



Achievement replacing ascription? Changes in homogamy in education and social class origins in Finland



Elina Mäenpää^{a,*}, Marika Jalovaara^b

^a Department of Social Research, P.O. Box 16, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

^b Department of Social Research, Assistentinkatu 7, 20014 University of Turku, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Socioeconomic homogamy – choosing a partner from one's own socioeconomic stratum – is regarded as an indicator of status-group closure in a society. Therefore, changes in socioeconomic homogamy over time are indicative of whether social barriers between status groups are growing or weakening. Various theoretical perspectives suggest that over the course of modernization, group boundaries in terms of socioeconomic family background become easier to cross, whereas homogamy with regard to individually achieved socioeconomic position strengthens. Using Finnish register data and log-linear modeling we analyze changes in homogamy with respect to educational attainment (achieved status) in cohorts born in 1957–1979, and in homogamy with respect to social class of the parental family (ascribed status) in cohorts born in 1965–1979. We examine the marriages and cohabitations of 30-year-old women in each birth cohort. The results indicate that homogamy in social class origins has weakened only among children of farmers. General educational homogamy shows a small increase from the oldest to the youngest cohort, but the trends differ depending on the level of education: homogamy has strengthened among those with a low level of education, whereas it has weakened among the highly educated. The results further show that women are increasingly inclined to partner with men who are less educated than themselves. The decline in homogamy among the higher educated indicates more social openness in Finnish society, but at the same time the increase in homogamy among those with few educational resources may be a sign of increasing marginalization of this group.

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1. Introduction

Socioeconomic homogamy – similarity of partners in terms of social and economic characteristics – is considered an indicator of status-group closure, whereas heterogamy signifies that members of the different groups view each other as social equals (Blossfeld, 2009; Kalmijn, 1991a, 1998; Smits, Ultee, & Lammers, 1998). Changes in homogamy over time are thus indicative of the direction and intensity of social change in a society: homogamy trends reveal whether boundaries between status groups are becoming lower, or whether members of different groups increasingly interact among themselves. Given that co-residential partners pool and cumulate their resources, trends in socioeconomic homogamy also contribute to the development of inequality between families and households (Blossfeld, 2009; Schwartz &

Mare, 2005). Moreover, among families with children, changes in homogamy also reflect changes in the contexts in which children are raised and in which the intergenerational transmission of social status occurs (Schwartz & Mare, 2005).

Cross-national comparative studies indicate that compared with other European countries, the tendency toward educational homogamy is relatively weak in Nordic societies (Domański & Przybysz, 2007; Katrňák, Fučík, & Luijckx, 2012). Using register data that extends up to the early 2000s, this study focuses on the question of whether and how socioeconomic homogamy has changed in the Nordic context over recent decades and analyzes trends in homogamy with regard to education and social class origins in Finland. The analysis of educational homogamy covers cohorts born in 1957–1979, and the analysis of social class origins those born in 1965–1979.

The second half of the 20th century was a time of rapid economic and social change in Finland. Up until and immediately after the Second World War the country was predominantly agrarian, but it industrialized and developed into a modern society at a fast pace: 46% of the Finnish labor force worked in agriculture

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: elina.maenpaa@helsinki.fi (E. Mäenpää), marika.jalovaara@utu.fi (M. Jalovaara).

and forestry in 1950, dropping to 20% by 1970 (Statistics Finland, 1972). This development was accompanied by extensive migration from rural areas to cities: between 1950 and 1970 the urban population increased from one third to more than half of the population (Statistics Finland, 1972). Post-war reconstruction was followed by active building of the welfare state. The reform of the basic education system in 1972 stipulated nine years of compulsory schooling, the aim being to provide equal educational opportunities for all children irrespective of their place of residence and social background (Pekkarinen, Uusitalo, & Kerr, 2009). Under the previous system students were allocated to academic and vocational tracks at the age of 11, but the reform postponed this choice until the age of 16 (Pekkarinen et al., 2009). Higher education also expanded in the 1960s and 1970s through the founding of seven new universities and the development of existing ones. Although the proportion of Finnish women in paid work was among the largest in the Western world already in the post-war decades (Julkunen, 1999), the 1973 Child Day Care Act which required municipalities to provide publicly funded day care for children further facilitated the combining of paid work and family life for both sexes. All in all, the birth cohorts of the 1970s grew up in a society that was socially and economically quite different from that of the 1950s. In this paper, we ask to what extent societal changes such as transformations in the class structure, educational expansion and increasing economic equality between men and women were reflected in the patterns of partnership formation. Did the significance of socioeconomic status differences in partner choice change between cohorts born in the 1950s and those born in the 1970s?

The patterns of family formation have changed considerably since the 1970s. One significant change was the emergence of non-marital cohabitation. Only one in ten of first unions among Finnish women born in 1941–1943 began as cohabitations, as opposed to three out of four among those born in 1953–1955 (Finnäs, 1995). There was a further increase to over 90% among women born in 1962–1964, and the proportion remained stable in cohorts born in the 1970s (Finnäs, 1995; Jalovaara, 2012). On the whole, the timing and prevalence of first-union formation did not change much in the cohorts born between the 1940s and the 1960s – more and more couples merely started their union by starting to live together without marrying first (Pitkänen & Jalovaara, 2007). Cohabitation has also increasingly become a long-term alternative to marriage, and childbearing within cohabiting unions is common: currently over 40% of children in Finland are born to unmarried mothers (Statistics Finland, 2013). The establishment of cohabitation as a socially accepted type of partnership has rendered young married couples a more select group than before, and therefore analyses based solely on marriages are likely to give an incomplete and potentially biased picture of the changes in partnering patterns. Given that the register data in our use contains data on the formation and dissolution of both marriages and non-marital cohabitations, we have the opportunity to examine homogamy trends in all co-residential unions.

Measures of homogamy are typically divided into *absolute* and *relative* indicators. The absolute rate of socioeconomic homogamy refers to the observed percentage of couples who share the same socioeconomic status. Absolute homogamy reflects not only the degree to which persons prefer a partner with a similar status, but also the availability of partners in that position (Smits et al., 1998). For example, if there are fewer men than women with a high level of education, some highly educated women will not be able to partner with a highly educated man even though they would prefer to do so. Typically, researchers are interested in the relative rates of socioeconomic homogamy. These rates are controlled for the differences in the socioeconomic distributions of women and men. Relative homogamy is thus a better indicator of preferences and

norms in partner choice and the openness of status groups than absolute homogamy. We use log-linear models that control for changes in the distributions of educational level and social class origins among women and men to analyze changes in the relative rates of homogamy. Although the main focus of the paper is on relative homogamy, we also give an overview of changes in the absolute rates. These figures are important, too, since they indicate how common it is to partner within one's own groups, or to cross social and cultural boundaries in partner choice.

2. Theoretical background

Our study examines homogamy trends in two dimension of socioeconomic status: social class origins and individual educational attainment. The former is an indicator of an individual's ascribed status – the status that is determined through the family of origin – and it reflects one's social, cultural and economic conditions during the earliest stages of the life course. The latter, on the other hand, is an indicator of one's achieved status, and it reflects those social, cultural and economic resources that are acquired through one's own orientations and efforts in the later phases of life. How might homogamy tendencies with respect to these two status dimensions have changed in the study cohorts? Has the relative importance of similarity in ascribed and achieved status altered? These questions are approached here through what is known about changes in the social and demographic factors that are suggested to contribute to homogamy in the sociological literature.

First, one driving force behind socioeconomic homogamy is individual preference for a partner who shares similar values, tastes and lifestyles. Cultural similarity is preferred as it facilitates mutual understanding and confirms the partners' behaviors and worldviews (Coombs, 1962; Kalmijn, 1991a, 1998). Given that socioeconomic resources are correlates of tastes, values, attitudes and worldviews, cultural outlooks of the partners are more likely to match if the partners share a similar socioeconomic status. It has been suggested that the impact of parental family on adulthood values and lifestyles has declined in the course of modernization, and instead, education strongly shapes individual cultural resources, and hence partner selection decisions (Blossfeld, 2009; Hansen, 1995; Kalmijn, 1991a). One might thus expect the significance of homogamy in social class origins to have diminished, and educational homogamy to have become more salient.

Second, emphasizing the economic rather than the cultural side of socioeconomic status, the resource-competition theory implies that people seek a partner with the maximum amount of resources (Kalmijn, 1998). Socioeconomic homogamy is the outcome of a two-sided competition: given that high-status individuals are not willing to form unions with persons who have fewer resources, those in advantageous socioeconomic positions tend to partner with each other, whereas those in lower positions have to choose among themselves if they wish to partner (Erola, Härkönen, & Dronkers, 2012; Halpin & Chan, 2003; Kalmijn, 1998). As education becomes the key determinant of an individual's socioeconomic resources and overrides the influence of family background on status attainment, people will increasingly focus on educational attainment rather than socioeconomic origins in their partner selection (Blossfeld, 2009; Kalmijn, 1991a; Smits et al., 1998). This perspective, too, implies increasing educational homogamy and declining homogamy in socioeconomic family background. What is likely to further accentuate educational homogamy is the fact that a family with two breadwinners is the social standard in Finland: as women with plentiful socioeconomic resources become more attractive to men, the tendency toward educational hypergamy – women partnering with men who are more highly educated than themselves – weakens and homogamy strengthens (Blossfeld, 2009; Halpin & Chan, 2003).

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