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Is educational assortative mating passed down through generations? Evidence from Europe

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ABSTRACT

Educational assortative mating can contribute to social closure and the intergenerational reproduction of inequality; a stratifying force that may intensify if mating behaviors are transmitted from parents to children. Despite its potential role in deepening social inequalities, however, the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating has been largely overlooked in empirical work. This study tests such transmission using micro-data from four EU-SILC waves, covering 32 European countries and a 45-year period. The analytical sample comprises 174,990 men and women, aged 35–45 and living with a different-sex partner. Based on a research design that accounts for indirect effects and confounding, the findings show that educational homogamy is transmitted across generations, but only among the highly educated. The transmission of heterogamy is gender-specific and occurs only when the same-sex parent occupies the higher educational position. The findings contribute to debates about the role of educational assortative mating in perpetuating inequality.

1. Introduction

The nonrandom sorting of individuals into romantic couples is known as assortative mating. Individuals tend to prefer partners with characteristics similar to their own, including educational attainment (De Hauw et al., 2017). Indeed, the majority of couples in Europe today consist of partners with similar levels of education (Uunk, 2024). This prevalence of educational homogamy in couples can have far-reaching implications for the reproduction of social advantages across generations as it concentrates valuable family resources—which shape children's opportunities and life chances—within a subset of privileged families (Schwartz, 2013). Whereas educational heterogamy fosters social interchange and cohesion between groups (Uunk, 2024), homogamy exacerbates social inequalities and reduces interaction between different social strata (Kalmijn, 1994b, 1998).

Prior research has shown that educational assortative mating plays a central role in the intergenerational reproduction of advantage (Corti & Scherer, 2022; Holmlund, 2022; Katrňák et al., 2012; Mare, 2016; Wittemann & Yastrebov, 2024). When both partners in a couple are highly educated, economic resources, social and cultural capital accumulate in the family, enhancing children's educational opportunities (Schwartz, 2013). Importantly, if children inherited their parents' mating behavior, the stratifying force of educational assortative mating would grow even stronger, as this would fuel *social closure* in the next generation (Berent, 1954) when an increasing share of the extended family belongs to a similar social group. Over time, this intergenerational dynamic can widen economic, social, cultural, and political divides in societies (Esping-Andersen, 2016; Schwartz & Mare, 2005). Yet, despite its potential to amplify social stratification, the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating has received scant empirical attention.

Research on the intergenerational transmission of family behaviors has shown that various traits are passed down from parents to children, including the timing of marriage and fertility (Riise et al., 2016; Van Poppel et al., 2008), the number of children (Beaujouan & Solaz, 2019; Requena & Reher, 2023), or the probability of multi-partner fertility (Lappegård & Thomson, 2018) and divorce (Di Nallo & Oesch, 2023). In a similar vein, children may also inherit their parents' mating behavior. As shown by Mare (2016) for the United States, children of educationally homogamous parents are more likely to marry within their own educational group than children of parents with mixed educational backgrounds. Potential mechanisms underlying the transmission of educational homogamy include the *socialization* of children to prefer mates with similar social traits and their *exposure* primarily to potential

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partners with similar family backgrounds (ibid.).

Beyond Mare's (2016) contribution, there is no systematic evidence on the intergenerational transmission of education-based mating behavior, and no study to date has examined this question in a European setting. This study fills that gap and examines the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating in Europe. Building on Mare's work, we move beyond a binary distinction between homogamy and heterogamy by disaggregating the latter into *hypergamy* (where men are more educated than their female partners) and *hypogamy* (where women are more educated than their male partners). This distinction allows us to test gendered patterns in the transmission of parental behavior. Moreover, it accounts for a pertinent demographic trend: the reversal of the gender gap in education that is reflected in falling proportions of hypergamous couples and a growing share of hypogamous couples (Esteve et al., 2016; Hirschl et al., 2024).

We analyze data from 32 European countries that participated in at least one of the four waves of the EU-SILC (Statistics on Income and Living Conditions) study that included the rotating module on the intergenerational transmission of poverty (2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023). These waves provide a pooled sample of 174,990 individuals aged 35–45 (born between 1956 and 1990) who were living with an opposite-sex partner in the same household at the time of the interview. Using information on the educational attainment of individuals, their partners and their parents, we study the intergenerational association between the parents' educational mating pattern and their children's educational mating pattern.

To examine the intergenerational transmission of educational mating patterns, we estimate logistic regression models for subsamples stratified by gender and levels of educational attainment, that account for indirect effects and confounding. Our results provide robust evidence for intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating, but not in all groups. We show that parental homogamy raises the likelihood of homogamous union formation among highly educated offspring. Moreover, moving beyond the dichotomy homogamy-heterogamy reveals strongly gender-specific patterns where the transmission of heterogamy from parents to children depends on the relative educational position of the same-sex parent in the parental couple. We explore the heterogeneity of the results across Europe and validate our findings through a series of robustness checks.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Background: why educational assortative mating matters

Educational assortative mating plays a key role in the intergenerational transmission of social advantage (Corti & Scherer, 2022; Holmlund, 2022; Katrňák et al., 2012; Mare, 2016; Wittemann & Yastrebov, 2024) and carries significant implications for families and society. Depending on whether one adopts a family perspective or a societal lens, educational homogamy—when romantic partners have similar levels of education—is evaluated differently.

From a *family perspective*, educational homogamy is beneficial. Homogamous couples tend to share similar values, aspirations, and child-rearing philosophies. Such congruence can reduce their risk of union dissolution (Kalmijn, 1994a; Mäenpää & Jalovaara, 2014; Mazzeo et al., 2024) and foster consistent parenting (Eeckhaut et al., 2014; González-Sancho, 2014). Moreover, by reinforcing the same values and behaviors, homogamous parents amplify each other's influence on the child (Bingley et al., 2022; Sunde et al., 2025). This alignment also reduces parental conflict, creating a more harmonious home environment that benefits children's health (Pesando, 2022; Rauscher, 2020), emotional well-being and social skills (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

From a *societal perspective*, however, educational homogamy can perpetuate social reproduction, curb social mobility, and reinforce boundaries between social groups (Katrňák et al., 2012; Uunk, 2024). Whereas educational heterogamy in families favors interchange between individuals from different social positions, potentially reducing the economic divide between different socioeconomic groups (Uunk, 2024), educational homogamy in families restricts children's exposure to different social groups and educational strata, contributing to the reproduction of social inequality (Kalmijn, 1994b, 1998). Consequently, in societies with high levels of educational homogamy—where partner choice is strongly constrained by barriers between social groups—social mobility tends to be lower (Grebol et al., 2026; Katrňák et al., 2012; Ultee & Luijkx, 1990).

Relatedly, educational assortative mating has been argued to heighten levels of *household income inequality* as the pairing of high earning individuals can increase measured levels of dispersion in household income (Fernández et al., 2005; Greenwood et al., 2014; Hu & Qian, 2015; Schwartz, 2010, 2013). However, this finding is dependent on high levels of female labor force participation, whereas in countries where married women typically do not work for pay (or where high-income men tend to marry women who are less likely to work), high levels of assortative mating on education can coexist with weak or even negative spousal earnings correlations (Frémeaux et al., 2024; Schwartz, 2013). Moreover, changes in the degree of educational assortative mating over time have been shown to explain only a small share of the trend in rising income inequality (Boertien & Permanyer, 2019; Breen & Salazar, 2011; Eika et al., 2019; Pesando, 2021). Nevertheless, even if countries' institutional setup (e.g., gender regime, wage setting and redistribution) strongly mediates how much educational assortative mating translates into disposable-income inequality (Breen & Andersen, 2012; Frémeaux et al., 2024), it is still true that when dual high-education couples form, they typically concentrate non-financial resources like cultural and social capital and high educational aspirations, which raises inequality in children's environments and may still strengthen the international reproduction of advantage (Fernández & Rogerson, 2001).

In summary, while educational homogamy offers advantages at the family level, it presents structural challenges for societies by contributing to the intergenerational reproduction of social advantage, social closure, and segregation (Bruch & Mare, 2011; Corti & Scherer, 2022; Holmlund, 2022; Katrňák et al., 2012; Wittemann & Yastrebov, 2024). Together, this body of research demonstrates why our research question is sociologically relevant, even though we do not empirically investigate the relationship between assortative mating and inequality in this study. Instead, we focus on whether educational mating patterns are transmitted across generations, providing foundational evidence about the persistence of mating patterns that can plausibly underlie broader stratification dynamics.

Indeed, the stratifying effects of educational homogamy can amplify if mating behaviors are transmitted across generations. When *educational homogamy* is passed down from parents to children, it renders extended families ever more homogeneous with each generation in a self-perpetuating cycle of social (dis)advantage. A similar problem emerges when *educational heterogamy* is passed down through generations. If highly educated children from heterogamous homes continue to "partner down"—curbing their own upward mobility and denying their children the head start that homogamous parents typically provide—social disadvantage is passed to the next generation, further widening the gap between more and less privileged families. From a social stratification perspective, therefore, it would be preferable if heterogamous mating occurred evenly across society rather than remaining entrenched within families.

2.2. Mechanisms: the intergenerational transmission of mating behavior

Having discussed the potential implications of the intergenerational transmission of mating behavior for stratification dynamics, we now turn to the question of why children may reproduce their parents' mating patterns. Mare (2016) identified two key mechanisms driving the transmission of educational homogamy across generations. First,

children of homogamous parents are typically *exposed* to a less diverse pool of potential partners, which increases their likelihood of also partnering homogamously. Second, homogamous parents and the social environment they create can shape their children's mating *preferences*, steering them towards similarly educated partners. Indeed, research indicates that families tend to cluster in socially homogeneous neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, fueling the transmission of homogamy to the next generation (Bruch & Mare, 2011). Hence, children raised in homogamous families are more likely to interact with peers from similar educational backgrounds, which may influence their own educational attainment, narrow their social circles to individuals with comparable levels of education, and shape their partner preferences accordingly. Consequently, they are likely to form homogamous relationships, mirroring their parents' behavior.

These two mechanisms also apply to the transmission of heterogamous partnering. First, children raised in heterogamous families are exposed to more diverse social environments, increasing their pool of potential mates with dissimilar educational backgrounds. Second, educational heterogamy in the family of origin can shape children's mating *preferences* by instilling certain values or by familiarizing them with distinct family dynamics. For instance, children from hypogamous families may normalize relationships in which women hold significant bargaining power, whereas children from hypergamous families may internalize more traditional, gender-typical roles and seek similar arrangements in their own relationships. This is supported by empirical research showing that the sons of working mothers tend to marry working women rather than more traditional wives (Fernández et al., 2004). Consequently, children from heterogamous families may be more likely to form heterogamous unions themselves than children raised in homogamous families.

2.3. State of knowledge

Although the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating has the potential to reinforce social stratification, empirical research on this phenomenon remains surprisingly scarce. To the best of our knowledge, only two studies have examined the transmission of educational assortative mating across generations. The one most directly assessing this transmission is Mare (2016), which finds an association between parents' educational homogamy and that of their offspring in the United States, and shows that this transmission was weaker during periods when homogamy levels were lower. Also focusing on the United States, Nguyen (2021) finds that spousal inequalities in years of schooling, labor supply, and income among parents—measured by the woman's relative status in the parental couple—tend to be reproduced by sons, but not by daughters. For Europe, no previous study has examined the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating.

By contrast, there is more empirical evidence on intergenerational continuity in assortative mating by ethnicity, nativity, or religious affiliation, typically measured as endogamy versus intermarriage. Swedish population-register studies link parents' endogamous or exogamous mating pattern to their children's subsequent partner choices and document strong parent–child associations (Celikaksoy, 2012; Irastorza & Elwert, 2021). Similar patterns have been documented in the Netherlands and Finland, where parents' religious/ethnolinguistic affiliation affects their children's partner choice (Kalmijn et al., 2006; Uggla & Saarela, 2024). Carol (2014) demonstrates intergenerational transmission of intermarriage-related attitudes using parent–adult child dyads among Turkish minorities in Western Europe, highlighting a plausible socialization mechanism that can shape later partnering.

Drawing on the limited literature on the intergenerational transmission of mating behavior and the mechanisms outlined above, we expect a positive association between the educational mating pattern of the family of origin (differentiating between homogamy, hypergamy, and hypogamy) and the individuals' own mating pattern, indicating a transmission of mating behaviors across generations. However, we anticipate that the intergenerational transmission of heterogamous mating patterns is likely to be gendered. We expect women—and especially men—to avoid reproducing unions in which their own sex occupies the lower-educated position, a behavior consistent with gender status beliefs and evidence on gendered mate selection (Fisman et al., 2006; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Instead, individuals are likely to reproduce their parents' educational mating pattern when the same-sex parent occupies the higher-educated position. This prediction aligns with the gender socialization hypothesis (Downey & Powell, 1993; Powell & Downey, 1997) and the stronger influence of the same-sex parent (Farré & Vella, 2013; Magnusson & Nermo, 2018; Polavieja & Platt, 2014). Therefore, we expect sons to more likely reproduce parental hypergamy than hypogamy, while daughters will be more prone to reproduce parental hypogamy than hypergamy.

Table 1
Observations by EU-SILC wave and country of residence.

	2005	*2011*	*2019*	*2023*	*Total*
Austria	1139	1717	1102	1202	5160
Belgium	1301	1377	1295	1212	5185
Bulgaria	-	1493	1396	1287	4176
Switzerland	-	1813	1391	-	3204
Cyprus	1408	1225	1030	1103	4766
Czechia	958	1551	1826	1099	5434
Germany	3474	2609	1277	-	7360
Denmark	837	619	402	286	2144
Estonia	995	1118	1132	885	4130
Greece	-	1280	3109	1656	6045
Spain	4489	3904	3799	5211	17,403
Finland	1286	973	1096	978	4333
France	2595	2632	1805	2612	9644
Croatia	-	1246	1486	1448	4180
Hungary	1587	3210	954	1300	7051
Ireland	1133	825	989	877	3824
Iceland	-	431	-	-	431
Italy	6616	5069	2734	3385	17,804
Lithuania	1243	920	548	604	3315
Luxembourg	1088	1966	1095	814	4963
Latvia	689	1043	528	552	2812
Malta	-	1028	809	888	2725
Netherlands	1276	1327	915	776	4294
Norway	825	710	607	615	2757
Poland	4672	3351	3385	2789	14,197
Portugal	1320	1391	2706	1407	6824
Romania	-	1767	1740	1589	5096
Serbia	-	-	1517	-	1517
Sweden	778	612	600	977	2967
Slovenia	1029	1195	1048	937	4209
Slovakia	1827	1587	1211	1001	5626
United Kingdom	-	1414	-	-	1414
Total	42,565	51,403	43,532	37,490	174,990

Note: The sample includes information from all 27 European Union members, plus United Kingdom, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Bulgaria.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data

This study draws on the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), an annual household survey designed to collect information on income and living conditions across Europe. We use cross-sectional data from the four waves (2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023) that included the rotating module on the intergenerational transmission of poverty, which recorded both parents' educational

attainment for all individuals aged 25 and above. The analytical sample includes 32 countries that participated in at least one of these waves, thereby offering the most complete representation of Europe achievable with the available data (see Table 1). While the main analysis is conducted on the pooled sample to maximize sample size and statistical power—including country-fixed effects to account for country-specific institutional and socioeconomic characteristics—we also explore heterogeneity in the results across Europe.

The EU-SILC collects information on all household members, including the nature of their relationships with one another. From this, we construct an analytical sample of 174,990 individuals aged 35–45 who were in a co-residing heterosexual relationship at the time of the interview—regardless of their marital status—and for whom we have valid information on their own, their partner's, and both their parents' educational attainment.

We choose this age interval because educational careers are largely completed at these ages and partnership formation has substantially stabilized by this stage of the life course. Furthermore, we choose a 10-year interval to mitigate potential selection bias. Because our data are cross-sectional and lack complete relationship histories—specifically, they do not indicate whether the observed union is the individual's first or most significant, nor whether separations or re-partnering occurred—a wider age range can bias results toward more stable and durable unions. Conversely, focusing on the 35–45 age group introduces the possibility of life-cycle effects, as some individuals may not yet have entered a stable cohabitation. To address this, we conduct a sensitivity analysis using an alternative sample of individuals aged 45–55. Consistent findings across both age groups would suggest that utilizing cross-sectional data at these specific life stages does not significantly bias our results.

The main analytical sample (individuals aged 35–45) comprises seven five-year birth cohorts, spanning from 1956 to 1990 (see Appendix Table A1). While this span is broad, it ensures sufficient statistical power for all intended analyses. To evaluate whether pooling cohorts with distinct structural mating constraints affects our findings, we divide the sample into three cohort groups (1956–1970; 1971–1980; 1981–1990) and replicate the primary analysis for each. Stability in results across these sub-samples would suggest that the underlying patterns are robust to the varying structural mating constraints experienced by different cohorts.

All analyses are conducted separately for women (N = 93,001) and men (N = 81,989).

3.2. Variables

The core variables in this study are the educational attainment (of respondents, their partners, and both of their parents) and the education-based mating pattern in the two generations. To standardize the educational attainment measure across survey waves and generations,[1] we differentiate between three levels: *low* (ISCED 2 and below), *medium* (ISCED 3 and 4), and *high* (ISCED 5 and above). Regarding the educational mating pattern of respondents and their parents, we distinguish between *hypogamy*, where the woman attained a higher level of education than the man; *homogamy*, where both partners attained the same level of education; and *hypergamy*, where the man attained a higher level of education than the woman.

Importantly, there is sufficient variation in the educational attainment and mating patterns of parents to conduct the intended analysis (Appendix Table A2). Moreover, the parental educational mating pattern does not significantly affect singlehood status (Appendix Table A3) and, therefore, does not influence the selection into our sample of co-residing couples.

3.3. Trends in educational attainment and assortative mating in Europe

Over the period covered by our data, Europe experienced a profound expansion of higher education, notably increasing the percentage of tertiary-educated individuals (Fig. 1): while 25% of individuals born between 1956 and 1960 attained tertiary education, this share rose to 49% among those from the 1986–1990 cohort. Despite cross-national variation in timing and intensity, the youngest cohort includes at least 30% tertiary-educated individuals in every country (Italy at the lower bound), and up to around 75% in others (Denmark and Luxembourg).

Importantly, this expansion was more pronounced among women in virtually all countries, resulting in a reversal of the gender gap in education (see Appendix Table A4 for exact figures). In some countries, such as Austria, the reversal occurred at the end of the observation period; in others, including France or Sweden, it had already taken place before the earliest cohorts observed. Only in Germany, the proportion of tertiary-educated men in the youngest cohort still slightly exceeds that of women. In all other cases, women ultimately surpassed men in educational attainment.

This gendered educational expansion altered the structural constraints for mating. The increasing number of tertiary-educated women relative to tertiary-educated men limits the extent to which highly educated women can realize preferences for homogamous partnering, leading some into hypogamous arrangements or singlehood. The same applies to low- and middle-educated men, who increasingly face a shortage of low-educated women with whom to form homogamous or hypergamous unions (Esteve et al., 2016).

As a result, the prevalence of homogamy, hypogamy, and hypergamy shifted markedly over time (Fig. 2). In the pooled sample, the share of hypergamous couples steadily declined from 21% to 10%, while hypogamous unions increased from 18% to 25% and homogamous unions from 61% to 66% (see Appendix Table A5). Among the youngest cohorts, educational hypergamy has become exceedingly rare, accounting for fewer than 10% of co-residing couples in many countries, whereas hypogamy has risen in nearly all contexts. The timing and intensity of these shifts differed across countries, with a later rise of hypogamy in the German-speaking countries and, to some extent, in Central and Eastern European countries (e.g., Czech Republic or Hungary).

Ultimately, these structural changes may either constrain or facilitate the realization of inherited mating preferences, thereby shaping the potential for intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating. However, the goal of this study is not to assess the role of mating preferences or mating constraints as such but rather to examine the occurrence of an intergenerational transmission of mating patterns, independently of marginal changes in the distribution of mating patterns across the parental and children's generations. To this end, our empirical strategy relies on the examination of odds and relative risk ratios (see below).

3.4. Intergenerational flows

As an initial descriptive approach to the data, Fig. 2 illustrates the flows of individuals from their family of origin to their own family in terms of mating patterns, i.e. the flows from each origin category (parental homogamy, hypergamy, or hypogamy) to each destination category (i.e., individuals' own mating pattern). Since our data include information from multiple countries, cohorts, and survey waves, instead of raw origin-by-destination tables, we present average predicted flows (see Appendix Table A6 for detail on the underlying model).

Homogamy is the most prevalent mating pattern in both generations (Fig. 3). About 48% of women and men in our sample were both raised

[1] In all survey waves, the individual's educational attainment has been recorded in more detail than that of their parents. The same attainment measure is used for both generations. Using a more detailed measure of attainment for children would increase heterogamy rates in this generation and may underestimate intergenerational transmission of homogamy.

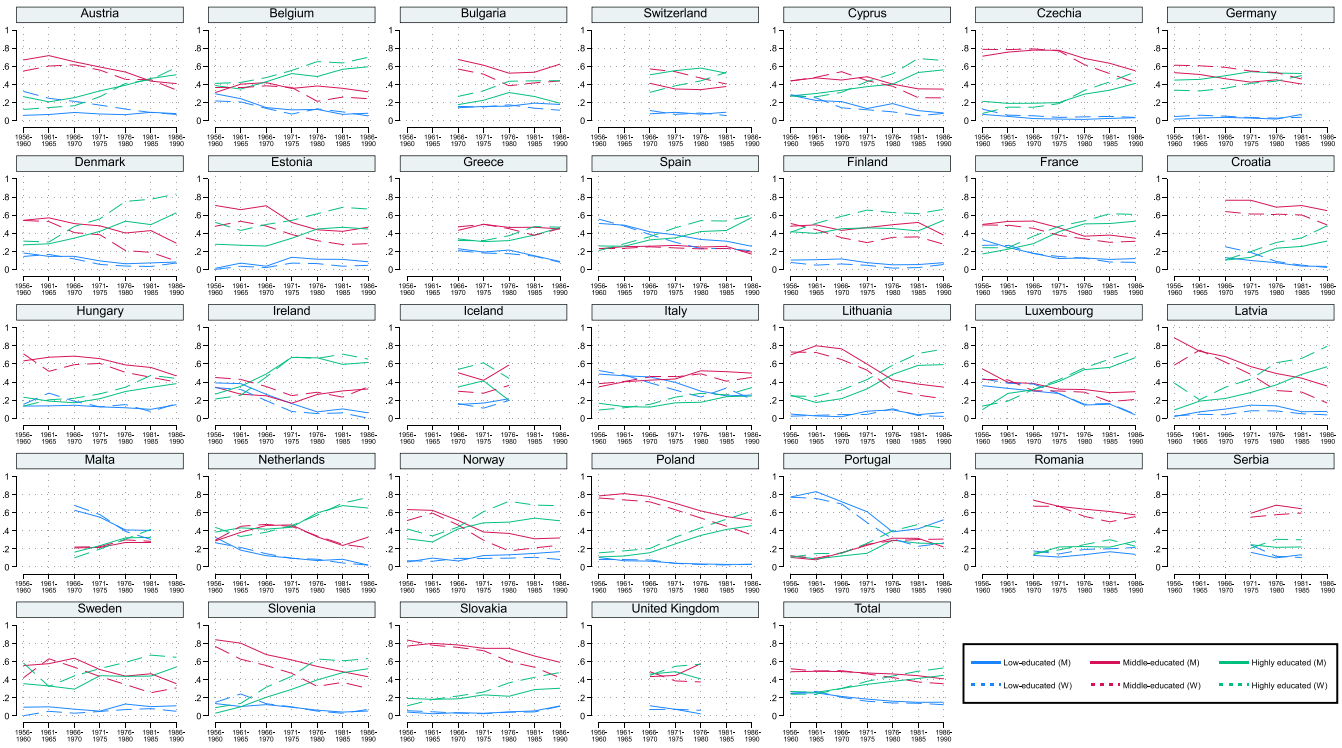


Fig. 1. Evolution of the educational attainment of respondents, by country of residence. **Note:** Authors' elaboration from EU-SILC 2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023.

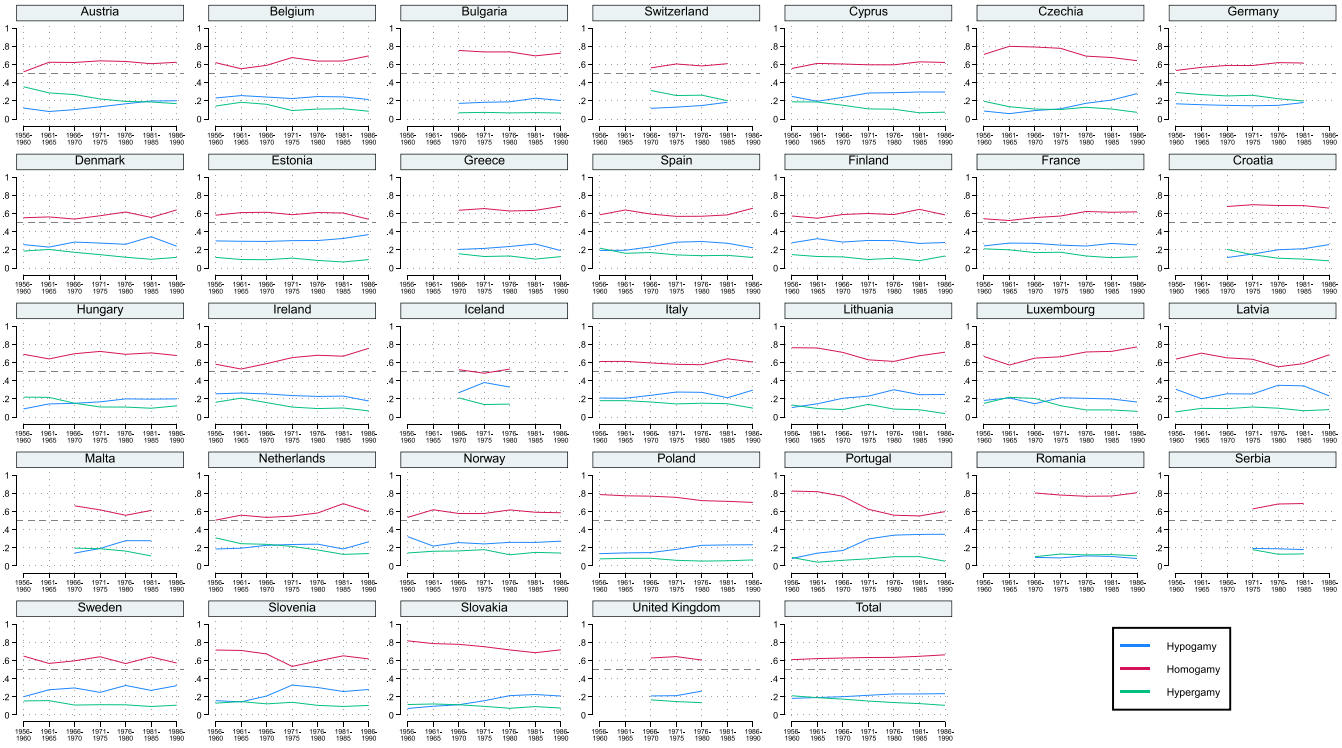


Fig. 2. Evolution of the educational mating pattern of respondents, by country of residence. **Note:** Authors' elaboration from EU-SILC 2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023.

in homogamous families and also formed this type of union themselves.[2] Notably, homogamy is the most common pattern for both women and men, regardless of whether they originate from a homogamous or a heterogamous family. Most of the flows from heterogamous families of origin are to homogamy, whereas flows across different types of heterogamy are rare (about 5% of all flows are between hypergamy and hypogamy).

Whereas about 64% of women and men from homogamous families

[2] Inferred from Appendix Table A6 ((69,680 x 0.643) / 93,001) and ((61,640 x 0.644) / 81,989).

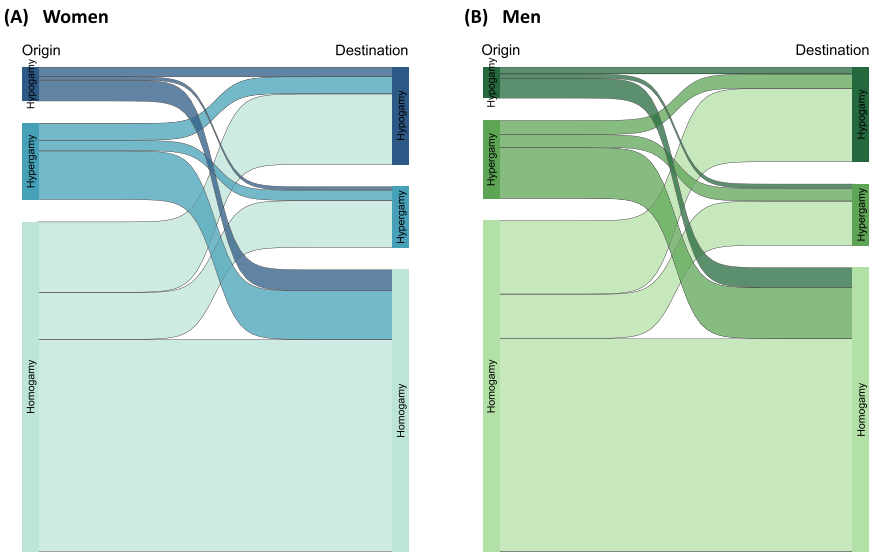


Fig. 3. Flows from origin (parental mating pattern) to destination (own mating pattern). **Note:** Results from a multinomial model including country-, cohort-, and wave-fixed effects.

partnered homogamously themselves, at first sight, the intergenerational persistence of heterogamy appears to be weaker: a minority of children raised in heterogamous families adopted the same mating pattern as their parents (e.g., about 14% of women raised in hypergamous families also formed a hypergamous union and about 28% of the relatively few women raised in hypogamous families also formed a hypogamous union, cf. Appendix Table A6).

Yet, our research interest is in whether those raised in heterogamous families (either hypogamous or hypergamous) have a higher relative risk of adopting the same specific mating pattern as their parents than their peers—with similar educational attainment—raised in homogamous families. And vice versa, whether those raised in homogamous families have a higher relative risk partnering homogamously than their peers—with similar educational attainment—raised in heterogamous families (either hypogamous or hypergamous).

3.5. Analytical strategy

A key challenge in examining the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating lies in isolating the direct relationship between the mating pattern of parents (MP^P) and that of their children (MP^C), accounting for confounding pathways and the mediating role of children's education. Fig. 4 illustrates these issues through a Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG).

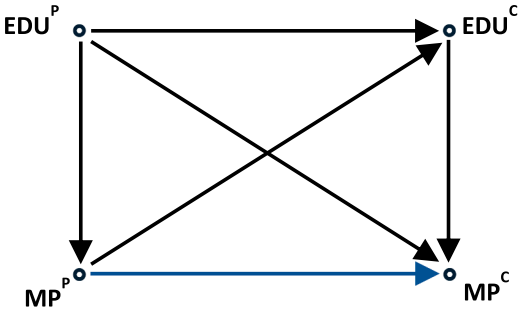


Fig. 4. DAG of the relationship between parents and children's mating patterns. **Note:** EDU^P: parents' educational attainment; EDU^C: child's educational attainment; MP^P: parents' educational mating pattern; MP^C: child's educational mating pattern. The association of interest is highlighted in blue ($MP^P \rightarrow MP^C$). The backdoor paths are: $MP^P \leftarrow EDU^P \rightarrow EDU^C \rightarrow MP^C$ and $MP^P \leftarrow EDU^P \rightarrow MP^C$. To block those paths, we need to control at least for EDU^P.

The transmission of mating behavior across generations can be conceptualized as a two-stage process. The first stage represents the intergenerational transmission of education. Parents' educational attainment (EDU^P) as well as their educational mating pattern (MP^P) shape the educational attainment of their children (EDU^C, e.g., (Blossfeld et al., 2024; Byun & Bai, 2020; Ortiz-Gervasi, 2021; Valdés & Steiber, 2025). In the second stage, individuals form relationships with specific mating patterns, a choice constrained by their educational attainment. For example, the daughter of two highly educated parents is likely to achieve higher education herself, which narrows her options to homogamy (like her parents) and hypogamy (partnering down). Similarly, children of educationally mixed parents are less likely to reach the educational level of the more educated parent (Corti & Scherer, 2022), which also affects their options of partnering homogamously, upward, or downward. Within the factual constraints of possible mating patterns at each level of educational attainment (EDU^C), children's mating patterns are shaped by their parents' education (EDU^P) and by their parents' mating pattern (MP^P). For example, highly educated parents may prefer highly educated partners for their children—regardless of their children's educational attainment—to maximize the socioeconomic standing of the resulting family (Schwartz et al., 2016). Overall, the transmission of mating patterns across generations can be decomposed into an *indirect path* of parent's mating pattern mediated by the child's educational attainment ($MP^P \rightarrow EDU^C \rightarrow MP^C$) and a *direct path* that is independent of the child's level of education ($MP^P \rightarrow MP^C$).

Our primary interest lies in estimating this direct effect of parents' mating pattern (MP^P) on that of their child (MP^C), whose estimate is confounded by two backdoor paths. The first backdoor path is generated by the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment ($EDU^P \rightarrow EDU^C$). Because educational attainment shapes and constrains mating patterns in both generations, this creates a confounding path that needs to be accounted for ($MP^P \leftarrow EDU^P \rightarrow EDU^C \rightarrow MP^C$). The second backdoor path arises from the direct influence of parental education on the child's mate selection ($EDU^P \rightarrow MP^C$). As parental education affects mating patterns in both generations, this introduces an additional path that also needs to be controlled for ($MP^P \leftarrow EDU^P \rightarrow MP^C$). To identify the relationship of interest, therefore, we need to control for parental education, effectively blocking both backdoor paths.

Furthermore, to account for the *indirect* pathway ($MP^P \rightarrow EDU^C \rightarrow MP^C$), we stratify the sample by children's educational attainment, thereby examining the direct effect of parents' mating pattern on the child's mating pattern for low, medium, and highly educated

individuals. It is important to emphasize, however, that this empirical strategy does not eliminate the possibility of unobserved confounding and therefore does not support a causal interpretation. Accordingly, the term effect is used to refer to the intergenerational association between parents' and children's educational mating patterns, without implying causality.

3.6. Model setup

To implement this identification strategy, we adjust two sets of models. The first set are binary logit models, which compare the relative risk of the child's mating pattern (Hypo^C, Homo^C, or Hyper^C) with any of the other mating patterns. The second set are logistic regression models, which compare the relative risk of the child's mating pattern with each of the other options (binary or multinomial depending on the mating options at the given level of the child's education). All models are stratified by the individual's educational attainment and include parental education as a control. Consistent with most previous research, we adopt the 'dominance approach' measuring parental education based on the attainment of the more educated parent.[3] All models include country-, cohort- and wave-fixed effects.

The first set of models examine the impact of a binary indicator capturing whether or not children adopted the same mating pattern as their parents, separately for each mating pattern in the child generation (Hypo^c, Homo^C, and Hyper^C). From women's perspective, the equations are:

$$logit\left(\frac{P(Hypo^{C}_{ijkt}=1)}{P(Hypo^{C}_{ijkt}=0)}\right)=\alpha+\beta Hypo^{P}_{ijkt}+\delta EDU^{P}_{ijkt}+\gamma_j+\lambda_k+\mu_t \text{for} EDU^{C}=2,\quad 3$$

$$logit\left(\frac{P(Homo^{C}_{ijkt}=1)}{P(Homo^{C}_{ijkt}=0)}\right)=\alpha+\beta Homo^{P}_{ijkt}+\delta EDU^{P}_{ijkt}+\gamma_j+\lambda_k+\mu_t \text{for} EDU^{C}=1,\quad 2,\quad 3 \tag{1}$$

$$logit\left(\frac{P(Hyper^{C}_{ijkt}=1)}{P(Hyper^{C}_{ijkt}=0)}\right)=\alpha+\beta Hyper^{P}_{ijkt}+\delta EDU^{P}_{ijkt}+\gamma_j+\lambda_k+\mu_t \text{for} EDU^{C}=1,\quad 2$$

Where *i, j, k,* and *t* index individuals, countries, cohorts, and waves, respectively. Results are reported as odds ratios (OR), obtained by exponentiating β coefficients from Eq. (1). These indicate whether the odds of forming a specific union increase when parents also formed this same type of union. As low-educated women (men) cannot form hypogamous (hypergamous) partnerships and highly educated women (men) cannot form hypergamous (hypogamous) relationships (factual constraint), seven ORs are computed for each gender.

Since the models in Eq. (1) do not exploit all the information on mating patterns, our second and preferred specification relies on a setup that allows us to test whether parents' specific mating pattern influences the relative risk that their children form unions with the exact same pattern, rather than a specific alternative pattern. From women's perspective, the equations for the three subsamples stratified by educational attainment (EDU^C) are:

$$\ln\left(\frac{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=a)}{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=b)}\right)=\alpha+\beta MP^{P}_{ijkt}+\delta EDU^{P}_{ijkt}+\gamma_j+\lambda_k+\mu_t \text{for} EDU^{C}=1$$

$$a=2,\quad 3; b=2,\quad 3; \textit{and } a\neq b$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=a)}{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=b)}\right)=\alpha+\beta MP^{P}_{ijkt}+\delta EDU^{P}_{ijkt}+\gamma_j+\lambda_k+\mu_t \text{for} EDU^{C}=2$$

$$a=1,\ldots,3; b=1,\ldots,3; \textit{and } a\neq b \tag{2}$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=a)}{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=b)}\right)=\alpha+\beta MP^{P}_{ijkt}+\delta EDU^{P}_{ijkt}+\gamma_j+\lambda_k+\mu_t \text{for} EDU^{C}=3$$

$$a=1,\quad 2; b=1,\quad 2; \textit{and } a\neq b$$

Where *a* and *b* refer to the two mating patterns being compared: hypogamy (1), homogamy (2), or hypergamy (3). The models are multinomial for medium-educated women, while they are binary for low- and highly educated individuals, who can only choose between homogamy and one alternative mating pattern. To quantify the *association* of mating patterns across generations, we rely on relative risk ratios (RRR), derived by exponentiating the coefficients β from Eq. (2). Specifically, we examine RRRs that compare the relative risk that children whose parents exhibit mating pattern A (e.g., hypogamy) have also chosen pattern A instead of pattern B (e.g., homogamy), relative to children whose parents exhibit mating pattern B.

With three possible mating patterns, three RRRs of this kind are calculated for the three pairwise contrasts (hypogamy vs. homogamy, hypergamy vs. homogamy, and hypogamy vs. hypergamy) for medium-educated individuals. For low- and highly educated individuals, only one RRR can be calculated. Overall, five RRRs are thus reported for each gender.

4. Results

4.1. Intergenerational transmission of educational mating patterns

The findings from the first set of logit models according to Eq. (1) are shown in Table 2, separately for women (panel a) and men (panel b). They provide evidence for the transmission of homogamy in some groups. The odds that highly educated women form a homogamous

Table 2
Odds ratios capturing the intergenerational transmission of mating patterns.

(A) Women			
	Low education	Medium education	High education
Homo^P → Homo^C	0.76 (0.07) *	0.97 (0.03)	1.48 (0.04) **
Hypo^P → Hypo^C	-	1.61 (0.10) **	1.47 (0.05) **
Hyper^P → Hyper^C	0.88 (0.08)	0.96 (0.04)	-
(B) Men			
	Low education	Medium education	High education
Homo^P → Homo^C	1.00 (0.10)	0.88 (0.03) **	1.48 (0.05) **
Hypo^P → Hypo^C	1.23 (0.15)	0.97 (0.04)	-
Hyper^P → Hyper^C	-	1.90 (0.11) **	1.41 (0.05) **

Note: **p ≤ 0.001; *p ≤ 0.05. Results from a series logit models stratified by educational attainment, controlling parental educational attainment, and including country, cohort, and wave-fixed effects. The estimates are reported in the form of odds ratios comparing the odds of mating pattern A when originating from a family of type A instead of from a different family type. For instance, the first row depicts the ratio between the odds of partnering hypogamously when coming from a hypogamous family compared to the same odds when coming from a non-hypogamous family.

[3] In families where both parents are equally educated, it is inconsequential which parent's education is considered. In families where one parent is more educated than the other, that parents' level of education may dominate in shaping the child's educational trajectory, as that parent may have more say in decisions regarding children's schooling and resource allocation (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996).

union increase by 48% when their parents already partnered homogamously (OR = 1.48; p ≤ 0.001). However, this positive association is not observed for women with medium or low education. In fact, low-educated women from homogamous families have greater odds of "partnering up" than copying their parents mating pattern (OR = 0.76; p ≤ 0.05). For men, we also find evidence for a transmission of homogamy across generations. However, in line with the findings for women, this is only the case for highly educated offspring (OR = 1.48; p ≤ 0.001). By contrast, medium-educated men from homogamous families are more likely to partner heterogamously than to follow their parents into homogamy (OR = 0.88 ≤ 0.001). For men with low education, no association is observed between parental homogamy and children' odds of homogamy.

Regarding the transmission of heterogamy, the pattern of findings for women are reversed compared to those for men. For medium- and highly educated women, coming from a hypogamous family increases the odds of hypogamous union formation by 61% (OR = 1.61; p ≤ 0.001) and 47% (OR = 1.47; p ≤ 0.001), respectively. Parental hypergamy, by contrast, does not affect women's likelihood of partnering hypergamously. For medium and highly educated men, we find instead that parental hypergamy is transmitted across generations (OR = 1.90; p ≤ 0.001, and OR = 1.41; p ≤ 0.001), whereas parental hypogamy is not (non-significant ORs). These results show that children do not tend to follow their parents in relationships in which they have the lower level of education: women follow their parents into hypogamy but not hypergamy, while men follow their parents into hypergamy but not hypogamy.

4.2. Pairwise comparisons of mating patterns

The findings from the second set of logit models according to Eq. (2), which account for more detail in parental mating patterns, are discussed for three specific comparisons: homogamy vs. hypogamy, homogamy vs. hypergamy, and hypogamy vs. hypergamy. The results are reported as relative risk ratios (RRR) in Table 3.

For daughters, the RRRs for the first choice (homogamy vs. hypogamy) suggest that the relative risk of partnering homogamously rather than hypogamously increases substantially when they are from homogamous rather than hypogamous families. This relative risk increases by 64% for highly educated women (OR = 1.64; p ≤ 0.001), and by 69% for those with medium education (OR = 1.69; p ≤ 0.001). It is worth noting that the RRR remains identical whether the comparison is framed as homogamy versus hypogamy or vice versa. This means that the RRR captures an intergenerational association in the choice between two mating patterns, rather than a preference for one of the patterns. Thus, a RRR above one indicates that homogamy becomes more likely relative to hypogamy when parents partnered homogamously instead of hypogamously, just as hypogamy becomes more likely compared to homogamy when parents are hypogamous rather than homogamous.

Table 3
Relative risk ratios capturing the intergenerational transmission of mating patterns.

(A) Women			
	Low education	Medium education	High education
Homo vs Hypo	-	1.69 (0.12) **	1.64 (0.06) **
Homo vs Hyper	0.78 (0.08) *	0.88 (0.04) **	-
Hypo vs Hyper	-	1.65 (0.13) **	-
(B)Men			
	Low education	Medium education	High education
Homo vs Hypo	1.17 (0.17)	0.84 (0.04) **	-
Homo vs Hyper	-	1.82 (0.12) **	1.52 (0.06) **
Hypo vs Hyper	-	1.84 (0.17) **	-

Note: **p ≤ 0.001; *p ≤ 0.05. Results from binary and multinomial logistic regression models stratified by educational attainment, controlling for parental educational attainment, and including country, cohort, and wave-fixed effects. The estimates are reported in the form of odds ratios comparing the relative risk of mating pattern A vs. B, when originating from a family of type A vs. type B. For instance, the first row depicts the ratio between the relative risk of partnering hypogamously instead of homogamously when coming from a hypogamous family compared to the same relative risk when coming from a homogamous family.

With regard to low- and medium-educated women's choice between homogamy and hypergamy, however, we find a negative association of mating patterns across generations (RRRs < 1), indicating that the relative risk of partnering homogamously is lower for women from homogamous families than for those from hypergamous ones. This suggests that women from hypergamous families of origin shy away from copying their parents' (gender traditional) mating pattern, which may be due to a negative role model of a patriarchal family of origin.

For sons, the results are again reversed. The RRRs for the second contrast (homogamy vs. hypergamy) suggest that men's relative risk of forming a homogamous rather than a hypergamous union (or the other way around) increases substantially when their parents are homogamous rather than hypergamous: by 82% for men with medium education and by 52% for highly educated men. But for men's choice between homogamy and hypogamy, we find a negative association, suggesting that men with mothers who outrank their fathers in terms of education shy away from following their fathers into this pattern. It can also be argued that men from hypogamous families of origin were socialized into valuing egalitarian relationships with women. Therefore, they are drawn to seek homogamous unions in which women and men have an equal status.

Transitions between homogamy and heterogamy across generations occur very frequently (see Section 3.3) and thus hold substantial empirical relevance. By contrast, shifts from hypogamous origins to hypergamous destinations, and vice versa, are comparatively rare, accounting for less than 5% of intergenerational flows between matting patterns observed in our analytical sample. Even so, the results for the latter, which can only be examined for medium-educated children, suggest that women and men from hypogamous families are more likely to form a hypogamous rather than a hypergamous relationship compared to those from hypergamous families (men: OR = 1.84 and women: OR = 1.65; p ≤ 0.001). The result can be also expressed in the other direction: children's risk of partnering hypergamously instead of hypogamously increases if parents are hypergamous rather than hypogamous. Substantively, this finding suggests that children of both genders who were socialized into certain gender dynamics in heterogamous families are more likely to follow their parents to form the same union type instead of forming the opposite pattern.

At first sight, the result may seem at odds with the transmission of heterogamy for medium-educated individuals in the contrasts homogamy vs. hypogamy (for men) and homogamy vs. hypergamy (for women). However, the two sets of results are complementary, reflecting different mechanisms. The hypogamy-hypergamy contrast highlights the potential role played by socialization, whereas the empirically more relevant heterogamy-homogamy contrast highlights that in the context of common preferences for same-status unions (homogamy) children only follow their parents to form heterogamous unions when the same-sex parent occupies the higher educated position.

5. Heterogeneity across Europe

Next, we explore the heterogeneity in the results of our preferred specification (based on relative risk ratios) across Europe. Country-level sample sizes do not permit a comprehensive cross-national comparison, as the analysis requires disaggregation by sex, educational attainment, and both parental and own mating behavior. This fine-grained stratification generates numerous empty cells at the country level, preventing

the estimation of RRRs in most cases. We therefore aggregate countries into regional blocks[4] and present results separately for women and men (Table 4). Even at this level of disaggregation, however, some cells remain sparsely populated. Accordingly, we only report RRRs based on cells with at least 50 observations. Estimates based on cells with 50–99 observations are presented in square brackets to indicate that they should be interpreted with caution.

The pattern identified in the main analysis is broadly reflected across regional blocks. The only clear deviation is the RRR capturing the intergenerational association in the choice between hypogamous and homogamous partnering among low-educated men in Southern Europe. In the pooled sample, the estimated RRR is 1.17 and not statistically significant, suggesting no positive intergenerational association. By contrast, among low-educated men in Southern Europe, the corresponding estimate is 1.73 and highly statistically significant.[5] This indicates that these men are more likely to partner hypogamously instead of homogamously when they come from a hypogamous family compared to a homogamous one (or the other way around). This divergence among low-educated men from Southern Europe compared to the overall sample may be related to particularly strong gender role socialization effects on those men who on average remain living with their family of origin the longest before forming a first partnership (Ferraretto & Vitali, 2024). All other RRRs are similar in magnitude and sign to those estimated in the pooled sample or, at minimum, lead to the same substantive conclusions regarding the presence or absence of a positive intergenerational association.

It is worth mentioning that the intergenerational association of mating patterns among highly educated women and men—estimable in most regions—is highly stable across Europe, both in terms of sign and magnitude. Conversely, the comparison between hypogamous and hypergamous partnering among medium-educated individuals—particularly men—is difficult to assess at the regional level, as few men from hypogamous families form hypogamous unions. Nevertheless, in those cases where estimation is feasible, the pattern is consistent across regions and mirrors the pooled results.

Overall, our exploratory analysis across European regions indicates a largely stable pattern, with little indication of systematic heterogeneity associated with country-level characteristics.

6. Robustness checks

Finally, we test whether our findings are robust to life-cycles effects and cross-cohort variation. First, while our main analysis focused on individuals aged 35–45, we replicate the estimation for individuals aged 45–55. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, the key difference between the two samples lies in type of singles excluded from the analyses. In the younger group, we likely exclude singles who have yet to form their first co-residing relationship, while in the older group, we are likely to exclude singles who have dissolved past unions. As we do not observe complete relationship histories, we cannot control for these factors. However, our results in this entirely different sample remain highly similar (see Appendix Table A7), confirming that our conclusions are robust to variations in sample composition by age and union history.

Second, to address potential heterogeneity introduced by pooling

Table 4
Relative risk ratios capturing the intergenerational transmission of mating patterns, by European region.

(A)Women

	Low education	Medium education			High education
	Homo vs Hyper	Homo vs Hypo	Hypo vs Hyper	Homo vs Hyper	Homo vs Hypo
Southern Europe	0,86 (0,15)	1,75 (0,23) **	1,82 (0,28) **	0,98 (0,10)	1,82 (0,15) **
Western Europe	0,55 (0,18)	[1,61 (0,29) *]	[1,73 (0,33) *	0,90 (0,11)	1,50 (0,14) **
Central Europe	-	-	-	1,10 (0,09)	1,75 (0,26) **
Northern Europe	-	-	-	1,02 (0,15)	1,50 (0,14) **
Eastern Europe	[0,62 (0,14)*]	[2,33 (0,41) **]	[1,17 (0,27)	0,60 (0,06) **	1,91 (0,17) **
Balkan countries	-	-	-	[0,60 (0,11) *]	1,95 (0,30) **
Baltic countries	-	[1,82 (0,35) *]	-	-	1,49 (0,16) **
Anglo-Saxon countries	-	-	-	[1,21 (0,34)]	[1,53 (0,26)*]
Total	0,78 (0,08)*	1,69 (0,12) **	1,65 (0,13) **	0,88 (0,04) *	1,65 (0,06) **

(B)Men

	Low education	Medium education			High education
	Homo vs Hypo	Homo vs Hypo	Hypo vs Hyper	Homo vs Hyper	Homo vs Hyper
Southern Europe	[1,73 (0,39)*]	1,02 (0,13)	1,42 (0,26) *	2,08 (0,32) **	1,64 (0,14)**
Western Europe	-	0,82 (0,12)	-	1,52 (0,28) *	1,53 (0,15)**
Central Europe	-	[1,02 (0,17)]	-	2,30 (0,40) **	1,77 (0,15)**
Northern Europe	-	0,79 (0,09) *	-	[1,20 (0,25)]	1,28 (0,16)*
Eastern Europe	-	0,91 (0,08)	-	2,33 (0,29) **	1,33 (0,15)*
Balkan countries	-	[0,72 (0,13)]	-	-	[1,99 (0,39)**]
Baltic countries	-	0,78 (0,09) *	-	-	-
Anglo-Saxon countries	-	-	-	-	[1,62 (0,36)*]
Total	1,17 (0,17)	0,85 (0,04) **	1,84 (0,17) **	1,82 (0,12) **	1,53 (0,06)**

Note: **p ≤ 0.001; *p ≤ 0.05. Results from binary and multinomial logistic regression models stratified by educational attainment, controlling for parental educational attainment, and including country, cohort, and wave-fixed effects. The estimates are reported in the form of odds ratios and their (SD) comparing the relative risk of mating pattern A vs. B, when originating from a family of type A vs. type B. Relative risk ratios based on cells with less than 50 observations are not reported; estimates based on cells with less than 100 observations in square brackets.

[4] Countries are grouped by geographical proximity into eight clusters: **Southern Europe**: Portugal, Spain, Italy, Malta, Greece, Cyprus; **Western Europe**: France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxemburg; **Central Europe**: Germany, Austria, Switzerland; **Northern Europe**: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland; **Eastern Europe**: Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria; **Balkan countries**: Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia; **Baltic countries**: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia; **Anglo-Saxon countries**: Ireland, United Kingdom.

[5] Although based on less than 100 low-educated men that originated in a hypogamous family and formed a homogamous relationship.

individuals born across a wide range of years (1956–1990), we split the sample into three birth cohorts (1956–1970, 1971–1980, 1981–1990) and compare estimates between them. As shown in Appendix Table A8, the RRRs for each cohort are highly consistent with those in Table 3, with only slight variations attributable to smaller sample sizes. This stability across cohorts indicates that the intergenerational transmission of educational mating patterns in Europe has remained largely unchanged over the study period, underscoring the robustness of our conclusions amid long-term structural shifts in educational attainment and partner selection. This conclusion aligns with the observed homogeneity in the results across European regions, as these also present markedly different distributions of educational attainment and varying prevalences of homogamous, hypogamous, and hypergamous unions.

7. Discussion and conclusions

This study addresses a gap in empirical work on the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating by leveraging EU-SILC data from 32 European countries to test whether parents' educational pairing shapes their children's partner choice. To isolate this effect, we stratify our analyses by the offspring's education level and include a control for parental education. Using binary and multinomial logistic regression models, the study provides robust evidence for intergenerational transmission.

Our analyses show that among highly educated individuals, having educationally *homogamous* parents strongly raises the chance of also forming an educationally homogamous partnership. Further examination of choices between homogamy and the two heterogamous mating options (hypo- and hypergamy) shows that mating patterns are transmitted only to children with at least medium education, while children with lower education do not seem influenced by their parents' mating pattern. For the highly educated, whose only alternatives are to match their parents' status or partner downward (women in hypogamy; men in hypergamy), there is clear evidence that offspring from homogamous families are far more likely to form homogamous unions than those from the corresponding heterogamous type of family.

Regarding the intergenerational transmission of heterogamy, the analysis reveals a gendered pattern, contingent on whether the same-sex parent occupies the higher-educated position. We first show that parental hypogamy significantly increases the probability that women partner hypogamously, yet no such association is observed for hypergamy. For men, in turn, there is a strong and positive intergenerational association for hypergamy, but not for hypogamy. Pairwise comparisons further clarify these dynamics, showing that for highly and middle-educated women (men), parental hypogamy (hypergamy) increases the probability of hypogamous (hypergamous) rather than homogamous pairings. In turn, we do not observe that hypergamy (hypogamy) is chosen over homogamy by middle and low-educated women (men). Finally, for both middle-educated women and men, originating in a hypogamous families instead of a hypergamous one notably increases the probability of forming a hypogamous rather than a hypergamous couple, while originating from a hypergamous family pushes towards hypergamy.

The observation that the transmission of heterogamy depends on the sex of the child and which parent holds the educational advantage aligns with prior research emphasizing the greater influence of the same-sex parent on children's behaviors (Downey & Powell, 1993; Farré & Vella, 2013; Magnusson & Nermo, 2018; Polavieja & Platt, 2014; Powell & Downey, 1997). Consequently, children only inherit a tendency to choose heterogamy over homogamy when the heterogamous pattern afforded the educational advantage to the same-sex parent. This implies that in the empirically most relevant mating choice between heterogamy and homogamy, individuals tend to follow their parents into "partnering down" but not into "partnering up".

These findings are relevant for social stratification research. The transmission of homogamy to the next generation can contribute to widening gaps between more and less privileged (extended) families, to social closure, and the social reproduction of advantages and disadvantages. In a similar vein, the transmission of heterogamy can contribute to the entrenchment of social inequality, as it limits the opportunities for social advancement among individuals with heterogamous parents and their own children. From a social stratification perspective, the clustering of educational heterogamy within extended families contributes to social divides and cannot be deemed preferable to the clustering of educational homogamy in certain family lines. Educational heterogamy *per se* can foster interchange between social groups and help reduce social closure and foster social mobility. However, when it runs in families, this alters its societal effects. Therefore, our results carry highly relevant implications for the social reproduction of societies.

In particular, this study identifies a previously overlooked pathway in the process of educational reproduction. Recent research has shifted from retrospective analyses—focused on how parental education shapes children's educational attainment—to prospective approaches that examine how the educational gradient in fertility and educational assortative mating contribute to the socially stratified production of highly educated children (Corti & Scherer, 2022; Skopek & Leopold, 2020; Song & Mare, 2015). These studies show that highly educated individuals are more likely to produce highly educated children not only due to the resources and support they provide but also because they tend to form homogamous unions, and when they do so, they pool resources that enhance their children's educational opportunities. However, highly educated individuals are also less likely to have children and therefore less likely to pass on their advantages, which partially offsets this effect (Wittemann & Yastrebov, 2024). Building on this line of research, we propose a thus far unexplored mechanism: the intergenerational transmission of assortative mating. Parents may inherit a tendency from their own parents to partner homogamously and, by implication, to pool resources in ways that reinforce their children's achievement. By contrast, individuals whose parents were educationally heterogamous may themselves have grown up under less advantageous conditions than those with two highly educated parents. If they in turn replicate their parents' heterogamous partnering patterns, they transmit similarly less favorable conditions to the next generation. The intergenerational transmission of mating behavior may therefore constitute one additional pathway through which educational advantages and disadvantages are reproduced across multiple generations.

From a policy perspective, our findings highlight the importance of promoting social interaction between individuals from different social strata. Greater exposure to potential partners from diverse backgrounds can increase the likelihood of heterogamous union formation, thereby weakening the intergenerational transmission of mating behavior and contributing to a more equitable distribution of resources across families. Governments should not, of course, seek to influence personal partnering choices. However, they can foster social environments that facilitate interaction among individuals from different social and educational backgrounds, thereby reducing the extent to which families of origin constrain exposure to potential partners and the formation of mating preferences.

As with any study, ours has limitations. First, we rely on cross-sectional data, observing individuals at a single point in time. Consequently, those not in a co-residing relationship at the time of the survey are classified as single and excluded from the analysis—even if they recently dissolved a union or are about to enter one. Longitudinal data tracking each person's longest co-residential partnership would overcome this shortcoming. Nonetheless, we found no indication that parents' educational mating patterns are associated with their children's relationship status, and our core findings hold when we repeat the

analysis at a different life stage. Second, we lack information on respondents' childhood living arrangements and complete parental union histories. As a result, we cannot determine whether respondents were raised by both biological parents, experienced parental separation, or lived in stepfamily arrangements. This limitation may affect the extent to which individuals were actually exposed to parental mating pattern. However, the study focuses on individuals born between 1956 and 1990, whose parents typically formed unions in earlier decades, when divorce and non-marital childbearing were uncommon in most European countries. Consequently, exposure to stable two-parent households was the predominant experience for individuals in our sample. Third, although we carefully address potential confounding and the role of parents' and children's educational attainment, our analysis cannot establish causality. Unobserved factors—such as parental health—may influence both generations' educational mating patterns, thus contributing to the observed associations. As is common in research in social and educational mobility, our study is observational and based on cross-sectional data, which inherently limits causal interpretation. Fourth, while our sample of analysis covers all of Europe, we are unable to analyze individual countries. Instead, we provide an exploratory analysis for eight European regions, which suggests substantial homogeneity in the effects of interest across the continent. Finally, our analysis is limited to heterosexual couples. In the cohorts examined, co-residing same-sex couples represent a small proportion of the population, resulting in an insufficient analytical sample. Moreover, one of the central aims of this study was to examine the intergenerational transmission of hypogamous and hypergamous arrangements, concepts that do not apply to same-sex couples. Nevertheless, future research could investigate whether the patterns observed for heterosexual couples also extend to same-sex partnerships.

Despite these limitations, our study sheds light on an unresearched yet highly important and consequential phenomenon, provides robust evidence of the intergenerational transmission of educational assortative mating and points toward valuable directions for further investigation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Valdés Manuel T.: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nadia Steiber:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Appendix

Table A1
Observations by wave and birth cohort

	EU-SILC 2005	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2023	Total
1956–1960	4147	-	-	-	4147
1961–1965	20,328	-	-	-	20,328
1966–1970	18,090	25,218	-	-	43,308
1971–1975	-	22,249	8981	-	31,230
1976–1980	-	3936	20,868	12,226	37,030
1981–1985	-	-	13,683	17,216	30,899
1986–1990	-	-	-	8048	8048
Total	42,565	51,403	43,532	37,490	174,990

Table A2
Parents' educational mating patterns, by birth cohort of the child

Cohort	Hypogamy	Homogamy	Hypergamy	Total	Total
1956–1960	5.2%	73.8%	20.9%	100%	4147
1961–1965	4.8%	74.7%	20.4%	100%	20,328
1966–1970	5.8%	74.8%	19.3%	100%	43,308
1971–1975	7.4%	75.6%	17.0%	100%	31,230
1976–1980	8.2%	76.0%	15.8%	100%	37,030
1981–1985	9.8%	74.7%	15.5%	100%	30,899
1986–1990	11.9%	72.7%	15.5%	100%	8048
Total	7.4%	75.0%	17.6%	100%	174,990

Note: Authors' elaboration from EU-SILC 2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023.

Table A3
Relationship status, by parents' educational mating pattern

	Hypogamy	Homogamy	Hypergamy	Total
Not in a relationship	30.9%	25.6%	28.1%	26.5%
In a relationship	69.1%	74.4%	71.9%	73.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Total	21,783	16,194	39,324	235,725

Note: Authors' elaboration from EU-SILC 2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023.

Table A4
Individuals' educational attainment, by sex and birth cohort

	Women's educational attainment			Men's educational attainment		
Cohort	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
1951–1955	24.9%	52.2%	22.9%	24.2%	51.8%	24.0%
1956–1960	24.7%	51.2%	24.1%	23.3%	53.3%	23.4%
1961–1965	20.4%	50.5%	29.1%	20.6%	52.2%	27.1%
1966–1970	16.6%	47.2%	36.3%	17.9%	49.6%	32.5%
1971–1975	13.8%	41.3%	44.9%	16.6%	46.3%	37.1%
1976–1980	12.2%	37.1%	50.7%	14.4%	44.8%	40.7%
1981–1985	10.1%	34.4%	55.5%	12.9%	42.1%	45.0%
1986–1990	16.9%	44.9%	38.2%	18.3%	48.9%	32.8%
Total	24.9%	52.2%	22.9%	24.2%	51.8%	24.0%

Note: Authors' elaboration from EU-SILC 2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023.

Table A5
Educational mating patterns, by birth cohort

Cohort	Hypogamy	Homogamy	Hypergamy	Total	Total
1956–1960	18.1%	60.8%	21.1%	100%	4147
1961–1965	19.1%	62.0%	18.9%	100%	20,328
1966–1970	20.0%	62.6%	17.4%	100%	43,308
1971–1975	21.6%	63.2%	15.2%	100%	31,230
1976–1980	23.1%	63.3%	13.6%	100%	37,030
1981–1985	23.1%	64.5%	12.4%	100%	30,899
1986–1990	23.4%	66.1%	10.5%	100%	8048
Total	21.4%	63.2%	15.4%	100%	174,990

Note: Authors' elaboration from EU-SILC 2005, 2011, 2019, and 2023.

Table A6
Predicted probabilities, uncontrolled for parental and own education

(A) Women

		Destination			Total	
		Hypogamy	Homogamy	Hypergamy	%	N
	Hypogamy	27.7%	62.0%	10.3%	100.0%	7155
Origin	Homogamy	21.4%	64.3%	14.3%	100.0%	69,680
	Hypergamy	22.5%	63.8%	13.7%	100.0%	16,166
Total		22.2%	64.0%	13.8%	100.0%	93,001

(B) Men

		Destination			Total	
		Hypogamy	Homogamy	Hypergamy	%	N
	Hypogamy	21.9%	64.4%	13.7%	100.0%	5771
Origin	Homogamy	22.2%	64.4%	13.4%	100.0%	61,640
	Hypergamy	18.2%	65.2%	16.5%	100.0%	14,577
Total		21.5%	64.5%	14.0%	100.0%	81,989

Note: Predicted probabilities (as observed) estimated from a multinomial model including country-, cohort-, and wave-fixed effects.

Table A7
RRR capturing the intergenerational transmission of mating patterns for individuals aged 45–54

(A) Women			
	Low educated	Medium educated	Highly educated
Homo vs Hypo	-	1.65 (0.13) **	1.53 (0.07) **
Homo vs Hyper	0.95 (0.10)	0.84 (0.03) **	-
Hypo vs Hyper	-	1.26 (0.11) *	-
(B) Men			
	Low educated	Medium educated	Highly educated
Homo vs Hypo	0.86 (0.13)	0.76 (0.04) **	-
Homo vs Hyper	-	1.77 (0.11) **	1.29 (0.07) **
Hypo vs Hyper	-	1.31 (0.12) *	-

Note: **p ≤ 0.001; *p ≤ 0.05. Results from binary and multinomial logistic regression models stratified by educational attainment, controlling for parental educational attainment, and including country, cohort, and wave-fixed effects. The estimates are reported in the form of relative risk ratios (RRR). For interpretation, see notes below Table 3.

Table A8
RRR capturing the intergenerational transmission of mating patterns, by birth cohort (women)

(A) 1956–1970			
	Low educated	Medium educated	Highly educated
Homo vs Hypo	-	1.92 (0.23) **	1.52 (0.12) **
Homo vs Hyper	0.68 (0.13) *	0.87 (0.06) *	-
Hypo vs Hyper	-	1.73 (0.22) **	-
(B) 1971–1980			
	Low educated	Medium Educated	Highly Educated
Homo vs Hypo	-	1.72 (0.19) **	1.71 (0.10) **
Homo vs Hyper	0.65 (0.11) *	0.88 (0.06)	-
Hypo vs Hyper	-	1.97 (0.26) **	-
(C) 1981–1990			
	Low educated	Medium educated	Highly Educated
Homo vs Hypo	-	1.60 (0.23) **	1.67 (0.10) **
Homo vs Hyper	1.12 (0.23)	0.82 (0.08)	-
Hypo vs Hyper	-	1.09 (0.19)	-

Note: **p ≤ 0.001; *p ≤ 0.05. Results for women from binary and multinomial logistic regression models stratified by educational attainment, controlling for parental educational attainment, and including country, cohort, and wave-fixed effects. The estimates are reported in the form of relative risk ratios (RRR). For interpretation, see notes below Table 3.

Descriptive analysis of flows

Since our data includes information from multiple countries, cohorts, and survey waves, instead of presenting raw origin-by-destination tables, we present estimates of these flows based on the following multinomial logistic model,

$$\ln\left(\frac{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=a)}{P(MP^{C}_{ijkt}=b)}\right)=\alpha+\beta MP^{P}_{ijkt}+\gamma_j+\lambda_k+\mu_t \mathrm{a}=1,\ldots,3 \quad and\ a\neq b \tag{1}$$

where MP^{C} denotes the educational mating pattern of an individual i from country j, cohort k, and wave t; b is the reference category of this variable and a any other category; MP^{P} represents the mating pattern of parents; and γ_j, λ_k, and μ_t are fixed effects for country, cohort, and wave, respectively. From this model, we estimate the *average predicted probabilities* (based on the observed values of covariates of each respondent) of children's homogamy, hypergamy and hypogamy, given the parental mating pattern (Appendix Table A6). These probabilities are subsequently multiplied by the sample size of each origin category to calculate the number of individuals predicted to transition from each origin category into each destination category. These flows are visualized in the Sankey diagram shown in Fig. 2.

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