

Short Abstract

“Assortative Mating Patterns in Mexico by Education and Skin Color
using the Mexican Family Life Survey”

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In this paper, I will investigate assortative mating patterns using a novel dataset collected in Mexico, a module of the Mexican Family Life Survey. These data collects retrospective partner histories (i.e. marriages, consensual unions, dating relationships, or any six month relationship) which include socio-demographic characteristics of each partner, as well as their skin tone.

The first contribution of this paper will be to describe assortative mating patterns using these data, focusing on education, skin tone, and age. To do so, I will rely on traditional homogamy log-linear models. I will take advantage of the retrospective partner histories to make a second contribution. By observing three types of relationships (i.e. partners not living together, consensual unions and marriages) I will be able to investigate patterns of assortative mating by type of relationship. Finally, this paper contributes to the research on assortative mating patterns in Latin America.

Long Abstract
“Assortative Mating Patterns in Mexico by Education, Skin Color, and Age
using the Mexican Family Life Survey”

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1. Introduction

Research on assortative mating over the past three decades indicate that there is a tendency of individuals to marry others with similar traits such as education (e.g. Blossfeld 2009; Mare 2008; Blossfeld and Tim 2003; Mare 1991), religion (e.g. Bisin, Topa and Verdier 2004; Johnson 1980), occupation (e.g. Erickson and Goldthorpe 1992; Kalmijn 1991; Hout 1982), race/ethnicity (e.g. Kalmijn 1998) and age (e.g. Qian and Preston 1993).

In general, these studies focus on the investigation of spousal resemblance within marriage. However, in some countries new norms toward greater gender equality and more individualism (Van de Kaa 1987) have in turn changed conceptions about dating, marriage and family. The development of new institutional arrangements of union formation has extended the research of assortative mating to include cohabiting couples (Schwartz 2010; Hamplova 2008; Blackwell and Lichter 2000 2004; Schoen and Weinick 1993) in order to understand difference and similarities between these two institutional arrangements. However, few studies examine assortative mating patterns in dating relationships to understand the overall mate selection process understood as a progression of intimate relationships (Goldstein and Harknett 2006; Blackwell and Lichter 2004). Most of this evidence comes from developed countries.

Little is known about assortative mating patterns in Latin American countries due to scarcity of data. Given that in Latin America, consensual unions exist since colonial times, the few studies in the topic often compare consensual unions and marriages. At the national level, there are three cross-national comparisons studies examining educational homogamy differences between consensual unions and marriages in Latin America (López-Ruiz, Esteve and Cabré 2009; López-Ruiz, Esteve and Cabré 2008; Esteve and McCaa 2007), and one single country study examining racial and ethnic endogamy (Brazil [Telles 2004]) that does not make any distinction between marriages and consensual unions.

In general, the data available for Latin America to study these patterns comes from Censuses or Vital Statistics. These sources are often used to study educational homogamy because they include couples' information on education, and in the case of the Census it also provides information of type of union. The cross-sectional nature of these data sources entails some limitations that have been commented by other researchers (e.g. Blossfeld and Tim 2003). First, cross-sectional data include all the marriage stock (i.e. first marriages and remarriages), so the study of assortative mating may confound the effect of assortative marriage dissolution (Blossfeld 2009). To avoid this problem, researchers often restrict their samples to include individuals from

certain age ranges close to marriage formation, thus assortative mating patterns of remarriages are often overlooked. Second, cross-sectional data often measure individuals' characteristics at the time of data collection, which might not be the relevant measures to study assortative mating (e.g. to study educational homogamy, ideally researchers would like to use partners' educational attainment by the time of the marriage and not by time of the data collection). Third, when using marital matches, researchers exclude single men and women who also participate in the marriage market.

Studies on assortative mating by race or ethnicity only exist for Brazil (Telles 2004), because it is one of the few countries that collect race and ethnicity data in Latin America. Most Latin American countries do not collect race and ethnic data. Even though race and ethnicity in Mexico comprises white, indigenous, black, and mixed races, the Mexican census and some household surveys only try to recognize indigenous populations by asking them if they speak an indigenous language (Telles 2007; Hopenhayn, Bello and Miranda 2006).

This paper has two objectives. First, it will document assortative mating patterns by education, skin color, and age. To do so, I will estimate log-linear homogamy models to describe the association between couples' characteristics, net of marginal distributions. Second, I will examine differences in mate selection among couples that have not formed a union, couples that live in consensual unions and married couples. In particular, I will examine if observed homogamy patterns are the outcome of a "winnowing" process where heterogeneous couples are less likely to persist compared to homogenous couples. My analysis will focus on two traits: education and skin color. To achieve my goal, I will use a novel dataset collected in Mexico, the Mexican Family Life Survey (MxFLS).

2. Theoretical Framework

The vast empirical research on assortative mating finds a strong correlation between characteristics of spouses in terms of race, education, occupation, and religion among others. Based on these findings, social scientists from distinct fields have developed theoretical models to explain why assortative patterns in union formation arise. Economic and exchange theories explain the matching process by assuming that marriage is voluntary, individuals are rational and seek to maximize their well-being, and men and women face competition for the best possible mate (e.g. Edwards 1969; Becker 1973; Fox 2009).

The classic economic model shows that gains from marriage are maximized when women specialize in home production and men in labor market activities (Becker 1973 1974). Similarly, exchange theory argues that individuals will form a union if potential partners are different in at least one trait (other than gender) to gain something from marriage (Rosenfeld 2005). For traits that are hierarchically ordered (e.g. education, income, or physical attractiveness) individuals will prefer to form a union with others with comparatively more desirable characteristics than their own (South 2001; Mare 2008; Becker 1973). However, competition among individuals in the marriage market will lead to positive assortative mating patterns.

These theories emphasize the selection process where individuals choose partners based on their preferences for certain traits under a static framework with no search frictions. Oppenheimer (1988) emphasizes the mate search process and suggests that satisfactory matches can also be attained through processes of "adaptive socialization" that take place while dating, cohabiting or even after marriage. Oppenheimer explains this socialization as a mechanism

through which partners modify certain traits to improve the quality of the match attained through the selection process (Oppenheimer 1988: 564). Another interpretation of this process of socialization may include the impact of earlier romantic experiences in subsequent ones. For example, for U.S. women, having a first sex partner from another race is associated with the selection of a first husband of another race (King and Bratter 2007).

These theories explain marriage market patterns focusing on preferences for mates' attributes and the search process to attain a good match. However, marriage patterns result from the interaction of preferences and opportunities, and opportunities depend on the degree of contact among social groups (Blossfeld and Tim 2003; Kalmijn and Flap 2001; Kalmijn 1998).

Borrowing from these ideas, Blackwell and Lichter (2000 2004) propose the “winnowing” hypothesis, which indicates that as individuals progress in their relationships from dating to cohabiting to marriage, they become more selective in their choices. However, the constraints imposed by competition allow them to achieve someone with at least the same resources they can offer in exchange in the marriage market. Hence, the hypothesis predicts that as individuals progress from dating to cohabiting to marriage, homogamy will increase. This hypothesis implies that couples that select out of dating will tend to be less homogamous than couples who progress from dating to cohabitation. Similarly, couples that progress from cohabitation to marriage will be more homogamous than couples that select out of cohabitation. This hypothesis treats cohabitation as a trial marriage.

Alternatively, Schoen and Weinick (1993) propose the “looser bond” hypothesis which assumes that cohabitation is an alternative to marriage with distinct goals and norms. They argue that cohabitation “involves less commitment and greater individual autonomy” (p. 409). The lack of long-term commitment of cohabitation implies that women will prefer to participate in the labor market rather than specialized in household production activities, as a consequence both partners will be more likely to participate in the labor market. Based on egalitarian principles, cohabiting couples would place more importance on achieve characteristics than on ascriptive ones in the mate selection process. The “looser bond” hypothesis implies that married couples will follow more frequently the traditional gender-based division of labor, hence married couples will tend to be less educational homogamous.

Contrary to the “winnowing” hypothesis, the “looser bond” hypothesis implies that, with respect to achieved characteristics (1) couples that select out of cohabitation will tend to be less homogamous than couples who remain, (2) that married couples will be less homogamous than cohabitators, and (3) a lower tendency of women to form hypergamous unions. For ascribed characteristics, both the “winnowing” and the “looser bond” hypothesis predict less homogamy among cohabitators than among married.

3. Prior Research

Empirical evidence is not conclusive. Studies using cross-sectional data provide support for the “winnowing” hypothesis by showing that educational homogamy among cohabiting couples is lower than among married couples (Schwartz 2010; Blackwell and Lichter 2000). However, other studies find support for the “looser bond” hypothesis. Using data for marriages in the late 1980s in the United States, Schoen and Weinick (1993) find that cohabiting unions are more likely to be educationally homogamous than married couples; conversely, Schwartz (2010)

finds no educational differences between cohabitation and marriages for new formed unions. Other findings indicate that women within marriages are more likely to be educationally hypergamous and that women in cohabiting unions are more likely to be educationally hypogamous (Schoen and Weinick 1993; Blackwell and Lichter 2000 2004; Goldstein and Harknett 2006). Finally, consistent with the idea that cohabitation is founded in more egalitarian values, Blackwell and Lichter (2004) find that, among the highest educated individuals, those who have ever-cohabited are most homogamous compared to those who never cohabited.

For ascribed characteristics, both hypotheses predict that cohabiting couples will be less homogamous than married couples. Empirical evidence supporting these hypotheses is weak. Blackwell (2004) finds that racial homogamy is the strongest for married couples and the weakest for dating couples. Other studies find that racial homogamy patterns differ by race or ethnicity. Some studies find that the patterns of racial homogamy by whites and blacks support the “winnowing” hypothesis (Blackwell 2000 2004), while other only find these patterns among Hispanics (Goldstein and Harknett 2006).

Given the inconsistency of the findings, Schwartz (2010) suggests that results from cross-sectional data are likely to be affected by selective exits by type of union. Using a stock-and-flow approach, she finds that cohabiting couples that exit (either because they entry to marriage or became single) are more homogamous than couples that remain cohabiting. Conversely, she finds that couples that exit from marriages are less homogamous than couples that remain in a marriage. She concludes that differences by union type are largely driven by selective exits than by marital selection, and that the trends toward more educational homogamy in the United States are not driven by cohabitation.

One limitation of previous empirical studies that have tested the “winnowing” hypothesis is that, in general the data does not include the whole dating history, so that researchers are able to see at most marital and cohabitation histories¹ (Blackwell and Lichter 2004). In this paper, I will be able to overcome this limitation by using the MxFLS, which includes retrospective partner histories, as well as, restrospective marital histories.

Most of the evidence I have presented here comes from the United States. To my knowledge, there is only one study available that addresses this issue in Latin American. The study was conducted by López-Ruiz et al. (2009) and use census data to test the “winnowing” hypothesis for several Latin American countries, including Mexico. They find modest differences in educational homogamy between consensual unions and marriages, and suggest that an in-depth analysis using retrospective marital data would be necessary to determine if the hypothesis is empirically supported or not. Furthermore, they find that hypergamy is slightly stronger in the case of marriages than in the case of consensual unions. Results from this study are likely to be driven by selective exits, as suggested by Schwartz (2010).

In order to formalize my hypotheses, I will proceed first by describing the functions and meaning of cohabitation in Latin America, focusing on Mexico.

¹ An exception is the paper by Goldstein and Harknett (2006) which use longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study; these data includes information of partners who are married, Cohabiting, Dating or No Longer Involved.

Consensual Unions in Mexico

Marriage and Consensual unions are two institutional arrangements that have coexisted since colonial times in Latin America (Lopez et al 2009; Castro 1997). One of the historical explanations about the origins of consensual unions in Latin America suggests that during the colony, given that males outnumbered females from European descent, societal norms allowed sexual relations with indigenous women; however, due to restrictions imposed by religion these unions were never formalized (Lopez et al 2009; Castro 1997). For the population in the lower income distribution, consensual unions became an alternative to marriage because they could not afford the costs associated with the formalization of the union (Lopez et al 2009; Castro 1997).

Currently, prevalence of consensual unions in Latin America varies greatly by region. In 2002, Dominican Republic showed one of the highest percentages of consensual unions (64%) while Mexico showed one of the lowest (20%) (Castro et al. 2008; Lopez-Ruiz et al. 2009). Although Mexicans are more likely to form marriages, from 1970 to 2000 consensual unions have increased from 13% to 20% (Lopez-Ruiz et al. 2009).

Today, most of the consensual unions are formed by the less educated groups. In 2000, 81% of the individuals living in consensual unions attended less than secondary school compared to 68% of married individuals (Lopez-Ruiz et al. 2009). Castro et al. (2008) suggest that the prevalence of consensual unions among the disadvantage population may indicate that economic constraints more than preferences are guiding couples decision to form consensual unions as an alternative to marriage. In Mexico, consensual unions constitute institutions where childbearing and childrearing activities are socially acceptable (Castro et al. 2008). Fertility patterns differences between types of union are non-existent (Rodriguez -Vignoli 2005). Furthermore, consensual unions eventually turn into marriages after 25 years (Goldman and Pebley 1986). Finally, though consensual unions are socially recognized, marriage is considered a more prestigious and stable institution.

While traditional consensual unions occurred among the least educated, new evidence indicates that this type of union formation is becoming more important among the more educated, due to similar reasons that in developed countries (i.e. changes in the norms and values toward greater gender equality and individualism) (Rodriguez -Vignoli 2005; Fussell and Palloni 2004). In fact, research shows that the expansion in consensual unions in Latin America has been mainly driven by the expansion of this type of union among the more educated (Rodriguez -Vignoli 2005).

In sum, there are two types of consensual unions in Mexico with different characteristics. Traditional consensual unions are conceived as an alternative to marriage, and are often chosen by the economically disadvantage population who choose this option mainly driven by economic constraints. Modern consensual unions can be conceived as an alternative to marriage or as a trial to marriage, are mostly chosen by the highly educated, and are founded in more gender egalitarian principles.

4. Research Model

The first objective of this paper is to document assortative mating patterns by education and skin tone and age using the MxFLS. I hypothesize a tendency for educational homogamy because in

modern societies education has become the most important indicator of labor market success (Blossfeld 2009; Mare 1991; Treiman 1970), and of cultural background, values, tastes, and lifestyles (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Mare 1991). I expect to find a tendency for skin color homogamy, male age hypogamy and female age hypergamy.

The second objective of the paper is to investigate assortative mating patterns among couples that have not formed a union, couples that live in consensual unions and married couples. My analysis will focus on two traits: education and skin color. Education is an achieved trait that serves as an indicator of labor market success, while skin color is an ascribed characteristic that serves as an indicator of physical attractiveness, in particular for women (Hunter 2002; Hill 2002).

First, based in the “winnowing” hypothesis I expect more educational homogamy in cohabiting couples compared to couples who have not formed a union. Second, given that for individuals in the lower socio-economic strata traditional consensual unions are an alternative to marriage, I expect same levels of educational homogamy between couples in consensual and marital unions. Third, given that for individuals in the higher socio-economic strata consensual unions may be conceived as a trial to marriage or as an alternative to marriage, I will expect same levels of educational homogamy between couples in consensual and marital unions if marriages are conceived as an alternative to marriage. However, if consensual unions are trials to marriage, based in the “winnowing” hypothesis, I will expect more educational homogamy in married couples compared to couples in consensual unions. Fourth, based in the “winnowing” hypothesis I expect more skin tone endogamy in cohabiting couples compared to couples who have not formed a union.

5. Data

I will use the Mexican Family Life Survey which is a longitudinal household survey of about 35,000 individuals, representative at the national level of the Mexican population. The baseline was fielded in 2002, and the second wave was conducted in 2005, with household recontact rates over 90%. The third wave is currently in the field, and as of today recontact rates are over 70%. The MxFLS is a multi-purpose survey that includes a rich set of socio-economic, demographic, and health characteristics of individuals, as well as, retrospective marriage and education histories.

Currently, a new module designed to investigate marital preferences is being administered to a subsample of the MxFLS. The new module collects retrospective partner histories, including information about marriages, consensual unions, dates, or any person with whom the respondent tried to establish a partner relationship for a period longer than six months. Second, respondents are asked to rate the skin color of all their partners and the interviewer is asked to make an assessment of the skin tone of the respondent. In addition to the retrospective partner histories that will be collected in the new module, I will also use information collected in the first, second and third wave of the MxFLS regarding retrospective marital histories, and educational histories. All these modules will be used to get information about education, age, and skin color of respondents, and their partners or spouses, by the time of union formation.

The sample will consists of 1514 individuals with the demographic characteristics shown in Table 1. Educational attainment will be collapsed in five ordered categories: (1)

secondary or less, (2) secondary graduate, (3) some high school, (4) high school graduate, (5) some college or more. Skin color will be collapsed in four categories: (1) black, (2) dark brown, (3) light brown, and (4) white. Age will be collapsed in 4 groups: 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, and 51-60.

Measurement of education will be based on education level by the time of union formation. Measurement of skin color of respondents will be based on an interviewer's assessment using a 10-point skin color scale. The same 10-point skin color scale is showed to the respondent so they can make an assessment of their spouse or partner by the time of union formation.

To examine assortative mating patterns by education, skin tone and age, I will use the stock of individuals living in a consensual union or marriages, which comprises 65% of the sample. However, given that the stock of marriages is subject to selective marital dissolution and remarriages, I will restrict my sample to first marriages or first consensual unions if they did not become a marriage.

To investigate assortative mating patterns per type of relationship, I will include in the sample individuals in the process of dating, cohabiting until first marriage. Relationships after the first marriage are going to be excluded from the analysis.

6. Methods

First, to document educational homogamy, skin color and age endogamy, I will generate cross-classifications of male and female partners' education (6 categories) using log-linear homogamy models. Homogamy models permit estimating associations between males and females partners' characteristics controlling for marginal distributions. These associations are represented by the odds that males and females partners have the same rather than different education attainment. I will generate similar cross-classifications for skin color (4 categories) and age groups (4 categories), and describe the data using the same type of log-linear models.

Second, to investigate assortative mating patterns by union type, I will restrict my analysis to first marriages, first cohabitations (if they did not ended in marriage), and the last dating partner before making the transition to first marriage or first cohabitation. The reason for this is that the literature shows that as people age, they become less selective in the partner choice. I will estimate a multinomial logistic regression model to obtain predicted probabilities of the transition from dating to cohabiting, from cohabiting to marriage, or from dating to marriage, as shown in Figure 1. This dependent variable measures relationship status at different points in time based in the retrospective partner and marital histories. The explanatory variables will include individual and joint characteristic of partners. The main independent variables in the model will be dummy variables indicating whether couples (1) are educationally homogamous, (2) show skin color endogamy. I will also include three dummy variables indicating whether (1) the female is 3 year older than the male partner, and (2) the male is 3 year older than the female partner. I will include as control variables education, age, and skin tone of each male and female partner, as well as, a set of dummy variables indicating whether the male and female partners have children together, or each one has children with another partner. This strategy will allow me to investigate the effect of being homogamous on the probability of each transition. If the probability of being homogamous is greater from cohabiting to marriage than from dating to cohabiting, this may indicate that a "winnowing" process is taking place.

In sum, I will document assortative mating patterns by education, skin color, and age using homogamy log-linear models. I will take advantage of the rich set of information collected in the retrospective partner and marital histories available to investigate assortative patterns by union type by estimating a multinomial logistic regression model of the odds of transitioning from dating to cohabiting, from cohabiting to marriage, or from dating to marriage.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I will investigate assortative mating patterns using a novel dataset collected in Mexico. These data collect retrospective partner histories that will allow us to investigate patterns of assortative mating using information from the time when the union was formed. For the case of Mexico, this dataset offers a great opportunity to explore these patterns with richer information than the data available using the Census or the Vital Statistics.

The first contribution of this paper will be to describe the assortative mating patterns using this new dataset. By doing this, I will be able to measure the associations between female and male partners' traits. To estimate these associations I will rely on traditional homogamy log-linear models. I will describe partners' resemblance in education and age using these models to compare the patterns in the dataset with other studies that use census data, thus validating that the data reflects what other data sources indicate.

I take advantage of the retrospective partner histories to make a second contribution to the literature. By observing three types of relationships (i.e. partners not living together, consensual unions and marriages) I will be able to investigate patterns of assortative mating by type of relationship. Most of previous research lacked of a history that included dating, cohabiting, and married couples with representative information at the national level. This study will provide some insights in the ways assortative mating may play a role in marital stability, which ultimately may have important consequences in children's outcomes and the reproduction of inequality. Finally, this paper contributes to the research on assortative mating patterns in Latin America.

8. References

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Figure 1: Transitions Into Cohabitation and Marriage

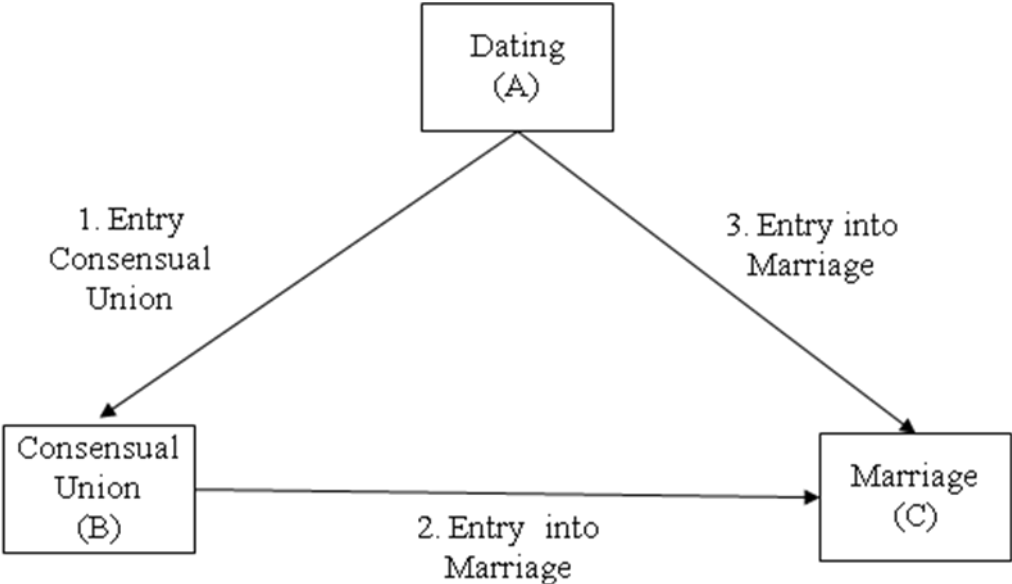


Table 1: Sample characteristics (N=1514)

Sex	
Male	47%
Female	53%
	100%
Marital Status	
Single	24%
Married / Consensual Union	65%
Divorced/Separated	5%
Widowed	2%
DK	3%
	100%
Age Group	
20-30	41%
31-40	22%
41-50	20%
51-60	16%
	100%
