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## ASSORTATIVE MATING IN CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON: A SUMMARY OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

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In this final chapter, we summarize the major findings of the book's country-specific case studies on assortative mating. The focus of our discussion is on the role of the educational system as a marriage market in the course of educational expansion and the impact of social origin on the process of assortative mating in the life course. We are especially interested to examine the generality of the earlier findings from our German pilot study (see Chapter 2).

### HOMOGAMOUS, UPWARD AND DOWNWARD MARRIAGE

We begin with a summary of the rates of homogamous, upward and downward marriage across birth cohorts in the various countries (see Tables 15.1 and 15.2). We only interpret the results for women in Table 15.1 because the results for men are similar (see Table 15.2). Since homogamous, upward and downward marriage rates are not only dependent on the number of educational attainment levels in each country but also on the educational distributions of men and women and their changes across cohorts, we do not compare directly the absolute marriage rates across countries. Instead, we concentrate our cross-national comparative interpretation on the differences between empirically observed and estimated rates and their trends across cohorts. The computation of the estimated rates are based on the assumption that marriage decisions in each birth cohort were taken randomly, given the distributions of educational attainment levels of men and women within each birth cohort. Eight of the thirteen case studies in this book reported these differences (see Tables 15.1 and 15.2). All eight studies showed that the observed homogamy rates have always been higher than the rates estimated under the assumption of a random marital matching. In other words, people seem to prefer to a large extent marrying an equally educated partner in all countries. This finding supports Becker's (1981) hypothesis that men and women benefit mostly from each

other if they resemble themselves as much as possible or Blau's (1994) thesis that "the like likes the like."

Table 15.1 shows in addition that for all eight countries the gaps between observed and estimated homogamy rates have been increasing in the course of the expansion of education. This finding can be considered as a first hint that through educational expansion the structurally increased chance of meeting a partner of equal qualification in the educational system raises the level of educational homogamy. In this sense, the educational system seems to increase its role as an important marriage market for equally qualified people in modern societies – even across ethnic groups, as shown in the Israeli study (see Chapter 14).

If we examine women's rates of marrying upwardly, we find the opposite pattern. In all eight countries, the observed upward rates for women have been consistently lower than the upward rates estimated under the assumption of a random marital matching (Table 15.1). This means that even in earlier gender-traditional historical periods, women's upward marriages, to a high degree, seem to have been structurally forced marriages. Many women had to marry upwardly (or many men had to marry downwardly) simply because the average level of education of women was below that of men. However, in more gender-traditional historical periods this downward marriage of men was economically rational because women were supposed to stay at home. Of course, this situation changed fundamentally when societies moved from male breadwinner to dual earner societies (Blossfeld, Drobníč 2001). In the course of this transition, wives' income has become a significant determinant of the living standard and "lifestyle" of the family. Thus, educational attainment gained importance for young women, too. The country-specific chapters show that the proportion of upwardly marrying women has declined sharply as women's educational attainment levels have caught up with those of men's. Table 15.1 documents that in this decline the gap between observed and estimated rates has been stable in most countries over time ("no trend") or has even widened, so that the proportions of women marrying upwardly dropped faster than they were forced by the convergence in average educational attainment levels of men and women.

Women's rate of marrying downwardly is even more interesting (Table 15.1). In seven of the eight countries (the exception is France) women's observed downward marriage rates have always been systematically lower than the rates estimated under the model of random marriage. For earlier gender-traditional historical periods, this result is not surprising. During these days a good education was particularly important for men, since it was the husband's income which normally determined the economic and social status of the family. Thus, women in gender-traditional societies tended to prefer men with high levels of education and good labor market opportunities and competed for them in the marriage market. In such gender-traditional societies, women who married downwardly (or men who married upwardly) deviated with regard to the dominant distributive realities regarding the gender of providers and dependents (see Brines 1994). They also violated socially sanctioned arrangements offering recurrent opportunities to advance claims about the self as "naturally" male and female (Berk 1985) and they risked social

accountability, negative judgements from relatives, friends, colleagues, and even a threat of their gender identities (Brines 1994). It is therefore not surprising that downwardly marrying women were a minority in all countries in the past.

Based on the fact that gender roles are deeply entrenched in all social relations and social and interactional pressures concerning the male breadwinner role continue to be important even in dual-earner societies (Blossfeld, Drobnič 2001), we expected that the increase in women's downward marriage across cohorts should be lower than it would have been possible based on the increasingly balanced educational attainment levels of men and women across cohorts. And indeed, Table 15.1 reveals that there has been an increasing divergence between observed and estimated downward marriage rates for women in most countries. The male breadwinner norm still seems to be a significant mechanism for partner choice (see Blossfeld, Drobnič 2001). This norm defines wives as secondary providers and makes it still difficult for women (and men) to marry downwardly (upwardly) in terms of educational level. The study on Israel (Chapter 14) in this book demonstrated that sometimes highly educated women have another option. Instead of downward marriage within the own ethnic group, they marry across ethnic lines in search for equally educated men (see also Stier, Shavit 1994).

To sum up, the country-specific patterns of homogamous, downward and upward marriage rates, as shown in Tables 15.1 and 15.2, support the hypothesis that peoples' preferences are inherently prone to (educational) homogamy: "the like likes the like." While in more gender-traditional societies - characterized by a low degree of women's labor force participation - women's educational attainment levels were less important characteristics for the marriage market, this situation changed when modern societies started to transform from male breadwinner to dual-earner societies (Blossfeld, Drobnič 2001). In dual-earner societies, wife's income becomes a significant determinant of the living standard of the family, so that young men increasingly prefer women with a high income potential, too. This change in men's preferences, together with the structurally increased chance of men to meet women of equal qualification in the educational system, seems to increase the observed homogamy rates above the rates estimated under the assumption of a random marital matching. On the other hand, women's upward marriage always appears to have been the result of structural constraints: many women had to marry upwardly simply because the average level of education of women was below that of men. The proportion of these upwardly marrying women clearly declined as the educational attainment structure of men and women became more balanced. Finally, women's downward marriage is still under some social and interactional pressures. In many countries, downwardly marrying women still risk social accountability and negative judgements from relatives, friends, colleagues. Thus, in most countries women's observed downward marriage rates stayed far below the downward marriage rates which were possible under the assumption of a random marital matching.

*Table 15.1. Observed Versus Predicted Homogamous, Upward, and Downward Marriage Rates of Women and Their Changes in Various Countries*

Country	Observed Versus Estimated *)					
	Homogamy Rates	Trend	Upward Rates	Trend	Downward Rates	Trend
West Germany	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend	Lower	Gap increasing
The Netherlands	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend	Lower	Gap increasing
Flanders	Higher	No trend	Lower	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend
France	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing	Higher then lower	Gap decreasing, then increasing
Italy	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing, then decreasing	Lower	Gap decreasing, then increasing
Spain	-	-	-	-	-	-
Great Britain	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend	Lower	Gap increasing
United States	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend	Lower	Gap increasing
Denmark	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sweden	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hungary	-	-	-	-	-	-
Slovenia	Higher	Gap increasing, then decreasing	Lower	Gap increasing, then decreasing	Lower	No trend
Israel	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied

\*) Estimated rates assume a random matching between men and women and take into account the changing educational structure of men and

*Table 15.2. Observed Versus Predicted Homogamous, Upward, and Downward Marriage Rates of Men and Their Changes in Various Countries*

Country	Observed Versus Estimated *)					
	Homogamy Rates	Trend	Upward Rates	Trend	Downward Rates	Trend
West Germany	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend
The Netherlands	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend
Flanders	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing
France	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing	Higher	Gap decreasing, then increasing
Italy	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing, then decreasing	Lower	Gap increasing, then decreasing
Spain	-	-	-	-	-	-
Great Britain	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend	Lower	No trend
United States	Higher	Gap increasing	Lower	Gap increasing	Lower	No trend
Denmark	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sweden	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hungary	-	-	-	-	-	-
Slovenia	Higher	Gap increasing, then decreasing	Lower	No trend	Lower	No trend
Israel	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied

\*) Estimated rates assume a random matching between men and women and take into account the changing educational structure of men and

TIME-DEPENDENT EFFECTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM ON  
ASSORTATIVE MATING

In twelve country-specific chapters, advanced longitudinal analyses were used to study the impact of the educational system on the rate of homogamous marriage in greater detail. We hypothesized that the organizational structure of educational systems in modern societies imposes a stepwise selection process and a relatively rigid age-graded logic on the life course, so that educational expansion translates into highly time-dependent homogamy rates over the life course.

*Table 15.3. Summary of Effects of the Educational System as a Marriage Market in the Models for Women Across Countries*

Country	Effects of Selected Variables on the Rate of Homogamous Marriage (Models for Women)		
	“Not in school	“Duration in school“	Duration after school““
West Germany	Positive	Positive	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
The Netherlands	Positive	Positive	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Flanders	Positive	Positive	Monotonically decreasing
France	Positive	Positive	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Italy	Positive	Not studied	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Spain	Positive	Negative	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Great Britain	Positive	Positive	Monotonically decreasing
United States	Positive	Not significant	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Denmark	Positive	Positive	Not significant
Sweden	Positive	Not significant	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Hungary	Positive	Positive	Monotonically decreasing
Slovenia	Positive	Not significant	Not studied
Israel	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied

First, we argued that in each generation the less able and educationally disadvantaged are leaving the educational system earlier so that the stepwise selection process in the educational system creates increasingly homogeneous groups. With rising duration in school, we expected therefore an increasing likelihood of establishing a social relationship with a similarly qualified partner – and then perhaps of later marriage. These opportunities to meet do not only include the contacts that one makes within the classroom or the educational institution itself, but also the opportunities to meet similar people in leisure and sports activities

which are also, to a large extent, structured by the fact that young people continue to be in school. Table 15.3 shows that in most countries, there is indeed the statistically significant positive effect of “duration in school” on the rate of homogamous marriage for women (for men similar results can be found in Table 15.4). This means that with increasing duration in school the rate of homogamous marriage rises. However, three countries (the United States, Sweden, and Slovenia) report no statistically significant impact of “duration in school” on the homogamous marriage rate. In these countries, duration in school does not matter for the homogamy rate. It seems that these are especially those countries that are characterized by an open and unstratified educational systems. In these educational systems, almost all children have the opportunity to attend school until the age of about 18. In Spain this effect is even negative. The negative effect for Spain is particularly difficult to interpret. It might be a methodological artifact or an instance of an interesting difference of the Spanish society. Further in-depth research is needed on the Spanish case to solve this interpretative puzzle. The general picture is, however, that there is a high degree of similarity with regard to the positive effect of “duration in school” on the rate of homogamy in very different societies.

Second, we assumed that in most modern countries attaining an education makes it difficult to adopt family roles and educational participation is connected to a high degree of economic dependence on parents or the state. Most young men and women participating in the educational system are therefore “not ready” to start a family. Completing education is thus a socially significant precondition for entering into marriage. Tables 15.3 and 15.4 show that in all countries the time-dependent variable “not in school” has - the expected - positive effect on the homogamy rate. This means that the transition from school to work has a cross-nationally consistent impact on (homogamous) marriage (see also Blossfeld, Huinink 1991). In all twelve countries, varying widely in important characteristics, the transition from school to work is therefore an important step in the normative (and economic) conception for entering into (homogamous) marriage.

Third, since young people participating in the educational system are “not ready” for marriage, they do not only postpone family formation, but will often catch up after leaving school. Thus, we expected that, after leaving the educational system, the tendency to marry homogamously should at first increase because many school leavers transform their partnerships formed in school into marital ones, and then, with increasing exposure to a more heterogenous environment outside the educational system, decrease again. Tables 15.3 and 15.4 show that for most countries the rate of homogamous marriage is in fact at first increasing and then decreasing after people have left school. For some few countries (Flanders, Great Britain, and Hungary) the rate jumps up immediately after the transition from school to work and afterwards declines. The general observation is therefore that with increasing duration in more heterogeneous environments after leaving school, the homogamy rate is declining.

In summary, the organizational structure of the educational system in modern societies produces a highly time-dependent homogamy rate over the life course. In most countries duration in school increases the likelihood of homogamous marriage.

However, as long as young people are in school, they are normally “not ready” to start a family and they delay family formation until they have left school. They then quickly catch up with their age cohort and the (homogamous) marriage rate is rising steeply. Finally, with increasing time out of school and exposure to more heterogeneous environments, the homogamy rate is declining again. Of course, such a time-dependent homogamy rate over the life course cannot be reasonably studied with cross-sectional data or traditional mobility tables.

*Table 15.4. Summary of Effects of the Educational System as a Marriage Market in the Models for Men Across Countries*

Country	Effects of Selected Variables on the Rate of Homogamous Marriage (Models for Men)		
	“Not in school	“Duration in school“	Duration after school““
West Germany	Positive	Positive	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
The Netherlands	Positive	Positive	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Flanders	Positive	Positive	Monotonically decreasing
France	Positive	Positive	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Italy	Positive	Not studied	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Spain	Positive	Negative	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Great Britain	Positive	Not significant	Decreasing
United States	Positive	Positive	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Denmark	Positive	Positive	Not significant
Sweden	Positive	Not significant	Curvilinear: at first increasing, then decreasing
Hungary	Positive	Not studied	Monotonically decreasing
Slovenia	Positive	Not significant	Not studied
Israel	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied

#### THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ORIGIN ON ASSORTATIVE MATING

Finally, we sum up the findings of the country-specific chapters with regard to the impact of social origin on assortative mating over the life course. Social origin refers to a conglomerate of highly correlated economic and social characteristics of parents such as wealth, household income, prestige, jobs, education etc. These correlates not only make status differentials between educational groups of parents symbolically more important, but also function as barriers between social circles. We therefore hypothesized that with increasing level of father’s education social

networks become more exclusive so that father's educational attainment level should have a positive direct effect on the rate of educational homogamy of children. Tables 15.5 and 15.6 clearly show that the results of the direct effect of father's education on children's homogamy rate differs from country to country. The finding of the German pilot study can therefore not be generalized. Further research is needed to study which of the many differences between countries produce the heterogeneity in these findings.

*Table 15.5 Summary of Effects of Social Origin on Marriage Patterns for Women Across Countries*

Country	Direct Effect of Father's Education on Homogamy	Indirect Effects of		
		Father's Edu = Daughter's Edu on Homogamy	Father's Edu < Daughter's Edu on Homogamy	Father's Edu > Daughter's Edu on Homogamy
West Germany	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive
The Netherlands	Not significant	Positive	Positive	Positive
Flanders	Negative	Positive	Not significant	Positive
France	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
Italy	Not studied	Positive	Positive	Not significant
Spain	Negative	Positive	Not significant	Not significant
Great Britain	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied
United States	Not significant	Positive	Positive	Positive
Denmark	Not significant	Positive	Positive	Positive
Sweden	Not significant	Positive	Positive	Positive
Hungary	Negative	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied
Slovenia	Positive	Positive	Not significant	Not significant
Israel	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied

With regard to the indirect effects of social origin on marriage decisions, we find more similarity across countries (Tables 15.5 and 15.6). First, we expected a positive effect, if the level of education of son/daughter corresponds to that of the father. In this case, the social networks of the family of origin and the social networks mediated through the educational system will overlap the most and mutually reinforce each other. Tables 15.5 and 15.6 show unanimously that this is indeed the case. A correspondence between father's and children's level of education has a positive effect on the homogamy rate of the children.

Second, we argued that educationally upward mobile sons and daughters (with regard to the educational level of their fathers) continue to stay in contact with the people with whom they grew up (friends, acquaintances, relatives, etc.). We therefore hypothesized that these young men and women will still meet persons from the network of their social origin and, to a large extent, also marry downwardly. For women, with the exception of France (where the effect is significantly negative), we find a high degree of similarity of this effect across

countries (see Table 15.5). Thus, in most countries, women's downward marriage is positively related to individual upward mobility in educational attainment level: in particular educationally upward mobile women are very likely to marry downward. Surprisingly, for men the insignificance of this effect abounds across countries (see Table 15.6).

Finally, we assumed that educationally downward mobile sons and daughters still have the opportunity to meet better educated potential (marriage) partners through the networks of their families of origin and therefore are likely to marry upwardly. Again, for daughters (Table 15.5) and sons (Table 15.6) there is a consistent relationship across countries that allows us to generalize the result of the German pilot study: Sons and daughters who have not attained the educational level of their family of origin in modern countries have a tendency of counter mobility through marriage and are thus, at least partially, able to correct their individual educational failure.

*Table 15.6 Summary of Effects of Social Origin on Marriage Patterns for Men Across Countries*

Country	Direct Effect of	Indirect Effects of		
	Father's Education on Homogamy	Father's Edu = Son's Edu on Homogamy	Father's Edu < Son's Edu on Homogamy	Father's Edu > Son's Edu on Homogamy
West Germany	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive
The Netherlands	Positive	Not significant	Not significant	Positive
Flanders	Not significant	Positive	Not significant	Positive
France	Not significant	Positive	Negative	Positive
Italy	Not studied	Positive	Not significant	Not significant
Spain	Negative	Positive	Positive	Not significant
Great Britain	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied
United States	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive
Denmark	Not significant	Positive	Not significant	Positive
Sweden	Not significant	Positive	Not significant	Positive
Hungary	Negative	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied
Slovenia	Positive	Positive	Not significant	Not significant
Israel	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied	Not studied

To sum up, we can say that the results of the cross-national comparison of the effects of social origin on assortative mating produced a complex picture. The direct effect of father's educational attainment level on the homogamy rate, which we found in our pilot study for West Germany, certainly cannot be generalized across countries. This relationship is obviously much more complex and dependent on country-specific idiosyncrasies which need to be analyzed in more detail in future. Also the positive effect of educationally upward mobile sons on downward marriage, documented in the West Germany pilot study, does not systematically

show up in other countries. The dominant picture is that there is no significant effect for men. Only educationally upward mobile women have a higher likelihood to marry downwardly in most countries. It seems that educationally upward mobile women are better able to cope with social and interactional pressures concerning the male breadwinner role, if they marry downwardly. It is interesting, that in almost all countries analyzed, educationally downward mobile sons and daughters still have the opportunity to marry upwardly. They are able to meet better educated potential (marriage) partners through the networks of their family of origin. Finally, a correspondence between father's and children's level of education clearly has a positive effect on the homogamy rate of children in all countries under study. In this case, the social networks of the family of origin and the school system overlap most and reinforce each other.

#### ASSORTATIVE MATING AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN MODERN SOCIETIES

It seems that in many modern societies a combination of at least three factors tends to increase the formation of couples with equally educated partners and educational homogamy: (1) people often prefer to associate with equally educated partners; (2) educational expansion increases contact opportunities for equally educated men and women at an age when young people start to look for partners and form couples; and (3) women's changing economic role in dual-earner societies increases the importance of women's education and labor force attachment. Thus, the changing role of the educational system as a marriage market in the course of educational expansion and women's changing economic roles in the labor market and the family are the main driving forces behind this development.

The rise of cohabitation and the increase in separation and divorce do not seem to be balancing forces for these changes. A recent international comparative study on the impact of assortative partnership selection, division of work in the household and union separation shows that educational heterogeneity of partners in cohabiting couples does indeed increase the rate of separation (Blossfeld, Müller 2002-3). Thus, cohabitation seems to function as an additional social filter in the process of family formation. In addition, the divorce rate is higher for marriages where the partners have different educational attainment levels.

What is the relevance of these structural changes for social inequality? Since education is the most important determinant of occupational success and it is connected with valuable cultural resources, an increase in the formation of couples with equally educated partners and educational homogamy implies a rise in social differences *between* couples and families in modern societies. Social inequality engendered in individuals' life courses is further enhanced through couple formation and marriage because individuals then pool their advantageous or less advantageous socioeconomic resources, respectively. An increase in homogamy therefore enhances the inter-household distribution of economic well-being as well as class and status in modern societies. This is particularly true when women's labor force participation is increasing and the whole family system moves from male

breadwinner towards dual-earner structures (Blossfeld, Drobnič 2001). The cumulative advantage within some families and the growing status differentiation between families in the course of increasing educational homogamy is also very likely to lead to a growing inequality of opportunities among the children of the next generation. These processes have to be studied in more detail in the future.

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