

AGE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRIDES AND GROOMS IN AUSTRALIA

Like other aspects of social behaviour, attitudes about the appropriate relative age differences between spouses is affected by community assumptions about age (husbands should be a few year older than their wives), but little attention has been given to this recognised social behaviour compared with other aspects of marriage and family.

However, large age differences between spouses have been shown to affect the quality of spousal relationships in the form of a diminished value consensus between husbands and wives, and resulting tensions (Presser 1975). Large age differences could also affect the success of marriages. Statistically, marriages where husbands are considerably older than their wives are more likely to break up than those where couples are of a similar age, or where wives are older than husbands (Tzeng 1992). Spousal age difference also has implications for the status of women in relation to men, with older-husband-and-younger-wife marriages with very large age differences having been found to signify the lower status of women (Veevers 1984; Presser 1975; Casterline et al. 1986).

A decline in age difference between spouses has been observed in other

countries. For example, in the United States the proportion of marriages where the husband is much older than the wife has decreased while there has been a slight increase in the incidence of wife-older marriages (Mensch 1986).

The analysis here looks at changes in age difference over time between brides and grooms in Australia.

Over seven decades, the mean age difference between brides and grooms for all marriages in Australia has declined by one year from 3.6 years (grooms 3.6 years older than brides on average) in 1921 to 2.6 years in 1995. Figure 1 shows that the decline has occurred across all age groups of brides and grooms, but particularly in the older age groups. As observed in trends of age difference in previous studies (Bhrolchain 1992), Figure 1 also shows that the age difference between brides and grooms increases with the increasing age of grooms, but declines with the increasing age of brides.

Figure 2 shows that there has been a substantial decrease in the percentage of marriages where grooms are at least five years older than brides, from 38 per cent in 1921 to 28 per cent in 1995. There has been an increase in the proportion of same-age

marriages (marriage partners aged within one year of each other), from 26 per cent in 1921 to 29 per cent in 1995. There has also been an increase in the proportion of marriages where brides are older than grooms; in 1921, 16 per cent of marriages involved a bride two or more years older than the groom, compared with 21 per cent of such marriages in 1995.

Although groom-older marriages are still the prevailing marriage pattern, with grooms being at least one year older than brides in two-thirds of marriages in 1995, the trend toward marriages where the husband and the wife are of similar age had clearly increased over time. In 1921 and 1941, those marriages where grooms were at least five years older than brides comprised the largest group; in 1961 and 1981, marriages where grooms were two to four years older than brides prevailed; and in 1991 and 1995, a marriage age gap of around one year between spouses became the largest group.

In summary, age difference between brides and grooms in Australia has declined over time, indicating an historical trend toward marriages with smaller age gaps. Such a trend implies a change of age preference in choice of partner, and previous studies indicate that this is affected by changes in age at marriage, marital history, women's education and women's status in society. However, further in-depth study of this trend is needed to examine the links between demographic and socioeconomic factors and age differences between brides and grooms.

References

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