Migrants in interethnic partnerships: between preferences and structural opportunities

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Introduction

This study aims to explore the individual socio-demographic characteristics of migrants living in interethnic partnerships in the destination country Germany. The majority of research on interethnic partnerships has been conducted in the United States (e.g., Rosenfeld 2002), Canada (e.g., Kalbach 2002), and Australia (e.g., Meng und Gregory 2005). Research for Europe is limited to The Netherlands (Kalmijn und van Tubergen 2006). However, Germany is the most important country for immigration in Europe (Migration Data Portal 2021). In 2022, 28.7% (23.8 million individuals) of all individuals in Germany did not acquire German citizenship by birth or have a parent who was not born as a German citizen (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023a), which represents quite a significant share. In addition, the proportion of interethnic partnerships is continuously increasing. A steady increase is documented in official statistics for Germany for the number of binational marriages (where one partner has a foreign passport) as one group of interethnic partnerships (Lorke 2021). In 2019, 7 percent of all formed marriages were binational (Datenreprot 2021). However, information about the characteristics of migrants living in interethnic partnerships is rare. This applies in particular to cohabiting and living apart together partnerships.

In this paper, we examine what characterizes the persons crossing "ethnic boundaries" (Luthra 2013) in Germany by looking at a) the structural characteristics of migrants in interethnic partnerships and b) the probability of being in an interethnic partnership for migrants of Turkish origin and Ethnic German resettlers in Germany. We go beyond the previous research by not comparing the socio-demographic characteristics of migrants living in an interethnic partnership with the characteristics of native Germans. Instead, we focus on migrants living in interethnic partnerships with the majority population and compare them with migrants living in partnerships with migrants from the same or other ethnicity. We chose ethnic German resettlers and Turkish migrants for this comparison as they represent the two largest migrant groups in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023c). Thus, we can answer if the social distance from the majority population – represented by migrant generational status – is relevant for partners in interethnic partnerships. In addition, there are research gaps for the preliminary stages of marriage (Baykara-Krumme 2020; Rother 2008). Therefore, we address non-marital partnerships in this paper.

Data & method

The individual-level data for the empirical analysis of immigrant partnership characteristics are drawn from the German Family Panel (*pairfam*; see an overview in Huinink et al. 2011). We selected *pairfam* in favour of other studies[1] in Germany for several reasons. First, the study design follows a multi-actor approach and thus includes detailed information on the ethnic background of both partners, amongst

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[1] German Microzensus, GGP, SOEP

other sociodemographic characteristics relevant to our research question. Data on respondents' migration background and ethnicity have been available since the 5th wave of *pairfam*. Thus, we can conduct our analyses based on the country of birth of the respondents and their ancestors. This is a more favourable indicator of migration history compared to nationality, which can change over the life course (Gresch und Kristen 2011).

Second, since we select only migrants as our study's primary subjects (anchors), a sufficient number of cases is crucial to conduct the analysis. The underrepresentation of migrants is a problem in several social science surveys for the context of Germany and abroad, including *pairfam*. However, the *pairfam* refreshment sample from wave 11 adds new anchors and a new cohort to the base sample, resulting in 9,435 conducted interviews. Through the increase in the number of cases, we can identify enough anchors with immigration histories (N = 2,073/22%) as a starting population for our analysis. Furthermore, *pairfam* provides novel calibrated design weights based on migration history to better adjust for the slight underrepresentation of migrants (Wetzel et al. 2021). Hence, we rely on the first year of the refreshment sample, the 11th wave (sample 2018/19; Brüderl et al. 2021), where the base sample was supplemented but not yet downsized through panel attrition.

Third, *pairfam* employs a cohort approach that includes four birth cohorts: 2001-03, 1991-93, 1981-83, and 1971-73; hence the anchors range in age from 14 to 48. Although the cohort approach imposes non-negligible limits on generalisability, it is beneficial for us as we are interested in romantic partnerships that are more frequently formed and persistent in these age groups, allowing us to analyze different relationship phases and possible relationship patterns across cohorts. Additionally, *pairfam* data identifies married and cohabiting couples and so-called Living-Apart-Together partnerships enabling us to compare the outcomes between different types of relationships.

To estimate the characteristics of migrants in interethnic partnerships compared to migrants in intraethnic or intra-co-migrant partnerships, we first exclude all anchors without a migrant background and then all migrants not in a romantic partnership at the time of the survey. After excluding the cases and listwise deletion according to the missing values in the covariates, 1,098 (extrapolated 1,806) partnerships from *pairfam's* 11th wave remain in the sample. We operationalize the dependent variable dichotomously, whereas migrants in intra-migrant partnerships form the reference category for the following multiple regression analysis.

We use regional proxy variables to capture the partner market characteristics and the availability of opportunities to form ethnically endogenous partnerships (Blau 1994; hypothesis 1 and 2). Region of residence is included as a dummy variable, with living in western Germany as the reference category.[2] The variable to measure community size is coded as rural areas with less than 20,000 inhabitants, urbanized areas with more than 20,000 but less than 100,000 inhabitants, and urban regions with more than 100,000 inhabitants, whereas urban areas serve as a reference category according to the City and community types in Germany based on recommendations of the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung 2023).

We also expect educational differences of migrants living in interethnic partnerships and measure education according to the ISCED categorization (high/medium/low). To test shrinking cultural barriers

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[2] Since reunification in 1990, the Federal Republic of Germany has 16 federal states. The eastern German states in our analyses include Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, and eastern parts of Berlin. While western German states include Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Bremen and Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and western parts of Berlin.

as the generational status rises (see hypothesis 4), we include migrant generation and religious affiliation into our analyses. We distinguish between second-generation immigrants born in Germany but with at least one parent not born as a German citizen and one parent born abroad in the reference category. The variable measuring religious affiliation differentiates between Christians, Muslims, and members of other religious groups, while migrants with no religious affiliation form the reference category[3].

According to the social distance theory, ethnic groups have different barriers to "ethnic boundary crossing" by forming interethnic partnerships (see hypothesis 5). To account for this, we include an ethnicity variable that considers biographical information about the anchor's parents and allows us to distinguish between Ethnic Germans, Turkish immigrants, respondents with one parent of German origin, and a heterogeneous category of all other ethnicities. Since we expect different relationship patterns depending on the gender (see hypotheses 6a/b), we include gender (men/women) in our analysis. Even though our analysis sample already consists only of migrants in a partnership, we can further distinguish these partnerships according to their degree of institutionalization, which is assumed to vary between interethnic and intra-migrant partnerships (see hypothesis 7). We compare cohabiting and living apart together partnerships with married partnerships in the reference category. We control for age cohort corresponding to the four cohorts of the *pairfam* study in our analysis (2001-03, 1991-93, 1981-83, and 1971-73).

Findings

Both *generational status* and *ethnicity* have significant effects on the dependent variable. The generation variable shows that the probability of an interethnic relationship is 17 percentage points higher on average for the second migrant generation than for the first generation (Figure 1). In turn, ethnic Germans and other ethnicities show a decreased probability of an interethnic partnership compared to individuals with one parent of German origin. Moreover, Turkish migrants are, on average, with a 25 percentage points lower probability than the reference group, the least likely of all ethnic groups studied to engage in an interethnic partnership. In addition, the model shows that belonging to a Muslim or another world religion compared to being unreligious lowers the probability of an interethnic relationship on average. Thus, when ethnicity and religious affiliation are included in a model, we can observe both factors' idiosyncratic, statistically significant effects.

There are no significant differences between *women* and *men* in the likelihood of entering an interethnic partnership. However, this does not imply that there are no indirect gender differences via interactions with other variables in the model, which will be examined in a further step. Since our theoretical assumptions postulate different mechanisms of impact for some variables according to gender, we estimate separate models for *women* (Figure 2) and *men* (Figure 3). Two significant predictors lower the likelihood of an interethnic partnership among immigrant *women*: Turkish ethnicity and a Muslim religious denomination. This expected result supports our hypothesis (Figure 1). However, the (additive) magnitudes of the effects are exceptionally high, as Turkish women, on average, have a 26 percentage points lower probability of an interethnic relationship than women of half-German origin. In addition, Muslim women even have a 40 percentage points lower likelihood of an interethnic partnership than migrant women without a denominational affiliation. On the contrary, second-generation migrant women, older age groups, and women with a high level of education have significant positive average effects on the probability of being in an interethnic relationship compared to immigrant women in the respective reference groups. Further, the likelihood of migrant women living in an interethnic relationship is more likely to be a non-marital cohabitation and with a rural residence.

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[3] Since religious affiliation is only available for the newest cohort (those born in 2001-03) in wave 11, the information on religiosity for all other anchors is drawn from wave 9.
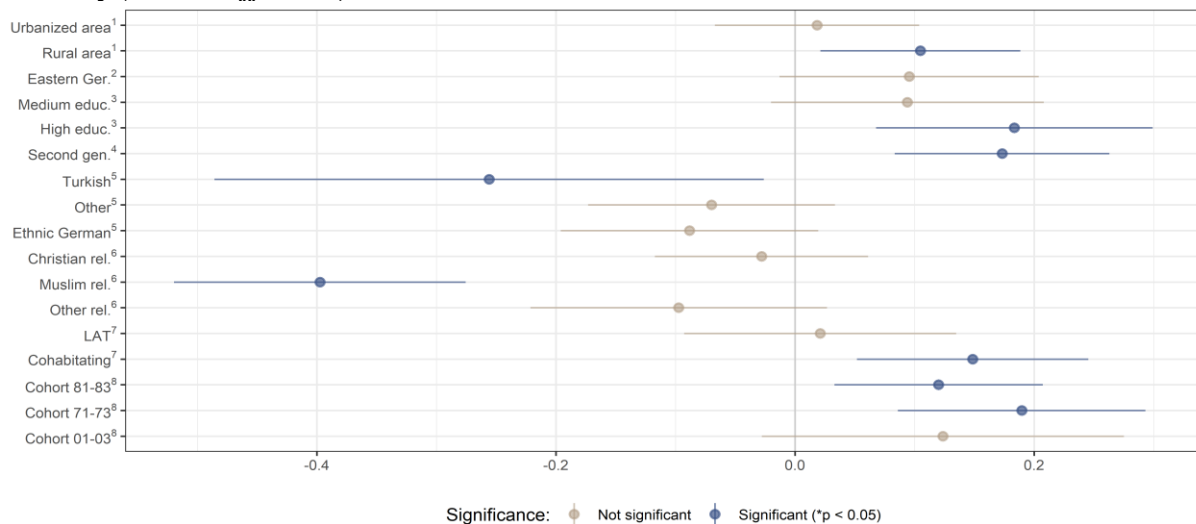
Figure 1: Logistic regression analysis for estimating interethnic partnerships of migrants in Germany (AME coefficients)
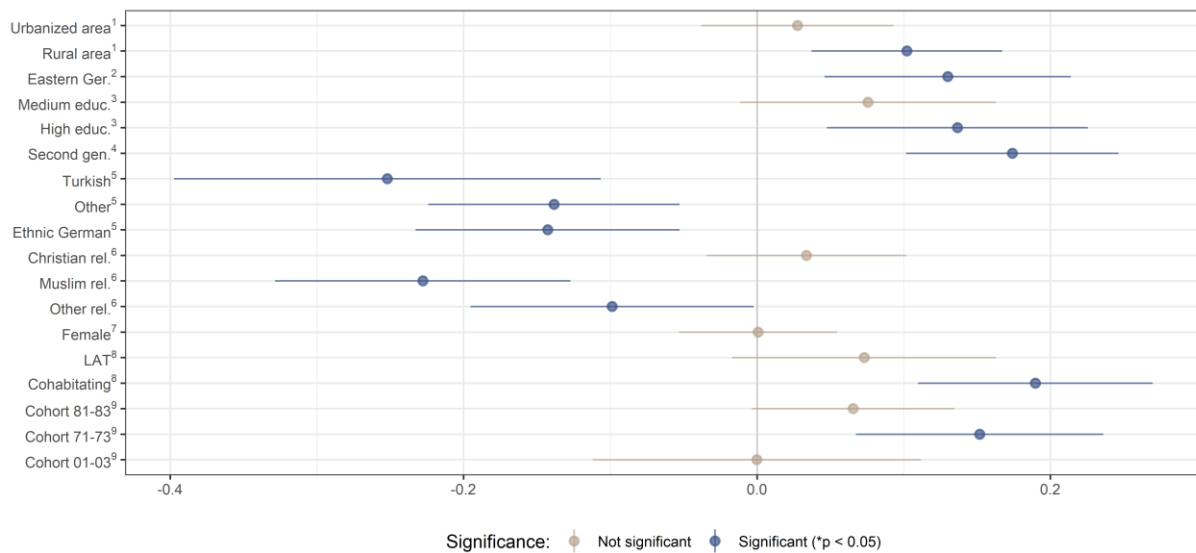
Source: Own computation with not weighted *pairfam* 11.0 (2018/19) data (Brüderl et al. 2020)

The pattern of the relevant individual characteristics contributing to the dependent variable differs for *men* (Figure 3). Here, too, ethnicity is highly relevant, albeit not only for migrants of Turkish origin but for all migrant groups compared with the reference group. Remarkably, for men, religion has no significant effect on the likelihood of interethnic partnership when controlling for ethnicity. Moreover, a different age pattern can be observed among male migrants: The youngest cohorts have, on average, the lowest and negative probability of an interethnic partnership. We can find a similar positive marginal effect of second migrant generation, relationship institutionalization, and partner market proxy variables as in the case of migrant women. However, compared to migrant women, higher education has no significant influence on being in an interethnic partnership in the case of migrant men.

Figure 2: Logistic regression analysis for estimating interethnic partnerships of __female__ migrants in Germany (AME coefficients)

Source: Own computation with not weighted *pairfam* 11.0 (2018/19) data (Brüderl et al. 2020)

Figure 3: Logistic regression analysis for estimating interethnic partnerships of _male_ migrants in Germany (AME coefficients)
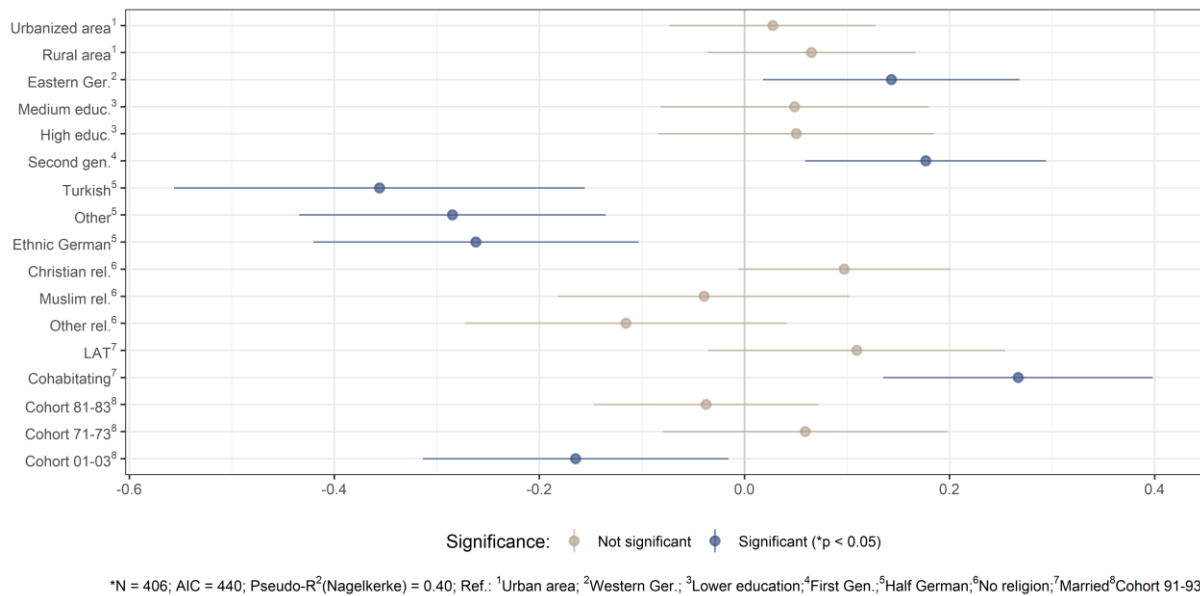
Source: Own computation with not weighted _pairfam_ 11.0 (2018/19) data (Brüderl et al. 2020)

Returning to Figure 1 and focusing on the relationship status, we observe an increased probability of individuals in interethnic partnerships living in non-marital cohabitation compared to marital living arrangements. Moreover, in the _cohort comparison_, only the oldest cohort has a significantly increased average probability of being in an interethnic partnership.

We have also estimated models by ethnicity and generation, focusing on relationship status (details available on request). Models _by ethnicity_ reveal minor differences between the four groups in terms of the occurrence of cohabitation. Reliable results couldn't be obtained for migrants of Turkish origin due to the limited number of cases. For the group of 'others' there is on average a higher likelihood of cohabitation or living apart together relationships, while ethnic German resettlers or migrants of Turkish origin do not show such patterns. Descriptive analyses by ethnicity show that cohabitation in interethnic partnerships is uncommon among both first- and second-generation migrants of Turkish origin. Separate models by _migrant generation_ show a higher likelihood of cohabitation over marriage for interethnic partnerships for the first generation. However, when controlling for ethnicity, second generation displayed no significant differences in relationship status between interethnic and intraethnic partnerships.