

Why do power couples migrate to metropolitan areas? Actually, they don't

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More than half of all “power couples” – couples in which both spouses are college graduates – live in large metropolitan areas (MSAs) with more than two million residents. What causes the concentration of well-educated couples in big cities?

A new study from the *Journal of Labor Economics* disputes prior research suggesting power couples migrate to large MSAs. Instead, the researchers argue that college-educated singles are more likely to move to big cities where they meet, date, marry, and divorce other college-educated people. In other words, power couples don't move to big cities intact – they're formed there. This finding has important implications for city planners hoping to attract a well-educated workforce.

In 1970, 39 percent of power couples lived in a metropolitan area of at least two million residents. By 1990 this number had grown substantially: Fifty percent of all power couples lived in a big city. In contrast, couples in which neither spouse has a college degree have the lowest probability of living in a large city and the lowest rate of increase, growing from 30 percent to 34 percent in the same twenty year period.

Using data from a large-scale statistical study of 4,800 families (Panel Study on Income Dynamics), Janice Compton (University of Manitoba) and Robert A. Pollak (Washington University and National Bureau of Economic Research) argue that couple migration patterns to large metropolitan areas are influenced gendered determinants – couples in which the man has a college degree are far more likely to move to a

metropolitan area than couples in which only the woman has a college degree.

The researchers analyzed data from men aged 25-39 and women aged 23-37, including all married couples who live together and all unmarried heterosexual couples who have lived together for at least one year. They found that migration patterns for “part-power couples” in which the woman is a college graduate are statistically similar to couples in which neither partner is college educated.

“Part-power couples” with a better educated wife are also less likely to migrate from one large metropolitan area to another large metropolitan area, and are more likely to migrate from a large metropolitan area to a mid-size metropolitan area, the researchers found.

“We find that power couples are not more likely to migrate to the largest metropolitan areas and are no less likely than other couples to migrate from such areas once they are there,” write the researchers. “The observed trends in location patterns are primarily due to differences in the rates at which power couples form and dissolve in cities of various sizes rather than to the migration of power couples to the largest metropolitan areas.”

Indeed, even during the 1990s when the proportion of power couples living in metropolitan areas dropped, the percentage of college educated single men and college educated single women living in big cities increased modestly.

Source: University of Chicago

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