

Trends in relative status of men and women in educationally hypogamous unions in Sweden

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Introduction

In most countries women have historically had the tendency to “partner up” by choosing a partner with higher socio-economic standing than themselves. One important facet of this hypergamy has been in education—women typically chose partners with higher education than themselves. When women were the minority in higher education, women with higher education were more likely to remain unmarried and childless. The expansion of higher education since the 1950s has transformed societies and women are now over-represented in higher education in most OECD countries (Schofer and Meyer 2005). This educational expansion has occurred in parallel to falling fertility and postponed childbearing, leading to a great research interest in the family formation behavior of highly educated women.

Researchers have previously worried that highly educated women would be unable to find or unwilling to accept partners with lower education, and that this could have negative implications for fertility (Lewis and Oppenheimer 2000, Van Bavel 2012).

However, recent studies show that educational hypogamy is a growing trend across Europe, and thus higher educated women appear to be willing and able to partner down (Blossfeld and Timm 2003, Domanski and Przybysz, 2007). As women’s role in society has changed, authors have argued that men’s preferences for partners have changed, and women’s income and work has become increasingly important (Blossfeld 2009). Men with lower education are thus more interested in a partner with high resources. Furthermore, men and women may be more open to having a relationship where the woman has the higher status, even though this is not traditional (Sweeney and Cancian 2004). This change in values is in line with theories of ideational change, more relaxed social boundaries, and individualization that is part of the Second Demographic Transition. An alternative explanation could be that women in educationally hypogamous relationships have more education, but not greater socio-economic resources in general, than their partners. This is due to the nature of the educational expansion process where the educated group and the returns to education have become more heterogenous. Women have more education than men, but they are also likely to study subjects such as education and health care where wages are not necessarily high. Women in

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hypogamous relationships may thus have higher credentials officially but may have lower income or come from lower-status households than their lesser educated male partners. Though much research has been focused on educational hypogamy and heterogamy, data constraints often make it difficult to study differences within the highly educated group. This study uses high quality Swedish register data to make a unique contribution to the study of educational assortative mating by examining status along several dimensions: socio-economic class of origin, income, and occupational prestige. The aim of this study is to understand on what measures women in hypogamous unions have higher or lower status than their partners, and to understand how these trends have changed over time during the process of educational expansion.

Data and Research Design

This study uses high-quality Swedish register data to study women who have achieved a post-secondary degree prior to the formation of a child-bearing union. We study the cohorts born in 1940, 1950, 1960, and 1970, as these are the cohorts who experienced different phases of the educational expansion (primarily in the late 1970s and in the 1990s in Sweden), and have had time to form their first union. We focus on childbearing unions as these are a consistent point of comparison in a society where the meaning of marriage has transformed radically over the last decades. We study women with post-secondary degrees at the time of the birth of the first child, and their male partners who do not, to examine how the trends have changed in resources men and women possess in the partner search and union formation process.

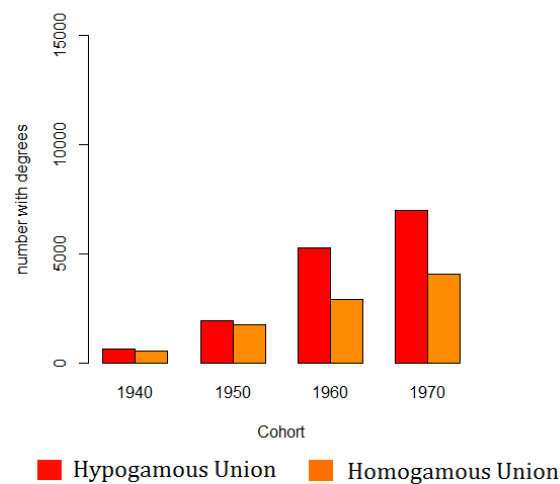
To examine changes in relative socio-economic status between the partners we focus on several dimensions: social origin (social class of parents), income, and occupational prestige. We use individual records from the register data to connect the women from our four birth cohorts to their childbearing partner and collect data on these three status indicators for each woman and partner. We connect both the woman and their partners to their parents and then use census data to extract occupational and educational information about the parents between ages 10-20 for the woman and partner. We code the occupation and education indicators into a seven-class schema: upper service class, lower service class, routine non-manual workers, small employers and the self-employed, lower grade technicians, skilled working class, and the unskilled working class, following the main distinctions of the Erikson-Goldthorpe classification scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). We draw income

information from the registers for women and their partners the year prior to the birth of the child, and code their incomes into sex-specific quantiles for that year. This means that women who had a child in 1980 have their incomes compared to all employed women in 1979, and their male partner has their income compared to all employed men in 1979. The measure of occupational prestige is taken by converting occupational codes similar to ISCO into the SIOPS occupational prestige scale (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, Treiman 1992).

The analysis presented in this abstract is all based on descriptive results, although we are experimenting with regression models to examine the change in the relevance of the different status indicators, as well as with different measures of status.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Figure 1: Women with a post-secondary degree at time of first child, by birth cohort and partner’s educational level



The first figure shows a picture of the growing number of highly educated women in hypogamous unions, and their increasing role as a share of all unions for highly educated women. This group has increased dramatically as women have overtaken men in higher education, and whereas less than 600 women born in 1940 had their first child with a less-educated partner, the group size was over 7500 for women born in 1970. Figure 2 below shows the distribution of women in hypogamous unions according to the first status variable, socio-economic class. The figure shows women split into seven classes according to the EGP class schema and shows the percentage of women coming from each class whose partner

comes from the same, higher, or lower class. . Class 1 refers to the upper service class, while class 7 refers to the unskilled working class and refer to the social background of the parents of each individual. The pattern looks very similar across cohorts, and with the exception of women from classes 1 and 2 (upper and lower service class), the majority of women have a partner whose parents belong to a higher social class than them. This pattern suggests that there might be a trade-off between achieved status (for the women) and inherited status (for their partners).

Figure 2: Relative EGP class in hypogamous unions by women’s birth cohort and class

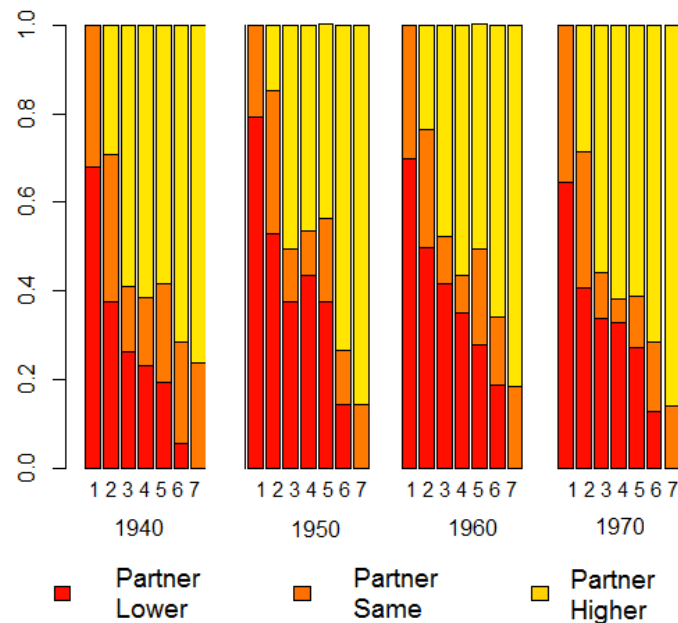


Figure 3 presents descriptive trends for relative income. Among the 1940 and 1950 birth cohorts, all women in hypogamous unions were in the 4th or 5th quantile of the women’s income distribution in the year prior to income formation. However, among later cohorts there is greater heterogeneity. Among women born in 1970, who fall within the 3rd quantile of the income distribution (earning more than 40% of all women) at the time of union formation, the majority have a partner who has a better rank on the income distribution. However, for most women across all cohorts, a large share have a partner within the same income quantile. These results are partly the result of comparing status relative to others of the same sex, rather than comparing absolute income. Women with a higher education are

more likely to be at the top of the income distribution of all women, even if their income is lower than their partners. However, further analysis (not shown) suggests that women's absolute income is also often higher than their partners'. The last figure (4), shows the relative occupational prestige score within each couple. Here a clear pattern emerges across cohorts—men have a higher occupational prestige score than their female partners on average, and this trend becomes more clear over time.

These preliminary results indicate interesting findings: although women have higher education in these unions, higher education for younger cohorts does not necessarily imply higher occupational prestige or higher income. By examining different dimensions of socioeconomic status, we are able to disentangle relative standing for men and women in hypogamous unions to see to what extent hypogamous unions challenge more traditional models of partnership, as the second demographic ideational change framework would suggest. As this group has grown in size and attracted increasing attention of researchers, our study is an important first step to discovering the heterogeneity within the group using data providing a high-level of detail at the couple-level. Furthermore, by analyzing how relative status of men and women within hypogamous relationships has changed over time, we contribute to a more general understanding of the way that partner market constraints shape patterns of educational homogamy, and of the consequences of educational expansion has had for union formation.

Figure 3: Relative income in hypogamous unions by women's birth cohort and income decile

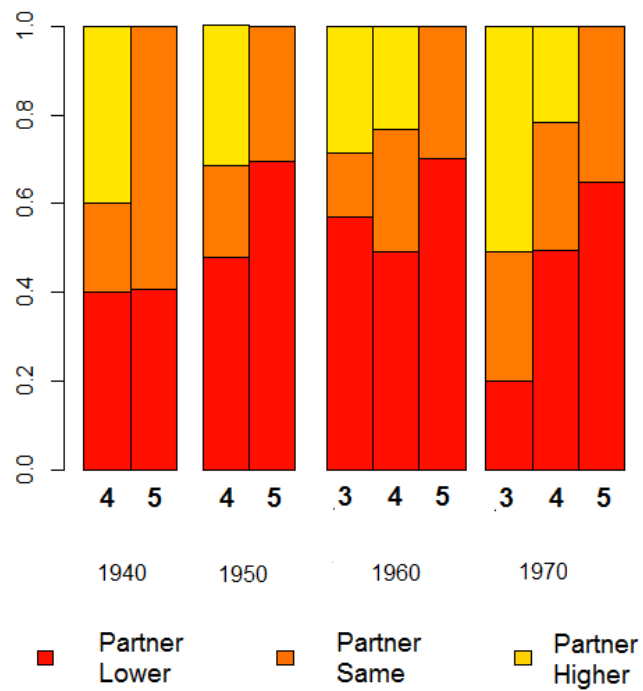
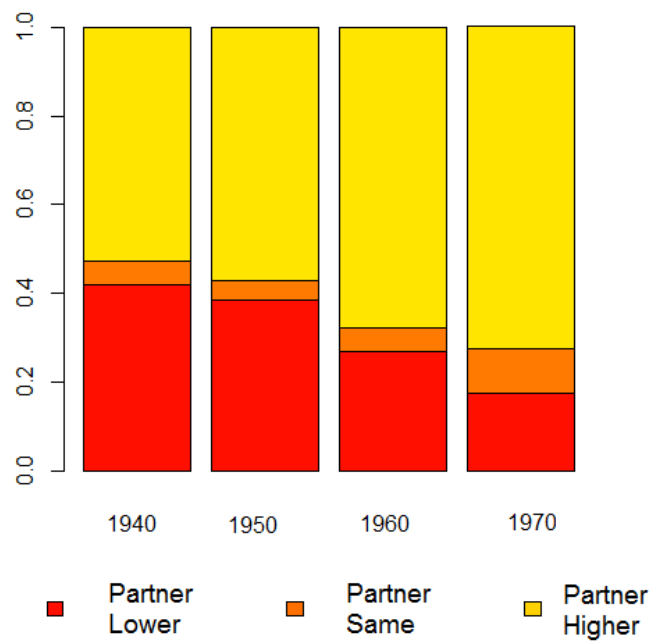


Figure 4: Relative occupational prestige in hypogamous unions by women's birth cohort



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