

Partnership quality and stability among young refugees in Germany

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The formation and dissolution of romantic partnerships represent key demographic processes that shape the broader integration of immigrants into host countries. The question of partnership formation becomes especially relevant in the context of the large influx of young, single refugee men who arrived in Germany in 2015/16. Upon arrival, they were confronted with only small co-ethnic communities, which likely led many to seek partners among members of the receiving society in the following years. Romantic partnerships with members of the receiving population are considered a strong indicator and driver of immigrants' social integration (Gordon, 1964). However, such exogamous partnerships have been shown to be more prone to dissolution compared to endogamous partnerships (e.g., Kalmijn et al., 2005; Milewski & Kulu, 2014), potentially hampering long-term integration processes. Previous research has shown that individuals in exogamous partnerships report more partnership conflict and lower partnership quality (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008) and that lower partnership quality is a predictor of partnership dissolution (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Against this background the present study examines the partnership quality and stability of exogamous and endogamous partnerships of young refugees in Germany.

Previous research on partnership quality of exogamous partnerships is mostly U.S. focused. On the one hand, it shows lower partnership quality of racially or ethnically exogamous couples (Brown et al., 2018; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008) and, on the other hand, no difference between partnership quality in exogamous and endogamous partnerships (Brooks, 2022; Henderson & Braithwaite, 2021). Research on the topic in Europe is scarce, focusing more on outcomes such as partners' mental health or life satisfaction. This strand of research has shown that immigrants in exogamous partnerships report lower life satisfaction (Gawron & Carol, 2023), with some research showing no reduced subjective well-being of individuals in exogamous partnerships (Potarca & Bernardi, 2021). Furthermore, studies indicate that native women and migrant men in exogamous partnerships report poorer mental health, and that native men and immigrant women face higher suicide risks than those in endogamous unions (Eibich & Liu, 2021; Oksuzyan et al., 2023).

The ultimate signal of low partnership quality is partnership dissolution. Previous research has shown that low partnership quality and conflict within the partnership are associated with higher partnership instability (Arránz Becker et al., 2005), even though these might not be the only reasons for partnership dissolution (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Exogamous partnerships are consistently reported to be less stable and more prone to dissolution in both U.S. (Brown et al., 2018; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009) and European literature (Kalmijn et al., 2005; Milewski & Kulu, 2014; Smith et al., 2012).

Given that most previous research on partnership quality was conducted in the U.S and consequently focused (mostly) on partnerships between members of different racial rather than ethnic or immigrant groups, the present study addresses the topic of partnership quality in a European context. It thereby examines a particular group of immigrants, whose partnership quality and stability has not been studied before, namely the refugees from the 2015/16 influx. The study focuses on Germany as the host society,

which received large numbers of refugees, predominantly from Syria and Afghanistan (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2017; OECD, 2017). Refugees in Germany faced unequal opportunities for social and economic inclusion, shaped largely by differences in legal and protection status (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2017; Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020). Recognized protection status facilitated access to work, education, and mobility, while those with insecure or temporary status experienced prolonged uncertainty and restricted rights (Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020). These institutional constraints also extend into the private sphere, as legal insecurity impedes the formation of stable romantic relationships and long-term partnerships (Birger & Peled, 2017).

We analyze data from the first two waves of the novel panel survey PARFORM (wave 1 collected 2022/23 and wave 2 collected 2023/24). The survey sample included refugees with Afghan or Syrian citizenship (the two largest groups from the 2015/16 influx in Germany) who arrived in Germany between 2014 and 2018 up to the age of 30 and who were unmarried at the time of arrival in Germany. The sample hence includes young unpartnered refugee men from Muslim majority origin countries, who are in a life course stage in which partnership and family formation in the culturally distant receiving country are high on their agenda. The data were collected in CAPI and CAWI modes, encompassing rich information on partnership patterns of these young men. Overall, 3,412 refugees participated in the first wave (33.4% in CAPI and 66.6% in the CAWI mode) and 1,186 refugees participated again in wave 2 (all CAWI mode). Our two separate analytical samples include those refugees who reported a current partnership in the first wave (N = 1,441) and those who reported a current partnership in the first wave and still participated in wave 2 (N = 584).

We investigate whether (1) young refugees in exogamous partnerships report lower partnership satisfaction than those in endogamous partnerships, whether (2) young refugees in exogamous partnerships report more conflict than those in endogamous partnerships, and whether (3) lower partnership satisfaction and higher conflict in exogamous partnerships mediate the relationship between exogamy and partnership dissolution. We further explore (4) the mediating and moderating roles of various refugee and partnership characteristics. First, we focus on partnership heterogamy: Partnerships that are exogamous on one characteristic, such as ethnicity, are more likely to also cross other boundaries, such as religious or educational group lines (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008). Hence, we explore whether including other dimensions of heterogamy (inter-religious, inter-educational, inter-language partnerships; partners with different levels of religiosity and partners being more than five years different in age) will explain some of the negative influence of ethnic exogamy on partnership quality and instability. Second, we examine the role of parents in the offspring partnerships: Parents play an important role in the stability of partnerships and in the formation of exogamous partnerships, especially for refugees who rely heavily on their parents and family to find partners (Kogan et al., 2025). We therefore expect parental interference in the relationship between exogamy and partnership satisfaction, partnership conflict and partnership instability. Third, we scrutinize the role of refugees' legal status: We will explore if conflict and partnership satisfaction have different implications for refugees with and without an unrestricted legal status, since those with a less stable legal status might be more interested in staying in a partnership with a German citizen woman; however, at the same time they may only be perceived as candidates for less committed relationships, which are more prone to dissolution.

Our models control for the selection into exogamous partnerships, including variables such as refugees' religion, religiosity, education, main activity, legal status, and their parents' education. We additionally

control for refugees' origin, age, time since arrival in Germany, if they have children, the type of partnership they are involved in, and the survey mode (CAPI vs. CAWI).

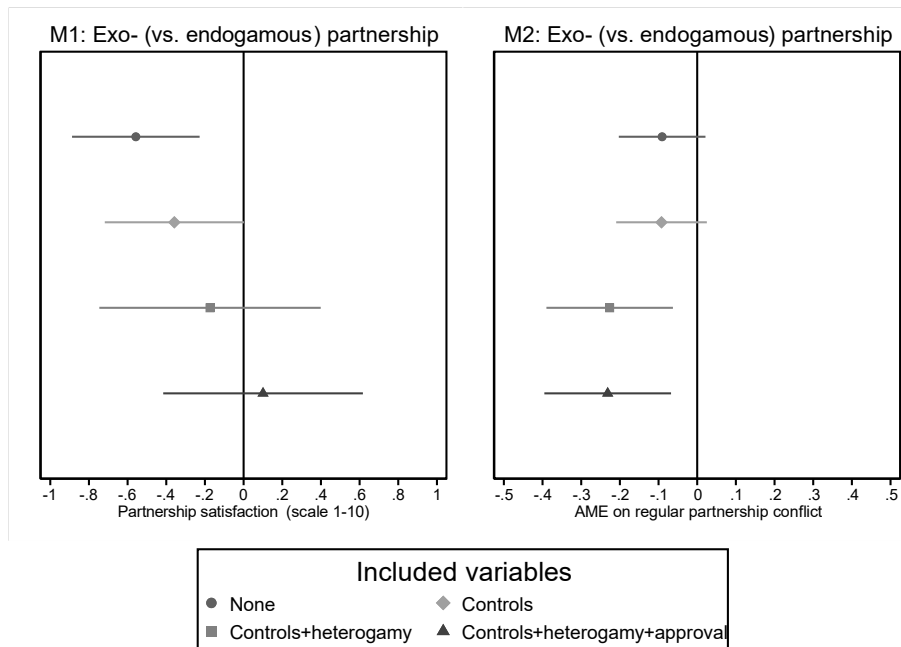


Figure 1. Regression analyses: Refugee partnership satisfaction and conflict

Source: PARFORM wave 1 (pre-publication version v2.0), PARFORM wave 2 (pre-publication version v2.0), Note: Data weighted.

Preliminary analyses using weighted linear and logit regressions show that refugees in exogamous compared to endogamous partnerships report lower partnership satisfaction (Figure 1 (left)). Partnership satisfaction however does no longer seem to be lower in exogamous partnerships when other dimensions of partnership heterogamy and parental approval of the partnership are accounted for. Concerning partnership conflict, refugees in exogamous partnerships are less likely to report regularly having conflicts with their partner than those in endogamous partnerships (Figure 1 (right)). This relationship even reaches statistical significance on conventional levels when other dimensions of heterogamy and parental approval of the partnership are included. We also find that refugees' exogamous partnerships are not more likely to break up between waves than endogamous partnerships. However, refugees in exogamous partnerships are more likely to report an intention to end the current partnership in wave 2.

Further analyses will more deeply examine the role of partnership heterogamy beyond ethnicity, parental approval, and refugees' legal status in the relationship between exogamy and partnership quality as well as stability, and with this contribute to a better understanding of refugees' (social) integration trajectories.

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