

The role of his and her education in union dissolution and subsequent union formation. The case of Belgium at the beginning of the 21st century

Lindsay Theunis

Supervisors: Prof. dr. Jan Van Bavel & Prof. dr. Christine Schnor

English summary

This doctoral dissertation is part of a new line of research that arose at the turn of the twenty-first century. At that time, more and more scholars began to question what the possible implications of the reversed gender gap in tertiary education might be for family life. The fact that women now surpass men in terms of participation and success in higher education has potentially far-reaching consequences for marriage markets, family formation and relationship outcomes.

The general objective of this study is to analyse the potential implications of the reversed gender gap in tertiary education for union dissolution and subsequent union formation in Belgium. To fulfil this objective, three specific aims are formulated. Firstly, this study aims to determine how the absolute and relative educational level and field of study of spouses are associated with the likelihood of divorce in marriage cohorts where the pattern of hypogamy, i.e. women marrying lower educated men, became more common. The second aim was to disentangle the role of former spouses' absolute and relative education in two important (unintentional) strategies to cope with the negative consequences of a divorce, namely trying to stay in the joint(ly owned) home and starting a new relationship. The third and final aim is to identify whether the risk of divorce and re-partnering are directly related to the educational composition of the marriage market, which changed substantially due to the reversed gender gap.

The analyses are based on sets of the 2001 Belgian census data, linked to the national population registers of 2001 to 2006, and of the Divorce in Flanders survey (2009 - 2010). Event history modelling was applied to analyse the role of education in the two time-dependent partnership transitions, i.e. divorce and (assortative) re-partnering. Diagonal reference models (DRMs) were used to investigate the effect of education on the only time-independent partnership transition, i.e. moving out of (vs. staying in) the joint home.

A first group of findings suggest that educational differences between spouses in terms of his and her level of attainment and field of study contribute to marital dissolution, but not entirely as predicted by the conventional theories. Neither in the study on the level of education nor on the field, the educational homogamy assumption, i.e. educational partner similarity should stabilize marriage, received much support. In contrast to most previous research on spouses' level of education and divorce, the results show that unions where spouses share the same level of education (homogamy) are generally not more stable than unions with a female educational advantage (hypogamy). Unexpectedly, only the traditional male dominant unions (hypergammy) exhibit a somewhat higher divorce risk than the other union types. Based on these findings, it may be argued that hypergamous unions are less in line with current gender distributions in education (more highly educated women than men), less compatible with increased gender-egalitarian norms in society and therefore more likely to divorce than hypogamous unions. However, the results on spouses' field of study suggest that the male breadwinner ideal may not have become entirely irrelevant for marital stability. Among couples where both spouses attained a university degree, being in a gender typical pairing -where the husband graduated in more

masculine field of study than wife- still reduces the risk of divorce as compared to being in a gender atypical pairing –where the wife graduated in more masculine field of study than husband. Couples where both spouses graduated in a field of study with a similar degree of gender-balance take an intermediate position.

A second set of findings show that divorcees' likelihood of moving out and their new partner choices are besides their own level of education related to their former partners' level of education. With regard to moving out, the results highlight the relatively high likelihood for highly educated women to remain in the joint home: they move less often than their male partners in homogamous and hypogamous unions. Maybe, these highly educated women do not only experience many incentives to claiming the joint home, they might be also more successful in it due to their presumably high socio-economic resources. The findings on re-partnering underline how new partnerships with more-educated men probably compensate the negative repercussions from divorce for low educated women: they are at least as likely to re-partner a medium educated man as to re-partner homogamously. Among medium educated men, we found a remarkably high chance to re-partner upwards with a tertiary educated woman. This may be related to both men's preference for younger women as the fact that the overall level of education is higher in more recent cohorts, particularly among women. Next to the effect of divorcees' own level of education on assortative re-partnering, the effect of the educational level of the former spouse indicates that divorcees tend to repeat the kind of match made in their first marriages when they choose a new partner: their risk to re-partner a low, medium or highly educated partner is positively correlated with having been previously married to a low, medium, or highly educated partner, respectively.

The findings on the context-level indicators representing education-specific marriage market characteristics reaffirm that the reversed gender gap in education may have had far-reaching consequences for people's relationship outcomes. For instance, couples' likelihood of divorce appears to be lower in communities where the prevalence of hypogamy is higher. In line with the theoretical reasoning behind the findings on the couple-level indicator of hypogamy and hypergamy, it may be argued that spouses in a hypogamous marriage share some attitudes and values conform to the increased egalitarian norms and preferences towards partnerships. Consequently, a high proportion of hypogamy in couples' local community might reflect a high degree of gender-egalitarian norms of its inhabitants which can lead to a lower tendency for them to divorce. In the analysis on new partnerships, we took into account the quantitative constraints in potential matches of the opposite sex. This measure showed that the number of single highly educated women in the population, which increased considerably due to the reversed gender gap, is positively associated with men's likelihood of re-partnering in general, and of re-partnering a highly educated woman in particular.

All in all, the findings of this dissertation seem to (1) contradict the pessimistic expectation that divorce rates will increase due to the rise of hypogamy, (2) suggest less negative outcomes of divorce on housing for women in the near future if disproportionately more hypogamous unions will dissolve, and (3) predict an increase of hypogamy among higher-order unions, similarly as among first marriages, due to the increased supply of single highly educated women on the marriage market. Future work will be needed to shed more light on trends over time while accounting for the marginal distributions of homogamy, hypergamy and hypogamy.