

**Educational Homogamy in Marital and Cohabiting Unions: A Test of the Double Selection Hypothesis**  
(Extended Abstract)

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The dramatic increase in cohabitation in the United States over the past several decades has changed the social environment in which individuals make decisions about whether, when, and whom to marry. However, differences in partner selection in cohabitation and marriage and the impact of cohabitation on the resemblance of spouses are poorly understood. One common hypothesis about the possible effects of cohabitation on the resemblance between spouses is the “double selection” hypothesis, coined by Blackwell and Lichter (2000) but found elsewhere in the literature as well (e.g., Gwartney-Gibbs 1986:432; Sahib and Gu 2002). According to this hypothesis, married couples will be more likely to be homogamous than cohabiting couples because many of them have had two opportunities to accept or reject each other rather than just one. As cohabitators live together they gain new information about each other that they may not have otherwise had. This new information reduces uncertainty about the quality of the match and may lead to the dissolution of poor matches thereby increasing the selectivity of marriage. Thus, the double selection hypothesis posits a “demographic winnowing process that successively selects individuals into cohabiting unions and then into marriages” (Blackwell and Lichter 2000:297).

There are two key elements of the double-selection hypothesis. First, the “winnowing process” implies that cohabitators who marry will be more likely to be homogamous than cohabitators who split up. Second, it implies that married couples who have not cohabited with their spouses before marriage will be less likely to be homogamous than married couples who have cohabited prior to marriage. However, either of these mechanisms will produce a greater degree of resemblance between married couples than between cohabiting couples. In other words, the odds of homogamy among married couples will be higher than among cohabitators if *either* (a) cohabitators who split up are less likely to be homogamous than cohabitators who marry or

(b) married couples who have cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage are more likely to be homogamous than married couples who have not cohabited prior to marriage.

Past studies have largely relied on cross-sectional data and thus have not directly tested the double-selection hypothesis (Blackwell and Lichter 2000; Jepsen and Jepsen 2002; Qian 1998; Qian and Preston 1993; Schoen and Weinick 1993). These studies generally find that cohabitators are less similar than married couples with respect to ascribed characteristics such as race/ethnicity, religious background, and age (Blackwell and Lichter 2000; Casper and Bianchi 2002; Schoen and Weinick 1993; Jepsen and Jepsen 2002) and are more similar than married couples with respect to earnings and employment (Casper and Bianchi 2002; Brines and Joyner 1999). However, the findings with respect to education vary widely. Using data from the late 1980s and early 1990s, one study finds that cohabiting couples are more educationally similar than married couples (Schoen and Weinick 1993), whereas another finds the opposite (Blackwell and Lichter 2000), and still others find no difference (Jepsen and Jepsen 2002; Qian 1998). Differences in data sources, sample selection, methodology, and model choice may all explain these disparate results.

Studies that have used longitudinal data to examine transitions out of cohabitation and into marriage cast doubt on the double-selection hypothesis. Of the three studies that examine the joint education characteristics of cohabitators, one finds that only cohabitating couples with large educational differences are more likely to separate than to marry (Smock and Manning 1997:337) while two others find no effect of educational differences on the likelihood of splitting up or marrying (Oppenheimer 2003:133; Sassler and McNally 2003:Table 3). These studies suggest that if marital unions are indeed more likely to be homogamous than cohabiting unions, it may be because of differences in the odds of homogamy between married couples who cohabit prior to marriage and those who do not rather than because of differences in the resemblance of cohabitators who split up and those who marry. Thus far, however, no study has examined both pieces of the double selection hypothesis simultaneously.

This paper has two objectives. The first is to resolve the disparate findings of past research on differences in educational homogamy by partner type. To do this, I use log-linear models and two primary data sets, one of which have been used in previous work and one of which is new to this question. First, I re-analyze the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) data used by Schoen and Weinick (1993) to determine whether differences in research methodology and modeling techniques account for differences between their study

and others' findings. Second, I introduce recently released cohabitation data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) to the topic. The NLSY79 contains rich information on respondents' cohabitation and marital histories as well as spouses' and partners' educational characteristics over a 24-year follow-up period. In addition to examining differences in educational homogamy by couple type, I use the NLSY79 to determine the possible effects of differences in sample selection on results from past studies. The samples used in past research have varied widely, ranging from analyses of all of the cohabitators and married couples in the population at a given time (Jepsen and Jepsen 2002; Spanier 1983), to all cohabiting and married couples within a relatively narrow age range (Blackwell and Lichter 2000), to newly formed cohabiting and marital unions (Schoen and Weinick 1993). Because the NLSY79 contains information on multiple relationship transitions for the same individuals, it is ideal for assessing the effects of using these different samples on our conclusions about differences in partner resemblance by couple type. Finally, I corroborate my results using data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) (used by Qian 1998) wherever possible. For both the CPS and the NSFH, it is possible to locate the NLSY79 cohort (born 1957-1965) so that cohort differences do not bias my comparisons.

Second, this paper uses the 1987-88 and 1992-94 waves of the NSFH and the NLSY79 to directly test the hypothesis that couples who enter marriage via cohabitation are "doubly selected." I test both whether (a) cohabiting couples who split up are less likely to be homogamous than those who marry and (b) married couples who have cohabited prior to marriage are more likely to be homogamous than those who have not cohabited. Thus, this paper brings new data to bear on the question of how differences in educational assortative mating vary by union type and the extent to which these differences may be the result of variation in the way in which cohabitators and married couples sort into and out of their relationships.

Preliminary findings from the NLSY79 and the CPS indicate that differences in sample selection may play a large role in explaining the disparate findings of past research. I find that cohabiting couples are much less likely to be educationally homogamous than married couples using a sample of prevailing unions from the NLSY79, that is, all unions in the population at a given time. I observe a similar differential using data from the CPS. However, restricting the NLSY79 sample to newly formed unions largely eliminates this difference. Nevertheless, I find support for the hypothesis that couples who enter marriage via cohabitation are "doubly selected" and are more homogamous than cohabiting couples who split up using data from the

NLSY79. I find no difference in the educational resemblance of couples whose marriages are preceded by cohabitation and those who marry without first cohabiting. Data from the first and second waves of the NSFH remain to be added.

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