



# Timing of union formation and partner choice in immigrant societies: The United States and Germany<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

As Gordon noted in his 1964 treatise on assimilation, marriage across ethnic boundaries and in particular, marriage into the mainstream is a key indicator as well as a mechanism of immigrant assimilation. Since then research has investigated numerous micro- and macro level correlates of exogamy. In this paper we focus on a topic that has received less attention thus far – how the timing of marriage is associated with partner choice. We compare the United States and Germany as two countries with significant immigrant and second-generation populations but where mainstream patterns of union formation differ. In both contexts we show that unions that cross ethnic boundaries happen later in life than those that stay within. Comparing across countries we argue that in Germany differences in the timing of union formation between the second generation and the mainstream, may pose additional barriers to intermarriage that do not exist in the United States.

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## 1. Introduction

Ethnic intermarriage has long been a topic of interest among family and migration scholars. In his treatise on assimilation, Gordon (1964) argued that exogamy was both an indicator as well as a mechanism for the structural assimilation of immigrants. Others have argued that exogamy is often the final step in the assimilation process (Qian & Lichter, 2001; Sassler, 2005). Previous research focusing on exogamy has highlighted the demographic, as

well as the individual determinants of intermarriage (Kalmijn, 1998). For example, the relative availability of co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic partners, and the ways in which socioeconomic differences and residential patterns shape contact possibilities between groups are well-known determinants of intermarriage (Qian & Lichter, 2007). This significant literature notwithstanding, the role of timing and its relation to partner choice, the topic of this paper, has received little attention so far. In this respect, we argue that the timing of union formation is an important aspect of marital assimilation and analyze two ways in which it matters.

First, we argue that with respect to marriage market dynamics, group-level differences in the timing of first marriage may act as a barrier to intermarriage. Just as spatial segregation will diminish contact possibilities between individuals from separated groups, differences in the age at which people marry may yield a “temporal separation.” To the extent that timing preferences are fixed, individuals will also seek out partners whose expectations of marital timing match their own. In addition, individuals who choose to marry across ethnic boundaries must find a compromise where one or both partners will deviate from the respective group pattern.

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This will matter more in social contexts where patterns of union formation differ considerably between groups.

Second, the age at which individuals marry and partner's ethnicity are inextricably linked. On the one hand, individuals who wait longer to marry may be forced to "cast a wider net" and accept partners of a different ethnic background (Lichter, 1990). On the other hand, individuals who choose to marry later may have more specific preferences with regard to education and income, lessening the importance of other characteristics such as race or ethnicity (Oppenheimer, 1988). Individuals may also wait until they have gained some degree of independence from the parental household in order to wait out parental objections to a non-coethnic partner (Kasinitz et al., 2008: 232). All three of these scenarios point to a delay in the timing of exogamous compared to endogamous unions.

By examining the link between the age at which individuals marry and partner choice, this paper extends previous research on the correlates of intermarriage between immigrants and natives. Given that the "context" that the mainstream sets with respect to marital timing is an important variable, our paper is based on a comparative analysis of two immigrant-receiving societies: Germany and the United States. Although the age at which individuals first marry has steadily risen in both countries, in the United States marriage in the early to mid 20s is still the predominant phenomenon. By contrast, marriage in Germany is often delayed until the late 20s or early 30s. Contrasting these two countries allows us to highlight variation in what is typically referred to as mainstream patterns of marital timing. In this paper, we focus on second-generation immigrants, who are much more likely to intermarry than first-generation immigrants and for whom intermarriage is a better indicator of assimilation given the higher propensity of first-generation immigrants to arrive with spouses (Qian & Lichter, 2001, 2007; Sassler, 2005). We specifically focus on the two largest immigrant groups in each country: Turkish immigrants in Germany and Mexican immigrants in the United States. Beyond comparability in relative size, Turkish and Mexican immigrants also share similar socioeconomic positions in Germany and the United States, respectively.

The remainder of this paper is organized into four sections. First, we review the literature on exogamy as it relates to intermarriage between the second generation children of immigrants and their native counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Second, we discuss contextual factors and the compatibility of marital timing patterns between the second generation and natives in Germany and the United States. Third, we examine the timing of union formation across endogamous and exogamous unions. We expect differences in the timing between exogamous and endogamous unions to be similar across the two countries. That is, marriages for those who cross ethnic boundaries will occur

later in life compared to those who marry within the ethnic group. Fourth, we compare within-group differences for individuals who enter into exogamous versus endogamous unions. We illustrate that in social contexts with significant disparities in group-level patterns of marital timing, compromises across individuals who do intermarry must be found. Specifically, one or both parties must deviate from group-level standards of marital timing when they decide to marry exogamously. On the other hand, in contexts where patterns of marital timing are similar for those with native and immigrant backgrounds, a compromise in the timing of marriage is easily attained given smaller between-group differences.

## 2. Marital assimilation and timing of union formation

### 2.1. Partner choice

The literature on intermarriage cites demographic factors, individual characteristics, peer and family pressure as barriers to entry into exogamous unions. Demographic factors such as group-level birth and migration rates influence the likelihood of intermarriage by expanding or contracting the pool of eligible mates (Blau, Blum, & Schwartz, 1982). Recent research in Germany (Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2006; Klein, 2001) and the United States (Qian & Lichter, 2001, 2007; Sassler, 2005) have shown that not only the size but also the sex composition of immigrants and the mainstream are important for patterns of intermarriage.

One central question in this regard is how the pool of eligible partners is delimited. Especially for migrants and their children, for many of whom cross-border ties are an integral part of life, the pool of eligible partners may not be limited to the local context or even the host country, but may include the parents' country of origin. Migration policies that allow for the immigration of foreign spouses enable established migrants or their children to seek eligible mates in the country of origin. For example, a considerable share of immigrants and their children already residing in Germany marry partners who are currently living abroad (Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2006; Kalter & Schroedter, 2010). Similar patterns are observed throughout Europe, but can be found in the U.S. context as well (De Valk, Liefbroer, Esveltdt, & Henkens, 2004; Milewski & Hamel, 2010).

In addition to population-level factors, individual-level characteristics such as gender, education and age also influence the likelihood of exogamy. Men are more likely to marry exogamously compared to women, both because of differences in the sex ratios of the immigrant and native populations<sup>2</sup> and because of women's central role in transmitting ethnic traditions to the next generation (Kalmijn & van Tubergen, 2010; Sassler, 2005). Higher education tends to provide more opportunities to meet peers with native parentage; hence better-educated first- and second-generation immigrants are more likely to

<sup>1</sup> The second generation refers to individuals who are born in the receiving country and have at least one foreign-born parent. By mainstream or natives we refer to those who are native born, with two native-born parents.

<sup>2</sup> This will be less relevant in our case as we look at the second generation where sex ratios are generally more balanced.

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