

Exploring a minority in the minority: Same-sex couples among immigrants in Germany

Extended abstract

Research question

This paper studies the intersection of international migration and sexual orientation by looking at same-sex couples among the international migrant population in Germany. This study is exploratory because there are hardly any available data on this minority within a minority; the topic is sensitive; and the “target group” is assumed to be very small. Our main goals are to estimate the prevalence of same-sex couples among the female and male migrant populations, and to describe their socio-demographic characteristics. To gain a better understanding of these same-sex couples, we compare them to heterosexual migrant couples and to same-sex German native couples.

Background

Our paper is motivated by several different trends related to the increasing diversity of European populations. First, in recent years, the heterogeneity of European populations has been growing as a result of continuing immigration. The share of the population living in the EU Member States who are foreign citizens (i.e., who have a foreign citizenship) recently rose to 12%. More than 20% of the population of Europe are first-generation immigrants or descendants of immigrants; and this share is growing (Coleman 2006). Most previous studies on the demographic behavior of immigrants were based on the classical assimilation perspective, and were focused on the question of whether immigrants adapt over generations to the majority population of their destination country. A key assumption of the assimilation perspective is that the native population of the destination country serves as the point of reference. Moreover, previous demographic studies on partner choice and union formation have focused almost exclusively on heterosexual individuals. This may be in part because many immigrant groups in Europe come from countries where non-normative expressions of sexuality are forbidden and subject to sanctions. It is also possible that scholars have not seen this topic as important, especially given that the potential “target population” is assumed to be very small. Yet another reason may be related to data availability, as questions about sexual orientation and same-sex partnerships have only recently been included in official statistics and social surveys. In addition, due to the sensitivity of the topic, the reliability of the data that exist may be limited.

Second, developments that are frequently referred to in the context of the Second Demographic Transition have been observed in recent decades. The changes in union formation patterns that characterize this transition include shifts toward a pluralization of living arrangements and an

individualization and a de-institutionalization of the life course. These developments have been accompanied – if not preceded – by substantial changes in values (van de Kaa 1987) with respect to sexual liberalization, marriage, and family. Over the same period, marriage and family legal frameworks have changed in many western European countries, with couples in non-normative living arrangements gradually gaining more rights, and thus becoming less disadvantaged relative to heterosexual married couples. In this changing societal climate, the numbers of same-sex couples reported in western European statistical sources have been increasing.

Third, while same-sex unions may be “legal” in most western European contexts, they continue to be expressions of “non-normative,” “unconventional,” or non-standard lifestyles. On the one hand, activities such as Christopher Street Day attract both LGBT and heterosexual people. The public discourse and the representation of same-sex individuals in the arts and the media suggest that Europeans are rather open to and accepting of same-sex preferences and living arrangements. On the other hand, research on individual attitudes toward homosexuality has shown that there is considerable variation, with significant shares of respondents indicating that they reject same-sex behavior completely, and individuals who belong to a sexual minority reporting that they have experienced discrimination. It therefore appears that because same-sex preferences and behaviors remain sensitive topics, the reporting of same-sex living arrangements may not correspond to the lived reality. Thus, investigating same-sex couples from a quantitative point of view presents methodological challenges.

Fourth, the formation of same-sex partnerships challenges theoretical considerations regarding partner selection at the individual level (Lengerer & Bohr 2019). Our study is conducted at the intersection of two minority groups, both of whom face social disadvantages and are subject to “othering” processes: namely, international migrants and individuals with same-sex preferences. In our theoretical considerations and empirical analyses, we will compare these couples to couples who are exogamous with respect to national origin, as such “mixed” couples who are also subject to othering processes and social exclusion.

Partner choice appears to be the product of three main factors: namely, individual preferences, opportunity structures, and third-party influences (Kalmijn 1998). Classical theories of partner choice, household economics, and marriage do not, however, take into account preferences and choices with respect to the sex of the partner. While an individual’s sexual preferences appear to influence his or her partner choice, recent literature has shown that such preferences are not stable over the life course, as an individual’s attitudes and the expression of his or her preferences tend to be highly influenced by the societal climate, such as religious discourses or legal conditions. A person’s sexual behavior may not, however, coincide with his or her sexual preferences, particularly if the behavior is non-normative. In this context, opportunity structures and legal conditions become more important.

Previous literature has shown that the number of same-sex couples increased in several European countries after the legal conditions regulating these unions became more liberal (Andersson et al. 2006 for Sweden and Norway; Lengerer & Bohr 2019 for Germany). While the number of same-sex unions is slowly increasing as a result of liberalization and modernization (Rosenfeld 2007), the share of all couples who are same-sex is still rather low. In Germany, previous studies have estimated the share of couples who are same-sex at between 0.5 and 1.1% (Lengerer & Bohr 2019).

However, for international migrants in Europe, the question of homosexuality has hardly been raised in the demographic literature. The exceptions are a handful of papers on attitudes toward homosexuality, which showed on the one hand that immigrants are more opposed to homosexuality than European natives (Röder 2015), and on the other that migrants are more open to homosexuality than their stayer counterparts in their respective countries of origin (Soehl 2017). The differences in attitudes toward same-sex relationships seem to be especially large between immigrants from Muslim countries and European natives (Norris & Inglehart 2012). However, little is known about the behavioral dimension of queer international migrants (Luibheid 2008).

The working hypotheses guiding our study consist of two parts. First, we compare the prevalence of same-sex couples in migrant and non-migrant populations. As many immigrants in Germany come from countries where sexual norms are less liberal, we assume that the percentages of individuals who are in same-sex couples are lower among immigrant groups than they are among natives, but that there may be some variation by country of origin (H1). Our second working hypothesis addresses the reporting practices of same-sex couples. As individuals with a same-sex partner may fear that openly acknowledging the nature of their relationship will have negative consequences, they may avoid answering specific questions or provide false information. We therefore distinguish between respondents who reported being in a same-sex union and those whose answers were missing or implausible. We assume that the level of underreporting is higher among immigrants than among non-migrants because attitudes toward homosexuality tend to be more negative among immigrants (H2). Second, we study the individual determinants of same-sex couples. In line with previous research on non-normative partner choice, we assume that people in same-sex unions are younger and better educated than people in opposite-sex couples, and that they are more likely to be heterogamous with respect to other traits. As the previous literature on European natives has indicated that more men than women are in same-sex couples, we display the results for women and men separately.

Data and sample

We use the scientific use file of the German Microcensus for 2013. Our initial sample contains all persons between the ages of 18 and 70 who reported being married or in a registered partnership (which is equivalent to marriage for same-sex couples), and all households with at least two adult

household members. In the construction of our analytical sample, we accounted for the possibility that the respondents avoided answering certain questions or provided false information. We follow a procedure used by Lengerer and Bohr (2019), who recommended working with a range of results. Our lower limit of the prevalence of same-sex unions was formed by the respondents who reported sharing their main residence with a clearly identified intimate partner. The sample constructed on this basis contained 158,778 persons, about 0.6% of whom were in a same-sex couple. We then added the respondents who reported their household as a secondary residence in the Microcensus; the respondents who indicated they were married, but were not permanently living in the same household as their partner (living apart together /LAT); the respondents who did not answer the question on the nature of the relationship; and the respondents who provided inconsistent information on their relationships with the other household members, but for whom the composition of their household suggested that they were in a same-sex couple. The sample constructed on this basis contained 165,327 persons, about 1.9% of whom were in a same-sex couple. This sample, which we refer to as the “full” sample in the following, sets the upper limit of the range of the prevalence of same-sex couples.

First results

Table 1 shows the shares of individuals in same-sex couples among the immigrant and the native population using different methods of sample construction. The shares of couples who are same-sex are lower among immigrants (0.3 to 1.4%) than among natives (0.6 to 2.0%), regardless of whether the restricted or the full sample is used. The difference between the restricted sample and the full sample is, however, larger among the immigrant population; our imputations of missing data and likely false answers more than quadrupled the percentage of individuals in same-sex unions among immigrants, whereas these imputations only tripled this percentage among natives.

Addressing our second working hypothesis on the determinants of same-sex couples, we found that the patterns among migrants are similar to those among natives: i.e., same-sex unions are more prevalent among men than among women, and the individuals in these unions are better educated than people in opposite-sex couples. Interestingly, our results indicate that migrants in same-sex couples are more similar (endogamy) in terms of other socio-demographic variables (age, education) than migrants in opposite-sex couples with mixed countries of origin.

Table 1: Individuals in same-sex couples among migrants and natives in Germany, by reporting practice

	Natives			Immigrants		
	% same sex	N same sex	total N	% same sex	N same sex	total N
Valid answers, main residence (=restricted sample)	0.6	812	126717	0.3	92	32048

+ Valid answers, secondary residence + LAT	0.7	898	130656	0.3	104	32563
+ Missing values/ imputed answers	0.7	902	130672	0.3	104	32566
+ Possible false answers (=full sample)	2.0	2619	132391	1.4	474	32936

Source: Calculations based on German Microcensus SUF 2013.

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