

The Social Structuring of Mate Selection: Assortative Marriage Patterns in the Israeli Jewish Population

Authors : Naava Dihi, Jon Anson

Abstract : Love, so it appears, is not socially blind. We show that partner selection is socially constrained, and the freedom to choose is limited by at least two major factors or capitals: on the one hand, material resources and education, locating the partners on a scale of personal achievement and economic independence. On the other, the partners' ascriptive belonging to particular ethnic, or origin, groups, differentiated by the groups' social prestige, as well as by their culture, history and even physical characteristics. However, the relative importance of achievement and ascriptive factors, as well as the overlap between them, varies from society to society, depending on the society's structure and the factors shaping it. Israeli social structure has been shaped by the waves of new immigrants who arrived over the years. The timing of their arrival, their patterns of physical settlement and their occupational inclusion or exclusion have together created a mosaic of social groups whose principal common feature has been the country of origin from which they arrived. The analysis of marriage patterns helps illuminate the social meanings of the groups and their borders. To the extent that ethnic group membership has meaning for individuals and influences their life choices, the ascriptive factor will gain in importance relative to the achievement factor in their choice of marriage partner. In this research, we examine Jewish Israeli marriage patterns by looking at the marriage choices of 5,041 women aged 15 to 49 who were single at the census in 1983, and who were married at the time of the 1995 census, 12 years later. The database for this study was a file linking respondents from the 1983 and the 1995 censuses. In both cases, 5 percent of household were randomly chosen, so that our sample includes about 4 percent of women in Israel in 1983. We present three basic analyses: (1) Who was still single in 1983, using personal and household data from the 1983 census (binomial model), (2) Who married between 1983 and 1995, using personal and household data from the 1983 census (binomial model), (3) What were the personal characteristics of the women's partners in 1995, using data from the 1995 census (loglinear model). We show (i) that material and cultural capital both operate to delay marriage and to increase the probability of remaining single; and (ii) while there is a clear association between ethnic group membership and education, endogamy and homogamy both operate as separate forces which constraint (but do not determine) the choice of marriage partner, and thus both serve to reproduce the current pattern of relationships, as well as identifying patterns of proximity and distance between the different groups.

Keywords : Israel, nuptiality, ascription, achievement

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