

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Take Me Home: Determinants of Return Migration among Later Life Immigrants in Germany

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1. Project Aims

A frequently overlooked consequence of migration to post-war Europe and North America has been the aging of immigrants themselves. As foreign born individuals approach later life stages, residential decisions concerning where to live will be important. This project examines the determinants of return migration as foreign born individuals approach later life in Germany. Return migration in later life engages a different set of conditions than return migration earlier on, including the framing of return migration as a possible retirement strategy. This project seeks to understand how return migrants are influenced not only by their own socio-demographic characteristics, but by the social and economic characteristics of their family members in choosing where to live.

2. Significance

In many ways, contemporary Germany is a prototype of countries in Western Europe that face substantially large ageing populations. Foreign born persons constitute a growing share of this population, but little is known about them (Deutsche Bundestag 2006). One reason is that previous policy directives have generally aimed at the social and economic incorporation of younger persons. Academic research has tended to reinforce this bias by focusing on the assimilative processes of children, adolescents and middle-aged adults (Warnes and Williams 2006).

Realistically, the needs, preferences and relationships of later life immigrants differ from younger persons. First, economic and social inclusion may no longer be a goal at this life stage. Case studies suggest that the withdrawal of older immigrants into communities of co-ethnics and co-linguists is common (Akhtar and Choi 2004; Clyne 1981). Second, kinship roles and intergenerational relations also transform in later life (Katz et al. 2003). Although parents may not fully relinquish financial and emotional support of the younger generation, adult children may find themselves providing increased care to parents, even as they continue to receive certain types of support from them. Both dynamics will inform migrants' decisions to remain in Germany or to return to countries of origin. These choices will significantly impact Germany in preparing for the aging of immigrants, and countries of origin, who may not be equipped for large scale return migration.

3. Background

Previous research has framed return migration as a short-term response to unfavorable employment conditions in the destination country. For this reason, decisions to return are usually linked to individual earnings patterns, savings behavior and unemployment spells where return migration remains an option at any point in time (Kirdar 2005; Constant and Zimmerman 2003). A few studies have explicitly linked family characteristics to return migration over the life

course. Framed as “attachments” to host countries and countries of origin, the geographic location of spouses, children and parents may motivate decisions to stay or re-migrate (Constant and Massey 2002).

4. Question

Building upon previous research that examines return migration at earlier life stages and incorporating the role of family relationships into decisions on where to live, this project will provide a detailed analysis of the individual and family-level determinants of return migration for individuals aged 50 and above. A central paradox to return migration is that individuals who presumably spend a sizeable portion of their lives working abroad are not only economically integrated, but socially incorporated as well (Bovenkerk 1974). Why then, do individuals return to their countries of origin in later life? Return migration at this life stage engages a different set of considerations, including the framing of return as possible retirement strategy (de Coulon and Wolff 2006; Klintäll 2006). For this reason, family resources will play a crucial role in determining where migrants age.

5. Method

I use a discrete-time hazard model with time-varying and time-invariant covariates to examine the likelihood of return migration. As the dependent variable, I distinguish moving abroad from remaining in Germany. Like previous studies that have examined return migration (Constant and Massey 2002; Dustmann 2001), I infer that immigrants who move abroad are in fact returning to their country of origin. Independent variables will include time-invariant and time-varying characteristics of the individual. Time-invariant variables include respondent’s sex, education, number of children, country of origin and year of immigration. Time-varying covariates will include individual’s and partner’s employment and unemployment histories, type of work, income, citizenship and health status over time.

6. Data

My research uses data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (GSOEP), a longitudinal study of individuals and private households that began in 1984 (Wagner et al. 1993). Since then, 22 waves of data were collected on a yearly basis. An oversample of foreign-born persons and the availability of information regarding children and family members in the GSOEP are particularly attractive for this analysis. To account for attrition and significant demographic change since 1984, several supplemental and refresher samples have been added. Taking advantage of the rich panel data, I use not only fixed demographic characteristics, but also changes in respondent’s and partner’s income and employment as determinants of return migration.

7. Sources

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