Gender implications of new assortative mating patterns: mating down and sharing more equally the domestic work?

Clara Cortina[1]
Anna Martínez Mendiola[1]

1 Universitat Pompeu Fabra. 25 Ramon Trias Fargas street, 08005 Barcelona, Spain.

Extended Abstract

Introduction and hypotheses

The expansion of education and the closing of the gender gap in education have reshaped assortative mating patterns in Western societies, reducing traditional educational hypergamy while strengthening educational homogamy (Van Bavel, Schwartz, & Esteve 2018; Esteve et al. 2016). However, the impact of this increasing equality in the composition of couples on the relative socioeconomic status of partners is not straightforward. Existing research suggest that educational homogamy has only had a marginal effect on differences in partners' income and occupational positions (Breen and Salazar 2011; Qian 2017). In other words, since women generally experience lower returns on education than men, educational homogamy covers the actual socioeconomic hypergamy of women (Baizan and Cortina 2022).

In this paper, we argue that due to the persistent lower status of women, the uneven division of housework and caregiving responsibilities between men and women remains far from being overcome (Bianchi et al. 2000). Consistent with the resources theory (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; Brines 1993) our main hypothesis is that educational hypogamic couples will continue to exhibit an uneven distribution of tasks at home unless partners reach a more egalitarian occupational position. If the division of household labor is primarily determined by the amount of resources each partner bring to the relationship, economic dependence may compel women to largely engage in household work and caregiving to trade for economic resources. Therefore, in societies in which educational expansion is not followed by actual gender equity, assortative mating patterns (Kalmijn 1998) are an additional factor or reinforcement of gender differentials in society.

Data and methods

We take an innovative approach by adopting a longitudinal perspective to analyze the dynamic nature of couples' arrangements in paid and unpaid work. Drawing on data from the British Understanding Societies panel data (UKHLS) and the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP),

we explore the relationship between partners' educational and occupational characteristics and their division of housework and caregiving in these two countries in recent years. Both the UKHLS and SOEP datasets are panel datasets that allow us to identify co-residing couples (selecting opposite-sex couples only) and follow them over time to assess the emergence and patterns of intensification of the uneven distribution of domestic work. For the British case we combine the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), selecting all the individuals who are present in both studies. This covers a long time span going from 1991 to 2019 (pre-covid wave).

For our research purpose, we first select harmonized time-use variables, which provide insights about how household tasks are shared among (same-sex) couples. These variables are different in each dataset: in the German data respondents report the number of weekday hours in housework and the number of weekday hours in childcare while in the British data there is a set of about the partners' distribution of different household tasks: grocery shopping, cooking, washing/ironing, cleaning. It is worth noting that for the German dataset the variables are available yearly and for the German dataset and for the first part of the British dataset (BHPS) these variables are available annually since 1994 (wave 4), while there are available only every two waves since the second one for the UKHLS. Combining the information from these variables we compute our main dependent variable: distribution of domestic work and care of the children.

Secondly, we use the educational attainment level (highest qualification) of the spouses and the status (both social class of origin and occupational category of the current job) to compute the two main explanatory variables: educational and status assortative mating. These variables are coded in three categories: homogamous (similar level of both spouses), hypogamous (higher level of the female spouse) and hypergamous (lower level of the female spouse).

We take into consideration other relevant variables including the main sociodemographic characteristics of the partners (age, nationality, etc.) and of the couple (type of partnership, duration of the partnership, etc.). A series of panel data regressions using random-effects models will be applied.

Preliminary results

We present here preliminary descriptive results for the British case only, using data from wave 10 (corresponding to 2015). We have now chosen to examine one single variable of housework division (distribution of cleaning tasks) and one related to caregiving (responsibility for childcare). The measurement of status homogamy is based on the current occupation of the individuals.

According to our expectations, we find that educational assortative mating patterns do not perfectly align with status assortative mating (Table 1). Firstly, we observe that educational homogamy is more prevalent than status homogamy. Secondly, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that 35% of couples where the woman has a higher education level than the man still exhibit hypergamous status patterns (Table 3).

Furthermore, our analysis indicates that the distribution of housework tasks is more uneven compared to caregiving duties. Notably, both responsibilities primarily fall on women (Table 2). However, this distribution varies significantly depending on the homogamy profile of the couple. Specifically, the distribution is least uneven in homogamous couples and particularly in hypogamous couples, where the woman holds a dominant position (see Table 4 and Table 5). As hypothesized, this hypogamous effect is more pronounced concerning occupational status than education.

Table 1. Distribution of the couples according to the educational and status assortative mating

Educational homogamy		Status homogamy	
	%		%
Same education	36.67	Same class	22.50
Male more educated than female	28.00	Male with higher class than female	48.83
Female more educated than male	35.33	Female with higher class than male	28.67
Total	100.00	Total	100.00

Table 2. Distribution of the couples according to the distribution of housework and childcare

Who is responsible for childcare		Who does the cleaning	
	%		%
Mainly the female spouse	49.33	Mainly the female spouse	66.67
Mainly the male spouse	3.67	Mainly the male spouse	4.33
Jointly	46.50	Jointly	24.50
Some one else	0.50	Some one else	4.50
Total	100.00	Total	100.00

Note: according to the woman   Note: according to the woman

Table 3. Correspondance between educational and status assortative mating

	Same status	Male with higher status than female	Female with higher status than male	Total
Same education	24.55	48.64	26.82	100
Male more educated than female	19.64	66.67	13.69	100
Female more educated than male	22.64	34.91	42.45	100

Table 4. Distribution of housework and childcare by educational assortative mating

	Mainly the female spouse	Mainly the male spouse	Jointly	Some one else	Total
Who does the cleaning					
Same education	64.55	3.64	25	6.82	100
Male more educated than female	74.4	3.57	18.45	3.57	100
Female more educated than male	62.74	5.66	28.77	2.83	100
Who is responsible for childcare					
Same education	49.55	2.73	47.27	0.45	100
Male more educated than female	54.76	3.57	41.07	0.6	100
Female more educated than male	44.81	4.72	50	0.47	100

Table 5. Distribution of housework and childcare by status assortative mating

	Mainly the female spouse	Mainly the male spouse	Jointly	Some one else	Total
Who does the cleaning					
Same class	58.52	5.93	31.11	4.44	100
Male with higher class than female	72.7	2.73	19.11	5.46	100
Female with higher class than male	62.79	5.81	28.49	2.91	100
Who is responsible for childcare					
Same class	36.3	2.96	59.26	1.48	100
Male with higher class than female	61.43	1.37	36.86	0.34	100
Female with higher class than male	38.95	8.14	52.91	0	100

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