Divorce risks of immigrants in Sweden

Gunnar Andersson, Kirk Scott

Abstract

Migration is a stressful life event that may be related to subsequent marital instability. However, while the demographic dynamics related to the fertility and mortality of migrants have been studied in great detail, we still lack accurate analyses of divorce risks of immigrants in Europe. The present study improves on this situation by investigating the divorce risks of immigrants in Sweden. It focuses on immigrants who married subsequent to migration to Sweden and tests the relative importance of cultural background and socio-economic status in explaining the divorce behavior of immigrants. Both factors turn out to be important. For groups for which divorce risks are elevated, this can often be explained by immigrants' relatively poor labor-market status. Other groups of immigrants rather have depressed divorce risks. Our study is based on population register data on the resident population of Sweden and covers the fifteen most common immigrant groups in this country.

Extended abstract

Introduction and summary

Migration is a stressful life event that may be related to subsequent marital instability (e.g., Boyle et al. 2008). This holds for international migration in particular, and crude divorce statistics sometimes reveal elevated levels of union disruption for different groups of immigrants in developed countries. However, while the demographic dynamics related to the fertility and mortality of migrants have been studied in great detail, we still lack accurate analyses of divorce risks of immigrants in Europe and developed countries in other parts of the world. This is partly due data constraints: census data do not allow for much longitudinal analysis and most survey data contain too few immigrants to allow the study of migrants as separate categories. The present study improves on this situation by drawing on population-register data to investigate the divorce risks of immigrants in Sweden. It focuses on immigrants who married subsequent to migration to Sweden and tests the relative importance of cultural background and the socio-economic success in Sweden in explaining the divorce behavior of immigrants. Both factors turn out to be important. For the immigrant groups for which divorce risks are elevated, they can often be explained by these groups' relatively poor labor-market status. However, other groups of immigrants rather have depressed divorce risks, regardless of their socio-economic success or non-success. Our study is based on population register data on the resident population of Sweden. It covers the fifteen most common immigrant groups in this country, with geographical origins from almost every corner of the world. It is an extension of previous research of the authors that studied the interrelation between international migration and the childbearing dynamics of migrants to Sweden (Andersson and Scott 2005, 2007).

Divorce behavior in Sweden

In terms of family demographic context, Sweden is a country where divorce is easy to achieve; divorce is more frequent than in most other European countries, but less frequent than in the US (Andersson 2002). Immigrants to Sweden come from a variety of countries, with very different family demographic and social contexts. By means of longitudinal analyses of the divorce behavior of immigrant women and men

who have married in Sweden, we study how their divorce risks are related to the country of origin of the migrant and his/her spouse, and their socio-demographic characteristics. This allows us to test hypotheses on the role of (i) childhood socialization in country of origin; (ii) disruption in family life due to the migration event; (iii) adaptation of family demographic behavior to that prevalent in the country of destination; and (iv) the socio-economic characteristics of immigrants – in order to explain divorce dynamics and differences in behavior across migrant groups.

Data and methods

The study is based on data from the Swedish Longitudinal Immigrant database, a register-based panel containing longitudinal information on vital events from Swedish population registers, coupled to earnings and social-security data from the country's tax registers. The database we use contains information on socio-demographic life histories of residents in Sweden during 1980-2001. It contains data on immigrant women and men stemming from fifteen countries, and any spouses in Sweden to these migrants, as well as a random sample of Swedish-born residents. In total, the database contains information on the life histories in Sweden of some 550,000 immigrants and natives. The initial database contained a sample of 110,000 individuals, which was expanded through the inclusion of spouses, cohabitants with which an individual had a child, and their children in order to provide data on complete families of migrants.

In our data and analysis of divorce risks, we need to distinguish between two types of married migrants: those that were married at migration to Sweden and those that married in Sweden subsequent to immigration. The situation in terms of union dynamics is different for these categories and the variables we can apply differ, too. In particular, we lack data on marriage formation for those who were already married upon migration to Sweden. Swedish registers only contain information on dates of marriage formation for marriages that are contracted in Sweden. In our study, we focus on the family dynamics of migrants who have married in Sweden. We focus on the relative importance of country of origin, whether the marriage consists of spouses from different national origins, and the role of couples' demographic and socio-economic characteristics in divorce behavior. Of particular interest is the role which labor market success or failure has for the union stability of different types of

migrants. Other variables we consider are the ages of spouses, and the presence of children in the household.

Our analyses are done by means of event-history analyses of the divorce risks by time since marriage formation in Sweden. As a reference, we estimate divorce risks for the native Swedish-born population as well.

Immigrants in Sweden

The fifteen immigrant groups that we cover in our divorce study are as follows.

Immigrants from *Finland* comprise by far the largest single foreign-born group in Sweden. The reasons for this are partially historical, partially geographical, and partially economic. Due to a shared national history up to the early nineteenth century, some six percent of the Finnish population is Swedish-speaking and Swedish is an official language in Finland. For a long time Finland lagged behind Sweden economically before finally catching up during the 1980s. These facts, plus the existence of a free Nordic labor market, led to a large flow of labor migrants from Finland to Sweden, which slowed down only during the late 1970s to early 1980s due to the equalization in living standards between the two countries. Due to a long intertwined migration history, many Finnish-born women have settled down with Swedish-born men.

Danes and *Norwegians* are two other immigrant groups with a substantial and longstanding presence in Sweden. As with the Finns, geographic proximity, shared culture and the existence of a free Nordic labor market have helped ease integration into Swedish society. In the case of these two countries, the similarities to Sweden are even more pronounced than for Finns, as spoken Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are not much more different than dialects of the same language.

Immigrants from *Germany* mostly come from previous West Germany. While Germany had an early tradition as a labor exporting country immediately following the Second World War, and has consistently sent economic migrants to Sweden since then, very high fractions of German women and men have migrated to Sweden as tied movers, married to or cohabiting with Swedish-born partners.

Polish immigrants in Sweden arrived for a variety of reasons. Some came as refugees from the communist regime, either for political reasons or as members of the persecuted Jewish minority, while others came as tied movers, either to previously

migrated Poles or to Swedes – largely Swedish men – who were their spouses. As with Finland, geographic proximity to Poland simplified migration, while in many ways the existence of a communist regime until the late 1980s worked against it.

Czechoslovakian immigrants are classified in our data according to the old country borders. The vast majority of Czechs and Slovaks living in Sweden arrived during the unrest of the late 1960s. While migration continued after this, it did so at a quite low level.

With the same logic we treat immigrants from the former *Yugoslavia* as a single group. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, new immigrants were registered as coming from the different new FYRs, but those arriving previously were not automatically reregistered. Yugoslavian immigrants are split into two primary groups: labor migrants arriving during the 1960s, and the refugee migrants arriving in conjunction with the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

Immigrants from *Greece* came largely as labor migrants during the 1960s, and later as family members following these early migrants, but there were also a number of refugees who came after the 1967 military coup. The refugees tended to return to Greece, however, leaving the majority of the remaining population as labor immigrants.

Turkey has a varied history of migration to Sweden. During the 1960s, Turks arrived as labor migrants, but later there was a shift in character towards refugee immigration – largely dominated by ethnic Kurds. During the entire period we can also identify large-scale tied immigration: Most Turkish women came to Sweden as wives to previously immigrated Turkish men.

The few *Iranian* immigrants that came to Sweden prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution arrived as students. The real upsurge in numbers of Iranians came with the refugees arriving during the mid- to late 1980s. It was during this time that Iranians proceeded to become one of Sweden's largest immigrant nationalities.

Iraqi immigrants first began arriving in Sweden in connection with the Iran-Iraq War during the 1980s and increased again during the First Gulf War of the early 1990s. The real increase in migration occurred in connection to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Immigration to Sweden from *Ethiopia/Eritrea* increased through the famines and civil unrest of the 1980s, with a large fraction coming from Eritrea. Eritreans and

Ethiopians in Sweden have exhibited very high levels of homogamy, with very few cases of marriage outside their East African group.

Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, and stretching through the 1980s and 1990s, *Vietnamese* immigrants have been arriving in Sweden as both refugees and as tied movers related to refugees. The refugees are largely ethnic Chinese.

Chilean immigration to Sweden started on a fairly large scale following the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973. The mid- to late 1970s saw a large number of Chileans entering Sweden as refugees. These numbers soon switched to tied movers during the 1980s, as relatives to the early refugees arrived. There was a renewed increase in the numbers of refugees arriving in the late 1980s, just prior to democratization.

Migrants from the *United States* have arrived throughout the post-world war period. While some came for employment reasons, most arrived as students or as tied movers through relationships with Swedes. This is evident in the high rates of intermarriage between immigrants from the U.S. and native Swedes.

Finally, we have included a category *other*, which accounts for immigrants from any other nationality than those specified above.

Variable descriptions

In our study we focus on *country of origin* as a marker of cultural background and the *labor-market position* in Sweden as a marker for socio-economic success in Sweden. By means of a step-wise modeling we aim at disentangling what separate roles socio-economic and cultural factors may have upon the divorce risks of immigrants.

Our main country variable refers to the recorded country of birth of the woman in a marriage. The baseline is for women married with a man from the same country as her. Additional binary variables show the effect on divorce risks of being married to a husband of different national origin or a husband born in Sweden. In addition, since Swedish *citizenship* indicates a more permanent legal status in Sweden it can be assumed to ease a divorce decision. Therefore we include a dummy for citizenship status for each partner in the union.

Our socio-economic variable is defined by eight mutually exclusive labor-market states. We use the information on the registered annual earned income and on

public transfers received during a year in order to classify each spouse into one of the following categories:

- Enrolled *student* – receiving public student assistance (loans and grants) as the primary source of non-earned income during the year. Practically all students in Sweden receive public financial support.

- *Unemployed* – receiving unemployment assistance or allowances from labor-market retraining programs as the primary source of non-earned income during the year.

- *Welfare* recipient – having social-welfare transfers as the primary source of non-earned income during the year. Social welfare is paid to people who cannot support themselves by other means. It includes, for example, an introductory allowance for refugees who have received a residence permit for Sweden. It is one of the few social-security benefits in Sweden that is not entirely individual-based but calculated instead on a household basis.

- Actively engaged in the labor force and earning a *low income* – earning between 35,700 and 107,100 SEK (in 1995 prices) during the year from work, and not being a student, unemployed, or a welfare recipient according to the definitions above.

- Earning a *medium income* – earning between 107,100 and 178,500 SEK from work.

- Earning a *high income* – earning between 178,500 and 267,750 SEK from work.

- Earning a *top income* from work – more than 267,750 SEK during the year. Very few women but not so few men earn that amount. Top-income earners were entitled to less generous income replacement during periods of unemployment, sickness, or parental leave.

- *Non-participant* – not falling into any of the categories mentioned above. This category can, for example, comprise house wives, persons living in households where someone else receives family-based social-welfare transfers, other dependent adults, or, in the case of migrants, persons who have emigrated from Sweden without having notified this to the Swedish authorities.

- Additionally, we include a variable which indicates whether an individual receives full or partial pension of some kind. Since pensions may be received

while still working, this is not an exclusive category, and we depict it with a binary dummy variable.

Furthermore, we control for the effects of the age of the two spouses on divorce risks. Finally, since the existence of young children in a household also has a strong impact of divorce propensities we include an indicator of whether the household includes a child aged 0-7.

Preliminary results

Table 1 shows the preliminary results of a step-wise modeling where we first present divorce risks by country of origin of the woman in an immigrant couple, then control for further demographic factors, and finally for the role of the labor-market status in Sweden of the two spouses.

Conclusions

Our analysis reveals a very strong impact of both country of origin and labor-market status on the divorce risks of immigrants in Sweden. Divorce risks differ a lot between different country groups. Some nationalities have markedly higher divorce risks than native-Swedish couples; some have much lower risks. Socio-economic success or rather lack of success matters too. When we control for the effect of the relatively poor labor-market status of immigrants we find that this explains practically all of the excess risks of the groups that first displayed higher divorce risks than Swedish-born couples.

References

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Table 1: Divorce risks of couples in Sweden who married in Sweden, 1980-2001, by country of origin, migrant status, and demographic and socio-economic status

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Swedish citizenship			
Husband citizen		0.81***	0.90***
wife citizen		0.95*	1
Country Heterogamy			
both Swedish	1	1	1
Husband Swedish		1.01	1.21***
wife Swedish	1.12***	1.05*	0.96
diff. migrant origin		1.18***	1.17***
Wife's birth country			
Denmark	0.86**	0.89	0.75***
Finland	0.99	0.92*	0.79***
Norway	0.84***	0.87*	0.71***
Germany	0.48***	0.50***	0.46***
Poland	1.56***	1.59***	1.22***
Czech	0.91	0.99	0.85*
Yugoslavia	1.06	1.02	0.84***
Greece	0.50***	0.49***	0.47***
Turkey	0.52***	0.48***	0.36***
Iraq	0.84**	0.85**	0.49***
Iran	1.27***	1.23***	0.87**
Vietnam	0.71***	0.67***	0.52***
Ethiopia	1.53***	1.57***	1.07
Chile	1.53***	1.42***	1.03
USA	0.70***	0.73***	0.69***
Other country	0.99	0.88**	0.68***
Age status			
Husband's age		0.99***	0.99***
wife's age		0.99***	0.99***
child less than 7 yrs		0.52***	0.53***
Husband's SE status			
Student			1.02
Welfare			1.24***
Unemployed			1.17***
non-participant			1.14***
Pension			1.07
low earnings			1.05
Medium earnings			1
high earnings			0.70***
top earnings			0.59***
Wife's SE status			
Student			1.51***
Welfare			2.49***
Unemployed			1.34***
non-participant			0.86***
Pension			1.24***
low earnings			0.81***
Medium earnings			1
high earnings			1.14***
top earnings			1.24***