13. Partner choice and partner markets

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1. INTRODUCTION TO CONCEPTS AND TERMINOLOGY

Partner choice represents a crucial stage in the process of family formation, and plays a key role in the reproduction of socio-economic and cultural inequality, in the development of kinship bonds, and in the enactment of gender. Given its intricate links with broader societal shifts, partner choice represents a particularly exciting area of study, not just for family sociology and demography, but for sociology in general. The term ‘partner choice’ is used interchangeably with the terms ‘mate choice’ and choice of a ‘romantic partner’ (Lewis 2016; Schwartz 2013). The adjective ‘romantic’ connotes that the partner is chosen based on passionate mutual affection. While cross-cultural studies have suggested that passionate or romantic love is likely to be a human universal (Fisher et al. 2006; Jankowiak and Fischer 1992), it appears that romantic love did not become a normatively expected basis for marriage until the nineteenth century, particularly in Western societies (Coontz 2005; De Munck et al. 2016). This review, like most work in sociology and family demography, focuses on long-term partnerships that may lead to household formation and, potentially, to joint childrearing, rather than on short-term sexual relationships without any commitment. Partner choice encompasses situations in which partners are still living apart, living in unmarried cohabitation, or living together as married spouses. While the main focus of this chapter is on heterosexual relationships, same-sex partner choice is an emerging issue that is discussed in the final part of this chapter (see also Evertsson et al. in this volume). Moreover, the analysis focuses on partnerships that are expected to be monogamous at a given point in time. Polygamy (the practice of having multiple spouses at the same time), either in the form of polygyny (a man having more than one wife) or polyandry (a woman having more than one husband), is not discussed.

There is considerable evidence that *assortative mating* is pervasive (Lichter and Qian 2019; Schwartz 2013). This concept denotes the fact that matches do not occur at random, as partners are sorted based on sharing a number of traits. The concept of *endogamy* refers to the tendency of people to select a partner within their own social group, while *exogamy* refers to choosing a partner outside of one’s own group (also called *intermarriage*; e.g., between religious groups). The distinction between endogamous and exogamous unions is used to indicate differences or similarities in qualitative group characteristics such as geographic origin, religious denomination, or ethnic background. Alternatively, the concept of *homogamy* refers to the tendency of people to choose a partner who has status characteristics close to their own that can be ordered or quantified, such as income, educational attainment, or socio-economic status. The unions of partners who are far apart in terms of such characteristics are called *heterogamous*. When an individual has a partner with higher status (‘partnering up’), the concept of *hypergamy* is used; whereas when an individual has a partner with lower status (‘partnering down’), the concept of *hypogamy* is applied. When qualifying unions, the wife is often used as a reference person: i.e., when the female partner has partnered up, the union is called hyperga-

mous; and when the female partner has partnered down, the union is called hypogamous (De Hauw et al. 2017; Esteve et al. 2016; Van Bavel et al. 2018).

2. THE MARKET APPROACH TO PARTNER CHOICE

In family sociology and demography, the most common theoretical tool for studying partner choice is to approach it as a market with a supply side and a demand side (Blossfeld and Timm 2003; De Graaf and Kalmijn 2003; Kalmijn 1998; Qian and Lichter 2018; Schmitz 2017; Schwartz 2013). While it was standard in the past to talk about the *marriage market*, it is now becoming more common to talk about the *partner market* to reflect the reality that partner choice is not limited to the choice of a marital partner. The concept of the market places those making the deal at centre stage. Trades on the market consist of matches based on two-sided decisions: both parties involved need to agree to form a partnership. However, using the concept of the market does not necessarily imply that matching decisions are expected to be rational; i.e., that decision making is guided by the maximisation of some kind of utility function. While the market approach does imply that individuals are engaged in some form of conscious decision making about whom to partner with, it does not assume that those involved are conscious of all of the factors that affect such decisions.

2.1 Needs, Preferences, Opportunities

The analysis of partner choice from a market perspective can be structured along three dimensions: first, the *needs* or desires an individual hopes to meet by entering the partner market and finding a partner; second, an individual's *preferences* for partners with certain traits; and, third, the *opportunities* (or barriers) an individual has to gaining knowledge about potential partners (also called *search costs*). As all three of these factors are inherently and profoundly affected by cultural and gendered beliefs, values, and norms, they vary not just between individuals and men and women, but between societies over time and space.

First, having a partner may fulfil an individual's *needs* for affection, support, kinship, offspring, and economic security; and the greater these perceived needs are, the higher the individual's inclination to look for a partner is likely to be. Not everyone is interested in entering the market to find a partner. In some societies, the pressure to live one's adult life in marriage is very strong, and adults who never marry are pushed to the margins of such cultures. In other societies, people may feel more freedom to decide whether to enter a union, or the pressure to marry may be more subtle (Hertel et al. 2007). Those who are already engaged in a relationship are usually normatively not supposed to be on the market. Nevertheless, even those individuals whose explicit level of need to find a partner appears to be low could decide to enter a new (maybe adulterous) relationship. In other words: who is and who is not 'on the market' for union formation is not clear-cut. This is a complicating factor researchers face when they are attempting to delimit a relevant sample for an empirical analysis of partner choice. Just like people visiting a city might end up buying things they were not looking for, people who do not feel the need to find a partner may end up entering a new relationship.

Second, agents on the partner market are supposed to have *mate preferences*; i.e., when considering potential partners, they like some traits more than others. Given that matching decisions on the partner market are two-sided, in heterosexual partner choice, the preferences

of one sex define the *attractiveness* of the other sex. Thus, distinguishing between needs, preferences, and opportunities in mate choice is equivalent to using the concept of attractiveness for the second factor. The concept of *marriageability* has also often been used as an equivalent term (Lichter et al. 1992): i.e., people with desired traits, like those having a steady income, are then designated as being more marriageable.

Third, as people will never be able to meet all potential partners, they have limited meeting *opportunities*, and thus face *constraints*. A closely related concept is that of *search costs*: i.e., people are aware of the characteristics of only a small sub-sample of everyone who is on the partner market, and gathering more relevant information about more people will entail some costs (defined broadly to include social and psychological as well as monetary costs). Search costs arise because partner markets are not frictionless (Lichter et al. 1992). An individual's opportunities to learn about potential partners, as well as his/her search costs, are affected not just by his/her cultural context, but also by factors related to geography, social structure, and demography. Geographic propinquity still plays a key role (Haandrikman et al. 2008), even in online dating markets (Bruch and Newman 2019), which have expanded tremendously since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Potârca 2017).

In terms of social structure, schools and colleges play an important role in structuring opportunities to meet potential partners for young people, and workplaces structure similar opportunities for adults who have entered the labour market (Kalmijn and Flap 2001; McClendon et al. 2014; Sweeney and Cancian 2004). An individual's opportunities to meet a partner with the same qualifications are strongly dependent on his/her level of educational attainment, because educational systems involve a stepwise selection process. The lower educated enter the labour and marriage market at earlier ages, when social networks tend to be more heterogeneous. In contrast, individuals with advanced education tend to enter increasingly homogeneous groups that are filtered in terms of educational qualifications. Thus, the likelihood of educational homogamy in a partnership increases significantly with the partners' educational attainment (Blossfeld and Timm 2003).

Finally, the demographic composition of the partner market affects meeting opportunities and search costs as well. Demographic shortages of suitable partners not only lowers the probability of finding a match, it influences the characteristics of the partners if a match does occur (Choi and Tienda 2017; Lichter et al. 1995). The concept of the *partnering or mating squeeze* (De Hauw et al. 2017; Van Bavel et al. 2018) – which is derived from the concept of the marriage squeeze (Schoen 1983), and has been expanded to include partnership formation outside marriage – is intended to capture this effect of demography: when the number of people with desired traits (e.g., opposite-sex age peers) in the partner market is low, the search costs will be higher and the meeting opportunities will be more limited.

The concept of the partnering squeeze points not only to the role of opportunities, but also to the influence of age preferences. Indeed, partnering markets are clearly age-structured with respect to preferences as well as to opportunities. The available evidence suggests that heterosexual women tend to prefer men who are the same age or a bit older than themselves, but typically not more than 10 years older; while men tend to prefer women who are in their mid-20s, regardless of their own age (Buss and Schmitt 2019; England and McClintock 2009; Grøntvedt and Kennair 2013; Skopek et al. 2011b). The preferences of the opposite sex clearly affect the likelihood of finding partners with increasing age: i.e., it is more challenging for older women and for younger men to find partners (Kolk 2015).

Opportunities to meet potential partners are structured by age as well. When rates of divorce and separation were still low, dating opportunities were typically focused on adolescent and young adult people, at, for example, schools and colleges, clubs, and weekend parties. Hence, the age range of union formation was strongly centred on the mid-20s. As unions have become increasingly unstable and marriage and cohabitation are increasingly postponed, union formation has become much more spread out across the older adult ages (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Sassler 2010). As a result, new sites have emerged that provide older singles with the opportunity to meet potential partners outside of more traditional meeting spots like the workplace or the neighbourhood, such as singles-only holidays and after-work parties. The expanded age range of the partnering market has also boosted the rise of online dating (McClendon 2018; Rosenfeld et al. 2019).

The actual matching process depends on the interplay of needs, preferences, and opportunities. This interplay is dynamic in that all three factors may change over historical time, as well as over the life course. For example, if people experience an improvement in their earnings prospects on the labour market, they may feel less of a need to enter marriage to seek economic security. Accordingly, women's increased educational and labour market participation levels have allowed women to postpone union formation, and to wait until they find an attractive partner (Oppenheimer 1988). People may update their preferences as a result of their experiences on a constrained partner market (Grow and Van Bavel 2015; Lichter et al. 1995). Opportunities to meet different kinds of people can and often do change, such as when young adults leave their hometown to pursue advanced education.

In practice, people do not usually find 'the perfect match' that maximises the fit between the actual traits of their chosen partner and their ideal mate preferences. Due to time constraints, limited meeting opportunities, competition on the partner market, and the limits of one's own attractiveness, people will usually settle for a match that is sufficiently good, rather than attempting to maximise the fit between the actual and the desired mate characteristics. This phenomenon of choosing an option below the maximum but above a threshold of acceptability is called *satisficing* (Todd and Miller 1999). The acceptability threshold is dynamic, as it will change based on earlier experiences. To the extent that the pressure to find a mate increases with age, the threshold is also expected to fall with age (Todd et al. 2005).

The influence of significant others such as family and friends (also called 'third parties'; Kalmijn 1998) on partner choice varies between societies and social groups, but will always be channelled through needs, preferences, and opportunities. *Arranged marriages* represent one extreme on a scale reflecting the extent of third-party influences on a match, in which the parents or the wider families are involved in setting up the matching opportunities in accordance with their familial preferences, rather than using the preferences of the matched individuals as the main guideline. But even in online dating, third-party influences are present through the habitus brought to the digital meeting site by online daters as fully socialised subjects (Schmitz 2017).

2.2 Matching, Competition, and Exchange

A key challenge of research on partner choice is disentangling the influence of partner preferences on the one hand, and constrained opportunities on the other (Lichter et al. 1995). Theoretically, there are several ways to explain the observation that most matches tend to be homogamous with respect to social features such as educational attainment. According to the

matching mechanism, homogamy emerges because of homophily; i.e., people tend to prefer partners with similar qualities. According to the *competition* mechanism, people compete with others to find a partner who preferably has *more* of some desired quality. If both sides of the market prefer more of some characteristic in their partners, and given the competition on each side of the market, then everyone ends up with someone roughly similar to him/herself, since nobody wants to ‘partner down’. Whether matching or competition prevails may depend on the trait considered (Schwartz 2013), and on the societal context. The existing evidence suggests that in modern Western societies, both men and women tend to prefer partners who are similar to them in terms of educational attainment, but, all else equal, also have high earning prospects (Grow and Van Bavel 2015, p. 5). Moreover, the matching mechanism clearly prevails with respect to endogamy based on ethnicity and religious background (Schwartz 2013).

Whether matching or competition predominates may also depend on gender. This appears to be the case with respect to *age homogamy*; i.e., the very persistent pattern that partners tend to be about the same age, but with the male partner usually being a couple of years older than the female partner (Van de Putte et al. 2009). While older men tend to prefer younger female partners, women tend to prefer men of about the same age or even a bit older (Kolk 2015). However, most older men will not be able to find a mid-20s female partner, as they will face competition from younger men. Hence, while matching explains age homogamy for women, competition may explain it for men – with the male partner typically being a bit older. *Age heterogamy* is generally higher in higher-order unions: after separating from their previous partners, the age differences between male and female partners tend to be greater (Qian and Lichter 2018).

While matching and competition usually generate couples who have similar traits; *exchange*, a third mechanism, tends to generate couples who are unequal on a given characteristic. People on one side of the partner market may combine attractive traits with features that are less desired by the other side of the market, and vice versa (Kalmijn 1998). Therefore, a complementary match could be made if ego has desired feature A but lacks B, while alter has a lot of B but lacks A. Exchange occurs when individuals trade such qualities, which will only happen if both traits are valued and are in some way considered substitutable (McClintock 2014; Qian and Lichter 2018). While exchange generates couples who have complementary traits (for example, when a high-earning female professional with long working days marries someone with low earning potential but lots of time and willingness to take care of housework and children), matching and competition forge supplementary matches (for example, when two high-earning individuals get married and pool their incomes, potentially reinforcing income inequality between households).

Since needs, preferences, and opportunities are strongly gendered (and play a role in sexual selection as an evolutionary force in human biology, Buss and Schmitt 2019), the literature mentions cross-trait exchange as an important mechanism in heterosexual partner choice. Most common is the assertion that men may find a so-called ‘trophy wife’ by exchanging high socio-economic status for other desirable resources, such as beauty and youth, as well as homemaker and childcare skills (Gullickson 2017). To the extent that people attribute a hierarchy to racial or ethnic groups, ethno-racial differences may be involved in exchanges as well, such as when poorer women from ethnic minorities partner with richer men of the majority group, or when lower-status white women partner with higher-status black men (Choi and Tienda 2017; Sassler and Joyner 2011). Marriage order appears to be a trait valued for exchange as well: never-married individuals are in a better position than previously married

individuals to marry more attractive partners. This holds particularly for women (Qian and Lichter 2018). Even though matching and trading are competing forces, they are not mutually exclusive. Some couples may match on a given set of traits, while others engage in a cross-trait exchange (McClintock 2014).

3. EMERGING TOPICS

3.1 Gender Equality and Gender Inequality

The late twentieth-century reversal of the gender gap in education to women's advantage has inspired a surge of scholarly interest in heterosexual partner choice, which is an important mechanism in the reproduction of gender inequality (Van Bavel 2012; Van Bavel et al. 2018). A key question is to what extent gender inequality in partner choice is weakening. The expanded participation of women in education and the labour market makes them less dependent on men to secure their economic well-being, leading to a convergence in partnering *needs*. The same trends also affect meeting *opportunities*, as men and women are now more likely to share mixed-gender schools, colleges, and workplaces – even though the choice of study subject and occupation remains strongly gendered (Sweeney and Cancian 2004; Van Bavel et al. 2018). More equal meeting opportunities may also explain convergence in gender-specific divorce trends and re-partnering opportunities after divorce (Grow et al. 2017; Schnor et al. 2017). Finally, there is evidence suggesting that male and female mating *preferences* are also converging, even though clear sex differences remain (Zentner and Eagly 2015). The extent of such convergence is a matter of debate. Evolutionary theory predicts that complete gender equality in partner preferences is unlikely to occur, since mate choice is linked with sexual selection as an evolutionary force (Buss and Schmitt 2019).

Homogamy remains the most common pattern, but the reversal of the gender gap in education has made educational hypogamy more common than hypergamy (De Hauw et al. 2017; Esteve et al. 2016). However, what this tells us about mate preferences is unclear, as disentangling the effects of needs, opportunities, and preferences remains methodologically challenging. Marrying 'down' in terms of education does not necessarily mean that women no longer prefer high-status men, as hypogamy may hide the maintenance of more traditional matching patterns on other dimensions such as occupational status or income (Van Bavel et al. 2018). Qian (2017) interprets the observation that husbands still make more money than wives, even when the latter are more educated, as evidence that educational hypogamy does not challenge the higher status of men, as income, rather than education, is used as the main status marker. Still, the educational reversal has increased the relative earnings of women in couples (Van Bavel and Klesment 2017), and has made female breadwinners more common than they were in the past (Klesment and Van Bavel 2017; Vitali and Arpino 2016). Even Qian's (2017) evidence for the United States (US) shows that the tendency of women to marry up in income has declined since the 1980s. As Van Bavel et al. (2018) explained, the finding that women still 'partner up' in income does not need to follow from a preference to avoid status reversal. Rather, given that women continue to earn less than men, on average, it is consistent with a situation in which women and men alike prefer partners with good economic prospects (Grow and Van Bavel 2015).

3.2 Same-Sex Couples

Both the legal rights and the visibility of same-sex couples have increased in recent decades, as witnessed by the growing number of nations that accommodate same-sex marriages (Paternotte 2015). While there has been an expansion of social science research on families headed by same-sex couples since the start of the twenty-first century (Biblarz and Savci 2010), the number of studies that have addressed same-sex partner choice is still very limited. This may be due in part to the fact that identifying same-sex couples in conventional data sources has been difficult (Andersson et al. 2006; Evertsson et al. in this volume; Festy 2007).

As to the demography of partner choice, the evidence so far indicates that, on average, the partners in same-sex households are older, and the age gap between the partners is larger, than in households headed by heterosexual partners. Homosexual men appear to be more likely to enter registered partnerships than homosexual women (Anderson and Noack 2010; Cortina et al. 2012), but this does not hold in all countries where same-sex partnerships are legally recognised (Chamie and Mirkin 2011). In Norway and Sweden (Andersson et al. 2006), and in Canada and Spain (Cortina et al. 2012), same-sex partnerships, and especially gay partnerships, are more likely to involve a foreign-born partner than heterosexual partnerships. US data show that same-sex couples tend to be less homogenous than different-sex couples on several characteristics, including ethnicity, age, and education (Jepsen and Jepsen 2002; Schwartz and Graf 2009).

In many societies, same-sex relationships are marginalised, which may encumber people's intentions to enter long-term same-sex relationships. Potârcă et al. (2015) have shown that the normative and legal-institutional legitimisation of same-sex unions is associated with the long-term partnering preferences of gays and lesbians. In supportive contexts, their partnering preferences are more likely to prioritise long-term relationships and monogamy than in contexts in which same-sex unions are more marginalised. Overall, compared with gay men, lesbians tend to believe more strongly in the importance of monogamy; but in contexts in which same-sex marriage is legally recognised, gay men tend to distance themselves from the stereotype of being prone to short-term relationships (Potârcă et al. 2015).

The opportunities to meet potential partners differ in important ways. Unlike heterosexual individuals, gays and lesbians cannot assume that most people they meet will share their sexual orientation. Because of the limited size of the partner market, and given that sexual orientation is generally not visible in daily life, gay and lesbian people have long been more prone than heterosexual people to use non-traditional means for finding a partner, such as internet dating. The internet enlarges the opportunities to get in touch with a wider variety of people of similar sexual orientation, which is particularly beneficial to people facing thin dating markets (Potârcă et al. 2015; Rosenfeld et al. 2019). Gay men and lesbians tend to be geographically more mobile than heterosexual individuals, and are more likely to live in large urban centres (Anderson et al. 2006), which may reduce third-party influences from family and other relatives (Schwartz and Graf 2009).

Apart from the preference for a same-sex or a different-sex partner, there appear to be many similarities between the mate preferences of homosexual and heterosexual people. Regardless of their sexual orientation, most individuals seek in a partnership affection, dependability, shared interests, and similar values and (religious) beliefs. Moreover, men, regardless of their sexual orientation, are more likely to emphasise a partner's physical attractiveness; while women, regardless of sexual orientation, tend to put greater emphasis on personality traits

(Peplau and Fingerhut 2007). Like heterosexual men, gay men exhibit preferences for partners who are younger than themselves (Burrows 2013). Another US study found that gay men and lesbians alike rate intellect, pro-social behaviour, and family-oriented characteristics as desirable in potential partners, but tend to value these characteristics more in long-term than in short-term sexual relationships, which is also in line with findings for heterosexual people (Regan et al. 2001).

3.3 Online Dating

In the twenty-first century, the internet has become a widely accepted channel for finding a partner, weakening the role of family and friends (Hobbs et al. 2017; Potârcă 2017; Rosenfeld et al. 2019). An emerging stream of research addresses to what extent online dating is changing the partnering market. The current evidence indicates that those who go online to seek a partner are a somewhat selective part of the general population. They tend to be more highly educated and have higher incomes than the overall population (Hitsch et al. 2010), and those who report finding a long-term partner online tend to have less extraverted personalities (Danielsbacka et al. 2019). As to the reasons for this selectivity, there are two opposing hypotheses. According to the *compensation* hypothesis, individuals who face difficulties meeting a partner through more traditional channels go online to compensate for deficits encountered offline. According to the *Matthew effect* hypothesis, online dating causes the rich to get richer, as it is mostly used by individuals who already have strong dating skills, and who use the internet as an additional partnering tool. So far, the evidence of which hypothesis is more accurate is mixed. Some studies have supported the Matthew effect, but a recent study in Germany found that extraverted people are less likely to have found their current partner online. This latter finding is more in line with the compensation hypothesis, which argues that more timid individuals tend to use online dating to compensate for a lack of extraversion in face-to-face situations (Danielsbacka et al. 2019).

It is clear that the internet is massively expanding the opportunities to get in touch with potential partners. The use of explicit criteria in searches enhances the efficiency of the partner search, which should be particularly beneficial to individuals who face thin dating markets (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). More generally, if mate preferences are homogamous and endogamous, using explicit criteria to search a large database of potential partners could facilitate matches between partners with similar traits (Hitsch et al. 2010). On the other hand, by providing a large, flexible, and diverse supply of potential mates in a setting that can be accessed in relative anonymity, online dating may be perceived as being less tightly structured than traditional institutionalised arrangements due to the absence of direct third-party influences. It is possible that the anonymity of internet dating facilitates a less constrained pursuit of mate preferences, with preferences being more decoupled from individual resources (Potârcă and Mills 2015).

Consistent with the latter hypothesis, a study based on data from Germany and the US suggested that the internet may promote weaker educational, ethnic, and religious endogamy than more traditional meeting contexts such as schools and gatherings of friends, and family (Potârcă 2017). Nevertheless, the mechanisms that cause homogamy and endogamy to be the dominant patterns in mate choice clearly work on the internet as well. A study based on German data has shown that educational homophily is a dominant force in online mate choice (Skopek et al. 2011a). After controlling for the opportunity structure on the online platform,

the preference for similarly educated partners appears to be a major factor, especially among women. There is, for example, evidence that women are highly reluctant to contact partners with educational attainment lower than their own (Skopek et al. 2011a).

Apart from examining the specificities of online dating, scholars have been using data from internet platforms to shed new light on puzzles that have not yet been solved with conventional data about couples (Hitsch et al. 2010; Skopek et al. 2011a, 2011b). For example, Lewis (2016) found that both the matching (preference for similarity) and the competition (preference for higher status) mechanisms play a role in explaining homogamy in ways that are not always symmetrical between men and women. The same US study also showed that similarities in socio-demographic characteristics are to some extent by-products of a preference for interpersonal compatibility (shared values, activities, and looks), but that many of the effects of these similarities are independent.

Overall, recent studies also imply that, fundamentally, dating in the online world is structured in similar ways to dating in the offline world, as traditional social conditions found offline are reproduced online. Online daters exhibit categories of perception and sets of mate preferences that correspond systematically with their position in the (offline and online) partner market, and in society at large (Bruch and Newman 2019; Schmitz 2017). For example, empirical research indicates that ethno-racial preference hierarchies are similar in online and offline dating (Potârca and Mills 2015). There is no evidence that dating apps and internet dating are transforming partner choice and the partner market into a kind of individualised marketplace for entertainment where users can always return ‘for another bout of shopping’ (Bauman 2003, p. 65). Instead, the existing research suggests that most individuals go online to seek romantic love and monogamy, and are committed to longer-term relationships. Accordingly, the technology is evaluated (positively or negatively) based on whether it helps people pursue meaningful partnerships (Hobbs et al. 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

The study of partner choice has been and continues to be a central issue in family sociology and demography. Given the implications of endogamy and exogamy, as well as of homogamy and heterogamy, for the reproduction of social inequality, the significance of partner choice extends to social science in general. Patterns of assortative mating emerge out of the dynamic interplay of partnering needs, preferences, and opportunities. Systematic similarities and dissimilarities between partners who start a relationship can be explained by several theoretical mechanisms, including matching, competition, and exchange processes. As all of these factors involved in partner choice are profoundly affected by the socio-cultural context, match-making does not just involve two individual parties.

Conceptualising partner choice as happening on a partnering market does not necessarily mean that partner choice should be seen as a utility-maximising rational choice process. While the market approach does imply some kind of conscious decision making, it does not entail that those involved are conscious about all factors affecting such decisions – just like buying products in a supermarket may be guided to a large extent by unconscious and in many ways ‘irrational’ factors.

Partner choice also plays an important part in the enactment of gender. Given the major changes in gender relations in recent decades, including the reversal of the gender gap in edu-

cation and women's enhanced participation in the paid labour market, recent work on partner choice and partner markets has focused to a large extent on gender equality and inequality, with the empirical evidence suggesting that the partner preferences of men and women are converging, even though important differences remain. While most of this research has been on heterosexual relationships, partner choice among same-sex couples represents an emerging topic that may shed new light on gender issues in the coming years.

The internet is playing an increasingly important role in partner choice, not just because the technology has become widely available and pervasive, but also because the age range of the partnering market has greatly expanded, mostly as a result of union instability. More traditional opportunities for finding a partner tended to be focused on adolescent and young adult singles, whereas online dating is accessible to all ages. So far, the evidence indicates that matches formed online are structured in very similar ways to those forged in the offline world.

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