A New Dimension of Assortative Mating: Education in Childhood Neighborhoods, Sweden 1982-2022

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Abstract

Assortative mating has long been important in demography and other social sciences. We know that partner selection is determined by factors related to exposure to different potential partners in the marriage market, socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, and prevailing family systems. In this paper we add another dimension to this analysis by incorporating the educational level of the neighborhood of upbringing. In addition to well-known factors such as age and individual education, neighborhood conditions in childhood could be an important trait in the assortative mating process. We study assortative mating in first unions with a special focus on the neighborhood of upbringing. We use full-count register data for Sweden, 1982–2022, with detailed individual-level information on education and other variables as well as detailed longitudinal geographic information. We measure neighborhood conditions by the share of adults with higher education in the neighborhood of upbringing, and estimate conditional logit models with this neighborhood variable as well as own education, age, country of birth, income and presence of children. Neighborhoods are measured at the DeSO level, which is a detailed statistical area unit developed by Statistics Sweden. Preliminary findings show that neighborhood of upbringing has a substantial association with homogamy, as well as evidence of neighborhood educational hypergamy.

Extended abstract

Assortative mating has for long been an important area of research both in demography and other social sciences. We know that partner selection is not done at random but determined by a complex web of factors related to the exposure of different potential partners in the marriage market, socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, and prevailing family systems (Blossfeld and Timm 2003; Di Maggio and Mohr 1985; Kalmijn 1994, 1998). Looking only at assortative mating by socioeconomic status (social class, education, income) there has been an historic change from a primacy of ascribed characteristics, such as class origin, to achieved characteristics such as own education (e.g., Lichter and Qian 2019). In the traditional male-breadwinner model of the immediate post-WWII period, negative assortative mating on earnings potential was rational from a specialization perspective, as high-earning men could devote maximum time to market work while women with less earnings potentials mainly worked in the domestic sphere (Becker 1973, 1974, 1991). Such specialization maximized household income given the number of desired children of a certain quality.

As education is an important determinant of the earnings potential, one might expect the same negative assortative mating in terms of education. However, Becker lists education together with intelligence, ethnicity and height as a trait for which he assumes positive assortative mating (homogamy). The reason is that education is not only about earnings, but also about meeting opportunities, shared interests and values. In addition, there is a positive assortative mating on intelligence (Horwitz et al. 2023), which supports this assumption of a general tendency of positive assortative mating on education (educational homogamy), at least partly through sorting through the school system. Nevertheless, because men had higher levels of education on average than women, there was often a pattern of female hypergamy in practice. Since the 1960s, with increasing levels of labor force participation and higher education for women in most western societies, educational homogamy has increased in many countries, but with some difference in timing (Blossfeld and Timm 2003; Katrnák and Chromková Manea 2020; Mare 1991; Schwartz and Mare 2005). More recently, the fact that women have overtaken men in terms of university degrees has led to an increase also in female hypogamy, as there simply are not enough high education men available to marry for university educated women (Esteve et al. 2012; 2016; Van Bavel 2012; Qian 1998).

The matching process on the marriage market can be viewed as similar to job search on the labor market (Oppenheimer 1988; Schwartz 2013). Men and women are looking for the best possible match but finding such a spouse takes time and is therefore costly, which is why partner seekers only search until they find an acceptable match, much like a job seeker who accepts an offer that is good enough (Qian and Lichter 2018). In the search, different traits are important, not only education but also age, race, religion, ethnic origin, place of origin, etc. In the literature on assortative mating there has been a particularly large focus on some of these traits, most notably education, race/ethnicity, and age.

In this paper we add another dimension to this analysis by incorporating the educational level of the neighborhood of upbringing. In addition to own education, age, and country of birth, neighborhood conditions in childhood could be an important trait in the assortative mating process. There is considerable evidence showing that neighborhoods are important in forming values and attitudes – including aspirations for higher education – through peer influence (e.g. Duncan et al., 1968; Galster, 2012), even though there is also considerable self-selection into relationships with people of similar values and attitudes (see review in McPherson et al., 2001). Adults in the neighborhood also influence preference formation and attitudes by acting

as role models (Wilson, 1987). Social networks start to form from early ages, and these networks are likely important also later in the life course when decisions about union formation are made. Furthermore, proximity and distance to individuals of heterogeneous backgrounds can affect how individuals are perceived by others, thereby affecting the perception of social distance between them (Akerlof, 1997), either reinforcing existing social boundaries or weakening them. Both weak and strong interpersonal ties have been found important in job search and educational choice (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) and can also be expected to affect partner choice. In other words, social networks can contribute to preference formation concerning valued characteristics in a partner but could also be part of the marriage market, i.e., a place to find a partner. When partners are found through social networks from the neighborhood of upbringing (e.g., Blau and Duncan, 1967: 354–359), a higher proportion of highly educated residents in the area can be expected to increase the chances of finding a highly educated spouse.

Previous research has highlighted different patterns of assortative mating for cohabitation and marriage, with cohabiting unions being less homogamous in the U.S. (e.g., Blackwell and Lichter, 2000). It is also often maintained that remarriages are less homogamous than first marriages, even if this does not always seem to be the case (see, e.g., Jacobs and Furstenberg, 1986; Schwartz and Mare, 2012; Shafer, 2013; Qian and Lichter, 2018). Union formation at higher ages is often less homogamous, at least when the youngest ages are excluded (Schwartz and Mare, 2012; Lichter et al., 2022). One might also expect network effects and third-party influence to be weaker for re-partnering and for union formation at higher ages, which would tend to weaken the neighborhood influence. Hence, there are reasons to expect that the neighborhood influence on partner selection would be lower in higher-order unions than in first unions.

We study assortative mating in first unions with a special focus on the neighborhood of upbringing. We use full-count register data for Sweden, 1982–2022, with rich individual-level information on education and other variables as well as detailed geographic information. More specifically, we measure neighborhood conditions by the share of people with higher education in the neighborhood of upbringing, and estimate conditional logit models with this neighborhood variable together with own education, age, country of birth, income and presence of children. Neighborhoods are measured at the DeSO level, which is a detailed statistical area unit developed by Statistics Sweden.

Data and Methods

Data and sample

We use geocoded complete-count register data from Statistics Sweden, covering the period 1982 to 2022. These registers include rich information on demographic variables, family links, education, and income, as well as annual information on place of residence for the entire population in sub-municipal Demographic Statistical Areas (DeSO)[1].

Our sample is composed of heterosexual unions formed between 2011 and 2022 by individuals born between 1974 and 1993 that could be followed up at age 16 and in adulthood. Age 16 is when we measure the neighborhood educational level, and we focus on the period 2011–2022 because it allows us to include cohabiting unions without shared

[1] DeSO are geographic areas within Swedish municipalities with a population between 700 and 3000 inhabitants. The division follows geographic boundaries such as municipal limits, streets, water bodies and railroads. It is also related to other administrative boundaries such as densely-populated areas (*tätorter)* and voting districts. The study uses the original DeSO areas from 2018 rather than the reviewed areas from 2025.

biological children. In Sweden, where non-marital cohabitation has been common for several decades (Ohlsson-Wijk et al. 2020), this is a more realistic unit of analysis than exclusively looking at marriages. However, this individuals who previously were in cohabiting unions without common children that had dissolved by 2011 are recorded as never in a union. Hence, the definition of first union is measured with considerable error for the earlier cohorts in the sample.

The main dimension of assortative mating we add is the educational level in the neighborhood of upbringing. We measure it by the share of adults (age 25–64) holding a university degree that is 3 years or longer in the DeSO area when an individual is 16 years old. In future versions of the study, we will use individualized and scalable neighborhoods based on the k-nearest neighbor measure based on 100x100m grids.

Statistical analysis

Our method is based on Qian and Lichter's (2018; see also Jepsen and Jepsen, 2002; Nielsen and Svarer, 2009) approach using fictional couples and conditional logit models. We compare the observed traits of couples in unions with fictional couples randomly drawn from opposite-sex individuals who are not in a union. Potential partners are assessed on the basis of non-labor-market attributes such as age, nativity and presence of children and labor-market attributes like income and education. The conditional logit model estimates the likelihood that a union is actual rather than fictional as in Equation 1:

$$P(y_i = j|\mathbf{z_i}) = \frac{e^{\mathbf{z}_{ij}\boldsymbol{\gamma}}}{\sum_{\mathbf{j=1}}^{J} e^{\mathbf{z}_{ij}\boldsymbol{\gamma}}} \quad (1)$$

Where $\mathbf{z}_{ij}$ is a vector of variables that varies across the actual pairings *i* and fictional pairings *j*, while γ is a vector of coefficients to estimate.

Since marital sorting is subject to opportunities in the local marriage market, pairings must be drawn from the same marriage market and within a reasonable age range. We thus select fictional partners from the same municipality and previous year of the formation of the union within an age range which covers more than 95% of all actual unions in Sweden. For men, this means that the fictional partner must be between 12 years younger and 4 years older, and vice-versa for women. During the study period Sweden comprised of 290 municipalities which varied in population size from 1,053 to 563,576, with a median of 7,881 (2020) (Statistics Sweden, statistical database, www.scb.se).

We model assortative mating by neighborhood educational level, age, education, income, nativity and presence of children before union, and control for whether individuals lived in the same DeSO code at age 16. We do not, however, control for distance between childhood neighborhoods.

We estimate two sets of models in which we define assortative mating variables as absolute differences and categorical differences. The base models include only the neighborhood share variable and the control for same DeSO area, and subsequent models add other homogamy variables.

In the absolute differences models, we treat our assortative mating measures as continuous or dummy variables, and estimate differences in the share of neighbors with a university degree, age differences are measured in years, income differences in tens of thousands of Swedish

Krona[2], and educational attainment differences in terms of levels of educational attainment. Nativity and presence of children are treated as dummy variables. Despite the importance of ethnic endogamy, data on this characteristic is not collected in Swedish statistics, only country of birth.

In the second model, we treat the assortative mating variables as types of pairings related to homogamy trends. Neighborhood shares of university-educated are converted into quartiles and pairings are classified into same quartile (reference), man higher, or woman higher. Age at union is classified as man is 0–2 years older than the woman (reference), man is 3–5 years older than the woman, man 6+ years older than the woman, or woman is older than the man. Educational pairings are classified as both partners have the same educational attainment (reference), man has higher educational attainment or woman has higher educational attainment[3]. Nativity is classified as both partners being born in Sweden (reference) or at least one partner being foreign-born. Since we follow individuals up at age 16, our sample excludes couples formed between a native and a foreign-born individual who immigrated to Sweden after age 16, which results in a small share of foreign-born individuals in the sample compared to the total population. Children before union is classified into neither partner having a child before union (reference) or at least one partner having a child before union. Income differences are classified as partners being within 25,000 Swedish Kronor of each other's yearly income (reference), or the man or woman having incrementally higher income than their partner (25,000–50,000, 50,000–100,000 or 100,000 or more).

Preliminary Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the sample of first unions. The neighborhood share of university educated is similar for men and women, around 14%, with a 9% standard deviation. The sample is 16 years of age in the period 1982–2009, and the share of the adult population with university degrees in this period is somewhat lower than for the current population, since older cohorts tend to have lower educational attainment. Average age at first union in Sweden is 31.0 years for men, but 29.4 for women, within the normative 2-year partner age difference found elsewhere. Men have significantly higher income than women at union formation, earning about 30 000 SEK more than their partners. In terms of education, the reverse is true, and women are over-represented among the college educated, with 46.4%, while men are only at 30%. Conversely, men are over-represented in the secondary and primary education categories, while the vocational and short-college education category exhibits no gender differences. This is related to expansion of Swedish higher-education that benefitted women, and at the same time to the organization of the Swedish labor market in which women-dominated non-academic occupations, such as nursing and lower-grade education and child care, increasingly require university degrees, while the educational requirements of corresponding male-dominated occupations have changed considerably less. The share of foreign-born is about 6% for both men and women, but the share of those with children before the union for women (7%) is more than twice as high as for men (3%). It is likely that at least

[2] We deflate yearly income to 1980 prices, which correspond to about a fourfold decrease from current levels. 100 000 1980 SEK corresponds to about 418 000 SEK today.

[3] Educational is classified into 4 categories, (1) Primary education for individuals who did not complete the Gymnasium, (2) Secondary for individuals who completed either form of Swedish Gymnasium, (3) Vocational or short-college for individuals with vocational training or colleges lasting up to 2 years, and (4) College and postgraduate for individuals with college degrees longer than three or postgraduate degrees.

some of these individuals with children previously have been in cohabiting unions. The proportions of missing values are displayed for each variable and do not exceed 1%.

[Table 1 here]

Table 2 presents an analysis of the composition of differences between actual and fictional unions, reflecting opportunities and constraints in the marriage market. The table compares the observed scenario and a counterfactual scenario based on random sorting of partners. Beginning with neighborhood pairings, actual pairings are more likely to be from the same quartile of neighborhood educational level, or from one where the man comes from a neighborhood with a higher share of university-educated than in fictional pairings. Age homogamy is three times more common in actual than in fictional pairings, but pairings of older men and younger women are less frequent in actual than in fictional couples, while pairings of older women and younger men are more frequent in actual pairings. This indicates that the pattern of older men marrying younger women is not as strong in Sweden compared to what it could be under random matching. There is strong homogamy in educational pairings, with 51% of actual couples against 35% of fictional ones, but the next most likely pairing is women having higher education than men, consistent with Sweden's gendered occupational structure discussed above (see also Esteve et al., 2016). Pairing in terms of foreign-born partners are less common than under random matching, with only 10% of actual couples having at least one foreign-born partner, but 14% under random matching. This is also in line with strong endogamy in terms of country of origin, especially for some immigrant groups (see Dribe and Lundh 2011). Finally, in terms of income, the most likely pairings are those with similar incomes, followed by those where the man has higher income than the woman. Under random matching, there would be less income homogamy and pairing between men with significantly higher income than women would be even more common.

[Table 2 here]

Table 3 shows the results from the first set of conditional logit models using continuous and dummy variables. The base model shows that a 10-percentage point difference in the neighborhood share of university educated between partners decreases the odds ratio of an actual match by 24%. Models with other variables attenuate this difference to 14%. Age homogamy is substantial with every additional year decreasing the odds ratio by 30%, which is consistent with strong age homogamy patterns in first unions. Educational homogamy is similarly strong, with a difference in one educational level between partners reducing the odds ratios by 32%. Nativity shows there is a strong preference for unions between natives, with a foreign-born partner reducing the odds ratio of an actual union by over 50%. Children are also strong barriers to union formation, with a reduction of 81% in the odds ratio of being an actual union. Finally, income differences are also substantial, with each 10,000 kronor difference between spouses decreasing the odds ratios by 10%.

[Table 3 here]

Table 4 shows the results from the second set of conditional logit models using pairings related to the likelihood of forming unions. Here we see that neighborhood differences are more concentrated in cases where the woman is from a neighborhood with a higher share of university-educated than in cases where the man is from such a neighborhood. In both cases, there is a decrease in the odds ratio of being in an actual union compared to the reference category, but in the cases where the woman's neighborhood has a higher share, the decrease is

13% in the adjusted model, while it is only 4% when the man's neighborhood has a higher share. This finding could be related to female hypergamy, where women are more likely to partner with men from a higher-status neighborhood, but the reverse is less common.

Findings in terms of age show once more the strong age homogamy, with drastically reduced odds ratios for larger age differences between partners, but it shows that couples where the woman is older than the man are relatively more common than couples where the man is significantly older than the woman, which may be related to gender equal norms and high female labor force participation in Sweden.

In terms of education, patterns reinforce the descriptive results in table 2. Educational homogamy is the most common type, but the odds ratios that women have higher education than men are only 7% lower than the reference category. Conversely, the odds ratios that men are more highly educated is 72% lower. This is likely related to the aforementioned gendered structure of the Swedish occupations, with women being more likely to be in the College educated category than men.

Similarly to table 3, foreign-born partners and children are impediments to union formation, and the reduction in odds ratios is likewise to the those presented above. Income differences on the other hand, show that income homogamy and an income advantage for men are the norm, while large income differences lead to significantly reduced odds ratios of an actual union.

[Table 4 here]

Taken together, these findings confirm homogamy patterns in terms of age, education, income, nativity and children, and they show that there is an additional dimension of assortative mating beyond the individual level, namely the neighborhood of upbringing. Compared to individual level characteristics such as education and income, the magnitude of this association is smaller, but still substantial. It can be compared to about a third of the change observed in homogamy due to education, or an income difference of about 14 000 kronor. We believe this is a reasonable result considering the potential influence of a meso-level context on union formation are expected to be less important than individual-level characteristics, but their magnitude is not negligible.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Composition of first unions by gender

	Men	Women
Neighborhood share of university educated	13.8 (9.0)	14.7 (9.2)
Age	31.0 (4.1)	29.4 (3.9)
Income (5-year average)	97,339 (62,702)	64,076 (37,624)
Education		
College and postgraduate	30.5%	46.4%
Vocation or short-college	16.2%	16.3%
Secondary	46.8%	33.2%
Primary	6.2%	3.7%
Missing	0.4%	0.3%
Foreign-born	6.3%	5.5%
Children before union		
At least one partner	3.1%	6.7%
Missing	0.9%	0.8%
Number of unions	278,613	

Source: Authors calculations based on data from Statistics Sweden.

Table 2: Pairings of actual and fictional first unions

	Actual (N=278,613)	Fictional (N=835,843)
Neighbourhood quartile		
Same	35.5%	30.8%
Man higher	28.6%	25.4%
Woman higher	35.9%	43.7%
Age		
Homogamy	45.5%	16.1%
Man older 2-6	26.9%	28.1%
Man older 6+	7.1%	38.3%
Woman older	20.5%	17.5%
Education		
Same education	51.1%	35.0%
Man higher	13.3%	38.3%
Woman higher	35.0%	24.9%
Missing	0.6%	1.9%
At least one spouse foreign born	10.0%	14.2%
Children before union		
Yes at least one spouse	7.6%	14.1%
Missing	1.1%	0.9%
Income		
Within 25k	34.8%	23.5%
Man 25-50k+	22.9%	17.0%
Man 50-100k+	26.3%	32.8%
Man 100k+	6.3%	16.4%
Woman 25-50k+	5.3%	5.2%
Woman 50-100k+	2.9%	3.7%
Woman 100k+	0.4%	0.7%
Missing	1.0%	0.6%

Source: Authors calculations based on data from Statistics Sweden.

Table 3: Odds ratios of an actual versus a fictional match in first unions - absolute differences

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Neighbourhood share (10% change)	0.76***	0.87***	0.86***	0.86***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Age (years)		0.71***	0.69***	0.70***
		(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education		0.67***	0.67***	0.68***
		(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Nativity (At least one foreign-born)		0.45***	0.47***	0.49***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Children (At least one partner)			0.19***	0.19***
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Income (10k SEK diff.)				0.90***
				(0.00)
Observations	1,114,452	1,095,112	1,086,149	1,085,711
Log-lik	-382560	-280462	-264212	-257660

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01.

Table 4: Odds ratios of an actual match compared to an artificial match

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Neighborhood differences				
Same as partner				
Man higher	1.11***	0.95***	0.96***	0.96***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Woman higher	0.64***	0.88***	0.86***	0.87***
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age				
Man older 0–2				
Man older 3–5		0.33***	0.30***	0.31***
		(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Man older 6+		0.06***	0.05***	0.06***
		(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Woman older		0.42***	0.47***	0.48***
		(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education				
Same as partner				
Man higher		0.24***	0.27***	0.28***
		(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Woman higher		1.00	0.91***	0.93***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
At least one foreign-born partner		0.48***	0.49***	0.50***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
At least one spouse has children			0.23***	0.23***
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Income differences				
Within 25 000 SEK				
Man 25–50 000+				1.06***
				(0.01)
Man 50–100 000+				0.74***
				(0.01)
Man 100 000+				0.31***
				(0.00)
Woman 25–50 000+				0.58***
				(0.01)
Woman 50–100 000+				0.37***
				(0.01)
Woman 100 000+				0.21***
				(0.01)
Observations	1,114,445	1,095,112	1,086,149	1,085,711
Log-lik	-381741	-274008	-261808	-253846

Standard errors in parentheses. All models control for whether individuals were in the same DeSO area at age 16. Neighborhood differences are measured in quartiles of the share of university-educated adults distribution. Educational categories are Primary, Secondary, Vocational/2-year college and 3+ yrs. College/Postgraduate. *** p<0.01.