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## Ideal ages for family formation among immigrants in Europe

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates ideal ages for marriage and parenthood among immigrants from over 160 countries origins living in 25 European countries. Ideals regarding the timing of family formation are indicative of how individuals perceive the family life course and provide insight into family-life aspirations and the meaning attached to these transitions. Using data from the European Social Survey (Round 3, 2006;  $N=6330$ ) and a cross-classified multilevel modeling approach, we investigate associations between the influences of the dominant family formation timing patterns in countries of origin and settlement, individual-level characteristics, and ideal ages. We make innovative use of a standard demographic measure, the singulate mean age of marriage, to measure family formation patterns. Results suggest that residential context influences are associated with the timing ideals of all migrants, but origin influences seem to be associated with the ideals of only the most recent migrants.

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The timing and sequencing of events is central to the development and trajectory of life courses (Billari, 2005). Life course researchers have stressed the importance of context and time in shaping both the experience and perception of events in the life course (Elder Jr., 1985). Also in studies of immigrants, emphasis is placed on the contextual (socialization) effects of country of origin and settlement when it comes to life course transitions and preferences (De Valk, Wingens, Windzio, & Aybek, 2011). Timing preferences for family life transitions are likely determined by individual characteristics and experiences, but also influenced by dominant, macro-level family formation systems. However, comparative studies of the timing of family life events among those of immigrant origin are still largely lacking and existing work on timing preferences mainly focuses on one country or one migrant origin group (e.g. De Valk & Liefbroer, 2007; Giuliano, 2007). With information on

diverse migrant populations across a range of countries of settlement, we can shed light on the influences of family formation systems in both origin and destination that may shape timing preferences for family life transitions. In this paper we fill this gap in the literature and explore family formation ideals regarding the timing of marriage and childbearing among immigrants of diverse origins across Europe.

Forming a partnership, getting married, and bearing and raising children are significant transitions for individuals. Ideals regarding the timing of these events may be indicative of the meaning attached to these transitions and how they should best fit into the life course. Moreover, in the case of migrants, ideals may be a particularly useful measure of attitudes toward the family life course since the timing of actual family behaviors is often distorted by the act of migration (e.g. Andersson, 2004; Milewski, 2007; Toulemon, 2004). The perceived ideal timing of family events is governed by attitudes and values, and is transmitted at multiple levels, through family and community socialization, and institutions. As such, ideals may give us insight into identity, individuals' understanding of their position in the social world, and processes of

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family change after migration among immigrant-background (first- and second-generation) populations.

Using data from the third round of the European Social Survey, covering 25 European countries, we explore factors shaping ideal ages for two key family life transitions, marriage and parenthood, among immigrants and their descendants. We analyze variation in ideal ages by individual attributes and develop a new proxy measure to capture the dominant family formation timing patterns in countries of origin and settlement. With this measure, we are able to assess the extent to which macro-level family formation regimes in countries of origin and settlement influence individual timing preferences, and the relative importance of these influences. Finally, we consider how the influences of macro-level family formation patterns are mediated by immigrant's duration of residence in their country of settlement and migrant generation. Results provide new insights into the influence of contexts on perceptions of family life, social distance, and family change among immigrant populations in European societies.

## 1. Theory and hypotheses

First- and second-generation immigrants constitute a large and growing share of European populations (Castles & Miller, 2003; Eurostat, 2011). Questions of social distance and change between ethnic groups are at the core of academic and public discourses. It has been argued that while immigrants may integrate in the public domain (e.g. labor market and education), changes in the private domain, in particular regarding the family life course, are slower to occur. Thus, it may be particularly important to disentangle persistent cultural influences on social distance in the private domain (Gordon, 1964; Lesthaeghe, 2002a). Research into family change among migrants has largely focused on actual behavior and, in particular, on intermarriage and fertility (some exceptions are: De Valk & Liefbroer, 2007; Huschek, de Valk, & Liefbroer, 2011; Sassler & Qian, 2003). Although intermarriage may be the strongest indicator of the social distance between groups and the degree of incorporation in a new country of residence (see, for instance: Bean & Stevens, 2003; Kalmijn, 1998; Pagnini & Morgan, 1990), there is a well-documented tendency toward homogamy across a variety of characteristics (race, ethnicity, education, as well as nativity). If intermarriage is rare, it may not be an ideal measure of social distance (Sassler & Qian, 2003). Studies of fertility behavior have demonstrated that the act of migration is often closely bound up with family formation processes (Milewski, 2007; Stephen & Bean, 1992), and so it too may be a flawed measure of family change among first generation immigrants (Andersson, 2004; Sobotka, 2008; Toulemon, 2004).

Where private domain behaviors may be more resistant to influence and slower to occur (as with intermarriage) or be sensitive to the act of migration (as with fertility), family formation ideals may be an alternative indicator of social distance between groups in society. Ideals are “representation[s] of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) would like you, ideally, to possess (i.e., a representation of someone's hopes, aspirations, or wishes

for you)” (Higgins, 1987, pp. 320–321). Ideals contribute to an individual's sense of self and identity, but also to one's understanding of the position of the self in the social world (Higgins, 1987). Along with individual behaviors, values, and norms, ideals regarding the timing of family-formation events may be indicative of the meaning attached to these transitions and how they should best fit into the life course. In addition to reflecting individual identity, ideals can be linked to behavior; for instance, according to the Theory of Planned Behavior, individual behaviors are the outcome of ideals and attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991; Lesthaeghe, 2002b). As such, the ideal timing of family life events may give a more accurate understanding of immigrants' aspirations or wishes for their own family lives or for the family lives of other significant persons in their families, social networks, or communities.

Ideals may be shaped by community- or country-level influences, through family and community socialization, institutions, and social norms. Immigrants are unique from majority (non-immigrant-background) populations in that they occupy a sociocultural middle ground between their countries of origin and residence, with family-life ideals potentially shaped by influences on both sides (De Valk & Liefbroer, 2007; De Valk & Milewski, 2011; Foner, 1997; Glick, 2010; Nauck, 2001). The distinction between the influences of countries of origin and residence is often made when theorizing about the position of immigrants in their new home country and has been previously used to study structural integration (Van Tubergen, 2005, 2010). Cultural norms, practices, and behaviors associated with the dominant family life patterns in countries of origin may be transmitted and maintained by family and friends from the same origin, in both origin and settlement countries. Family formation patterns in the country of origin can serve as a macro-level determinant, capturing the cultural meaning of family formation. We hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Family formation patterns in countries of origin of immigrants will be associated with ideal ages for family formation among immigrants from that origin.

Family life ideals may just as well be shaped by the dominant patterns and practices in the country of settlement. The past three decades have been a time of rapid change in European family systems, with respect to social norms, individual preferences, and behavior. Along with delayed home leaving, the emergence of non-marital cohabitation, increases in union dissolution and falling fertility rates, first marriage and first births occur at older ages (Aassve, Arpino, & Billari, 2013; Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). Although the experience of these changes has been nearly universal in Europe, the magnitude of change is varied across countries (Reher, 1998; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). These diverse family formation patterns within European country contexts likely shape the ideals held by all residents, irrespective of background. Therefore, we can expect the following:

**Hypothesis 2.** Family formation patterns in countries of residence will be associated with ideal ages for family

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