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The Role of Geographical Distance in the Decision Making Process of Partner Choice

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ABSTRACT

Many people think they met their partner by chance. However, numerous studies show that the process of partner choice follows regular patterns. Most people choose partners who are similar to themselves, for instance regarding age, educational level, religion, ethnic group, and geographical background. Although on an aggregate level, partner choice occurs according to general patterns, the decision making process to choosing a partner is less well studied. To understand these patterns, one has to go down to the micro level. This study aims to improve our *understanding* of the *process* of partner choice in the Netherlands, by adopting a qualitative approach. Which considerations do people make when choosing a partner? What are their preferences, how are they influenced by social norms, and by the opportunities to meet partners? Based on previous findings, we have a specific interest in the role of geographical distance and local cultural differences on partner choice.

THE SPATIAL DIMENSION OF PARTNER CHOICE

Partner choice is the result of preferences for certain characteristics in a partner, social and cultural norms, and the possibilities to meet partners (e.g. Kalmijn, 1998). From an elaborate body of literature it is known that individuals tend to look for a partner with similar characteristics. Homogamy, or the similarity between marriage or cohabitation partners, has been found for age, education, occupation, religion, ethnic group, and geographical background (e.g. Hendrickx 1994, Uunk 1996, Kalmijn 1998, Schwartz and Mare 2005, Haandrikman et al, 2008b). Second, cultural and social norms within groups may lead to partner choice within the group. The church, ethnic group, village or peer group may have a large impact on the choice of a partner. Thirdly, the opportunities to meet partners may be restricted by a number of (geographical) factors. People tend to live amongst people like themselves (see for instance Bottero, 2005), and therefore have a higher chance to find a partner much like themselves. Schools, neighbourhoods, and for instance hobby clubs function as local marriage markets where similar people meet and mate (for instance Smeenk, 1998).

Partner choice is subject to strong distance decay. Spatial homogamy, or choosing a partner who shares the same geographical origin, was a topic much researched in the 1950s and 1960s in the US and UK (e.g. Bossard, 1932; Davie and Reeves, 1939; Küchemann *et al.*, 1974; Coleman, 1979; Coleman and Haskey, 1986), but has received little attention in recent years. In a recent study, we found, similar to earlier studies, that the chance to meet a (marriage) partner decreases with increasing distance. Most Dutch partners choose a partner at close distance: half of all new cohabiters choose partners who live within six kilometres (Haandrikman *et al.* 2008a).

Geographical distance influences partner choice in several ways. Physical proximity increases the likelihood of spontaneous social encounters that increases the chance of meeting potential partners. Moreover, bridging distance still involves time, energy and costs. Marriages involving long distances between partners are still relatively rare. These factors together influence the *opportunities* people have to meet

partner. Moreover, people prefer partners similar to themselves, regarding social class, educational level and religion. These persons are mostly found close by, in the same town or in areas with similar cultural characteristics. In this way, *preferences* also influence the chance to meet a spatially homogamous partner.

The variation found in spatial homogamy can be attributed to a set of factors, as found in previous papers (Haandrikman *et al.* 2007; 2008a; 2008b). First, demographic characteristics of partners matter. With increasing age, individuals tend to find their partner at shorter distances, and those living in the parental home and those living in single person households before cohabitation find their partners significantly more nearby than singles and other household members. Second, socioeconomic characteristics of partners influence spatial homogamy as well. The higher the educational level and the higher the income of partners, the longer the distance to partners. Geographical location of partners also influences the distance to partners. In rural and peripheral areas, partners are found at greater distances. Also, with increasing degree of urbanisation, the distance between partners decreases. A regional analysis of distances between partners before cohabitation revealed that besides income differences, especially regional cultural differences, mostly in dialect and value orientations explain differences in spatial homogamy (Haandrikman *et al.*, 2007).

Hence we know that demographic, socio-economic, cultural and spatial characteristics of partners influence their partner choice. However, we do not know how individuals make decisions in the process of partner choice, how they are influenced by social and cultural norms, and how the opportunities to meet partners affect their choice. Most people think they met their partner by accident, hence they seem unaware of the preferences they have, and of the specific group of people they choose partners from (Haandrikman, 2008). The aim of this paper then is to disentangle the dynamics of partner choice, i.e. find out how preferences, norms and opportunities interact in leading to the choice of a spatially homogamous or heterogamous partner.

APPROACH

To find out what the decision making process looks like that precedes partner choice, our approach is a qualitative one. To understand the process of partner choice, one has to go down to the micro level (Smith, 1989; Coleman, 1990). In order to find out how preferences, norms and opportunities lead to the eventual choice of a partner, we will conduct about 25 interviews with persons who recently started cohabitation or marriage. The most important questions to be answered in the study are:

- How do individuals choose their partners?
 - What is the role of age, educational level, income, religion and language in choosing a partner?
 - What is the role of geographical distance in partner choice?
- What are the opportunities to meet partners?
- How do preferences, norms and opportunities interact in the process of partner choice?
- Is the role of geographical distance in partner choice related to cultural similarity?

By conducting a qualitative study, we want to understand why people choose a partner, who is either spatially homogamous or heterogamous. The factors that were found to be important in explaining (regional) patterns of spatial homogamy can be better understood by listening to why and how people chose their partners. Are people

making conscious choices regarding the characteristics of their partner, or do they unconsciously choose a partner from the pool of partners available to them, based on spatial clustering of persons with certain characteristics?

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