

Who contacts whom? Education-specific patterns of online mate selection

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Abstract

Data from an online dating platform are used to study the importance of education for initiating and replying to online contacts. We analyze how these patterns are influenced by educational homophily and opportunity structures. Social exchange theory and mate search theory are used to explain online mate selection behavior. Our results show that educational homophily is the dominant mechanism in online mate choice. Similarity in education significantly increases the rate of both sending and replying to initial contacts. After controlling for the opportunity structure on the platform, the preference for similar educated others is the most important factor, particularly among women. Our results also support the exchange theoretical idea that homophily increases with educational level. If dissimilarity contacting patterns are found, women are highly reluctant to contact partners with lower educational qualifications. Men, in contrast, do not have any problems to contact lower qualified women. Studies of educational homogamy generally show that couples where women have a higher level of education are rare. Our study demonstrates that is mainly the result of women's reluctance to contact lower qualified men.

Introduction

The remarkable individual propensity to associate with a partner who has similar characteristics is a recurrent empirical finding in the study of mate selection. From a social structural point of view, this *homophily* has far reaching consequences for the reproduction of social inequalities in modern society. One aspect that is particularly important for the process of homophily is an individual's education. More than ever before, education has become the pivotal determinant of occupational success, and it also reflects the cultural resources influencing individuals' preferences for specific partners. Therefore, educational homophily suggests that the degree of social inequality engendered in individuals' life courses will be further enhanced through their marriage choices, because the advantageous (and disadvantageous) economic and sociocultural resources of two individuals are then pooled and cumulated (cf. Mare 1991, Blossfeld & Timm 2003).

Several recent empirical studies show that *educational homogamy* has even increased in many industrialized countries in recent decades (for an overview cf. Blossfeld 2009,

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Kalmijn 1998, Mare 1991). Blossfeld & Timm (2003) argued that the formation of similarly educated couples is largely influenced by structural contact opportunities in the educational system. In addition, women's changing economic role in dual-earner societies has increased the importance of their education and labor force attachment (cf. Blossfeld & Drobnič 2001, Eggebeen & Hawkins 1990). As a consequence, men in more recent birth cohorts should increasingly prefer highly qualified women, and this should accentuate the level of homogamy even more as the traditional marriage pattern of the male breadwinner declines.

Despite numerous studies reporting empirical evidence favoring either the structural or the intentional mechanisms of mate selection, we still do not know how structural opportunities and individual strategies actually operate together: is educational homogamy primarily a consequence of the structure of the educational system, and thus, simply an institutionally preformed phenomenon? Or is educational homogamy more a result of homophily, implying that it is actors making intentional choices who systematically want to associate with similarly educated partners? The present study addresses this question by analyzing the process of mate selection in online dating. We focus on education-specific patterns of assortative mating and examine whether and to what extent similarly educated participants in online dating platforms contact each other on a specific German Internet dating website and also whether there are gender-specific variations in their decisions.

The Internet marriage market has grown rapidly in the last few years, and is now regularly used for mate search by about 5.5 million Germans (Schulz et al. 2008). Since becoming a mass phenomenon, online dating is often regarded in the literature as a driving force in the reduction of social inequalities, because such online platforms are less restricted and quite open (cf. Illouz 2006). The implication is that people meet and mate beyond traditional social barriers. If this was indeed the case, the recent macro level findings indicating high levels of homogamy should primarily be an outcome of structural or institutional selection effects on local marriage markets rather than homophile individual preferences and strategies. Up to now, there have been only a few empirical studies of online dating (e. g. Fiore & Donath 2005, Hitsch et al. 2006, Hitsch et al. 2009, Lee 2008), and there is need for more empirical evidence to assess the relevance of preferences in the process of mate selection.

Our choice of the digital marriage market to analyze mate selection has at least one substantive and one methodological advantage. Substantively, access to online dating platforms is neither restricted, nor is the context institutionally prestructured or selective compared with so many contexts in everyday life. Although there might still be a remarkable digital divide in modern societies (e. g. Dewan & Riggins 2005, Schulz et al. 2008), once this barrier has been passed, the digital marriage market is an open meeting space compared with the restricted contact opportunities in everyday life. If users continue to frame their decisions along educational divides, we can conclude that this is an expression of individual preference.

Methodologically, online dating offers unique data for sociological analyses, because it enables us to explicitly study social interactions on the microlevel. Particularly when investigating the very early phase of the mate selection process, this is an excellent source of information. It enables us to work with nonreactive observational data on mutual contact processes recorded without contacting the platform users. Every action and decision on this online dating platform, from a single mouse click to long e-mail messages, is logged in a database, allowing an accurate time-dependent reconstruction of the single phases of the mate selection process. Thus, we are able to analyze the very early decisions in

the partner selection process in great detail by looking at who contacts whom first by e-mail (initial contact) and who replies to whose contact offers. Indeed, it is during this phase of the mating process that decisions are made about whether a resource relation between two users might be rewarding, and these early decisions condition every later phase. According to the hypothesis on the path dependence of social phenomena, these early decisions in the process of partner choice set the course for the further development of relationships.

In our paper, we will first develop the theoretical framework for our analysis. This framework is based mainly on exchange theory, and allows us to derive hypotheses on education-specific contact behavior for men and women within the context of online mate search. We will then present our empirical results, before finally drawing several conclusions on what can be learned from our study.

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