How do family relations influence interethnic partner choices? The role of cohesion, affection and diversity in native and migrant families

Abstract:
Despite the well-documented effect of parental attitudes and their socioeconomic status on interethnic partnerships, little is known about how family relations are associated with interethnic partner choices. The present study investigates whether cohesive and affective family ties as well as the family structure is connected to interethnic partnerships. Based on data from wave five of the German Family Panel (pairfam), I estimate logistic regression models for natives and migrants separately. Results indicate that for natives, cohesive and affective relations are not connected to interethnic partnerships. For migrants, cohesive relations have a detrimental effect on being in an interethnic partnership. Overall, these findings suggest that family processes may help to understand why some migrant groups are more likely to be in an interethnic union than others.

Keywords: interethnic partner choice, family relation, migrant

Zusammenfassung:

Schlagwörter: interethnische Partnerschaft, Familienbeziehungen, Migranten

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Introduction

Marriage is the most intimate form of a social relationship (Kalmijn 1998; Song 2009) and thus, marriages between members of different ethnic and cultural groups – i.e., interethnic marriages – are often associated with close social interactions across these groups (Qian/Lichter 2001; Lichter et al. 2007; Song 2009). Interethnic marriage links the families, friends, and lives of natives and migrants and is therefore considered to indicate natives' and migrants’ mutual acceptance as social equals (Lichter et al. 2007). Gordon (1964) suggests that intermarriage is the final step in the social integration process of immigrant populations. In order to understand how and why members of different ethnic groups intermarry, Kalmijn (1998) proposes that the interethnic partner choice depends next to preferences for specific characteristics of the future spouse and the possibility to meet potential partners on third parties such as the family. However, our understanding of how the relationship to one’s family affects interethnic partner choice is limited. This raises the following question: to what extent and how can cohesive, affective and diverse family ties explain interethnic partner choices?

Many studies confirm that the family plays a relevant role in interethnic partner choices (e.g., Kalmijn/van Tubergen 2006; van Zantvliet et al. 2014; Carol 2015). Attitudes toward interethnic partnerships are formed in the family context (Huijnk/Liefbroer 2012; Carol 2013a; Huijnk et al. 2013) and transmitted from one generation to the next. For instance, Carol (2013b) studies parental and children’s attitudes toward interethnic partnerships simultaneously and finds that children’s attitudes toward interethnic partnerships are negative if parents’ preferences for coethnic partnerships are strong. Huijnk and colleagues highlight the role of family relations in the formation of attitudes towards interethnic partnerships (Huijnk/Liefbroer 2012; Huijnk et al. 2013). Members of close and cohesive families possess negative attitudes towards members of other ethnic groups as close kin by marriage. In turn, warm and affective family relations lead to more tolerance for interethnic partnerships. Despite the vast amount of research on the link between parental characteristics and children’s interethnic partnerships, Steinbach/Hank (2016) point out that the effect of family relations on partner choice remains understudied.

The present study takes up the perspective that family relations influence and transmit attitudes toward interethnic partnerships and takes it further by studying the effect of family functioning on the actual interethnic partner choice. I set out the following research question: Are cohesive, affective, and diverse family relations linked to the interethnic partner choice? I am interested in whether the relationship to parents and siblings is connected to interethnic partner choices. To answer this question, I use data from the German Family Panel (pairfam) and study the effect of cohesive, affective, and diverse relations to parents and siblings on interethnic partner choice in Germany. Given the wide range of migrants from different countries who differ in their family relations from native Germans, I study the influence of family relations on interethnic partner choices for native Germans and migrants separately.

The German immigration history is characterized by a first inflow of migrants from Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey and former Yugoslavia. They were recruited as guest workers in the mid-1960s to offset labor shortages due to economic growth after the Second