Spatial and Institutional Contexts of Educational Assortative Mating in Sweden*

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Introduction

Partnering tends to occur within educational boundaries. Across societies and time, individuals are far more likely to form unions with partners who have attained similar levels of schooling (Mare 1991; Schwartz 2013). Because education shapes both material resources and social lifestyles, this pattern—known as educational assortative mating—has become a central mechanism in the reproduction of inequality across generations (Schwartz and Mare 2005; Torche 2010). However, despite extensive work documenting trends and variations in educational homogamy (Blossfeld 2009), direct empirical tests of the mechanisms that link education to patterns of exposure and encounter remain scarce. Most studies emphasize preferences for similarity or the signaling value of education, while fewer investigate how education also structures *where* individuals live and work, and thereby *whom* they meet.

A long-standing lineage in sociology argues that social interaction is shaped by opportunity structures: the concrete settings that delimit the pool of potential contacts (Blau 1977; Feld 1981). People meet in bounded arenas—neighborhoods, workplaces, schools—that channel contact along existing social and spatial lines. Segregation along these lines limits cross-group encounters and constrains relationship formation (Kalmijn 1998; McPherson et al. 2001). Educational attainment is central to these processes because it not only defines social status but also organizes everyday contexts of interaction. Adults with similar schooling often share workplaces, occupations, and residential areas, generating repeated contact and fostering social closure.

This paper examines how the geography and institutional organization of everyday life shape educational assortative mating. We build on theories of opportunity structure and propinquity—the tendency for social ties to form among those who are physically or organizationally close (Bossard 1932; Feld 1982)—to conceptualize partner choice as embedded in overlapping spatial and institutional fields. Using Swedish full-population register data, we link individuals' educational attainment to detailed spatial and organizational measures that

capture potential encounters across multiple domains. Specifically, we incorporate (i) *residential distances* between individuals' homes, (ii) *workplace distances* between their places of employment, (iii) *cross-domain distances* between one person's residence and another's workplace, and (iv) *shared institutional membership*, defined as working or studying within the same workplace, school, or university. Together, these measures capture both spatial proximity and organizational co-presence as distinct but intersecting channels of social exposure.

Data and Methods

Our study uses comprehensive data from the Swedish full population registers provided by Statistics Sweden (SCB), covering 1990–2022. During this period we observe precisely where people are living, working and studying, including property identifiers and positions on a $100\,m \times 100\,m$ grid. We use a retrospective approach to identify the onset of cohabitation among those who eventually marry or have children together. Starting from the full population of couples that are ever observed to marry or co-reside with common children, we backtrack through residential records to identify the first year when both partners were registered as living on the same property.

To examine how education structures opportunity for encounter, we build on a discrete-choice framework using conditional logit models, that models partner choice conditional on the composition of the partner market. For each individual entering a union, 100 counterfactual potential partners are sampled from the population of available singles of the opposite sex. Because the model compares each chosen partner to potential partners who differ in included covariates, the resulting estimates reflect preferences and constraints relative to the actual composition of local partner markets rather than absolute population frequencies. In other words, if individuals with little (or alot) of education are concentrated in particular workplaces or residential or occupational areas, this concentration is incorporated directly

into the model's choice sets.

To evaluate the substantive role of different domains of proximity, we combine the estimated models with counterfactual simulations that sequentially remove proximity effects for (i) shared workplace or institution, and (ii) the three types of distance measures—home-to-home, home-to-work, and work-to-work. Comparing observed and simulated partnering rates allows us to quantify how much of educational assortativity arises from the geography and institutional organization of everyday life.

This modeling strategy provides a unified micro-level approach to partner choice that links the structural composition of partner markets to individual decisions, capturing how education shapes both the opportunity to meet and the likelihood of forming unions within or across educational boundaries.

Preliminary Results and Expected Contributions

Preliminary estimates from the conditional logit models support the theoretical expectation that both spatial and institutional proximity are powerful predictors of partner choice. Models integrating workplace information—but not yet schooling as an institutional context—show that sharing a workplace is strongly associated with union formation. The effect of working in the same establishment exceeds that of sharing the same ethnic ancestry, highlighting the importance of everyday organizational settings as arenas of exposure. Being employed within the same firm but at different workplace locations also increases the likelihood of partnership, though to a lesser degree, consistent with weaker opportunities for direct interaction.

Among the distance measures, residential proximity exerts the largest influence on the probability of partnership, followed by the residential-to-workplace distance between potential partners. Workplace-to-workplace distance has the smallest predictive effect, suggesting that physical co-location at work matters primarily when accompanied by direct organiza-

tional overlap.

Subsequent analyses will incorporate educational institutions to capture school-based exposure and will extend the modeling framework to evaluate how these mechanisms contribute to overall educational assortativity. By combining detailed spatial data with a design that conditions on local partner-market composition, the study will quantify how much of educational homogamy can be explained by residential and workplace segregation versus individual preferences. More broadly, the project contributes to research on partner choice by integrating spatial and organizational propinquity into the study of educational boundaries, offering a unified approach to understanding how the geography of everyday life reproduces social inequality.

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