Migrant Assimilation in Europe: A Transnational Family Affair

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The paper advances our empirical and theoretical understanding of migrant assimilation. It does so by focusing on a very particular group of individuals who appear more likely than other migrant types to “go native.” We call these individuals “mixed nationality relationship migrants” (i.e., migrants who have committed to a life outside their home country because of the presence of a foreign partner). The paper argues that the transnational family milieus that emerge from this form of international migration are critical to the assimilation process. Empirical material from 11 in-depth interviews with female migrants in Britain (Sheffield) and France (Paris) supports our argument. We also suggest that such “extreme” assimilation is more likely within a regional migratory system – like the EU – where the “identity frontiers” crossed in the formation of a transnational family are relatively shallow.

INTRODUCTION

The paper has one main aim: to advance our understanding of the mechanics of migrant assimilation from a European perspective. It focuses on the experiences of migrants living in the UK and France who have “gone native,” and considers why this has occurred. We argue that the household unit is critical, as are the particular social, cultural, and economic networks and

1The Paris research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Award (R00429934392) and was carried out as part of a PhD, in conjunction with the University of Sheffield and the Université de Paris 1. The British research was conducted as part of a Sheffield-based project focusing on the related issue of the assimilation of skilled, foreign women. Particular thanks go to Paul White, Catherine Rhein, and Deborah Sporton for advice given on both research projects; and to Alison Stenning and Tim Neal for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. We also thank the anonymous referees for their very helpful comments.
resources emanating from it. Specifically, when migrants live with a foreign partner, in their partner’s home country, a particular type of transnational family “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984) emerges, which acts as a central everyday site in and through which assimilation proceeds.²

All too often, normative judgments are made as to the “acceptable” level of migrant assimilation; especially from right-wing (so-called) populist politicians such as Jean Marie Le Pen (“Front National” in France) and Nick Griffin (“British National Party” in the UK) (Thranhardt, 1995; Mayer, 2003; Cziesche et al., 2006). We hope, therefore, that by demonstrating the very particular family contexts needed for assimilation we can temper the power of calls made for migrants to “fit in” and “be more like us.”

In reality, assimilation is actually a very complex process and relies, to a large extent, upon a very specific type of transnational family habitus. Very simply, few first-generation migrants can be said to have “gone native.” Moreover, those that have tend to share one thing in common: they live with a partner born and brought up in the host country. Possibly, commentators like Le Pen and Griffin, who lament the lack of migrant assimilation, would advocate such cohabitation as a solution to the “problems” they cite. More likely, however, they would balk at the thought of greater cohabitation between migrants and the indigenous population. A response consistent with the latter would, very instructively, demonstrate that assimilation is not the issue at stake.

**ASSIMILATION IN THE UK AND FRANCE**

Our research draws on evidence from two quite similar European countries – the UK and France – and so considers migrants who have negotiated relatively shallow “identity frontiers” in forming transnational families (Cohen, 1994). This is an important contextual point: our findings are couched within the European migration system, and one would expect assimilation to be more complex and convoluted when deeper identity frontiers are crossed during mixed-nationality relationship migration.

²Various scholars have already very productively applied the concept of the “transnational habitus” to studies of migrants’ everyday lives; albeit in relation to the development of transnational rather than host-nation identities (Kelly and Lusis, 2006; Waters, 2007). We use the term in recognition of this literature and offer a new empirical angle on the notion of the transnational habitus.
The UK and France have very different citizenship traditions (Favell, 2001; Bertossi, 2007). In a republican-secular country like France, migrant distinctiveness poses a threat to national solidarity and, indeed, the founding principles of the “Indivisible Republic” (Brubaker, 1992). The long-running *affaire du foulard* (hijab ban) and the more recent riots in the Parisian *banlieue* (suburbs) (November 2005) underline the disjunction now evident between assimilation in theory and assimilation in practice (Simon, 2003; Dikeç, 2006; Duval-Smith, 2006). In the UK, a less ideological and more pragmatic approach to assimilation has been adopted through the discourse of multiculturalism. Distinction has been viewed as less threatening, and has generally not been seen as posing a challenge to the principles underlying the nation-state. Nevertheless, as in France, there are still intense debates over the so-called “parallel lives” between majority and minority communities (*cf.* Peach, 1999; Johnston *et al.*, 2005; Phillips, 2005; Simpson, 2005) and once again, urban unrest has been a recurrent theme (Benyon, 1984; Power and Tunstall, 1997; Cantle, 2001; Amin, 2003).

Whilst the basis of, and considered option towards, migrant assimilation has differed historically between Britain and France, it has always been, and remains, a key policy concern in both countries. Furthermore, we use 11 in-depth interviews from the UK and France to make the same point: that the assimilation of migrants within the European Union depends very much upon their embeddedness within particular transnational family milieus. Before advancing this argument – through identifying five key assimilation mechanisms – we will first review the extensive assimilation literature.

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3 It is important not to oversimplify; there has not been a single dominant assimilation tradition in France, as the *droit à la différence* discourse of the late 1970s/early 1980s demonstrates (Brubaker, 2001:536–7). Similarly in the UK, debates over multiculturalism have been frequent and at times fierce. The comparison is, however, valid in that it captures contemporary differences in dominant tendencies between France and Britain with regard to how migrant/minority difference is framed in public discourse.

4 France, for example, has traditionally had “one of the more liberal naturalisation regimes in Europe” (White, 1998:152), with resultant high levels of citizenship acquisition reflecting the institutional power of the egalitarian principle on which the Republic was founded (Horowitz, 1992).

5 Multiculturalism in the UK can be traced back to at least the 1960s when the Labour Home Secretary at the time, Roy Jenkins, described it as: “not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance” (cited in Sommerville, 2007:51).
LITERATURE REVIEW

Assimilation in Theory

The link between migration, assimilation, and mixed-nationality relationships has long been studied (Merton, 1941; Kennedy, 1944). The notion of assimilation more generally can be traced back further, to the 1920s Chicago School. Widespread use of the term, initially by US sociologists, was underpinned by optimism that immigrants would move upwards socially, outwards spatially, and blend in culturally over time (Park and Burgess, 1921; Park, 1950). A number of critiques followed.

First, scholars started to question assimilation as a process *per se*, and more subtly, they also questioned assumptions within the theory. It was seen as assuming Anglo-Saxon conformity, based on the belief that a single mainstream culture existed, with assimilation heading inexorably towards a stable and identifiable end-point (Gordon, 1964; Glazer and Monihan, 1970; Gans, 1979; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Alba and Nee, 1997; Brubaker, 2001). Portes provides one of the most coherent critiques in this respect by talking in nuanced terms of “segmented assimilation,” whereby migrants assimilate into different cultures rather than a single “melting pot” (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). This notion should be seen as an important modification to assimilation theory, rather than signaling a fatal flaw.

Second, by the early 21st century, concern had grown over how to balance the nation-state’s desire for cohesion and stability, through the assimilation of minorities, with migrants’ desire (often need) to maintain difference and diversity. This need for balance, along an assimilation-multicultural “continuum,” characterizes current UK policy thinking (Home Office, 2004), and to a lesser, but increasing extent, has infiltrated French political debate.

Third, assimilation theory – which is located at the scale of the nation-state – has had to yield ground to transnationalism; with scholars accepting the need for theories of migrant adjustment at a range of geographical scales. The development of an increasing body of transnational literature, accompanying an established body of assimilation research, has been a welcome addition in this respect.

All three critiques have modified our understanding of assimilation, rather than undermining it. As Bommes (2005:4–5) argues: “assimilation refers to a general condition of existence for all individuals in modern society” and is a notion that should be critiqued and adjusted but never ignored.
Assimilation in Practice

Research focusing on the key components of the assimilation process has tended to focus on intermarriage:

More than any other indicator, intermarriage represents the final outcome of assimilation. (Hirschman, 1983:408)

Intermarriage is a fundamental part of the sociological understanding of assimilation. (Rosenfeld, 2002:152)

The North American literature is particularly impressive here, and identifies racial hierarchies and distinct “marriage markets” (Heer, 1974; Fu, 2001; Rosenfeld, 2002) based on the well-established racial divisions and ghettoization processes in many American cities. European researchers, in contrast, have tended to explore the link between migration, family formation, and assimilation through a religious, rather than racial, lens (Lievens, 1999; Muñoz, 1999; Samad and Eade, 2003; Campani and Salimbeni, 2004).

Whilst the intermarriage research on both sides of the Atlantic has been important in identifying some of the key mechanisms of migrant assimilation, it is also important to recognize that marriage is an institution in decline, and so using it as a surrogate to study and quantify assimilation is increasingly problematic. There exists a weird and wonderful array of transnational family structures and we prefer instead to talk of “mixed nationality relationship migration” and the “transnational families” that form as a result. Crucially, these structures are not always amenable to large-scale quantitative data analysis.

The literature appears to show that, in our “age of migration” (Castles and Miller, 2003) transnational family structures are becoming increasingly significant. King (2002:99–100), for example, notes the rising phenomenon of “love migration”:

The possibility for the initiation of such “transnational intimacy” is greatly increased by mass travel, study abroad, and tourism; whilst the accelerating speeds and technologies of travel and communication in a shrinking Europe increase the chance of such transnational love being maintained. My conclusion is simple: do not underestimate the libidinal factor in migration.

In a European context, such transnational intimacy may eventually become a symbolic “Entente Cordiale” for a new and organic European identity (Lowenthal, 2000; Bailey and Boyle, 2004; Kofman, 2004; Bruter, 2005).
In terms of explaining what King terms “love migration,” age and life stage are acknowledged as key factors (Boyle et al., 1998; Eurobarometer, 2006). People move most frequently during their 20s and 30s, usually for work-related reasons. This also coincides with a time in people’s lives when family formation is most likely. There is, then, a clear link between age, migration, and the family (for a review see Kofman, 2004). Interestingly, women seem to be more likely than men to move to live with a partner and/or to follow a partner’s career (Pahl and Pahl, 1971; Mincer, 1978; Grundy, 1992; Boyle et al., 2001; Cooke, 2001; Nilsson, 2001).

There are two main ways in which mixed-nationality relationship migration may come about: in some cases partnerships are the cause of migration; in other cases, migration modifies partnership formation (Piper, 2003). There are, then, mixed-nationality relationship migrants who either 1) met a foreign partner and moved permanently to his/her home country; or 2) moved to a foreign country, met a partner in that country, and then decided to stay as a result. In terms of the latter group, migrants often meet partners whilst studying abroad as part of educational exchange schemes (see, e.g., King, 2002; Findlay et al., 2006). In terms of the former, these exchange schemes are also important: the UK is one of the most significant destinations in the world for foreign students and university is where many British people will meet a long-term partner. In both instances it is important to recognize that the decision to migrate may be related to changing family circumstances but not always directly or contemporaneously (Flowerdew and Al-Hamad, 2004).

Beyond experiences as a student, it is important to note that the opportunities to meet a foreign partner within Europe appear to be increasing. Migration is becoming more circulatory and transient in nature (Findlay, 1995; Salt, 1997) and increasing numbers of graduates now look for temporary work-life experiences abroad (MacEinrí, 1991; King and Shuttleworth, 1995; O’Riain, 2004; Clarke, 2005; Conradson and Latham, 2005). In addition, it appears that – given changes in capitalist/patriarchal relations – female migrants have become increasingly involved in autonomous forms of migration (Ackers, 1998, 2004; Zulauf, 2001; Boyle, 2002; Hardill, 2002; Iredale, 2005; Kofman and Raghuram, 2005, 2006). These trends towards increasing circulation, less formal migration, and increasing gender equality indicate greater potential for the development of mixed-nationality relationship migration. Very simply, there appears to be greater opportunity than ever before in Europe to meet a foreign partner.

Linguistic competence is another crucial facilitator for mixed-nationality relationship migration, and evidence points to a link between language and
gender (Bell et al., 2003). Women across Europe appear to be more likely than men to study languages, and as a result will be better equipped to access foreign social networks (structural assimilation) through which transnational families eventually form (Ackers, 1998; Bell et al., 2003). Khatib-Chahidi et al. (1998) demonstrate this link between common language and relationship formation, as do King et al. (2000:128) when they argue that language is probably “the most significant indicator of the ability to integrate with the local indigenous community and to come to terms with the local culture.” The gender difference relating to language learning points towards women being more willing/able to move in relation to transnational family formation than men. As well as the gender-language dimension, it is also argued that national identity/patriotism tends to be a less intense locational tie for women than it is for men. Women appear more likely to ground their identities at a personal/familial level, and less likely to harbor strong nationalistic sentiment (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1998). As Schrover and Vermeulen (2005:827) observe:

Women do not relate to the nation-state in the same way as men do. Men are more strongly associated with nationality than women are. This is even more so for women who have married outside the community to which they originally belonged. Through their marriage they are assumed to have transferred their loyalty.

Transnational Families

The key question that this paper seeks to address is how the transnational family milieus formed from mixed-nationality relationship migration facilitate assimilation. Simply put, such milieus provide migrants with relatively rapid and direct access to host-country sociocultural networks, where access would normally take years, decades, and even generations to negotiate. Aware of the importance of the myriad forms of transnational family milieus, Kofman (2004:248) argues that they are “the catalyst for a new citizenship . . . the crucible of multiple belongings, and should therefore become a priority for European research and policy.” What is surprising is how little research has to date been carried out in this area of migration studies (although see Kelly and Lusis, 2006; Waters, 2007).

We do know that whilst, on the one hand, migrants may experience what Beck (2000) labels “transnational spatial polygamy,” on the other, they continue to ground their identities within nation-state structures (Favell,

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6For example, in 2003 in the UK 8% of male against 14% of female A-level entries were in languages (Bell et al., 2003).
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2003; Scott, 2007). The issue is the degree to which transnational and national structures are balanced. Our cohort of mixed-nationality relationship migrants is interesting because their transnational linkages with home are relatively limited, whilst their embeddedness within the national structures of the host country is relatively extreme. For our interviewees, assimilation within the nation-state is still the dominant process: they may be transnational families, but this particular form of transnationalism opens up the host society to the migrant partner rather than creating any kind of placeless internationally orientated transnationalism.

The presence of a partner’s kin and kith networks are central in opening up the social and cultural networks of the host nation to the mixed-nationality relationship migrant:

The extended family, especially the in-laws, assumes the role of familiarizing the newcomer with the local culture. It is also the primary agent for conveying local values and practices and for defining what is expected both from a man and, in particular, his foreign wife. (Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra, 2006:52)

Access to host-country social networks appears to have a significant cumulative impact on a migrants’ identity and the depth of assimilation (Heller and Lévy, 1992; James, 2001; Piller, 2002).

Although transnational household formation opens up communal networks and facilitates personal-linguistic development (Berry, 1990), the process is far from straightforward and there are numerous examples in the literature of transnational family breakdown (Becker, 1991; Breger and Hill, 1998). In particular, this relates to the speed of assimilation, which by necessity is particularly intense. Foreign partners are “thrown in at the deep end” and face “immediate problems establishing themselves in their husbands’ social world” (Imamura, 1988:292). This initiation, and the need to commit almost from day one to life as a migrant, is another important factor in the “extreme” assimilation process. It is, very simply, “more difficult to dip a toe in the water” (Sian, 20s, Paris resident of two years) when migrating to live with a foreign partner.

The success of transnational families, therefore, usually depends upon sacrifice. Most obviously, we have seen above how women appear more likely than men to move for reasons of transnational family formation (King and Arbuckle, 1992; Imamura, 1998; Constable, 2004; Górny and Kępińska, 2004; Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra, 2006). A recent report by the IPPR (2006:23) mapping the global British diaspora found that “men are slightly over-represented amongst those who move abroad for work, whereas women are hugely over-represented among ‘other adults’ (i.e., joining partners).” We have
also seen how women may have less significant place-based attachments than men (Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1998; Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005; González-Ferrer, 2006). Sacrifice and compromise within the transnational household are likely to be vital to its long-term success, and the evidence suggests that this is still gendered.

Beyond the household milieu and the native social networks emanating from it, the linguistic skills of mixed-nationality relationship migrants are clearly conducive to professional employment. It is important to recognize, therefore, that “not all women necessarily ‘suffer’ economically from family migration” (Bailey and Boyle, 2004:231). Mixed-nationality relationship migrants may make sacrifices and compromises, but they have a relatively high degree of professional autonomy: indeed, all the mixed-nationality migrants we interviewed were employed professionally and used their bilingual skills within the workplace. This will obviously support processes of assimilation.7

Figure I summarizes the relatively unique position of the transnational family in relation to assimilation. Specifically, it is worth noting that certain familial contexts enable female migrants to perform dual roles of “wives and workers” (Piper, 2003), as in our study, whilst other types of international family migration are more restrictive (for a comparative perspective see Scott, 2006).

**METHODOLOGY**

The focus of most research around mixed-nationality relationship migration has been directed towards quantifying rates of intermarriage and the resulting increase in numbers of mixed-race children: both are used as statistical surrogates for assimilation (Coleman, 1994; Fu, 2001; Rosenfeld, 2002; González-Ferrer, 2006). Whilst valuable, there are some limitations to this work. It is dependent on marriage, for example, which cannot capture the increasing numbers of people in transnational partnerships who remain unmarried. Marital statistics are also dependent on nationality figures, and overlook migrants who have naturalized. This is problematic because migrants within mixed-nationality relationships are more likely to naturalize, and because there are different rates of naturalization in different countries (Neyrand and Sili, 1998). Finally,

7 Whilst in general women appear to lose out more than men from family-based migration — what Smith and Bailey (2006) term the “gender gap” — it is likely that mixed-nationality relationship migrants are more able than most to continue their professional careers abroad. It is important, therefore, not to treat women as a homogenous group.
measuring assimilation in this way privileges the outcomes, at the expense of understanding the processes of assimilation.

This paper is concerned with the process of assimilation and, specifically, the agency of the transnational family unit in this process. This explains why the research we draw upon is qualitative in nature, building upon a relatively recent qualitative-sociological tradition that is distinct from the more established quantitative-demographic tradition in the assimilation literature (see Breger and Hill, 1998; Lauth Bacas, 2002; Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra, 2006; Rodríguez Garcia, 2006). The study is also a response to the concerns voiced, in particular by geographers, over migration being researched at an individual level rather than as a process intricately linked to family formation (Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 2004; Kofman, 2004).

Overall, we carried out 11 in-depth interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to 1 hour 15 minutes. Recruitment was a major challenge because of
the fact that those in mixed-nationality relationships are generally much less visible than conventional migrant groups; none of the interviewees were prominent members of their respective migrant community organizations, and many had effectively “gone native.” (This issue of access may account for the paucity of studies into the lives of mixed-nationality migrants and the unique transnational families they form.)

Our approach to sampling, given the pragmatics of recruitment, was based on achieving a purposeful illustrative sample of a particular migrant type. Thus, whilst we hope that this sample is in some ways representative, it was not our intention to be representative per se (Valentine, 1997). Our sample is also limited to European migrants because we wanted to explore the process of migrant assimilation across relatively shallow identity frontiers.

The fact that we only interviewed women reflected an initial desire to follow up a particular and well-documented gendered dimension of transnational family migration: within Europe at least, women appear to be more likely than men to move internationally for family reasons. This may be because of women’s superior language skills; or possibly because they harbor less visceral nationalistic attachments. Women may also be more willing than men to make personal and professional sacrifices to join a partner overseas. Whatever the case, a specific confluence of structure and agency means that women seem more likely to experience “extreme” assimilation and we set out to examine their experiences.

Different constraints in the two study areas also meant that we employed slightly different recruitment techniques. In France our sample was drawn from a much larger research project. The six interviewees were part of a total sample of 36 British migrants living in Paris and the surrounding region of Île-de-France (see Scott, 2006). The length and breadth of our Parisian research enabled us to make contact with mixed-nationality relationship migrants through two main channels. First, we asked the British we had established contact with (via migrant-based organizations and social networks) whether they knew of, or worked with, any fellow British women living with French partners. Second, we (unexpectedly) gained contacts through friends/friend-of-friends both in the UK and France. These networks were particularly helpful in finding interviewees living in transnational Franco-British households with little or no contact with the expatriate community.8

8The size of the British population in Île-de-France (c. 25,000) undoubtedly helped our sampling strategy. In smaller communities such snowballing may not have worked as well, or at all.
The UK research was centered on Sheffield, a city with a much smaller migrant base than Paris. Nonetheless, given our concern with a particular type of migrant, and our broad interest in intra-European mobility, we felt that the differences in the size/global status between Sheffield and Paris would not be detrimental to our study. The differences did, however, shape our sampling and recruitment strategy. In Sheffield we had to be more focused: rather than snowballing through contacts within the city, we approached a well-known employer of European migrant workers. This strategy was also chosen because we only had three months to carry out our Sheffield-based research, as oppose to the ten months in Paris. A gatekeeper was co-opted to act as intermediary at the workplace we had selected. She was asked to forward details of our research, via email, to foreign-born colleagues who were living with a British partner. Interviewees were then selected from the list of staff who responded positively to the email. The fact that our UK-based respondents were drawn from a single site was a product both of Sheffield’s migrant base and of the time constraints on the project.

The differences in recruitment procedure meant that we interviewed various nationalities of migrants in the UK, whereas all our Paris-based respondents were the same nationality (British). However, all the UK-based interviewees were from western European countries, meaning that they fitted well into our focus on intra-European migration. The differences also meant that our UK cohort may have been less isolated/more communal than our French cohort by virtue of working together. A further difference in the sample relates to the citizenship traditions in the UK (multiculturalism) versus those in France (Republicanism), which have already been discussed.

Table 1 contains a summary of the 11 migrants interviewed in Paris and Sheffield. For each interviewee there were, theoretically, four possible types of mixed-nationality relationships they could have been involved in. Table 2 outlines these four types. It is necessary and relatively easy to distinguish between those migrants living with a host-country national (A and B) and those migrants living with a third-country national (C and D). All 11 of our interviewees were living with a host-country national and, as Figure I makes clear, this sampling cohesiveness was central to the “extreme” process of first-generation assimilation we aimed to explore. However, the fact that all our interviewees were living with a host-country national did not mean that they had migrated to Britain or France because of this. One must make a second distinction between those who “met and moved” (A and C) and those who “moved and met” (B and D). In reality, this distinction is quite complex: family formation is a messy and often nonlinear process (Flowerdew and Al-Hamad, 2004). However, as far as is possible, it is a distinction that is worth making.
### TABLE 1
**Mixed-Nationality Relationship Migrants in Britain and France**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South Yorkshire Interviewees</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Length of Residence in UK</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Family status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelie</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Divorced from British husband/two children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>British husband/one child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>British partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabine</td>
<td>Austrian</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>British partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>British husband/two children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Parisian Interviewees</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Length of Residence in UK</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Family status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>French husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sian</td>
<td>Welsh</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>French partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>French husband/children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>French husband/children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>French husband/children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>French husband/children</td>
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Illustrative of this complexity, Sian initially moved to Fontainebleau (southeast of Paris) and here she met her current French partner. However, when her contract ended she returned to her native Wales (as she had always planned) but used her time in Wales to find another job in Paris to be near her partner. It was only after settling in the city that she moved in with him, and they are yet to marry. In respect to her first migration Sian “moved and met,” but in respect to her second migration Sian “met and moved.” This complexity was common: Rebecca, Charlotte, Wendy, and Francesca were all involved in a series of international moves before the development of a long-term mixed-nationality relationship. Transnational family formation is often dependent upon a priori migratory experience and is rarely a discrete act; nor is it something people necessarily set out to embark upon (unlike, for example, career-path migration).

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Types of Mixed-Nationality Relationship Migrants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Met and Moved</td>
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<tr>
<td>Host-Country Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-Country Partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Processes of “Extreme” Assimilation**

Our 11 interviews – five in Britain and six in France – uncovered five dimensions that help explain the relatively “extreme” process of assimilation that occurs within transnational families. We will now discuss these dimensions, before briefly identifying how even the most assimilated migrants embed within transnational social and cultural milieus in order to maintain distinct elements of their home-country identity.

**Capitalist, Patriarchal, and Linguistic Structures**

Language is the vital human-capital component that makes the transnational family a viable and sustainable proposition. All our interviewees, perhaps understandably, felt that women were generally better linguists than men. This was particularly pertinent in the case of the Sheffield interviewees, who were all language teachers; and women made up the vast majority of teachers

9 Certainly, the fact that 72% of language-based Socrates-Erasmus students in the UK are female would support this link between gender, language, and migration (Findlay et al., 2006:303).
Interviewees also felt that women were more willing/able to give up their mother tongue. The willingness/ability of women to adapt linguistically was also linked to underlying capitalist/patriarchal structures. These still appear to favor the male career as far as family migration decision-making is concerned, and when positioned alongside the gender-language divide, provide further explanatory insight into the gendered process of “extreme” assimilation and transnational family formation observed.

Sian and Rebecca, for example, like all our interviewees, were bilingual; they spoke French at home, and worked full-time in an international/Francophone environment. Language competence was a necessary antecedent to migration; nevertheless, migration was also dependent upon the continued prioritization of the male career:

The only reason I’m here is because of my boyfriend . . . I think it’s the woman who always moves. Ok, you get these career-minded women who are really motivated, but for us normal beings a woman can more easily move from one job and get another because it’s not going to make any difference in her career per se. (Sian, 20s, Parisian resident of two years)

I’ve been here nearly twenty years. I was in Geneva before but I came to Paris when I met my husband, so that was the reason that I came. He lived in Paris at the time and I lived in Geneva. I came here without a job, and I did basic secretarial work when I first arrived. (Rebecca, 40s, Parisian resident of 23 years)

Thus, language ability, allied with capitalist-patriarchal career norms, creates a particular gendered context for mixed-nationality relationship migrants and the “extreme” assimilation that results.

Structural assimilation is relatively straightforward in this respect, facilitated by linguistic capital and the presence of a host-country partner. Our interviewees bonded with the native population almost from the day of their arrival: very different to the isolation felt by many other types of migrants who experience “culture shock” and encounter “language walls” following their move abroad. Marie, for example, felt that

it is just different when you’re talking about English people married to French. You don’t have to group together . . . you already have a network of in-laws, and your husband’s friends – who eventually become your friends. (40s, Parisian resident of 20 years)

Even those who followed the norm of building friendships with other migrants did so by networking with foreign professionals in general, made possible by a shared linguistic competency in the host language rather than on the basis of nation-based cultural, racial, ethnic, or religious cleavages. In fact interviewees
were adamant that the last thing they wanted to do was to proactively select friends of their own nationality and did not see any reason for doing so. Suzanne’s remarks were typical:

I’ve never wanted to get stuck with French people because I think it’s too easy to sort of get back into recreating your little French world and start criticizing everything that’s around you. (20s, Sheffield resident of eight years)

The intimate access to host society that develops through a partner’s existing social networks, and migrants’ own linguistic ability in both utilizing these networks and building their own networks beyond the home (usually via a hospitable professional environment), enables assimilation to reach a level unprecedented amongst other types of migrants.

A native partner effectively acts as a bridgehead: an access point for migrants into the host society. Sian, for example, admitted how “most people I socialize with are my boyfriend’s friends.” Working in an environment conducive to difference also facilitates integration because, as Amelie remarked, “I mix with professional people . . . it’s a kind of world which is very open.” However, even though well embedded, and possibly because they were so well embedded within the host society, migrants were always aware of subtle differences between themselves and their hosts. Some viewed these remnants of foreignness with contempt, or perhaps a feigned contempt:

One thing that really annoys me is the fact that I’ve still got a hint of an accent. (Francesca, 20s, Sheffield resident of 10 years)

Some people don’t realize I’m foreign for the first thirty seconds and then they’ve tended to realize that I am . . . I think people find it quite difficult to place my accent. (Carmen, 50s, Sheffield resident of 30 years)

My objective as soon as I arrived in this country was to try to sound as British as possible . . . I’m happy when people don’t notice I’m foreign. (Suzanne, 20s, Sheffield resident of eight years)

Status seemed to be linked amongst mixed-nationality relationship migrants to an ability to assimilate, with laments over slight accents possibly code for “look how well I have assimilated?”

**Mobility Capital**

Early mobility experience was crucial both to migrants’ linguistic development and to creating the opportunity for meeting foreign partners. Charlotte and Sabine’s experiences were representative:
I was a language student, it was a year out during my university studies and I really learnt to speak French. I also met the person who was later to become my husband, went back to England to finish my studies and during that time we decided to get married. So got married in October '76, and came to Paris as a permanent resident in late '76. (Charlotte, 50s, Parisian resident for 30 years)

The plan was always just to go abroad for one year but since I was employed by the University I got a fee waiver and did a Master’s degree, so this was the reason I stayed in my second year, and in the third year I met my partner. He’s English and he doesn’t speak any German whatsoever, so there’s not really much of a choice. (Sabine, 30s, Sheffield resident of five years)

Such experiences, whilst in education (Socrates-Erasmus) and beyond (such as the GAP year), lead to the development of “mobility capital,” characterized not only by linguistic competence and the greater likelihood of meeting a foreign partner, but also by more expansive social networks/identities and a familiarization with/normalization of life as a migrant (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Findlay et al., 2006).

Mobility capital, as we understand the term, refers to the knowledge amassed through international mobility that increases one’s potential ability to move abroad and to assimilate into national and transnational structures. It may relate to the modification of existing forms of capital (social, cultural, linguistic, economic, or human) or it may involve the acquisition of a new type of capital resource altogether (mobility capital). This latter, and more specific, form of capital acquisition relates to the individual/psychological transition resulting from international migration. To use an example, the migratory experiences of people who moved internationally whilst of school age will provide them with an extra set of transnational resources that can be deployed to make future international migration easier. Transnational family formation is very much bound up in the process of capital modification/acquisition that develops out of previous migratory experience (King, 2002).

One aspect of this modification/acquisition is that, as time passes and repositories of mobility capital increase, so migrants feel more removed from their “homeland.” The shift in identity associated with this de-territorialization makes “home” increasingly appear inward-looking and parochial: a place that challenges, rather than confirms, one’s sense of place(lessness). Wendy, for instance, remembered life in the UK in terms of “a closed-minded world” where “everyone knows what’s going on” (50s, Parisian resident for 35 years). She positioned herself against what she had left behind, and talked of a “personal journey” and contemporaneous shift in identity.

Many of the respondents felt that their physical journeys had left them to some degree “in limbo” psychologically. As Suzanne commented:
I think when you've lived abroad for a long time, you never feel quite that you belong to any other place but at the same time you feel that you belong to both places. (20s, Sheffield resident of eight years)

Our understanding of transnational family formation and subsequent “extreme” assimilation is helped by a realization that mobility experiences modify and constitute migrants’ capital repositories and that the ontological security associated with “home” is not inevitably grounded within one’s home country. This may be particularly true for those migrants “fleeing” their home country for personal/emotional reasons with a strong impetus to establish a new life overseas.

**Life Stage**

There are a number of important links between age, migration, and family formation and these are important in structuring assimilation. Migration is more common amongst younger people (Boyle et al., 1998). There is also a clear link between age and migration where familial and professional ties already exist (Kofman, 2004), with couples likely to move before they have children, or whilst their children are still young.

Migrants in mixed-nationality relationships will, therefore, generally be young enough to adapt to their partner’s culture, and are at a pivotal stage in life when such adaptation occurs. A decision needs to be made, for example, over what language to speak at home when children are born, and this is something that can have a significant influence on assimilation.

All our interviewees spoke their partner’s language at home and only a minority had brought their children up to be genuinely bilingual. Having said this, the presence of children did tend to draw mixed-nationality relationship migrants back home. The parents we interviewed told of the importance of at least a rudimentary intergenerational transfer of linguistic/cultural capital. Carmen, for example, encouraged her children to spend summers with her extended family in Spain, whilst Elizabeth would “take (her) son to Cornwall each summer to stay with his grandparents.”

In Elizabeth’s case, she had had almost no contact with the UK since migrating to Paris but the birth of her son changed this:

> There were family problems, I just wanted to get away [pause] I left my parents in circumstances which were not very pretty at the time and I was a cut-off for four years until I had my son. (30s, Parisian resident for 14 years)

Like Elizabeth, a desire to escape during a particularly difficult transition to adulthood also underpinned Charlotte’s migration. She left the UK “to run
away” and then met a French partner. Assimilation is, therefore, shaped by the link between migration and life stage and may be amplified when people move overseas in search of a fresh start and are, as a result, much more open to the possibility of meeting a foreign partner. It may also be amplified because of the pragmatic family decision-making that occurs when children arrive, but is also “checked” by the presence of extended family back home. The relationship between life stage and assimilation is clearly complex, but there is no doubt that mixed-nationality relationship migrants go through a unique process of transnational family formation and negotiation that, on balance, is extremely conducive to “extreme” assimilation and occurs during a particular life stage.

National Identity

None of our interviewees had any strong nationalistic/patriotic tendencies. Such ambivalence is likely to facilitate, and be facilitated by, migration. The notion of mobility capital, discussed above, helps to account for the way in which migrants’ place-based ties gradually diminish as time spent overseas increases. Identities become “a mixture” (Sabine, 30s, Sheffield resident of five years), with migrants taking “the best of both cultures” (Francesca, 20s, Sheffield resident of ten years).

Naturalization, assuming it is voluntary and not imposed, is one of the symbolic markers of this ambivalence. During the French stage of research we found that, of the 36 British migrants interviewed, only those living with French partners had naturalized. Significantly, figures from the French census also show that women make up three-quarters of the naturalized British in Paris (INSEE, 1999). There is, then, a clear link between transnational family formation, gender, and national identity, and this link is conducive to assimilation. The women we interviewed in Britain and France were very willing/able to adapt to their foreign partners’ lives, and relinquish aspects of their own national identity in the process: they expressed no desire to embed within home country social networks and were not in any way psychologically tied to/dependent upon their homeland.

Permanence

Permanence was a final factor in helping to explain the “extreme” assimilation observed within the transnational family milieu. Most migrants entertain the thought of “returning home” for years, even decades, after their initial
move. However, the mixed-nationality relationship migrants we interviewed talked of taking a much more decisive step when they decided to live in their partner’s home country. This decision takes on a particular significance when the partner is monolingual and therefore unlikely to ever migrate himself. The birth of children is another key event signaling permanence with regard to one’s migration, and thus facilitating ever deeper assimilation. Mixed-nationality relationship migrants, more than all other migrant types, had to commit to their host country from the outset because of the particular transnational family dynamic involved. This is significant and heightens the speed and depth of assimilation relative to other migrant types.

**TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS TO “EXTREME” ASSIMILATION**

Our 11 interviewees had largely “gone native.” Nevertheless, at certain times, and in certain domestic, professional, and communal “translocalities” (Smith, 2001), they performed as migrants rather than natives. For most of the time the domestic *milieus* mixed-nationality migrants inhabited assumed the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the host country. Children, for example, were generally brought up speaking the transnational family’s “father-tongue,” as Wendy’s experience illustrates:

> My husband hadn’t done English at school, didn’t understand English, and you can’t translate what you’re saying to your child! We spoke French at home . . . I went for months, years even, without speaking English (50s, Parisian resident of 35 years)

Furthermore, the social networks (kin and kith) emanating from mixed-nationality migrants’ homes were grounded in native rather than migrant spaces within the city.

However, there were some interesting “instantiations” – points of rupture in the everyday routines of migrants – where even the most assimilated respondents performed (out of choice) the migrant side of their identity. Suzanne, for instance, talked of how her husband was used to different rituals during mealtimes than her, and was clearly proud of the fact that she had brought a Gallic touch to her Sheffield home:

> In France everything revolves around food and long meals and sitting down at tables, meals are a major point of communication . . . With my partner he didn’t mind just taking his plate on his knees and sitting in front of the TV to eat. For me that’s just completely inconceivable . . . you have to sit at the table, you just
stop the TV and talk and I’ve actually sort of changed things, well I think we do fifty-fifty now.

Nonetheless, she was aware that whilst “there’s a lot of compromising going on . . . it’s more on my part (because) we live in his country.” This gendered process of domestic negotiation was a uniform one, with the domestic milieu principally a site of assimilation, but occasionally also a site of “foreignness.” Scott (2004) develops this point further, showing how British mixed-nationality relationship migrants may watch an occasional English-language film or a British TV show as a luxury when partners are away or working late.

Sporadic transnational performances like this were also evident outside the domestic milieu in migrants’ social and professional networks. Charlotte, for example, had “virtually no contact with fellow Brits” but did occasionally meet with foreign colleagues:

It’s only really when I want to see a typically British film like the Full Monty or Four Weddings and a Funeral that I meet up after work with British colleagues rather than going to the cinema with my husband. Other than that I have little contact with other English people.

Similarly, Marie and Rebecca’s migrant-based networking centered on the “infrequent” and “occasional” dinner party and Sian’s “odd drink” with colleagues was as close as she came to other migrants. This infrequent “luxurious” connection may appear to challenge our claim over “extreme” assimilation. However, because it is the exception, we would argue that it does the opposite: it reinforces the extent to which mixed-nationality relationship migrants have assimilated, with expressions of difference infrequent and entirely based on choice rather than necessity (see also Scott, 2004).

Furthermore, rather than only seeking out fellow nationals, mixed-nationality relationship migrants socialized with “like-minded” colleagues of “various nationalities” (Elizabeth), valuing the opportunity this afforded them to get to know migrants in a similar situation. The position of English as the global lingua franca undoubtedly helps in respect to this international professional sociability (see, e.g., Burricand and Fillon, 2003), a phenomenon that has been observed in relation to mixed-nationality relationship migrants elsewhere (Kennedy, 2004). Thus, even when mixed-nationality relationship migrants do embed within foreign social and professional networks, these networks tend to be international rather than mono-national in nature.

Some interviewees were members of migrant-based organizations. Once again, however, they chose international rather than mono-national clubs
and societies, reinforcing a general resistance to expatriate cliques and cabals. A Parisian interviewee, for example, was a member of a popular migrant organization called “Message.” Message is a support organization for foreign mothers in Paris and the surrounding Île-de-France region and whilst many of its 1,300 members came from mono-national, all-migrant families, a significant proportion (45%) came from transnational families (i.e., members live with a French partner/husband). For mixed-nationality relationship migrants, interaction with other foreign mothers through organizations like Message does not, however, appear to signal a lack of assimilation:

I didn’t go along because I wanted to meet British people. I went because I was a young mother in a strange country, and yes I guess at times I found this difficult [pause] I also wanted my children to have somewhere to go where English was spoken. (Rebecca, 40s, Parisian resident of 23 years)

Organizational membership was not related to an underlying desire to socialize with fellow nationals, and mothers came from a range of countries. Similar, albeit less formal, mothering networks were observed in Sheffield: once again members were united by their ability to speak English and by their status as mixed-nationality relationship migrants, rather than membership of a particular national community.

CONCLUSION

The Prime Minister of France, Francois Fillon, is married to a Welsh woman from Abergavenny. A gifted linguist at school, and law graduate, Penelope Fillon moved to Paris in the 1970s where she met and then married the current French Prime Minister. This is an exceptional example of a much more normal process of mixed-nationality relationship migration. Increasingly, people are either moving internationally because of the presence of a foreign partner (met and moved), or they are deciding to stay abroad having met a foreign partner following international migration for a different purpose (moved and met). Whatever the pathway, and whether involving prime ministers or ordinary citizens, this type of migration can lead to an exceptional outcome: extreme assimilation.

The paper has explored this process of assimilation through an examination of the transnational family and the social, cultural, and economic networks and resources emanating from it. We have argued that mixed-nationality relationship migrants – migrants living with a foreign partner in the partner’s home country – have a range of (gendered) personal qualities and resources
that, within the facilitating context of the transnational family, enable them to assimilate to a much greater degree than other migrant types.

Five factors appear critical in this respect. First, the linguistic skills of mixed-nationality relationship migrants, and the related influence of capitalist and patriarchal structures on their migratory decision, help account for the extreme assimilation. Second, the acquisition of mobility capital through earlier migratory experiences also appears vital and is an important precursor to transnational family formation. Third, the life stage at which mixed-nationality relationship migration takes place is particularly conducive to assimilation: it occurs at a time when family formation is a major priority. Fourth, our female respondents harbored limited and largely choice-based nationalistic/patriotic attachments and so the influence of the home country as a structural barrier to assimilation was negligible. Fifth, mixed-nationality relationship migrants accepted that migration was likely to be permanent from the outset and orientated themselves towards a life away from home. Alongside all these factors, the transnational family milieu itself acts as a key habitus and gateway. It is a space in which assimilation is lived and performed on an everyday basis and offers migrants access to the social, cultural, and economic networks and resources of the host country.

In exploring the ways in which extreme assimilation is largely a “transnational family affair” the paper has not only improved our understanding of the mechanics of contemporary migrant assimilation in Europe. It has also underlined just how unusual it is for first-generation migrants to “go native.” An awareness of this exceptionalism – of the very specific transnational family habitus needed for first-generation immigrants to assimilate – will hopefully put populist calls (which seem consistent across Europe) for migrants to “be more like us” and to “fit in” in perspective.

A key limitation to our study is the fact that it focused on European assimilation, with our migrant interviewees in Britain and France crossing relatively shallow identity frontiers. It is important, therefore, that the findings are related to other contexts. Specifically, follow-up comparative research would be useful in areas of the world where the identity frontiers crossed during mixed-nationality migration are deeper. Research is also needed into the changing importance of this type of international migration, particularly in light of the EU’s desire to foster greater internal mobility of its citizens. Mixed-nationality relationship migrants, and the transnational families they form, are also symbolically very important at a European level: they represent a form of integration “from below,” the “Entente Cordiale” needed for a genuine and organic sense of European identity to emerge.
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