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Research Article

Introduction to research on immigrant and ethnic minority families in Europe

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Introduction to research on immigrant and ethnic minority families in Europe

Hill Kulu¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

This article provides an introduction to the special collection of papers on partnership dynamics among immigrants and their descendants in five selected European countries: Sweden, France, the UK, Spain, and Estonia.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis shows a significant variation in partnership patterns among immigrants in all five countries. Immigrants from countries with more ‘conservative’ family patterns (e.g., those from Turkey, South Asia, and the Maghreb region) have high marriage rates, low (premarital) cohabitation levels, and are less likely to separate. By contrast, more ‘fluid’ family formation patterns dominate among some non-European immigrant groups (e.g., Caribbeans, Sub-Saharan Africans, and Latin Americans). The significant diversity of partnership patterns within countries across immigrant groups supports the idea that *socialisation* factors play an important role in their partnership behaviour. The partnership patterns of immigrants’ descendants are ‘in-between’. These findings support the idea that both the *minority subculture* and the *mainstream society* have an effect on the behaviour of ethnic groups; however, the role of minority subculture seems to be larger than expected among some groups (e.g., individuals of Turkish, South Asian, Slavic, and Maghrebian origin).

CONTRIBUTION

All five studies report a significant diversity in partnership patterns across ethnic groups and suggest that the diversity in family forms will persist in the future. We argue that future research should investigate family patterns among the ‘third generation’, examine the links between economic and cultural integration of ethnic minorities, and exploit various novel techniques to analyse the dynamic nature of individuals’ lives.

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1. Introduction

Research on immigrants and ethnic minorities has two broad objectives. First, the study of people who move from one societal context to another offers a unique opportunity to gain a better understanding of how various factors influence individuals' choices and actions. The research on immigrants and their descendants thus contributes to wider social science discussions on the role of structure and human agency and economy and culture in human action and social phenomena (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). These discussions are closely related to the classical methodological dilemmas of social science research, the roots of which extend back to ancient Greek philosophy. Should social scientists explain social phenomena from 'bottom up' or from 'top down' (individualism versus holism) and should they look for universalistic (science-based) explanations or (context-) specific accounts (Bhaskar 1978; Hollis 1994; Von Wright 1971)?

Second, research on immigrants and ethnic minorities is very much driven by the desire and need to improve our understanding of the factors that promote or hinder successful integration of immigrants and their descendants (Kulu and González-Ferrer 2014). While conventional research has considered assimilation of immigrants to be the expected outcome, recent literature has emphasised the importance of immigrant integration and cultural diversity (Alba and Nee 1997; Berry 1992; Gordon 1964; Portes and Zhou 1993). It is normally desired that immigrants and ethnic minorities achieve a high level of structural assimilation or integration, i.e., they should have the same educational, employment, and housing opportunities and outcomes as natives, but they may maintain their cultural distinctiveness, e.g., practise their own religion or speak their own language at home. The recent literature on transnationalism has challenged the classical debate of assimilation/integration versus separation/marginalisation, arguing that immigrants and their descendants may wish to live 'in-between' old and new home countries and that this practice should be supported (Glick Schiller 2010; Vertovec 2004). However, it remains far from clear whether living in 'transnational space' is a new form of successful integration in our globalised world, or rather reflects marginalisation (or incomplete integration) in a world where nation states are still important.

There is a large literature investigating the employment and educational patterns of immigrants and their descendants (Adsera and Chiswick 2007; Kogan 2007; Rebhun 2010; Rendall et al. 2010). Decent educational and employment prospects are seen as critical for the successful integration of immigrants and their descendants and are assumed to significantly shape other domains of their lives. Research on family dynamics among immigrants and their descendants is equally important in this context. Family patterns of immigrants and ethnic minorities provide another perspective on

their integration or the lack of it; family lives are also interwoven with both structural and cultural dimensions of the integration process. Further, research has argued that the prevalence of inter-ethnic marriages is the ultimate litmus test of immigrant integration in a society (Coleman 1994; Feng et al. 2012; Kalmijn 1998). The spread of mixed marriages can be seen as a signal that there are no (more) borders between groups that cannot be crossed in society, leaving a free choice in the marriage market for both majority and ethnic minority populations. Besides the choice of partner, the timing and type of union are also important indicators of changing social norms and behaviour among immigrants. These changes often depend on the time spent in the host country, or only become visible in the following generations.

The aim of this paper is to provide an introduction to the special collection of *Demographic Research* on partnership dynamics among immigrants and their descendants in five selected European countries. We first briefly discuss recent research on immigrant and ethnic minority families. We then summarise the individual papers and discuss their contribution, and finally outline future research avenues.

2. Advances in research on immigrant and ethnic minority families

There are two research streams on family dynamics and patterns among immigrants and ethnic minorities. The first examines determinants of inter-ethnic marriage among immigrants and their descendants (Alba and Golden 1986; Bagley 1972; Berrington 1994; Coleman 1994; Kalmijn 1998; Pagnini and Morgan 1990), and the second investigates childbearing patterns (Dinkel and Lebok 1997; Schoorl 1990). While both research streams have a long tradition, the increased availability of individual-level longitudinal data in the past two decades has boosted research activity in these areas and significantly enhanced our understanding of immigrant and ethnic minority family behaviour (Andersson 2004; González-Ferrer 2006; Milewski 2007; Singley and Landale 1998).

Studies on mixed marriages have investigated how various factors influence their formation, and also their stability. On the one hand, individual desires and preferences influence partner choice, and on the other hand the societal context also offers opportunities and constraints (Alba and Nee 1997; Kalmijn 1998). The latter normally include factors such as the size of immigrant group, sex ratio, geographical location and concentration, and discrimination against ethnic minorities or the lack of it (Hamel et al. 2013; Kalmijn and Van Tubergen 2006; Safi and Rogers 2008; Van Tubergen and Maas 2007). Similarly, individual preferences and contextual factors are used to explain divorce patterns.

The main focus of research on migrant fertility has been to determine how much the past and how much the current social environment shape the childbearing patterns of immigrants and ethnic minorities, and what role is played by factors related to culture and economy. The socialisation argument states that childhood environment shapes the fertility behaviour of individuals. Therefore, people who move from one social environment to another show childbearing patterns similar to non-migrants at their origin (Andersson 2004; Kulu and Milewski 2007). By contrast, the adaptation argument assumes that an individual's current social context is what matters most: therefore migrants exhibit fertility levels similar to those of the population at destination (Andersson and Scott 2005; Hervitz 1985). Similar arguments are used when studying the fertility behaviour of immigrants' descendants. On the one hand, the second generation may grow up under the influence of a minority subculture and thus exhibit fertility behaviour that is similar to that of their parents and different from the childbearing behaviour of the 'native' population. On the other hand, the descendants of immigrants may grow up under the influence of the mainstream society and thus show childbearing behaviour similar to that of the 'native' population (Milewski 2010). Equally, the descendants of immigrants may grow up under the influence of one social context (normally the minority subculture) and then later adapt to another (the mainstream society).

Taking the previous discussion into account, the question emerges of how we should study partnership formation and dissolution among immigrants and their descendants, which is the topic of the papers of this special collection of *Demographic Research*. We believe that the approaches used to study childbearing patterns and inter-ethnic marriage, despite their different emphasis, are complementary to each other and offer a fruitful way of proceeding. The socialisation hypothesis emphasises the critical role of an individual's preferences in partnership behaviour and assumes that these preferences are relatively stable over the life course. Although the approach can be seen as individualistic in essence, this is not necessarily the case. First, childhood environment is assumed to play a critical role in the formation of preferences, leaving less room for human agency than is usually assumed. Second, as individuals move from one social context to another they carry with them their norms and values. The continued daily social interaction of individuals of the same (ethnic) origin helps to sustain a cultural and normative environment, which will shape the behaviour of group members. In the case of ethnic groups, this can lead to specific behaviour that can differ substantially from the behaviour of the mainstream population.

The adaptation argument in its classical form can be seen as mainly emphasising the importance of contextual factors in immigrant demographic behaviour. Studies normally refer to the opportunities and constraints imposed on migrants by destination societies. These can be of an economic nature, e.g., employment opportunities due to

the structure of the labour market, but also normative factors like attitudes and behaviour of the majority population towards ethnic minorities. Again, although the adaptation argument mostly focuses on the role of various structural factors, this is not necessarily the case. First, economic and cultural environment may shape the values and preferences of immigrants, which constitute the reasons for their actions. Second, and even more importantly, the successful adaptation of immigrants normally assumes that human agency plays an important role.

The five papers in this special issue of *Demographic Research* investigate partnership formation and dissolution among immigrants and their descendants in Europe. The collection of articles extends previous research in the following ways. First, the papers study different partnership transitions among immigrants and their descendants, including the formation and dissolution of cohabitations and marriages. The analysis of both types of union makes a significant contribution to the literature on immigrant and ethnic minority families, which to date has solely focussed on marriages. Further, the articles investigate the formation and dissolution of both first- and second-order unions. The papers in this collection thus move beyond the ‘one-life-event-at-a-time’ approach that is dominant in the literature on immigrant and ethnic minority families, mainly due to data restrictions. We believe that the study of several partnership events over the life course provides us with much richer information about the opportunities and constraints that migrants face than does an analysis of only the first marriage of migrants.

Further, the articles in this special issue also examine family trajectories among the descendants of migrants, whose share in European countries has significantly increased in the last decades (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008; Zimmermann 2005). Research has shown that the social mobility of the second generation is not as large as we may wish. Their educational qualifications often remain lower than those of the majority population in European countries, and their labour market performance is often poor (Aeberhardt et al. 2010; Alba 2005; Aparicio 2007; Brinbaum and Cebolla-Boado 2007; Fibbi, Lerch, and Wanner 2007; Kristen, Reimer, and Kogan 2008; Meurs, Pailhé, and Simon 2006; Van Niekerk 2007). The studies presented provide information on the family behaviour of these population subgroups in Europe, improving our understanding of how various factors shape the lives of the second generation in the European context.

Finally, this special issue includes five European case studies on partnership formation and dissolution among immigrants and their descendants. Most previous studies have investigated immigrants in one or two countries only: there is a lack of comparative research on migrant families that draws on the opportunities offered by the European context. The countries included in this special issue are France and the UK – the ‘traditional’ immigration countries with a colonial past; Sweden – a representative

of the Nordic welfare regime; Spain – a former emigration country, which only very recently became an immigration country; and Estonia – an Eastern European country with specific post-WWII political and economic circumstances and immigration history. Although each country case forms a separate study, the comparison of results across countries with different immigration histories and welfare state provision significantly advances our understanding of how socio-economic, institutional, and policy settings shape the family lives of immigrants and their descendants in European societies.

3. Partnership patterns among immigrants and their descendants in selected European countries

Over the past half-century, European countries have witnessed significant changes in partnership patterns. Marriages have been postponed, divorce and re-marriage levels have increased, and non-marital cohabitation has become widespread (Lesthaeghe and Neels 2002). The universal marriage pattern was first challenged in the Nordic countries. Sweden showed an early onset of non-marital cohabitation, at first as a transition and testing phase for marriage but which soon developed into a long-term alternative to marriage. Sweden has been a forerunner in other changes in partnership patterns, such as later age at marriage and increased divorce and re-partnering levels. Andersson, Obućina, and Scott (2015) analyse the formation of first marriage, divorce, and subsequent re-marriage among immigrants and their descendants. Using the advantages of Swedish register data, the authors distinguish between numerous origin countries, allowing the detection of even small differences in partnership behaviour. Furthermore, the study provides separate insights into women with one or two foreign-born parents and women who arrived as children or as young adults in Sweden. The results show higher marriage, divorce, and re-marriage rates on average among migrants who arrived during their childhood than among immigrants who arrived in Sweden as adults. While the marriage level of immigrants varies significantly across the different countries of origin, most immigrant groups exhibit divorce risks similar to or higher than those of the native Swedish population, which the authors partly attribute to the disrupting effect of the migration process. However, immigrants from Turkey show high marriage and low divorce rates, suggesting that factors related to selectivity and socialisation also shape partnership patterns. Further, while most Swedish-born descendants of migrants exhibit marriage rates that are similar to or lower than those of native Swedes, descendants of immigrants from Turkey and the Arab Middle East have high marriage rates, supporting the importance of the group-specific patterns of early

marriage formation among these ethnic minorities. Interestingly, descendants of immigrants from Iran are characterised by very low marriage rates.

Estonia, although belonging socio-politically to the group of Eastern European countries, demonstrates family formation patterns that are similar to those of the Nordic countries. Using pooled data from two retrospective surveys, Rahnu et al. (2015) analyse the formation and dissolution of first and second unions among immigrants and their descendants in Estonia. The analysis of eleven different partnership transitions shows significant differences between the native population and Russian-speaking immigrants, particularly in the mode of partnership formation and the outcome of cohabiting unions. While non-marital unions have been common among native Estonians for some time, they have only relatively recently spread among immigrants. The union dissolution risks, however, are high among all population subgroups. The partnership patterns among the descendants of immigrants are similar to those of their parents' generation, although Estonian-born Russians are more likely to cohabit than their parent's generation of immigrants. The analysis also reveals that the ethnic differences in the choice of mode of partnership formation are observed for both first and second unions and that they persist after adjusting for the educational attainment and labour market status of individuals. The differences between immigrants and the native population are similar for men and women. The study underlines the importance of factors related to socialisation and minority subculture in combination with those of legacy and contextual factors such as high spatial concentration of immigrants and the linguistic division of the Estonian school system. The analyses also reveal moderate disruption effects of migration on partnership processes among the immigrant population.

Postponement of marriage, increased divorce rates, and diversity of union forms have also characterised recent partnership dynamics in France. However, the study by Pailhé (2015) shows that the patterns differ significantly by population subgroup. For the native French population, she observes a clear change from direct marriage to cohabitation as the dominant mode of partnership formation, whereas many immigrants still show a high risk of direct marriage, particularly those from the Maghreb region and Turkey. The descendants of immigrants have lower rates of union formation than immigrants, indicating a postponement of partnership formation among the second generation. The analysis also reveals elevated rates of cohabitation among the descendants of immigrants from Southern Europe, suggesting increased similarity with the native French population's partnership patterns. By contrast, early and universal marriage remains the dominant pattern among the descendants of immigrants from Turkey and Maghreb countries. Interestingly, differences across groups are only slightly reduced after controlling for individuals' educational and employment characteristics, but they decline after adjusting for parental social background and religiosity,

suggesting that socialisation factors play an important role in shaping the partnership behaviour of immigrants and their descendants in France.

The UK, despite its northern location, adopted the new partnership patterns later than other Northern and Western European countries. Nevertheless, the new partnership forms have spread rapidly in the last decades. Hannemann and Kulu (2015) investigate a wide range of union formation and dissolution transitions among immigrants and their descendants in the United Kingdom. Similarly to Sweden, Estonia, and France, cohabitation has become the dominant mode of union formation among the native population; by contrast, cohabitation remains rare among immigrants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and their descendants, as most of them marry directly. However, the small share of UK-born South Asians that chose cohabitation over direct marriage exhibits higher rates of separation from cohabitation and lower risk of marriage after entry into cohabitation than other immigrants, supporting the idea that both minority subculture and mainstream society influence their partnership behaviour. Immigrants from Western European countries exhibit partnership behaviours similar to those of the native UK population for both first and second unions. The analysis also reveals specific patterns among Caribbean immigrants and, interestingly, among their descendants. The Caribbean population has high cohabitation, low marriage, and high divorce risk, which the authors attribute to the specific notion of family in Caribbean countries.

The conservative partnership patterns in Southern European countries have persisted longer than in other European regions and new partnership patterns have only recently spread there. This provides a unique setting, where many of the immigrant groups come from regions with more fluid union patterns than the native population. González-Ferrer, Hannemann, and Castro-Martín (2016) analyse union formation and dissolution among immigrants in Spain, which has recently become a destination of immigration after a long period of being a migrant sending country, making this study the first of its kind. Given the recent onset of immigration streams to Spain, the number of Spanish-born descendants of immigrants of union formation age is still insufficient for detailed analysis. The study focuses on migrants from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and EU15 countries. All immigrant groups exhibit different union patterns compared to those of native Spanish women. Overall, immigrant women have higher union formation risk and are more likely to enter cohabitation as well as separate from their first union. González-Ferrer, Hannemann, and Castro-Martín attribute those differences to a combination of socialisation effects among immigrants from origins with more ‘fluid’ union patterns, as well as selection of immigrants according to partnership preferences and disruption effects after arrival in Spain. The conclusions are supported by the results of additional analyses of a sample of immigrants who only started their first relationships after arrival in Spain.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to provide an introduction to the special edition of *Demographic Research* and to summarise and briefly discuss the papers of this special issue in the light of recent research on immigrant and ethnic minority families. The main findings of the five papers are as follows. First, the analysis showed a significant variation in partnership patterns among minority groups in most countries. Individuals from Turkey and the Maghreb region in France exhibited high rates of (direct) marriage and low levels of cohabitation and marital dissolution, whereas Sub-Saharan African migrants had low rates of marriage and high levels of cohabitation and union dissolution. Similarly, (direct) marriage rates were high and (cohabitation and) dissolution levels low among immigrants from Turkey in Sweden and those from South Asia in the UK, whereas the Caribbean population in the UK showed the opposite patterns.

Second, immigrants from some countries with more conservative family patterns showed similar partnership trajectories across countries. Turkish women (and men) in France and Sweden and South Asians in the UK exhibited very similar union formation and dissolution patterns; partnership patterns were also similar, but with different dynamics, among Caribbean immigrants in the UK and immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in France. Although most studies included partnership transitions prior to and after migration, further analysis showed that the pre- and post-migration patterns among immigrants were not very different (except perhaps in Spain). Also, among most immigrant groups the analysis of second unions showed very similar patterns to that of first unions. The results thus seem to support the idea that socialisation plays an important role in the partnership behaviour of immigrants: immigrants normally bring their traditions and norms regarding family life, which shape their preferences and family behaviour later in life. The studies show that preferences for partnership modes change less than perhaps expected.

Furthermore, partnership patterns among the descendants of immigrants varied. For geographically close and culturally similar migrants and their descendants (Europeans in the UK, France, Spain, and Sweden) the analysis showed relatively similar partnership patterns for immigrants and their descendants in comparison with their respective natives. For culturally and also geographically more distant groups, the relationships were more complex. Women of Turkish, Sub-Saharan, and Maghrebian origin in France, those of Turkish and Arab Middle Eastern descent in Sweden, South Asians and Caribbeans in the UK, and the Russian-speaking population in Estonia showed very similar trajectories of union formation across generations, particularly in the choice of partnership mode, and the patterns were significantly different from those of the respective natives. Interestingly, however, their separation levels stayed 'in-

between' those of immigrants and natives, although this is potentially due to the spread of mixed marriages among some minority groups. In Spain the differences between European immigrants and natives were slightly larger due to the fact that Spanish natives can be considered to belong to the more conservative population group, while natives of France, the UK, Sweden, and Estonia are all considered more fluid in their partnership patterns. The studies thus suggest that the mainstream society as well as the minority subculture shape the family patterns of ethnic minorities, although the role of minority subculture seems to prevail more strongly among some groups (i.e., individuals of Turkish and Maghrebian origin in France, those of Turkish descent in Sweden, South Asians in the UK, the population of Slavic origin in Estonia, and Latin Americans in Spain).

Finally, in all studies the multivariate analyses included contrasts for basic socio-economic characteristics (e.g., education and employment) and some studies also controlled for cultural factors (e.g., family of origin, religiosity, language skills) to test the sensitivity of group differences to differences in individual-level characteristics. Interestingly, in most cases the differences across groups changed little after the inclusion of controls for socio-economic characteristics. However, group differences were sensitive to cultural factors, suggesting that the effect of these factors is strong and overruns those of potential socio-economic differentials. The similarity in behaviour of some minority groups across countries provides further support for the importance of cultural factors as related to family systems in the migrants' countries of origin. Nevertheless, the country context also matters: we observed lower marriage rates among all population subgroups in Spain and high separation levels in Sweden and Estonia across many minority groups. The Swedish study also detected some differences between immigrants who arrived mostly for employment reasons and those who came as refugees, showing the importance of migrant selection in the study of family patterns among immigrants and their descendants.

To summarise, all five studies convey the same message: there is a significant diversity of partnership patterns within countries across population sub-groups and we should not expect these differences to vanish in the near future. The large size of some minority groups and their spatial segregation has certainly supported initial differences in family preferences and behaviour and will continue to support these in the future. The analysis thus suggests that cultural rather than economic factors may explain differences in family-related behaviour across minority groups: if this is true, then the existence of specific partnership patterns does not necessarily reflect the poor structural integration of ethnic minorities but instead highlights the existing cultural diversity in European societies. Policymakers should ensure that different partnership forms are supported on equal terms and that children from different types of family have the same educational and social mobility opportunities.

This special issue significantly extends previous research on migrant families by investigating simultaneously several partnership transitions, by examining both immigrants and their descendants, and by providing an overview of patterns in a number of different European countries. It facilitates comparison by highlighting the similarities and differences across population subgroups and European societies. We believe that future research should explore the following avenues. First, investigation of family patterns should be extended to the ‘third generation’. Although for some descendants of immigrants their origin will remain just a record in their family history, for other ethnic groups, particularly those where intra-group marriage dominates, specific partnership patterns may also persist in the third generation, which may reflect and reinforce the emergence of an ethnic minority identity that tends to avoid cultural assimilation. Second, the links between structural/economic and cultural integration should be studied in more detail. Although most studies in this special issue emphasise the importance of preferences and cultural-normative factors in shaping the partnership behaviour of ethnic minorities, there is little doubt that economic and cultural factors are interwoven with each other. The data requirements (i.e., information about values and preferences) may make such an analysis challenging, but we are convinced it will be worth the effort.

Further, the role of opportunity structures should be further examined. Clearly, the large group size and residential concentration of some minority groups have enabled and promoted specific partnership patterns among these groups. We may also expect changes in partnership patterns with the gradual spatial dispersion of ethnic groups within urban regions and between cities, although the direction of causality between these processes remains far from clear. Finally, research should focus more on the dynamic nature of individuals’ lives and exploit various novel methods to measure this. Examples could be the application of the techniques of (multichannel) sequence analysis (Spallek, Haynes, and Jones 2014) or multistate models (Kulu and Steele 2013), allowing the simultaneous study of a number of life events and paths with and without adjusting patterns for the various socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of individuals.

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