

## **Intermarriage and Divorce in Germany: Testing Competing Hypotheses**

### **Extended abstract**

#### **Introduction and theoretical background**

During the last two decades most European countries have witnessed increased immigration streams and ethnic heterogeneity of their populations. Consequently, integration of immigrants and their descendants has become a major issue in European societies and research topic among social scientists. Various dimensions of immigrant structural and cultural integration have been studied; complementary policy measures have been proposed to increase social cohesion in increasingly heterogeneous European societies. Many authors see ethnic intermarriage as a mean for minority-majority integration and an increased social cohesion. Several recent studies report that ethnic intermarriage has increased in European countries.

Studies on marital stability and divorce show that dissimilarity between the partners increases the risk of divorce and separation, however. This has been reported for the age, educational and religious differences. While research on the effect of religious heterogamy on marital instability has a long history, particularly Protestant-Catholic intermarriage, the impact of intermarriage of ethnic groups or migrants and natives has been little studied. Earlier studies came from the U.S. and focussed on the effect of Black-White intermarriage on divorce; recent studies examine the impact of migrant-native and interethnic marriages on marital stability.

If dissimilarity between the partners increases the risk of divorce, then marriages that cross ethnic lines should have a higher likelihood of ending in separation than ethnically homogeneous marriages. The *heterogamy hypothesis* has been tested and supported by a number of studies (Rankin and Maneker 1987; Jones 1994; Kalmijn et al. 2005). Further recent research has also supported the *cultural dissimilarity hypothesis* arguing that the likelihood of divorce is not only high for ethnically heterogamous couples, but increases with an increase in the ‘cultural distance’ between the partners (Dribe and Lundh 2010). If so, the ethnic intermarriage may raise the divorce levels in society and an increased social cohesion may not be achieved at all. Fortunately, however, the picture is not as simple as it looks at first glance. A seminal study by Monahan (1970) showed that in the U.S. Black-White marriages were less stable than Black-White marriage, as expected; however, they were more stable than Black-Black marriages. The results of this and some recent studies have lead to a formulation of *the convergence hypothesis*: ethnically mixed marriages exhibit

the divorce levels that are between the levels of two constituent origin groups (Jones 1996; Zhang and van Hook 2009). Therefore, migrant-native marriages should not necessarily increase divorce levels in destination societies; if immigrants come from societies where divorce is less common than in destination society, which is the case for most European migrants, then the divorce levels in destination societies may even decline because of intermarriage.

The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of native-migrant intermarriage on divorce in Germany. We extend previous research in two ways. First, we examine the impact of heterogamous marriages on marital stability in the European context. Most studies have been conducted in the U.S., in a country with specific ethnic and race relations; the U.S. studies have also focussed on race and ethnicity rather than place of origin and migrant background. There are only handful studies executed in Europe with a focus on marriages of post-war ‘labour migrants’, which is still dominant migrant group in many European countries, particularly in Northern and Western Europe (e.g. Kalmijn et al. 2005). Second, we use a rich longitudinal data-set, the data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (GSOEP). The data allow us to control for many individual and couple characteristics when investigating the effect of migrant-native marriages on divorce including the individual values.

### **Context and working hypotheses**

Germany ranked first as destination country in Western Europe until recently. Today, almost 20 percent of the population are immigrants or were born to immigrant parents with Turks being the biggest and most visible immigrant group. The rates of intermarriage vary between the different countries of origin. Turks show the lowest likelihood of intermarriage; about 90 percent of immigrants from Turkey are married to a co-ethnic partner whereas for persons from Italy the corresponding figure is 50 percent.

In this study we investigate the effect of native-migrant intermarriage on divorce in Germany. We focus on marriages between German-born persons (‘natives’) and foreign-born individuals (‘immigrants’) from the countries as follows: Italy, Spain, Greece, the former Yugoslavia and Turkey. We thus limit our analysis to five main post-war ‘labour migrant’ groups in Germany. The competing hypotheses on the expected results in the German context can be summarised as follows:

The *heterogamy hypothesis*: Marriages between German-born individuals and immigrants have a higher likelihood of divorce than marriages between two German-born individuals or between two immigrants from the same country.

The *cultural dissimilarity hypothesis*: Heterogamous marriages have a higher likelihood of dissolution than homogamous marriages; marriages between German-born and Turkish-born individuals have a higher risk of separation than marriages between German-born persons and individuals who come from a Southern European country.

The *convergence hypothesis*: Marriages between German-born individuals and immigrants exhibit divorce levels that are between the levels experienced by intra-group marriages for natives and immigrants. German-Turkish couples are expected to experience higher marital stability than marriages between Germans and Southern Europeans.

The *selectivity hypothesis*: The differences in divorce levels between heterogamous and homogamous marriages are attributed to different composition of respective marriages by spouses' socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

The *adaptation hypothesis*: Native-migrant marriages are expected to exhibit divorce levels similar to the levels of either native or migrant groups, e.g. the risk of separation for German-Turkish couple is either similar to German-German or Turkish-Turkish couple.

## **Data and methods**

We use data of the German Socioeconomic panel study. Respondents have been questioned annually since 1984. We use the waves up to 2009. We focus on women's first marriages, marriages that started in the year 1980 or later, women who were born after 1945 and whose age at marriage was less than 40 years. We are able to construct the marriage history for about 6200 women in total. There are each about 400 women from Turkey and from other South and south Eastern European countries. We compare them to about 4700 non-migrants. The sample also includes about 700 migrant women from other countries.

We apply event-history analysis to study dissolution of women's first marriages. Among the 1500 immigrant women, about 15 percent report a divorce; this compares to about 20 percent of the first marriages of non-migrants.

## **Expected results**

First results show a significantly lower risk of a divorce for immigrant women than for migrants. However, the picture becomes more diverse when the migration background of the partner is also taken into account: Compared to marriages of two non-migrant partners,

women married to a German spouse have elevated divorce levels, whereas the divorce risks for marriages of two migrants is significantly lower.

Further multivariate analysis will include a number of control variables, such as birth cohort, educational levels of the partners, religion, and attitudes. We also explore the role of the country of origin in more detail.

