"Your place, my place or yet another?" Assortative mating and the place of a couple's first joint household

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Motivation

Changes in household and family dynamics often produce spatial mobility, by conditioning a move (such as partnership formation or dissolution) or demanding a different housing structure (such as the arrival of a newborn or the departure of adult children). Against the background of persisting gender inequalities and increasing family diversity, the study of spatial mobility and its implications for families and gender relations appears crucial (Vidal and Huinink, 2019).

Family migration research has largely concentrated on the migration decisions of couples, showing that a move tends to deter the labor market position of the following partner (the so-called 'tied mover'), who is most often female (Boyle et al, 2009). An under-researched area is the mobility that occurs when a couple starts living together (Brandén and Haandrikman, 2019). When forming the first joint household, either one or both individuals move. An emerging body of studies has examined the competing risks of a couple to move together or split up in function of the couple's distance (Krapf, 2018) and gender differences in the likelihood to move. The latter studies show that couples adapt to the man's professional and family situation (Malmberg and Pettersson, 2007), as women move more often to the man's place (Brandén and Haandrikman, 2019; Fischer and Malmberg, 2001), which impacts their professional careers and social ties (Loken et al, 2013). In recently published research drawing on Swedish data, Brandén and Haandrikman (2019) explained women's higher likelihood to move with power imbalances in the couple: the man often has a relative bargaining advantage, as he is more established on the labour market, older, and has a better housing situation. The Swedish data allow to study household formation conditional on that the couples had a common child or were married. It is thus not clear whether these findings can be generalized to all couples (including those who cohabited and remained childless) and to non-Scandinavian contexts.

This study links the characteristics of newly-formed couples to their location choice, drawing on Belgian census and register data. We investigate the specific role of assortative mating with regard to education, age, family structure and local ties (living at birth place, homeownership) in the process of household formation. Couple's background and assortative mating is known to influence many couple decisions, e.g. fertility, housework-labor division, separation, but we know to date very little about how it impacts locational choice. We examine the place where the couple forms its first joint household, defined as municipality[1], and distinguish four possible outcomes: 1) he moves to her place, 2) she moves to his place, 3) they move to a third place, 4) they are from the same place. The municipality is a relevant structure in people's everyday life, as it provides local

[1] Belgium is a small country (30,528 km^2) comprising 589 municipalities with an average area of 52 km^2. Population density in the municipalities is on average 773 inhabitants per km^2.

infrastructure (schools, leisure and everyday activities) and presents a source of identification. It corresponds the idea of a familiar environment in which people interact for utility, support, and socialization.

Theoretical background & hypotheses

Location choice is argued to depend on individual and household characteristics and on the macro context of opportunities and constraints (Mulder and Wagner, 2012). There is discussion whether the decision is based on the principle of maximization of individual utility or the couple's pooled utility. An example for couple's pooled utility (Mincer, 1978) is a woman that moves to his place even if it is to her disadvantage, because the man's gains from staying make this location choice advantageous for the couple. Individual utility, in contrast, is determined by individual's gains and losses from moving versus staying (Fischer and Malmberg, 2001). Gains from moving may be e.g. an investment in career or an increase in living quality, whereas the local ties lost may relate to the costs of moving. Location-specific capital, defined as the ties that bind people to a specific place, plays an important role in defining the costs of a move and can serve as a resource that enables people to stay at a given location (Mulder and Wagner, 2012). Social, human, or economic capital that cannot be taken to a new location can create local ties (DaVanzo, 1981). Local ties increase with age, the presence of children, homeownership and the continued residence at the place of birth. Bargaining can be a as solution to allocative and distributional problems. The bargaining approach, put forward by Manser and Brown (1980), presumes the maximization of individual utility and argues that gains and losses of both partners are weighted against each other, assuming gender symmetry. For example, a woman moves to his place even if it is to her disadvantage, because the man's utility from staying is higher than her utility. We thus formulate the following *first "bargaining" hypothesis*: *The partner with more local ties is more likely to stay in his/her environment, whereas the partner with less local ties is more likely to move*.

Forming the first joint household, one partner may move in with the other, but a couple may also choose to move a third place. In this case, the utility from moving should be higher than staying for both partners. A high level of education, which is often considered geographically flexible capital may relate to low costs of moving. Highly educated individuals are known to be more mobile than the less educated, because they have a wider horizon (considering a larger set of places) and higher returns from migration. Our *second "mobility" hypothesis* is thus: *Couples where both partners are highly educated are especially likely to move to a third place.* Also drawing on the idea of maximizing individual utility, the relative resource theory (Blood and Wolfe, 1960) states that characteristics that improve an individual's utility outside the couple should translate into a greater bargaining power. Assuming gender symmetry, the partner with most (economic) resources will drive the location choice. We approximate relative resources with educational pairing and expect in our *third "relative resources" hypothesis: The more educated partner is more likely to stay in his/her environment, whereas the less educated partner is more likely to move.*

Locational choice may also be influenced by traditional gender ideology. Traditional gender-specific roles such as the male-breadwinner model tend to make both partners prioritizing the man's

utility; in consequence, the man dominates the migration decision. We assume that remaining at the current place of residence comes usually with the most advantages and thus formulate our *fourth "gendered decision" hypothesis: The woman is more often moving to the man than vice versa.*

The couple can involve a man and a woman from different neighborhoods or from the same neighborhood. The latter type of couple can decide whether they move to another place or stay at the same place. Haandrikman and colleagues (2008), spatial homogamy is higher among older, single parents and the low educated. Thus, we formulate our *fifth "same place" hypothesis: Partners that are older, low educated or have children are more likely to form a couple and stay at the same place.*

Data and Method

We use a dataset provided by Statistics Belgium, which links information from the National Population Registers (2001–2006) and the 2001 Belgian Census. The 2001 Belgian Census provides information on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the entire Belgian population on 1 October 2001. National Population Registers include information on all residential moves between and within municipalities from 1 October 2001 to 1 January 2006. Our analytical sample includes N=247,838 newly formed couples, defined as couples formed between 2001 and 2006, with an age at union formation between 20 and 49 years. Our categorical dependent variable is location choice: (1) he moves to her place, (2) she moves to his place, (3) they move to a third place, (4) they are from and remain at the same place. In our preliminary analyses, we include the following information for each partner: education level (low (lower secondary) – medium (higher secondary) – high (tertiary), children of previous unions in household, age, homeownership[2]. We estimated multinomial logistic regression; the results are shown in predicted probabilities.

Preliminary findings

Descriptive results (not shown). In about one third of the couples, one partner moved in with the other: in 17% of the couples it was the man and in 19% it was the woman who moved. In contrast to prior findings drawing on Swedish data, this difference is minor; thus, we cannot conclude that household formation among newly formed couples is a gendered decision (hypothesis 4). In about another third (36%), the couple moved to a third place. 28% of the couples were from the same municipality and stayed there.

Results of multivariate multinomial regression (Figure 1): We found support for the "bargaining" hypothesis (1) in heterogamous couples (= with different characteristics): the partner with more local ties or bargaining power (expressed in age, presence of children, living at birth place, and homeownership) is more likely to stay in his/her environment, whereas the partner with less local ties is more likely to move. Regarding children, we also found that if the man or both partners have children, this increases their probability that the couple is from the same municipality and stays

[2] Note that homeownership is measured in the census data of 2001, when some were still living in their preceding union.

there, confirming the "same place" hypothesis (5). Age is not a strong predictor of household formation at the same place, but educational level is. Low educated have a higher probability to form a couple with someone from the same place and to stay there, whereas the more educated tend to move to a third place, thereby confirming the "mobility" hypothesis (2). Regarding educational pairing, we did not find evidence for our "relative resources" hypothesis (3) that postulated that the more educated partner would be more likely to stay in his/her environment, whereas the less educated partner would be more likely to move.

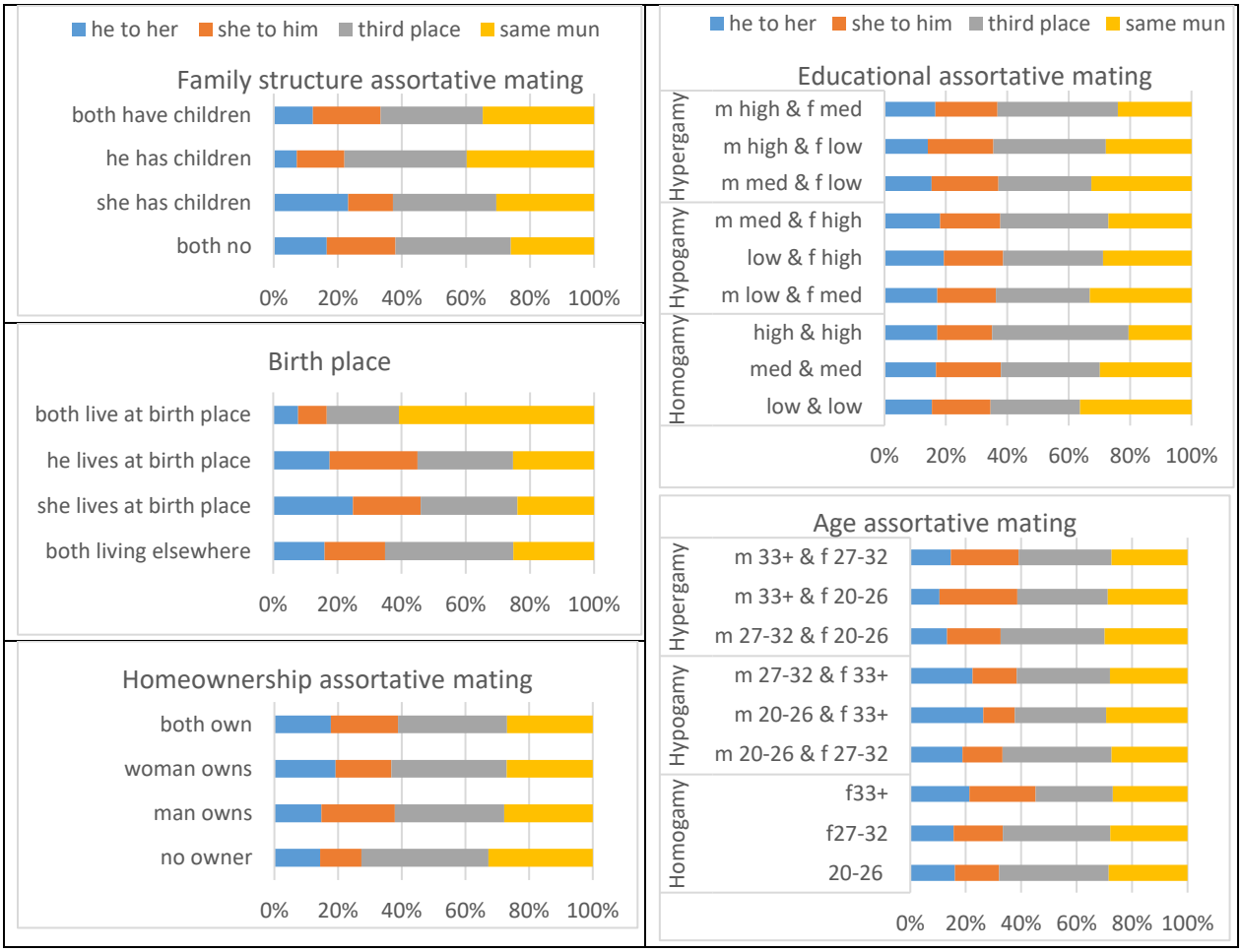

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of new couple's moving outcome. Source: Belgian census and register data (2001-2006), own calculations.

Next steps

We plan to include more information on local ties (distance to non-resident family members), the socio-economic position (occupation and place of work) and whether the couple involves a recently separated partner. Furthermore, we plan to investigate in greater detail the group of couples who chose a third place. Distance between partners before household formation can be taken into account. Since recently, we have access to a longer time period (1991-2018), which enables us to analyze trends across cohorts and periods.

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