INTERMARRIAGE AS A DIMENSION OF MARRIAGE CHOICE

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This paper was prepared for presentation in the Thematic Session on Intermarriage at the August 1991 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in Cincinnati. Much of the work reported on was supported by grant R01 HD19261 from the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (DHHS).
Intermarriage as a Dimension of Marriage Choice

It used to be customary to refer to the institute of marriage, and the families it created, as the foundation of society. Now that foundation appears to be cracking. Since the 1970's, the proportion never marrying has more than doubled, from 5% to over 10% of all U.S. women, while the female average age at first marriage rose from under age 22 to 24.5. Simultaneously, cohabitation has emerged as a major factor in American life (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). Among women born 1940-44, only 3% cohabited before age 25; among women born 1960-64, 37% did. To a considerable extent, similar trends have been observed in Western Europe as well.

This paper is based on the belief that what people look for in the institution of marriage is reflected in "who marries whom". By analyzing patterns of marriage choice, and their trend over time, we seek some insight into what is behind the recent "retreat from marriage."

THE MARRIAGE BARGAIN

Traditional marriage has often been seen as the exchange of a man's economic resources for a woman's domestic services. The exchange perspective can also provide an explanation of "who marries whom". The basic argument has been made along the following lines (Edwards, 1969):

a) both men and women want the "best" bargain, i.e. the most desirable partner, thus as
b) both generally reject persons with characteristics less desirable than their own,

c) both tend to marry some one very much like themselves, because such a person offers the best deal available.

That argument can be extended (Schoen and Wooldredge, 1989) by noting that under the traditional marriage exchange, which still persists to a considerable extent, females are motivated to emphasize a male’s economic characteristics while males are motivated to emphasize a female’s noneconomic (primarily social) characteristics. That reasoning leads to the following hypotheses:

I. There will be a strong tendency to homogamy - to "like marrying like" - on a wide range of significant characteristics.

Here, we consider the economic characteristic education and the noneconomic characteristics age, race/ethnicity, and mother tongue.

II. Departures from like marrying like will tend to reflect the different emphases of males and females. For example,

A) the groom will likely be older than the bride as greater age is associated with greater economic resources

B) the bride may have less education than the groom, as education, a close correlate of income, may not be emphasized by men as much as by women.

Thus we expect a pattern of women "marrying up" with regard to education, as well as the commonly observed pattern of women marrying older men.
III. There will be exchanges, that is, there will be marriages where there are systematic departures from homogamy which result in the groom having more of a characteristic emphasized by the bride and the bride having more of a characteristic emphasized by the groom. Specifically, we expect exchanges between:

A) male economic characteristics, such as education, and
B) female social characteristics, such as age, race/ethnicity, and mother tongue language.

The exchange view of marriage is quite plausible, but it is by no means the only one. In particular, Paul DiMaggio and John Mohr (1985) argued for a "matching model" where partners match cultural resources, or "cultural capital". Similar backgrounds and a common reference group are then the essential ingredients in marriage choice, and there are no "exchanges" in a "marriage market". Indeed, DiMaggio and Mohr challenged exchange theorists to show just what "resources" were exchanged and who exchanges them. That challenge will be confronted, but first a word is in order about empirical findings in past research.

THE EVIDENCE FOR THE MARRIAGE EXCHANGE

Most research, focusing on marriage records, provided abundant evidence of homogamy on all of the characteristics we are considering here. Still there were many exceptions to "like marrying like." Furthermore, while a number of studies showed that women "married up" with regard to education, some did not (cf. Glenn et
Writing 50 years ago, Kingsley Davis (1941) and Robert Merton (1941), using exchange theory arguments, correctly predicted that in the U.S. most marriages between blacks and whites would involve black grooms. Data consistently show that some 2/3 to 3/4 do. However, a study of black-white couples by Monahan (1976) found that the relative occupational positions of black husbands and white wives were generally equal. When they were not, it was usually the white wife who had the higher socioeconomic status.

Can these contradictory findings be reconciled or explained? Yes, because virtually all work on marriage choice suffers from serious methodological flaws, as marriage behavior is a very complex thing to analyze.

First, most studies used only marriage records. That is not without value, but behavior is best measured with reference to the population at risk. The number of unmarried persons generally varies greatly with such characteristics as age, race and education, and it follows that someone with relatively uncommon traits will be less likely to marry homogamously.

Second, even the use of conventional marriage rates is not enough. The male marriage rate between males with characteristics A and females with characteristics B, \( W_m(A,B) \), is

\[
W_m(A,B) = \frac{C(A,B)}{M(A)}
\]

(1)

where \( C(A,B) \) is the number of marriages between males with characteristics A and females with characteristics B, and \( M(A) \) is the number of males with characteristics A. The analogous female
marriage rate, $W_r(A,B)$, is

$$W_r(A,B) = C(A,B) / F(B)$$

where $F(B)$ is the number of females with characteristics B. Neither $W_s(A,B)$ nor $W_r(A,B)$ fully reflects the population at risk because the likelihood of an $(A,B)$ marriage is simultaneously dependent on $M(A)$ and $F(B)$ and everyone else in the marriage market. Here we run up against the so-called "two-sex problem" of demography, the inability of either male or female rates to capture the underlying propensity for marriage between $M(A)$ and $F(B)$.

The "2-sex problem" has been of particular interest to me, and I believe that I have found a relatively simple way to deal with it. Essentially, I argue that the underlying, mutual attraction for marriage between $M(A)$ and $F(B)$, the $(A,B)$ marriage propensity if you will, is given by the sum of the male and female $(A,B)$ marriage rates.

The mathematical argument is given in Schoen (1988, Chapter 6). Here, let me try and show you why it is reasonable for $W_s(A,B) + W_r(A,B)$ to reflect the propensity to marry independent of population composition. Consider a closed population of 100 marriageable men and 100 marriageable women where 10 marriages take place. Thus $W_s = W_r = .1$. A year later, assume that the propensity to marry is the same, but the marriageable population now has 100 males and 200 females. How many marriages will there be? Since there are more females, one would expect that the number of marriages will increase. The male marriage rate will then rise because $C$ increases while $M$ remains constant. The number of
marriages is not likely to double, because while the number of females doubled, the number of males remained the same. Thus the female marriage rate will fall, because the increase in the number of marriages is less than the increase in the number of females. The argument that the marriage propensity is constant means that the increase in the male rate is exactly offset by the decrease in the female rate, so \( W_m + W_f \) remains the same. In this case, that means \( C \) would increase to 13.33, \( W_m \) would rise to .133, \( W_f \) would fall to .067, and the marriage propensity would remain .2.

The use of marriage propensities makes it possible to eliminate the effects of composition and directly analyze the relative likelihood of marriage for all combinations of characteristics of the bride and groom. What are needed are the data to calculate those propensities.

DATA

In general, the research reported on here used machine readable files of
a) U.S. vital statistics data on marriages including age, education, and one or more social characteristics of both the bride and groom, and
b) Census population data for unmarried males and females with the same characteristics.

Age was generally divided into at least 10 categories, stressing the prime marriage ages. Education was divided into 4 categories, focusing on the major credentialing points, that is less than 4 years of high school, high school graduate, 1-3 years of college,
and college graduate.

Marriage rates, and then propensities, were calculated for every combination of bride and groom characteristics. That requires a lot of marriages, hence a state level analysis of data covering one to three years was usually indicated. There were approximately 205 thousand marriages in North Carolina-Virginia during 1969-71 (Schoen and Wooldredge, 1989), 40 thousand marriages in Wisconsin 1980 (Schoen, 1989), 172 thousand marriages in California 1970 (Schoen, Wooldredge, and Thomas, 1989), and 25 thousand marriages in Hawaii 1979-81 (Schoen and Thomas, 1989). Race (black/nonblack) was examined with the North Carolina-Virginia and Wisconsin data, ethnicity (Spanish surnamed/non-Spanish surnamed) with the California data, and a combination of race and ethnicity (i.e. Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Japanese, and white) with the Hawaiian data.

The one exception to the use of contemporaneous vital statistics data included here is a study using the 1976 Survey of Income and Education (SIE), a 150 thousand case national sample of the U.S. which included data on mother tongue language (Stevens and Schoen, 1988). In the SIE, rates were estimated from measures of marriage prevalence. Five different languages were considered, English, French, German, Italian, and Polish, each with over a million mother tongue speakers in the country.

RESULTS

Some clear and consistent findings emerge from an analysis of the data. First, there is strong support for Hypothesis I, homo-
gamy, as the highest marriage propensities are typically found for persons with the same characteristics, and the propensity to marry generally diminishes as the partners become less similar. Second, departures from homogamy are generally consistent with a female emphasis on male economic characteristics and a male emphasis on female non-economic characteristics. In particular, there is strong evidence that females do "marry up" with regard to education.

Let us focus on cases where the bride and groom have different educational levels. We can compare the sum of all of the propensities for marriages where the male has more education with the sum for marriages where the female has more education, and take the ratio of those two sums. If the ratio is greater than 1, females marry up, and if it is less than 1, males marry up. Table 1 reports those ratios for 5 different U.S. populations, and shows that there is a consistent pattern of females marrying up with regard to education. Hypothesis II is therefore supported as well.

Are there exchanges, as predicted by Hypothesis III? One way to examine that question is to see whether the extent to which women marry up varies with the race/ethnicity of those marrying. Table 2 shows that the extent of educational hyperogamy varies dramatically, and in the manner predicted by the exchange perspective. Women marry up with regard to education much more in marriages between a black (or Spanish surnamed) male and a nonblack (or non-Spanish surnamed) female. In contrast, males marry up with regard to education in marriages between nonblack (or non-Spanish
surnamed) males and black (or Spanish surnamed) females. The one unexpected result in Table 2 is that males marry up in marriages between two blacks (Schoen, 1989; Schoen and Wooldredge, 1989).

It is noteworthy that ethnic differences produced patterns quite similar to racial differences, even though interracial marriage occurred infrequently in North Carolina-Virginia 1979-81 while interethnic marriage was common in California 1970. Furthermore, the same pattern exists in Hawaii where intergroup marriage is extremely common. Hawaii has an ethnic hierarchy, however, with Chinese, Japanese, and whites the more favored groups and Hawaiians and Filipinos the less favored. Again, the extent to which women marry up with regard to education depends on the ethnicities of the bride and groom. Women marry up more when they marry a male from a group lower in the Hawaiian ethnic hierarchy and marry up less when they marry a male from a group higher in the hierarchy (Schoen and Thomas, 1989).

Such patterns of exchange appear with respect to mother tongue language as well. Using data for the U.S. as a whole, Gillian Stevens and I found that the extent to which women married up with regard to education varied by first language, with the pattern for persons whose mother tongue was French, German, Italian, or Polish, relative to those whose mother tongue was English, very similar to that of groups lower in an ethnic hierarchy.

An alternative approach to finding evidence of exchanges is to model the marriage propensities and look for the presence of interactions. Using the North Carolina-Virginia data, a number of
regression analyses were done to estimate marriage propensities from characteristics of the bride and groom, and to test for the presence of interactions between male economic and female noneconomic characteristics. Again the exchange perspective was supported. While there were only several thousand interracial marriages in North Carolina-Virginia 1979-81, the regression coefficient for the interaction between the characteristics black groom/ nonblack bride and groom with two categories more education was consistently positive for all ages, and on one occasion was significantly positive. That result is fully consistent with the Davis-Merton exchange hypothesis.

Interactions between age and education were also sought in the North Carolina-Virginia data. There were numerous instances of positive and significant interactions in cases where the groom was 10 or more years older and 2 educational categories higher than the bride, giving strong support for the existence of exchanges between an older male’s educational resources and a younger woman’s youth.

DISCUSSION

We have focused on analyses of marriage behavior based on marriage propensities in order to examine marriage choice independent of compositional effects. Several conclusions can be drawn from the consistent patterns which emerge from those analyses.

First, marriage is an exchange relationship, where the likelihood that a marriage occurs depends not only on the characteristics of the man and woman but on how those characteristics complement one another. Second, marriage behavior acts to repro-
duce the social order because the marriage exchange reflects prevailing patterns of social stratification. That influence is manifest with respect to both the emphasis and the evaluation placed on the economic and noneconomic characteristics of both parties. Third, as society changes so does marriage. The trend, clearly evident in the North Carolina-Virginia data, is toward less homogamy, more emphasis on female economic resources and, above all, less marriage. The propensity to marry has fallen substantially for persons in virtually all age, sex, race, and education categories.

As men and women are both active in the labor force and become more economically equal, they simply have less need to exchange, particularly to exchange on the long term basis that marriage implies. As the work place becomes more important, family ties recede—25% or more of women now in their 20's may NEVER have children. Alternative relationships which do not imply long term commitments, such as cohabitation, may offer a better "fit" for 2 earner couples.

Marriage is not likely to disappear. It persists even in societies where consensual unions are the norm, and marriage will always have a lot to offer. What is likely, however, is that marriage will no longer be an offer that cannot be refused.
REFERENCES


Table 1. Ratios of Educationally Heterogamous Marriage Propensities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Ratio (EDM &gt; EDF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California 1970</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii 1979-81</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina-Virginia 1969-71</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina-Virginia 1979-81</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin 1980</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** EDM and EDF refer, respectively, to the educational categories of the groom and bride.
Table 2. Ratios of Educationally Heterogamous Marriage Propensities by the Race/Ethnicity of the Groom and Bride

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race of the groom and bride</th>
<th>Ratio (EDM&gt;EDF)</th>
<th>Ratio (EDF&gt;EDM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Carolina-Virginia</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1969-71</td>
<td>1979-81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black, black</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>black, nonblack</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>nonblack, black</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonblack, nonblack</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity* of the groom and bride</th>
<th>California</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish, Spanish</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish, non-Spanish</td>
<td>2.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>non-Spanish, Spanish</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-Spanish, non-Spanish</td>
<td>1.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>all</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: EDM and EDF refer, respectively, to the educational categories of the groom and bride. 
# Not reported because of the small number of cases 
* Mexican American ethnicity based on whether person's surname was Spanish or non-Spanish