

Is It a Match? The Congruence of Partnership Preferences between Syrian and Afghan Refugees and the German Population

Paper Proposal for the European Population Conference, 12th-15th June, 2024

Stefanie Heyne, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES), University of Mannheim
stefanie.heyne@uni-mannheim.de

Irena Kogan, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES), University of Mannheim
irena.kogan@uni-mannheim.de

Jana Kuhlemann, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES), University of Mannheim
jana.kuhlemann@uni-mannheim.de

Extended Abstract (2-4 pages)

Motivation and key objectives

In 2015-16, many young unmarried men from Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries—especially Syria and Afghanistan—arrived in Germany. As there were only small co-ethnic communities in Germany at the time, these young refugees were likely to have faced difficulties in finding co-ethnic partners to form endogamous romantic unions. They may therefore have sought partnerships among members of the German population, including those with a migrant background. However, it is an open question whether the partner preferences of male refugees match the preferences and characteristics of female members of the host society. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the preferences of members of the German population, both majority and minority ethnic groups, correspond to the preference structure and characteristics of refugee men. Therefore, the main objectives of the study are, first, to compare the partner preferences and actual characteristics of young male refugees and young women from the German population on the dimensions of education, religion and religiosity. Second, we seek to identify potential matches by analysing the preferences and characteristics of those young male refugees and young women who best match the respective preferences and characteristics of the other side. By comparing the preferences of both sides and taking into account the respective characteristics of potential partners, we aim to gain a better understanding of the potential for partnership formation between refugees and members of the host society.

Previous research on partnership preferences in Europe shows that, for ethnic minorities, the most commonly reported preference is for a native partner, followed by a partner of one's own origin (Potarca & Mills, 2015). Furthermore, native white respondents in the US show lower preferences for interethnic unions compared to a general approval of others engaging in such unions (Campbell & Herman, 2015; Herman & Campbell, 2012). Muslim individuals and those from Muslim-majority countries of origin show lower acceptance of interethnic unions (Bayram et al., 2009; Bernhardt et al., 2007; Carol & Teney, 2015; Weißmann & Maddox, 2016), especially if they are highly religious (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). Similarly, highly religious Muslim individuals show lower acceptance of interfaith partnerships compared to those with lower religiosity (Cila & Lalonde, 2014).

Notwithstanding the valuable contribution of this research to the field, most of these studies are hardly able to disentangle the origin groups of the objects of their preferences from the characteristics of these groups (e.g. country of origin and religious denomination), not least because these dimensions are highly correlated. Furthermore, existing studies tend to focus on interethnic marriages without considering different types of romantic relationships, such as casual, committed partnerships or marriages, even though the literature has identified considerable differences in the extent of (ethnic) homogamy depending on the type of relationship (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Maddox, 2019).

Some studies focusing on attitudes and preferences towards refugees in Germany, using research designs that are able to disentangle the origin of population groups from the confounding characteristics of these groups, have shown that the German population has rather negative attitudes towards male refugees from Middle Eastern and North African countries (e.g. Czymara & Schmidt-Catran 2017) and low preferences for partnering with Syrian or Afghan refugees (Kogan et al. 2023). However, these studies have only focused on the refugee status and ethnic background of potential partners and have not taken into account further heterogeneity within the refugee population in terms of religion, religiosity or education.

Research methodology

Using two factorial survey experiments, our study compares the preferences of both sides and analyses whether they are consistent with the characteristics of the respective populations. We use data from the 9th wave of the CILS4EU-DE survey and from the first wave of the PARFORM study — a survey of young male refugees from Syria and Afghanistan. In both studies, we conducted an almost identical factorial survey experiment on partnership preferences. Respondents were randomly assigned to different experimental groups that differed in the description of a potential partner along the dimensions of ethnic

background, religious denomination, religiosity and education. They were then asked to rate their willingness to enter into a particular type of romantic relationship (casual relationship/dating, committed partnership or marriage) with the person described. In a first step, we compare the relationship preferences of young male refugees and young women from the German host population in terms of education (1. never enrolled in tertiary education, 2. has a tertiary degree), religious denomination (1. Christian, 2. Muslim) and religiosity (1. religion does not play a big role in the person's life, 2. religion plays an important role in the person's life). In a second step, we dig deeper into potential matches by analysing the preferences and characteristics of those young refugees and young women who best match the preferences and characteristics of the other side. In doing so, we take into account possible intersectionalities in both preferences and actual characteristics.

Current results

Pending the completion of the first wave of the PARFORM data collection, we have already analysed the partnership preferences of the German population based on the CILS4EU-DE data.

Among young German adults, refugees from Syria and Afghanistan are the least preferred potential partners compared to Germans. The avoidance of partnerships with refugees is fairly consistent and at comparable levels for respondents with and without a migrant background, with the sole exception of young people who themselves or whose parents were from Turkey. These respondents tended to be particularly opposed to partnerships with refugees. Respondents with a migrant background also showed the highest preference for a partner with a migrant background compared with a German-born person without a migrant background.

Both respondents with and without university degree, preferred a partner who has a university degree, but the effect was larger for respondents with university degree. Christian and Muslim young adults prefer partners of the same denomination, while the religiously unaffiliated prefer Christian to Muslim partners. All Muslim respondents showed no or little disapproval of a strongly religious partner, whereas Christian respondents or those with no religion showed strong disapproval of religious partners. Christian respondents' preference for partners of the same denomination was highest for marriage, followed by stable partnerships and lowest for dating. A similar pattern is found for female Muslim respondents. Male Muslim respondents showed the same high preference for marriage and committed partnership with Muslims as Christians, but were more open to dating non-Muslim partners.

In the next step, we will similarly identify preference profiles for young male refugees from Syria and Afghanistan. Then we will compare, first, preference across the groups of refugees and the German

population and, second, the preference profiles with the actual characteristics of the respective groups. Ultimately, we plan to quantify the probabilities of preference matches between the analysed groups along the analysed dimensions of educational level, denomination and religiosity and their potential intersections.