THE DYNAMICS OF ASSORTATIVE MATING AND
THE SURVIVORSHIP OF MARRIAGES

Arun S. Hendi[*]

University of Pennsylvania

The Dynamics of Assortative Mating and the Survivorship of Marriages

Abstract

This article examines how the intensification of assortative mating in the last half-century has patterned changes in the survivorship experience of older married couples. I bring together three different literatures—the literatures on marriage and mortality, widowhood, and assortative mating—and introduce a new formal demographic model linking the life cycles of married couples with changes in the joint distribution of spouses' characteristics, including age at marriage, education, and smoking status. Using data from the 1992-2010 Health and Retirement Study with mortality follow-up through 2011, I calculate trends in the life cycles of married couples—the number of years couples spend in the married state, the probability of widowhood, and the number of years spent widowed—over time and across cohorts. I then generate counterfactual estimates of how those trends would change if the intensity of assortative mating hadn't changed over time. Finally, I decompose changes in the survivorship experience of married couples into changes in mortality versus changes in assortative mating.