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# Marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment, and relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands

## Abstract

*This quantitative survey among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands investigates the relationships between marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment and relationship quality. Relationship quality may be negatively influenced by a process of cultural transition, by instability of the relationship itself or by underdeveloped communication skills between partners. Participants (n=223) have been married in the Catholic Church between 1995 and 2021. Correlations between various religious and spiritual activities and relationship quality have been calculated through linear regression analysis. Results show that overall, migrant couples and intercultural couples appreciate a more intensive, professional, and welcoming Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and pastoral accompaniment after marriage. It is also concluded that seeking reconciliation after a conflict ( $r=0.361$ ) and experiencing forgiveness from one's spouse ( $r=0.188$ ) are significantly associated with a higher perceived relationship quality. Finally, data indicate that migrants with a non-Western cultural background show a significant pattern of cultural defence ( $\mu=-0,375$ ) in comparison to Dutch people.*

*Keywords: marriage accompaniment; migrants; intercultural couples; relationship quality; integration.*

## 1. Introduction

It is a well-known phenomenon that in recent decades, more and more young couples in Europe are choosing cohabitation rather than marriage. On average, this choice has negative consequences for the quality and sustainability of the relationships themselves (Aarskaug Wiik, Keizer and Lappegård, 2012). The relationship quality gap between married and cohabiting couples is smaller in countries where cohabitation is most widespread. People who choose long-term cohabitation usually do not follow programs in Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE), which is often expected from couples who want to marry in the church. People who have done MRE score significantly higher on marital quality and commitment, as assessed by the couples themselves, and lower on marital conflict and divorce (Gray, 2013 and Stanley et al., 2006). When relationships end in divorce, this may have at least temporary negative consequences for the mental well-being of the adults and children involved (Härkönen, Bernardi and Boertien, 2017). In recent decades, in most European countries the number of low-conflict family breakups has increased. This has resulted in a more negative average effect on children's educational attainments, which is associated with the separation of their parents (Kreidl, Štípková and Hubatková, 2017).

Migration is another factor which may contribute negatively to the emotional well-being of adults and children, because, for various reasons it can be experienced as a stressful event. This can also be the case for children remaining in the home country. For example, Polish children experiencing separation from an emigrating parent or parents lasting from 6 months to 1 year experience a significantly higher level of anxiety than children from families who went to the Netherlands for permanent residence (Pufal-Struzik, Sordyl-Lipnicka and Duda, 2021, p. 120). On the other hand, when adult migrants have a negative appraisal of their situation in the host country, but can articulate their spiritual needs, this has a positive effect on their mental well-being (Maier et al., 2022). Participation in a religious community in the host country may thus give a sense of belonging, could give rise to a deeper self-reflection and take up social responsibility. This study focuses on migrant and intercultural couples who live in the Netherlands. They want to marry or are married in the Catholic Church and thus have followed some form of MRE. From a well-being perspective, it is interesting to investigate to what extent MRE and pastoral accompaniment might help couples to sustain their relationship quality, both before and after marriage.

From the total number of Christians in the Netherlands, 6.2 million in 2015, ca. 1 million have a migrant background. At a time when church attendance of Dutch Christians is decreasing, especially among Catholics, the number of Christian

migrants who regularly attend a church community is rising (De Hart and Van Houwelingen, 2018, pp. 103–104). For the Netherlands in 2022, the biggest group of migrants is coming from other European countries (64%). According to CBS Statistics Netherlands, the top six migration background countries in 2022 are the former Soviet Union countries, the old Soviet Union, Ukraine, Poland, Syria, and Turkey. This has changed considerably compared to 2021, when Polish migrants formed the biggest group who arrived in the Netherlands. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has led to a great shift in migration across Europe. In the last fifteen years, labour, family, and study are increasingly mentioned among both EU and non-EU migrants as the main motives for migration to the Netherlands; non-EU migrants also mention asylum. (CBS, 2022)

## 2. Theoretical background and objectives

MRE has been used as an instrument not only to prepare couples for their wedding, but also to increase their relationship quality. Meta-research in the field of cognitive and behavioural sciences shows that, if well designed and completed, most relationship education programs aimed at an improvement of the quality of communication and conflict management early in a relationship lead to a higher quality and health of the relationship, at least for a period of 0–5 years (Markman and Rhoades, 2012). The period of preparation and the first years of married life could be used to develop communication skills and possibly to prevent future relationship problems. One recent study on MRE in three Catholic dioceses in Germany showed that around 90% of the themes which are considered important by participating couples – relationship quality, communication skills, and meaning of the marriage promises – are treated ‘just rightly’ (Scheule, 2023, p. 123). Unfortunately, this study did not distinguish between native couples and migrants. It also needs to be said, that the prerequisites for MRE vary considerably between countries. For instance, in the diocese of Płock in Poland, before being admitted to an MRE-course, it is expected that couples have followed school-based premarital catechisation. If they have not done this, the parish priest will provide additional catechetical material to them and conduct a relevant examination before the start of the MRE (Kamiński, 2011, p. 131). For Dutch couples in the Netherlands, this would be pretty unthinkable, since school-based catechisation has almost disappeared.

When migrant couples come to a host country, they are often facing cultural differences, which could make them more vulnerable for relationship distress. Intercultural couples, for this research defined as a couple consisting of a migrant with a Dutch partner, face challenges of blending different cultural and

sometimes also religious backgrounds within their relationship. Migrants may experience unease in their contacts with people in the host society, for instance because of the high degree of secularity in the Netherlands (Derks and Sremac, 2020, p. 600). At times, migrants may suffer from feelings of loneliness or incomprehension. Church communities can help migrant and intercultural couples to enhance their relationship quality, to support them in their faith and to develop their social network, both within their own ethnic group as in relation to other ethnic minorities and to the hosting community. It is expected that their relationship quality could be increased by an intensification and more personalized form of MRE, with space for developing communication skills, both within the relationship as regarding their contacts with the host society. On the other hand, a negative appraisal of MRE could have negative effects on their relationship quality and integration process. In this study, migrant and intercultural couples who planned to get married or have been married in the Catholic Church are asked about their experiences with MRE, with prayer, worship, and other religious and spiritual activities. Most existing research on the relationship between MRE and relationship quality are of American or British origin, European studies in this area are scarce (Biemans, 2021). Focusing on migrants in the Netherlands, we have formulated the main question of this study as follows: *To what extent can MRE and pastoral accompaniment before and after marriage within the Catholic Church contribute to a higher relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands?*

With the increasing secularisation of the Dutch society, the influence of Christian religion in schools has been strongly reduced. In the previous century, when religious education was still a normal part of the educational program of primary and secondary schools, many Catholic parishes did not have a thorough, multidisciplinary, interactive MRE-program for couples. As Pope Francis admits, at times MRE has been characterized by an excessive idealization of marriage, for instance by an insistence on the duty of procreation and not on the formation of consciences (2016, n. 36–37). MRE as provided by Dutch parishes was and often still is restricted to an introduction of the couple to the local priest, some elementary catechesis on marriage and a preparation for the wedding ceremony. Recently, the Vatican Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life has pleaded for a broadening of MRE, comparable to the baptism catechumenate. The dicastery document points at the following elements to be included in the marriage preparation (without excluding any of them): formation, reflection, dialogue, liturgy, community, prayer, and celebration (2022, n. 16).

In the context of the Dutch Catholic Church province, nowadays most marriage preparations have a length of 5–10 hours. When MRE would be restricted to basic

catechesis and preparation of the wedding ceremony, this would be a missed opportunity to deepen the couples' relationship. A longer duration of an MRE program can have a positive effect on communication skills and relationship quality or satisfaction, although in earlier research this finding did not apply to programs of more than 20 contact hours (Hawkins et al, 2012). MRE can also have a positive effect on mental well-being of the participants (Spielhofer et al, 2014, p. 45). Therefore, a first hypothesis has been formulated as follows:

- 1) Marriage preparation with a length of more than 10 hours has a more positive evaluation than marriage preparation with a length of 0–5 hours or a length of 5–10 hours.

Because of more solid religious education in schools, often the previous generation of Dutch parish priests would not consider it a necessity to provide a couple who wants to marry in the church with an official marriage preparation course. Nowadays, several Catholic Bishops' conferences, for instance in Poland or in England and Wales, have issued guidelines for the preparation of couples for marriage (KEP, 2003; CBCEW, 2016). In the Netherlands, such diocesan guidelines do not exist. Still, programs which clergy and lay leaders use while providing MRE can make a difference. If MRE-programs with a systematic attention to improve communication skills are used, this could have a positive effect on the relationship quality after marriage. Also, leaders who have been trained in using skills-based programs when they give premarital education show better results in the couples' communication outcomes than leaders who are not trained (Owen et al, 2011). On the other hand, if such material is not used, the chances on remaining effect are strongly reduced. A second hypothesis which will be tested is the following:

- 2) Marriage preparation which made use of course material has a more positive evaluation than marriage preparation without course material.

If MRE as provided in a local parish is of short duration and mainly a formal and administrative preparation for the wedding, then the relationship between the MRE-leader (for instance the parish priest, a deacon or lay leader) and the couple will probably not develop into a warm, personal, and constructive relationship. During the marriage preparation, it is important that migrants feel understood and that their cultural background is respected. Regarding the wedding itself, it can be particularly important for migrants that certain cultural elements are included into the wedding liturgy, for instance some passages in their native language, certain musical or devotional elements. The working alliance clergy and lay leaders establish with couples whom they prepare for marriage in-

fluences the couples' positive and negative communication (Owen et al, 2011). Results showed that if a leader has a strong working alliance with a couple, then both the change in the couples' positive and negative communication are significant. Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

- 3) Marriage preparation characterized by a good cooperation with the preparation leader(s) has a more positive evaluation than marriage preparation without a good cooperation.

Fourthly, MRE can gain strength if it is accompanied by welcoming of the couple within the local church community. The importance of welcoming migrants within church communities has often been stressed by Pope Francis and others (Francis, 2018; Reuver, de and Nagy et al, 2018). Young couples could develop a social network and they could for instance learn from other married couples who are more experienced in what it means to sustain a marriage and build a family. Especially for migrant and intercultural couples who are relatively new in the host country, welcoming into the local community could be of great importance, also after the wedding. However, in many Dutch parishes formal welcoming by the community before, during or after the marriage preparation does not take place. We will investigate how couples who prepare for marriage evaluate the involvement of the local church community, by testing the fourth hypothesis:

- 4) Marriage accompaniment a welcoming by the church community has a more positive evaluation than marriage accompaniment without such welcoming.

Several American studies have demonstrated positive relations between various religious and spiritual activities and relationship quality. Couples who frequently go to church tend to report significantly better relationships, a stronger adherence to values like fidelity, a higher incidence of supportive behaviour within relationships, more moderate alcohol and drug consumption and less domestic violence (Wilcox and Wolfinger, 2008). Shared social networks with people who adhere to the same values could be helpful for the maintenance of a good quality relationship. In another study among low-income couples, it has been found that when couples pray together and have a shared religious faith, they evaluate their marital quality more positively (Lichter and Carmalt, 2009). However, so far these results have not been tested in a European context.

Elaborating on the results of previous research on the relation between religiosity and marital well-being, Jonathan Olson and colleagues focused on various aspects of religiosity within relationships, with forgiveness

as the most important of these (2015). The value of forgiveness within relationships is of course not limited to couples who share the same religion. Both religious and not religious participants were asked to what extent they experienced their spouse as forgiving towards them. Their results showed that granting and receiving forgiveness contributed to a significant improvement in marital quality. Therefore, it could be important that during MRE, attention is paid to dealing with conflicts and mutual forgiveness. A fifth hypothesis has been formulated to assess the relationship between various religious and spiritual activities and relationship quality:

- 5) The following activities are associated with a higher perceived relationship quality: Seeking reconciliation after a conflict; Granting and receiving forgiveness; Church attendance; Personal prayer; Praying together; Speaking about prayer life; Maintaining Sunday rest.

An earlier Europe-wide analysis of differences in religiosity between migrants and the native born showed that migrants have a higher self-assessed religiosity, a higher frequency of praying, and a higher church attendance (Aleksynska and Chiswick, 2011, pp. 15–17). Scholars in religion science state that ‘a vast majority of non-Western Christians will be more biblical than their Western sisters and brothers in the faith’ (Wijzen, 2009, p. 148). Still, among most migrants who have arrived in the Netherlands from Central and Southern Europe, the frequency of church attendance in the host country is less than pre-migration (Khoudja, 2022, p. 517).

The question of how to strengthen pastoral accompaniment before and after marriage fits in a wider perspective of cultural defence (CD) or cultural transition (CT) after migration. On one hand, religious activities could provide resources for CD, by creating connections between people from a common nationality in the new, host society and by offering services in the migrant’s own language, according to their cultural customs and answering to their social needs. Research shows that for instance for African-American women, migrant church communities can be a place of hope in their struggle against economic insecurities, social displacement or discrimination (Tulud Cruz, 2010, pp. 193–195). Within intercultural relationships, partners from an ethnic minority group sometimes face criticism, rejection, and racism in the host country. However, their majority host partners could also have such an experience when they are in a foreign context in their own country (Bhugun, 2019, p. 68).

After migration one can often see patterns of CT, when migrants give up elements of their own culture of origin and integrate in the host so-

ciety and church community (Bruce, 2011, pp. 49–52). They would for instance often use English or Dutch language in their contacts with their colleagues, neighbours, and parishioners. It is presupposed, that migrants with Western background (defined as Western and Southern Europe, the U.S.A., Canada and Australia) who migrate to the Netherlands, more often show a pattern of CT, because of the similarities of their home culture with the Dutch culture, whereas non-Western migrants (defined as Central / Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America) more often show a pattern of CD, because of bigger differences between their home culture, including their language, and the Dutch culture. Therefore, our sixth hypothesis is the following:

- 6) Migrants with a non-Western background score higher on CD / lower on CT than migrants with a Western background or Dutch people.

### 3. Method

In 2021, the total number of Roman-Catholic parishes in the Netherlands was ca. 431. Among these parishes are some 20 official migrant parishes, of whom 8 are Polish-speaking. Further, some 54 Catholic migrant communities have been registered, most of which do not have the official parish status (KDC, 2021). Of these 54 migrant communities, 21 are (partly) Dutch-speaking, 10 speak English, 11 Indonesian, 5 Ukrainian, 4 Spanish and 3 Portuguese. 17 other languages are registered; many parishes have indicated more than one language. The database does not contain numbers of participants.

The total number of marriages in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands has decreased from 7,700 in 2003 to 1,105 in 2019 and 660 in covid-year 2021 (Kregting, 2022, p. 17). It needs to be remarked that these numbers do not include couples who married in their land of origin and have migrated to the Netherlands. In fact, many couples prefer to marry in their land of origin, so that their family and friends can be present.

For this survey in 2021, 198 parish priests, student chaplains and contact persons of religious communities in the Netherlands have been contacted. They have been asked to forward the invitation to migrant or intercultural couples who were preparing for marriage or have been married in the Catholic Church after 1995, to participate in our online questionnaire. In some cases, they provided e-mail addresses of couples to us, so that we could ourselves invite the couples to participate. Besides a questionnaire in Dutch and English, survey translations have been made available in French, German, Indonesian, Italian,



Papiamentu, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. This approach resulted in a total number of 351 invitations. From this group, 118 individuals filled in the questionnaire. Further, circa 400 flyers were distributed among different migrant communities who gathered for a Catholic Mass, with an open invitation to take part in the survey. This resulted in another 117 responses. Participants have given their informed written consent to participate in this research. A total number of 235 participants completed the survey. Those participants received a gift card of 10 euros by e-mail. Five individuals were taken out from the list of results, because their marriage took place before 1995. Another six individuals were removed from the list, because at the moment of filling in the survey, they did not live in the Netherlands and neither they were married in the Netherlands. Finally, results from one person were taken out, because no nationality has been filled in. So, results were analysed from a total of 223 individuals, which means a response rate of 30%. It is noted that Dutch people who participated in the survey, were preparing for marriage or have been married within an intercultural relationship with a migrant spouse.

The survey consisted of 60 closed and 2 open questions, including: 21 questions on general characteristics of the group of participants; 10 questions on participants' assessment of their MRE and their perceived relationship quality; 23 questions on their current religious and spiritual activities and experiences and their desires for future activities and experiences; 5 questions measuring the assessment of their integration in the church community and in the host society (see below) and finally 3 questions regarding their opinion of church life in general in the Netherlands. For this survey, the participants' mean evaluation scores of the marriage preparation programs are compared with various characteristics of these programs, using F-tests and T-tests. We did not undertake a pre- and post-intervention to test the effectivity of marriage programs, since the focus of this research is not on the programs itself, but on the experiences migrant couples and intercultural couples have with pastoral accompaniment before and after marriage. In the Dutch Church province, there is no prescribed MRE-program. Therefore, the variety of the programs is great. A majority of the participants have not received official course material. This makes a comparison in the chosen educational method almost impossible. Therefore, to increase the reliability of the survey, we have chosen for objective criteria such as the length of the program, the use (or not) of official course material and the presence or absence of an official welcoming in the church community. The study design has been approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology.

Further in this research, correlations between various religious and spiritual activities on one hand and relationship quality on the other have been calculated through linear regression analysis, using SPSS software. Data have been controlled for educational level and age of the participants. Although in previous research low income has proven to be associated with marital distress and dissolution, we have chosen in this survey not to ask couples specifically about their income level, for privacy reasons. Other risk factors have been indicated as well in earlier research, such as parental divorce or previous divorce of self or spouse. If these risk factors play a role within the relationship, they could be dealt with for instance by means of individual or couple therapy or mediation. However, since this research focuses on how MRE and pastoral accompaniment could enhance future relationship quality and not on individual or couple therapy or mediation, these risk factors have not been taken into consideration in this survey.

To measure the extent of cultural transition (CT) or cultural defence (CD), we made a distinction between participants with a Western cultural background and participants with a non-Western cultural background. We asked them five specific questions: (1) if their participation in the local church community makes them feel more at home in the Netherlands (CT+1), or rather helps them to sustain their own cultural background (CD+1); (2) if because of their intended marriage, they feel more connected to Dutch society (Yes = CT+1; No = CD+1) or (3) rather to their own culture (Yes = CD+1; No = CT+1); (4) if they would like to have more contacts with other Christian, young Dutch couples (CT+1), or (5) rather with other Christian, young couples with a migration background (CD+1). CT- and CD-scores are supposed to be opposite to one another, so that the range of the total score varies from -4 to 4. Thus, we were able to measure the mean degree of CD or CT among both migrant and Dutch participants.

#### 4. Descriptive analysis of participants

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants (n=223)

| Origin                 | n = | Male | Female | Mean age | Mean educational level (1=primary education; 6=university) |
|------------------------|-----|------|--------|----------|--|
| Dutch                  | 56  | 41   | 15     | 41.7     | 5.1  |
| Other Western European | 36  | 19   | 17     | 38.9     | 5.5  |

|                                  |     |     |     |      |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|
| <b>Central/ Eastern European</b> | 56  | 14  | 42  | 37.8 | 5.4 |
| <b>North American</b>            | 2   |     | 2   | 37   | 6   |
| <b>South American</b>            | 20  | 4   | 16  | 37.2 | 5.5 |
| <b>African</b>                   | 7   | 5   | 2   | 39.8 | 5.1 |
| <b>Asian</b>                     | 45  | 21  | 24  | 38.5 | 5.7 |
| <b>Australian</b>                | 1   |     | 1   | 36   | 6   |
| <b>Total</b>                     | 223 | 104 | 119 | 39.1 | 5.4 |

Table 1. continued

| <b>Origin</b>                     | <b>Mean number of years married</b> | <b>Mean number of children</b> | <b>Mean relationship quality (1=not good; 10=excellent)</b> |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Dutch</b>                      | 8.9                                 | 1.18                           | 8.5   |
| <b>Other Western European</b>     | 7.8                                 | 1.03                           | 8.08  |
| <b>Central / Eastern European</b> | 9.8                                 | 1.45                           | 8.78  |
| <b>North American</b>             | 5.5                                 | 2                              | 9.5   |
| <b>South American</b>             | 5.7                                 | 1.35                           | 8.1   |
| <b>African</b>                    | 5.3                                 | 2                              | 8   |
| <b>Asian</b>                      | 10.1                                | 0.98                           | 8.2   |
| <b>Australian</b>                 | 2                                   | 0                              | 10  |
| <b>Total</b>                      | 8.7                                 | 1.2                            | 8.4   |

Table 1 gives a descriptive analysis of the participants. From the sample, it seems that among those couples who have chosen to marry in the church, a relatively high percentage is highly educated. Recent qualitative research in the United Kingdom shows a similar picture of a minority of highly educated, young 'active affirmers' of their faith and love life (Perrin, 2020, p. XV). 88% of participants has been baptized in the Catholic Church, with small regional differences. The other 12% of participants either have not been baptized, or have been baptized in a Protestant, Orthodox, or Anglican church community. Regarding the intercultural couples, it is remarkable that the numbers of Dutch men and Central / Eastern European and South American women are relatively high. It is further notable that they indicate their self-perceived relationship quality as high, with an 8.4 on a scale from 1 (not good) to 10 (excellent).

Table 2. Religious and spiritual activities and ethnicity (n=223)

| <b>Ethnicity</b>                                    | <b>Mean church visit (0=never; 4=more than weekly)</b> | <b>Personal prayer (0=never; 3=often)</b> | <b>Prayer as a couple or as a family (0=never; 3=often)</b> | <b>Speaking together about prayer life (0=never; 3=often)</b> |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Dutch (ref.)</b>                                 | 2.35   | 1.93                                      | 1.22  | 1.17  |
| <b>Western European, North American, Australian</b> | 2.0*   | 1.72                                      | 1.05  | 1.33  |
| <b>Central / Eastern European</b>                   | 2.68 **  | 1.93                                      | 1.25  | 1.36  |
| <b>South American / African</b>                     | 2.26   | 2.37**                                    | 1.44  | 1.63**  |
| <b>Asian</b>  | 2.4  | 2.11                                      | 1.89***   | 1.71***   |

\* = Significant at 0.1 level; \*\* = Significant at 0.05 level; \*\*\* = Significant at 0.01 level

Table 2. continued

| <b>Ethnicity</b>                                    | <b>Average number of religious and spiritual activities</b> | <b>Frequency of voluntary work within parish community (0=never; 3=often)</b> | <b>Importance of Sunday rest (0=not important; 3=very important)</b> | <b>Role of forgiveness within relationship (0=never; 3=often)</b> |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| <b>Dutch (ref.)</b>                                 | 2.95  | 1.0   | 2.07   | 2.30  |
| <b>Western European, North American, Australian</b> | 3.61  | 0.74  | 2.13   | 2.56**  |
| <b>Central / Eastern European</b>                   | 5.61***   | 0.62**  | 2.62***  | 2.30  |
| <b>South American / African</b>                     | 4.41**  | 0.55**  | 2.0  | 2.59**  |
| <b>Asian</b>  | 4.78***   | 0.87  | 2.16   | 2.25  |

\*\* = Significant at 0.05 level; \*\*\* = Significant at 0.01 level

Table 2 gives the data for various religious and spiritual activities which are undertaken by participants. Means of various ethnic minorities are compared, using F-tests and T-tests. Results show that migrants from South America or Africa spend more time in personal prayer than Dutch people, whereas Asian migrants pray more often as a couple than Dutch couples do. South American, African, and Asian migrants speak more often together about their prayer life and take part more often in religious and spiritual activities than Dutch people.

Dutch people more often visit a church community than migrants from other Western European countries. Central / Eastern European migrants, many of whom are coming from Poland, visit their church community more often than Dutch people, attach more importance to Sunday rest and participate more often in other religious and spiritual activities, such as a short retreat, a pilgrimage, for instance to a Marian shrine, a family celebration in the church and praying with their children at home. Polish migrants more often go to church within a migrant community, where celebrations take place in Polish. Asian, American, and African migrants more often integrate within the Dutch parish structure, where they find a mass celebrated in English, or they go to a specific English-speaking migrant community.

Participants were asked about the role of forgiveness within their relationship. Results show that for participants from other Western European countries, Africa, the Americas and Australia, forgiveness plays a significantly bigger role within their relationship than for Dutch people. As we will see, this has implications for their relationship quality.

## 5. Main results

In Table 3, the focus is on the characteristics and evaluation of marriage preparation programs in which couples participated. Overall, marriage preparation as provided by parishes is evaluated as rather helpful by most of the couples ( $\mu = 2.13$  on a scale from 0 to 3). Results show that marriage preparation with a length of more than 10 hours has a more positive evaluation ( $\mu = 2.49$ ) than marriage preparation with a length of less than 10 hours. Hypothesis 1 can thus be confirmed. In courses with a length of more than 10 hours, marriage preparation is usually not limited to the preparation of the liturgy at the wedding day, but more attention is paid to communication skills, to various ways of developing one's spiritual life, to the value of forgiveness within the relationship, to the establishing of a bond with other members of the church community, etc.

Table 3. Characteristics and evaluation of the marriage preparation

| Characteristic of the marriage preparation             | Evaluation $\mu$ (0=not helpful; 3=very helpful) | F- and T-values    |
|--|--|--------------------|
| Marriage preparation with a length of 0-5 hours (n=39) | 2.0  | F = 0.77; T = 0.15 |

|  |         |                        |
|--|---------|------------------------|
| Marriage preparation with a length of 5-10 hours (n=89) (= ref.)           | 2.16    |                        |
| Marriage preparation with a length of more than 10 hours (n=71)            | 2.49*** | F = 0.73; T = 0.0036   |
| Marriage preparation with course material (n=85)                           | 2.51*** | F = 0.066; T = 1.4E-05 |
| Marriage preparation without course material (n=113)                       | 2.04    |                        |
| Marriage accompaniment without a welcoming in the church community (n=136) | 2.04    |                        |
| Marriage accompaniment with a welcoming in the church community (n=87)     | 2.28**  | F = 0.48; T = 0.026    |
| Cooperation not good or mediocre (n=23)                                    | 0.78*** | F = 0.81; T = 4.5E-10  |
| Cooperation fairly well (n=65) (= ref.)                                    | 1.88    |                        |
| Cooperation very good (n=132)  | 2.51*** | F = 0.57; T = 1.65E-09 |
| Total  | 2.13    |                        |

\*\* = Significant at 0.05 level; \*\*\* = Significant at 0.01 level

As hypothesis 2 presupposed, marriage preparation which made use of course material has a significantly more positive evaluation than marriage preparation without course material. Many participants appreciate it when during the course they can reflect on their mutual expectations, their ways of communication, their dealing with conflicts, etc., as is done for instance in the marriage course *Before "I do"*. This is in line with research by Thomas Spielhofer and colleagues, who found that an emphasis on communication skills training during marriage preparation produces more positive effects on mental well-being (2014, p. 45). It is also appreciated when connections are made with Holy Scripture and with Church teaching (for instance by using the *Youcat*, papal documents such as *Amoris Laetitia* (the Joy of Love), the Catechism of the Catholic Church, etc.).

From these data we can conclude, confirming hypothesis 3, that a good cooperation between the person responsible for marriage preparation and the couple is a significant predictor for more positive evaluation of the marriage preparation. It is therefore worthwhile to invest in a more personal, professional, and culturally sensitive relationship between the responsible(s) of marriage preparation and the couples who want to marry.

Marriage accompaniment with a welcoming in the church community has a more positive evaluation ( $\mu = 2.28$ ) than marriage preparation without such a welcoming. Thus, hypothesis 4 can also be confirmed. When a social network is established with members of the church community, this could be helpful for sharing experiences of married life and family life, organizing activities to-

gether, mutual support, etc. For migrants in particular, a social network of the church community could help the integration process in the neighborhood or region where the church is located.

Table 4 shows the correlations between various religious and spiritual activities and perceived relationship quality.

Table 4. Correlation of various activities and relationship quality (n=223)

| Activity                                       | Correlation with relationship quality (r) |
|--|---|
| <b>Seeking reconciliation after a conflict</b> | 0.361***                                  |
| <b>Granting and receiving forgiveness</b>      | 0.188***                                  |
| <b>Church attendance</b>                       | 0.033                                     |
| <b>Personal prayer</b>                         | - 0.22                                    |
| <b>Praying together</b>                        | 0.043                                     |
| <b>Speaking about prayer life</b>              | 0.036                                     |
| <b>Maintaining Sunday rest</b>                 | 0.104                                     |

\*\*\* = Significant at 0.01 level

These correlations have been analysed through linear regression, which models the relationship between activities (independent variables) and relationship quality (dependent variable).

The way of dealing with conflicts within the relationship has been measured in two ways: 1) by asking participants about their opinion on the importance of actively seeking reconciliation after a conflict and 2) by asking them about the frequency by which forgiveness plays a role within their relationship. From the data we can conclude that seeking reconciliation after a conflict is significantly associated ( $r = 0.361$ ) with a higher perceived relationship quality. The frequency by which forgiveness plays a role within the relationship is also associated ( $r = 0.188$ ) with a higher perceived relationship quality.

Thus, hypothesis 5 about correlations with a higher relationship quality, can be confirmed regarding seeking reconciliation and granting and receiving forgiveness, but not regarding church attendance, personal prayer, praying together, speaking about prayer life and appreciation of Sunday rest. When asked about possibilities of improving the relationship quality, migrants mention matters of recreation much more often than Dutch people. This is understandable, since matters of recreation are most likely not among the first thing migrants are looking for after their arrival in the host country. Migrants also mention religious matters more often than Dutch people do. This corresponds with the findings of Table 2, that on average, migrants attach more value to religious and spiritual activities than Dutch people.

Table 5 shows that migrants with a non-Western cultural background score significantly higher in their pattern of CD in comparison to Dutch people or Western migrants, thus confirming hypothesis 6.

Table 5. Difference in cultural transition (CT) or cultural defence (CD) and relationship quality between migrants and Dutch participants (n=223)

| <b>Ethnicity</b>   | <b>Average (<math>\mu</math>) of CT minus CD</b> | <b>Difference in relationship quality among various ethnicities</b> |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Dutch (n=56) (ref.)</b>   | - 0.0893   | 8.49  |
| <b>Western (Western Europe, North American, Australian) (n=39)</b>                     | - 0.0769<br>(F = 0.52; T = 0.47(ns.))            | 8.21<br>(F = 0.011; T = 0.18 (ns.))                                 |
| <b>Non- Western (African, Asian, Central/Eastern European, South American) (n=128)</b> | - 0.375**<br>(F = 0.021; T = 0.041)              | 8.44<br>(F = 0.017; T = 0.40 (ns.))                                 |

(ns.) = not significant; \*\* = Significant at 0.05 level

Non-Western migrants have indicated more often than Dutch people or Western migrants that participating in the local church community helps them to sustain their own cultural background. Their marriage helps them to feel more connected to their own culture. They would also rather have more contacts with other Christians, young couples with a migration background than with other Christians, young Dutch couples. The average relationship quality does not differ between various ethnicities.

## 6. Conclusion

Marriage preparation and pastoral accompaniment after marriage in the Netherlands is increasingly international. The sample of this study has been limited to couples who are married within the Catholic Church. Therefore, results cannot be generalized to groups of migrants from other Christian denominations or groups with other or no religious affiliations. The method of data collection implies that participants have relatively close ties to the local parish priest. Further, participants' educational level and perceived relationship quality are relatively high.

We can conclude from this survey that an intensification of marriage preparation, with more contact hours (up to 20 hours before the wedding), leads to



a more positive evaluation by participating migrant and intercultural couples. Secondly, using course material made by experts in the field leads to a significantly more helpful marriage preparation than a preparation without course material. Thirdly, an official welcoming within the parish community also contributes to a higher evaluation score. Fourthly, investing in a good cooperation between the course leader and the couple has a beneficial effect on the couples' evaluation of the marriage preparation, whereas a poor or mediocre cooperation has a negative effect on the couples' evaluation. Fifthly, it is worthwhile to pay attention in marriage preparation courses and in pastoral accompaniment after marriage to the values of forgiveness and reconciliation after a conflict. This could lead to a higher relationship quality and may thus strengthen the marriage bond. It needs to be said that the empirical findings regarding hypothesis 5 are correlations, no causality can be supposed. For instance, forgiveness could contribute to a good relationship quality, but also a good relationship quality could contribute to the inclination to forgive.

Earlier research has indicated that often, migrants are 'more religiously observant than they were in the old country, especially once they marry and have children and passing on their culture (with its religious component) becomes an issue' (Bruce, 2011, p. 49). However, recent research (Khoudja, 2022) indicates that average church attendance increases during the first years after migration into the Netherlands, but without reaching pre-migration levels. Our findings indicate that MRE and other religious and spiritual activities could often be a support in the social and cultural transition from the migrant's own country to the host country; it could help migrant and intercultural couples to have a good start of their marriage and family life in the Dutch society, while being appreciative of their cultural roots.

In this survey, we did not investigate indicators for a successful integration in the host society. Individual cultural differences could be traced through qualitative research rather than by means of a quantitative survey. In-depth interviews could probably give further insights in the connection between MRE, religious practices and integration processes. It is recommendable that in interviews with migrant and intercultural couples, special attention is given to the motives which gave rise to their migration to Western Europe and to the role MRE and other religious and spiritual activities have played in their integration process.

Patterns of CD do not necessarily imply an unsuccessful integration. On the contrary, migrants who are firmly rooted in their home culture could probably deal more successfully with difficulties in the integration process in the host society. This study has shown that the role church communities play in this pro-

cess could be reinforced when their offer of MRE aimed at migrant and intercultural couples is further professionalised and when pastoral accompaniment before and after marriage is intensified.

Data wpłynięcia: 2023-04-04;

Data uzyskania pozytywnych recenzji: 2023-12-02;

Data przesłania do druku: 2024-01-15.

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