



Assortative mating after divorce: a test of two competing hypotheses using marginal models[☆]

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Abstract

We analyze data from 927 remarried men and women to examine the association between spouses' educational attainment, social class, and age in their first and current union. Applying marginal homogeneity models, we test two competing hypotheses: current unions of remarried people are more homogamous than their first unions (the learning-hypothesis) and remarried people's current unions are less homogamous than their first unions (the marriage market hypothesis). With respect to education, the evidence supports the learning-hypothesis for remarried men, but not for remarried women. With respect to social class, the evidence supports neither the learning-hypothesis nor the marriage market hypothesis. Finally, with respect to age, we find, for both men and women, support for the marriage market hypothesis. We conclude that the remarriage market may have become more beneficial to remarrying men to find a more educationally homogamous partner than their first partner. Moreover, greater age heterogeneity of available spouses in the remarriage market appears to be an important determinant of weaker age homogamy in remarriage.

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1. Introduction

People tend to choose a partner with a similar social background. Sociologists have extensively studied assortative mating with respect to such social background characteristics as education, class, and religion (Hendrickx et al., 1995; Kalmijn, 1994; Mare, 1991). These studies have focused predominantly on assortative mating in people's first marital or cohabiting unions. However, due to the increase in the number of divorces—in The Netherlands, about 30 percent of existing marriages will dissolve into divorce—remarriages and re-cohabitation have become increasingly important. For example, in The Netherlands it is estimated that about 66 percent of those who were married and who experienced a divorce will have entered a new union within 6 years (van Huis and Visser, 2001). Furthermore, on an average 58 percent of those who cohabited and subsequently dissolved their union will choose to live with a new partner within 4 years (Keij and Harmsen, 2001). Thus, only few people prefer to stay alone after dissolution of their union.

When a person experiences divorce and starts a new union, the same or a differing degree of homogamy with respect to social background characteristics, as compared to the first union, will characterize this new union. Common wisdom has it that people who marry for the second time ought to have learned something from their past experiences and mistakes. Yet it is also commonly believed that divorced people will repeat the same mistakes. Either they do not really learn from their mistakes or they are unable to put this learning into practice. For instance, people may have learned what kind of mate they really want but then they may be unable to find such a person, because their opportunities to do so may be restricted. The important question, then, is whether people actually 'do things differently' the second time around and, if so, what they do differently (Benson-von der Ohe, 1987).

In this paper, we examine changes in assortative mating from first to second unions by testing two competing hypotheses. The first hypothesis pertains to changed preferences for certain spousal characteristics among those willing to re-partner following divorce. It states that individuals who have experienced divorce will prefer a new partner who is more similar to them with respect to social background than their first partner was. More specifically, divorcées have learned from the adjustment problems of a non-homogamous first union that their second union should be more homogamous (Dean and Gurak, 1978). In short, former spouses are assumed to have 'learned from their mistakes' (Whyte, 1990) and make a better choice when re-partnering.

The learning-hypothesis is interesting for several reasons. In the first place, it reflects the popular and optimistic idea that people learn from their experiences, especially in relationships. However, whether this is actually the case has only rarely been tested empirically, and with contradictory results. In addition, there are several reasons to expect that remarriages will differ substantially from first marriages. Some commonly cited reasons for this include: the lessons learned from the failure of the first union, its continuous imprint on the current union, the fact that first and second unions take place at divergent points in an individual's life and, finally, that remarried individuals may be subject to very different expectations about how to be-

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