

Partner choices in long established migrant communities in Belgium.

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Extended Abstract

Background. Partner choice has often been used in research as a litmus test of assimilation and integration (Coleman, 1994; Dribe & Lundh, 2011; Lesthaeghe, 2000; Waters & Jiménez, 2005). Nowadays, this view has been strongly criticized and questioned (Lievens, 1997, 1999; Song, 2009; Waters & Jiménez, 2005). However, even though the partner choice is a very private choice and permeates the private sphere (Lucassen & Laarman, 2009) we believe that it is a reflection of possible structural barriers between ethnic groups.

Because migration waves started around the same time for Congolese, Algerian, Turkish, and Moroccan migrants, these long established migrant groups in Belgium constitute an interesting case for comparative study. Turkish and Moroccan migrants groups have already been extensively studied in Belgium. However the Belgian literature is lacking studies on Algerian and Congolese migrants (Swyngedouw & Swyngedouw, 2009). Consequently, this paper examines the partner choices (mixed, local intra-ethnic, and partner migration) of these 4 groups.

We want to demonstrate that all migrant groups would display the same trends in partner choice if all things were equal. However, this is seldom the case, and we consequently expect differences between each migrant group which could be attributed to differences in characteristics related to the proximity to native Belgians (i.e. boundaries). Furthermore, the prevailing partner choice could be influenced by both individual and structural factors.

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Research questions. In this paper, we depart from the differences between Moroccan, Turkish, Algerian, and Congolese migrants in the prevalence of mixed marriages, local intra-ethnic marriages and partner migration i.e. a marriage with a partner from the country of origin. First, we try to explain these differences by incorporating cultural differences, such as language (knowledge of French) and religion, differences in skin colour, and differences in migration history. All of these factors could explain stronger or weaker barriers to native Belgians. Furthermore, we analyse whether the current differences hold when controlling for individual (age, generation), and structural (diversity level, district size, community size, and sex ratio) characteristics.

Data. Our data comprise an extraction of the Belgian national register, and include all partnerships (marriages and co-habitations) of migrants for the period 2001-2008. We only select migrants of Turkish, Moroccan, Congolese, and Algerian origin, since they belong to the long established migrant groups in Belgium. We exclude remarriages and cohabitations, focusing only on first marriages.

Methods. First, we show the overall distribution of partner choices of the four migrant groups. Furthermore, these results are split according to the region in Belgium. These are the region of Flanders (Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), Wallonia (French-speaking part), and Brussels (bilingual). To assess whether the differences between Moroccan, Turkish, Algerian, and Congolese migrants were altered by taking individual and contextual factors into account, we perform multinomial logistic multilevel analyses to properly include these effects. The two analytical levels are: the individual level (N=54.142), and the level of the districts nested within marriage years (N=339). This was done to ensure that the structural influences are those prevailing at the beginning of the year one got married. Because preliminary analyses showed that the level of district corresponds more accurately to the marriage market when compared to the level of the municipality, we believe this is the appropriate level of analysis.

Results. Descriptive results show that there are profound differences between migrant groups in the prevalence of partner choices. Partner migration is dominant within the Turkish and Moroccan groups, while mixed partnerships are the main partner choice within the Algerian group, and the Congolese group prefers a local intra-ethnic partner. Apparently, migration history and the strength of the networks between the sending and receiving countries matter. Furthermore, there is no apparent link between the distribution of partner choices according to the Belgian districts. This is an indication that knowledge of the French language only plays a minor role in weakening the boundaries between the (French speaking) migrant groups and native Belgians.

Our multilevel analyses indicate that Algerian, Congolese and Turkish migrants differ significantly from Moroccan migrants in their partner choice as was already indicated by our descriptive results. However, after adding individual and contextual variables, the size of the migrant community in particular, the partner choices of Algerian and Congolese migrants approach those of the Moroccan migrants.

Conclusion: This paper emphasized the importance of including several parameters when researching the partner choices of several migrant groups. Boundaries do matter, as well as structural characteristics of the place of residence. In other words, the choice of a particular partner is not only a reflection of the heart, but is also driven by existing boundaries and structural influences.

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