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## Partner selection and social capital in the status attainment process

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### ABSTRACT

Why is individual success so strongly affected by parental socioeconomic status? We argue that parental socioeconomic status affects the socioeconomic status of one's romantic partner, thereby partially determining one's own social capital and socioeconomic status. Censored-inflated structural equation models using data from the Netherlands Longitudinal Lifecourse Study (NELLS) and British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) confirm these relationships, while cross-lagged analyses suggest that they may be causal in nature. The strong tendency for people to have a romantic partner that reflects their socioeconomic origin shows how far the influence of the parental home stretches and why it does so.

### 1. Introduction

Do parents shape the social class outcomes of their children by, in part, determining the social status of their romantic partners? Society at large has barriers that reduce the likelihood of romantic relationships between people from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Kalmijn, 1991; Schwartz, 2013). Individuals of different economic classes live, work, and recreate in different places, making partnerships that bridge economic levels unlikely. Attitudes and behaviors are shaped by class origins and thus individuals may find those with different backgrounds to be less comfortable to interact with and less attractive as romantic partners (Bourdieu, 1984). And if such relationships do form despite these impediments, third parties may respond with tacit, or even overt, disapproval (Kalmijn, 1991).

We show just how critical parental socioeconomic status (SES) is to one's partner choice in general, and the socioeconomic status of one's partner in particular. In addition, we show how this influence acts as an important mechanism through which parents transmit their socioeconomic status to offspring. We argue that partners can directly help the individual in the job market (e.g., Bernasco et al., 1998), and can indirectly help by building and activating social capital. Through these mechanisms, partner selection plays a key role in the status attainment process (e.g., Blau and Duncan, 1967).

A large and growing literature points to the role of network members in general (e.g., Lin, 1999) as well as, grandparents (e.g., Chan and Boliver, 2013), great grandparents (e.g., Knigge, 2016), and siblings (e.g., Knigge et al., 2014) in individual status attainment. Yet, attention to one's most intimate network member, one's partner, is still scarce. Nonetheless, a limited number of studies focusing solely on the role of a partner in gaining job status do exist. Recent research often finds a positive effect from a partner – probably because progressive norms have become more influential (Verbakel and De Graaf, 2009). Still much remains unknown about the underlying mechanisms. One of the crucial mechanisms through which a partner may affect one's job status is by transmitting social capital (Verbakel and De Graaf, 2009). Recent longitudinal research shows that partners have an effect on network size, and frequency of social contact (Kalmijn, 2012; Rözer et al., 2015). However, it remains unclear to what extent partners also affect

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other aspects of one's social capital, like the job status of one's network members, which might be a particularly relevant characteristic for obtaining assistance in the labor market (Lin, 1999; Van der Gaag, 2005). Moreover, the relevant causal links between social capital and job status have been disputed (e.g., Mouw, 2003). Recent studies have suggested that there are social capital effects above selection effects, but these studies remain limited in number (Bian et al., 2015; Chen and Volker, 2015; McDonald, 2015).

We innovate by extending the importance of social capital in the status attainment process to include the role of one's most intimate tie, one's romantic partner, and his/her effect on one's own social capital. Moreover, we employ innovative methods in an effort to more clearly resolve issues of causality. Finally, we rely on panel data from the NETHERLANDS Longitudinal Lifecourse Study (NELLS) and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) in order to evaluate the generalizability of our findings.

We selected these datasets because of the impressive quality of their data. The NELLS, our primary dataset, is a unique panel dataset containing high quality information about the social capital, education and job status of the individual as well as the individual's parents, partner *and* network members. The BHPS contains lower quality network data and fewer control variables, but offers more waves of measurement, as well as higher response rates and lower panel attrition, where the NELLS is comparatively weaker. Our primary aim is not to identify cross-country differences as this would require a greater and more purposeful selection of countries, but to identify common patterns as they would indicate that our findings are quite robust.

The Netherlands and Britain, as Northern European countries, are in many respects quite similar. As such, we think it reasonable to expect that a partner and social capital play a crucial and broadly similar role in the status attainment process for both nations. Indeed, consistent findings can likely be generalized in a straightforward way to other Northern European countries, and probably modern Western countries in general. However, The Netherlands and Britain also differ in some respects. In particular they differ in their levels of mobility and inequality; with inequality traditionally higher in the British (class) society than in The Netherlands (Black and Devereux, 2011). Therefore, the patterns we hope to observe might be slightly weaker in The Netherlands, indicating a more open society.

Although not the focus of our paper, we also examine potential differences between men and women. Our findings suggest that for men and women a high status partner leads to a high status job, in part because it leads to more social capital, and that the status of one's partner is partly a function of the socioeconomic status of one's parents. Critically, the majority of our findings are consistent across the datasets, indicating that our results are, indeed, quite robust.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. *The classic status attainment model*

In Blau and Duncan (1967) classic status attainment model one's job status not only depends on education, but also on one's socioeconomic origin. Origin is directly associated with job status, for example when children inherit the business of their parents, or when parents use their authority to help their children in the job market. Socioeconomic origin also influences outcomes indirectly through education; higher socioeconomic origins make it easier to obtain advanced degrees, which lead to higher status careers. Parents can influence their children's educational performance by, for example, using their own educational skills to help their children with schoolwork (De Graaf et al., 2000); familiarizing their children with the proper cultural attitudes and etiquette to perform well in school (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977); and using their knowledge of, and access to, professionals, as well as financial resources to maintain their children in the right school and academic track (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997).

### 2.2. *The role of social capital in the status attainment model*

An alternative way that socioeconomic origin might be associated with one's socioeconomic status is through one's social capital, or the resources embedded in one's social network (for a literature review see Lin, 1999). Social capital is increasingly seen as a by-product of other activities and exerts its influence primarily when individuals are not actively searching for a new job (McDonald, 2015). For example, social contacts often deliver job-relevant information through routine conversations, can increase one's prestige or ability to influence events, and can serve as valuable credentials in their own right (Bian et al., 2015; Lin, 2001; McDonald, 2015). The social contacts who are most helpful for status attainment are people with a high socioeconomic status because they typically have more valuable information, are better for one's reputation, and are able to exert influence on the behalf of the individual. When people are actively looking for a job, high status contacts can also provide information about desirable high status jobs (Chen and Volker, 2015; Hällsten et al., 2016; Lin and Dumin, 1986; Lin, 1999; Li et al., 2008).

Socioeconomic origin is an important predictor of one's social capital (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2002; Lin and Dumin, 1986; Volker and Flap, 1999). Parental background may be associated with one's social capital because parents' can act on a child's behalf, and because children become acquainted with many of the social contacts of their parents. The upper class also lives in certain neighborhoods, and sends their children to certain schools and organizations, creating opportunities for their children to form network connections to the offspring of other upper class parents (Blau, 1994; Mare, 2011; Mollenhorst et al., 2008). Furthermore, children learn certain norms and skills directly from their parents and imitate their behavior (Van Houten et al., 2013).

Parents can also indirectly influence the social capital of their children by influencing their education. Education creates opportunities to meet similar people, and skills and interests are determined by education. Therefore people tend to associate with those who are similar on education (Kalmijn, 1991). Meeting opportunities and choices reinforce one another to produce educational homophily (McPherson et al., 2001).

Based on the above, and in addition to the classic status attainment model, we expect, and will later test, that:

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