numerical minority locally (Crul et al. 2023). Newly arriving migrants and their children will primarily live their daily lives with other migrants and their descendants. Members of the historically dominant ethnic group in the cities also live in an environment where their group's dominance and power are no longer so obvious. In such situations, where a diversity of cultural norms and behaviours is present, the social norms of the historically dominant ethnic group are no longer the unquestioned standard. In majority minority contexts, where every ethnic group is now a minority, assimilation pressures might be more multi-directional. For people without migration background there might be a potential push (pressure or attractiveness) toward a social norm that emphasises a diversity of cultural norms and behaviours.

To test this empirically, we have focused on majority minority neighbourhoods in six European cities under research in the ERC funded *Becoming a Minority (BaM)* project (Crul et al. 2023). BaM was executed in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Malmö, Rotterdam and Vienna; all but Hamburg also have a majority minority composition at the city level. In general, we find that many people without migration background living in such highly diverse places, regardless of possible positive attitudes towards diversity, in their practice show little appetite for the diversity around them. They, for instance, have very few close friends with a migration background and they often choose schools for their children that are not representative of the diversity of their

neighbourhoods. They seem not to adapt, at least not actively, to the increased diversity around them.

In this article we concentrate on a particularly interesting subgroup among the BaM respondents: People without migration background in a mixed union. In the BaM research, a mixed union refers to a couple in which one spouse or partner has a migration background, i.e. is not born in the survey country (1st generation), and or has one or both parents not born in the survey country (2nd generation), and the other, the BaM respondent, does not have a migration background. This subgroup consists of people who are, in an intimate manner, interacting with diversity. We found that one in four people without migration background in a partnership, living in a majority minority neighbourhood, are in a mixed union. This makes the potential impact of this group considerable. Given the demographic of young people in these cities, where now less than 1 in 3 people under age 15 has two parents born in the survey country, we can also expect the group in mixed unions to grow. The social practices and the attitudes of people without migration background in mixed unions should therefore be investigated. This group may be influential in shaping the dynamics and interactions of majority minority cities in the future (Crul et al. 2023).

In this article, we will look in particular at these mixed couples' social networks and their adaptation to a diversity of norms and behaviours. We will compare the respondents in mixed unions with those who have a partner without migration background, our control group, and will use the comparison to see if being in a mixed union is associated with a different set of social practices and attitudes. We will use the outcomes to investigate the potential bi-directional effect of being in a mixed union. Does a mixed union, as assimilation scholars argue, primarily have a whitening impact on the minority partner, or is there also a potential diversifying impact upon the other partner? By 'diversifying effect' we mean the opposite of a whitening effect, for instance, when people socialise in an ethnically mixed environment and show openness to other cultural norms and behaviours, which can then result in diminishing the norms and practices of the historically dominant group.

We first provide a short introduction to the literature on mixed unions to place our findings in the context of the ongoing debates about the effects of intermarriage on the societal position of both the migrant and non-migrant partner. Then we briefly introduce our quantitative data gathered in the BaM research project, followed by the empirical findings introduced above. In the final section we will take up the discussion about the one or bi-directional impact of being in a mixed union and the potential whitening or diversifying impact of mixed unions.

2. Literature overview on intermarriage

2.1. How do we define and measure intermarriage?

A growing body of research has reported a significant increase in intermarriage and interracial unions in multi-ethnic Western societies, reflecting the greater social acceptance of mixed unions² in many societies (Pew 2015; Kalmijn 1998; Osanami Törnngren, Irastorza, and Song 2016).³ The cultural diversity generated as a consequence of international migration, and the subsequent settlement of migrants, has

facilitated the unions of people from different sending countries, and with disparate religions and ethnicities.

Studies of mixed unions are not only numerous but varied, and typically employ a range of definitions and measures, making the study of this phenomena challenging (Song 2012; Rodríguez-García 2015; Gaspar 2008). For example, studies of ‘marriage migration’ have tended to focus on cross-border marriages involving people in the Global North and spouses from other countries (see Charsley et al. 2020; Williams 2010; Constable 2004). While much of the North American and UK literature on intermarriage concerns racial and ethnic intermarriage (and interracial unions more generally), studies of intermarriage in Continental Europe have focused more on unions between people with and without migration background (what some call ‘cross border’ unions), or what Koelet and de Valk (2014) refer to as ‘bi-national European marriages’ (and see Schroedter and Rössel 2014). Since ethnic background data is not always available in some European countries (Simon 2015), nationality is sometimes used as a kind of proxy for interethnic unions (Koelet and de Valk 2014; Collet 2015; Irastorza and Elwert 2019; Nandi and Spickard 2014; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012). So, while countries such as the USA mostly commonly use measures of race as the basis of mixed unions, most European countries have used nationality or migration background, given their disavowal of ‘race’, especially in the aftermath of WW2. Yet it is the crossing of perceived ‘visible’ racial boundaries that has been the focus of much scholarship on intermarriage.

2.2. What do mixed unions tell us?

Why has it been important to capture unions that are regarded as interethnic or interracial in particular? First, intermarriage is generally regarded as an indicator of decreasing racial boundaries (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964). In fact, most research on intermarriage has argued that intermarriage is a key barometer of social distance, and the ethnic and racial relations, between majority and minority populations (Kalmijn 1998; Qian and Lichter 2007). If an ethnic minority group, with migrant background, marries, in large numbers, with members of a White majority, this would suggest very little social distance (and reduced prejudice) between the ethnic minority group and the White ethnic group (Gordon 1964). Second, and related to the first point on social distance, intermarriage is regarded as socially significant because it has been seen as the key litmus test of assimilation and integration, as intermarriage is regarded as the end point of an assimilation process (Gordon 1964; Alba and Nee 2003). However, other authors have questioned the assumptions about what intermarriage and ‘integration’ entails for the migrant and/or minority partners (Song 2009; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013; Rodríguez-García 2015; Keskiner 2020). Furthermore, it is debatable whether mixed unions result in integration or vice versa, since their significance is context dependent. The relationship between intermarriage and integration is likely to be multi-directional and segmented (Rodríguez-García 2015).

Representing the dominant view of intermarriage, according to Lichter, Qian, and Tumin (2015):

Intermarriage provides indirect evidence that intergroup boundaries have weakened and increasing shares of the foreign-born population are exposed to natives by living in the

same neighborhoods, attending the same schools, speaking the same language, and sharing the same economic status. Inter-marriage with natives thus represents a clear indicator of social integration of the foreign-born population. Inter-marriage connotes boundary blurring or crossing between population groups (57–58).

Therefore, theorising on inter-marriage has centrally been about its implications for the migrant and/or ethnic minority person. One key implication for the inter-marrying migrant partner is the belief that this person (and the person's ethnic group) is likely to lose ethnic distinctiveness, especially across the generations (Duncan and Trejo 2011; Waters 1990).

A number of factors influence patterns of inter-marriage, including educational attainment, structural factors such as the number of co-ethnics in one's locality (the marriage market), and the degree of social distance between an ethnic minority group vis-à-vis Whites, as this can vary for different groups (Qian and Litcher 2007; Pew 2017). In general, educational attainment is seen as an important determinant of inter-marriage because highly educated minorities have much more contact with Whites in settings such as workplaces and neighbourhoods (Xie & Goyette 2004; Qian and Litcher 2007). Migrants' generational status also influences the propensity to enter into inter-ethnic unions. 'Even the groups that are believed to have the strongest community structures and the strongest norms supporting endogamy appear to be experiencing increasing exogamy in the second generation and in more diverse residential settings' (Muttarak and Heath 2010, 275).

The literature has primarily focused, as shown in this overview, on migrants and minorities who are in mixed unions, often as a key aspect of immigrant adaptation. Much less is known about partners without migration background adapting to the networks and lives of migrant partners and their families and friends, and who are, as a result, more embedded in an ethnically diverse context. In a way, our research focuses on the mirror image of the research discussed above.

2.3. A focus on partners without a migration background

The main theoretical and empirical contribution of this article is that while most studies on mixed unions focus on the migrant partner, we focus on the partner without a migration background. While there are studies on the attitudes of the majority population in European countries towards mixed unions, little is known about those individuals who are actually in such partnerships. Are they somehow different from other individuals without migration background who are not in mixed unions, in terms of their educational attainment, their income, their social network, etcetera? While this paper cannot address this question in depth, it provides an initial investigation into what characteristics are associated with people without migration background in mixed unions in various European majority minority cities.

There is research on White people who are part of racially mixed families, often as parents (see Lazarre 2016). Twine's (2010) study of White mothers of Black/White mixed children in England explores their efforts to foster racial consciousness and 'racial literacy' in their children. Also in Britain, Mackenzie (2012) documents the experiences of White working-class women who are part of racially mixed families; these women typically encounter negative stereotypes for having had Black–White children.

While not the specific focus of the book, Song's (2017) study of multiracial people who are parents (many of whom had White partners) discusses the attitudes and co-parenting experiences of these White partners.

Studies that regard intermarriage (with Whites) for the minority partner tend to presume a whitening effect, but very little is actually known about what happens *after* intermarriage (Song 2021). A focus on partners without migration background provides an opportunity to explore how intermarriage does not necessarily imply a renunciation of the two partners' practices or beliefs (Rodríguez-García 2015). Rather, partners in mixed unions often engage in negotiations about their day to day lives, including decisions about their social networks and the upbringing of their children (Chong 2021; Song 2017). Furthermore, we still know very little about how people in mixed unions within transnational families negotiate not just emotional ties, but also cultural, religious and linguistic practices; conceiving of such unions, reductively, as migrant or dominant, can obscure the negotiations between partners (see King-O'Riain 2016).

In *Marriage Vows*, a qualitative study of Latinx American intra-marriage and intermarriage, Vasquez-Tokos (2017) interviews the White partners of those who had married Latinx people (and see Chong 2021, a study of Asian American intermarriage). By listening to the stories of White partners, Vasquez-Tokos (2017) argues that marriages need to be understood as bi-directional, not just Latinx partners somehow influenced by their White partners. In doing so, she argues against the 'whitening hypothesis' (Vasquez-Tokos 2014; Kim 2008) – that is, the assumption that minority people who marry White people necessarily become White and value Whiteness (Vasquez-Tokos 2014; Song 2021) – as opposed to the possibility that the White partner may adapt to the minority partner's norms and behaviours, cultural practices and social network. Just as Jimenez (2010) elaborated upon the concept of 'affiliative ethnicity', which focused on the 'migration' of White people into the migrant networks of their Latino spouses, Vasquez-Tokos (2017) illuminates what little we know about White people who choose to be in a mixed union.

3. Methodology and general description of mixed union partners

The data for this article comes from the ERC research project *Becoming a Minority (BaM)* and was collected between 2019 and 2020 in majority minority neighbourhoods in six European cities. By majority minority neighbourhood we mean a neighbourhood where there is no longer a numerical majority group. All groups in these neighbourhoods, including the people of native descent, are a numerical minority. We chose this setting because we wanted to look at people without a migration background who live in an ethnically diverse context. For detailed information on the methodology of the BaM research we refer to the introductory chapter of this Special Issue.

We sampled respondents either through the city register or through onomastic sampling. In each city we sampled people in all the majority minority neighbourhoods. People were asked to participate if they, and both their parents, were born in the survey country. In total, 3084 respondents between the age of 25 and 45 years old were in our sample. We specifically chose this age category because in this phase of life, people will often find a partner and start to raise a family, which means that important life choices are made. This includes choices regarding where to live, in which neighbourhood to raise

your children and where to send them to school. Of all the BaM respondents 2022 reported that they are in a relationship with a partner, which is about two thirds of our total sample. About a quarter (545) of the people in a union are in a relationship with a partner with a migration background (either 1st or 2nd generation). Given the fact that most of our respondents do not have a mixed friendship group this is an important group to look at (see also Kraus in this special issue).

In this article, the concept of mixed union is based on the migration background of the partners. A *mixed union* here refers to a couple in which one spouse or partner has a migration background, i.e. is not born in the survey country (1st generation), and or has one or both parents not born in the survey country (2nd generation), and the other does not. This definition of having a migration background, as it is also used by most countries' statistical bureau's, means that mixed unions with third generation partners are not counted. Consequently, there is likely an undercount of mixed unions in our data. If they could also have been included, this would probably have made the distinctions we found between people in mixed unions and those not in a mixed union only larger.

In the BaM survey data we can distinguish between respondents who are in a mixed union with either a migrant (1st generation) or a partner belonging to the second generation (Crul and Vermeulen 2003; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012; Timmerman, Vanderwaeren, and Crul 2003). In total, across the six cities this amounts to 545 respondents who have a partner with a migration background. In the BaM survey data there are 1477 respondents in a union with a partner without migration background.⁴ For instance, a couple may be binational, interethnic and/or interracial, and interreligious, or only some of those (see Caballero, Edwards, and Puthussery 2008). In cases where unions involve a 2nd generation individual and a partner without migration background, cultural differences may not be salient in some couples, while they are for others. We therefore explore this empirically also in this paper (Table 1).

In all six cities, the first-generation partners migrated from all over the world, from both Western and Eastern European countries, from North America, and from a wide range of countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Second generation partners' backgrounds were more often from earlier waves of migration, and their parent (s) more often came from countries where many labour migrants originate, like Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Former Yugoslavia and, in the Netherlands and Belgium, from former colonies like Surinam or Congo.

The distribution of people in a mixed union is shown in Table 2. Malmö is the city with the most mixed couples in the surveyed majority minority neighbourhoods, followed by Rotterdam and Amsterdam. In Antwerp we find the lowest share of interethnic

Table 1. People (25–45-year-old) without migration background who are in a mixed union, living in a majority minority neighbourhood: The partners.

The partner	Migrated to survey country: 1st generation	Born in survey country: 2nd generation
One or both parents with migration background	301	244
Both parents have survey country background	38 (Not in these analyses)	

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 2. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood.

	Partner 1st generation	Partner 2nd generation	Partner without migration background	Total
Amsterdam	18%	11%	71%	290
Antwerp	13%	8%	79%	434
Hamburg	12%	11%	77%	474
Malmö	19%	17%	64%	319
Rotterdam	17%	16%	67%	279
Vienna	13%	12%	75%	226
Total	301	244	1477	2022

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

couples; especially the share of respondents with a partner who is 2nd generation is relatively low, especially given that Antwerp has the largest share of youngsters with a migration background of all six cities: only one in four youngsters under age 18 has two parents born in Belgium.

We will first give some of descriptive findings from the survey in terms of background characteristics like gender, education, income and work.

The gender distribution of the respondents with both the first as well as the second-generation partner is not very different than that of respondents who have a partner without migration background (Table 3).

As it turns out, there are also no significant differences between the three groups when it comes to the educational level of the respondents. About two thirds of the respondents have a BA or an MA diploma. This is close to what the average educational level is among people in the age category 25–45 years old without migration background in the BaM cities (see introductory article of this Special Issue). The percentage of respondents with an MA diploma with a 2nd generation partner (36%) is slightly lower than that of respondents with an MA in a union with a 1st generation partner (41%) (Table 4).

We have less detailed information on the *educational level of the partner*. The data shows that about two third of the couples have similar educational levels, affirming trends toward assortative mating (Blackwell and Lichter 2000; Kalmijn 1998). About forty percent of the couples are both higher educated and in about twenty percent of the couples, neither partner has a higher education diploma. There are more respondents with lower educated migrant partners than the other way around, again there is no difference between men and women (Tables 5a and b).

The income distribution in the three groups is very similar, with one in five households having low incomes and about half enjoying above average incomes (Table 6).

If we look at their distribution in terms of activities, the three groups, again, look very similar. Respondents in a mixed union work in a paid job to the same extent, are a business owner or self-employed to the same extent and, also, are inactive in the labour market to the same extent as respondents in a union with a partner without

Table 3. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Gender.

	Female	Male	Other
Partner without migration background	55%	45%	0.5%
Partner 2nd generation migration background	50%	50%	0.3%
Partner 1st generation migration background	53%	47%	0%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 4. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood with a partner in three categories: Educational level (ISCED codes).

	Isced I Less than lower secondary	Isced II Lower secondary	Isced IIIa Lower upper secondary	Isced IIIb Upper secondary	Isced IV Advanced vocational	Isced Va Lower tertiary BA	Isced Vb Higher tertiary MA	Total
Partner 1st generation	1%	2%	10%	8%	11%	18%	41%	296
Partner 2nd generation	0%	3%	12%	7%	17%	25%	36%	238
Partner without migration background	0%	2%	11%	6%	12%	24%	45%	1449

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

migration background. As a result of their educational level and income levels being very similar, it does not come as a surprise that their housing situation is also very similar across the three groups.

Broadly speaking, there are two main ways that respondents are likely to have met their partner with a migration background. We have a few potential indicators in the survey as to where people might have met. As [Table 7](#) shows, there seems to be a potential correlation between living abroad for a longer time and having a 1st generation partner.

One could imagine that another potential place to meet a partner with a migration background is in post-secondary education and higher education. In particular, international students could form a potential pool of partners. However, we do not see a clear trend that respondents in a mixed union were more often in an educational environment that was indeed more ethnically mixed. The majority of all three groups attended rather ethnically homogeneous educational settings. One has to keep in mind that a lot of the BaM respondents came to the city for work and were enrolled in education in other, less ethnically diverse, places. However, when we look at the subgroup of respondents in mixed unions who were enrolled in *vocational education*, the ethnic diversity among the students in the secondary schools they attended is much more pronounced. About a quarter of them attended a secondary school where half or more of the students were of migrant descent. Such a school potentially could be a context to meet a partner with a migration background. Indeed, people who are with a 2nd generation partner have most often attended such ethnically diverse school contexts.

It is an interesting outcome that, in general, we have found little to no differences between respondents in a mixed union and those who have a partner without migration background. They seem to come from very similar socio-economic backgrounds and also have similar positions in society. With this conclusion as our starting point, in the next

Table 5a. Educational levels of partners in couples where one of the partners is 1st generation.

1st generation partner	Partner No higher education	Partner Higher education
Respondent No higher education	21%	10%
Respondent Higher education	20%	49%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 5b. Educational levels of partners in couples where one of the partners is 2nd generation.

2nd generation partner	Partne No higher education	Partner Higher education
Respondent No higher education	28%	10%
Respondent Higher education	21%	41%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 6. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Household income.

Income	Lowest	Middle	Highest	Total		
Partner 1st generation background	7%	14%	34%	32%	13%	284
Partner 2nd generation migration background	9%	11%	25%	33%	22%	227
Partner no migration background	7%	11%	25%	37%	20%	1358

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

paragraph we will assess if their social network and attitudes towards diversity differ. Interestingly, we find that, although socio-economically they are very much the same, in terms of their social network and attitudes they are very different indeed.

4. The social network and the adaptation to diversity among people without migration background in mixed unions

We analyse the social network and the potential adaptation to a diverse context of people without migration background in a mixed union compared to their peers in a union where neither partner has a migration background. We explore whether there is a bi-directional impact of being in a mixed union and if the union contributes to ‘whitening’ or, what we will call a ‘diversifying effect’ (the acceptance and or adoption of cultural norms and behaviours by the partner without migration background other than of the dominant group). In the case of whitening, we look at assimilation pressure towards norms and behaviours of the historically dominant ethnic group and, in the case of diversifying, we look at openness towards other norms and behaviours.

In [Table 8](#) we start out by looking at the circle of close friends of people without migration background in a mixed union with someone with a migration background compared to those who are not in a mixed union. While living in a majority minority neighbourhood, the majority of that latter group (56%) primarily lives in their own ethnically homogeneous bubble of people without a migration background. When we look at

Table 7. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Living abroad.

	Never lived abroad	Less than 3 months	Between 3 and 6 months	More than 6 months	Total
Partner 1st generation	46%	8%	14%	32%	301
Partner 2nd generation	56%	8%	13%	23%	244
Partner without migration background	60%	7%	14%	19%	1477

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 8. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Circle of close friends.

Close friends with a migration background	Almost nobody	Some	About half	A majority	Almost everybody
Partner 1st generation	23%	44%	23%	8%	2%
Partner 2nd generation	38%	46%	11%	2%	3%
Partner without migration background	56%	36%	7%	1%	0%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

people in a mixed union who have a first-generation partner, the percentage of people who have almost no close friends with a migration background drops by more than half to 23%. People in a mixed union with a second-generation partner are found in between the two other groups with 38%, which is a pattern we will see again. It is clear that there is an association between having a partner with a migration background and having a more diverse circle of friends. It is of course difficult to ascertain the direction of this association.

How should we read this outcome of a being in a mixed union? The assumption of assimilation theory – that the migrant partner is bound to adapt to the partner without a migration background – is at least questionable with this outcome. BaM respondents who have a first-generation partner show an even stronger tendency towards a diverse friendship group. The bi-directional effect we see is that a considerable group of partners without migration background are being ‘diversified’. In the case of the second generation partner the pattern is different. Here there is a considerable group (38%) that has almost no close friends with a migration background. It is likely that the partner with a migration background often has to interact in an environment where he or she is the only person with a migration background. This numerical minority situation could potentially lead to a lot of whitening assimilation pressure.

As it turns out, the idea that mixed unions result in assimilation pressure on the migrant partner is more complex. Because of the usual focus on the partners with a migration background in a mixed union, and their expected assimilation, there tends to be a blind spot regarding the potential reverse process. Our findings show that the potential bi-directional process is not only substantial in nature but almost equally large (Table 8).

If we look at the wider circle of friends (Table 9) the pattern becomes even more pronounced towards ‘diversifying’ than towards ‘whitening’. Almost half of the respondents in a union with a 1st generation partner and about a third of those with a 2nd generation partner have an ethnically mixed friendship group: half or more of their wider circle of friends has a migration background. This seems to suggest that the outcomes we found are indeed related to the partner, and not just to the pre-existing attitudes held by people without migration background before meeting their migrant partner.

But maybe even more interesting than these results, that might be expected based on the connection with the social network of their partner, are the outcomes for other forms of contact with people with a migration background. In Table 10 we show the results for the degree of contact with neighbours with a migration background. The findings again show that the respondents with a 1st generation partner more often have contacts with neighbours with a migration background. Being in a mixed union is clearly associated with more interethnic contacts. We do not know if the contact was initiated by the migrant partner or by the non-migrant partner. However, both options are interesting. In a case where the migrant partner initiated the connection, we see that being in a

Table 9. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Wider circle of friends.

Migration background wider circle of friends	Almost nobody	Some	About half	A majority	Almost everybody
Partner 1st generation	5%	52%	33%	8%	2%
Partner 2nd generation	17%	56%	23%	3%	1%
Partner without migration background	22%	65%	11%	2%	0%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

union with a person without migration background does not result in ‘whitening’ per se. If the partner without migration background initiated the contacts, then being in a mixed union seems to result also in more openness towards people with a migration background in general than we find in their peers who are not in a mixed union. Again, the results for the people with a 2nd generation partner lie in-between.

Children from mixed unions are increasingly the object of research. Some scholars of race and immigration argue that the increasing numbers of multiracial people (many of whom are part White) points to the expansion of the mainstream (see Alba, Beck, and Sahin 2017). Some scholars have also argued that some mixed people, the children of mixed unions, are able to claim social and cultural Whiteness (Rockquemore and Arend 2002; Twine and Gallagher 2008). In a predominantly white surrounding, this might indeed be the case. But is this also true in a majority minority context? In Table 11 we show the results for the friendship groups of these mixed union children. Of the first-born children of a parent without migration background and a first-generation parent, 34% of these children has a majority (or almost all) of friends with a migration background and another 22% has a circle of friends where about half of the friends has a migration background. The choice of the friendship group seems to suggest that these children identify more with their migrant heritage and not, like suggested in the literature, that they are ‘whitened’.

For children from two parents without a migration background, 69% (‘almost nobody’ + ‘some’) of the children have hardly any or just some friends with a migration background. They live in a majority minority neighbourhood, where in many cases at least two thirds of the children are of migrant descent – e.g. in Antwerp under the age of 15, now just one in four children in the city has two parents born in Belgium, in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, this is one in three –, nevertheless, their social circle is quite segregated (Crul and Lelie 2019). As before, the outcomes for children with a second-generation parent lie exactly in between. One group seems to edge more towards friends with a migrant background, while another equally large group seems to favour children without a migration background.

Not only do we find an association between the migration background of the partner and the social circle of our respondents, but we also see interesting differences between

Table 10. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Contact with neighbours with a migration background.

Contact with neighbours with a migration background	Almost nobody	Some	About half	A majority	Almost everybody
Partner 1st generation	8%	26%	33%	22%	11%
Partner 2nd generation	9%	34%	29%	22%	6%
Partner without migration background	11%	37%	30%	17%	5%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 11. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Background of first child's current circle of friends.

Migration background current friends of first child	Almost nobody	Some	About half	A majority	Almost everybody
Partner 1st generation	7%	37%	22%	20%	14%
Partner 2nd generation	9%	43%	28%	14%	6%
Partner without migration background	19%	50%	23%	6%	2%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 12. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Adopting habits from other cultures.

Did you adopt habits from different cultures?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Regularly	Often
Partner 1st generation	3%	13%	34%	33%	17%
Partner 2nd generation	10%	16%	39%	23%	12%
Partner without migration background	11%	21%	43%	18%	7%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

Table 13. People without migration background living in a majority minority neighbourhood: Learning a few words in another language to make contact with neighbours with a migration background.

How often did you learn a few words in another language to make contact with neighbours with a migration background?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Regularly	Often
Partner 1st generation	18%	23%	30%	17%	12%
Partner 2nd generation	27%	27%	29%	10%	7%
Partner without migration background	29%	31%	26%	8%	6%

Source: BaM survey 2019–2020.

those in mixed unions and respondents with a partner also without migration background regarding the adaptation of habits from other cultures (Table 12). The diversifying hypothesis as a counter to the whitening hypothesis is clearly demonstrated here. Also, people with a second-generation partner, a partner that is socialised in the survey country, still report a lot of openness towards adopting other cultural habits and practices. A third of them says they do that regularly or often. We also see that there seems to be an impact on people not in a mixed union living in a diverse neighbourhood: a quarter of them also report that they engage in other habits regularly or often.

A last example we want to discuss concerns language. Like with marriage, language usage has been considered a quintessential indicator of assimilation. But what about the opposite? What can we find on a willingness to speak a language other than the national language, a willingness to communicate in another language? Here too we see that being in a mixed union results in more willingness to speak another language to communicate with people other than those in their close circle ((Table 13).

5. Conclusion and discussion

Most studies of migrants have pointed to the processes surrounding assimilation (Gordon 1964; Alba and Nee 2003) or segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993), and the ways in which migrant individuals adapt, albeit variably, to the 'host' society. Because being in a

mixed union is seen as a key mechanism for passing down ethnically specific cultural values from parents to their children, most Western studies of intermarriage (which have focused on the minority partners) have tended to conceive of it as leading to forms of ‘whitening’, ‘ethnic dilution’ (Song and Gutierrez 2015) or ‘ethnic attrition’ (Duncan and Trejo 2011), especially in the case of people with generationally distant migrant ancestors. But some studies in the US have also suggested that the partner without a migration background may ‘migrate’ to and/or adopt some aspects of their partner’s ethnicity (Jimenez 2017; Vasquez-Tokos 2014). The usual emphasis in studies of intermarriage (that the migrant partner will undergo change) may have led to an underestimation of the consequences for the non-migrant partner in a mixed union, and their propensity to engage in the cultural practices and social networks of their migrant partners.

We still know very little about the non-migrant partner in unions with a partner with a migration background, including their propensity to adopt the cultural practices of their partner, and their propensity to reach out and embrace ethnic diversity more generally. The growth of intimate relationships between people with and without a migration background in majority minority cities in Europe provides an opportunity to explore the attitudes and experiences of non-migrant individuals in interethnic unions, and what such unions may portend for the wider society.

We have analysed in this article the association of being in a mixed union and the composition of people’s social network and their potential adaptation to other norms and behaviours than their own. As found in some earlier studies, these findings show the bi-directional nature of mixed unions. Assimilation theory implicitly assumes a hierarchical ordering of norms and behaviours, placing the cultural norms behaviours of the partner belonging to the dominant ethnic group above the other and, also, as more influential. We have argued in this article that the assumption of uni-directional impact and the presumed dominance of ‘white’ norms and practices in assimilation theory should be tested empirically – thus far, few studies, especially in Europe, have undertaken such an investigation. We proposed to look at an alternative hypothesis which we called the ‘diversifying hypothesis’. Are people without migration background in a mixed union more prone than their counterparts (not in a mixed union) to adapt to norms and behaviours other than the historically dominant? Do they adapt more to a diversity of cultural norms and behaviours, not only in their union, but also in their neighbourhood?

It appears that people in a relationship with a migrant partner (both first and second generation) display a much more diverse circle of close friends. They are also likely to have a more ethnically diverse wider social network. Given that these couples live in the European country of the non-migrant partner, the differences we found between people who are in mixed unions and their peers who are not are indeed strong. Based on the data about friendships, this study points to the relationship between being in a mixed union, and an increased propensity for the non-migrant partner to have inter-group contact in their own social network, and, maybe even more interesting, also in the wider society (contact with neighbours with a migration background). We also found that people without migration background in a mixed union show more willingness to adopt habits from another culture and to learn some words of another language to engage in conversation in the neighbourhood more frequently than those who have a partner without a migration background.

People with a partner with migration background pertaining to the second generation (born in the survey country) seem to engage less in what could be called ‘reversed

assimilation' than people who have a partner who is a migrant (first-generation). This seems to suggest that the outcomes we found for our respondents are indeed related to their partner, and not just to their pre-existing attitudes. The definite answer to the question of what comes first (being open to cultural differences and therefore find a partner with a migration background or being confronted with cultural difference in a mixed union, which makes you more open to cultural difference) can only be answered more convincingly by longitudinal quantitative data or with qualitative research that has a strong retrospective element.

Our findings show that the primarily uni-directional notion of assimilation, with the migrant partner doing all the adapting, is questionable. We see an equally strong trend going in the other direction. We therefore argue for an approach that takes a potential bi-directional impact into account. Mixed unions potentially can contribute to what we have called the diversifying hypothesis – an acceptance of and openness to other norms and behaviours than those of the dominant ethnic group. Given that about one in four people without migration background living in big cities who are in a union is in a mixed union, the effect of this phenomenon should not be overlooked.

Given the rising numbers of interethnic unions that we see in almost all historical migration countries, individuals who enter into relationships with people with a migrant background merit further research (Osanami Törngren, Irastorza, and Song 2016; Jimenez, Park, and Pedroza 2018; Song 2009). Such individuals may be important actors in facilitating more meaningful interethnic contact and interactions, which may help to normalise ethnic diversity as a fact of daily life. A focus on people who are in unions with people with a migration background is especially important since we conclude in other articles in this special issue that relatively few non-migrant people who live in ethnically diverse places are part of a mixed friendship group (Crul et al. 2023; Keskiner & Waldring 2023; Knipprath 2023; Kraus 2023; Schut & Waldring 2023). Many are living in a type of white bubble within a superdiverse city. This means that a lot of the interethnic contact in a neighbourhood, deemed important for social cohesion, is carried out by this particular group of people in mixed unions. This suggests the potential importance, therefore, of mixed unions, for the lessening of ethnic and racial boundaries and for social cohesion in the wider society, and relatedly, a possible reduction of prejudice and racism.

Notes

1. There is more room for ethnic retention, or a delayed assimilation, in theories of 'segmented assimilation' (Portes and Zhou 1993).
2. We will employ various term to address mixed unions, as different studies use different measures and different terms. The BaM project assesses all partnerships that are defined as a union by the respondent as a union, whether partners are married or not and or are living together or not.
3. However, Qian and Lichter (2011) have argued that there has actually been a 'retreat from intermarriage' among Asian and Hispanic Americans. The high rates of immigration in societies such as the USA, which has dampened out-marriage with native-born Whites, has slowed the process of immigrant integration (Qian and Litchter 2007).
4. There is a small group (38 respondents) with partners who themselves are born abroad, but whose parents were both born in the survey country. We will exclude this category from our analysis.

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ORCID

Maurice Crul  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2003-7826>

Frans Lelie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0499-4412>

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