

Migrants' subjective well-being in ethnically mixed marriages:

A life-course perspective

Annegret Gawron (University of Cologne) and Sarah Carol (University College Dublin)

In many studies, immigrants and their offspring report lower well-being. This is predominantly associated with acculturation (e.g., Berry et al. 2006), discrimination and disadvantages in the education system and labor market (e.g., Verkuyten 2008; Safi 2009). Research on the role of interethnic friendships and marriages (exogamous marriages) in well-being, by contrast, is rare but on the rise (Singla & Holm 2012; Bratter & Eschbach 2015; Chang 2016; Potarca & Bernardi 2016).

Exogamous marriages are seen as a vital step to integration on other dimensions. Previous research has repeatedly pointed out the benefits of exogamous unions for labor market participation and higher levels of earnings compared to migrants in endogamous marriages (marriages between co-ethnics) (e.g., Meng & Gregory 2005). We combine those two research streams, the one on well-being and the one on social integration, and pose the question: *Are exogamous unions beneficial to well-being over the life course?* This paper addresses migrants' satisfaction with different domains of life as one component of well-being (Diener et al. 1985) and compares well-being in exogamous marriages to endogamous marriages.

From assimilation theory (Gordon 1964; Alba and Nee 2003), we would assume that individuals in exogamous unions have a higher well-being (*assimilation hypothesis*), as their earnings and labor market participation are also higher (e.g., Meng & Gregory 2005). Yet, we argue that exogamous marriages are exposed to more marital conflict and socially less accepted due to spouses' heterogeneity in traits like ethnic background, education, religious affiliation, culture or social status (see also Kalmijn 1998) and should result in a lower well-being of exogamously married couples (*heterogeneity hypothesis*). A major challenge of exogamous couples are differences in language skills, language use, communication styles, and cultural differences in norms, values, beliefs, attitudes which also affect behaviour and mutual expectations (Sharaievska et al. 2013). This is mirrored in higher risks of relationship dissolution and lower levels of satisfaction among exogamously married couples (e.g., Milewski and Gawron 2019; Dribe and Lundh 2012; Feng et al. 2012; Milewski and Kulu 2014), which challenges the common wisdom of assimilation theory that exogamy is generally beneficial to individuals. This research therefore fills an important gap in current research by studying the role of exogamous unions for well-being.

We also argue that there might be no universal effect of marriage type on well-being, but that we need to refine this argument by devoting attention to different life cycles. For instance, Singla and Holm (2012) have observed that major conflicts occurred in a life cycle that challenges work and family balance, gender roles and parenting – the stage of the upbringing of children. This

leads us to our second research question: *To what extent do exogamous marriages enhance life- and health satisfaction of migrants across different life stages?* We argue that a dynamic perspective considering longitudinal variation across the family life cycle is lacking so far. We hypothesize that migrants in exogamous marriages report lower subjective well-being compared to migrants in endogamous marriages during the stage of raising children due to conflicts over parenting and gender roles (*family life cycle hypothesis*). To our best knowledge, this is the first study that employs a life-course perspective to the anyway rare studies on the association between intermarriage and subjective well-being.

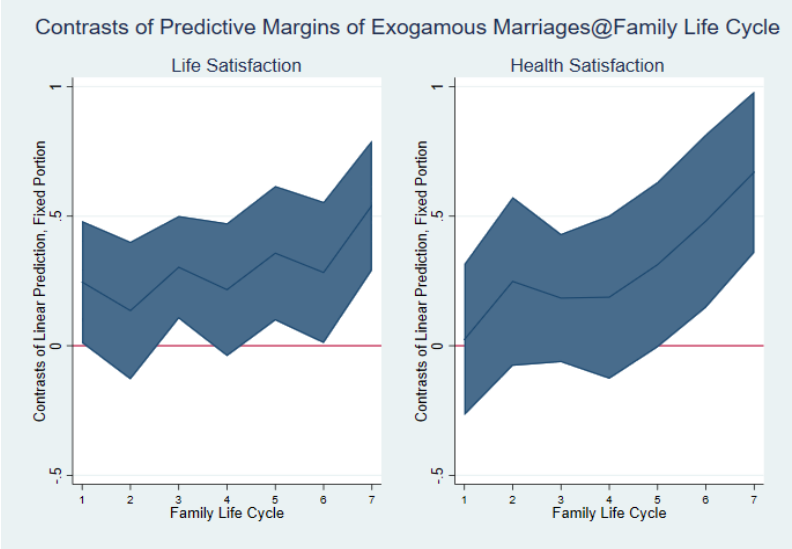
To answer our research questions, we employ data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), an annual panel study that began in 1984 as a random and representative sample of private households in West Germany, and expanded to East Germany in 1990. The survey is conducted with the heads of households and household members in face-to-face interviews. Generally, it oversamples migrants, initially from the five most important countries of origin to which the former recruitment countries of “guest workers” belonged (Turkey, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, Italy, and Spain). A special subsample of recent migrants was added in 1995. For the analyses, we use data from all available waves up to 2015 (32 waves in total). This allows us to study a broad sample of migrants (persons who migrated or have at least one parent being born abroad). The resulting sample consisted of 16,585 observations from which 2,983 live in exogamous unions (roughly about 18%).

To account for the non-dependence of answers due to repeated measurements for each person as well as for each couple, we use two-level linear mixed effects models (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008) with fixed effects for the survey year. Missing values are replaced by using multiple imputation with chained equations ($m=20$). Our dependant variables are measured with the items “How satisfied are you with your life, all things considered?” and “How satisfied are you with your health?”. Both items range on a Likert scale between zero (completely dissatisfied) and ten (completely satisfied). Our main independent variables are marriage type and family life cycle. If spouses stated to have the same country of origin, their marriage type was labelled as endogamous (0). Exogamous marriages (1) are characterized as unions in which spouses have a different country of origin. Our second main explanatory variable is the *family life cycle*, which is initially divided into eight stages of family development. As Duvall’s classification (1957) has lost its universality due to demographic changes such as rising divorce rates, remarriages, single-parenthood, and stepparent families, we have adapted his classification and distinguish between the following seven stages: (1.) before family formation (without children and before marriage), (2.) after family formation (with children up to two years old), (3.) families with school children up to twelve years old, (4.) families with teenagers up to 17 years old, (5.) families with adult children at home, (6.) families in the empty nest stage without children at home and (7.) aging family

members with at least one spouse being retired. We control for gender, ethnic origin, generation, income, education, discrimination, age, educational and religious differences between spouses.

In line with assimilation theory, our tentative results show that exogamously married migrants report a significantly better life and health satisfaction compared to endogamously married migrants. Controlled for gender and the family life cycle, the significant positive association persists. Regarding our third hypothesis, we observe variation across the life-course, but in the opposite direction. Figure 1 depicts those changes. The blue line shows the satisfaction of exogamously married couples in reference to endogamously married couples (red line). All deviations from the red line indicate significant differences between exogamously and endogamously married couples in their life and health satisfaction.

Figure 1: Life and health satisfaction controlled for gender and survey year

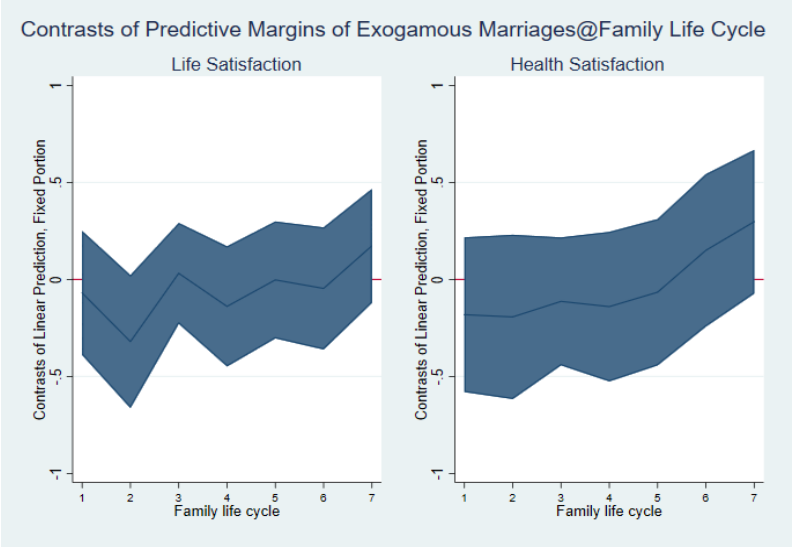


Source: Calculations based on GSOEP (1984-2015).

The life satisfaction of exogamously married couples is significantly higher in the stage with younger school children and adult children but also during the last family life cycle when couples reach retirement (Figure 1). The formative years of the marriage, when children are born and when children are teenagers do not go along with a significantly higher life satisfaction among exogamously married couples. These stages seem to be equally challenging for all couples. Interestingly, the pattern for life and health satisfaction are largely similar. However, the higher health satisfaction among exogamously married couples starts only after children are grown up and have moved out (Figure 1).

Non-western migrants have a significantly lower satisfaction. Religious, age and educational differences between partners cannot explain the lower satisfaction among non-Western migrants; neither can socio-economic status. However, holding ethnic origin constant results in an insignificant relationship between exogamous marriage and satisfaction across the life cycle (see also Figure 2). This suggests that cultural distance to natives might play a role.

Figure 2 Life and health satisfaction including all explanatory variables with socio-demographic controls and explanatory variables



Source: Calculations based on GSOEP (1984-2015).

We can conclude that marriage type as such is not generally linked to a higher satisfaction but that it varies across groups; ethnic origin seems to be the strongest predictor for health and life satisfaction. And this lower satisfaction among non-Western migrants is not linked to socio-demographic variables or cultural distance between partners as the coefficient for ethnic origin remains stable. Perceived discrimination could be another suspect but although it goes along with a lower satisfaction it does not explain the substantially lower satisfaction among non-Western migrants. We replicated those analyses with EU / non-EU migrants instead of Western / non-Western migrants and found the same results. In further analyses, we consider potential selection effects due to higher risks of union dissolution among exogamously married (leading to an overestimation of satisfaction if only happy couples survive all cycles) and (intended) return migration (leading to an over- or underestimation because happier as well as dying individuals might migrate). As a result, the gap between exogamously and endogamously married somewhat minimizes but the overall pattern remains stable.

Our findings underline the importance of studying well-being from a life-course perspective. We saw that the satisfaction was higher, for instance, in exogamous families with young school children than in endogamous families with young school children. At those stages, exogamy seems to be a valuable source of a higher well-being but not throughout the entire life course. This implies that we might need a refined assimilation theory that considers the varying importance of intergroup ties over the life course. A pressing question for future research is of course how this affects the well-being of children from those unions.