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PARTNER SELECTION BY IMMIGRANTS IN GERMANY: THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND EDUCATION ON AGE AT MARRIAGE

ABSTRACT: Using small-sample survey data collected by the author, this study examines the patterns of partner selection for 151 men and women aged 18 to 45 who have immigrated to Germany from 54 different countries. The article focuses on the effects of immigration as well as of religious affiliation and level of education of the partners on age at marriage. We show that, in comparison to the non-immigrant population in Germany, marriage at a relatively young age can be traced back particularly to the absence of pre-marital cohabitation. Among immigrants, there appears to be a preference for a partner of the same religion, and, as usual among non-migrants, people with an academic or professional degree largely prefer partners who have an equivalent level of education.

KEYWORDS: Immigrants – Intermarriage – Marriage squeeze – Partner selection – Germany

INTRODUCTION

Partner selection, a process in which men and women seek and find a spouse (Pohl 1973), is not only a micro-sociological phenomenon of partnership. It is also of societal importance as it reproduces social structure. In the theoretical case of purely random partner selection it can also change or wipe out existing ones. Thus a macro-sociological aspect has been gaining importance in Germany – as in other European countries – since the 1970s; namely the emergence of foreign sub-populations. These may also include religious groups that had either not been visible in Germany before, or had been so to a small extent, such as Moslems, Buddhists, and Orthodox Christians.

Previous studies have concentrated on the five largest immigrant groups, Turks, Italians, Spaniards, Greeks, and citizens of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, classified by nationality, because only these groups have been identifiable and detectable in the German marriage market so far (Vetter 2001). The context of immigrants living in Germany has rarely been addressed in the theories of partner selection until now. On the one hand, this was because German politicians did not want Germany to be seen as an immigration country. On the other hand, there has been a reluctance, due to the history of demography during the National Socialist era, to single out and study minority groups regarding their partner selection.

The development of immigration to Germany calls for a new research approach, since immigrants are founding families to greater extent here than before. Thirty years ago, the typical "guest worker" who came to Germany was male and married, and his family remained in his country of origin. Nowadays, an increasing number of single foreigners are coming to Germany, and the children and grandchildren of the former guest workers have reached the marriageable age.

Therefore, this study examines various immigrant groups who have left their home country to come to Germany. This also includes the so-called *Aussiedler*, immigrants who have moved here from those eastern regions of Europe that used to belong to pre-war Germany. Although *Aussiedler* have the right to obtain German citizenship immediately,

they undergo the same process of immigration within the same national, linguistic, or cultural units as other immigrants do (Bade 1994). We examine the partners' age at marriage, religious affiliation and level of education and compare these variables to the non-immigrant population.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Even though the number of new marriages is falling and non-marital cohabitation is spreading, marriage is still the most widespread form of intimate partnership, both among Germans and foreigners living in Germany. Non-marital cohabitation occurs in different immigrant groups at various rates of frequency. Among Turkish migrants, for instance, they are hardly a factor at all. This phenomenon has not been sufficiently explained by the literature on immigration. Visa regulations probably play a role here: as Turkey is not a member of the European Union, Turkish migrants do not have the same favourable position as *Aussiedler* or immigrants from the other countries which had traditionally provided Germany with workers (Spain, Italy, Greece). On the other hand, it is possible that religious and cultural norms contribute to partnership legitimisation. Marriage also continues to be the norm as a framework for childbearing, in that most parents, migrants or not, are married.

Partner selection, however, cannot be "simply" explained by theories of action or other purely motivational approaches, but is always influenced also by guidelines of structural opportunity (Klein 1996). Competition in the marriage market is primarily determined by the relative number of women and men in a population or sub-population. In nearly all immigrant sub-populations in Germany, no matter of which cohort, the number of men often greatly outnumbers the number of women at a marriageable age (Roloff 1997). This proportional inequality between the two sexes leads to a marriage squeeze at a disadvantage to men. This is most likely the reason why the rate of men marrying women from the host society is usually higher than that of foreign women who marry men from that society. In those few cases in which the migrant

group has a higher percentage of females, we can see that more women marry into their host society than men do (as in the case of Koreans).

This marriage squeeze situation also partially explains the relatively low age at marriage for female immigrants. The age at first marriage of migrant women is about two years lower than the average age of their counterparts in German society (Roloff 1998: Marriage age for foreign females: 26.4 years, for German females: 28.0 years; for foreign males: 28.2 years, for German males: 30.6 years).

Another factor influencing age at marriage is the education level a person has. Most of the foreign population residing in Germany have a lower level of education than the average German does. The act of migrating is usually accompanied by a loss of status, and the children of immigrants do not attend schools of higher education at the same rate as German children do (Fritzsche 2000). This may be another explanation of why, on average, foreign males marry two years earlier than German men. In addition, migrants possibly follow the marriage pattern of their country of origin rather than that of their host country. Nauck (2001) has shown that in Turkey even women with a higher school degree enter into their first marriage at a relatively young age, as hypergamy ("marrying up") is common in Turkish society. Hypergamy usually applies to a system that uses a strictly "ranking" education system, makes considerable investments in education, and differentiates in status between the sexes.

However, preferences and norms only show up against the structural background of the marriage market. We can see that many foreigners living in Germany tend to marry a foreigner of the same nationality or – to a much lesser extent – a German (and only rarely a foreigner from a different migrant group). This behaviour can be explained by looking at family economics, that is, a common language, culture, and social background facilitates communication and social relations. According to Becker's theory (Becker 1991), there should also be similarities in religious affiliation and the level of education. However, partner selection is regulated by the limits set by the marriage market, which include sex ratios and the participation of each sex in education. As Becker states, "Consequently, the lowest-quality members of the redundant sex remain single when there is positive assortative mating of those marrying, and the highest-quality members remain single when there is negative sorting" (Becker 1991: 120). This also includes sex differences in education leading to hypergamy. The more women participate in education, the more the number of homogeneous unions should increase, since the theory of family economics professes that homogamy in regard to educational level is preferred. This seems to be the case for Germans, but not – or not yet – to the amounts expected.

There has been very little research done on education and religious affiliation of foreigners in Germany on the individual level. Religion is seen as being secondary, if anything, to education, at least among Germans (Rückert *et al.* 1979). The majority of previous studies focus only on Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, or those without any religious affiliation (the official statistics in Germany do not register any other denominations). Therefore it is nearly impossible to draw any conclusions about the marriage behaviour of migrants from Asian countries (including Turkey). We can only assume that marriages between Germans and foreigners are more common among people of the same religion, such as those between an Italian or Spanish Catholic and a German of the same faith. This behavioural pattern is reflected by the low number of marriages between Germans and Greeks (who belong to the Greek Orthodox Church) or Turks (who mostly are Moslems). So far, no studies have been carried out on the marriage tendencies of members of smaller groups. Here we would assume that the smaller the size of the group, the higher the rate of marriage with non-group members. In this paper, we concentrate on these aspects and seek to expand our knowledge in this regard.

DEFINITION, DATA AND METHOD

The picture of migration to Germany is so complex that it is difficult to view all of the statistics on the subject at once. On the one hand, there

are relevant events which take place outside the country, such as couples marrying before they immigrate to Germany, or people of German citizenship marrying abroad. On the other hand, the official statistics in Germany only takes "German" or "non-German" citizenship into account. Because of naturalization, these figures do not necessarily give us any insight into the migration process. This is why our study deviates from the official definitions. We define an immigrant as a person who has left the country of birth and now lives in another country. The definition does not question a change in citizenship or the reasons behind migration. People who leave their home country after their 18th birthday are defined as first generation immigrants; their children are the second generation (the terms "migrant" or "immigrant" refer to both first and second generation migrants). Foreign people who have not immigrated (because they were born in Germany) or whose parents did not immigrate are regarded as not having migrant status. A marriage in which the partners differ in one aspect of culture, be it education, religion, or national origin, is defined as intermarriage. If the partners, married or cohabiting, belong to the same groups, the (marital) union is viewed as being homogeneous.

The data come from a small-sample survey collected in 2002. We used the snowball system for circulating the questionnaire. Distributors were, for example, German teachers of foreigners and contact persons working in ethnic clubs and religious community centers. A total of 302 people (151 Germans and 151 immigrants, single, married, or living in non-marital cohabitation) aged 18 to 45 participated in the study. The immigrants come from 54 countries. We asked questions on the level of education and nationality and sorted them according to continents of origin (due to visa restrictions). We also asked the respondents to indicate their religious affiliation in the questionnaire. This seemed necessary because the research literature on immigration only reflects speculations about the relation between a person's ethnic/national origin and his/her religion. Persons from larger religious groups, for example Moslems, were included in this sample as well as those of smaller groups, such as Buddhists.

For comparisons regarding the age at marriage, we used the H-Test and the F-Test. The Chi²-Test was used for a comparison between alternative data. The confidence interval is 95%. (For detailed documentation of the questionnaire, methods, and the sample, see Milewski-Nykiel 2002.)

RESULTS

Age at marriage

Migrants marry at a younger age than non-migrants do. The immigrants in our sample married aged 25.7 (women) and 28.4 (men); women without a migration background at 26.9, and non-migrant men at age 30.3. These results are relatively close to the average age at marriage observed in Germany (see section on Theoretical framework for a comparison).

The results of this study show that one cannot explain immigrants' younger age at marriage as having one singular cause. First, the low age at marriage for both sexes arises from a significantly lower frequency of pre-marital cohabitation than that of non-migrants. Only 28.6 percent of relationships in which both partners are immigrants lived together before they entered a marital union, as opposed to 77.3 percent of non-migrant ones. This compares to merely 57.1 percent of female migrants who married a non-migrant man and lived with their partner before the wedding. However, 81.8 percent of male migrants married to a non-migrant woman had been in a pre-marital cohabitational union. Immigrated women without having experienced a pre-marital cohabitation marry at age 24.3, those who engaged in pre-marital cohabitation at age 27.9 (non-migrant women: 24.4/27.5 years). For men, the experience of a pre-marital cohabitation also influenced their age at marriage significantly: they marry at 29.6 years; those without pre-marital cohabitation at 27.3 years (non-migrants: 29.2/30.8 years).

Since the frequency of pre-marital cohabitation is similar for first and second generation immigrants, it is clear that another factor than

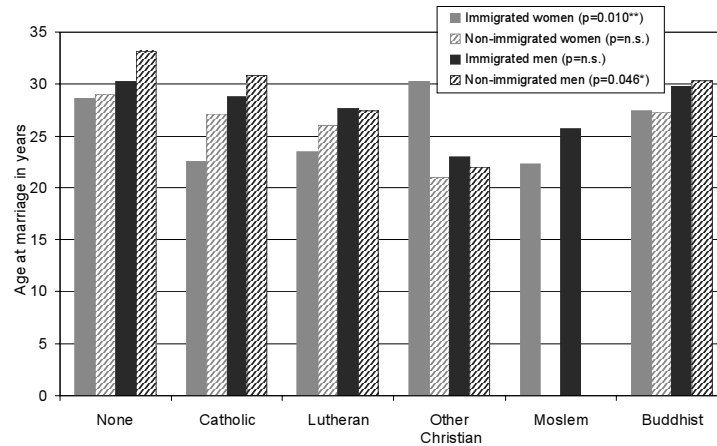


FIGURE 1. Age at marriage by religious affiliation.

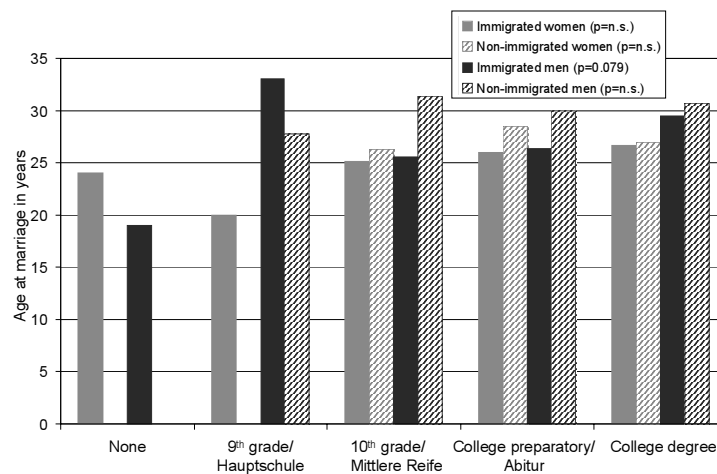


FIGURE 2. Age at marriage by level of education.

visa restriction plays a role. These are the religious attitudes which also affect the frequency of pre-marital cohabitation. Members of Moslem and smaller Christian church communities (mainly the Orthodox churches) show by far the lowest frequency of pre-marital cohabitation. In addition, Moslem women marry at the youngest average age (22.3 years), while those with no religious affiliation enter a marital union at a relatively high age at marriage (28.6 years). This compares to 30.3 years for women of smaller Christian groups, which is the oldest age at marriage, and 27.4 years for Buddhist women. The size of the marriage market seems to influence the wide differences in the age at marriage: members of larger minorities are able to a greater extent to find partners of the same religion and marry at a younger age than members of relatively small groups, even if they are not in pre-marital cohabitation, which is the case for members of smaller Christian groups in the sample (Figure 1).

For men with an immigration background, we see that the distribution for the age at marriage tends to be U-shaped when the education level is taken into account (*Hauptschule*/9 years attendance at school: 33.0, *Mittlere Reife*/10 years of school attendance: 25.6, and college degree: 29.4 years). In our sample, the relatively high age at marriage for persons with 9 years attendance at school can possibly be attributed to the migration process itself, as in most cases the latter is accompanied with a loss of status. It is also possible that seeking a bride in the immigrant's home country leads to the postponement of marriage. A significant difference in the average age at marriage between the immigrant generations seems to support this hypothesis. First generation

migrants show a higher age at marriage (29.8 years) than their second generation counterparts (26.1 years), who either came to Germany with their parents during their childhood or were born here (Figure 2).

For women with an immigrant background, both first and second generation, we cannot observe any relation between the average age at marriage and the education level. On the one hand, this may be the result of their relatively low level of participation in the education system. On the other hand, immigrated women may still follow the common mating patterns of their home countries.

Aspects of Homogamy/Heterogamy

For university graduates and people who have completed an occupational training program, our sample confirms restrictive tendencies in the choice of a partner. Men and women who have immigrated as well as non-migrants tend to prefer a homogeneous partnership. This was evident in the answers given by singles as well as by people living together with a partner. Only in the group of non-cohabiting women and men who have a boy- or girlfriend is the number of heterogeneous partnerships larger than the homogeneous ones.

We find the same pattern regarding religious affiliation. Thus we cannot confirm the hypothesis that its importance is declining. Single persons of all religious groups significantly prefer a homogeneous partnership, nearly without exception. When there is a mixed marriage or non-marital union, in most of the cases the partner belongs to a group at least within the same world-religion, for example between both of the large Christian churches in Germany. We observe a relatively

strict demarcation between the mainstream world religions: 85.7 percent of Moslem women marry a man of the same faith. Over 80 percent of Catholic women choose a husband who belongs to the Catholic, Lutheran or another Christian church; the others have a partner without any religious affiliation. The same situation applies to Lutheran women. Three of four Buddhist women have a homogeneous partnership (under 20 percent of partnerships with men who have no religious affiliation). Since the eastern Asian groups in our sample have a relatively low number of members, we had expected them to have a higher rate of intermarriage.

In addition, a homogamy preference shows up regarding the country of origin. In the example of Asia, we see differences between smaller and larger sub-populations: more than 90 percent of Turkish women and men who migrated have a partner from the same country of origin. Women and men from smaller minority groups, such as from Japan and Iran, have significantly lower rates of homogeneous marriage; around 50 percent for women and 60 percent for men.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that partner selection among immigrants follows its own pattern to some extent. In view of the expansion in education today, from which migrant children may also profit, it is worth considering the process of family formation of migrant groups in Germany. Here, the question is whether migrants to Germany who have obtained (or are in the process of obtaining) a higher school degree will follow the trend of the mainstream population towards a wider plurality of partnership forms and the postponement of starting a family (among others), or whether they will continue to adhere to established patterns. As seen in our sample, the influence of religious affiliation would certainly support the hypothesis that there exists an "immigrants' pattern", that is for example expressed in a younger age at marriage.

An individual's migration history, or the background of an immigrant's family, must be considered more in detail. So far, members of the second generation have not been the subject of detailed research. Their orientation in choosing a partner and planning a family perhaps differs depending on whether only one parent or both are immigrants. Knowledge of the German language is an important factor, too, as it is a key in education success. Second generation immigrants with a German parent can be expected to have better school performance than children of two immigrant-parents. We assume the use of the German language at home also influences the second generation's choice of religion and the degree to which they practise their beliefs.

CONCLUSION

The most important trait of partner selection among immigrants is a low frequency of pre-marital cohabitation. This results in a tendency to marry at a relatively young age. This is more often determined by religion rather than by other factors, such as permission of residence. The influence of religious attitudes seems to be very strong. This is confirmed by an observed preference for homogeneous partnership. This result supports our hypothesis drawn from the theory of family economics in which homogamy of this trait is considered desirable. Even in the cases where people belong to smaller religious groups, where one would expect higher intermarriage rates, migrants prefer partners of the same religion. However, for these people, seeking a spouse obviously takes longer than for members of the larger religious groups. This leads to a difference in the age at marriage.

In addition to religion, we can also show that the level of education guides partner selection among both immigrants and non-migrants. Those with an academic or professional degree tend to choose partners with a similar level of education and/or professional training. Here, migrants show similarities to the host population, whereas the age at marriage is still considerably younger than that of non-migrants. The

age at marriage shows a U-shaped pattern for male immigrants. For female immigrants, the level of education has no influence on their age at marriage.

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