

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCE ON MATE SELECTION: IS THERE AN EFFECT OF ADOLESCENT NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTERISTICS ON FUTURE PARTNER CHOICE?

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DESCRIPTION OF THE TOPIC AND THEORETICAL FOCUS

Extensive research on mate selection shows that similarities in terms of social status, education, religion and geographical origin are important factors in partner choice. In this study we will expand on this research by considering an additional factor that may increase the probability of a match: coming from a neighborhood with shared socio-demographic characteristics.

In the neighborhood effects literature, the importance of neighborhood context for the development of social norms, behavioral patterns and demographic outcomes has repeatedly been stressed (Ainsworth 2002; Galster 2007). Empirical evidence also indicates that neighborhood context can shape life course trajectories with respect to education, family formation and occupational careers. Using Swedish data, significant contextual effects have been found for socio-economic careers (Andersson 2004), educational outcomes (Andersson and Subramanian 2006; Andersson and Malmberg 2014), income and poverty (Malmberg and Andersson 2014), social unrest (Malmberg, Andersson and Östh 2013), and fertility (Andersson, Malmberg and Thomson 2014).

Within homogamy studies, studies on spatial homogamy, or the similarity of partners regarding their geographical origins or background, have accounted for some geographical dimensions of partner choice, although it remains a relatively under-researched component of homogamy. Spatial homogamy is usually operationalized as the geographical distance between partners at birth or before co-residence. Most studies find an increasing frequency of marriage with decreasing geographical distances between the addresses of partners at time of marriage or cohabitation, across the globe and across time, though distances are increasing (e.g. Bossard 1932; Clegg et al. 1998; Haandrikman et al. 2008; Haandrikman 2011; Ouyang et al. 2009). Most studies have in common that they are cross-sectional and based on small samples. The literature on residential segregation, on the other hand, is much richer, but has not focused on effects on partner choice, with a few dated exceptions (Peach 1974; 1980; Pullum and Peri 1999; Rogoff Ramsøy 1966).

Social homogamy has been studied much more often, stressing the importance of a similar educational level, income class, occupation and social class (e.g. Haandrikman and Van Wissen 2012; Kalmijn 1991; Schwartz and Mare 2005; Uunk 1996). Economic theories of marriage largely refer back to Becker (1973), arguing that people mate assortatively because marriage will occur when an individual's utility level can be increased. Mating with a partner with the most attractive economic resources will lead to the highest utility. Spatial homogamy studies have found that especially the higher educated and those with high incomes find partners at longer distances. We do not know, however, what the influence of neighbourhood context is on partner choice. Do the higher educated, for instance, match with persons from similar neighbourhoods across urban areas?

The partner choice literature generally assumes three factors to be of primary importance: preferences, norms and opportunities (Kalmijn 1998). In the neighborhood effects literature, the following mechanisms are often considered to be behind contextual effects: social control, collective socialization, social capital and institutional characteristics (Ainsworth 2002; Galster 2007). Applied to partner choice, we may assume that individuals who grow up in the same type of neighborhood are likely to spend their young adult years in similar activities and, thus, have an increased probability of meeting and developing romantic relationships compared to individuals that have been linked into diverging life course trajectories. In addition, having similar contextually influenced norms and attitudes may provide additional support for partner formation.

The paper will address the following research question: Is partner choice affected by neighborhood context in youth? We contribute to the homogamy literature by including neighborhood homogamy in adolescence, based on a unique measure of neighborhood and using longitudinal geocoded register data for the whole of Sweden. Furthermore, we will enrich the contextual effects literature with a study on contextual effects on partner choice.

EMPIRICAL DESIGN, DATA AND METHODS

In order to analyze contextual influences on partner choice, the study employs a longitudinal design, using register data from the PLACE database, administered by Statistics Sweden and managed at Uppsala University. PLACE contains individual level register-based data for all persons living in Sweden in the period 1990-2012, with geocodes of all 100 by 100 meter squares. The present papers takes a cohort approach, focusing on the 1980 birth cohort, which enables us to follow a group of individuals with similar age, historical and socio-economic circumstances and examine contextual effects on their partner choice.

Neighborhood context is measured in 1995 at age 15 and partner selection is monitored from age 18 to age 32. We use two indicators for partnering: marriage or parenting a child (as Swedish register data does not allow for identification of unmarried cohabitation). To be included in our study individuals had to have stayed in the same geographical location between the ages of 14 and 18 years. This non-mobility criterion, which reduces the sample by 15%, is imposed in order to ensure that individuals have been affected by the same surroundings during the exposure period. Individuals with missing data on parental background are also excluded. Of the 102,592 individuals born in 1980, 74,648 individuals are included in our final sample.

After a descriptive analysis of median distances between partners at age 15, a conditional logit model will be estimated to examine whether coming from neighborhoods with similar socio-demographic characteristics matters for partner choice. In the model, actual partner matches are compared to alternative matches; the latter drawn randomly from the dataset that will be spatially stratified. A similar method was used by Haandrikman and Van Wissen (2012), though they only used individual level data.

We will also be able to test whether neighborhood importance varies between ethnic groups, gender, parents' education and housing type. We will employ a multilevel model, with both individual background variables relevant for partner matching and contextual effects in youth.

Contextual measurement

Our approach to context measurement introduces two novelties: first, and most importantly, we introduce contextual measures that are based on individually defined and scalable neighborhoods. Second, we introduce a factor-analysis based representation of the spatial variation in a socio-demographic context as a means to manage the wealth of information resulting from scalability.

We measure neighborhood population compositions using individual centered neighborhoods of fixed population size. Thus, we use register data containing information of individual residential location to compute contextual variables based on the population composition among an individual's nearest 12, 25, 50, 100, 200, 400, 800, 1600, 3200, 6400, 12800, and 25600 neighbors for 1995. The Equipop software was developed by John Östh in order to address the modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP) in segregation measurement (Östh, Malmberg and Andersson 2011). Recently, Equipop has been used to analyze residential segregation in LA (Östh, Clark and Malmberg 2014) and Sweden (Östh, Malmberg and Andersson 2014). In this software, individualized neighborhoods are obtained by expanding a circular buffer around each residential location until the population encircled by the buffer corresponds to the population threshold chosen. When this threshold is reached, the program computes aggregate statistics on a selected socio-economic variable for the encircled population.

We will use the following socio-demographic indicators based on parental background to account for neighborhood effects: educational level, social allowance, family type, disposable income, born abroad, unemployment and housing tenure. For these indicators, we will calculate aggregate statistics for the population of individualized neighborhoods encompassing the nearest 25 to 25,600 neighbors of the individuals in the birth cohort.

To be able to make the resulting number of variables (12 different levels of neighborhood scale and seven indicators) manageable, and avoid problems of multicollinearity, we will subject the contextual indicators to a factor analysis that compresses the indicators to a smaller number of factors that jointly capture more than 79% of the original variation. The factors influence a varying degree of neighbors as contextual variables. The resulting analysis provides an opportunity to analyze the scale dependence of contextual effects.

EXPECTED FINDINGS

Earlier studies using the same cohort have shown that neighborhood context has significant effects on educational achievement, early income career, and the timing of family formation (Andersson and Malmberg 2014; Malmberg and Andersson 2014; Andersson, Malmberg and Thomson 2014). This suggests that coming from neighborhoods with shared characteristics can have a positive influence on the likelihood that two individuals become partners. In addition, this study may help to clarify whether partner choice patterns vary between individuals brought up in different types of neighborhoods.

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