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**Authors**

Sweeney, Megan M.  
Cancian, Maria

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***Megan M. Sweeney***  
***Maria Cancian***

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## The Changing Importance of Economic Prospects for Assortative Mating\*

Megan M. Sweeney  
Department of Sociology  
Institute for Health, Health Care Policy,  
and Aging Research  
Rutgers University  
[Mmsween@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:Mmsween@rci.rutgers.edu)

Maria Cancian  
La Follette School of Public Affairs  
School of Social Work  
Institute for Research on Poverty  
University of Wisconsin  
[Cancian@lafollette.wisc.edu](mailto:Cancian@lafollette.wisc.edu)

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\* Direct all correspondence to Megan Sweeney, Department of Sociology, Rutgers University, 54 Joyce Kilmer Ave, Piscataway, NJ 08854 ([Mmsween@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:Mmsween@rci.rutgers.edu)). Primary research funding was provided by the University of Wisconsin Graduate School. Additional support was provided by the Institute for Research on Poverty. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Population Association of America Meetings, Los Angeles, California, March, 2000. The authors thank Robert Mare for comments on a previous version of this paper, Patricia McDaniel for research assistance, and Elizabeth Evanson and Dawn Duren for assistance in preparing the manuscript.

## The Changing Importance of Economic Prospects for Assortative Mating

### ABSTRACT

In light of recent changes in the labor force participation and socioeconomic standing of women, we ask whether a woman's position in the labor market has become more important over time as a determinant of her position in the marriage market. To test this hypothesis, we examine change over time in the association of wives' wages and husbands' socioeconomic standing, using data on first marriages among members of two cohorts from the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience. Unlike much prior research on assortative mating, we take an individual-level approach to the analysis and rely on improved measures of labor market position, such as measuring wives' wages *before marriage* and considering various indicators of husbands' socioeconomic standing. Our findings do suggest some increase over time in the importance of economic prospects for assortative mating, with stronger evidence of change observed when husband's longer-term position in the labor market is considered.

## **The Changing Importance of Economic Prospects for Assortative Mating**

Social scientists consider the question of who marries whom to be a central organizing feature of social life. A large body of literature has established that people tend to seek spouses with particular characteristics, and prefer to marry within their own social group. The tendency toward homogamous mating has been demonstrated along a number of different dimensions, including race and ethnicity (e.g. Alba and Golden 1986; Pagnini and Morgan 1990; Qian 1997; Schoen and Wooldredge 1989), religion (e.g. Bumpass 1970; Johnson 1980; Kalmijn 1991a), social background (e.g. Blackwell 1998; Kalmijn 1991b), age (e.g. Qian 1998; Sweet and Bumpass 1987), educational attainment (e.g. Jacobs and Furstenberg 1986; Kalmijn 1991a; Lichter, Anderson, and Hayward 1995; Mare 1991; Rockwell 1976; Schoen and Wooldredge 1989; Spanier and Glick 1980), and occupational characteristics (e.g. Jacobs and Furstenberg 1986; Hout 1982; Kalmijn 1991a, 1994).

Recent changes in factors related to marriage in contemporary societies -- particularly the improved labor market position of women and increases in their labor force participation -- have contributed to social scientists' growing interest in investigating shifts over time in patterns of assortative mating. To the extent that current cohorts of women spend more of their lives in the labor market than did previous cohorts, we might expect an increased emphasis on women's socioeconomic characteristics for marriage. Indeed, a model of marriage in which both men and women seek spouses with good labor market prospects underlies much recent research on marriage timing and assortative mating. While some empirical evidence does point to an increasing

association between the educational attainment and occupational characteristics of spouses (e.g. Kalmijn 1991a, 1991b, 1994; Mare 1991), most prior research has examined cross-sectional samples of marriages existing at a particular point in time and has considered a limited array of measures of socioeconomic characteristics. Both factors limit the potential of this research for testing hypotheses about changing marriage behavior.

The current research addresses the fundamental question of whether and how the association between the socioeconomic characteristics of husbands and wives may be changing over time. We offer several important extensions on previous research. First, we examine a variety of indicators of husband's socioeconomic status, including observed earnings, expected future earnings, a composite index of occupational status, as well as separate measures of occupational education and occupational earnings. Our approach allows us to consider change in the association of wives' labor market position with both economic and cultural aspects of husbands' occupational standing, and to investigate the sensitivity of this association to the time-horizon over which husband's standing is considered. Second, we use longitudinal data and take an individual-level approach to the analysis, which has several notable advantages over most previous studies. For example, our analysis is less affected by attrition through divorce than are studies examining the characteristics of cross-sectional samples of married couples.<sup>1</sup> Because we have

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<sup>1</sup> When couple characteristics are reported after any extended period of marriage, selective attrition through differential patterns of divorce becomes problematic. Given some evidence that divorce is related to levels of marital homogamy and other characteristics of spouses (Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991;

measures of wives' wages *before* marriage, our results should also be less influenced by the impact spouses have on one another after marriage. Finally, our approach permits an examination of the association of spouses' socioeconomic characteristics net of basic controls for factors such as age at marriage and region of residence.

## THEORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Both sociologists and economists have written extensively on the underlying processes determining partner choice. Economists typically analyze marriage as a voluntary union of rational individuals, with the aim of maximizing some concept of joint consumption. As explained in the classic discussion by Becker (1973, 1974), the division of labor facilitated by marriage will be of greatest advantage for couples with the greatest difference in wage rates. Within this model, negative assortative mating on wages produces greater gains the larger the wage advantage of the spouse who works for wages relative to the spouse who concentrates her (his) efforts at home.

Recent additions to this literature in economics explore other views of potential gains from marriage, with implications for patterns of assortative mating. For example, marriage brings benefits as individuals can achieve economies of scale (i.e., it takes very little extra effort to cook a meal for two people rather than one). Marriage also provides a context for investments in household public goods--goods that are collectively consumed by the household in which one spouse's consumption does not reduce the other's (for

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Sweet and Bumpass 1987; Tzeng and Mare 1995), some bias from this source is expected. Looking at first marriages among recently married couples minimizes, but does not remedy, this problem of selection.

example, a picture on the wall or the well-being of children). This aspect of marriage depends on the spouses having similar tastes, implying positive assortative mating on factors associated with taste for public goods (Lam 1988). To the extent that these factors (for example, education) are also related to wages and other measures of socioeconomic standing, this approach implies positive assortative mating on these characteristics.

Economic models of marriage have heavily influenced the thinking of sociologists. Social exchange theory (e.g. Edwards 1969, Schoen and Wooldredge 1989), for example, makes use of the economic metaphor of social relationships as extended markets in which individuals attempt to maximize gains and minimize costs through marriage. The focus of exchange theory is on the resources individuals trade in order to maximize rewards. It is assumed that men and women will most often marry spouses with similar levels of resources, largely because of the tendency to reject those with fewer resources than themselves. The resources that are exchanged, however, need not be identical in nature so long as they are considered equivalent. Departures from homogamy are expected to occur most often when these equally valued, but not identical, resources are exchanged. Because of the tendency for men and women to fill different roles in society, social exchange theory suggests that such departures from homogamy will likely involve the exchange of men's socioeconomic resources (such as income and status) for women's non-economic resources (such as social and domestic services).

Oppenheimer (1988), drawing on ideas from social exchange theory and job search theory in economics, has suggested that the basis for assortative mating has



changed over time. As the tendency for both women and men to remain attached to a work career increases, Oppenheimer argues that the characteristics considered important in a spouse also change. In particular, women are increasingly evaluated as potential spouses on the basis of their own achieved socioeconomic status, rather than more traditional characteristics such as religion, family background, and physical attractiveness. Thus Oppenheimer's theory implies an increasing association over time between wives' wages and the socioeconomic standing of their husbands. Oppenheimer further emphasizes that the long-run benefits of marriage, and thus also assortative mating outcomes, depend heavily on the expected future characteristics of spouses. Indeed, she argues that the difficulty of assessing important *future* characteristics of spouses based on the incomplete information available at any given time seriously complicates the process of partner choice.

The central assumption underlying Oppenheimer's theory is that a woman's achieved socioeconomic standing, rather than her productivity in the home or social background, has increased in importance over time as a determinant of her position in the marriage market. If Oppenheimer's theory were correct, we would expect that women's productivity in the labor market would display a strengthening association over time with the socioeconomic standing of the men who they marry. Several recent investigations of change in patterns of assortative mating have directly or indirectly tested this hypothesis, mostly relying on log-linear analyses of contingency tables of husbands' and wives' post-marriage characteristics. For example, several studies report an increase in the association of spouses' educational attainments between 1940 and the 1980s (Blackwell 1998;

Kalmijn 1991a; Mare 1991). Evidence of some increase in educational homogamy persists when trends are adjusted for changes in the timing of marriage and school leaving during this period, particularly at the upper end of the schooling distribution (Mare 1991). In other research, Kalmijn (1994) considers change in the association of newlyweds' (i.e. couples married no more than two years) occupational standing between 1970 and 1980. One important strength of this study is that Kalmijn considers multiple dimensions of occupational status, considering both spouses' economic status (occupational earnings) and their cultural status (occupational education). While Kalmijn find evidence of some increase in the importance of occupational earnings for partner choice during this period, he reports some reduction in the importance of occupational education. In both periods, however, he finds stronger homogamy with respect to occupational education than with respect to occupational earnings.

Although these prior investigations have provided important insights into trends in patterns of assortative mating, they are limited in their ability to provide a solid test of Oppenheimer's theory. For example, greater educational attainment may contribute to productivity both in the labor market and in the home (Cancian 1995). Another empirical complication faced by previous analyses is the potential endogeneity of labor market activities of spouses-- in particular, the potential for wives' labor force participation to respond to their husband's earnings, commonly referred to by economists as the "income effect." Suppose, for example, we observe that high-wage men are now more likely to be married to women also earning high wages. It may be that high wage men are increasingly marrying women with the potential to earn high wages. Alternatively,

marriage patterns may have remained stable, and labor force participation patterns of married women may have changed. In particular, it may be that women married to high-earning men generally did not pursue high-wage jobs after marriage in the earlier period. These women may have had high wage potential, but relatively low observed wages after marriage. In order to measure changes in assortative mating we must distinguish between changes in marriage formation and changes in the impact of husbands' socioeconomic standing on wives' labor market decisions within marriage.

Our research addresses these concerns, and builds on previous trend studies of patterns of assortative mating. First, to assess the importance of wives' potential in the labor market, we rely on measures of wages, which are generally considered by economists to explicitly reflect productivity in the labor market. Second, we analyze longitudinal data on labor market and marital histories, and are thus able to measure wife's productivity in the labor market *before marriage*, indexed by her pre-marriage wage. Wages observed before marriage should be largely independent of husband's earnings. Finally, we consider multiple measures of husband's socioeconomic standing, including measures that reflect shorter-term and longer-term socioeconomic standing as well as differently signal the cultural and the more explicitly economic status that accompanies labor market position.

## DATA

We use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Young Women (NLSYW) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to model changes in assortative mating over two cohorts of young women. These data are particularly well suited for the

current research, given their large and nationally representative samples of young adults, extensive information on socioeconomic characteristics of respondents and their husbands, and multiple cohort design. Information for the early cohort (NLSYW) comes from 12 surveys fielded over 16 years, from 1968 to 1983.<sup>2</sup> Responses to 16 annual surveys conducted between 1979 and 1994 are used for the late cohort (NLSY). Our analytic sample was limited to white women who were between the ages of 14 and 17 and never married at first interview, and who subsequently married by the 1982 (NLSYW) or 1993 (NLSY) interview. We further eliminate women who married before the age of 17, as these are considered non-normative transitions which are not of direct interest to the current analysis. To be included in a particular regression analysis, respondents must also have non-missing data on own socioeconomic status, the socioeconomic status of their husbands, age at marriage, and the regional and SMSA status of their residence in the year of marriage. Because patterns of partner choice may vary by marriage order (e.g. Jacobs and Furstenberg 1986), our study examines only patterns of assortative mating among women entering first marriages. These restrictions lead to a maximum sample size of 789 early cohort women and 794 late cohort women.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The sample of young women was interviewed annually from 1968 through 1973, as well as in 1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1982, and 1983. Interviews were also conducted after 1983, but these data are not used in the current analysis

<sup>3</sup> Actual sample sizes for particular regression models are indicated in the table of results. These vary due to differences in levels of missing data among particular measures of husbands' and wives' socioeconomic characteristics.

Although these surveys also contain reasonably large samples of black women and their husbands, we have limited our analysis to whites for several reasons. First, rates of non-marriage have been higher (and increasing more rapidly) among black women than among white women. Indeed, in 1990, 85.6 percent of white women ages 30 to 34 had married, compared with only 61.1 percent of similar black women (Norton and Miller 1992). We feel that modeling non-marriage is essential for understanding change in patterns of assortative mating among blacks. Second, previous research points to differences in the spouse preferences of blacks and whites, suggesting that the underlying process of assortative mating may differ by race. For example, South (1991) reports that black men are less willing than white men to marry someone who is unlikely to hold a steady job, who earns much less than they do, or has less education than themselves. South finds black women, however, to be *more* willing than white women to marry someone who is unlikely to hold a steady job, but less willing to marry someone with either more or less education than themselves or whom they do not consider to be good looking.<sup>4</sup> Although beyond the scope of the current analysis, more research is needed to better understand these racial differences in partner preferences and in patterns of assortative mating.

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<sup>4</sup> South's sample, however, includes only unmarried and *non-cohabiting* people under age 35. Given high rates of cohabitation among people in this age group (Bumpass and Sweet 1989), the extent to which South's can be reasonably generalized to the population of unmarried people is questionable.

## VARIABLES

*Husbands' Earnings*

Two approaches are taken to measuring husbands' earnings. First, we compute the natural log of husband's observed earnings in the year following marriage. These measures are summed from questions about wage and salary, farm and business, and military earnings taken directly from the surveys.<sup>5</sup> Economic theory, however, suggests that the earnings measure of interest should be permanent income, rather than current earnings. Given differences in age-earnings profiles and the ability to smooth income and consumption over time, a prospective spouse should consider the present discounted value of total earnings, rather than current earnings. In her theory of marriage timing, sociologist Valerie Oppenheimer (1988) also emphasizes the long-run labor market position of potential spouses.

We therefore also construct a second measure of longer-run earnings, assessing earnings expected ten years in the future. While our second measure does not account in full for the expected age-earnings profile, we believe it may be superior to current earnings. We base our measure of expected future earnings on actual trajectories observed in the 5 percent public use micro-sample of the 1970 census. In this year, individuals reported their earnings as well as the occupation they held five years prior to

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<sup>5</sup> The first valid observation of husband's earnings after the year of marriage is selected for this variable. All measures of observed wages and earnings are transformed into 1990 dollars using the Consumer Price Index.

the census. The expected future earnings measure we construct is based on a regression of earnings in reported in 1970 (natural log) on dummy variables for occupation held five years earlier (1965), along with sex and race. The regressions are estimated separately for five-year age-groups. The dummy variables for 1965 occupation are based on Kalmijn's (1994) grouping of more than 400 occupational titles into 70 occupational groups.<sup>6</sup> In grouping occupations, Kalmijn merges occupations when they are similar in terms of industry and type of work, and generally keeps occupations separate than are similar in type of work but different in terms of earnings or education (e.g. policemen vs. other protective service workers) (Kalmijn 1994).

As 1970 census data permit direct estimation of earnings only five years in the future, it is necessary to estimate five-year transition probabilities between occupational groups. Essentially, we need the probability of holding a particular occupation five years in the future, given one's current occupation, in order to calculate earnings expected ten years in the future with these data. To this end, we again use these census data to calculate the distribution of occupations in 1970 for incumbents of particular occupations in 1965. These transition probabilities are again estimated separately for 5-year age groups. The coefficients from the original regressions (to predict earnings in 1970) are

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<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to Matthijs Kalmijn for generously providing codes used to classify detailed occupations into his 70 composite occupational groups. As industry of current job was not consistently asked with respect to current spouses in the National Longitudinal Surveys, we cannot divide several occupational groups by industry in the same manner as Kalmijn. Otherwise, our procedures for grouping occupations are identical.

then weighted by these transition probabilities, and the appropriate age-specific equations are recalculated. Essentially the probabilities of holding a given occupation in 1970, given that a particular occupation is held in 1965, are used as weights on the coefficients of the first regression equation. The construction of the expected future earnings measure is described in greater detail in Sweeney (1998).<sup>7</sup>

### *Husbands' Socioeconomic Status*

Our first measures of husbands' socioeconomic characteristics are consistent with the approach taken by economists, who in studies of marriage and social stratification have tended to emphasize the level of productivity in the labor market, focusing on measures of earnings such as those described above. Sociologists, however, have also been interested in other information occupations convey about social standing. For example, sociologists have ranked occupations based on subjective ratings of prestige or according to the distribution of education and earnings among occupational incumbents.<sup>8</sup> While these measures permit the consideration of both pecuniary and non-

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<sup>7</sup> One potential criticism of the expected earnings measures is that they are based on labor market trajectories and attainment from the 1965-1970 period, before most of the women studied here were making decisions about marriage. One could argue that they are therefore better measures of true earnings expectations for the early cohort than for the late cohort of women. The direction of this bias, however, should be to reduce the likelihood that we would detect growth over time in the association between wife's earning power and husband's earnings measured in this way.

<sup>8</sup> See Hauser and Warren (1997) for a more detailed discussion of the differences between measures of occupational prestige and indices of socioeconomic status.



pecuniary rewards of occupations, there is also evidence that occupational status may be a better indicator of long-term standing than is a simple measure of income. For example, using data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, Hauser and Warren (1997) demonstrate higher correlations among occupational status scores than among earnings measured at different points in the life span.

In addition to the previously described measures of current and expected future earnings, we therefore also construct additional measures of husband's socioeconomic status. These measures are based on the first job observed at least one year after marriage. We begin with a composite measure of socioeconomic status, the Stevens-Featherman (1981) occupational status index (TSEI2). The Stevens-Featherman index is based on a regression of Siegel prestige scores on measures of the educational attainment and income of both male and female occupational incumbents in 1970. This measure is preferred to Duncan's SEI, which is based on educational and income data from the 1950 Census, on a subset of 45 occupations, and on data for male workers only.<sup>9</sup>

Although composite measures of occupational status have been a mainstay of research on social stratification, Hauser and Warren (1997) have recently argued that their usefulness is questionable, suggesting that the relative importance of the occupational and income components of status may vary depending on the outcome being examined. Indeed, they argue that social scientists would be better advised to separately

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<sup>9</sup> It has also been suggested that the particular 45 occupations used to construct SEI led to an overestimate of the importance of occupational income relative to occupational education (e.g. Hauser and Warren 1997).

consider occupational education and occupational earnings. In an example of such an approach in the study of assortative mating, Kalmijn (1994) uses these two measures separately to reflect the theoretically distinct concepts of cultural and economic status.

In addition to our composite measure of socioeconomic status, we therefore also create separate indicators of occupational education and occupational earnings. We follow Hauser, Sheridan, and Warren (1999) in constructing these measures, using a started logit transformation of the percentage of incumbents in each detailed occupation above a given threshold of education or earnings.<sup>10</sup> The threshold for occupational education is having completed at least one year of college, and the threshold for occupational earnings is earning at least \$10,000 in 1969. These measures are constructed from characteristics of occupational incumbents in the 1970 Census. For the early cohort, 1960-basis occupation codes are transformed to 1970-basis codes,<sup>11</sup> and thus occupational education and occupational earnings are calculated for members of both cohorts.

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<sup>10</sup> The started logit is of the form  $\ln[(p+.01)/(1-p+.01)]$ , where  $p$  is the proportion of the population above the threshold. This transformation reduces heteroskedasticity in the transformed variable without creating extreme outliers (Hauser et al. 1999).

<sup>11</sup> 1960 occupation codes are matched with 1970 codes using Table 1 of Census Technical Paper 26, "1970 Occupation and Industry Classification Systems in Terms of their 1960 Occupation and Industry Elements", 1972, U.S. Bureau of the Census

*Wives' Characteristics*

Our central measure of wife's labor market position is her pre-marriage wage, which is taken directly from the survey.<sup>12</sup> We measure wives' wages rather than earnings because our interest is in the importance of earnings potential (not observed labor supply) and a substantial portion of the variation in women's earnings reflects variations in hours worked. In standard economic models of labor supply actual marital earnings reflect decisions about the time allocation between household and market work. As such, wages are one indicator of a wife's quality, while earnings reflect both wage rates and the resulting optimal labor supply.<sup>13</sup> We also include several other characteristics of wives in the regression analysis. Because of life course variation in levels of socioeconomic attainment and cohort shifts in marriage timing, we include a measure of age at marriage in all models estimated here. Similarly, because of potential regional and metropolitan status differences in patterns of attainment, we also construct measures for residence in a SMSA or in the South at the time of marriage. Again, we are interested in the relationship between spouses' socioeconomic characteristics net of these basic control variables. We also include a measure of whether a woman was enrolled in school at the time her pre-marriage socioeconomic standing was assessed. Lastly, to control for less frequent

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<sup>12</sup> Women's wage observed closest in time to marriage (but before the actual year of marriage) is selected for this variable. Approximately 11 percent of women in our analytic sample had no valid observations of market wages before marriage.

<sup>13</sup> The model implicit in our estimates does not take in to account the labor supply decision for husbands. This is consistent with the overwhelming proportion of prime-age married men who work full time.

interviews for the early cohort, we construct a dummy variable indicating whether wives' wages were measured two or more years prior to marriage.<sup>14</sup>

## RESULTS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for all variables used in the current analysis. As expected, given the well established trends in women's labor market participation and standing during the time period examined here, we see significant improvements in wives' socioeconomic standing between the two cohorts. Wives' pre-marriage hourly wages (measured in constant 1990 dollars) have increased by over one dollar during the time period studied here, moving from approximately six dollars per hour among early cohort women to over seven dollars per hour among late cohort women. Higher levels of enrollment at the time pre-marriage wage was measured for the early cohort likely reflect shorter gaps between schooling and marriage for early cohort women than for late cohort women, and as with the dummy variable for timing of measurement of pre-marriage socioeconomic standing, these variables also likely reflect differences in fielding procedures between the two cohorts. Late cohort women also tended to marry later, with the average age at marriage moving from approximately 21 to 22.5 years during the time period studied here. Late cohort women were also more likely to live in a SMSA or in the South than were early cohort women. Although late cohort

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<sup>14</sup> Recall that the NLSYW cohort was interviewed annually from 1968 to 1973, and then in 1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981, and 1983. The NLSY cohort was interviewed annually from 1979-1994.

husbands displayed somewhat higher observed and expected future earnings, their average occupational status score was quite similar to that of early cohort husbands. Interestingly, while late cohort husbands tended to have somewhat lower occupational education than early cohort husbands, they displayed greater occupational earnings.<sup>15</sup>

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE.]

We begin our investigation patterns of assortative mating with an examination of change over time in the association of wife's labor market productivity with various measures of husband's earnings. As shown in Table 2, Model 1 regresses husband's observed earnings on wife's wage and control variables. Despite theoretical reason to expect change in the association between the earning capacities of spouses, we do not find evidence of statistically significant change over time in the relationship between wives' wages and husbands' observed earnings. Instead, our findings suggest a historical pattern of women with the highest wages marrying men with the highest earnings. It may be that our measure of current earnings is not a good indicator of husband's longer term socioeconomic prospects, that the relatively short period between the two cohorts we examine is insufficient to capture longer-term changes in mating patterns, or it may simply be that the theoretically predicted change has not occurred.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> When evaluating the nature of these changes, it is important to keep in mind that cohort shifts in marriage timing may be an important underlying determinant of observed differences in the socioeconomic standing of husbands.

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the coefficient for the timing of measurement of wife's wage is significantly different from zero for the late cohort of women. Because this measure is more likely to pick up actual variations in labor supply (rather than timing of interviews) for the late cohort of women, we re-

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE.]

In addition to the findings for pre-marriage wage, we see some effects of control variables on husbands' post-marriage earnings. Not surprisingly, women who marry at relatively older ages tend to have higher-earning husbands. It is not possible to discern here whether this effect is driven by age-variation in partner preferences or, because of the tendency for women to marry men similar in age to themselves, simply by growth in men's earnings over the life-cycle. We also see a positive relationship between husband's earnings and living in a SMSA at the time of marriage, although this effect is statistically significant only for the late cohort of women.

We next turn our attention to Model 2, which displays estimates similar to those previously discussed, except that the dependent variable is now husband's expected *future* earnings. Given the emphasis that sociologists and economists place on longer-run economic standing as a criterion for partner choice, it is perhaps not surprising that we

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estimated Model 1 (not shown in Table 2) without this control for measurement timing. This was necessary to ensure that the measure -- as a proxy for intermittent labor supply -- was not absorbing some of the wage effect for the late cohort. Dropping this measure from the model produces little change in the individual cohort coefficients for wife's pre-marriage wage, nor does the cohort difference between the pre-marriage wage coefficients become significantly different from zero. Similar alternative model specifications, without the control for measurement timing and without both the control for measurement timing and enrollment, were tested for all measures of husband's socioeconomic standing examined in this analysis. In no case do our substantive conclusions change regarding cohort differences in the socioeconomic resemblance of spouses.

see stronger evidence of change over time in the association of wife's earning power with her husband's expected future earnings than with his earnings observed closer to the time of marriage. Indeed, the estimated effect of wife's wage on husband's expected earnings approximately doubles between the early and late cohorts of women, and this difference is statistically significant at the .05 level. As found for the previous model of husband's observed earnings, we again see a positive estimated effect of age at marriage and SMSA status on husband's expected future earnings. We further see a positive relationship between living in the South at the time of marriage and husband's expected earnings.

We next consider alternative models of how the association of wife's wage with the socioeconomic characteristics of husbands has been changing over time, now focusing on a more traditionally sociological measure of husband's socioeconomic standing: a composite index of occupational status (TSEI2). As shown in Model 3, we again find evidence of statistically significant change over time in the association of wife's wages with husband's occupational status. While the estimated effect of wife's wage on husband's occupational status is relatively large and positive for both cohorts of women, it attains statistical significance at conventional levels only for the later cohort. Wife's age at marriage is again positively associated with husband's occupational status, although the strength of this association has declined significantly over time. While living in a SMSA at the time of marriage is significantly associated with marriage to a relatively higher status husband for only the late cohort of women, residence in the South is associated with marrying a higher status husband only among early cohort women.

Change over time in the magnitude of these effects, however, is not statistically significant at conventional levels for either of these measures.

Finally, we disaggregate occupational status, separately considering occupational education and occupational earnings. These measures are assumed to correspond to the cultural and economic dimensions of occupational standing. Similar to the findings for our composite measure of socioeconomic status, our separate indicators of husband's occupational education and occupational earnings display positive associations with wives' wages for both cohorts, although in each case the magnitude of this effect is statistically significant only for the later cohort. Our finding of change over time in this association, however, is statistically significant when husband's socioeconomic status is indicated by his occupational education, but not when husband's status is indicated by occupational earnings. The general pattern of findings, however, is otherwise similar for both measures of standing. Control variables follow a similar pattern to the previous models, with a positive (but weakening) relationship between wife's age at marriage and both husband's occupational education and his occupational earnings. We find some evidence of a positive effect of living in a SMSA or in the South, although the strength and significance of these effects varies somewhat across cohorts and measures of husband's social standing.

Taken together, the current findings tell an interesting story. They suggest that there has been some change over time in the importance of socioeconomic prospects for assortative mating, although the strength of this conclusion varies depending on the measure of socioeconomic standing used. In general, we find stronger evidence of change



over time when the measure reflects husbands' longer-term rather than shorter-term socioeconomic standing, and when the measure examined considers cultural as well as more explicitly economic rewards of jobs.

## DISCUSSION

Changes in the labor market participation of married women, especially among whites, might be expected to alter expectations regarding women's contributions in marriage and consequent patterns of assortative mating. In this paper we estimated the importance of women's productivity in the labor market for their position in the marriage market. Using information from first marriages for two cohorts of white women, we have estimated the relationship between the wages of wives and the socioeconomic standing of their husbands. We consider socioeconomic standing measured in a number of different ways, including current earning power, expected future earnings, a composite index of occupational standing, as well as separate indicators of occupational education and occupational earnings.

While we find little evidence of change over time in the association of spouses' current earnings, our analysis does suggest that women's earning power has become a more important determinant over time of their husbands' expected future earnings. We also find evidence of an increase over time in the association of wives wages with the occupational statuses of their husbands, which we argue is also a better indicator of long-term socioeconomic prospects than is a measure of current earnings. Taken together, our results do generally support the theoretical prediction that women's position in the labor

market has become more important over time as a determinant of their position in the marriage market. Consistent with Oppenheimer (1988) and with economists' emphasis on permanent income over current income, our findings are more persuasive in suggesting that change over time has occurred in the process of assortative mating when considering longer-run measures of socioeconomic standing than shorter-run measures of standing. An increase in the socioeconomic resemblance of spouses has potentially important implications for long term levels of inequality among families, which should be investigated in future work.

This paper represents an initial effort to understand patterns of assortative mating and their variation over time. There are a number of limitations that we hope to address in ongoing research. First, the analyses presented here consider assortative mating among those who marry, but do not address the decision to marry. Changes in the nature of marriage--whether related to exogenous increases in women's employment, or to changes in the expected duration of marriage or other factors--can be expected to affect who marries, as well as whom they marry. Integrating these processes in our analysis is particularly crucial for the comparison of white and black couples, given the high proportion of nonmarriage among blacks. Given high rates of premarital cohabitation and well-documented increases in the experience of cohabitation in recent decades, we hope also to broaden our analysis to consider both legal marriage and cohabitation.

Finally, while these results offer some insight into the overall association between the socioeconomic characteristics of husbands and wives, they provide less information about the nature of the underlying processes producing these patterns. Future

work should further investigate the complex underlying mechanisms responsible for the changing patterns of assortative mating observed here. For example, additional research should consider how the changes in marriage timing, particularly in relation to school completion (Mare 1991), might contribute to this process. The relationship of partner choice to structural changes in the economy is also of great interest. We have provided a broad measure of change here. We hope that future work will offer a more complete picture of how and why the process of partner selection is changing over time.

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**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in Analysis of Partner Choice:  
National Longitudinal Survey of Young Women and National Longitudinal  
Survey of Youth**

Independent and Dependent Variables	Early Cohort (NLSYW)		Late Cohort (NLSY)	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
<u>Wife's Characteristics</u>				
Pre-Marriage Wage (\$1990)	6.062	(2.803)	7.173	(3.706)
Measured while Enrolled (1= yes)	0.184		0.098	
Measured 2+ Yrs Prior (1=yes)	0.412		0.099	
Age at Marriage (years)	21.068	(2.975)	22.552	(3.321)
Lived in SMSA at Marriage	0.679		0.771	
Lived in South at Marriage	0.298		0.335	
Age at first interview				
14	0.231		0.174	
15	0.294		0.258	
16	0.255		0.276	
17	0.220		0.292	
<u>Husband's Characteristics</u>				
Earnings (log \$1990)	9.783	(0.744)	9.861	(0.820)
Expected Future Earnings (log \$1990)	10.127	(0.310)	10.165	(0.315)
Occupational Status (TSEI2)	35.552	(19.559)	35.585	(19.211)
Occupational Education	-1.164	(1.567)	-1.259	(1.506)
Occupational Earnings	-1.252	(1.219)	-1.130	(1.164)

Note. Data are weighted. Standard deviations are shown in parentheses for continuous variables.



**Table 2. Coefficients from Regression of Husband's Socioeconomic Characteristics on Wife's Pre-Marriage Wage and Control Variables: National Longitudinal Survey of Young Women and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, White Cross-sectional Samples Only**

Independent Variables	Model 1: Observed Earnings		Model 2: Expected Earnings		Model 3: Occupational Status		Model 4: Occupational Education		Model 5: Occupational Earnings	
	Early Cohort	Late Cohort	Early Cohort	Late Cohort	Early Cohort	Late Cohort	Early Cohort	Late Cohort	Early Cohort	Late Cohort
Wife's Socioeconomic Characteristics										
Pre-Marriage Wage	0.04 (0.01) <sup>a</sup>	0.05 (0.01) <sup>a</sup>	0.01 (0.00) <sup>a</sup>	0.02 (0.00) <sup>a,b</sup>	0.56 (0.30)	1.47 (0.22) <sup>a,b</sup>	0.05 (0.02)	0.12 (0.02) <sup>a,b</sup>	0.03 (0.02)	0.06 (0.01) <sup>a</sup>
Measured while Enrolled (1= yes)	-0.09 (0.07)	0.22 (0.13) <sup>b</sup>	0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.05)	6.36 (1.75) <sup>a</sup>	2.18 (3.22)	0.52 (0.14) <sup>a</sup>	0.20 (0.25)	0.17 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.20)
Measured 2+ Yrs Prior (1=yes)	0.08 (0.07)	-0.38 (0.09) <sup>a,b</sup>	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.02 (1.85)	-2.14 (2.13)	0.04 (0.15)	-0.11 (0.17)	-0.10 (0.12)	-0.18 (0.13)
Age at Marriage (years)	0.04 (0.01) <sup>a</sup>	0.06 (0.01) <sup>a</sup>	0.04 (0.01) <sup>a</sup>	0.03 (0.00) <sup>a</sup>	2.00 (0.36) <sup>a</sup>	0.80 (0.25) <sup>a,b</sup>	0.15 (0.03) <sup>a</sup>	0.06 (0.02) <sup>a,b</sup>	0.11 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>	0.04 (0.02) <sup>a,b</sup>
Lived in SMSA at Marriage (1=yes)	0.07 (0.06)	0.21 (0.07) <sup>a</sup>	0.08 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>	0.09 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>	2.93 (1.50)	4.02 (1.59) <sup>a</sup>	0.21 (0.12)	0.27 (0.12) <sup>a</sup>	0.14 (0.10)	0.37 (0.10) <sup>a</sup>
Lived in South at Marriage (1=yes)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.06 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>	0.05 (0.02) <sup>a</sup>	4.79 (1.48) <sup>a</sup>	1.02 (1.40)	0.43 (0.12) <sup>a</sup>	0.02 (0.11) <sup>a,b</sup>	0.18 (0.09)	0.19 (0.09) <sup>a</sup>
Age at First Interview										
(14)										
15	-0.01 (0.08)	0.07 (0.09)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)	3.41 (2.00)	-0.74 (2.11)	0.26 (0.16)	-0.02 (0.17)	0.26 (0.13) <sup>a</sup>	-0.06 (0.13)
16	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.09)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.23 (2.00)	0.16 (2.06)	0.02 (0.16)	0.04 (0.16)	0.10 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.13)
17	0.04 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.09)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	2.08 (2.09)	0.61 (2.04)	0.19 (0.17)	0.12 (0.16)	0.13 (0.13)	-0.08 (0.13)
Constant	8.79 (0.25) <sup>a</sup>	8.04 (0.23) <sup>a</sup>	9.21 (0.10) <sup>a</sup>	9.34 (0.08) <sup>a</sup>	-15.48 (6.49) <sup>a</sup>	4.55 (5.33)	-5.11 (0.52) <sup>a</sup>	-3.68 (0.42) <sup>a</sup>	-4.01 (0.41) <sup>a</sup>	-2.72 (0.33) <sup>a</sup>
R-squared	0.10	0.19	0.19	0.25	0.13	0.15	0.13	0.15	0.09	0.10
N	738	731	789	794	768	773	768	773	768	773

Note. <sup>a</sup> p < .05 (two-tailed test). <sup>b</sup> Significantly different from Early Cohort coefficient at .05 level.