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Timing of union formation and partner choice in immigrant societies: The United States and Germany

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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.

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 and 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 and 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 markets 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. 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 regards 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 and Lichter 2001; Qian and Lichter 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.¹ 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

¹The 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.

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.

Marital assimilation and timing of union formation

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 et al., 1982). Recent research in Germany (Klein 2001; Gonzalez-Ferrer 2006) and the United States (Sassler 2005; Qian and Lichter 2001; 2007) 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 and Schroedter 2010). Similar patterns are observed throughout Europe, but can be found in the U.S. context as well (De Valk et al. 2004; Milewski and 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 populations² and because of women's central role in transmitting ethnic traditions to the next generation (Kalmijn and 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 marry exogamously than their less-educated counterparts (Hwang et al. 1995; Qian and Lichter 2001; 2007).

Third parties, such as parents and peers, may also exert a strong influence on partner choice (Kalmijn 1998). Ethnographic studies and interviews with children of immigrants suggest that parents in particular may discourage intermarriage, often by expressing explicit

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

preferences for co-ethnic partners (Kibria 2009). Yet some children of immigrants may also prefer endogamous unions to ensure intergenerational continuity. Choosing a co-ethnic partner is one way to guarantee that parents are able to communicate with their partner, in-laws and future grandchildren (Kasinitz et al. 2008: 233).

Finally, as will be the focus of this paper, age also matters in influencing who one marries. A number of plausible mechanisms have been proposed in this regard. First, marrying later may encourage individuals to choose partners of different backgrounds. Analyzing a sample of white women in the U.S., Lichter (1990) found that women who delay marriage, especially past age 30, “cast a wider net” and choose partners different from themselves with respect to education, age and ethnicity.³ Another explanation is that those who delay marriage may be less focused on a partner’s ethnic background and place more emphasis on other characteristics, such as the partner’s socioeconomic potential. Alternatively, individuals who enter into an exogamous relationship may wait longer to assess whether a partner’s other characteristics, such as socioeconomic traits, are well-matched before deciding to marry (Oppenheimer 1988). Third, given third party objections to intermarriage, individuals who want to intermarry may delay marriage as a conscious strategy to “wait out” parental objections or wait until they gain greater independence. For example, in a study of second-generation immigrants in New York City, one respondent stated: “At 21 my parents wanted me to marry someone Chinese. I waited ’till I was 32, and by then they were just happy I married anyone at all!!” (Kasinitz et al. 2008: 232).

Preferences for timing

While the timing of marriage may be connected to partner choice, preferences for the timing of union formation in turn are likely shaped by an individual’s immediate and broader social contexts. For example, research in the United States suggests that second-generation immigrants whose parents stem from countries with comparatively earlier norms of marital timing are less likely to marry exogamously than individuals whose parents stem from countries with similar norms of marital timing (Kalmijn and Tubergen 2010). Similarly, research in the Netherlands suggests that second-generation children of immigrants, in particular Turks, prefer younger ages of marriage than their native Dutch counterparts (De Valk and Liefbroer 2007). In the latter case, both parental preferences as well as adolescents’ own ethnic background have a direct effect on young adults’ preferences for early marriage. Additional research illustrates that ethnic variation in expectations of marital timing begin in early adolescence, with preferences solidifying in adulthood (Crissey 2005; East 1998).

Focusing on the timing of union formation engages the often-overlooked fact that marital assimilation is based not only on the preferences of immigrants and their children, but also on those of their eligible mainstream partners. The idea that marital assimilation occurs via the participation of both parties resonates with Alba and Nee’s (2003) definition of assimilation as a two-way rather than a one-way asymmetric process involving the wholesale assimilation of immigrants with little to no adjustment among natives (Qian and

³The evidence for the effect of delayed marriage on marrying a partner from a different ethnic/racial category is, however, only significant in urban marriage markets where there is a geographic proximity between different ethnic groups (p.806).

Lichter 2007; 70). That is, if both immigrants *and* natives possess set expectations for the age at which they plan to marry, then entering into a romantic relationship with a partner who may (or at least is perceived to) deviate from this pattern may not be desirable. Thus, considerably different between-group patterns in marital timing may be one barrier to exogamy (De Valk and Liefbroer 2007; Kalmijn and Tubergen 2010).

The context of marital assimilation in the United States and Germany

Illustrating how immigrants and their descendents deviate from the mainstream is common practice in studies of immigrant assimilation. However, highlighting differences in what is considered mainstream is less common. In this paper, we juxtapose the United States and Germany as countries with clear differences in the mainstream timing of marriage. Table 1 presents some summary statistics on entry into first marriages for Germany, the United States and key countries of origin of immigrants. As these data show, the age at which individuals first marry tends to be earlier in the United States compared to Germany, a comparison that holds for both men and women. Approximately 19% of U.S. men and 33% of U.S. women between the ages of 20 and 24 have married, compared to 5% of German men and 15% of German women. In Germany, the delay in first marriage is frequently attributed to a greater propensity to cohabit before marriage, compared to the United States (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). Cohabitation is increasingly competing with marriage as a socially legitimate union in Germany, although it is also on the rise in the United States.

The cross-national differences in marital timing are also conditioned by institutional factors. Institutional arrangement may shape choices in the life course. The literature on Germany indicates that women struggle to combine family life and professional career which may result in postponement of union and family formation (Blossfeld & Huinink 1991; Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999; McDonald 2000). Similarly, in the United States, these differences are typically observed across class lines, with the delaying of marriage and family formation more prevalent among highly educated women, who also seek to establish themselves professionally before starting a family (Oppenheimer 1988; Sweeney 2002).

Immigration histories between the two countries also point to stark contrasts. The United States has a long history of immigration, whereas Germany only in the post-war period became a destination country for foreign labor migrants. Today, the share of foreign-born individuals in both countries is comparable and in each country, one main source country dominates the immigrant population. In the United States, Mexican-Americans are the largest immigrant group. Although this group is extremely diverse, most Mexican immigrants in the United States possess lower average levels of education, earn less and are more likely to live in poverty than native-born Whites (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). The low socioeconomic status of Mexican immigrants, combined with the sheer size of this population both in relation to the general population and among the foreign-born, makes the study of second-generation Mexicans particularly salient. Similarly in Germany, Turkish immigrants are the largest immigrant group and on average possess lower levels of education and income than natives (Alba 2005).

In addition, Turkish and Mexican immigrants share similarities with respect to family formation processes. In both countries of origin, age at first marriage tends to occur at younger ages than the respective host countries, and pre-marital cohabitation remains low (Castro-Martin 2002; Nauck 2002).⁴ However, the gap in marital timing between Turks and Germans is on average larger than the difference between Mexicans and Americans. For example, Table 1 shows that while only 5.2% of German males in their early 20s have married, 5.5 times as many men or 62% of the same age group in Turkey did. Similarly, over 4 times as many Turkish women have married by age 24 compared to their German counterparts. In the U.S. case these numbers are far less extreme. Twice as many Mexican males aged 20 to 24 have ever married (39%) compared to their U.S. counterparts (19%). The gap is even smaller when we compare Mexican women, of whom approximately 55% have ever married by age 24, compared to U.S. women, 33% of whom are married by the same age.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Given the variation in marital timing for individuals in both sending and receiving countries, we first ask whether the gap in age at first marriage between the second generation and natives will be the same across countries. We expect that the gap between the Turkish second generation and the mainstream will be much larger in Germany compared to the United States, where early marriage is common for both the second generation and natives. Second, we turn to the interaction between individual's timing of marriage and partner choice and ask how the timing of marriage is related to entry into exogenous and endogamous unions. We predict that in both countries, entry into exogamous unions will occur later than entry into endogamous unions both because of a casting a wider net/extended search model and because of an individual's propensities to wait out parental and peer objections to intermarriage. However, entry into marriage will be later overall in Germany due to German patterns of delayed marriage and the prevalence of pre-marital cohabitation. Third, we ask how entry into an exogamous union alters the timing of marriage for the second generation and natives compared to peers who enter into endogamous unions. In addition, do these differences vary by the receiving country? We expect that both the second generation and young adults with native parents will face trade-offs in the age at first marriage when marrying across ethnic lines. That is, as posited by Alba and Nee (2003), marital assimilation is a two-way street and those who enter into exogamous unions must be prepared to deviate from group patterns of marital timing. We also predict that deviations from ethnic group timeframes will be most stark in Germany, where the gap between Turkish and German patterns in marital timing is most evident.

⁴An important caveat here is the historical roots of cohabitation, or consensual unions, in Latin America. These unions, rather than functioning as a precursor to marriage, often replace marriage altogether, especially among individuals of low socioeconomic status (Castro Martin 2002; Goode 1993). As Castro Martin writes (2002: 35) "whereas cohabitation in developed societies usually serves as a trial period preceding marriage or an alternative to singlehood ... consensual unions in Latin America are best described as surrogate marriages."

Data

To address these questions, we use data from two recently completed surveys of second-generation immigrants: the survey of Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) and the German component of the Integration of the European Second Generation survey (TIES). The IIMMLA data were collected in 2004 and cover the Los Angeles Metropolitan area. The data include more than 4,500 respondents from age 20 to 40, including second generation individuals from major immigrant groups in the area as well as individuals with native-born parents. The German component of the TIES data were collected in 2007 and include approximately 900 second-generation respondents aged 18 to 35 from two major immigrant groups in Germany: 500 Turkish and 400 Ex-Yugoslavians. About 500 individuals of the same age with native-born parents were also interviewed as a control group. The sample was divided between residents of Berlin and Frankfurt am Main, the cities with the highest concentration of immigrants in Germany. We focus our analysis on the Mexican and Turkish second-generation respondents and comparison groups of native parentage in the United States and Germany. In the United States, we defined the comparison group as those with native-born parents who identify as Non-Hispanic White.

The two main variables of interest in our study are the age at first marriage and whether the respondent entered into an endogamous or exogamous union. Each respondent reports on their marital histories, which includes information on the respondent's age at first marriage. We define exogamous unions as relationships where the partner is of a different ethnic group than the respondent. Thus in Germany, a marriage between a second-generation Turkish immigrant and a partner of Turkish descent – either first or second generation – is considered an endogamous union. In the United States we used established pan-ethnic categories (i.e. Hispanic, Asian) to define the type of union. Thus a second-generation Mexican marrying a second-generation Guatemalan is not considered exogamy, but a second-generation Mexican marrying a native White partner would be. The literature on intermarriage suggests that these pan-ethnic categories are indeed meaningful as high rates of marriage within these categories but across national origin lines are quite frequent (Waters 2005 p.110). Thus for the purpose of our analysis this definition captures the relevant process. Although we recognize the sizeable share of second-generation individuals that have foreign-born spouses, we do not distinguish between partner's nativity status and treat these as endogamous unions. While the analysis of different nativity unions is a topic in its own right, for the purpose of our argument the distinction is not critical.⁵

Our models control for the respondent's gender, education and religiosity, all of which are related to the timing of union formation. Because men tend to marry later on average than women, we include an indicator distinguishing men from women. Given that individuals with higher education also tend to marry later (Oppenheimer 1988) we control for educational achievement. For each country we take a commonly used measure of

⁵Approximately 20% of married second-generation Turkish men and 27.5% of married second-generation Turkish women have a partner who was born in Turkey. In the United States, approximately 17% of married second-generation Mexican women and 11% of married second-generation Mexican men have a spouse born in Mexico. In a separate analysis not shown here, we exclude individuals with partners who are born in Turkey and Mexico respectively and find that our substantive results remain unchanged.

educational stratification. In the United States, we categorize respondents into those with less than a high school degree, individuals with some college education but no college degree, those with a Bachelor's degree, and those with an advanced degree. In Germany, we distinguish between respondents who attended Hauptschule (the lowest educational track), those who were graduated from Realschule, the middle or vocational track, and those who graduated from Gymnasium, the track that allows access into higher education.

Finally, we include measures of religiosity as well as the respondent's family structure while growing up. Religiosity is a well-known determinant of early marriage (Thorton et al. 1992) and in this paper we distinguish between individuals in three categories: those who rarely attend religious services, those that occasionally attend services and those that attend services regularly/weekly. With respect to family structure, individuals who grow up in traditional family structures are also more likely to marry earlier than those who do not (Axinn and Thornton 1996; Trent and South 1992). In this paper, we distinguish between individuals who were raised on two-parent biological families from those who did not.

Analysis and Results

Because union formation is a process that is still underway for a large part of the respondents in our data, we use discrete time event history models which allow for left censoring to model the timing of entry into unions. We do so in several steps. First, we present a set of survival curves comparing the entry into unions (marriage and cohabitation) between the second generation and our native comparison groups in the United States and Germany. We also estimate a discrete time event history model, which controls for gender, education and family background. In the next step, we distinguish between endogamous and exogamous marriages and, again using event history analysis, model them as competing risks. Because we are chiefly interested in the role that timing plays in partner choice, we focus on the baseline hazard of entering into marriage and compare this hazard across different union types. Finally, we combine these two analytic steps and distinguish between the timing of both endogamous and exogamous unions across members of the second generation and natives.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics of the survey respondents. In general, the children of immigrants in our sample have lower levels of educational attainment than respondents with native parents, both in Germany and the United States. Approximately twice as many second generation respondents fall into the lowest educational category as do respondents from our comparison groups but second generation respondents are only half as likely to be in the highest educational category. At the same time, second-generation respondents were more religious than natives, with the differences being much more pronounced in Germany than in the United States. Among German natives, almost 80% stated that they either have no religion or do not practice a religion and almost none (1%) practice regularly whereas among the Turkish second generation only a third are not religious and approximately 11% practice regularly.⁶ In general, U.S. respondents are much more religious (compared to native Germans) even though our sample draws from a major metropolitan area. Only a third of non-Hispanic White respondents are not religious or do not practice while 27% regularly

attend services. The Mexican second generation is somewhat more religious with 38% practicing regularly and only 14% reporting having no religion or not practicing.

At the time of the interview only 20% of German natives were married compared to 36% of second-generation Turks. Rates were higher overall in the United States with 47% and 54% of second-generation Mexicans and non-Hispanic Whites married, respectively. This can partly be attributed to on average earlier age at marriage in the United States, but also to the higher age range of the IIMMLA data, which covers respondents ranging from age 20 to 40 compared to the TIES data which includes young adults aged 18 to 35.

Different sequences: Comparing the timing of union formation across national origin groups

By their very nature, relationships require a consensus among partners regarding the sequence in which a union is formed. Thus apart from any social barriers that inter-ethnic unions need to overcome, there also remains the issue of expectations related to marital timing and the role of premarital cohabitation. As we show in this step of our analysis, the context that the mainstream sets matters. Our data allow us to comparatively examine the timing of entry into marriage and in the case of the German TIES data also the timing of cohabitation.

Figure 1 displays a set of survival curves showing the proportion of individuals who have entered into a marital or cohabiting union across different ages. In the right panel we see that in the United States the timing of marriage is broadly comparable across different ethnic groups. Although the Mexican second generation (dashed line) tends to marry at somewhat younger ages than their native counterparts (solid line), the trends are quite similar. By contrast in Germany (middle panel), we see large differences between the Turkish second generation and native Germans. This gap is chiefly due to the fact that Germans on average tend to delay marriage until rather late, and although the Turkish second generation appears to marry at a comparatively early age, this is certainly not the case when compared to the United States. If we were to overlay the marriage patterns of second-generation Turks onto the U.S. data, they would seem quite compatible to the mainstream. For example, comparing across all groups, we see that the differences are quite stark: while at age 26, 53% of second generation Mexicans, 56% of the non-Hispanic Whites, and 58% of second generation Turks are still unmarried, almost 90% of native Germans remain unmarried.

The last panel demonstrates how differences in the timing of first union are narrowed once we broaden our definition of unions to include cohabitations as well as marriages. The curve for native Germans shifts substantially and the gap between the Turkish second generation narrows. Unfortunately, data on all marital and cohabitation histories are only available in the TIES data; in the IMMLA data, questions on pre-marital cohabitation are restricted to those who were married at the time of survey. However, this is not as significant of a problem given that pre-marital cohabitation plays a larger role in the family formation process in Germany compared to the United States.

⁶We recognize that in the case of Germany attending Mosque and church may not be equivalent activities and differ in their meaning, nevertheless they do provide an indicator of religious activity and observance.

The discrete time event history analysis presented in Tables 3 and 4 confirms this interpretation. In the United States (Table 3) we see that there is no statistically significant baseline difference in the timing of marriage between second generation Mexicans and the non-Hispanic White comparison group. When we add control variables for educational background, however, the difference becomes negative ($p < 0.1$) indicating that the Mexican second generation marries somewhat later. Once adding control variables for family background and religiosity this difference increases and is statistically significant at $p < .05$. As expected, men tend to marry somewhat later than women. Education has a curvilinear effect such that those with some college education marry later but those with college degrees are not significantly different from those in the lowest educational category (no high school degree). Religious individuals tend to marry earlier whereas those who grew up with both biological parents marry a bit later ($p < 0.1$).

Turning to marriage in Germany (Table 4A), we see a significant baseline difference between the Turkish second generation and native Germans. This difference declines somewhat but remains significant even after controlling for all of the covariates. Education and religiosity have similar effects as in the United States, with religious individuals marrying earlier and those with higher education marry later. In contrast to the United States, however, growing up in a two-parent family does not matter for the timing of marriage. Once we expand the definition of unions to also include cohabitation we see that the difference between second generation Turks and those with native parents disappears (Table 4B). The effect of other covariates is substantively the same.

When and who: Timing and partner choice

Despite these different patterns in marital timing in the United States and Germany, we predict that in both countries endogamous unions will occur earlier than exogamous unions. To attain an estimate of the conditional effect of time on the risk of marriage we again estimated discrete time regression models for both datasets. However, in this analysis we differentiate between three outcomes for each year that the individual is at risk: no marriage, entry into an endogamous union, and entry into an exogamous union. To parsimoniously model the time dependency of the outcomes we entered time as a natural spline with five degrees of freedom which does not lose a significant amount of fit compared to a specification with time entered as yearly dummy variables. We then calculated the partial effect of time using the effects package in R (Fox and Hong 2008).

Figure 2 illustrates the partial effect of time on the risk of marriage for endogamous and exogamous unions in Germany and the United States. In both contexts we can see that the hazard for endogamous unions rises steeper and peaks earlier than the hazard for exogamous marriages.⁷ The maximum partial effect of time occurs about three years earlier for endogamy than for exogamy in both datasets. This does indeed suggest that there is a different temporal dynamic in marriages depending on the ethnic composition of the couple.

⁷Note that our coding of exogamous marriages is strictly defined to marriages outside of one's own ethnic group. By default, the majority of these unions occur between the stated group and the third generation native comparison, but in a few cases these unions also include partners who both have an immigrant background.

Those who marry across ethnic boundaries marry later than those who marry partners of the same ethnicity.

Finding a common ground - bridging differences in timing

Finally, to address the question of how individuals from groups with differences in the timing of marriage compromise, we further stratify our data and analyze the timing of endogamous and exogamous unions by ethnic group. Again we first estimate a series of discrete time event history models. Given that in each group we have fewer cases of individuals who enter into exogamous unions, we opt for an even more parsimonious specification of time and use a cubic polynomial instead of a spline. In addition, these models do not include the covariates on education and family background. Due to the smaller sample size for respondents who marry exogamously in each group, these results should be seen as indicative rather than conclusive.

With that caveat in mind, the panels in Figure 3 show clear differences in trends. The contrast is most pronounced for German natives. In this case, exogamous marriages occur earlier than endogamous marriages. The hazard rate rises early on for exogamous unions and reaches its maximum in the mid-20s. By contrast, the risk of marriage for endogamous unions starts out flat and begins to rise only in the mid-20s and does not peak until the respondents reach their 30s. Thus German respondents pose an exception to the pattern we discussed in the first section of this analysis – instead of delaying exogamous marriages as compared to endogamous unions – the situation is reversed. Among the German native population, those who marry a partner with a different ethnicity are likely to marry *earlier* than Germans who form endogamous unions. We argue that this pattern indicates that indeed a process of “finding a middle ground” between natives and the second generation is at work. In this case it is natives who adapt to the timing patterns of the second generation.

Not surprisingly, the opposite pattern is observed for second-generation Turks. Those entering marriages with partners from the same ethnic group do so at younger ages than those with partners from a different group. This finding resonates with the general pattern detected in the first part of the analysis, namely that exogamous marriages occur later than endogamous unions.

In the U.S. context, where the timing of union formation is more compatible across the second generation and natives, we see roughly similar patterns across ethnic groups. In the case of second-generation Mexicans, although entry into both types of unions initially increases at a similar rate, we see that the hazard for endogamous unions peaks earlier in the mid-20s compared to exogamous unions where the peak is not until the late 20s. In the case of non-Hispanic Whites, the differences are less pronounced, yet also here we see a slightly stronger increase in the hazard of marrying for endogamous unions in the early 20s compared to exogamous unions.

Discussion

Previous research has framed intermarriage between immigrants and natives as an indicator of the social distance between groups as well as a process by which it is bridged. Much of

this work focuses on the demographic structures that provide opportunities and constraints for exogamous unions (Qian and Lichter 2001; Qian and Lichter 2007; Sassler 2005) as well as the peer- and family- level influences on partner choice (De Valk and Liefbroer 2007; Kalmijn and Van Tubergen 2010). In this paper we add to this literature by examining how the timing of union formation and marriage is connected to partner choice.

In response to our first research question, we find substantial variation in the compatibility between natives and the second generation with regards to timing of union formation. Whereas in the United States the Mexican second generation and non-Hispanic Whites first marry at comparable ages, in Germany the tendency for late marriage among the native German population creates a “temporal separation” in the marriage market. The case of the Turkish second generation provides an excellent example. By their mid 20s more than 50% of Turkish second generation respondents were married compared to only 10% of their native German peers. If we take the marital timing as an attribute on which individuals are matched, then it is clear that in Germany the potential pool of partners for a marriage between children of Turkish and German descent will be rather small. This difference is partly due to the high prevalence of long-term pre-marital cohabitation among native Germans (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). Indeed, when we broaden the definition of union formation to include marriage *and* cohabitation, the difference between the Turkish second generation and their native German peers largely disappears.

In addition, our results support our hypothesis that endogamous unions tend to occur earlier in life and exogamous unions tend to occur later. While between-group differences in the age at marriage may limit opportunities for intermarriage, we also show that individuals’ timing of union formation is related to partner choice. As hypothesized earlier, in both Germany and the United States, those marrying outside their ethnic group tend to marry later compared to those who marry endogamously. Unfortunately the data we have do not allow us to examine what ultimately leads to the relative delay in exogamous marriages. A larger sample that would allow matching on covariates, that includes multiple time points and in-depth interviews may be necessary to disentangle these processes.

Nevertheless, all plausible mechanisms point to the fact that this relative delay is related to the social distance between groups. It could be a tradeoff in preferences as Lichter (1990) argues. According to Lichter, although individuals generally prefer to marry within their group, those who delay marriage, particularly women after age 30, may be forced to “cast a wider net” and marry those who differ from themselves on characteristics such as ethnicity. Thus crossing ethnic categories in choice of partner would be a result of delaying marriage. While our results are broadly compatible with such a view, on closer look this theory may not be the best fit. Our sample does not have many individuals who marry after age 30, yet we find such an effect among respondents in their 20s. Specifically, we find that the rate of exogamous marriages rises slower and peaks several years later than the rate of endogamous unions, which rises and peaks in the mid to late 20s. Alternatively, marrying across group boundaries may be perceived as riskier and individuals may feel more confident about entering into an exogamous union if other criteria such as socioeconomic status are well established and well-matched (Oppenheimer 1988). A later age at marriage may also reflect

an individual's willingness to "wait out" parental objections to an exogamous union (Kasinitz et al., 2008: 232).

Lastly, when entering into exogamous unions, we find that the second generation and their native counterparts face a trade-off in group-level patterns of marital timing. In Germany in particular, natives marry earlier and immigrants marry later than their counterparts who marry endogamously. On the other hand, in contexts where marital timing is similar for both natives and the second generation, such as in the United States, we do not find signs of such compromises in timing.

Our findings broadly speak to variation in the mainstream context of assimilation that the second generation encounters. Assimilation theories, both neo-assimilationist (Alba and Nee 2003) and segmented (Portes and Zhou 1993, Portes and Rumbaut 2001) as well as the emerging field of second-generation comparative research, emphasize the importance of context for the second generation's assimilation trajectories (Crul & Schneider 2010). Context in this research generally includes institutional arrangements and social conditions that migrants and their children encounter, including the reception of migrants and the level of discrimination against a specific group (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), neighborhoods and local economic conditions (Waldinger 2001) and, especially for the second generation, the structuring of the education and entry into the labor market (e.g. Crul and Vermeulen 2003, Holdaway et al. 2009).

Our comparison of marital timing highlights the fact that mainstream variation in the timing and sequencing of union formation can also be an important element of the assimilation context. If sufficiently different from the preferences found in immigrant families, mainstream patterns of marital timing can pose an additional social barrier that is not necessarily linked to discrimination or putative differences in value orientations (Dribe and Lundh 2011).

Although this study adds nuance to the literature on factors that influence intermarriage, we are aware of its limitations. First, our samples are limited to large urban areas only and are not nationally representative. Although Los Angeles, Berlin and Frankfurt as major urban centers represent a large and important share of the immigrant population, they certainly do not capture the whole picture – especially for the Mexican population but also for our native comparison groups. For example, our urban sample may have a higher mean age at first marriage as compared to a national sample, particularly in the case of our comparison groups. In addition, exogamous unions are more represented in urban areas compared to rural areas (Rosenfeld and Kim 2005).

Second, we do not distinguish between endogamous unions with partners who are native born versus foreign born (i.e. a second generation Mexican respondent marrying someone born in Mexico). This is a topic on its own right (e.g. Gonzalez-Ferrer 2006; Milewski & Hamel 2010) and may well shape dynamics of timing and intermarriage in ways that our paper does not address. However a robustness test (not shown here) where we exclude all respondents with foreign-born spouses leaves the substance of our results unchanged.

Albeit only a first step, our analysis suggests that intermarriage, as one phenomenon that decreases the social distance between groups, requires an adjustment for both immigrants and natives. By examining the timing of key milestones by which people enter into unions and how this relates to the formation of unions that cross ethnic boundaries, we can advance our understanding of assimilation. Finally, our paper highlights the importance of considering mainstream patterns such as the timing of marriage and family formation, both as a context of assimilation and a bar against which the assimilation of immigrants is assessed.

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Figure 1.
Survival curves summarizing age at entry into first unions.

Figure 2.

Timing of first marriage by type in Germany (top panel) and first marriage in the United States (bottom panel).

Note: Curves represent effect of time estimated using a discrete time hazard model which includes all covariates with time entered as a natural spline with 5 degrees of freedom.

Figure 3.
Timing of marriage by type of union and national origin group. Plots of the effect of time using a discrete time event-history model

Table 1

Age at first marriage and percent ever married for Germany, the United States and select countries of origin.

Country and year of census	Men			Women		
	Average age at first marriage	Difference to Germany/U.S.	% Ever married age 20-24	Average age at first marriage	Difference to Germany/U.S.	% Ever married age 20-24
Germany (1996)	31.8	--	5.2%	29.0	--	14.8%
Turkey (1990)	25.0	6.8	28.2%	22.0	7.0	61.8%
Croatia (1991)	27.9	3.9	14.9%	23.8	5.2	44.1%
U.S.A. (1995)	28.7	--	19.2%	26.0	--	33.2%
Mexico (1990)	24.6	4.1	38.9%	22.4	3.6	54.6%
El Salvador (1992)	25.3	3.4	34.5%	22.3	3.7	49.9%
China (1990)	23.8	4.9	37.5%	22.1	3.9	58.6%
Philippines (1990)	26.3	2.4	26.8%	23.8	2.2	44.3%

Source: United Nations (2000).

Table 2

Summary statistics for samples used in analysis

	Parents' Origin			
	TIES data	IIMMLA data		
	Turkish (n=503)	German (n=503)	Mexican (n=553)	American, NH White (n=407)
Married	36%	20%	47%	54%
Male	48%	48%	49%	49%
Religiosity: none or does not practice (*)	32%	79%	14%	33%
rarely attends	31%	14%	16%	18%
occasionally attends services	26%	6%	31%	21%
regularly/weekly attends services	11%	1%	38%	27%
Comes from an intact family	96%	83%	66%	51%
Education - Germany				
Lower track (*)	22%	9%		
middle track	63%	63%		
higher track	15%	29%		
Education – US				
no degree (*)			19%	9%
High School			28%	15%
Associates degree			31%	25%
Some college			6%	8%
Bachelor's degree			11%	29%
Graduate degree			6%	14%

Note:

* indicates omitted reference category in regression analysis.

Table 3

Discrete-time proportional hazard model for entry into first marriage in the IIMMLA data.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	z	Coef.	z	Coef.	z
Mexican	-0.10	-1.13	-0.19	-1.93~	-0.24	-2.32*
Male	-0.47	-5.09***	-0.49	-5.18***	-0.39	-3.89***
Education (a): High School			-0.06	-0.38	-0.02	-0.12
Associate's degree			-0.18	-1.26	-0.14	-0.92
Some college			-0.73	-2.99**	-0.68	-2.64**
Bachelor's degree			-0.40	-2.45*	-0.26	-1.47
Graduate degree			-0.12	-0.67	-0.06	-0.33
Religiosity (b): rarely attend					0.17	1.03
Occasionally					0.22	1.47
Regularly/weekly					0.52	3.79***
Intact family					-0.20	-1.93~
Intercept	-4.65	-12.16	-4.41	-11.01	-4.75	-10.76

Note: Yearly time factors are included in the model but omitted from the table.

Omitted variables: (a) No High school degree, (b) no religion or does not practice.

*** p<0.001;

** p<0.01;

* p<0.05

~ p<0.1

Table 4A
Discrete-time proportional hazard model for entry into first marriage in the German TIES data.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	z	Coef.	z	Coef.	z
Turkish	0.76	6.10***	0.71	5.64***	0.53	3.67***
Male	-0.48	-3.92***	-0.48	-3.94***	-0.49	-3.96***
Education (a): Mid-track			0.05	0.29	0.15	0.88
Tertiary/Academic			-0.49	-2.22*	-0.36	-1.58
Religiosity (b): rarely and					0.12	0.77
Occasionally					0.52	3.10**
Regularly/weekly					0.72	3.07**
Intact family					0.15	0.53
Intercept	-7.16	-7.13	-7.08	-6.98	-7.41	-7.06

Note: Yearly time factors are included in the model but omitted from the table.

Omitted variables: (a) Lowest educational track, (b) no religion or does not practice.

*** p<0.001;

** p<0.01;

* p<0.05;

~ p<0.1

Table 4B

Discrete -time proportional hazard model for entry into cohabitation or marriage in the German TIES data.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	z	Coef.	z	Coef.	z
Turkish	0.11	1.09	0.05	0.48	-0.02	-0.20
Male	-0.34	-3.32***	-0.35	-3.43***	-0.34	-3.32***
Education (a): Mid-track			-0.11	-0.76	-0.05	-0.32
Tertiary/Academic			-0.53	-2.98**	-0.46	-2.54*
Religiosity (b): rarely attd					0.01	0.07
Occasionally					0.20	1.34
Regularly/weekly					0.41	1.91~
Intact family					0.01	0.06
Intercept	-6.82	-6.81	-6.62	-6.56	-6.72	-6.54

Note: yearly time factors are included in the model but omitted from the table.

Omitted variables: (a) Lowest educational track, (b) no religion or does not practice.

*** p<0.001;

** p<0.01;

* p<0.05;

~ p<0.1