

Chapter 7

‘Going home’ To Where the Heart Is: Mixed International Families in the Republic of Ireland

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Introduction

In 2011 the Irish Census reported that 17 per cent of the Irish population was not born in Ireland and 12 per cent identified as non-Irish nationals. While 85 per cent of the population indicated that they were white and Irish there was also a fast growing 87 per cent increase in the population of people with Asian ethnic backgrounds other than Chinese (Indian, Pakistani, etc.) and most were under the age of 40 (CSO 2012a:30). A question on foreign languages was asked for the first time on the Census in 2011. The results showed that over half a million (514,068) Irish residents spoke a foreign language at home and that, unsurprisingly, Polish was by far the most common, followed by French, Lithuanian and German.

How are non-national households different from Irish ones? Again, the Census 2011 found that roughly the same percentage of non-Irish nationals and Irish people live in households that have 2 parents and children in them - 34 per cent of non-Irish nationals and 35 per cent of Irish households were in this formation (CSO 2012b:16). As in most modern developed nations, the number of people in ‘traditional’ family formations in Ireland is declining but does that mean that families themselves are of decreasing importance in Ireland? This paper finds that while there are increasingly

diverse family forms in Ireland, including in this study, mixed racial/ethnic, bilingual, multifaith and same sex couples and their offspring, the cultural importance of family institutional regimes (Gilding 2010) both practices and institutions remain important and in some cases are expanding to include transnational emotional practices. This chapter adopts the position that the family is a crossroads where several institutions intersect to shape cultural understandings of legitimate love and intimacy. Family life often takes the form of emotional and intimate repertoires of social action or practices. Family practices, however, are intimately shaped by institutional and structural constraints such as the state, which legitimately recognizes only certain types intimacy through marriage and civil partnership laws and regulates who can love whom through migration and citizenship laws. In the context of contemporary Ireland, therefore, a key question arising is, with increasingly ethnically diverse transnational families, how do these practices play out and how are they shaped by social and institutional (including state) constraints?

With an increasingly diverse population and a commitment of both non-Irish and Irish nationals to traditional 2 parent and children household formations, one would expect to see a rise in the number of mixed households. Are there families where people are married to people of different ethnicities or nationalities to themselves in Ireland? Are there mixed families in Ireland and if so what does it tell us about how notions of culture, family and belonging are changing in Ireland?

We know from Census 2006 that 112,898 (or about 9 per cent of the population) indicated they live in a 'mixed Irish/non-Irish' household. By 2011, the Census told us that 20 per cent of people from Hungary live in 'mixed Irish Nationality'

households meaning that at least one Irish national and at least one non-Irish national live in the household. This could be family members with different nationalities such as Irish born children and their Hungarian born parents who live together. Other ethnic groups such as those from the USA (68 per cent), UK (65 per cent) and Nigeria (79 per cent) also indicated that they live in ‘mixed’ households again most likely with children and parents holding different nationalities (Census 2011 Profile 6 2012:17). But are all mixed households in this situation?

To better understand who lives in ‘mixed’ households, I analyzed the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) from 2010 to try to get some indication (although not of cohabitating and same sex couples) of who is married to whom to try to work out how many of these mixed households were comprised of mixed couples and not just family members with different nationalities.¹

In 2010 in the QNHS, The Percentage of People in All Partnerships by gender (based on the above estimated total) was:

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gender effect in out marriage to those from the UK, but when one examines non-EU or other partners, Irish women are less likely to marry non-Irish and non-UK men. The next step would be to try to figure out why there is a slight gender gap in out marriage outside of UK partners.

Clearly the number of mixed Irish/Non-Irish households is on the rise in Ireland and this could reflect a growing family based multiculturalism facilitated in the first place by intimate and interpersonal relationships in mixed families. Ulrich Beck calls these types of families 'global families' (2011). They are often interracial, intercultural, interfaith, and multilingual. They are also highly transnational families where intimate ties within families stretch across both time and geographic space. Many of them also increasingly use technology such as Skype to create and maintain intimate ties of transnational emotional support networks (King-O'Riain 2013). These families also stand in a position to broaden knowledge and appreciation or ties to Ireland from loved ones abroad. But how do families like these in Ireland create and sustain senses of belonging both within and across nation states? What experiences have these types of families had in Ireland? What do their experiences tell us about the changing nature and diversification of families who reside in the Republic of Ireland, but whom increasingly have emotional ties across the world?