

Interpolating Demography with Families and Households

Frances K. Goldscheider

Population Studies and Training Center
Brown University
Providence, RI 02912

This paper argues that the field of household and family demography serves a critical role in the development of our understanding of the determinants and consequences of population trends. Like the community, families and households are situated between the two levels at which demographic research is ordinarily conducted—the individual and the nation-state. The results of the papers in this issue are used to illustrate the critical ways that intergenerational and gender relationships shape demographic processes.

When I first decided to take up the challenge of structuring a special issue, which the PAA now provides to the editors of *Demography*, the topic area was clear to me. I am a quintessential family demographer, interested in the entire spectrum of intra- and interhousehold family relationships as they are shaped by gender and generation. The angle, the theme, was not yet clear, however.

At that time I was helping to organize a conference called “Reshaping the Family: Social and Economic Changes and Public Policy,” held at RAND in January 1994. I knew these papers would provide me with a useful base because the previous effort to produce a special *Demography* issue on fertility had failed for lack of high-quality submissions. The conference was somewhat interdisciplinary, a situation I have often found to be fruitful. This led to the hope that further disciplinary extrapolation would be even more valuable. My goal was to reach beyond “standard” research in family and household demography—if a new field like this can be said to involve standard research—by encouraging papers in more distant disciplines. I signaled this emphasis through the subtitle—“Expanding the Boundaries”—and by advertising the issue widely.

This effort at disciplinary extrapolation did not work. The few non-“standard” papers we received did not survive review, even though that process was structured to reflect the concerns and interests of demographers most sympathetic to their kinds of research. Hence the collection published here mostly reflects the work of the usual suspects, with a strong flavor of their origins, because half of the papers are connected in some way to the RAND conference. Geographic variation is also minimal because nearly every paper uses U.S. data. My efforts at extrapolation, always interesting to demographers but also problematic, were not successful, at least on the disciplinary dimension. It is not easy to compile a special issue that meets the standards of peer review¹ and is also narrowly defined.

Nevertheless, these research papers present a grand opportunity. They allow us to *interpolate theoretically* between the separate levels that currently define and limit the field of demography by filling the gap between the country level and the individual level. The purpose of this overview essay is to focus demographers’ attention on the ways household and family demography, as embodied in these excellent and often provocative

papers, can teach us to look at the still imperfectly understood social structures² that stand between the individual and the nation-state. Interpolation is still a valuable tool of our field, and can be applied fruitfully to this situation.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE INTERPOLATED?

Demographic analysis operates almost entirely at two extreme levels of human behavior—the individual and the national. Although most demographers currently study the demographic behavior of individuals, the field of demographic study that took shape before the 1960s was country-based. The major sources of data available to scholars interested in human population processes were the printed tables published by the census bureaus and vital statistics offices of governments. Few of us who began to study demography in the graduate programs that bloomed in the 1960s learned to collect our own data, although a central task was to assess the quality of the data we used. Vincent Whitney taught several generations of demographers at Brown and at the University of Pennsylvania that “publication does not make something true.” He gave us examples of ludicrous rates from various sources, showing that the endless notes accompanying the tables of the *UN Demography Yearbooks* often told a richer story about the structure of world demography than did the numbers in the tables themselves. Throughout, our major goal was to describe, not to theorize, because the behavior of individuals was distant from our view. We left the task of understanding the behavior of governments to political scientists.

This picture changed when the computer was joined with the individual-level data from the sample surveys on United States fertility and from the 1960 Census Public Use Sample. New data sources and the means to analyze them revolutionized the methods of analysis, the tools of the trade for most demographers. Suddenly we found ourselves able to develop causal models of individual behavior and to ask why people move, marry, have children, and take care of their health.

Yet despite these riches of new data and new tools, we have not done well in analyzing the transition in fertility, the dominant component of the balancing equation identified by our disciplinary forebears' country-level analyses. At fertility conferences, one still hears senior family demographers asking “Why have children?” in genuine puzzlement. I believe that we will not answer any of the questions about the causes of demographic behavior until we move beyond our focus on the individual decisionmaker. We must increase our attention to the families and communities that shape individuals' decisions because their decisions make sense primarily in this context. Our individual-level theorizing must focus much more sharply on what people “get” from belonging to various kinds of families, and hence on why they should form them, remain in them, and contribute to them. This focus concentrates our attention on the content of the long-term intergenerational and gender relationships which, together with working (ordinarily for survival, sometimes for accomplishment, and occasionally for glory), make up the center of most people's lives. Much of the argument I hope to develop applies as well to communities as to families, but given the content of these papers, I leave to others the challenge of developing the parallel more fully.

FAMILY DEMOGRAPHY AND THE GENERATIONS

Demographers should have a head start in understanding intergenerational relations, and we should begin to make fuller use of this dimension in our attempts to understand current young adults' demographic behavior. The connections are clear at the macro level

because demographers are used to seeing the age pyramid as a whole (Figure 1). The pyramid shapes the relationships between the generations, as measured (for example) by the dependency ratio. The dependency ratio combines older with younger dependents and compares their sum to the number of nondependent working-age adults, indexed roughly by

$$((P_{<15} + P_{65+})/P_{15-64}) \times 100; \tag{1}$$

this can be regarded as the ratio of mouths to hands. After all, it is the insights of demographers that have fueled the concern with the fiscal soundness of the Social Security system in the twenty-first century.

Demographers have even gone beyond the mechanical comparison of cohort sizes to achieve the analytic insight that cohort shifts are governed by the decisions made by earlier cohorts. The Easterlin hypothesis that a cohort's fertility is influenced inversely by its relative size is a strong formulation of intergenerational connection—that is, that the quantity of one cohort affects the quantity of another. We can also imagine weaker formulations, however, in which characteristics of a cohort other than its size influence the quantity or quality of the cohort members' children and hence the nature of future cohorts.

Figure 1 shows how demographers might use the familiar age pyramid to consider intergenerational and other family relationships. In Figure 1, Arrow A focuses our attention on the relationships between adults and their children and potential children, one dimension of which is fertility. This leads us to ask how adults' characteristics influence fertility. The Social Security problem is an example of the connections linking the elderly with their adult children, as indicated by Arrow B. This connection is also important in view of the size and extent of the formal intergenerational contributions that are subject to that mechanism, but it is not the only connection. The problems in financing Social Security normally result from the increase in the ratio of the oldest (retired) generation to the middle, employed

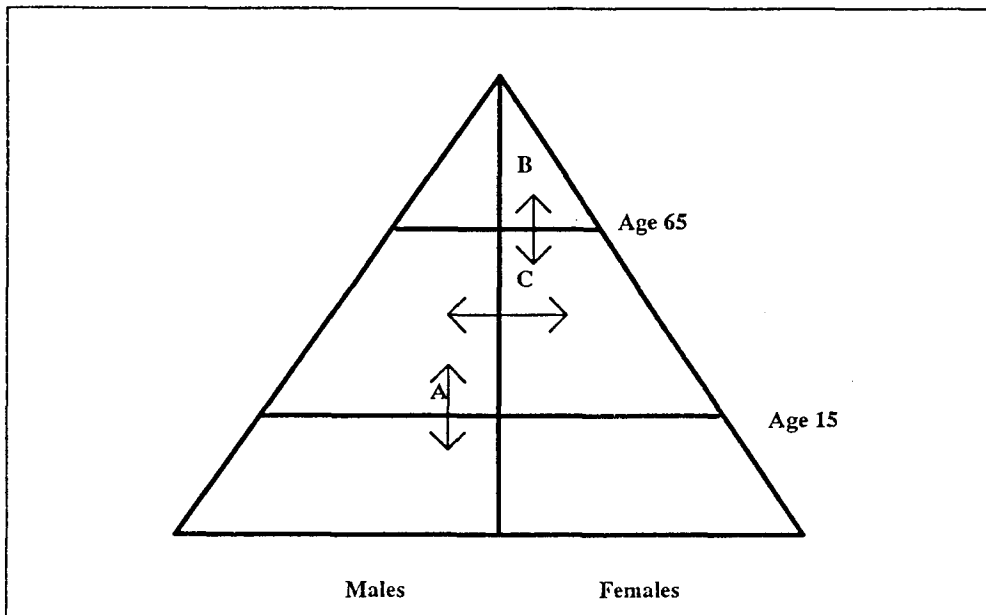


Figure 1: Generational and Gender Relationships in the Age-Sex Population Pyramid

generation. (Of course, *nondemographers* frequently fail to note that persons of working age often have fewer *young* dependents to compete for their contributions.)

The first four papers focus on these two arrows. Two papers—by Cherlin, Kiernan, and Chase-Lansdale (hereafter Cherlin et al.) and by Furstenberg, Hoffman, and Shreshta (hereafter Furstenberg et al.)—analyze the relationships between parents and their dependent children as they are mediated by divorce. This is an Arrow A issue, but eventually it will become an Arrow B concern that will influence our sociodemographic futures for a long time. The second set of two papers in this section—by Kramerow and by Logan and Spitze—focuses on the relationships between the elderly and their adult children, in which the issues are family and public support. These are Arrow B issues. They are influenced, however, by Arrow A history from a half-century ago, when today's elderly were young adults, forming and raising families.

The analysis by Cherlin et al. uses data from Great Britain, and shows us that children who were born in 1958 and who experienced parental divorce between 1965 and 1974 made transitions to three adult family roles earlier and under more problematic circumstances than those whose parents did not divorce during that period. They left home earlier (particularly because of family friction), entered unions earlier (particularly via cohabitation), and became parents earlier (particularly outside marriage). These effects appear even after controlling for a rich set of family and individual characteristics measured before divorce.

The analysis by Furstenberg et al. suggests other consequences of divorce. New data from the PSID provide the opportunity to examine transfers of time and money between parents and adult children for a "matched sample" of panel members—that is, for those families whose members remained in the sample after the children left home and the parents divorced. The investigators used the children's reports for information on transfers and the parents' records to measure the timing of divorce. They found that divorce reduces the proportions involved in transfers by 18 percentage points for money received by adult children, by 26 percentage points for time received, and by 18 percentage points for time assistance given by children to their divorced fathers.

Using these papers to project into the future, then, becomes a familiar exercise because "cohort succession" is a central concept in demography. Demographers understand that the experiences of a given cohort will echo into the future when the older cohorts are replaced by this new one as it ages. Demographers invented, and easily understand, the image of the baby boom as a large meal that a python is slowly digesting. These papers tell us that the divorce revolution will ramify through the generations. The generation that began the divorce revolution is investing less time and less money in their children. Consequently, they are contributing to a rising generation of adults who will have more problematic transitions to family roles and who in turn will provide less direct support to their parents, particularly their fathers, when the parents join the ranks of the elderly. Other research on the consequences of parental divorce and remarriage on educational attainment also should raise concerns about the new generation's ability to contribute to the elderly via Social Security taxes.

These two papers should remind us that studying the elderly is always an exercise in history and projection. The behavior of the current elderly, who appear in our contemporary surveys, reflects not only today's conditions but also those which shaped them in the past. The conditions that people encounter in young adulthood, which influence their options as they experience early family and job transitions, also shape the worldviews and habits they develop to maintain the lives they choose and to interpret those lives to themselves and others (Alwin and Krosnick 1991). Those who would understand the attitudes and behavior of the elderly should study, as far as possible, the conditions their subjects experienced and the views they expressed *as young adults*. Those who would project the characteristics of the future elderly should consider as well what we know about the lives of current young

adults. The two papers that focus on the elderly, and hence on Arrow B, challenge us to perform this exercise.

Kramerow's paper has the longest historical sweep. By examining the living arrangements of the elderly in the United States in 1910, 1940, 1960, and 1990, she asks us by implication to consider the factors shaping Americans' family lives from the mid-nineteenth century onward as they had children or did not, bought homes or did not, moved west and/or left the farm, and established the basis for earning a living in later life. She shows more specifically than does earlier research that the strong growth in separate living for the elderly has characterized the entire twentieth century, increasing significantly (in the pooled model) in each time interval.

Why, then, did so many family scholars continue to insist from the 1960s on that the decline of the extended family in the United States and western Europe was a myth? A consideration of the age pyramid shows what misled them. The aspect of the pyramid most familiar to demographers is the change in its shape with the decline in fertility. The high-fertility pyramid has a very broad base, with many children in relation to working-age adults and many working-age adults in relation to the elderly. The low-mortality and replacement-level fertility pyramid is a near-rectangle, with nearly the same numbers in each age group. This change in the age pyramid means that the proportion of older persons living with their adult children could diminish throughout the twentieth century, even though the proportion of adults living with an elderly parent does not decline.

The broad-based population pyramid makes financing Social Security easy; it also makes intergenerational coresidence rare, even if every elderly person lives with an adult child, thus linking residentially these two segments of the population pyramid. Many family scholars did not notice that family extension was decreasing from the viewpoint of the elderly themselves because increasing proportions of *potentially coresident* elderly parents were going to live elsewhere—outside a family setting. Thus they were outside the population of interest for most family scholars, who study families and hence have missed the growth in nonfamily living. Arrow B has lost most of its residential connection, whatever other connections remain between these two segments of the age pyramid.

The growth in separate living for the elderly may be contributing to what is sometimes called "the war between the generations." Samuel Preston (1984) in his PAA presidential address published in this journal, pointed out how public funding of programs for the elderly has grown in relation to those for the young in the United States. Many observers have assumed that this trend reflects the greater power of the elderly, which they are using to advance their economic interests at the expense of younger people's interests.

The study by Logan and Spitze, however, finds no evidence of a generational war. Their analysis of attitudinal data reveals that, if anything, older persons are *less* supportive of family and public obligations to the elderly than are younger persons. The differences are often very large, even after controlling for factors likely to affect such attitudes. Clearly it is premature to declare a "war" in the alarmist terms often heralded by journalists and feared by advocates for the elderly.

It may be some time, however, before we have enough evidence on these attitudes and how they may be changing. The age gradient may have been even sharper in the past. Logan and Spitze's results can also be interpreted as predicting that with cohort succession, the elderly may become substantially more committed in the next few decades to programs that benefit them. Further, the current elderly are simply less supportive of government programs benefiting persons of any age. We also find sharp age-related differences in support for federal funding for public schools: 77% of those age 18–29 favor increased federal funding for public schools, compared with 47% of those age 70 and above (Vinovskis 1993). The commitment to the family among the elderly may remain high; yet, with their increased residential isolation from their children, their grandchildren, and their

children's neighbors' children, they find it much easier to vote against school bond issues because they cannot vote in their children's district and have no children to vote for in their own.

FAMILY DEMOGRAPHY AND GENDER RELATIONSHIPS

Demographic research focuses strongly on fertility (Arrow A), and fertility implies relationships between men and women. Demographers designed the population pyramid with two sexes primarily to reflect sex-selective mortality and migration, and to provide symmetry. Hence gender is a fundamental design feature of the pyramid. Because of the role of intergender relationships in fertility, gender is also a fundamental consideration in demographic behavior.

Nevertheless, practitioners in the field provide evidence that demographers have been even less sensitive to the importance of problematic gender relationships in understanding demographic behavior than to intergenerational relationships (Watkins 1993). In part this omission reflects conditions during the period of most rapid growth for demography, the 1950s through the 1970s, when the nuclear family was (temporarily) at a high point. This was the time of the baby boom, with historically early ages at marriage for men and women and low rates of divorce in most of the countries that trained demographers. Strong bonds, firmly supporting parenthood, could be taken for granted. Thus it made sense to restrict the study of fertility to married women and to treat men as a fertility "context," whose characteristics (such as their incomes) could be appended to those of their wives.

Family patterns, however, are changing rapidly throughout the world and shifting men's and women's roles, both in relation to each other and to their children. In industrialized countries, marriage is declining as a site for bearing and raising children. The proportions of children born both in nonmarital cohabitations and entirely outside unions have increased substantially (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994; van de Kaa 1987). Female-headed families are also becoming more important in less developed countries (Bruce, Lloyd, and Leonard 1995). Demographers, however, rather than realizing that these changes reflect increasing problems in the relationships between men and women and sharpening their focus on Arrow C (gender), have reacted to the increase in fertility outside marriage by omitting any examination of male characteristics, because they cannot be measured easily for unmarried women.

Thus demographers are left to focus their analyses of fertility change wholly on women and on the changes in their lives, such as the growth in female labor force participation, that have made marriage elective for them (Westoff 1986). Because men have faded from the demographic picture, these scholars have failed to notice that the growth in female-headed families indicates that men's family roles via daily parenthood must be changing even more deeply than women's family roles.

What we see as a shift in women's lives simply mirrors a shift that occurred in men's lives in industrialized countries in the nineteenth century: the opportunity to earn cash for their labors. When these opportunities opened up for men, the economic justification for men's having a family dwindled. The importance of labor as a source of wealth declined (and wives and children were always the labor resource available to most men). Men's earnings could purchase the domestic services normally provided by wives; the value of children for securing men's old age by competently taking over the family farm or business—or by marrying someone who could do so—became much more indirect, and vanished completely with the development of public and private pensions. This led temporarily to a division of labor requiring specialization of money and services. The forces that brought men into the labor market did not cease to operate, however; as a result,

women also have gained the chance to earn cash for their labors. Thus the financial basis for the relationship between the sexes has changed again. But is financial exchange the only reason for family membership?

Most couples have always known that the basis of marriage was not merely the direct exchange of money for services, and that ample reasons existed for forming long-term, coresidential relationships without reference to the standard division of labor. Nearly all studies of married couples have confirmed that the primary basis of marital choice is homogamy (that is, similarity of backgrounds, interests, values, and lifestyles), thus attesting to the central importance of companionship in marriage. This is as true in societies where elders arrange marriages as in those where the couples themselves make the decisions.

Sociologists classify marriage among the “primary relationships”; these, like other family ties and like friendships, are based on enduring, trusting, sharing relationships. This is why most people prefer partners with the same educations, neighborhood experiences, ethnic and religious orientations, and histories (which form much of the basis for age homogamy) as their own. In contrast, “secondary relationships” are based primarily on immediate exchange, which economic theory suggests should reinforce differentiation and specialization (Becker 1981).³ Some economists also recognize that the principles which make sense in impersonal exchanges (such as international trade and stock markets) are quite different from those governing long-term, face-to-face exchanges, where trust and communication are critical (Ben Porath 1982).

Two of these papers show dramatic evidence that homogamy is growing in relation to specialization in U.S. marriages. Leibowitz and Klerman examine the case that should justify most strongly the expected division of labor within marriage—the labor force participation of married women with preschool children. Their analysis of change over the past quarter-century shows that married mothers of small children became far more likely to work mainly because women’s choices now are based more on their own opportunities and less on exchange and specialization. Their work decisions respond less to their husbands’ earning possibilities (exchange), and to the presence of their own small children (specialization).

The analysis by Karoly and Burtless takes up this story and makes the link to homogamy because they are interested in family income inequality as an outcome, not in whether women work. Because wives now work less to supplement their husbands’ incomes than as a reflection of their own opportunities, spouses with similar, high levels of human capital both earn high incomes, while spouses who share low levels of human capital both earn much less. Wives’ earnings no longer serve to smooth out income inequalities over time and in the cross-section, but instead increase inequality. In a society in which women work and in which most income components correlate positively with earnings (given the weakness of the redistributing safety net), homogamy has exacerbated the growth in inequality.

The transition from marriage based on males’ incomes and females’ services has not been smooth, however. The dramatic increase in divorce, the rise in age at marriage, and the growth of proportions unmarried may reflect, at least in part, the resulting confusion. Many men and women feel strongly that most of the elements of the 1950s marriage contract are still important. Women expect a man to be a good provider, even if their own earnings when pooled bring the family safely above the poverty level. Men (and women) expect women to take primarily responsibility for managing the children and the home. Each still suffers strong disappointment when the other does not fulfill the now-outmoded contract. Often they do not take into account the possibility that the man’s wages eroded at least partially in response to increased competition from many sources, including women,

and that the woman's ability to put dinner on the table when he comes home from work is affected by the hours she works outside the home.

The rise in divorce and the delay in marriage have had a dramatic consequence in view of most women's continued commitment to family, namely the rise of the female-headed family. Moffitt and Rendall provide a thorough account of this rise, and show how the incidence and duration of single-parent spells have increased for women. They document that women increasingly entered sole parenthood via nonmarital childbearing instead of divorce in the 1970s and 1980s, much as divorce displaced widowhood as the source of unmarried parenthood from the 1940s to the 1960s (Kobrin 1973).

Projecting these trends would be a discouraging demographic exercise because they seem to imply that children are increasingly the province of women, while men live separately. Increasing evidence, however, suggests that studies such as Moffitt and Rendall's overstate the growth in single parenthood. Men and women are continuing to form unions and to raise children together. Our convention-minded data collectors often code their families as "single-parent" if the coresident men and women are not married to each other. Most survey organizations, including the Census Bureau (which produces the most widely used national data on the numbers of mother-only families), exclude the cohabiting partners of children's mothers from their definitions of families. Hence they also exclude the men's earnings from the calculation of family income. As shown by Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet, cohabitation is a rapidly growing household—and perhaps family—form, which includes many of the children treated as living in a mother-only family.

The growth of cohabitation poses critical questions for demographers, only some of which are being addressed. Lillard, Brien, and Waite examine what is probably the most frequently addressed research issue on cohabitation: whether marriages preceded by a period of cohabitation are more or less stable than those begun without previous cohabitation. Their basis for expecting greater stability is the additional information about the partnership, which presumably can be obtained only through coresidence. Their bases for expecting less stability are the possibly corroding effect of cohabitation on long-term commitment and the results of all previous studies. Lillard et al. show that the negative impact of cohabitation on marital stability shown by previous research simply reflects the selectivity of those who choose to cohabit: they have characteristics that increase the odds of divorce, other things being the same. The authors conclude that cohabitation has no effect on subsequent marital stability. Either the effects offset each other, or, more likely (because duration of cohabitation has no effect), the degree of commitment indicated by marrying is the same whether or not cohabitation occurred. This result should tell us a great deal about cohabitation.

We need to know much more about cohabitation, however; some of this is mentioned by Bumpass et al. What sort of parenting goes on in these families? Is there enough to override the Census Bureau's assumption that these really are single-parent families? Is there enough income pooling and enough investment in the children's well-being to make the cohabiting partners' income truly "family income"? The phenomenon of cohabitation raises both the classification question that interests Bumpass et al. and the empirical questions needed to establish whether a new basis of classification is needed. Under what circumstances is child raising in cohabitational unions effective via investments of time and money in children? What is the meaning of marriage, and how does the commitment it implies influence people's decisions to become parents (Arrow A)? What sort of support will be provided by the cohabiting partner of an elderly person's child (Arrow B)? The gender issue (Arrow C) is not irrelevant to these questions.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This exercise in theoretical interpolation, using research on families and households as a bridge between our individual-level theories and our national-level concerns, raises critical questions for the future of demography as a research discipline. To study families more carefully, we need fuller data and better methodologies. We need to know more about the family ties of the people whose decisions we study, defined by the content of their past, present, and expected relationships. Coresidence is an important criterion, but not the only one. Data sets that link individuals over time, such as the PSID, the SIPP, the parent-child and sibling files of the NLS samples, and the burgeoning NSFH, are critical. They are difficult to use, however; only the NSFH is employed much in relation to its availability for these sorts of questions, probably because of the relatively simple, cross-sectional structure of its first wave. The creation of the PSID relationship file is also a major advance.

Nevertheless, most of the data we have been using have too many gaps and require too much work. Also, the focus on the individual actor has been a more convenient way for all of us to pursue our analyses. Once we understand the limitations of this approach, however, even seriously flawed and incomplete data can be put to use. The paper by Freedman and Wolf provides us with several models showing how the creative use of data can fill gaps and allow family-level analysis. These authors have taken the technique of multiple imputation far beyond its normal use—filling in values missing because of respondent's nonresponse—and have applied it to the painfully common cases in which information on other family members was requested in some circumstances but not in others (survey nonresponse, as it were). Sometimes questions are asked about activities or characteristics of parents or children in the household but not of those outside, or vice versa. The NSFH2, for example, asked questions about a partner's previous children in the marital history but not in the cohabitation history. With the careful construction of "shadow samples" for deriving their regression estimators, Freedman and Wolf show how much more we can learn through the careful and creative use of data. In this way they demonstrate how the questions raised in this special issue can be addressed, even before we obtain perfect data with which to address them.

NOTES

¹ All of these papers survived the normal process, and then were screened again for the contribution to the issue as a whole.

² I use this term in the broadest sense, as do sociologists, to cover the full array of institutional arrangements that order the many dimensions of human societies, including economic, political, and religious structures. Hence it is not in opposition to economic relationships. Economists often make the same point—that their use of *economic* relates broadly to all types of activities and is not constrained to the merely financial. Anthropologists take the same view of their use of *culture*.

³ Becker's analysis of marriage argues that homogamy (positive assortative mating) is efficient on all spousal characteristics except wage rates (Becker 1981, 73). His argument that wage rates are sorted negatively, however, rests on his assumption that marriages with the greatest division of labor are the most efficient (defined as maximizing aggregate commodity outputs), because he does not consider that one of the "products" which individuals seek to maximize in marriage might be companionship. That is, marital relationships are also a consumption good.

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