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*Loving the Stranger: Mixed Couples and Mixed Emotions*

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Abstract. *This paper brings together two of the key theoretical concepts attributed to Georg Simmel – the notion of the ‘stranger’ (the person who is not indigenous to a social context and perpetually seen as possibly not belonging) and ‘love’ as socially constructed which has the potential to turn an individual love into a notion of ‘super individual couplehood’ unifying two individuals and transforming them in the process. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 35 people in ‘mixed’ couples, this paper examines how loving the stranger is constructed, maintained and challenged across cultures, languages, races, and nationalities.*

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**Introduction**

‘Mixed’ marriages – across national, ethnic and/or racial boundaries – are a prominent feature of contemporary social life. Often mixed marriages are used to measure how well outsider migrant or racial/ethnic minority populations are integrated into or belong to mainstream by their marriage to someone who is from the mainstream culture/race. In these marriages, a ‘stranger’, someone from outside the society/culture, falls in love with a ‘non-stranger’ assumed to be from the mainstream society. This paper examines the case of mixed (one partner identifies as not-Irish and one as Irish) international couples (both same sex and heterosexual identifying) living in Ireland. 17.3% of the population in Ireland is now not born in Ireland (CSO, 2017). Increasing diversity in Ireland has meant that there is a rising number of international mixed couples and people. There is no data available on mixed marriages

in Ireland from the Census 2016 (by age, gender or ethnicity) yet, but from earlier Censuses we know that most marriages in Ireland are endogamous. Lunn and Fahey (2011), using 2006 Census data, found that there are a growing number of interracial partnerships with 22.7% of Asian women and 19.6% of Black men in a partnership with a white Irish partner.

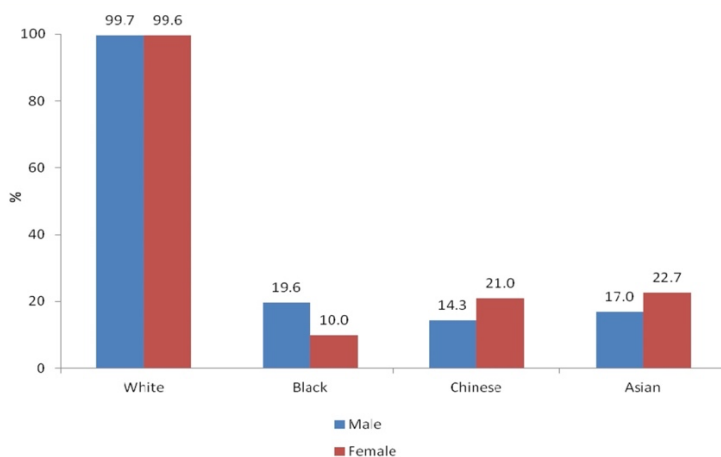


Figure 1 – Partnership by ethnicity: per cent with whites (from Lunn and Fahey, 2011: 27).

Using Growing Up in Ireland survey data, Roder et. al. (2014) likewise found that while most children in the survey have mothers of a similar background as their partner, there are a few who have partners of other backgrounds. O’Malley (2020) found that the majority of mixed race families contained a white mother with mixed race black children (O’Malley, 2020: 935).

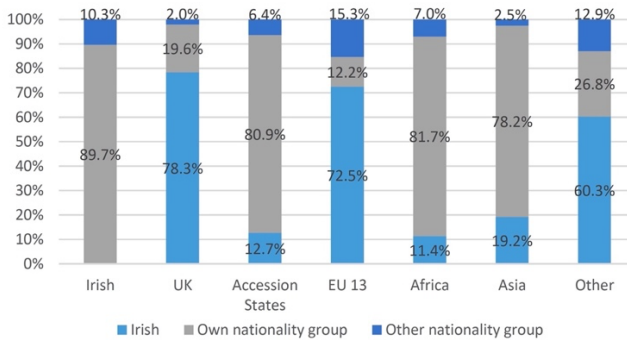


Figure 2 – Nationality group of mather's partner (from Roder Et. al.,2014: 21)

This in part explains how Ireland has started to become “more than white” (King-O’Riain, 2019: 821). Within mixed couples in Ireland, like many migrants who are seen as the ‘stranger,’ the non-Irish partners interviewed here often spoke of feeling like they didn’t fit into or belong in Irish society. No matter how long they lived in Ireland, spoke Irish or were familiar with Irish culture, they felt racialized as a perpetual stranger in Ireland labelled a ‘blow in’ or someone who did not originate in Ireland.

To understand this significant new pattern of social relations, this paper applies Georg Simmel’s concepts of ‘the stranger’ and ‘love’ to an analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with 35 people in ‘mixed’ (one partner from Ireland and one not from Ireland) couples. It examines how loving the stranger is constructed and given meaning in terms of ever day lived emotional experience, as structured by the ‘social forms’ of Love and The Stranger.

The first part of the paper analyses the social processes through which ‘love’ is recognised and created in these mixed couples. It traces the various ways in which these tacit ‘social forms’ interact and are mobilised in everyday relationships. In particular, the analysis investigates the tension between the ‘unique’ and the

‘universal’, which is central to these social forms, as well as to globalisation itself. Under conditions of globalization, the understanding that love is socially and culturally constructed is put to the test as different notions of love come up against each other within international mixed couples. Next, the paper examines the micro-politics of the translation between social forms through an analysis of how these couples both experience and negotiate Love and the Stranger, often by arguing that theirs is an ‘epic love’. It finds that, for many of the couples interviewed here, love also became a motivation for social action – the act of transnationally migrating to a country they had never lived in before – thus posing the love of the stranger as a possible path to growing multiculturalism in Ireland.

### **Understanding Mixed Relationships: Literature on Love and ‘the Stranger’**

In the modern era, it has been claimed that there has been a shift to search for a ‘pure relationship’ which,

...refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it (Giddens, 1992: 58).

Robertson (1992) critiques Giddens for having a blind spot about the non-western world and his analysis of the ‘other’ within these relationships. He writes,

(Giddens) suggestion that there is no Other in a globalized world apparently absolves

him from undertaking such a task. He fails to understand that it is only in a (minimally) globalized world that a problem of 'the Other' could have arisen. What he apparently doesn't see is that a view of the world as marked by unicity can coexist with a view of the world as a place of others – indeed that such a recognition is central to the conceptual mapping of the global circumstance (Robertson, 1992: 144-145).

Many other authors have shown that this conceptualisation has also masked how the individual pursuit of love is deeply embedded in and shaped by larger social structures such as patriarchy (Jamieson 1999) and neo-liberal capitalism. Simmel offers a way to provide a more dynamic analysis of how these 'pure relationships' are structured by the various 'meso-level' social forms that are the infrastructure of everyday life. In particular, his conceptualisations of Love and the Stranger provide a rich source for the more micro analysis of the experiences of international mixed couples in negotiating concepts and practices of love. Georg Simmel is perhaps most famous for introducing the concept of the stranger in 1908 and writing about the role of the 'stranger' in society. He wrote,

The stranger will thus not be considered here in the usual sense of the term, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow – the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going (Levine, 1971: 143).

One of the main characteristics of the stranger is that they decide to remain (in my data they do this for love) and are not accepted as native to the mainstream and majority of the society in which they live – hence a perpetual stranger. Another characteristic, implied in the above quote is that the stranger has 'itchy feet' and is always

thinking of the place they came from as well as where they are presently living. According to Simmel, the stranger is:

...fixed within a certain spatial circle – or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to spatial boundaries – but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it (Levine, 1971: 143).

However, the ‘distance’ to the Stranger is challenged by the involvement of ‘Strangers’ in the social form of Love, which is intensely intimate. As Vilhelm Aubert writes, “Love is an emotion in which the forces forming the foundation of all social life meet with the most individualistic cult of the personal”(Aubert, 1965: 203). For Simmel and Aubert, love can be seen as linking individuals to others and to larger social institutions within and across relationships. Simmel also wrote extensively about the concept of love and about the simultaneously unique and universal aspects of love. He writes, “in the stage of first passion, erotic relations strongly reject any thought of generalization: the lovers think that there has never been a love like theirs; that no other can be compared either to the person loved or to the feelings for that person” (Wolff, 1950:406). Their love is unique to themselves. Ironically, this love becomes more familiar over time and in the end is recognized as love because of the universal socially constructed and recognized definition of love. Therefore, while the social forms of the ‘stranger’ and ‘love’ (according to Simmel) could be in tension with each other as both far/near or outside/inside a society at the same time, they also can complement each other as each represents a particular mix of specific personal experience and simultaneously, universal culture. The tension arises when the stranger can never be a part of the community, but Love moves from the unique relation

to a broader set of communal relationships giving the appearance of acceptance.

This tension takes place within modern understandings of love. Luhmann (1987) argues that love is an ideal achieved through interpersonal interpenetration, which can neither be reached nor abandoned. Bauman (2003) argues that love is becoming 'liquid' and is rooted in unregulated individualism which eventually is still managed by the state. While neither directly address mixed couples, the seeds of how love works in mixed couples can be seen in the tension between universal and culturally shaped notions of love in the scholarly work on mixed couples across the world. Charsley et.al. (ed. 2012) trace *Transnational Marriages in Europe* through an analysis of the

involvement of transnational bodies and networks in facilitating cross-border unions, the role of the State in regulating marriage-related migration, the markedly gendered nature of many of these flows, considerations of race and ethnicity, and the great variety of marriages spanning borders (Charsley, 2012: 4).

Williams (2012) expands this idea and argues that cross border marriages can be seen as transnational communities in the making (Williams, 2012: 37).

More broadly, the research on mixed couples has focused on managing interculturality within mixed couples (Rodriquez-Garcia 2006; Djurdjevic and Girona 2016; Cotrell 1990; Marotta 2010). Some have had an explicit therapeutic focus (Karis and Killian 2009; Crippen 2011; Romano 2008). Others have analysed government policies on migration for love/marriage across geographic and national borders (Conradsen and Kronborg 2007; Lavanchy 2012; Eggebø 2013). Love has also been examined within mixed couples as a specific cultural construction and/or a universal emotion (Fisher 2016; Jankowiak 2008; Lindhom 1998, 2006). It is within this context of the tension between culture and universality of love

within mixed couples that I place this research. I add to this literature in terms of how interculturality within couples is shaped not only by the governmental policies on marriage and migration, but also how it reveals the tension between culturally specific notions of love and universality. In the next section, I examine how these tensions are negotiated within couples through the themes of: Universality of Love, Loving and Belonging, and; Culturally different but epic love – as an illustration of re-interpreting the social form of love through the encounter with the social form of the stranger.

## **Methods**

The data in this article come from an interview study of 35 interviewees involved in transnational mixed couples and families. The interviews were conducted through English from 2010-2012 with same sex and heterosexual couples and families (ages 26-60), from Ireland, France, Canada, US, UK, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Poland, Zimbabwe, China living in Ireland. Interviewees were from Cork, Kildare, Galway, Tipperary, Dublin and the surrounds. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

Thirty-five people were interviewed for this research which started with the couple/intimate dyad as the initial emotional relationship examined. All couples had one member who described him/herself as international and not Irish. Eighteen people were interviewed as couples together and eighteen as individuals as per the preference of the interviewees – all were a part of a larger transnational family. In total, the interviewees represented participants in twenty-three heterosexual relationships and four same sex relationships (three lesbian and one gay male couple). The vast majority of the sample was married (including two of the four same sex couples married in other legal jurisdictions that allowed



same sex marriage). Fifteen people in the sample had children. More women and more non-Irish people agreed to be interviewed, so that Irish men are somewhat under-represented.

Most of the interviewees lived in or around Dublin, Ireland in urban and suburban locations, but 6 interviewees currently lived in rural locations. Some of the Dublin area interviewees also had past rural experiences. Most of the interviewees were self-identified as middle class with two families identifying as 'well off' with high levels of education and employed as academics and architects. Four families described themselves as 'struggling' and seemed to be less well off. For example, in one family the husband was long-term unemployed, the wife was a full-time homemaker and carer for their four children and their only source of income was social welfare. They had no car or landline phone, but they had broadband access<sup>1</sup>.

For the most part, the people interviewed did not meet their partners online, but instead in person in various contexts such as studying, working, speed dating, or through friends. Almost all non-Irish people in the sample had made the decision to migrate to (or back to) Ireland in order to stay together as a couple/family.

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<sup>1</sup> Sampling of interviewees was done through a national call through the Educate Together (the only multid denominational) Schools in Ireland asking for participants from international/transnational families. Ads were also placed in gay/lesbian, ethnic migrant, and interracial print magazines to recruit interviewees. Announcements were also placed in newsletters of relevant community-based organizations such as the Bilingual Forum Ireland. I also contacted the former founder of the Harmony organization, Marian Tannam. Harmony was a community-based organization that existed in the 1980s and 1990s in Ireland for interracial families of which many members were predominantly white Irish women who had had children with black African and Caribbean men and who were raising mixed children in Ireland. From this meeting snowball sampling was used to contact former members for interview. While the sample of interviewees is not generalizable, I did try to ensure as much regional, gender and ethnic and class diversity as possible in the sample.

Most described their transnationalism as driven by ‘love’ – they migrated for love and continue to maintain strong connections transnationally for love.

### **Negotiating Love and the Stranger in Mixed Couples**

This first part of the analysis explores how couples negotiated the potential complementarities and tensions of Love and the Stranger. The first thing that was of interest in the interviews was just how tacit or taken for granted were interviewees’ understandings of the nature of ‘love’. Although from different cultural, religious and often racial backgrounds, most interviewees had a difficult time explaining how they knew they were in love with their partner. For example, when I asked people how did their relationship with their partner ‘get serious’ or become something that past relationships had not, almost every respondent used the term ‘being’ or ‘falling in love’. When I asked them how did you know you were in love? The most common response was that they ‘just knew’.

Jonah (32) from Zimbabwe and Mary (30) from Ireland, met while they were both working in Malawi. They married and returned to Ireland where they now live with their young daughter. When asked ‘how did you know you were in love?’ Jonah responded: “We didn’t, we still don’t!” (laughter). Mary continues,

For me, I couldn’t say it was love at first sight because we met and then very quickly ...but I think it was very instant that I felt that romance or whatever it was, because it wasn’t in my plan. I wasn’t thinking I might meet someone here. I had had lots of other relationships for years and then I definitely wasn’t thinking ‘Oh, I wonder will I meet somebody in Malawi and fall in love?’ you know? It wasn’t on my mind. So, I did feel straight away that we just seemed to be together.

Jonah: I knew it when I was jumping on a bus to follow her to Ireland. In the middle of the night I was going to a place where I knew no one. All I had was a phone number and I was following Mary over to this place and I was thinking ‘what the hell are you doing?!’ but I came anyway.

They ‘just know it’ in large part because they have taken meanings from their social experiences that they label as ‘love’ and when they see those and more importantly ‘feel’ those feelings, they ‘know’ they are in love. They know it because it is familiar on some level to them from their social experience and they link the bodily feeling to the cultural script to confirm their notions of what love is. It is resonating with their emotional repertoire of feelings that are ‘feelable’ and links into a narrative or script of love which is socially learned and then embedded within social interactions which in turn shapes their emotional expectations and interactions. But as Ann Swidler points out, “people had great difficulty explaining why they love the people they do” (Swidler, 2001: 26).

Sasha (an Irish care worker) and Rosanna (an Australian chef) both in their 30s explained how they met at a lesbian speed dating night in Dublin and how their relationship progressed from there. Rosanna explained to me:

I will tell you how I know I am in love with Sasha because it is a lot more recent. It was just the way she spoke to me, completely treated me as an equal, as an intelligent being and I have always felt it in my stomach, it is the butterflies and the tingles all over. And just the way she makes me laugh and the nurturing and caring that I get. Someone who will actually go above and beyond themselves and definitely puts me first. And you don't do that unless you feel a lot for that person.

For a vast majority of people, though, being in love and loving someone in a different way than your friends, for example, contradicts the Simmelian concept of the simultaneity of love as

both unique (unlike other loves) and universal (you tacitly know it because you recognize it from socially constructed definitions of love). Often the sense of tacit ‘just knowing’ one is in love was explained to me as an act of emotional recognition (feeling butterflies as above), familiarity or trust - that they just ‘felt at home’ with the person they love. Many invoked the analogy of ‘home’ and belonging in their discussions of how they knew they could trust, love and be loved by that person. Simmel gives us a way to understand this combination of familiarity and trust in the familiar as one side of love, but that it is allied to the sense of something unique and special.

### **Universality of Love: Love as a Social Form**

Love then is tacitly known and understood, but also universal and this in part because love is available to those within the society as a social form. Even with recognition of the universality of love across the world, most of the couples interviewed insisted that theirs was unique, different and a “love like no other.” The person in love actually is having an experience “that has occurred a thousand times before” (Wolff, 1950: 402). Felmlee and Sprecher (2007) argue that there has perhaps been a universality of romantic love across cultures, times and ages. They tell us that “love is a dynamic emotion that develops in a socially interactive sphere” (Felmlee and Sprecher, 2007: 406). However, they don’t explore the difference between love as an object and the concept of ‘being in love.’ Jonah and Mary would agree. When asked if there were culturally different notions of love across Zimbabwean and Irish culture – they said that there were not.

Mary: I wouldn't say there were big differences.

Jonah: No, I don't say it is different you know. It was probably the same in my country.

Mary: Now that I know Jonah's family, I don't think there is any difference in the way people fall in love.

Jonah: I would say it is a worldwide thing, it is the same all over.

While these discussions give us a good context in which to understand the process that Simmel hints at in terms of the 'universality' of love, it does not give social actors the agency to modify, challenge and change notions of love when crossing cultural/national boundaries.

Instead, social actors use a cultural script and a social form of love, which is then used to describe multiple different forms of relationships. By understanding love as under the same script/form, we then know how to relate to the people within it. One key feature is that this way of thinking about love implies a long-term exclusive commitment (but expressed as a unique set of feelings). However, this seems more dynamic in mixed couples for when someone loves, they also are changed and change others through loving practices. Even conceptions of what love 'is' are changed in the social interactions that constitute loving practices. For example, in the sample here of mixed couples, there were long discussions about the ways in which partners influenced each other's shifting notions of love over time.

Georg Simmel argued that emotions constitute society and social relations emphasizing the importance of context in the experience of emotions (Flam, 2009). In 'The Stranger,' Simmel writes about love,

An estrangement – whether as cause or as consequence it is difficult to decide usually comes at the moment when this

feeling of uniqueness vanishes from the relationship. This is a way a relationship includes both (social) nearness and distance at the same time (Wolff, 1950: 406).

Love then is both individual and unique (like no other) but at the same time, ultimately socially defined, measured and recognized. Love is often considered ‘authentic’ or real and not a sham through socially accepted forms (couples) and rituals (marriage) or producing children but in fact, there are many different and other types of love that are not authenticated/legitimated or sanctioned by society or social institutions. For mixed couples, this also encapsulated feeling both near and far at the same time whilst still positing that their love was epically unique.

This also spiralled outwards from the primary couple and was clarified and made public when others questioned the veracity of their love because they were a mixed couple. Many of the interviewees fell back on an explanation of the need to meet and find the ‘right’ person. This was more important (and more individual), but they also felt that they wanted and needed support and approval of their wider family and social networks that their love was legitimate and real. The public recognition and acceptance of their love and couple hood also changed that love. Time and life experiences (children) also changed what they thought of as love and how they loved.

When asked where they thought that their own ideas of love had come from, many talked about the influence of the media and popular culture. Notions of love are an increasing part of our popular culture, representations in art, literature, tv, media, technology, music etc. ideology of romance and scripts of how people should act, even what ‘being in love’ means, all shaped by social context and situation. Swidler (2001) argues that when we ‘talk of love’ it exposes the social construction of love both for

individuals, but also shows how individual conceptions are shaped by social context and interaction over time. Claire, a twenty something woman from the mid-western part of the US came to Ireland on a study abroad programme and met Sean, her now Irish husband. She describes the beginning of their relationship becoming serious and the different cultural approaches to that.

But still, I was only 20 so I was young enough. And my family was very positive and his family was very positive, but I also remember his mother saying to him, and not when I was there, but she said to him privately and she told me later, 'are you sure she is as serious about you as you are about her?' Because for her she was saying, like an American girl who came over here for a year to study.... But her impression also was that Americans don't take relationships as seriously, she said they have a much higher divorce rate and all of this. She said, 'Sean you have got all in to this, oh this is the girl for me, are you sure she feels the same way?' So I remember that was quite funny because before she ever met me she was saying, 'are you sure she is as serious as you?' So a lot of mixed reactions going into the period. Like I was apprehensive enough about [unclear 19 40 23] I didn't actually ever doubt that we would make it because I just felt that confidence but I was going, oh this is going to be hard. And it was hard, it was quite hard.

The cultural understanding of loving relationships and how serious they would be interpreted to be was assumed to be different between Ireland and the US. This led to different expectations of love and the degree or depth and import of the feelings at hand.

However, we can see in the interview data here that intercultural love relationships are not always equal and do not always exist outside of power relations. Lynn Jamieson's (1999) critique claims that

Empirically, intimacy and inequality continue to coexist in many personal lives. Personal relationships remain highly gendered.

Men and women routinely both invoke gender stereotypes or turn a convenient blind eye to gendering processes when making sense of themselves as lovers, partners, mothers, fathers, and friends” (Jamieson, 1999: 491).

In the realm of culture, there can be inequalities as well. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2014) explain, “The universalism of love, or, more precisely, the promise of universalism, bewitches us, deadens our senses, seduces us and smuggles the world’s conflicts into the beds and hearts of lovers” (Beck and Gernsheim, 2014: 55). These inequalities can and sometimes do, mean that power within love relationships can be expressed in cultural imbalances and confusions.

May, in her 50s who is white Irish and now divorced from her Chinese husband, Li, of 25 years, explains how cultural differences and expectations shaped the emotional and eventually unequal gendered division of labour within their relationship.

Interviewer: What kind of confusions did you have?

May: We had issues around financial issues – from the beginning we were both aware that there would be so many differences in cultures that we did make some leeway. He did not expect me to sit at home and I would have had a lot of freedom with my friends in the beginning but when our kids started coming along it didn’t happen overnight but you could see slowly him changing... em. He expected me more to fit into the traditional role of what he considered what a Chinese mother and housewife wife should be whereas for me I would have considered... I found it very difficult to fit into what was expected of me, like to be staying at home and for my husband to be in charge financially and for him to have so much freedom if he wanted to go out with friends. He didn’t go to discos, but



off in the casinos maybe just staying after work, chatting with friends...that type of thing.

While May and Li (her husband) started out with more equal understandings of their roles in their relationship, the culturally shaped gendered expectations of motherhood and their different understandings of what they meant put a strain on their relationship. It is not surprising that May and Li came to know their own emotions through their language and culture of origin. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2014) argue that “couples or families who live in the same place but whose members come from different countries or continents and whose conception of love and the family is essentially determined by their country of origin” (Beck-Gernsheim, 2014: 15) may find conflict in terms of expressing and interpreting emotions.

In this sense, I was curious if there were global flows of ideas of love which were similar across the world and shaped by global media and social networks. Many couples here expressed quite similar (again Simmelian universality) notions and definitions of love and they claimed that they were no different than other couples. However, it was when they faced racism or assumptions from others that they are not ‘really’ in love or are not seen as a family that made them question the authenticity of their love. They also found it quite difficult to describe what it feels like emotionally and they were particularly annoyed when the state asked them to ‘prove’ the veracity of their love.

## **Loving and Belonging**

People who love people who are different from themselves demographically (interracial or same sex couples) know that they are still ‘crossing a social line’ and are not the ‘norm’. In this section, I explore what the tensions around belonging mean in practice when people are doing both the social forms of love and stranger. When

mixed couples crossed this line to join together, they spoke of a changing sense of belonging in Ireland. This sense of belonging can be defined as: “Belonging is here defined as a sense of ease with oneself and one’s surroundings” (May, 2011: 368). In this sense, belonging involves a process of creating a sense of identification with one’s social, relational and material surroundings and identifying what you have in common with some people and what makes you different from others.

...Belonging plays a role in connecting individuals to the social. This is important because our sense of self is constructed in a relational process in our interactions with other people as well as in relation to more abstract notions of collectively held social norms, values and customs (May, 2011: 368).

There are, of course, rules that guide who can belong and what criteria determine that belonging. To generate a sense of belonging relations must be long-lasting, positive, stable and significant (i.e. filled with affective concerns, with ‘care’) (Antonsich, 2010: 647). The interactions and interpersonal relationships build your sense of belonging through emotions or ‘personal, intimate, feelings of being ‘at home’” (Antonsich, 2010: 644).

Emotions then are key in this process of belonging as, “...people experience their social position and their intersubjective ties as drenched with emotion and morality” (May, 2011: 369). The emotion of feeling the stranger or not belonging are embedded within informal interactional structures and norms that guide who can and cannot belong (what they can and cannot feel and what form that can take). These often took the shape of hierarchies of belonging when for example, mixed race people and other ‘strangers’ who had no ‘one’ place or group to belong to were seen as margin dwellers and liminal people often rejected by both sides

and not having any place (even with length of time and cultural knowledge) to belong.

This became crystal clear when interviewees discussed how their love for their partner also came with cultural responsibility, guilt and at times, conflict. Susan, who is college educated and from the United States in her mid 40s explains to me how this comes up in her relationship with her Irish husband Conor.

Susan: It depends on what it is, there are a lot of times where he can quite agree with me. There are times where I will say, yeah it is annoying in Ireland that no one sticks to the rules because it means things aren't sorted out and there is a huge waiting list for driver's licences whereas in America you walk in and you get your driver's licence. But there are times too where I can put him on the defensive, and vice versa. I think we have learned more and more that we have to be careful of things because I used to think nothing of saying, 'oh can you believe what your mom served for dinner, it was so plain and there was no taste to it.' And then I had to think, wait a second this is his mom and I am thinking like isn't it strange to him. It was the way he was raised.

Like I can go, 'oh Ireland is so crazy the way Catholicism is so big and I hate that everyone has to do it.' And Conor would say, 'wait a second, you were lucky that you had that freedom and the reason Catholicism is so big is because we couldn't be Catholic for so long, so we had to cling to it.' So for him, he gets a bit defensive because there is a history there and that.

The emotions of not belonging and not feeling supported, of culture shock and the adjustment to a new culture and society inadvertently became the responsibility not just of Susan, but also her Irish born husband. He also spoke of the early days when she was 'totally homesick' and having trouble 'settling'. Conor's commitment to and love for Susan drove him to think about how to best make her feel that she belonged linking both being a

‘stranger’ in a new land because their love was a unique ‘love’ which he thought could help in mediating that.

This belonging links to the idea of home in ideas about love. But, it also is in tension with the Stranger. Next I illustrate how the ‘stranger’ isn’t just a fact, but is actively produced and enforced as a social identity.

The making of the non-Irish partner into a ‘stranger’ was often done even by close family members of mixed couples in Ireland who assumed that there would be different emotional repertoires and interpretations of emotions. Mary and Jonah explain how the different cultures in their families - black Zimbabwean culture and white Irish Catholic culture – when combined created suspicion for some. Mary describes how they got engaged and when they told her parents they were getting married - “It did not go well”.

Jonah clarifies, “They didn’t like me (laughing).” Mary explains, “I think they just were, they wanted to protect me. They thought somehow that you go away and you meet someone and they take advantage of you.”

Jonah: They thought I was married in Africa with loads of kids that I’d left behind! (laughing).

Mary: I remember my mam saying just before we got married ‘how do you know he is not married?’ and I said, ‘Well, because he told me he is not, you know?’ like you would expect anyone to tell you. I think it was just so out of their experience – especially my dad....they had literally never spoken to anyone from Africa at that stage so it was a big shock....there was a bit of a ‘to do’ and mam was worried about ‘if you have children, they will be different’.

While the love between Mary and Jonah was well cemented, and they felt at the age to get married, her family were less assured in part because Jonah did not belong to Irish society and their children would be racially and culturally mixed and therefore 'different'. In this sense, belonging was a part of love but full belonging was never really made available to the Stranger (O'Malley 2020). Uncomfortable with a stranger, Mary's intimate partner, in their midst meant that Mary's Irish family had to 'adjust' to incorporating a stranger into their family.

### **Culturally Different But Epic Love**

Often mixed couples stressed how they were culturally and sometimes racially or culturally different from one another, but they asserted that there were many commonalities in their relationships. They often re-interpreted the social form of love through the encounter with the social form of the stranger (their non-Irish partner). For many, in this section, they reinterpreted their relationship by emphasising the difference and the tension between love and stranger – arguing that their love is even more unique or epic as an attempt to resolve this tension. For example, Mei, a Chinese Canadian from the east coast of the US, married Séamus, her Irish husband in a quick marriage ceremony before emigrating to Ireland. They now have 3 children and are settled in the UK, but she describes their early culturally different notions of love.

Mei: I do think for myself, I do think there is an epic love in a funny kind of way, from the minute I met Séamus it just seemed to work and we talk about this ourselves, how we can get on so well and yet come from such different backgrounds.

While they recognize that their love is not unlike others, they also do think that despite their cultural differences, they have an epic and unique type of love. Mei continued to explain to me that one way

that love is expressed is her willingness to leave her family, friends and culture behind to migrate to Europe because she loves her husband. Seamus also discussed what he saw as the epic nature of their love which stood beyond or outside of cultural differences between themselves. Seamus explains,

Hmmm...the idea of whether love is something you work at and develop over time relative to something that just happens. And I don't think in that respect Mei is particularly Chinese, nor do I think that I am particularly Irish. I think in that respect we meet somewhere in the middle. And an important part of what we work with in developing the love in our relationship is founded in a basic attraction. We find each other attractive. It is founded in the shared history of the initial romantic period of our relationship. But it is not wholly sustained by that. I think an extreme version of this western idea of love is that you have this explosive meeting that is in itself...love.

Likewise, Claire (from England) and Sean (Irish) noticed their cultural differences in terms of the types of 'love' they practiced with their families of origin. Claire explains,

Like when I met Sean and he met me, I was very focused of loving the world and going out and ok we have to make change in social justice and volunteering and like I will give my family the time I have left over. And Sean was very focused; he used to go down to his family every weekend when I met him, like every second weekend is now a compromise. So he was very focused on loving his family, going down every weekend, mow the lawn, cook the meal and all these kinds of really good things. It is funny actually since I have been with Sean I have seen my family way more and spent way more time with them in person and on the phone and his influence on me that I am like, wait a second why was my family second?

Interviewer: Do you think your concept of love was different than his concept of love when it first started?

Claire: Yeah definitely when I met Sean, I had an idea of love where I think it had kind of been based on popular culture, where I thought love would be someone really loving who I am and all the things I do. So it was more I wanted them to be impressed, look at me [unclear] and volunteering and all these things. And when I met Sean it really threw me off because he didn't care about those things, oh I volunteer and I read these books and I get these various things, it didn't bother him, he wasn't interested. And it totally threw me off. And yet he was still impressed by me, it was just something that didn't have to do with my achievements or anything, it was like, I like you as a person it doesn't matter the things you are involved with. And I think for him as well, like he had been in a relationship before with a girl who was very needy and I suppose just kept asking things of him and he kind of felt, oh this is what a relationship is. And when he met me it was much more like he realised no, a relationship is more about being yourself and being independent and yet still caring enough about the other person that you would take time. So I think it changed a lot for the both of us.

One of the things that Claire liked most about Sean was that he was so different from herself and 'what she expected' she would find attractive in terms of a man who also loves volunteer work as those types of men in her words 'tended to be nerdy.' The cultural and racial differences between partners were often mentioned in the interviews with some participants claiming they while they didn't fetishize for example, 'Asian women' they did in fact have a preference in their dating life.

Many of the couples in this study were able to apply the social form of love, even within a context where it was difficult – where society denies the intimacy between strangers and non-strangers that is part of Love. Love then bridges both the individual and

uniqueness (a love like no other) but at the same time, how do people know it that is it love? Know that it is unique? They know this through the past socialization of notions of love, models of love and practices, which they deem as ‘true love’, not ‘pretend love’. And yet, as Simmel writes, this is so common that it is generalized to a vast number of social actors ironically as a unique experience. Often it is through the social and socially accepted forms (couples) and rituals (marriage) or producing children that it becomes ‘known’ and legitimated as love, but in fact, there are many different and other types of love that are not authenticated/legitimated or sanctioned by society or social institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Interviewees here discussed love as both an individual choice and a choice shaped by larger social forces. They insisted that choosing whom to love was an individual choice that was made unimpeded by social shaping. They worked on improving their relationships in individual terms (Illouz 2013) but also admitted that if love and partner choice were really not shaped by social factors that more people would probably be in mixed couples. Statistics of interracial marriages bear this fact out. If it was really a random or free choice who your partner would be, marriage rates should be relatively free from gender and racialized patterns. Marotta (2010) argues that it is possible that mixed couples in a global world give rise to ‘cosmopolitan strangers’ who undermine binary logics (e.g. you belong to one nation and one nation only) and essentialism (e.g. you are of one culture and one culture only if born there). This combines both unicity and universality in a new ways as where the concept of global society can combine with the type of actor (native or a stranger) in new ways.



Clearly there are complex social reasons that shape mixed marriage patterns, so while there is discussion of individual choice (Giddens 1992) and an individualization of responsibility for love there are also structural constraints to that love. Eva Illouz eloquently argues that the love, as the interviewees above discuss, is shaped by the “transformation in the ecology and architecture of romantic choice”(Illouz, 2013: 60). In the end, the romantic and love choices that are available to people, the evaluation criteria they use to measure depth of love and the autonomy they have to choose, are all shaped by unequal social structures. Within these structural constraints, there are also power dynamics within international couples in terms of cultural competence and sense of cultural responsibility for the ‘stranger’ – the one living away from home and perhaps lacking belonging in Ireland - in the relationship.

Simmel argues that if we consider love from the perspective of the subject-object concept, love is the most powerful manifestation of the psychic immanence of the conception of the world. “When we love, however, and especially when the object of our love, unlike everything with a human soul, does not bear within itself a latent intention that disposes it to become an object of love, we feel a definite freedom in the choice, mode, and extent of our subjective activity” (Simmel, 1984: 159). But this love when applied to the stranger can be both near and far at the same time.

The Stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational or generally human nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us and connect us only because they connect a great many people. A trace of strangeness in this sense easily enters even the most intimate relationships (Wolff, 1950: 405).

Love is one of the great formative categories of existence for Simmel. He writes:

This claim unequivocally reveals love as an ungrounded and primary category. This is exactly the status love has insofar as it determines the total and ultimate essence of its object and creates it as this object, which prior to this did not exist. As one who loves, I am a different person than I was before, for it is not one or the other of my "aspects" or energies that loves but rather the entire person, which need not imply a perceptible change in any other external manifestations (Simmel, 1984: 161).

As Seebach and Nunez-Mosteo argue, romantic love "...is feeling, bond, two-sided ideal and institution. Romantic love unites subjective with objective culture. It is reciprocal, social and individual, at the same time" (Seebach and Nunez-Mosteo 2016 <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/21/1/14.html>).

Through an examination of Loving and belonging, Universality of love, and culturally different but epic love, I have tried to analyse how mixed couples in Ireland re-interpret the social form of love through the encounter with the social form of the stranger using the work of Georg Simmel. These couples' combination of Love and Stranger drive, despite the pressures from the state, a deeper form of societal transnationalisation including the relations with extended families, bringing the Stranger deeper into the community.

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