

Bridging cultures, building families: Exploring the Dynamics of Multicultural Families

28 – 29 – 30 May 2026
Brussels

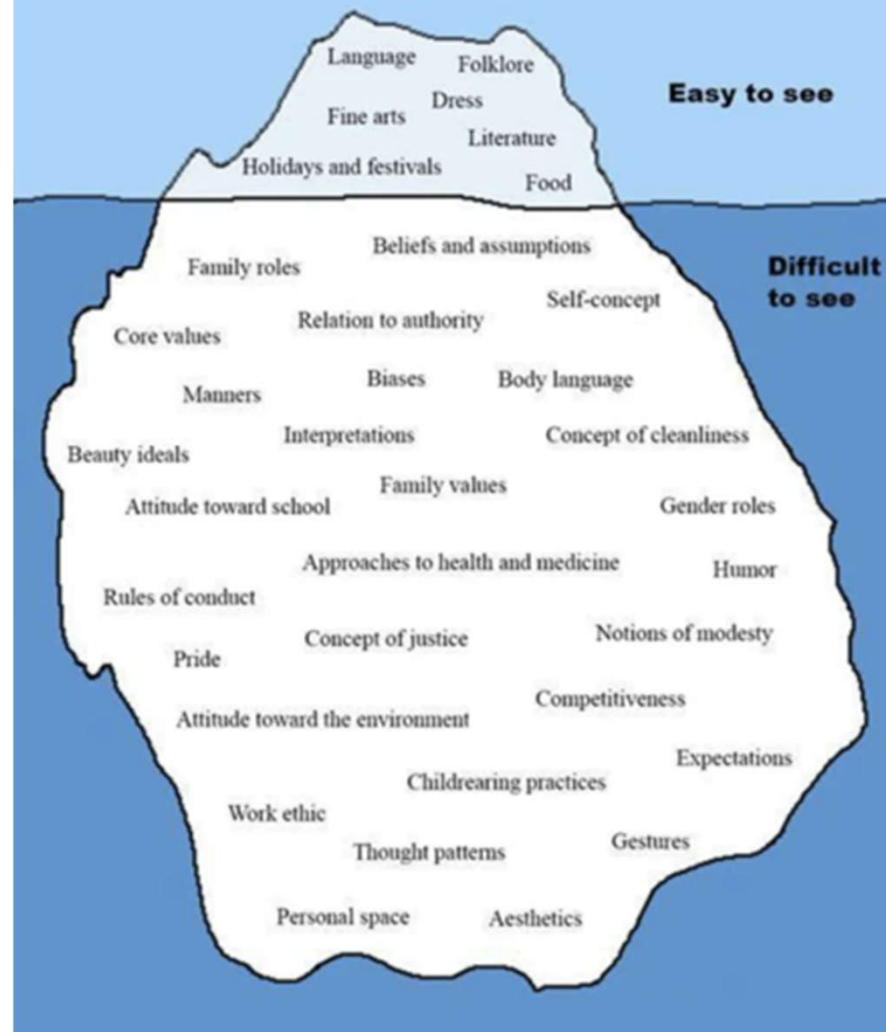


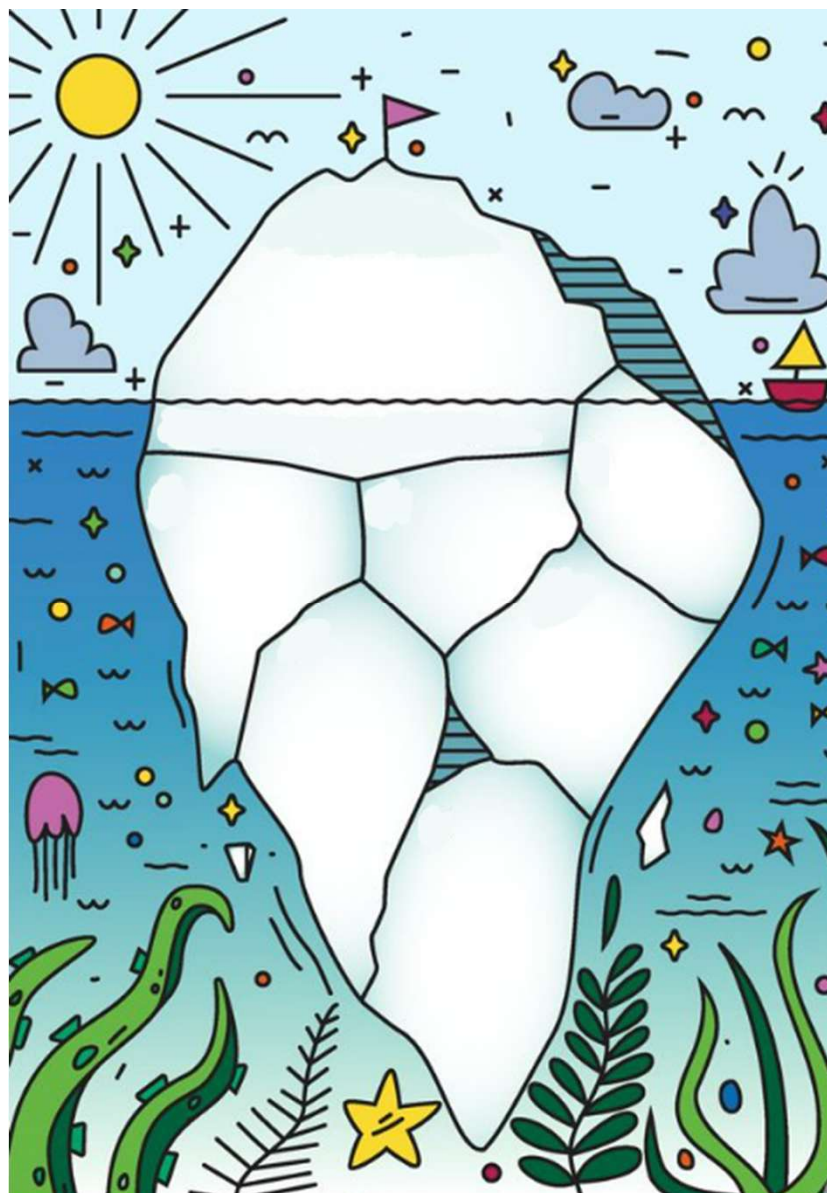
Odisee
UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Centre for
Family Studies



The Cultural Iceberg





When the family becomes superdiverse. How bi-cultural couples challenge family support and policies

Dirk Geldof, Kathleen Emmery, Silke Peeters, Kim Lecoyer & Birsen Taspinar



Kenniscentrum Gezinswetenschappen Odisee

70th ICCFR annual conference, Brussels, Belgium

*“Bridging cultures, building families: Exploring the Dynamics of
Multicultural Families”*

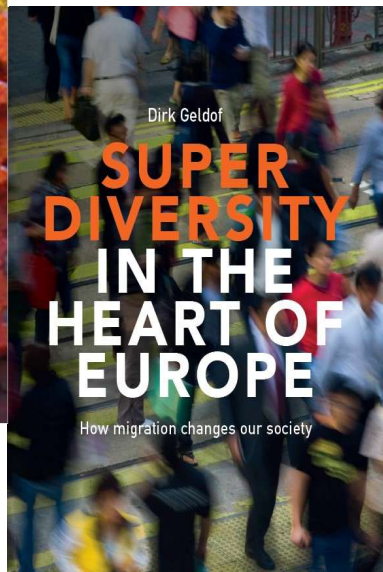
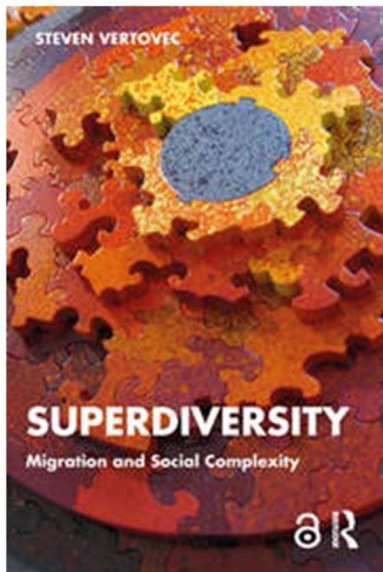
29th May 2026

When the family becomes superdiverse. How bi-cultural couples challenge family support and policies



- Today: sneak preview
- Three years of practice-based research on the diversification of relations in Belgium
- Book in final stage, will be presented in autumn 2026 (in Dutch)

Why research on bicultural relations in Belgium, through the lense of superdiversity?



- Belgium is becoming superdiverse
 - Diversification of diversity
- => Increasing number of bicultural relations and families
- However, a focus on families is missing in research on superdiversity
- Higher risk of divorce
- Colourblind family support and family policies are problematic

When the family becomes superdiverse. How bi-cultural couples challenge family support and policies

KIM LECOYER, BIRSEN TASPINAR, SILKE PEETERS, KATHLEEN EMMERY, DIRK GELDOLF



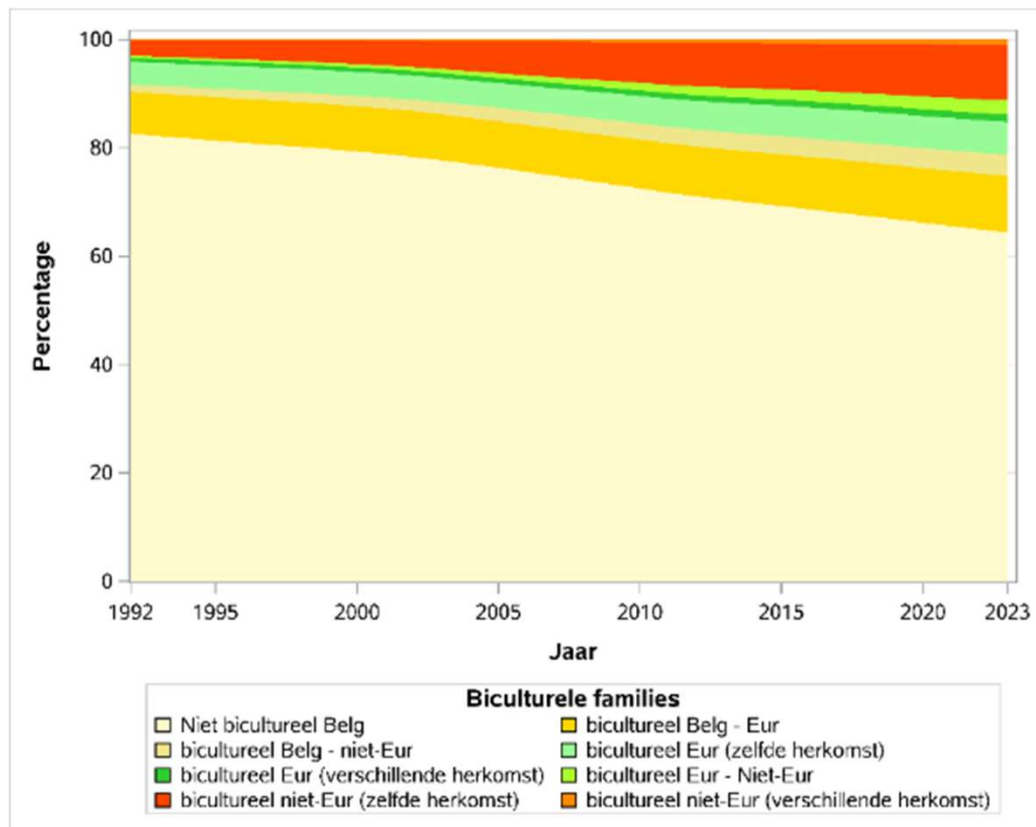
- The aim of this lecture: four questions
 - How superdiverse are relations and families in Belgium?
 - How do bicultural couples experience their relations?
 - Why should family support become more divers-sensitive?
 - Why should family policies become more divers-sensitive?

How do we define bi-cultural couples or relations?

- We refer to couples as bicultural when at least one partner is of non-Belgian origin. This includes couples:
 - With one partner of Belgian origin & one of non-Belgian origin
 - With both partners of non-Belgian origin
 - & each partner has a different background.
 - With both partners of non-Belgian origin
 - Sharing the same background.
 - => because they share a minority status in society and this affects their relationship
- We focus on origin because an increasing number of citizens with a migrant background have acquired Belgian nationality.
 - Including the nationality of birth of the parents

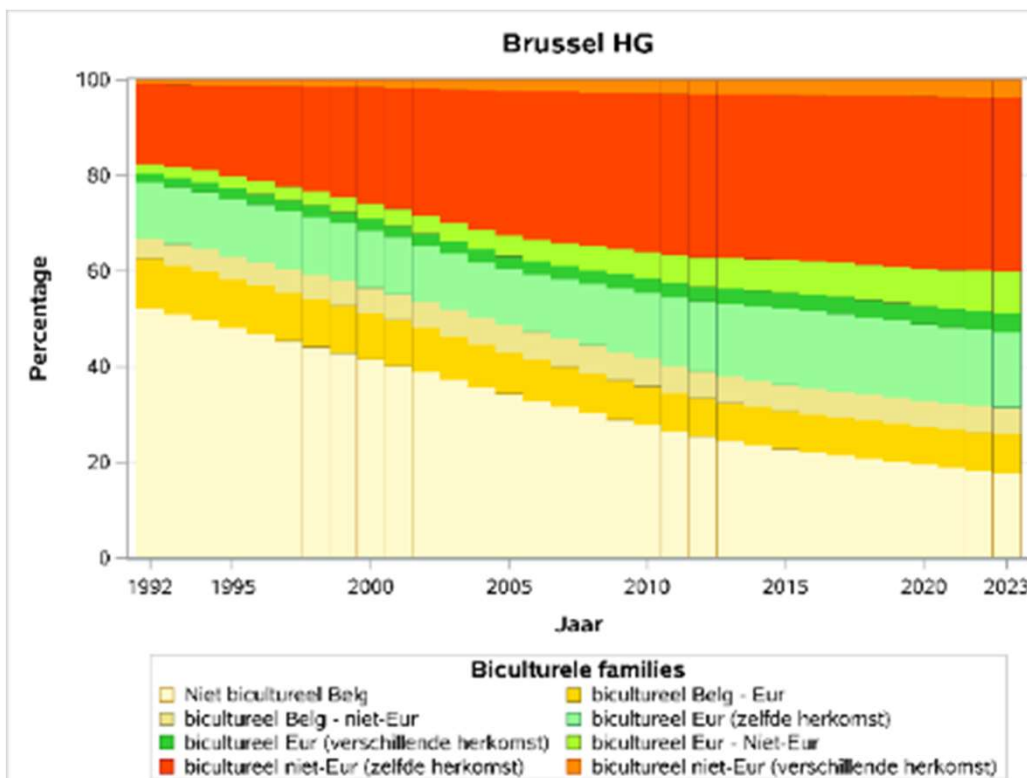


The superdiversification of relations and families Strong increase of bicultural relations in Belgium



- 1992: one in six (17,4%)
- 2023: > one in three (35,6%)
- Top 3:
 - Belgian – European
 - 10,4% of all relations
 - European - same origin
 - 6,1% of all relations
 - Non-European - same origin
 - 10,2% of all relations

The superdiversification of relations and families The majority of the couples in Brussels



Brussels = majority-minority city

- o Almost 80% of the citizens of foreign origin

=> 82,2% of couples bicultural

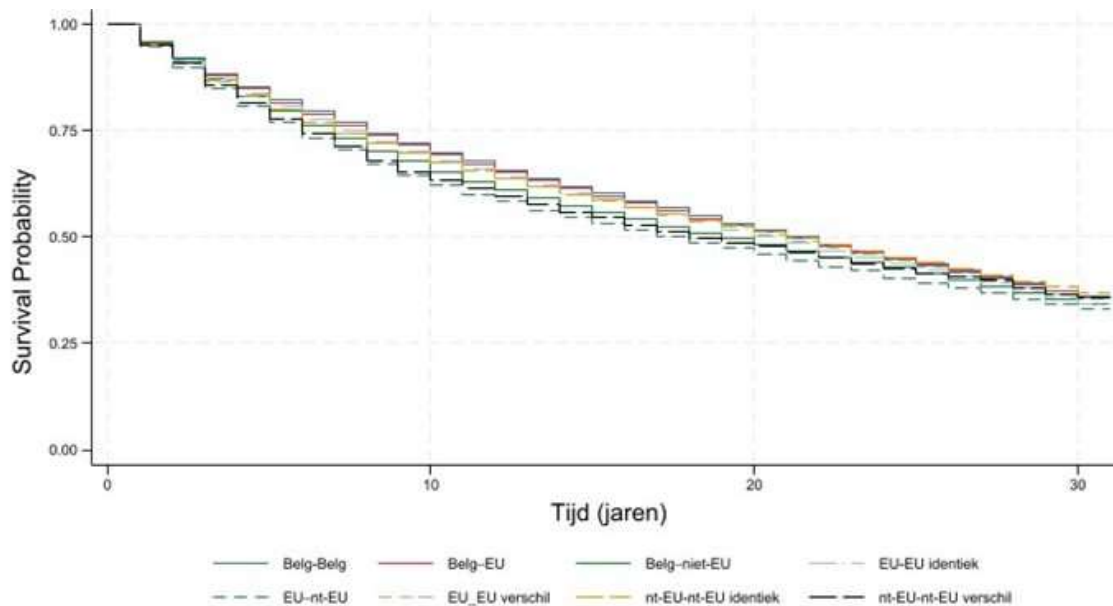
- o Same top 3 as on national level

The superdiversification of relations and families: Top 10.

Historical migration countries 20th century to superdiversification 21st century
=> an increasing number of different combinations

Top 10 – Couples in Belgium (1992)	Top 10 – Couples in Belgium (2007)	Top 10 – Couples in Belgium (2023)
1. Belgian – Belgian	1. Belgian - Belgian	1. Belgian - Belgian
2. Italian - Italian	2. Moroccan - Moroccan	2. Moroccan - Moroccan
3. Belgian - Italian	3. Belgian - Italian	3. Belgian - Italian
4. Belgian - French	4. Italian - Italian	4. Turkish -Turkish
5. Moroccan - Moroccan	5. Turkish - Turkish	5. Belgian - French
6. Belgian - Dutch	6. Belgian - French	6. Belgian - Dutch
7. Turkish - Turkish	7. Belgian - Dutch	7. Italian - Italian
8. Spanish - Spanish	8. Dutch - Dutch	8. Romanian - Romanian
9. Dutch - Dutch	9. Belgian - Moroccan	9. Belgian - Moroccan
10. Belgian - German	10. French - French	10. Dutch - Dutch

The superdiversification of relations and families Significant higher risk of divorce for bicultural couples



- Highest risk of divorce:
 - Belgian and Non-European
 - European and non-European
 - Non-European with different origin
- However, higher risk not necessarily linked to origin

The superdiversification of relations and families Looking through and beyond the ethnic lense

Tabel 3: Event-history analyse van echtscheiding in België (1993-2022)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Bicultureel gezin (ref = niet-bicultureel, BE-BE)				
Bicultureel Belg - Eur	-0.048***	-0.068***	-0.056***	-0.019***
Bicultureel Belg - niet-Eur	0.157***	0.139***	0.150***	0.155***
Bicultureel Eur (zelfde herkomst)	0.023***	-0.044***	-0.030***	0.039***
Bicultureel Eur (verschillende herkomst)	0.056***	-0.014	-0.005	0.043***
Bicultureel Eur - Niet-Eur	0.195***	0.126***	0.131***	0.156***
Bicultureel niet-Eur (zelfde herkomst)	0.015***	-0.036***	-0.022***	0.025***
Bicultureel niet-Eur (verschillende herkomst)	0.182***	0.117***	0.122***	0.148***
Migratiestatus individu (generatie) (ref = autochtoon)				
Eerste generatie		0.105***	0.068***	0.007*
Tweede migratie		0.108***	0.070***	0.023***
Latere generatie		0.095***	0.050***	-0.021***
Migratiestatus individu (regio) (ref = België)				
Historisch migratieland		-0.035***	-0.026***	-0.022***

Buurland	0.020***	0.028***	0.031***
Andere Eur	0.005	0.006*	0.002
Niet-Eur	0.015**	0.017**	0.010
Opleidingsniveau (ref = ISCED 3-4, midden)			
ISCED 0-2 (laag)		-0.070***	-0.021***
ISCED (5-6 (hoog)		-0.040***	-0.032***
Regio in België (ref = Vlaanderen)			
Wallonië		0.038***	0.038***
Brussels-Hoofdstedelijk Gewest		0.076***	0.069***
Huishoudinkomen (ref = deciel 5+6)			
Deciel 0+1+2		0.028***	0.015***
Deciel 3+4		-0.022***	-0.013***
Deciel 7+8		-0.031***	-0.042***
Deciel 9+10		-0.041***	-0.049***
Individueel inkomen (ref = deciel 5+6)			
Deciel 0+1+2		-0.080***	-0.048***
Deciel 3+4		-0.070***	-0.014***
Deciel 7+8		0.009***	0.040***
Deciel 9+10		-0.012***	0.037***
Aantal kinderen (ref = geen kinderen)			
1 of 2 kinderen			-0.048***
3 en meer kinderen			-0.071***
Leeftijd van het jongste kind (ref = 7-12 jaar)			
0-2 jaar			-0.064***
3-6 jaar			0.016***
13-18 jaar			-0.053***
18+			-0.188***
Constante	-3.758***	-3.788***	-3.767***
Observaties	101251945	101251945	101251945
Log likelihood	-1.480e+07	-1.480e+07	-1.480e+07
Chi²	112015	117934	124388

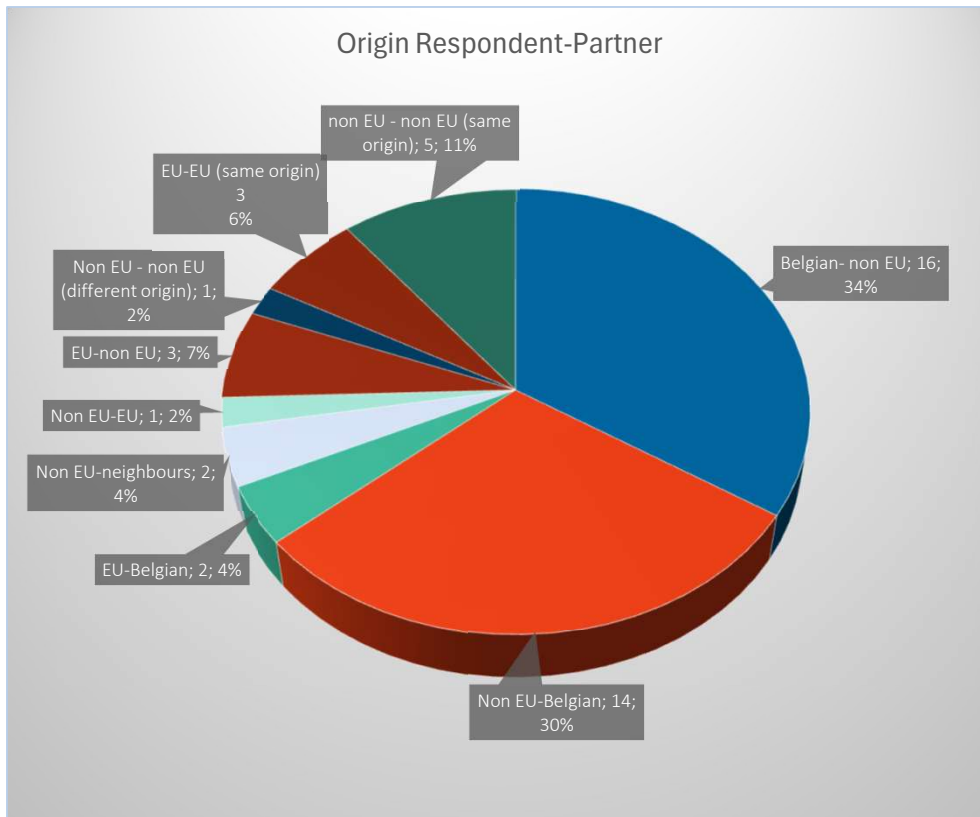
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Noot: parameters van de tijdsvariabele (basishazard) werden niet opgenomen in deze tabel.

The superdiversification of relations and families Looking through and beyond the ethnic lense

- Going beyond the ethnic perspective (superdiversity lens)
- Additional variables explain parts of why couples have a higher risk of getting a divorce
 - Migration generation, migration country, highest level of education, household and individual income, how many children present and age of youngest child
- Not all differences between couples are explained by these variables
 - Bicultural nature of the relationships plays a role in their risk at divorce
 - Not only individual characteristics, but also as a result how today's society reacts on bicultural relations.
- Numbers only tell part of the story...

What do couples tell us? Methodology



- 47 in-depth interviews with respondents in a bicultural relationship
 - 10 by the researchers
 - 37 by (adult) students
 - as co-researchers
- Aim: maximum variation
 - In practice: overrepresentation of women, underrepresentation of certain profiles...

What do couples tell us?

First of all: Simply people in a relationship ...

- Minor differences in relationship satisfaction between bicultural and other couples (Gezinsenquête 2016)
 - But shared minority background can facilitate things?
- *“Simply, with ups-and-downs... like in all relationships...”*
- Universal couple strategies for a strong relation:
 - Open communication as a universal basis
 - Mutual respect, recognition and appreciation
- More or less the same needs for relationship support (but more adequate support is needed)

Introducing Inne & Talal

“You know what’s difficult? It’s unclear whether our misunderstandings come from cultural differences, personal differences, or just language... probably a combination”

“All the paperwork is in Dutch, and it’s so complex that he can’t fully understand it on his own... so I become a bit like a social worker. And that feels very uncomfortable”

“Whose priorities take precedence? (...) I take many decisions on a daily basis, but all the major decisions are taken at his tempo”

“This relationship is not only up to us. Whether it works or not goes far beyond us. And I find that very difficult... and also very unfair”

What do couples tell us?
...With extra layers that add complexity

- Within the relation:
 - Communication, language, emotions, gender expectations, power and positionality...
- Around the relation:
 - Family expectations, social judgement, loyalty conflicts...
- Beyond the relation:
 - Institutional barriers, inequalities, racism and discrimination...

Stress in bi-cultural relationships is rarely just relational.

It is relational, contextual and structural - at the same time.

Introducing Sevda & Mehmet

“I was torn away from everything... from my family, my friends, my life (...) I felt like I lost my value... as if I was seen as someone without worth, just because I couldn't speak the language”

“I was always trying to manage both sides... it was very heavy for me”

“Suddenly he could explode... for nothing (...)”

“I offered him my ‘contract’: if it's yes, we go back together. If not, it's over. (...)
You don't have the right to treat me without respect”

What do couples tell us?

Coping strategies in bicultural couples

- Cultural consciousness
- Relational coping
being yourself while adapting to each other, building a shared “we”
- Meaning-making and positioning
understanding and positioning this “we” within a broader context
- Boundary work
protecting that “we” in relation to the outside world

Couples continuously navigate between:

- Self-oriented strategies: autonomy, setting boundaries
 - We-oriented strategies: attunement, co-constructing meaning
- ongoing process of balancing, boundary-setting, and meaning-making, in which couples actively construct a shared “we-culture.”

Introducing Sevda & Mehmet (2)

“I said to him all the time: you have to be followed, you need someone to help you, because you are not well. But he didn’t accept it. He said: you are the one who has a problem. (...)

At a certain moment I said: I will go myself. I will start. (...)

So I found a psychologist... I took the train, it took two hours.

And that man told me: bring your husband. He has to come.

So I managed to convince him to go. (...)

And after, when he saw another therapist, he came out crying...
and he said: I will never make someone live what my father made me live.
I will stop this cycle.”

Introducing Inne & Talal (2)

“Sometimes it was really helpful that the therapist could kind of give subtitles — like, this is what that person is actually trying to say”

“I think what we mainly experienced there was... that we can put difficult things on the table, and that it doesn't mean we'll break up because of it”

“What is helpful about it for me is that we have a regular time and place where we can have those conversations, and then also close them again. Otherwise, it just turns into very intense, emotional discussions that go on and on without any kind of ending”

What do couples tell us?

Searching (but often not finding) divers-sensitive support

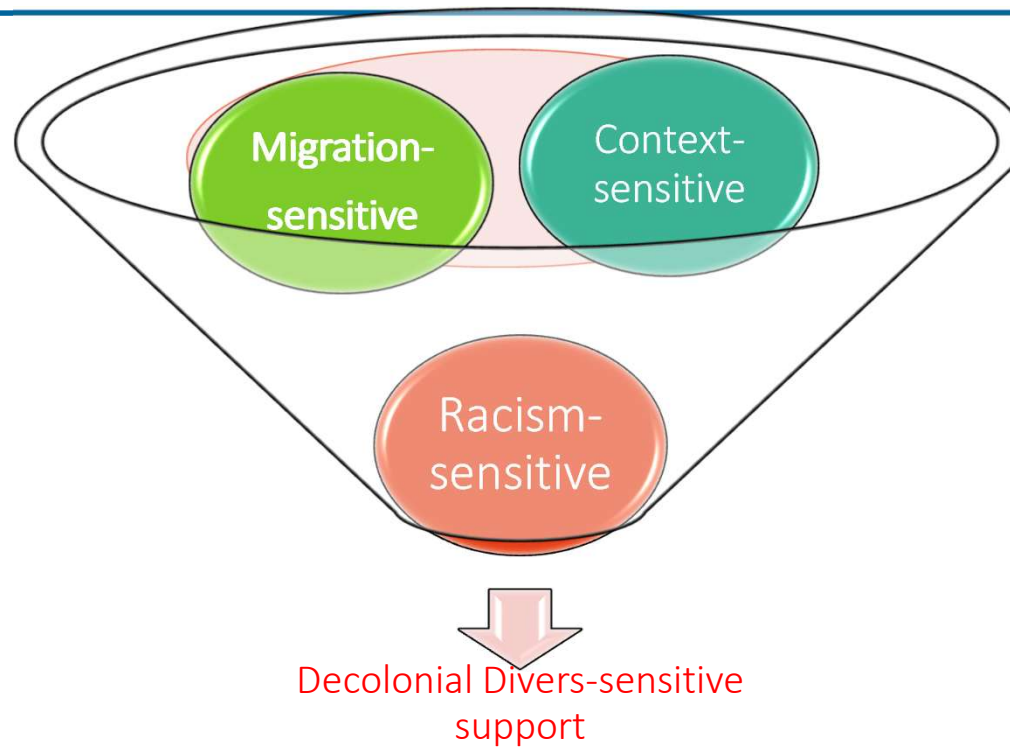
- Bicultural couples largely share similar needs
- Attitudes towards support are more complex and layered:
 - Situated at the intersection of relationship, culture(s), family and society
 - Morally loaded : loyalty, shame, privacy, “failing” ...
 - Often marked by differences between partners in attitudes toward help
- Barriers in (finding) support
 - Lack of cultural sensitivity
 - White, middle class & secular bias
 - Mistrust, fear of not being understood
 - due to negative experiences
 - Stigma, taboos
 - Loyalty issues, moral pressure against seeking help
 - Cost, waiting lists
 - Structural and institutional barriers

Implications for family support: not more, but better...

Support of bicultural couples still often falls short in:

- ➔ Racism-sensitive care of families (*decolonizing the support systems*).
- ➔ In recognizing the grief after migration (trauma & migration-sensitivity)
- ➔ In recognizing the contextual needs (contextual sensitivity)
- ➔ In recognizing what couples need in the personal, contextual and structural layers (divers-sensitivity)

- Supporting should contain all the layers
- (Decolonial) Divers-sensitivity is not merely multi-layered, it also entails the dynamic interaction among the various dimensions of the systems, within families are embedded and interconnected.





Implications for research

Mental health inequality:

“Those who are not seen, are not understood and not appreciated. Also: what we don't understand and appreciate, we don't see. How invisibility shapes the world – as a great unequalizer, but also, sometimes, as a privilege” (Perez)

Implications for research

- Some respondents are racism-sensitive, culturally sensitive and context sensitive.
 - Some don't recognize racism, don't even know the migration story of their partner.
 - Some couples talk about each others cultural and family heritage, others try to assimilate.
 - So , what couples tell us, what they don't talk about, how they tell their stories is strongly connected with their world view.
 - But it also tells us something about the research tools and systems.
- Ask yourself: Did we capture all of these stories, in decolonial ways, so we can see the specific needs of the bicultural couples in the society?
 - Ask yourself: What questions are we not asking?

Empirical issues

Bi-cultural couples with both non-Belgian origine, discuss the topic of racism with each other:

Is it a topic they avoid?

Is it because they both internalize this?

Is it a common theme that brought them together?

Is it the interviewer failing to ask the right question?

- How can we know that we asked the questions, that reveal what we don't know?
- How can we systematically examine the reasons why certain experiences, perspectives or patterns fail to emerge in interview material?

Circulation of knowledge

- In qualitative research, “participants” are often expected to share intimate experiences and reveal personal information.
- Decoloniality considers the study sample not “participants” but “knowers.” Fadil (2019)

Ask yourself: How can we deal with research outputs in decolonial ways?

What forms of knowledge production and dissemination can be developed to return this contribution in ways that are meaningful and beneficial to the communities involved?

Contextual and structural issues

How well do bicultural couples read the structural and contextual influences in their lives?

It is like recognize the water when you always have lived in water.
For instance: *what is the impact of migration on the relationship?*

- Ask yourself: did we conceptualize the process by which individuals internalize social dynamics that remain unnamed or unrecognized?
- How can we challenge the tools that give a view over lives that were overlooked or unmeasured until now?

Implications for family policies

- Family forms, relationships and needs are becoming more diverse, but **family policy** struggles to capture this complexity
 - National Register limitations
 - Universal (colour blind) approach, avoiding addressing ethnic-cultural diversity
 - What is seen as the 'normal' family by society & policymakers?
 - yet service use remains unequal
 - e.g. lower uptake among non-EU-families
 - Limited support for professionals on divers-sensitive work, multilingual and transnational context

Implications for family policies

- **Beyond family policy:** multiple policy domains
 - Complex administrative procedures
 - Family law
 - Housing, labour market, childcare



Conclusions



- 'Thé family' today is
 - more superdiverse than ever
 - More diverse in contrary to what many people think
- Family support
 - has a strong white middleclass bias
 - Is not yet adapted to increasing superdiversity
 - Need for (more) diverse-sensitive family support
- Family policies
 - Are too often colourblind
 - Ignore the extra layer of complexity for many bicultural relations
 - Ignores transnational families
 - And their responsibility to normalise this evolution

Research team

Centre for Family Studies, Odisee
University of Applied Sciences

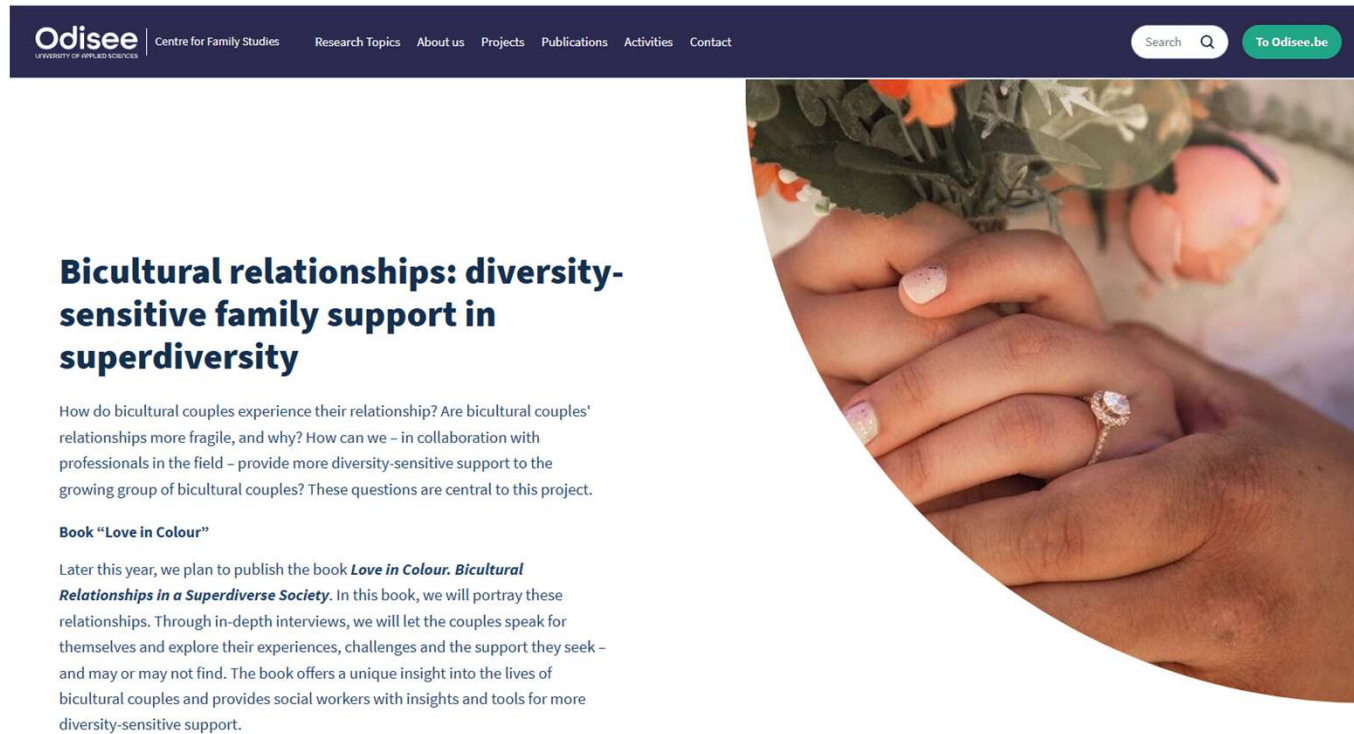
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Website

- <https://kcgezinswetenschappen.odisee.be/en>
- <https://kcgezinswetenschappen.odisee.be/en/research-projects/bicultural-relationships>



The screenshot shows the Odisee website header with the logo and navigation menu. The main content area features a large image of two hands holding a bouquet of flowers. The text on the page discusses bicultural relationships and the upcoming book 'Love in Colour: Bicultural Relationships in a Superdiverse Society'.

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Bicultural relationships: diversity-sensitive family support in superdiversity

How do bicultural couples experience their relationship? Are bicultural couples' relationships more fragile, and why? How can we – in collaboration with professionals in the field – provide more diversity-sensitive support to the growing group of bicultural couples? These questions are central to this project.

Book "Love in Colour"

Later this year, we plan to publish the book *Love in Colour. Bicultural Relationships in a Superdiverse Society*. In this book, we will portray these relationships. Through in-depth interviews, we will let the couples speak for themselves and explore their experiences, challenges and the support they seek – and may or may not find. The book offers a unique insight into the lives of bicultural couples and provides social workers with insights and tools for more diversity-sensitive support.

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Coffee break – ZONNEBLOEM

- **Workshop 4** - "Supporting Family reunification of Refugee Families"
Alfredo Rizzo (INAPP, Italy) and Prof, Pascal Debruyne (Odisee, Belgium) – IRIS
- **Workshop 5** - "What's Love Got to Do With it? - The immigration law challenges faced by bi-national couples in Ireland and the UK"
Barbara Coll (Solicitor, Rep. of Ireland) & Barry O'Leary (Solicitor, UK) – LELIE
- **Workshop 6** - "Navigating the space between us: Towards diversity trauma and racism sensitive support practices for bi-cultural families" Kim Lecoyer, Birsen Taspinar, Geert Schelkens (Odisee Center for Family Studies, Belgium) – ROOS

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