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Intermarriage and Mortality: Evidence from Sweden

Introduction

Migration is considered one of the major forces of social transformation and the continuous waves of migration to Western Europe from other parts of the world over the course of the last several decades have transformed once relatively homogenous societies into meeting places of different ethnicities and cultures. One of the very important consequences of the acceleration of migration is an increased prevalence of intermarriage in contemporary Western societies. Intermarriage with respect to nativity and ethnicity has attracted a great deal of attention among social researchers, primarily because of the widespread opinion that intermarriage can be considered a barometer of the openness of the host society and an indicator of the general patterns of social interaction in multiethnic societies. This has resulted in what has become a sizeable body of research on the determinants of the formation and dissolution of intermarriages. The research in intermarriage has been growing and this has also been the case with the range of topics within the field. For instance, Platt (2012) analyzes the experiences of children of mixed partnerships in the UK, Duvander (2001) analyzes how marrying a native partner affects labor market prospects in Sweden whereas Hout and Goldstein (1994) explore the role of intermarriage on ethnic identification in the US. Our goal is to analyze the association between mortality and living in mixed marriage (defined in this paper as marriage between Swedish-born and foreign-person) and thus contribute to the knowledge on intermarriage by tackling a topic that has rarely been addressed in previous research.

Theoretical background

Why should one believe that there may be some association between intermarriage and mortality at all, net of socio-economic and other observable characteristics? The point of departure in our analysis is the previous empirical evidence about the link between partner characteristics and mortality: for instance, Jaffe et al. (2006), Suarez et al. (1984), and Torssander and Erikson (2009) all find some evidence that partner's education is associated with mortality risk to some extent. The causal mechanisms are not entirely clear, but it is

believed that the link between partner's education, occupation and income and own mortality risk can be explained by the family lifestyle, as well as by the possible importance of these characteristics for the choice of partner. However, less attention has been paid to the possible impact of partner's nativity or ethnicity on individual's mortality risk. Linking the existing knowledge on intermarriage and socio-economic determinants of mortality we propose two (not necessarily competing) hypotheses. The first hypothesis ("convergence hypothesis", a term borrowed from the research on divorce risk in intermarriages) is based on evidence showing ethnic differences in mortality (LeClere et al., 1997; Hummer et al., 1999; McDonald and Kennedy, 2004) and states that the risk of mortality for individuals living in a mixed marriage will be in between the mortality risks of the ethnicities involved in the intermarriage. The second hypothesis is based on the evidence that intermarriages are on average characterized by a lower level of relationship quality and less social support from third parties (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato, 2008) and states that due to a higher level of marital stress individuals living in mixed marriages are exposed to a higher mortality risk, all else equal.

Data and methodology

The data are drawn from the compilation of Swedish registers compiled in the STAR ("Sweden over Time: Activities and Relations") database. The analysis covers the period between 1991 and 2007. A large number of observations on the one hand and the heterogeneous structure of the Swedish immigration population on the other make it possible to obtain a more fine-grained picture of the research question, as we will be able to establish mortality risk associated with intermarriage not only for natives and immigrants as a whole, but also for each large immigrant group living in Sweden. The individuals residing in Sweden enter the sample by fulfilling two conditions: being married (or cohabiting) and being at least 30 years old between January 1, 1991 and December 31, 2007. The individuals can exit the study in the following ways: 1) turning 75 between January 1, 1991 and December 31, 2007; 2) dying within the same period; 3) divorcing (or separating) within the same period or 4) emigrating within the same period. Failure event in the analysis is the death of the individual and Cox proportional hazard models will be used to examine the association between being in a mixed marriage and individual mortality. The principal variable of interest is the type of marriage, as defined by nativity of each partner (native-native, immigrant-immigrant or immigrant-native) and the reference category are Swedish-born individuals married to Swedish-born partners. The multivariate model controls for a wide range of individual socio-economic characteristics, partner's characteristics as well as for a possible influence of contextual factors (such as ethnic composition and segregation in the municipality of residence, see Collins et al, 1999 for the empirical evidence).

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