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Spatial homogamy in the Netherlands: mapping distances between partners

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• Homogamy • Partner market • Spatial Patterns • GIS • Population Register

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Abstract

The spatial dimension of the partner market is underexposed in research on recent marriage patterns. When distance decay is applied to partner choice, we can state that the number of unions declines as the distance between potential partners increases. The main research questions of this paper are: To what extent are partners spatially homogamous in the Netherlands? Secondly, can regional and spatial patterns concerning spatial homogamy be identified? We use individual longitudinal data from the population register for the period 1995-2005. For couples who start a shared living, the former addresses of both partners are compared. For all postal codes, distances between partners before shared living are calculated and analysed using a Geographic Information System. Data are aggregated for year of cohabitation and region. We expect the spatial dimension to be important in partner choice, and to be stronger in regions where religion has an important meaning to the population.

Background

Research has shown that marriage partners do not find each other by accident. Studies on mate selection have found that around the world, partners are homogamous regarding age, education, occupation, social origin, religion and geographical origin. The spatial dimension has been underexposed in research on recent marriage patterns. In some older studies, spatial homogamy - the similarity of partners regarding geographical background - is mentioned. Geographical distances between marriage partners have been examined in a range of countries and regions varying from India to the Outer Hebrides and the Russian federation. In the United States in the 1940s and 50s, so-called propinquity studies were conducted, in which the proximity of bride and groom before marriage is examined. Examples of these studies are Bossard (1932) in Philadelphia, Davie and Reeves (1939) in New Haven, Koller (1948) in Columbus, Ohio, and Ellsworth (1948) in a small town in Connecticut. From most of the studies it was concluded that the number of marriages declines as the distance between potential spouses increases. For example, Bossard (1932) found that one third of all married couples lived within five or less blocks from each other before marriage. A few decades later, some studies investigating geographical distances between marriage partners include Mayfield (1972) in India, Coleman (1979) in Reading, UK, Coleman and Haskey (1986) in England and Wales, and Clegg et al. (1998) in the Outer Hebrides.

For the Netherlands, the existing studies are mostly outdated or based on historical data. We do know that Dutch people tend to marry within their own group, where the 'own group' may be defined by religion, social origin, education or cultural behaviour (Hendrickx 1994; Uunk 1996). For instance, Hendrickx (1994) found that different religious groups have different levels of endogamy. Protestant denominations, such as the re-reformed, are more endogamous as far as marriage is concerned, than the more liberal denominations. Studies taking into account spatial homogamy are mostly based on historical data, and most studies deal with compact research units, such as provinces or cities. Examples are studies on the cities of Delft, Arnhem and Gouda (as discussed in Van Poppel and Ekamper, 2004) and the province of Zeeland (Kok 1998, cf Van Poppel and Ekamper 2004), and Drenthe (Boekholt 1990). These studies show that marriages decline in number with increasing distance from the parishes or municipalities under study. Results from other historical studies show that there has been a slight decrease in spatial homogamy in the Netherlands for the period 1900-1950 (Polman 1951).

Studies have shown that marital distances differ by age (Clegg et al. 1998; Fisher 1980; Coleman and Haskey 1986), social class (Coleman and Haskey 1986; Van Poppel and Ekamper 2004), and occupational class (Clegg et al. 1998). Moreover, religion or denomination may affect partner choice (e.g. Polman 1951). Religion or denomination is regionally differentiated, just as dialect is. We expect spatial homogamy to be stronger in regions where religion and dialect have an important meaning to the population.

Research questions and objectives

The spatial dimension of the partner market may be viewed in several ways. On the one hand, distance acts as a barrier to meeting partners: the probability to find a partner close to home is simply greater compared to the probability of finding a partner that lives a long distance away. Secondly, the probability to find a partner close by is greater given the fact that people tend to live amongst people who resemble them selves, for instance regarding educational level or social class. In this paper we address the first issue: partner choice and distance decay.

The objective of this paper is to identify the importance of spatial dimensions of the partner market in the Netherlands. Two main research questions are: What is the importance of spatial factors in current patterns of partner selection in Netherlands? At the national level, to what extent are partners spatially homogamous? Secondly, can regional (e.g. north-south, east-west) and spatial (e.g. urban/rural) patterns concerning spatial homogamy be identified?

Data and method

To study partner choice, it makes sense to examine relatively stable unions, because of the permanence of these relationships. In the literature on partnerships, many different concepts turn up. Manting (1994) defines a union as a sexual and intimate relationship between a man and a woman in which the permanence of the relationship is assumed and a *common residence* is shared (p. 13, italics added). This definition implies that shared living marks the start of a union.

We are interested in couples who start living together: those who get married and start living together, and those who start cohabitation without getting married. Basically, we are interested in the following transitions in household positions:

- Transition from living in the parental home to living with a partner
- Transition from living alone to living with a partner
- Transition from living with a partner, split up with a partner, and start living with another partner.

The importance of spatial factors in partner choice is studied by examining couples that start a shared living, and to investigate both partners' former addresses and birth places. In this way, we can make a statement about the extent of spatial homogamy of Dutch couples. We use data from the Dutch population register (Gemeentelijke Basisadministratie, GBA). The dataset contains individual level data for a period of 10 years (1995-2005) for all inhabitants of the Netherlands that are registered in a municipality. The household file of the GBA contains all households (including married and unmarried couples), together with information on address, household position, age, sex, marital status, and birthplace. Because of the longitudinal character of the data, all residential moves within the period 1995-2005 can be examined. The study is limited to heterosexual partners who are born in the Netherlands.

For couples who start a shared living, we calculate the distance between their former addresses, using the 'Geografisch Basisregister' (Geographic Base Register). This register contains the so-called RD-coordinates for all individual household addresses. The coordinates are based on the 'Rijksdriehoekmeting', the national coordinate

system in use in the Netherlands, which is an azimuthal map projection. With these coordinates, for each household or individual, the (Euclidian) distance over which the move took place, is calculated. We compare these distances for all 4-position postal codes in the Netherlands. Moreover, we compare the distances between birthplaces of partners. The data are aggregated for both year (or group of years) of cohabitation, and region (e.g. municipality). We use a Geographic Information System for the mapping and analysis of data.

Expected findings

On the basis of the few (older) studies on the Netherlands, we expect that nowadays distance still plays a role in partner choice processes. We expect to find spatial differences regarding spatial and geographical homogamy within the country. With this dataset, we are able to distinguish between for instance rural and urban areas, and different municipalities. We expect that the distances between partners will differ for urban and rural areas, and for different regions in the Netherlands (north-south or east-west). Considering these spatial differences, regional case studies are selected.

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