

Studying the education level of married couples in 22 European countries

21st-Century Cinderella



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Do people tend to marry spouses with similar or different levels of education? In what countries is such “marital homogamy,” i.e. equal levels of education between spouses, a more frequent or rarer phenomenon? A study carried out in 22 European countries seeks to answer these questions



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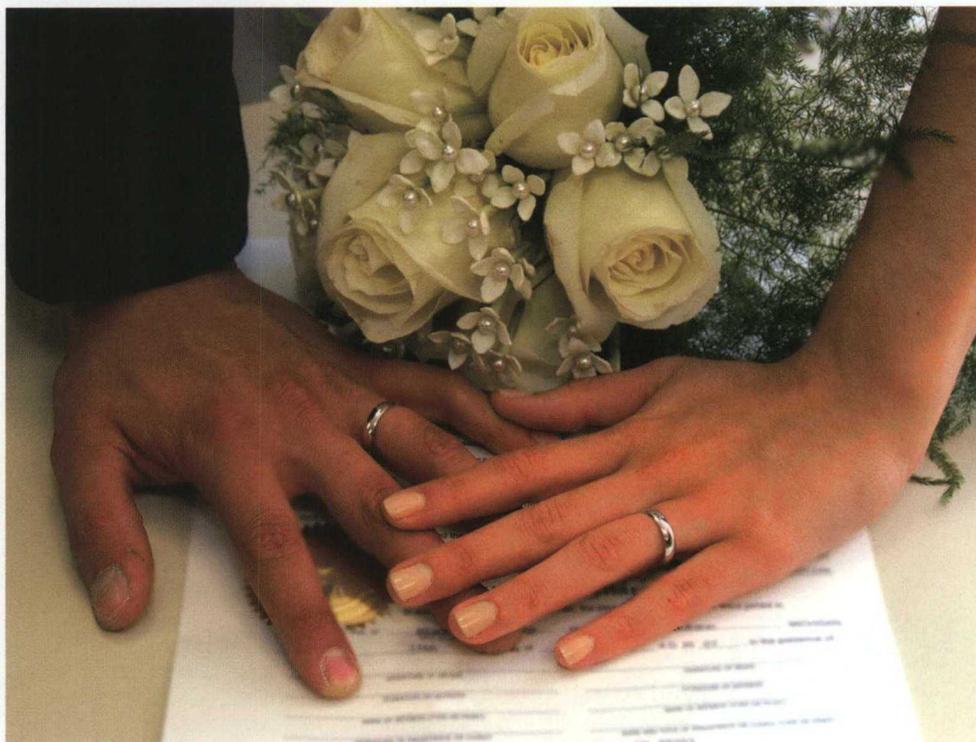
the main focus of broader investigation into spouse selection patterns, reflecting the key role education plays in determining the course of one’s life. Educational career is the fundamental channel determining one’s position within the social hierarchy, because level of education correlates with the possession of resources crucial for access to respective positions. Level of education is therefore an important criterion for the economic profitability of a marriage, a factor certain authors feel mate-seekers take under consideration. Education likewise shapes the values and preferences that affect one’s choice, as the school environment replaces the family as contacts are being made.

Research questions

We drew upon data from the European Social Survey to respond to four questions. The first pertains to the degree of association seen between the education of spouses – we identify in which countries such an

This article discusses the findings presented in one chapter of a book analyzing marital homogamy in both cross-national and cross-time perspectives. Here we focus solely on educational homogamy. This is

The latest research undermines the notion that marriage is a universal route of advancement for women. In 2002, wives were in fact seen to have a higher level of education in 9 of 21 European countries



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association is more strongly or weakly evident. Previous analyses have found the following factors to be un conducive to marital homogamy: a high level of economic development, Protestant religion, and democratization. While constraining ourselves to European societies, we attempted to enrich those findings to include additional aspects. Our second question asks between which levels of education the most prominent intermarriage barriers are evident, in particular whether such barriers are seen to increase in tandem with greater differences in education level. The third question, in turn, probes deeper into the nature of intermarriage barriers, asking whether families where both spouses have primary, uncompleted secondary, secondary and university level education show the strongest homogamy. The fourth question addresses asymmetry in marriage patterns between men and women. Existing research has indicated that men generally have a higher

level of education than women. We sought to find out more about whether this is a universal regularity, especially in the context of the changes underway in the structure of education, in many countries shifting towards more balanced educational status between men and women.

As the basis for our investigation we took data from the first and second rounds of the European Social Survey. The first round was carried out in 2002 (or 2003 in certain countries) and encompassed 22 countries in all. The second round was performed in 2004 (although delays once again postponed implementation in certain countries until 2005).

Degree of correlation

Previous international research compared data on the degree of similarity between spouses' level of education for several dozen countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and both Americas, indicating that dif-

Marital homogamy – marriages between spouses with similar levels of education – serves as a measure of the openness of society. A study from 2002 shows that the European countries with the strongest marital homogamy, i.e. with the lowest degree of openness, were Italy, Hungary, Poland, and Norway

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ferences between countries stem from non-uniform levels of economic development, democratization, and the dominant type of religion. Because our analysis concentrated on a more homogenous set of countries (Europe), we did not expect it to uncover new dependencies as far as the degree of correlation between spouse education level is concerned.

Indeed, findings for the countries we analyzed indicate that variation in the correlation between spouses' education level does not present any pattern that might be given a sensible explanation. In 2002, the strongest tendency for educational homogamy was seen in Italy, followed by Hungary, Poland, and Norway; new data from 2004 enabled the Czech Republic and Estonia to be added to this list of countries exhibiting the least degree of openness. The countries found to lie at the opposite extreme were the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, Spain, and Finland. These observances are not very amenable to any coherent interpretation in terms of the impact of common culture, historical traditions, economic level, or a division into postcommunist vs. western societies. We therefore leave open the issue of explaining the variation in educational homogamy seen among European societies. Although that is perhaps not an entirely precise assertion, since the absence of observable regularity can be treated as lending a sort of confirmation to the hypothesis that the degree of educational homogamy is curvilinearly dependent upon developmental indicators. This hypothesis maintains that the strength of that dependency wanes after a certain (appropriately high) level on the scale of development is exceeded.

Advancement through marriage?

Turning now from degree of correlation to observed patterns, we tried to verify hypotheses about the international prevalence of three phenomena. The first of these involves the occurrence of asymmetry, manifesting itself in different marital patterns based on the level of education of men and women. Previous research indicated that husbands generally have a higher level of education than wives. This finding is usually viewed in the context of something called "marital mobility," which has been com-

pared to professional mobility. A concept mainly applied to women, marital mobility involves a change in position depending on the social status of one's spouse - marriage could entail advancement or degradation within the educational hierarchy, prestige, and other measures of inequality. The findings of previous analyses, therefore, seem to confirm the occurrence of a general regularity that marriage serves as a factor of social advancement more frequently for women. While the findings of our analysis substantiated the presence of a significant gender gap, we likewise found that a clear tendency for marriages in which the woman had a higher level of education was observed in 7 of 22 countries in 2004, and in 9 of 21 countries in 2002. We can conclude it would be hard to defend the notion that marriage universally serves as a route of advancement for women - especially since this prevalence of better educated wives holds true even after we eliminate the effect of differing educational structure within the population of men and women.

Barriers ever higher

Homogamy is known to manifest itself most clearly as an overrepresentation of marriages where spouses have the same

It is frequently noted that the degree of openness of marital barriers varies over different stages in the life cycle of the individual

level of education. Various hypotheses have been posited about which level of education is conducive to homogamy to a greater or lesser degree. In the United States, stronger homogamy has been evidenced for marriages between individuals with university-level education. Nevertheless, that conclusion and its justification were not borne out in the ESS data. In 2002, the greatest degree of marital homogamy was evidenced among spouses with primary education in 16 European countries, and among spouses with university education only in 4 countries. In 2004, in turn, 15 societies showed the greatest degree of homogamy among spouses with primary education, against 7 societies showing the greatest homogamy among marriages with university educa-



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tion. These patterns occurred with equal frequency in Poland in 2002, while in the Czech Republic in 2004 the greatest homogamy was seen among spouses with uncompleted secondary education.

The fourth regularity posits the occurrence of a hierarchical scale of barriers to marriages. Consistent with the findings of previous studies, we found most countries showed an increase in marital barriers the greater the distance between the spouses' level of education. Exceptions to this were noted only in the United Kingdom in 2002, and in the Czech Republic in 2004.

In conclusion, let us readdress the unexplained variation observed among countries in terms of the degree of dependency between spouses' level of education. Such variation is strong among the ESS survey participants, yet no regularity emerges to enable those differences to be understood. The absence of any macroeconomic determinants is noteworthy, as it might suggest that the tendency towards open social structure is to a large degree independent of economic factors and the influence of culture. However, it should be borne in mind that

our findings reflect the entire adult population. It is frequently noted that the degree of openness of marital barriers varies over different stages in the life cycle of the individual (marriage patterns may differ for different age groups), and also changes over time. It also might depend on whether we are dealing with a first or second marriage. We cannot rule out, therefore, that variation in the degree of educational homogamy may be subject to specific regularities even within the European countries, but they need to be analyzed independently for different types of marriages – something we were unable to do without the appropriate data. ■

Further reading:

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- Domański H., Przybysz D. (2007). Educational homogamy in 22 European countries. *European Societies*, 10(4), 495–326.

In 16 European countries studied in 2002, the greatest marital homogamy occurred among marriages where the spouses had primary school education