

Trends in the Gender Education Gap in Marriage and Marital Dissolution

(Extended Abstract)

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Men's and women's educational attainment has shifted dramatically over the past half century. Both men and women complete more schooling than in the past, but beginning in the mid-1980s women's educational attainment began to surpass men's (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006). Previous research suggests that the reversal of the gender gap in education among men and women quickly translated into a reversal of the education gap among husbands and wives. At nearly the same time as women's college completion outpaced men's, newly married wives' educational attainment began to exceed their husbands'. By 2003, 55% of married couples with different education levels were those in which wives' education exceeded their husbands', up from less than 40% in the mid-1970s (Schwartz and Mare 2005).

Previous research has shown that couples are more likely to divorce when they do not share the same education background, particularly when it is the wife who has more education. These negative effects appear to have remained unchanged over time and, by some estimates, may have even increased (Heaton 2002; Teachman 2002). Given the steady rise in the number of marriages in which wives have more education than their husbands, one would expect divorce rates to have increased as a result. Instead, after increasing through the late 1970s, they have gradually declined. One reason that previous studies may not have found a decline in the negative effects of having more education than one's husband is that they use data on marriages primarily formed before the mid-1980s, but declines in divorce were only beginning at this time and the gender gap in educational attainment had not yet reversed. This project will be the first to our knowledge to examine changes in the effects of spouses' relative education using data on more recent marriage cohorts, for which declines in divorce rates were well underway and for which women's educational attainment clearly exceeded men's. Among these cohorts, the negative effects of wives' greater educational attainment may have declined, which would be more consistent with declines in divorce.

The paper will contain two parts. First, we will conduct a descriptive analysis of the changing characteristics of couples in which wives' education exceeds their husbands' (hypogamous marriages). This part of the analysis will investigate how the joint education distribution of hypogamous couples have changed and whether wives who "marry down" marry

down farther today than they have in the past, or whether they marry husbands with educational credentials more similar to their own. The descriptive portion of the study will inform the second part of the paper which will examine the changing association between husbands' and wives' educational characteristics and marital dissolution. This part of the analysis is guided by the hypothesis that as hypogamy becomes more common, the negative effects of this arrangement on marital stability will decline. In addition to examining trends in the overall association between hypogamy and divorce, this part of the analysis will also examine trends in the association between different configurations of husbands' and wives' educational attainment and divorce. It may be that particular combinations of spouses' education are especially problematic for couples, e.g., marriages between highly dissimilar couples or those between wives with a college degree and husbands with a high school degree.

Data & Methods

This study examines marriages formed between 1950 and 1999 using data from the U.S. census, the Current Population Survey (CPS), the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). We use census and CPS data for our descriptive analyses and as a point of comparison for descriptive statistics from the PSID and NSFG. For our analyses of trends in the association between spouses' relative educational attainments and marital dissolution, we take advantage of the PSID's longitudinal design and retrospective marital history from the NSFG. Unlike other sources of data that have commonly been used to study marital dissolution, the PSID and NSFG have information on both spouses' educational attainment.

We use data from the 1969 to 2005 waves of the PSID and focus on marriages formed between 1970 and 1994 to allow sufficient follow-up time for recent marriage cohorts. From the NSFG, we use data from surveys conducted in 1973, 1976, 1982, 1988, and 1995 and focus on marriages formed between 1950 and 1984. (More recent NSFG data do not contain sufficient information on spouses' education.) Several studies have used the NSFG to examine the association between spouses' relative educational attainment and divorce (Heaton 2002; Sweeney and Phillips 2005; Teachman 2002). Although the sample sizes are smaller in the PSID than the NSFG, it has two main advantages: (1) it has data on more recent marriages and divorces than the NSFG and (2) it has information on both spouses' earnings.

Although this study is motivated by the reversal of the gender education gap in marriage, husbands' and wives' earnings will also play a key role in the analysis. Previous studies have found that wives with higher earnings relative to their husbands are more likely to divorce (e.g., Brines and Joyner 1999; Heckert, Nowak, and Snyder 1998; Rogers 2004). If the association between wives' relative educational attainment and their relative earnings has grown, then

Heaton's (2002) finding of an increased negative effect of wives' greater educational attainment may instead reflect wives' increased relative earnings. The omission of spouses' relative earnings may also explain Teachman's (2002) finding of no change in the association over time.

We use discrete-time hazard models to estimate trends in the effects of spouses' relative educational attainment on marital dissolution and control for other factors that are predictive of divorce such as marital duration, age at marriage, race, homeownership, cohabitation prior to marriage, religion, and number of children in the home. We will also include earnings and the relative earnings of spouses using the PSID data to test whether the association between spouses' relative educational attainment is merely a reflection of spouses' relative earnings.

Preliminary Results

Our preliminary results indicate that, while declines in the negative association between hypogamy and marital stability are not evident in the NSFG for marriages beginning between 1950 and 1984, there is some evidence that homogamous marriages have become less likely to dissolve compared with the traditional arrangement in which husbands have more education than their wives (hypergamous marriages). Using data from the PSID, we find that in more recent marriage cohorts, there is evidence of a decline in the negative association between hypogamy and marital stability as well as evidence that homogamous marriages are becoming less likely to dissolve than hypergamous marriages. These findings are consistent with substantial changes in women's educational attainment over this period and with growing symmetry between the sexes in mate selection. In continued work on this project, we will investigate how these associations vary across the education distribution and test the extent to which they are a reflection of spouses' relative earnings.

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