CASTING A WIDER NET?
MARRIAGE TIMING AND PARTNER CHOICE

Kevin Shafer
Zhenchao Qian
Department of Sociology
The Ohio State University
300 Bricker Hall
190 N. Oval Mall
Columbus, Ohio 43210

Please direct correspondence to: Kevin Shafer, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University, 300 Bricker Hall, 190 N. Oval Mall, Columbus, Ohio 43210. Email: shafer.71@sociology.osu.edu

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, marriage markets in the U.S. have been undergoing rapid changes: age at marriage has increased steadily and newly married couples are much more likely today to have the same levels of educational attainment compared to the past. While growing parity in educational attainment between men and women makes educational homogamy demographically possible, changes in marriage timing may play an important role. In this paper, we examine how variation in marriage timing contributes to the rising educational homogamy. Using NLSY79 and NLSY97 panel data, we compare men and women of the two cohorts in their transitions to first marriage and how timing affects partner choice. We argue that increasing diversity in age at marriage has created fragmented marriage markets – one for less educated men and women who marry at earlier ages and the other for their better educated counterpart who marry at later ages. We pay special attention to the context in which men and women do not marry or form "mismatched" marriages in terms of age and educational attainment.

CASTING A WIDER NET?
MARRIAGE TIMING AND PARTNER CHOICE

The interplay of age, education, and marriage is a well-established social phenomenon (e.g. Mare 1991; Qian and Preston 1993; Qian 1998). In recent decades, the average age at which individuals are first married has steadily increased (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). During the same period, a similar trend in the number of college-educated individuals has also taken place (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). This is especially true for women, who have, in recent years, surpassed men in the number receiving college degrees (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). More time in school and the pursuit for professional careers after college have pushed back the age at which women are likely to marry (Thornton, Axinn and Teachman 1995). The economic independence of women has changed the dynamics of marriage markets (Oppenheimer 1997). Men and women are almost equally likely to look for spouses with good education and strong economic prospects (Mare and Winship 1991). As a result, educational homogamy has become increasingly prevalent in the last 30 years (Mare 1991; Qian 1998).

It is well established in the previous literature that age at marriage and educational homogamy are both increasing. However, little is known in terms of the relationship between marriage timing and partner choice. In particular, we are unclear about how marriage timing plays a role in the processes that lead to educational homogamy. Using NLSY panel data, we apply event history analysis techniques to examine the transitions to first marriage and explore the relationship between marriage timing and marriage choice. We argue in this paper that increasing diversity in age at marriage has created fragmented marriage markets—one for less educated men and women who marry at earlier ages and the other for the better educated counterpart who marry at later ages. We pay special attention to the context in which men and women do not marry or form "mismatched" marriages in terms of age and educational attainment.

Since the 1970s, the barriers between educational groups have been significantly strengthened, reducing the likelihood of intermarriage by educational attainment (Mare 1991). These factors are often associated with economic conditions (Levy 1987; Lichter et al. 1992) and the increased economic independence of women (England and Farkas 1986). In these terms, both men and women base their marriage decisions on the quality of a potential partner, not their availability. Empirical evidence shows that marriage rates among less-educated, lower SES white women (Lichter et al. 1992) and blacks (Wilson 1987) are significantly lower than 30 years ago. In addition, as women have gradually attained economic independence, marital expectations of both men and women have been altered (Oppenheimer 1988). As a result, both men and women actively pursue college-educated partners with strong earnings potential, promoting educational homogamy (Mare 1991). If the attractiveness of potential partners drives the marriage market then the barriers between educational groups should remain strong over time. Specifically, if the economic attributes of a partner are essential to marriage, then both women and men may opt to remain unmarried rather than marry outside of their educational group, especially when their educational achievement is high. Such a finding would indicate that the pressure to marry within one's group is relatively strong.

Other evidence, however, points out that as individuals age the availability of potential partners in the marriage market continue to dwindle (Guttentag and Secord 1983). For example, Qian and Preston (1993) found a significant reduction in the potential partner pool over one decade for both women 25 and over and men. Despite a reduction in potential partners, marriage rates for college-educated women age 25 and over are relatively higher than for other groups. Yet, our knowledge of this group's marriage patterns is relatively weak.

Two potential trends arise from the increasing prevalence of delayed marriage. On the one hand, highly educated men and women may be acting in favor of their economic interests by delaying marriage to find suitable, attractive marriage partners. While this is demographically possible, we argue that changes in marriage timing affect educational homogamy.

Specifically, we expect that as individuals age the number of available, attractive potential partners dwindles to the point that barriers between educational groups are easier to traverse. Given that women now earn the majority of college degrees, this trend may prove to be especially true for them.

While Mare (1991) points out that many highly educated individuals pick their potential partners most often from locally available pools, such as schools (Mare 1991). For example, if two people meet in college and marry then each of them with have, at least, some college education (Mare 1991). Drawing from such a pool of potential partners promotes educational homogamy. However, given the trend in delayed marriage and the reduced availability of college-educated men, women may be more likely today to be in heterogamous relationships. Once again we revisit the notion that it may come down to attractiveness versus availability and expanded marriage markets for the individual.

In our analysis we use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 and 1997 (NLSY79 and NLSY97). These data are unique because they are presented in an event-history format, allowing us to follow an individual's marriage activity, educational achievement and other important life history events (NLSY 2005). We use these data to compare the transition to marriage for both the older cohort and younger cohort. Our first goal is to examine how individuals' characteristics, time constant and time varying, affect their transition to marriage. Our second goal is to explore how marriage timing affects their partner choice. In addition to individual characteristics, we will take into account how local marriage market characteristics (educational compositions, for example) affect variation in marriage timing and marriage choice between the two cohorts.

In summary, our paper extends the previous literature in several ways. First, we analyze the data in a unique way through the use of event history analysis. Second, we provide a time period comparison that yields potential changes in marital patterns. Third, these potential changes in marital patterns take place a time in which significant demographic shifts have taken place.

WORKS CITED

England, Paula and George Farkas. 1986. *Households, Employment and Gender: A Social, Economic and Demographic View.* New York: Aldine.

Guttentag, Marcia and Paul F. Secord. 1983. *Too M any Women? The Sex Ratio Question.* Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Herr, David M. and Amyra Grossbard-Shectman. 1981. "The Impact of the Female Marriage Squeeze and the Contraceptive Revolution on Sex Roles and the Women's Liberation Movement in the United States, 1960 to 1975." *Journal of Marriage and Family.* 43:49-65.

Lichter, Daniel T., Diane K. McLaughlin, George Kephart and David J. Landry. 1992. "Race and the Retreat From Marriage: A Shortage of Marriageable Men?" *American Sociological Review.* 57:781-799.

Mare, Robert D. 1991. "Five Decades of Educational Assortative Mating." *American Sociological Review*. 56:15-32.

_____ and Christopher Winship. 1991. "Socioeconomic Change and the Decline of Marriage for Blacks and Whites." Pp. 175-202 in *The Urban Underclass,* edited by C. Jencks and P. Peterson. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. 2005. "NLSY 79." Washington DC: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Retrieved September 21, 2005.

Oppenheimer, Valerie Kincade. 1994. "Women's Rising Employment and the Future of the Family in Industrial Societies." *Population and Development Review.* 20:293-342.

_____. 1997. "Women's Employment and the Gain to Marriage: The Specialization and Trading Model." *Annual Review of Sociology.* 23:431-53.

Qian, Zhenchao. 1998. "Changes in Assortative Mating: The Impact of Age and Education 1970-1990." *Demography.* 35:279-292.

_____ and Samuel H. Preston. 1993. "Changes in American Marriage, 1972 to 1987: Availability and Forces of Attraction by Age and Education." *American Sociological Review.* 58:482-495.

Thornton, Arland, William G. Axinn and Jay D. Teachman. 1995. "The Influence of School Enrollment and Accumulation on Cohabitation and Marriage in Early Adulthood." *American Sociological Review.* 60:762-774.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2000. *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

_____. 2005. *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Wilson, William J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.