Relative Ages of Husbands and Wives at Marriage

SOME FACTS

WHEREVER MARRIAGES ARE REGISTERED, the ages of the bride and groom are recorded, and data are compiled in a square table showing the annual numbers of marriages classified according to the celebrants' ages in combination. This form of statistics is very widely available. For instance, the *Demographic Yearbooks* of the United Nations Organization have included separate information for no less' than eighty countries. The data for England and Wales are published every year, and have been issued in this way for many decades.

Although this is one of the best recorded of all demographic facts, it is also one of the ·least well studied. What, indeed, can one extract from such material? The first thing to do, clearly, is to examine its general nature. Some specimen figures are given below. They relate to twenty-seven major countries taken in combination.

TABLE 1
Marriages Classified by Ages of Husband and Wife

HUSBAND'S AGE

	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49	50–54	55–59	TOTAL
15–19	133,669	474,102	147,442	20,998	4,766	1,426	558	212	115	783,288
20–24	42,451	773,797	671,302	139,755	35,555	10,209	3,449	1,190	460	1,678,168
25–29	3,457	117,735	347,495	170,357	73,067	27,573	10,104	3,388	1,374	754,550
30–34	397	14,708	57,328	75,612	59,820	33,958	16,495	6,680	2,589	267,587
35–39	95	3,282	13,136	24,336	40,491	35,248	22,701	11,248	5,013	155,550
40–44	32	762	2,856	6,276	13,944	23,315	22,067	14,969	8,407	92,628
45–49	15	181	640	1,503	3,895	8,484	15,221	14,663	11,005	55,607
50–54	3	56	129	288	764	1,962	4,752	8,784	9,383	26,121
55–59	5	31	40	77	190	412	1,177	2,814	5,713	10,459
TOTAL	180,124	1,384,654	1,240,368	439,202	232,492	142,587	96,524	63,948	44,059	3,823,958

(WIFE'S AGE labels the rows.)

The totals of the rows and of the columns represent all the marriages classified by the ages of the wife and husband respectively. From these, it is easy to calculate the number of marriages to be expected in each cell of the table if the partners' ages were uncorrelated, that is, if there were no selection of partners by age, and mating was at random. For instance, the numbers of men and women marrying where the ages of the bride and groom were both twenty to twenty-four would be some 606,000 on this basis. The actual number was, however, nearly 774,000, or about 30 per cent higher. Similar calculations for individual countries, and for one country at different times, reveal an excess of much the same amount at this point in the table. At certain other points, the actual number of marriages is less than might be expected on the basis of random mating; for instance, the number of men aged thirty to thirty-four marrying women aged fifty and over is less than one-tenth of the "expectation".

These facts illustrate the well-known fact of preference for some partners over others, or "assortative mating", in regard to age. What other factors enter into the make-up of

the square table? One is clearly the numbers of men and women available for marriage at the time; another is the marriage rate and a third is the propensity to marry at a given age. The combined effect of all these factors no doubt alters from time to time, and from place to place, for a comparison of the square tables for different times and places reveals considerable variations. It would be of interest if such variations could be analysed into their components. Certainly the first item—the numbers of unmarried men and women available for marriage at each age, are often available from national statistics. It is, however, very difficult to separate out the propensity to marry on the one hand and the age preferences on the other.

If it were possible to eliminate purely demographic and economic factors, such as the supply of and demand for marriage partners, the residue of variation would no doubt represent the result of social and biological factors; for instance, the social pressures affecting the choice of mate could well have been quite different in England and Wales in 1851 from those in the same country in 1951, and the biological urges towards mates of varying ages might conceivably have a different pattern between Japan on the one hand, and France on the other, because of differences of race.

In an attempt to make such an analysis between these two broad groups of factors, with the aid of an electronic computer, an extensive study was made of the variations, in time and place, in the extent of age preferences. In this work, neither sex was assumed to be "dominant" in determining a marriage; both were taken as having an equal influence so far as age of partner was involved.

The conclusion reached from this study was that probably a very large part of the variations is explained by the economic and demographic factors; in consequence, the residue attributable to social and biological elements appears to have been relatively small. Moreover, the form of the residue did not appear to present any consistent pattern; its trend in time and place did not appear to lend itself to any rational interpretation in terms of known social trends or racial differences.

The lack of recognizable pattern in the residue probably indicates that the attempt to analyse the effects of demographic and economic factors on the one side and biosocial factors on the other has not succeeded. In this attempt, the totals of the rows and columns in the square table were assumed to be influenced by only the first of these classes of factor, and the preferential element in the individual cells by only the second class. This dichotomy could well be an over-simplification. While, therefore, the study indicated clearly that the figures in any square table are largely the product of demographic and economic factors, it seems safest to draw no conclusions at all regarding the possible effect of biosocial factors on the data.

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