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Advances in the Study of Mixedness: Evaluating the Relationship Between Mixed Unions and Social Integration

Pioneering research conducted by the INMIX Research Group at the UAB sheds light on one of the topics that has preoccupied social scientists for over a century: the relationship between mixed unions/mixed families and social integration. This study, which combines two research projects, concludes that this relationship is much more complex than has traditionally been theorized. The research highlights the socially transformative value of mixedness, while warning about the persistence of ethnic and cultural divisions that hinder social inclusion and social cohesion.

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The increase and internationalization of immigration in recent years in Spain has occurred parallel to a significant increase in mixed partnerships between immigrants and natives (including marriages and common-law unions) as well as greater numbers of mixed-race children, particularly in regions such as Catalonia. Still, little is known about the scope, internal dynamics, meanings, and social consequences of this phenomenon, in particular its relationship to social integration, an issue that has preoccupied social scientists (in anthropology, sociology, demography, etc.) for more than a century. According to the classical theory of assimilation, which emerged in

the US in the 1920s and was further developed during the 1950s and 1960s, mixed marriages can be considered a key indicator or "litmus test" of immigrants' and ethnic groups' integration into the mainstream society, as mixed unions are thought to facilitate, for instance, inter-group interaction and expansion of personal networks, economic mobility, and the lessening of racial and cultural prejudices.

The reality, however, seems to be more complex, as noted by the first study of its kind in Spain, which is based on two concurrent research projects ("Immigration and Mixed Unions: Ethnicity and Social Integration," funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain, and "E Pluribus Unum: Immigration, Mixedness and Social Cohesion," funded by the 2011 APOSTA programme of the UAB). Both projects are led by Dan Rodríguez-García, professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology and director of the Research Group on Immigration, Mixedness, and Social Cohesion (INMIX), a UAB research team that was recognized in 2014 as an Emerging Research Group (2014SGR-1527) by the Agency for the Management of University and Research Grants of the Catalan Government (AGAUR).

Anticipating the complexity of the relationship between mixed unions and social integration, the study employed a pioneering multi-method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including document analysis, analysis of census data, and ethnographic fieldwork. Participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with endogamous and mixed couples living in Catalonia and their descendants. The sample included seven very diverse countries of origin (Romania, Morocco, Senegal, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Pakistan, and China) and analyzed the different dimensions (economic, political, social, and cultural) of integration. The study analyzed, among other things, daily life and customs, socializing tendencies, the structure of personal networks, social and cultural capital, political and social participation, identity, intergenerational dynamics, and attitudes and processes of social discrimination among the couples and their descendants. From a theoretical point of view, the study moves away from the classical notion of "mestizo", rooted in a colonialist past, and talks about "mixedness" (*mixité* in French), an encompassing concept that refers to mixed marriages/mixed families in all this phenomenon's dimensions, and that goes beyond the demographic data to focus on the social processes associated with mixed unions and on the analysis of mixed unions as a "third space" of social transformation in the modern world.

The results of the study, which have already resulted in several high-impact scientific publications (see references below), suggest that the relationship between mixed unions and integration is much more complex than has often been theorized. First, it has been found that while endogamy (partnerships between people from the same country of origin) is still the prevalent trend, mixed unions and families are on the rise; however, this pattern is uneven, with some groups having a higher incidence of mixed marriages (e.g., Dominicans in Catalonia) than others (e.g., Ecuadorians, Pakistanis, or Chinese in Catalonia). This finding can be explained by structural and demographic factors (such as group size or sex ratios), the migration project and trajectory of the groups involved, and the particular sociocultural characteristics of the groups examined.

As for the relationship between mixed unions and integration, it has been found that this relationship is segmented and multidirectional—that is, positive and largely one-way for some aspects (e.g., the acquisition of nationality and the expansion and diversification of personal networks), negative or irrelevant for others (e.g., shortening the amount of time it takes to find a job, participating in associations, and having a stronger identification with the host society), and two-way or "bidirectional" for others (e.g., the learning of official languages—a form of human capital acquisition). In addition, differences in the degree of integration may vary according to factors such as the country of origin of the immigrant spouse, the duration of residence, social class, or gender. In this way, intermarriage may, for example, correlate with greater socioeconomic integration for certain origins, but not for others. Similarly, intermarried groups may simultaneously demonstrate greater integration in some areas (e.g., social and cultural integration) while not in others (e.g., socioeconomic mobility). These results point not only to the complexity involved in this relationship, but also to the need to consider the bidirectional nature of processes of integration and to include other aspects of integration—traditionally omitted in the literature on this field—that are related to everyday life, such as the acquisition of new values and norms, new cultural practices, new ways of thinking, and life satisfaction.

The study also reveals that intermarriage does not necessarily erode ethno-racial boundaries and negative attitudes between groups, thus questioning the role of intermarriage as a diluter and harmonizer of differences. On the one hand, there are social attitudes of rejection towards the formation of mixed couples, including those coming from the families of the spouses, and especially from the families of native spouses who are coupled with an immigrant belonging to a "visible minority" group, particularly immigrants from Muslim countries, such as Morocco and Pakistan. Further, ethno-racial prejudices and discriminatory attitudes (both towards one's own group and towards other immigrant minority groups) also exist among intermarried couples themselves. On this topic of perceptions, categorizations, and attitudes, the results of the study are also noteworthy with respect to the social categorization of the children of "visible" mixed couples, who are often socially categorized as "foreigners," based on their phenotype (skin colour, accent, or clothing) or on stereotypes and negative prejudices relating to the origin of the immigrant parent.

The study points out that an "identity mismatch" occurs where self-identification as "Catalan," "Spanish," or "mixed" does not match with the socially imposed categories of "immigrant" or "black," "Asian," or "Muslim." In contrast, among descendants of mixed couples who have a "white/European" phenotype, identity mismatch and related discrimination does not occur, and the claiming of a mixed identity is more symbolic and strategic, advantageously associated with greater human and social capital. According to the study, discrimination and "identity mismatch" can result in "reactive identities," which may limit social interaction, sense of belonging, the use of multiple sociocultural capital, and, in general, social inclusion, as has also been found by previous studies on the descendants of mixed couples in other countries (e.g., the United States, France, the Netherlands, and the UK). All this alerts us to the risk that the "pigmentocratic criteria" prevalent in other countries (e.g., the US) could increase in importance in processes of social inclusion/exclusion in Spain.

In sum, while acknowledging that mixed unions/mixed families can, to some extent, become an engine for the increased ethnocultural integration of immigrants and minority groups and for the weakening of social boundaries and the growth of inter-group solidarity, this study points out that intermarriage does not necessarily imply full integration nor does it guarantee the lessening of ethno-racial boundaries (the alleged "blurring" of colour lines) or of discrimination towards other groups. The value of this study, therefore, lies not only in highlighting the socially transformative value of mixedness, but also in shedding light on the disheartening persistence of ethnic and cultural divides that hinder inclusion and social cohesion. This research, which is also valuable at an applied level, shows us that mixed couples and their descendants constitute a micro-laboratory of intercultural relations that can help advance our understanding of intercultural dynamics and processes of social inclusion/exclusion at a macro level.

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