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Homestay, Sleepover, and Commensality: Three Intimate Methods in the Study of “Mixed” Families

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Abstract: Scholars most often adopt qualitative data-gathering methods, notably interviews, to access the lifeworld of “mixed” families. Nonetheless, when research questions require vivid details about their lives, other data-collection techniques may be needed. “Intimate” research methods, characterised by proximate contacts and interactions with “mixed” couples and their families, appear particularly useful in this regard. Drawing from ethnographic studies of mixed families of Filipino and Thai migrant women in Belgium and The Netherlands, the present paper unveils the heuristic value of three intimate methods—homestays, sleepovers, and commensality—in perceiving the realities of these women’s couple and family lives. Homestays and sleepovers allow an in-depth understanding of ways of life within homes, interpersonal interactions, and their intricacies. Commensality (i.e., eating together) offers “snapshots” of the lives of mixed families, providing insights complementary to other methods such as interviews. Hence, the three intimate methods explored in this paper are social sites in which one can view details, otherwise invisible or unspoken, of the lives of mixed families, ranging from power dynamics to intergenerational relations, from the family’s social class status and cross-border social ties to emotional situations.

Keywords: intimate research methods; homestays; sleepovers; commensality; “mixed” couples/families; migrant women; Belgium; The Netherlands



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1. Introduction

The literature on conjugal mixedness in the context of migration unveils methodological challenges in the study of “mixed” couples, that is, partners who are socially viewed as deviating from the normative idea(l)s of couples due to their different nationalities and ethnicities (see Collet 2012; De Hart et al. 2013). Accessing these couples and their family members to understand their situation and lived experiences appears particularly challenging. To address these issues, scholars generally adopt interviews and observations as qualitative data-gathering methods. However, interviews and observations may be insufficient and may need reinforcement when the research questions demand vivid details about the lives of “mixed” couples. Which specific methods to adopt in this regard? How do we carry out such methods?

I delve into these questions using the “backstage” metaphor (Goffman 1959), where “the suppressed facts” of “one’s activity” carried out “in the presence of other persons” (that is, the “frontstage”) come out or “make an appearance” (ibid., p. 114). In the context of scientific research, this “backstage” refers to processes that occur during data gathering, the details of which are rarely included in empirical publications—the “frontstage”. Focusing on the “backstage” of a study on “mixed” couples entails unveiling the methodological facts that help understand couples’ lifeworld. In this paper, I use the qualifier “mixed” drawing from the concept of “mixedness” (Varro 2003), which refers on the one hand to “intermarriage, mixed families, and the sociocultural processes involved” (Rodríguez-García 2015, p. 25) and, on the other hand, to the interactions of various factors such as “citizenship, nationality, culture, religion, “race”, social status”, and “gender”

(Collet 2017, p. 149) in the lives of individuals involved. Since the study of mixedness entails an exploration of individuals' private life sphere, I propose in this paper an "intimate" methodological approach to grasp in depth the nuances of their experiences. "Intimate" is related to the concept "intimacy" that refers to the interpersonal process during which two or more persons exchange ideas, points of view, and feelings, contributing thereby to mutual knowledge about themselves (Reis and Shaver 1988). Building on this highly theorised concept in a methodological reflection is relevant as many researchers of conjugal mixedness adopt it as an analytical frame or as a starting point towards a more in-depth theorisation (e.g., Bonjour and de Hart 2021; Groes and Fernandez 2018). In the present paper, intimate research methods denote proximate contacts and interactions with the target study groups within the realm of their home and beyond encompassing their larger social spaces. In the social sciences, there is a wide range of ethnographic practices that can be qualified as "intimate": for instance, home visits (Kilburn et al. 2018; Morrison 2013), walks (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017), hanging out (Geertz 1998), homestays (Dolezal 2011), sleepovers (Birnie et al. 2011), and commensality—that is, eating together (Vanderslice 2020). These practices are rarely considered as research methods themselves but instead as objects of analysis or as an accessory to more widely used data-gathering approaches such as interviews. If adopted as data-gathering methods in their own right, however, intimate approaches seem to present a high potential to access the private, domestic realm of individuals' lives and to capture their subtleties.

Throughout this paper, I examine the empirical utility of selected intimate methods in the study of "mixed" couples and their families in a migration setting. Specifically, I explore homestay, sleepover, and commensality as data-gathering methods. Homestay has been a widely studied phenomenon in the research fields of tourism, hospitality management, and international education, in which it has been understood as a form of paid accommodation in a private home offered to foreign tourists, guests, or students for the purpose of experiencing the lifestyle and everyday life of the hosts (see Dong 2020; Lynch 2005) but is rarely considered explicitly as a way to collect data. Sleepover refers to the situation in which one spends the night in someone else's home, a practice widely documented among children (Joshi 2012) and adolescents (Schalet 2010), notably in North America, Europe, and Oceania. Adopting sleepover as a data-gathering method responds to the recent call in sociology and social anthropology to pay important attention to the value of "sleepwork" (Gilliat-Ray 2021), as "giving further attention to sleep in fieldwork amplifies the importance of being able to function properly the next day" (ibid., p. 148). Sleepover as an embodied experience can provide researchers with interesting insights into the power dynamics in which they are enmeshed. Likewise, commensality is embodied and makes it possible to observe how the bodies experiencing it become "a site of knowledge production" (Vanderslice 2020, p. 17). Although commensality has garnered important scholarly attention as an analytical focus for the last decades (e.g., Abarca 2021; Bailey 2017), it has not been the case for commensality as a research method.

To illuminate the heuristic value of the above-mentioned intimate methods, the present paper draws from two separate ethnographic studies: one on ethnically mixed families of Filipino and Thai migrant women in Belgium (2012–2015) and the other one on divorces of mixed couples involving Filipino migrant women in The Netherlands (2016–2017). I selected the two countries due to the widely observed phenomenon of mixed marriages between their citizens and women from Southeast Asia (e.g., Suksomboon 2009; Heyse et al. 2007). Studies show that social gaps between partners abound in these mixed marriages: first, migrant women spouses are much younger than their European husbands; second, these migrants depend legally and economically on their husbands notably during the beginning of their immigration; and third, they mostly fulfil the large bulk of reproductive labour at home. Although my studies in the aforementioned countries mainly employed interviews, they also relied on intimate research methods to gather data. The adoption of intimate research methods in these studies took place in 31 cases out of 67 migrant women interviewed (50 Filipinos and 17 Thais): two homestays, two sleepovers,

and 27 instances of commensality. Intimate research methods would not have been possible without my informants' consent, initiative, and cooperation.

In the following sections, I first situate these methods within the ethnographic tradition of conducting research before reviewing the literature on mixed couples and families. At the core of this paper, I draw from my field notes and photographs to explore the relational character of intimate research methods. I unveil how these methods allowed me to grasp during my fieldwork the realities of mixed family life, which are most often difficult to understand through interviews: power dynamics, intergenerational relations, family's social class status, cross-border social ties, and emotional situations. To ensure the complete anonymity of my informants, I changed their names and modified in a few cases their professions as well as other details that may have made it possible to identify them (such as their acquired nationalities when other than Belgian and Dutch). Finally, I discuss the usefulness and ethical dimensions of intimate research methods. I conclude with methodological suggestions for future studies on mixed couples/families in a migration setting in times of a global pandemic.

2. Situating Intimate Research Methods

The empirical effectiveness of intimate research methods can be fully understood by revisiting the place these methods have occupied within the ethnographic tradition in the social sciences, notably in anthropology. Although they have not been explicitly described as data-gathering techniques, homestay, sleepover, and commensality have been mostly part of anthropologists' participant observations in different socio-cultural contexts. They mainly foreground the importance of home in ethnographic research.

In many cases, anthropologists live during fieldwork in a home they created within or slightly away from the community or villages they are studying. Home is used in this case as a sort of observation post. For example, Malinowski during his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands of New Guinea camped "right in the villages", which allowed him to observe "constantly the daily life of the natives" before his very eyes (Malinowski 2005, p. xii). Likewise, Mead resided in a home separated from her target study villages during her fieldwork among seven tribes in selected Pacific Islands. In her book "Male and female. A study of the sexes in the changing world", she explains that "(a)s in the choice of a house and in its construction, the other details of living are consciously fitted together to increase one's powers and chances of observation" (Mead 1975, p. 42). Contrary to early anthropologists such as Malinowski and Mead, many contemporary anthropologists reside in the home of an adoptive family during their fieldwork. This practice allows them in the process to progressively immerse themselves in the lifeworld of their target informants. Home appears here as an entry point to the target study group or community, which may accompany personal struggles. For instance, Blackwood (1995), who "lived with one family" during her research on social change and gender identity of lesbians in Minangkabau village in West Sumatra (Indonesia), "felt cut off" from herself and deeply lonely as she concealed her lesbian identity from her adoptive family during the beginning of her fieldwork. Her experience highlights that a longtime homestay can bring intimacy during fieldwork but at the same time challenges as regards the researcher's positionality in the field. This reality may partly explain why more and more researchers in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and geography mostly conduct home visits rather than longtime homestays to carry out interviews and/or observations with their informants (e.g., Kilburn et al. 2018; Meyer 2017). This approach is particularly useful when the study aims to grasp the material performance and representation in the domestic space of taken-for-granted issues such as gender subjectivities and sexualities (see Morrison 2013).

Unlike homestay, sleepover appears less mentioned in anthropologists' recounts of their ethnographic journeys. It probably takes place sometimes during ethnographic fieldwork but is not given much attention, which can be attributed to the fact that sleeping over in the home of study informants may pose the question of the researcher's safety. This is the case of one researcher studying "adolescent girls whose unstable housing disrupted

their lives” (Tolich et al. 2020, p. 591). It is not surprising that sleepover, when adopted as a data-gathering method, is usually set up in a laboratory and not in the home of informants (see Birnie et al. 2011).

Contrary to sleepovers, but like homestay, commensality has been explicitly part of the ethnographic tradition in anthropology. For instance, Mead (1928) narrates in her book “Coming of Age in Samoa” that she “spent more time” during her fieldwork “in the games of children than in the councils of their elders. Speaking their language, eating their food, sitting barefoot and crosslegged upon the pebbly floor” (ibid., p. 10). In her other book on males and females, she explains what an anthropologist does in the field: “the anthropologists’ way of studying people is not to experiment, but to learn by observation and participation. The anthropologist not only records the consumption of sago in the native diet, but eats at least enough to know how heavily it lies upon the stomach” (Mead 1975, p. 28). Eating the food that informants consume is a way of understanding them and reinforcing trust in researcher-informant relations. Like home, food is an entry point to the universe of the informants.

Given that homestay, sleepover, and commensality most often than not constitute ethnographic observations, they show high potential to bring rich empirical data if treated as data-gathering methods. They can complement conventional research methods such as interviews and stand by themselves as lone data-gathering techniques. As studies suggest (e.g., works by Malinowski, Mead, and Morrison, among others), the data collected from observations employing what I call “intimate research methods” in the present paper are thick, thought provoking, and nuanced. Hence, as they do in other research fields, intimate research methods can also bring in-depth data to the study of mixed couples and their families.

3. Researching Qualitatively Mixed Couples/Families in Migration Context

The literature on conjugal mixedness in migration settings shows that the dominant methodological approach scholars adopted is qualitative. Mostly informed by and inscribed in feminist, transnational, and more recently intersectional epistemologies, this corpus of studies unveils the different forms of qualitative methodologies mobilised during fieldwork.

Interviews, mostly organised through a thematic guide, allow the researcher to obtain specific sets of information from a partner, a couple, a family, or other social actors during a short period of time. When carried out multiple times with different informants, a sample of more than 15 individual partners and/or couples is frequently generated (e.g., Bezzini 2017; Chen 2021; Gaspar 2010). The bulk of data collected through these interviews is the object of scholarly analysis and publications (e.g., Denman 2009; Johnson 2007; Parisi 2019). Some published works provide information on how the interviews were carried out and the difficulties encountered before and/or during the process due to the influence of social categories such as gender, social class, and ethnicity. For example, in her study of Chinese-Hungarian mixed couples, Kovács (2016) explains that she could not convince some of her “potential interviewees” “to talk” to her and that “(t)hroughout the fieldwork period” she “found men, especially Chinese men, less willing to talk about personal affairs” (pp. 121–22). In his research on international marriages linking Vietnam and the United States of America (USA), Thai (2008) remarks how his social class background (i.e., having a job in the academia) made it difficult for him to interview Vietnamese grooms in the USA, which was not the case when he met and interviewed their brides in Vietnam. As a result of their numerical dominance on the so-called “global marriage market” (Constable 2003), most interviews conducted involve migrant women in heterosexual mixed couples. These interviews are sometimes combined with expert interviews—that is, interviews with social actors in contact or relations with mixed couples (see Heyse 2010; Odasso 2021). In a few cases, quantitative methods are also mobilised alongside interviews, such as in Rodríguez-García’s (2006) study of African-Spanish families in Catalonia during which he combined semi-structured interviews with survey and census data analysis.

In addition, researchers turn to ethnographic observations alongside interviews to gain more in-depth data about mixed couples and their families (see [Barabantseva and Grillot 2019](#); [Bonfanti 2021](#); [Lapanun 2019](#); [Maskens 2018](#)). This often implies following the couples/families for a long time within their social spaces. For example, [Kudo \(2017\)](#) investigated Japanese-Pakistani marriages and families for more than ten years, whereas [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) examined the lives of Filipino migrant women in Japan and their mixed families for more than 20 years. Likewise, Cole carried out a series of fieldwork in Madagascar and France during five years between 1993 and 2013 to study the “long-standing Malagasy role of *vadimbazaha*” (i.e., “the spouse of a European”) ([Cole 2014](#), p. S85). Observations are conducted in many ways, such as home and/or workplace visits, participating in social gatherings, and meeting couples in casual situations (see [Faier 2008](#); [Kim 2013](#); [Therrien 2012](#)). Some scholars adopt autoethnography (e.g., [Lester Murad 2005](#); [Meyer 2017](#)), a research approach that “combines discursive elements of ethnography and autobiography” ([Moser 2019](#), p. 232) while “engag(ing) in cultural analysis and interpretation” ([Chang 2016](#), p. 43). In her study of mixed couples in Morocco, [Therrien \(2008\)](#) emphasises the importance of “shared experience” during fieldwork and used her “own experience as an entry point” to her target study group by becoming herself “in a way” her “own informant” (p. 37). Similarly, [Geoffrion \(2016\)](#) draws upon her own experience of conjugal mixedness in her study of Canadian women in transnational couple with non-Canadian men. Autoethnography allowed her to “grasp in detail, the texture and the nuances” of her informants’ emotional experiences that “only come out in a fractured way in interviews” and that “are little captured by observation” ([Geoffrion 2016](#), p. 67). In this case, autoethnography can be qualified as an intimate research method as it involves observation (of oneself) and critical reflexivity allowing researchers to yield thick intimate data.

In general, in situ observations appear to be the norm in conjugal mixedness studies but since the 2000s, more and more scholars have resorted to “online ethnography” ([Markham 2005](#)), either as an only research method or as a supplementary one. Using such approaches, researchers carry out observations on selected websites and conduct content analysis (see [Angeles and Sunanta 2007](#); [Constable 2003](#)). The latter approach has also been gaining ground in the study of mixed marriages, couples, and families, notably to scrutinise family-related laws and policies. In this analytic method, a socio-legal approach effectively unveils the implications of laws and policies on the lives of mixed couples and their families. Taking into account laws and policies in the study of conjugal mixedness in migration settings leads to interesting empirical findings decorticated through different lenses, such as “technologies of love” ([D’Aoust 2013](#)), “marital citizenship” ([Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau 2017](#)), “intimate citizenship” ([Bonjour and de Hart 2021](#)), and the prism of security, citizenship, and rights ([D’Aoust 2022](#)). For instance, in her analysis of family-related migration policies in Switzerland, [Riaño \(2012\)](#) observes that those policies run counter to the gender equality principle being promoted in the country as they “provide” migrant women in couple with Swiss men “little or no scope for gaining access to paid employment” (p. 15). The analysis of family-related laws and policies is useful to comprehend larger social forces shaping the lives of mixed couples and their families.

To sum up, the above review of the literature, although non-exhaustive, suggests three major scholarly tendencies in terms of qualitative methodological strategies to study the lives of mixed couples and families in the context of migration. First, among the various qualitative data-gathering methods available, interviews in all forms (semi-structured, narrative, individual, couple, and so on) remain the most widely employed method to date. Second, observation largely appears to be in situ and to last for many years. Third, triangulation ([Denzin 1978](#) cited in [Flick 2004](#))—combining two or more research methods—represents one of the leading strategies in the field, mostly in the form of interviews mixed with observations, interviews with autoethnography, interviews with census data analysis, interviews together with law/policy analysis, or online ethnography with content analysis. As the literature shows, the above methods effectively generate rich empirical data. Details of how these data are obtained are rarely explained due to the limited

space available in journal articles and/or to the specific focus of the publication (empirical and/or theoretical). As a result, the picture of the processes surrounding interviews and observations is incomplete, and the existence of other ethnographic practices such as autoethnography during fieldwork is often overlooked. To visibilise the taken-for-granted ethnographic practices that form the “backstage” of qualitative research, I explore in this paper three examples of intimate data-gathering methods, which highlight their heuristic value and add fresh insights into the study of mixed families.

4. Results: The Heuristic Value of Intimate Data-Gathering Methods

Observations, home visits, and participation in mixed couples’ social activities sometimes include commensality but rarely homestay and sleepover. These intimate data-gathering methods—homestay, sleepover, and commensality—most often overlap and can provide opportunities to get to know better the lives of the mixed couples/families under study as well as the contexts they inhabit.

4.1. Homestays: Facilitating Immersion in the Lifeworld of Mixed Families

The best data I got out of visits to people’s homes were the mundane, the ordinary stuff of life [...]—dusty tables, picture frames, gifts from overseas, the special shoes from an overseas relative, the worried face, the overly neat hair, photo albums, and so on. Some of the interviews were illuminating precisely because of the specific places that I conducted them. (Thai 2008, p. 163)

The fieldwork account above suggests that home can be an interesting site to grasp mundane, taken-for-granted moments of the everyday life of mixed couples/families. The data collection method of spending some days in the home of these mixed couples/families can expose to the researchers their social spaces and ties crossing local and/or transnational borders, as well as provide them access to the voices of family members. If adopted at the beginning of fieldwork, homestay can act as an effective entry point into the lifeworld of a specific group of mixed couples/families, as I experienced below.

In October 2012, I started my study on Filipino-Belgian and Thai-Belgian families in Belgium. Residing in a neighbouring country at that time while coming to Belgium every two weeks for my work made it extremely difficult for me to meet potential informants. At the beginning of my research, I stayed in boarding rooms (*chambre d’hôte*) in various private homes near the university. One time, by chance, the family offering a room in their home was ethnically mixed: the mother was British and the father was Belgian. This six-day encounter gave me an idea to look for a boarding room for rent in the home of Filipino-Belgian or Thai-Belgian families. After asking some people among my contacts in Belgium, I finally found one Filipino-Belgian family renting a room in their home in a nearby town.

From November 2012 to June 2013, I stayed in their home for three days every two weeks. It was a bed-and-breakfast arrangement, but the mother of the family, Linda (a highly educated woman and entrepreneur), also invited me to join their family at dinner a few times. Having the same national origin as her and being myself in a mixed couple facilitated my immersion in her family’s lifeworld. At the beginning of my homestay, I informed Linda and her husband about my research and told them about my interest in interviewing them and their adolescent child. They shared their stories with me during informal conversations, and so did I about my own mixed family life. For example, I talked about the foods prepared and eaten in my home as well as the languages spoken in my family. With their consent, I carried out separate interviews with the couple and later with their child.

My second homestay experience took place at the beginning of my case study on Thai-Belgian families in Belgium, during which I was experiencing difficulties in meeting potential informants. To address this problem, I took a Thai language course that a Thai migrant association was organising. Thanks to this course, I met Som who later became my key informant. Although she was not married to a Belgian, I interviewed her on several

occasions as she was an active member of a Thai migrant association. My interviews took place not in Som's home but in a fast-food restaurant. Som opened her home for me for the first time from 22 to 24 April 2013 when I could not find an Airbnb place to stay in Belgium for my fieldwork. The first day of my homestay brought me discomfort as I wrote below in my field notebook.

I felt shy to intrude in this private life of Som. I met her American (nationality changed for anonymity) husband named Robert. He was eating (dinner) when we arrived. I was uncomfortable at that time, (I) didn't know what to say except 'thank you for letting me sleep' in their apart(ment)". (Fieldnotes, 22 April 2013)

After discussing with the couple, Som sautéed vegetables with spices and white rice. She and I ate dinner together and continued our talk afterwards. The room where I would be sleeping was a guestroom just next to the room of Som and Robert. The whole night I was half-asleep, hearing all the noises outside the apartment. In the morning, I drank tea with the couple before going to the university to work. At the end of the day, I returned to the home of Som and Robert. This time I felt comfortable, and my conversations with the couple flowed naturally. It was during this second meeting at their home that I started to pay more attention to the things around the apartment. During my conversation with the couple in their kitchen, I remarked on the small magnetic decorations on the door of their refrigerator. Each of the decorations had a name of a country the couple visited; Som told me that they had already gone to 24 countries "but not all the time together". I also noticed a big piece of ginger, red onions, and big shallots on a small bowl in the kitchen, which inspired me to take note of these things in the home of my other informants when they showed me their kitchen. When I left Som's and Robert's home the next day, I felt that my knowledge about them had deepened and that we had established a more relaxed, less formal relationship than usual between researchers and informants. Without my homestay, I would not be able to see Som's home environment. Based on my experience, interviewing informants in their homes does not automatically give researchers similar observations as the purpose of their visit is to interview them. In many cases, informants only showed selected rooms in their house, usually the kitchen and the living room (if the interview took place outside the house). However, if the informed visit aims to see the informant's home or specific objects within (see [Morrison 2013](#)), the researcher may have access to different rooms of the home.

Thanks to these two homestays, I obtained several insights that I could not easily get from one- or two-time interviews. These insights can be organised into three major themes: the power dynamics in the couple, intergenerational relations, and the family's social class status and networks. The power dynamics in the couple are not easy to grasp if not seeing the couple in their home context. For example, after dinner with my host Filipino-Belgian family, I observed the "continued negotiation" of the partners around several issues ranging from financial difficulties to the mundane aspects of family life: "the story of a cup, valise, wallpaper, and the house", as well as "deciding without consulting" the other partner (Fieldnotes, 16 December 2012). I wrote in my field notebook "power play" to describe this situation. My discussion with Linda revolved around the "dominating personality" of Filipino wives in Filipino-Belgian families and how such personality reflected the larger "matriarchal Filipino society" in which men's domination is "only (a) façade" (Fieldnotes, 16 December 2012). This discussion underlined the nuance of the "latent power" in couples ([Lukes 1974](#)). Except for Linda, most of my informants were stay-at-home wives as their Belgian husbands encouraged them to do so to avoid paying high taxes ([Fresnoza-Flot 2018](#)). In my host couple with a Thai spouse, although my homestay was very short in duration, it provided me with a hint about the power relations between the partners. Unlike other mixed couples I later interviewed, Som and her husband appeared to me in an equal relation: Robert did not rely on Som to cook foods, whereas Som was economically independent of Robert.

Regarding intergenerational relations, I witnessed how mixed family members expressed affection for one another. One morning over the breakfast table, I remarked to

Linda “how sweet” her child was: “hugging, hugging, kissing, kissing” her (Fieldnotes, 23 January 2013). Linda told me that her adolescent child was “closer to her” than to her father: “they’re like cat and dog” she said to describe the father–child relationship. She described her husband as “authoritative and sometimes, he just says like this, like that, without explaining” to their child (Fieldnotes, 23 January 2013). The mother–adolescent child closeness I observed in Linda’s family underlined what larger societies view as mixed families are, in reality, not so different from non-mixed families, in which such proximate relation has been documented (see [Hosley and Montemayor 1997](#)). In the case of Som and Robert who had no children, I found out during my conversations with them that they focused a lot on caring for their aged parents and that they regularly visited them in their respective countries of residence (USA and Thailand). This transnational caregiving was also observable in the case of Linda, whose mother came to Belgium to visit her during the warm season.

In addition, my homestays allowed me to understand the social class belonging of my informants. It was evident in their home decorations (paintings, handicrafts, traditional fabrics from the Philippines, Buddha images, and plates from Thailand, etc.), the size of their home (spacious, a garden at the back in the case of Linda, etc.), the location of their homes in a wealthy neighbourhood, their family’s activities (e.g., travelling abroad, eating in fancy restaurants), and the variety of international foods they consumed, among others. Thanks to my homestays, I had the opportunity to see different parts of the homes of my host families that were usually inaccessible to visitors. I was able to observe their consumption patterns and tastes, reminding me of what [Bourdieu \(1987\)](#) calls “habitus”. The social class standing of Linda’s and Som’s families was also evident from their social networks. For instance, the Belgian and Filipino friends and acquaintances of Linda and her husband sometimes dropped them at their home or called them up by phone. Likewise, Som knew many highly educated Thai migrants in Belgium and in other countries. I met some other informants in my study thanks to these wide social networks of Linda and Som.

My immersion in the intimate lives of my host families during homestays allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of their individual and collective lives. My field notes and memories of my homestays offered me detailed information that I could not have obtained through interviews and non-participant observations. I was able to talk and discuss with the members of the families present in the household, which was not possible during an interview with only the mother, the child, or the father of the family.

4.2. Sleepovers: Providing an Additional Window into the Intimate

Sleeping is a crucial part of human lives that has been largely neglected in “ethnography as a fieldwork practice” and in “writing about qualitative fieldwork methodology” ([Gilliat-Ray 2021](#), p. 157). My homestays would not have been complete without sleeping in the houses of my host families. Since my homestays were focused on what was happening during the waking hours of my informants, my act of sleeping and its surrounding processes were neither the object of my attention nor my chosen way of data-gathering. However, on two separate occasions during my fieldwork in Belgium and The Netherlands, I had the opportunity to turn to sleepover as a research method.

Unlike homestays, a sleepover consists of a one-night stay in the home of an informant and takes place in a span of a few hours. In my case, it started at the end of the afternoon and ended in the early morning. As a research method, sleepover entails paying attention for a short, intensive period of time to the set of processes taking place before, during, and after the night. Similar to daytime home visits (see [Morrison 2013](#)), it gives researchers access to intimate spaces such as the bathroom, toilet, and bedroom. It also offers the possibility to observe couple or family practices that are usually out of reach for researchers doing daytime home visits, such as late-night forms/rhythms of interactions or early morning activities.

The first opportunity for a sleepover arose when a Thai woman named Taeng invited me to her home for one night sometime in May 2013. I met her after I had interviewed the

eldest of her three children, who was at that time a student at the same university where I was working. It was Som who had passed me Taeng's contact. Like Linda and Som, Taeng was highly educated; she was an entrepreneur and at the time of our meeting was a full-time housewife. Residing in a wealthy neighbourhood far from the city centre, Taeng picked me up from the university in her luxurious car. I carried out my interview in the dining area of her spacious house. The eldest of her children whom I had interviewed was there and talked with us a bit. Before leaving to go to the university, she uttered some words in Thai to her mother, which I understood later when Taeng invited me to stay in her home. She said that her eldest child told her that "I was a good person" (Fieldnotes, 23 April 2013). The next time I came to Belgium for my work, I did not stay in Linda's house but instead proceeded to Taeng's home.

My sleepover in Taeng's place provided me with some hints about the power dynamics between Taeng and her Belgian husband. Before dinner, Taeng showed me a casserole of *Larb Moo* (internal organs and minced meat of pork cooked in pork blood with various spices) that she had prepared for herself. She told me that she regularly cooked separate dishes for her and her husband who did not like spicy "strange" foods. Economically dependent on her husband, Taeng considered her husband's tastes when deciding what to serve for family meals. Nonetheless, she expressed her agency by navigating the power relations in her couple through cooking two different dishes, which satisfied both her taste and that of her husband and children. I also found out the extent of the tension between Taeng and her other children. For sleeping, Taeng offered me the bedroom of one of her children, who apparently preferred to stay in a student room near the university. Unlike Linda and Som whose first marriage remained intact, Taeng had experienced a difficult divorce from her first Belgian husband, the biological father of her children. This conjugal rupture affected Taeng's relations with her children. I also remarked that her husband came home a bit late as he was working in a city more than 30 km away from home. Therefore, the family's dinner took place passed 8 o'clock in the evening. Practising Buddhism, Taeng also shared with me her spiritual reflections about life, her relations with her children, her experience as an immigrant in Belgium, and so on. My long discussions with Taeng about Buddhism and the meaning of life preoccupied my mind when I went to bed. My thoughts were wandering too about the teenage child of Taeng whose belongings were present in the room where I was. My sleep remained shallow that night, and I woke up early in the morning. Taeng and her husband got up earlier than me as the latter went to work. Taeng prepared tea for me and after that, I thanked her for welcoming me into her home. She passed me some books on Buddhism and drove me back to the university campus. My sleepover made me discover the spiritual quest of Taeng, and her relations with her husband and children as well as the night and morning rhythms of life in her home, which she had mentioned only in passing during my formal interview with her. I also saw intimate spaces in her home, namely the toilet, bathroom, and bedrooms, which Taeng did not show me during my first interview with her in her home.

The second occasion for a sleepover came during my fieldwork in The Netherlands for my study of the divorce of mixed couples involving Filipino migrant women: a divorced informant named Teodora, whom I had already interviewed and followed for a while in her social activities, invited me to sleep in her apartment. Teodora at that time was in a "living-apart-together" (Levin 2004) relation with a Dutch boyfriend, Howard, and was residing alone in her two-bedroom apartment. I did not know the details about her mixed couple until I came to her place for a sleepover. On our way to her apartment from the train station, Teodora "showed me where she worked: a home for the aged" and "she also brought me to the house of her friend married to a Dutch" (Fieldnotes, 9 May 2016). We talked non-stop when she was cooking, during the dinner, and after it. I found her "very open about her life": "she talked about her divorced and re-partnered sister" in Germany, about the details of her divorce, and about her plan to break up with her boyfriend:

About Howard, she's planning to dump him after her trip to Morocco from 15–23 May 2016. She shared with me what she didn't like about him: "*ganun sa pera*"

(“like this with money” saying it while closing her right hand), “*kuripot*” (thrifty), “talking about money all the time”. (Fieldnotes, 9 May 2016)

Teodora also “showed me her marriage and divorce documents”, which I photographed with her consent. This would not be possible if I interviewed her outside of her home. Aside from sharing with me the details about her life, she also explained to me “her feelings” and “her aspirations”. For sleeping, she prepared the room where one of her young adult children slept when visiting her. This incited her to tell me stories about her children and the state of her relationships with them. The room was well warmed, and the fatigue of long hours of conversations made me fall into sleep after a few minutes of wandering in my thoughts about Teodora’s family life experiences. I wrote in my notebook that Teodora and I went to bed at 1:35 a.m. At around 7:30 a.m. on 10 May, Teodora prepared breakfast for the two of us: “hard-boiled egg, Dutch black bread, green grapes, cheese, margarine, mayonnaise and black tea”. After eating, she walked with me to the train station and took two photos of us before we said goodbye to each other. The sleepover was very short but I had the impression that I had known Teodora for a long time due to the rich details of her mixed family life she shared with me. She again invited me to sleep over at her place a few months later, but I turned it down as I was starting my fieldwork at that time in Belgium.

Based on my fieldwork experience, sleepover can be qualified as a form of “focused ethnography” that is “characterised by relatively short-term field visits (i.e., settings that are “part-time” rather than permanent)” and by its strong “intensity of data collection” (Knoblauch 2005, p. 2). As Gilliat-Ray (2021) argues, “during fieldwork, our sleeping arrangements provide important insights into both the mundane and creative work of social scientific enquiry” (p. 157). Despite its short duration, sleepover can effectively capture the complexities of the lives of mixed couples and families, notably when the researcher is critically attentive to every detail of interpersonal interactions, events, and objects at home. Its empirical power can be further reinforced when adopted alongside conventional ethnographic methods in studies employing triangulation and when carried out several times in different informants’ homes.

4.3. Commensality: Obtaining “Snapshots” of Mixed Family Lives

Popularly known in the 1980s during the so-called “Kodak culture” (Chalfen 1987), “snapshot” has been understood as the act of “glancing at the target at a particular “instant” (over a short interval of time)” (Mann and Haykin 1991, p. 210). It is a rapid view of the target at a specific moment and place, which anyone can realise without technical know-how, a priori knowledge, and reflection. This meaning reverberates in qualitative research, in which the term “snapshot” implies non-detailed tidbits of information about the target study group obtained through very short-term, fast observation or interview in the field. Snapshots can be obtained during a short moment of interactions with the study informants such as during commensality. Gathering snapshot data using commensality as a research method appears effective in the study of individuals’ intimate lives, such as those of mixed couples/families.

In my studies, I employed commensality as a data-gathering method, notably alongside interviews of Filipino and Thai migrant women. Although I experienced commensality during my homestays and sleepovers, my attention to what it brought to my studies was particularly strong when I carried it out alongside interviews. During my fieldwork in Belgium, commensal eating occurred in three social spaces: at places of worship, in informants’ homes, and in fast-food and regular restaurants. Places of worship, namely Filipino-frequented Catholic Churches and Thai Buddhist temples, served as my entry doors to the Filipino and Thai immigrant populations in Belgium. These migrants organised social gatherings around colourful, popular Filipino and Thai dishes in their places of worship. While consuming these foods together, conversations took place among the participants and emotions were shared. Who came for the gathering, who brought what, who ate what, and who put order after commensal eating revealed to me the power relations within the Filipino and Thai immigrant populations.

In a Thai Buddhist temple in Belgium, one informant brought to my attention that “every lunchtime, women and other people in the temple sit there around the monks” (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2014). In this social space, the monk occupies an important position and when he asks Thai migrants to do something in the temple, they obey him. When the head monk invited me to join the group and to eat together with them, a young Thai migrant whose mother was married to a Belgian immediately passed me a plate, spoon, and fork. When I sat, “a woman smiled at me” and said, “*mabuti!*” (“fine” in Filipino). She told me that “she knew some Filipinas” and that she was a “widow” with “3 kids, all grown up” (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2014). While eating some dishes from the Isan region accompanied by glutinous rice (*khao nieww*), the young Thai migrant provided me with various information about Thai migrants and the communication problem between Thai mothers and their ethnically mixed children (*luk-kreung*). The short moment I spent eating with the women in the temple allowed me to obtain “snapshots”. After regularly frequenting the temple and joining Thai migrants in their different activities including commensal eating, I accumulated many such snapshots. When organised and analysed, these snapshots offered me a general picture of Thai migrants and the issues surrounding conjugal and familial mixedness.

Commensal eating mostly occurred in the home of my informants, particularly during lunchtime. In nine cases, I ate together with my informant and her family members (husband and/or child). Formal interviews while eating happened only in three of the 13 cases of commensality at home. Mostly, we ate first before the formal interview, and the foods prepared by the informants were dishes from their countries of origin, Belgian meals, or a combination of both. Commensal eating provides a small window through which to obtain a snapshot of not only the host mixed family’s table manners and culinary tastes but also their social class origin and emotional state. For instance, on 14 October 2013, I went to Charlene’s home to interview her and her Belgian partner. After my interview, she prepared *adobo* (chicken cooked in soy sauce and vinegar with vegetables) and rice. When her Belgian partner arrived home, I learned that he liked this dish a lot. The second time I visited Charlene, she invited me to eat with her for lunch. She prepared canned sardines with tomato sauce in noodles, a dish usually prepared in working-class households in the Philippines as its ingredients are affordable and it does not take a long time to cook. While eating, she told me that her Belgian partner did not like this dish and that she was taking advantage that he was not at home to cook it. This made me realise Charlene’s modest social class background and her nostalgia for the Philippines. Commensality incited informants to talk about foods, first and foremost. For example, I interviewed Amanda while we were eating lunch: “*frites* (fries) with mayonnaise, salad and *tête de veau* (calf’s head)” (Fieldnotes, 10 September 2013). She confided that since her husband did not like rice, her family only ate rice once per week. Amanda’s husband joined us in our meals and talked about their children’s ties with the Philippines, which he described as “not deep” (Fieldnotes, 10 September 2013). I noted this tidbit of information, a snapshot that I further inquired about during my separate interviews with the couple’s three children. Thanks to this, I gained an in-depth understanding of their children’s transnational connections and the quality of the interpersonal relations in their mixed family. It is interesting to note that many informants welcomed me to visit the kitchen of their homes, where I discovered their “Alibaba’s cabinets” filled with precious ingredients for their cooking and other foodstuffs, as one example below shows.

She allowed me to take a photo of her food cabinet in her kitchen. In one of the containers here, there’s rice. Many ethnic foods are in this cabinet [...] rice, *pancit bilhon* (rice stick noodles) and *loglog* (noodles made from cornstarch), and other ethnic foods. (Fieldnotes, 18 February 2013)

In nine cases, my interviews took place while eating and/or sipping a hot beverage in a regular or fast-food restaurant. These interviews recorded with my informants’ consent were combined with informal conversations that occurred the moment I switched off my digital recorder. Being in a public place where one can stay only if ordering something to eat or drink, the duration of these meetings with the informants was shorter than at their

home. Ordered foods were mostly small cakes or pastries to accompany a cup of coffee or tea. As I was the one who asked for an interview, I covered the expenses of the foods and/or drinks we consumed during the interview as a way for me to thank my informants. Since my interviews were conducted while eating or drinking with them, the snapshots of their lives that I gathered were not as numerous as those I gained during commensality in the home of my informants. For example, in my interview combined with commensality in a fast-food restaurant in a big mall on 26 May 2016, my informant named Lyn remarked to me that she and her Filipino friends regularly meet and eat there as the foods were good and cheap. This “snapshot” inspired me to investigate other Filipino women’s social networks and activities before and after their divorce from their Belgian or Dutch husbands.

Discussing and eating together are mutually reinforcing social activities, which enriches interpersonal interactions between the researcher and informants. They motivate people to share their stories and emotions. As [Vanderslice \(2020\)](#) remarks, commensal eating constructs “bonds” among participants as it is “a sensual experience” encouraging people “to reveal private details” of their lives (p. 18). It is not surprising that many of my informants who had commensal meals with me helped me meet additional informants for my studies. Thanks to commensality, conducting interviews became a particularly rich experience.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The intimate research methods examined in this paper—homestay, sleepover, and commensality—unveil how micro-level details enlighten macro-level understanding of the realities of mixed couple and family lives, in terms of power dynamics, intergenerational relations, social class belonging, cross-border social ties, and emotional situations. Each intimate method offers opportunities during and through which to grasp one or more of these aspects. Intimate research methods also entail reflections on the ethical challenges they may pose during the fieldwork process and open alternative ways to understand mixedness in the context of a global pandemic.

5.1. What Intimate Research Methods Offer

Homestay, sleepover, and to a certain extent commensality allow the researcher to understand the “power play” in mixed couples/families. They offer an opportunity for proximate, informal conversations and interactions between the researcher and informants.

Homestay and sleepover create a situation of intense interpersonal interactions during which the researcher can see with their naked eyes the power dynamics in action between partners and feel the emotions involved. For instance, I witnessed the gendered division of labour in my informants’ homes and the way migrant spouses expressed their agency. Interviews can provide insights into these intimate aspects, but they may miss the home context in which the informants’ experiences of and perspectives on such aspects originate. It is the details of the home context of mixed couples and what concretely takes place in it that are often missing in interview-based studies (e.g., [Gambol 2016](#)). Homestay and sleepover allow the researcher to capture the home context well. They also provide in-depth data on intergenerational relations, which are generally not fully described during formal interviews. Both methods facilitate the researchers’ access to some family documents and objects kept at home. Whereas interviews create and nourish the researchers’ mental pictures of mixed couple and family lives, the sensory experience of seeing, reading, touching, or even getting a whiff of the smell of home-located materials validates those pictures and contributes to researchers’ holistic understanding of mixedness. Each home has its own ambience, smells, architectural configurations, and decorations, reflecting how the couple or family inhabiting it organises their lives and how they view the world. Material objects at home speak about the past of the couple/family, their spiritual and religious orientations, or the person who left home. Aside from the personal belongings, the couple’s choices of home decorations, the foods and dishes their family consumes, the spatial location of their home, the language(s) they speak among themselves, and what

they organise as family activities are concrete indicators of their social location in their residence country and the extent of their transnational ties. On the contrary, commensality generates snapshots of various aspects of the lives of mixed couples and families. When it takes place many times, it produces several snapshots that create a meaningful overview of mixedness and its social environment.

The common point in which the three intimate methods converge is their empirical power to reveal some aspects of mixedness that are either completely disregarded in the initial research plan or slightly discussed during a formal interview. Intimate research methods also unravel the emotional state of the partners of mixed couples. Being in and inhabiting, even for a short period of time, the domestic space of couples/families plunge the researcher into their world, where emotions and affects can easily be seen by the naked eyes and felt during face-to-face interactions. Indeed, home is “both a material environment and a set of meaningful relationships, re-collections and aspirations” (Boccagni 2017, p. xxiv).

5.2. Ethical Insights from Intimate Methods

Adopting intimate research methods to study conjugal mixedness in a migration setting presents ethical challenges to researchers. Like interviews and observations, they require a certain level of trust from the potential informants. As Bonfanti (2021) remarks in her study of South Asian-Italian couples and their children in Italy, “conducting domestic ethnography is a tightrope walk between respect for privacy and involvement in the lives of families” (p. 64).

This is particularly the case when researchers wish to conduct homestay or sleepover in the house of mixed couples. In my case, except for Som, all the migrant women who opened their homes for me for homestay or sleepover initiated the invitation, and I was not the one who asked them if I could stay or sleep in their homes for one or more days/nights. If the researcher were to be the one to ask the informant (such as in my case with Som), the latter’s consent and that of his/her other family members would be needed. For example, Som asked first her husband Robert if I could stay in their apartment for three days and two nights before she accepted my request. It is also important that the family members met for the first time during homestay, sleepover, or commensality be informed about the reason why the researcher is in their home or taking part in the family activity. I did it so, for instance, when I met Taeng’s husband during my sleepover in their house. I asked for his oral consent if I could ask him a few questions about his experience of couple life with Taeng who grew up in a country different from his. I also shared with him and Taeng my own experience of conjugal mixedness and raising children in an ethnically mixed family setting. Sharing one’s own experience with one’s informants contributes to the mutual understanding of the everyday challenges experienced by mixed couples and families, which echoes Therrien’s (2008) fieldwork experience among mixed couples in Morocco.

Finally, in conducting domestic ethnography, researchers are expected to ensure that their data-gathering methods will not intrude on or disrupt the lives of their informants. Since intimate research methods take place during a short period of time and are well focused, the probability of disrupting the life of the host couple or family appears minimal. Nonetheless, important caution and reflexivity should be taken seriously since short-term intimate research methods can be as intense as long-term ethnographic fieldwork techniques, notably in terms of the researcher’s emotional and mental engagement and the richness of data to be noted down. The gender dimension of fieldwork should also be given critical attention. For example, if the entry point in the domestic sphere will be through the woman in a mixed couple, sleepover and homestay as data-gathering methods may pose more ethical challenges for a man researcher than for his woman counterpart. One challenge is to avoid conjugal tensions in the couple, which may stem from the husband’s jealousy over the physical presence of the researcher in the family home. If the man researcher’s entry point is the husband in a mixed couple, this challenge may not arise during fieldwork. Nonetheless, regardless of the gender of the main interlocutor, the man

researcher may encounter another challenge—to prevent suspicions of the family members as regards his “real” intention. To avoid this case, he should explain well to his informants the objective(s) of his research and highlight his researcher identity. He should avoid putting his informants in uncomfortable situations that may occur if he talks mostly with the woman in the couple and/or if he interacts closely with the couple’s children. He should also underline his gender-related identities similar to those of his informants: for instance, being in a mixed couple and/or being a father of ethnically mixed children. In summary, to avoid ethical problems during fieldwork, men and women researchers alike need to reflect in depth on the gender dimension of intimate research methods, specifically prior to and during fieldwork. In other words, it is a must for researchers to understand their positionality—that is, the way their multiple social identities (gender, social class, age, ethnicity, and so on) intersect and inform their attitudes and behaviours during fieldwork.

The success of intimate research methods appears contingent on researchers’ positionality. It is critically important that researchers exert efforts to diminish the social distance between them and their informants, who give them their time and share their private lives with them. To do so, researchers should engage in reflexive thinking to identify which among their various social identities can facilitate or impinge the trust of their (potential) informants as well as affect their interactions with them. In my case, I particularly mobilised my gender-related, national, and ethno-linguistic identities during fieldwork among Filipino and Thai migrant women. This approach created a friendly atmosphere where fluid interpersonal communications based on mutual trust and shared social identities between researcher and informants were possible. In Belgium, aware of the impact of my “researcher” identity on my informants who initially hesitated to entrust with me their personal stories, I highlighted my identities as a Southeast Asian migrant woman in couple with a European man and as a mother of ethnically mixed children (see [Fresnoza-Flot 2018](#)). In The Netherlands, I underlined during interactions with potential informants my “insider” identities based on natal country of origin (Philippines), ethno-linguistic affiliation (speaking Filipino, the national language of the Philippines), and family role (mother of ethnically mixed children). Interestingly, the fact that I was residing in Belgium and not in The Netherlands also reinforced the trust of my informants who were “reassured that their stories would be safe with me and not be spread among Filipinos in their receiving country” ([Fresnoza-Flot 2021](#), p. 7).

5.3. Researching Mixedness in Challenging Time

In the time of a global pandemic when proximate interpersonal contacts become increasingly restricted, adopting intimate research methods in the study of mixed couples/families seems difficult and requires an enormous trust on the part of potential informants. However, one of these data-gathering methods using social media platforms presents a potential for conversion into a digital method.

Homestay and sleepover appear difficult to convert into virtual form, but commensal eating can easily be realised when the informant agrees to discuss with the researcher while they are eating meals or having a coffee break. In this case, similar to an interview guide, a guide for virtual commensality as a research method will be useful. Despite the ethical challenges they may pose and the difficulties to carry them out in times of pandemic, intimate research methods still appear promising when it comes to the depth of data researchers of conjugal mixedness can gather in the field using them. Inspired by [Thai’s \(2008\)](#) fieldwork accounts, I can say that my meetings and interviews with partners in mixed couples would not have been enriching and enlightening without intimate research methods, albeit only in a few cases and during a short duration of time.

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