

Changes in the distribution of marital age differences in England and Wales, 1963 to 1998

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INTRODUCTION

Age differences between marital partners are important because the 'norm' in which marital partners are close in age, the woman typically being a few years younger than the man, underlies much of the social and economic organisation of our society. These assumptions are most visible in the social security system. The five year difference in men's and women's state pension age that exists currently in the UK and in other European countries is one example (for a discussion of the reasons for this difference in the UK, see e.g. Brown (1990)¹, Stewart (1998)²). To take another example, assessments of need for care services can take into account the existence of a spouse, whose age may be a factor in judgements about his or her ability to provide care.

But any change in the pattern of marital age gaps could have important implications for areas of life far beyond the social security system. Age gaps may affect decisions on whether to work full- or part-time and how long to pursue paid employment; similarly, they may influence financial planning for late life and for bequests, as well as availability of resources in retirement. They will be central to the length of time during which a pension provider must pay survivors' benefits; for this reason, private sector products take account of the existence and age of any spouse in various ways. This article arises from a study of how marital age gaps affect retirement, pensions, care and support of older people.

There are reasons for thinking that marital age gaps may be changing. The mean age at which people marry for the first time has increased from 25.6 years in 1961 to 29.8 in 1998 for men, and for women 23.1 and 27.7 respectively.³ At the same time cohabitation rates have risen sharply; for example, 8 per cent of single women were cohabiting in 1979 but the proportion was 31 per cent in 1998.⁴ Divorce rates rose

Assumptions about the 'typical' age gap between spouses underlie much social policy (e.g. the five-year difference in men's and women's state pension ages). In order to test the basis for these assumptions, detailed marriage registration statistics were obtained for 1963 and 1998, for England and Wales.

Age differences between spouses were calculated and analysed by year, age at marriage and previous marital status. The median age gap hardly changed between 1963 and 1998 but this concealed considerable increase in the proportion of marriages where the man was younger than the woman or – to a lesser extent – where the man was six or more years older.

dramatically from the 1960s to a peak of 14.2 per 1,000 married people in 1993 but declined slightly to 12.9 per 1,000 in 1998.⁵ Remarriage rates after widowhood or divorce rose to a peak in 1972/73 although they have been falling steadily since that time; in 1998 they were 44.6 per 1,000 divorced persons for men and 37.8 for women.^{6,7}

Other things being equal, marrying or remarrying at later ages increases the opportunity for marrying a younger partner. One might also hypothesise that biological age has become less of a defining factor in social identity and that therefore larger age gaps may be more acceptable to the partners themselves and to society. Ní Bhrolchain (1992)⁸ draws attention to the relationship between age at marriage and the average age difference between spouses. For men the average age difference has been found to increase with age at marriage, while for women it declines initially and then increases.^{9,10,11,12} More marriages at later ages might therefore be expected to increase the average age gap for men but the predicted effect from the woman's perspective is ambiguous.

Marital age differences have been studied as an aspect of demographic trends^{13,14} in relation to the marriage market^{15,16} and in terms of cultural and gender issues.^{17,8} They have also featured in studies of partners' retirement behaviour.^{18,19,20} Our aim here is to analyse marital age differences for people marrying in England and Wales in 1963 and 1998 to consider whether changes in the ages at which people married and changes in the proportion of marriages accounted for by people marrying for a second or subsequent time have resulted in changes in the difference between spouses' ages.

DATA

Our data come from special tabulations of marriage registrations in England and Wales. The tabulations provide the numbers of marriages according to the age of brides and grooms, age being measured in single years. This overcomes the limitation of routinely published statistics where the age of each partner is measured in five-year age groups, thus preventing accurate identification of age differences. Our data are disaggregated according to the marital status of each partner, distinguishing never married, divorced and widowed. In analysing the data we follow convention and measure the marital age gap as the man's age minus the woman's age.

The dates chosen for analysis, 1963 and 1998, represent two different periods in the demographic history of England and Wales. The 1960s

represent a period with very high marriage and remarriage rates for both sexes⁶; the median age at first marriage for both men and women was at its lowest level (23 and 22 respectively). Marriage patterns have dramatically changed since the mid-1970s with consensual unions replacing marriages especially among younger age groups and in general with much greater union instability. By 1998 these trends were well established and had spread to most age groups.

Demographic changes occurring in the last decades of the life course and changes in family form are often explained in terms of deinstitutionalization and destandardization. Declining pressure for conformity, lower support for traditional institutions such as marriage and general acceptance of cohabitation and divorce characterise the deinstitutionalization of family form. At the same time the traditional sequence of a life course (education – departure from parental home – employment – marriage – having children) is not strictly followed and age has become a less useful predictor for these transitions.

PROPORTION OF MARRIAGES INVOLVING REMARRIAGE; AGE AT MARRIAGE

The proportion of marriages involving previously married men and women trebled between 1963 and 1998, rising from 11 per cent to 30 per cent for men and 10 per cent to 30 per cent for women (Table 1). At the same time, age at marriage – first or subsequent – rose for both sexes. The median age of men who married in these years rose from 24 to 31 years. For women the median age at marriage increased from 21 to 29 years. For both, the spread of ages at which they married increased considerably (Figure 1). This reflects the common pattern in developed countries of a rise in age at first marriage in the past four decades.²¹ The percentage of marriages in which the man was aged under 30 fell from 77 per cent to 43 per cent. The percentage where the woman was aged under 30 fell from 84 per cent to 55 per cent. The percentages involving men and women in their thirties, forties and fifties all rose (Figure 1).

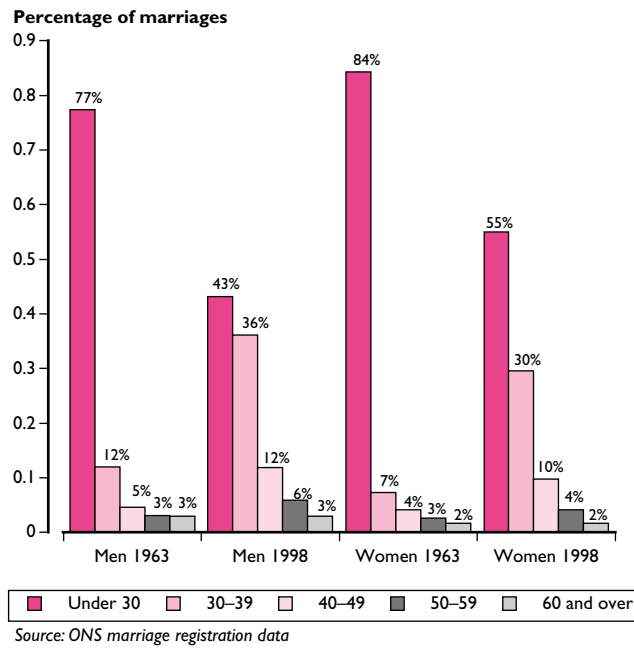
The changes in median ages at marriage are different for first and subsequent marriages (Table 1). The median age of men marrying for the first time increased from 23 to 28 and for women it rose from 22 to 27. By contrast, the median ages of men and woman marrying for a second or subsequent time both fell – from 47 to 41 in the case of men and from 42 to 38 for women.

Table 1 Median age gap and age*, by whether previously married, 1963 and 1998

| | All marriages | Man not previously married | Woman not previously married | Man previously married | Woman previously married |
|--|---------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Per cent of all marriages | | | | | |
| 1963 | 100 | 89 | 90 | 11 | 10 |
| 1998 | 100 | 70 | 70 | 30 | 30 |
| Median age – man | | | | | |
| 1963 | 24 | 23 | 24 | 47 | 43 |
| 1998 | 31 | 28 | 29 | 41 | 39 |
| Median age – woman | | | | | |
| 1963 | 21 | 21 | 22 | 38 | 42 |
| 1998 | 29 | 27 | 27 | 36 | 38 |
| Median age gap (man's age – woman's age) | | | | | |
| 1963 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2 |
| 1998 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 1 |

* Age recorded at marriage registration is 'age at last birthday'. Marital age gap must, therefore, be calculated as a whole number.

Figure 1 Marriages by summary age group, 1963 and 1998



MEDIAN MARITAL AGE GAP

Despite changes in the ages at which people married and in the proportion of marriages involving remarriage the median age gap, at 2 years, was the same in 1963 and 1998, taking all marriages together (Table 1). In marriages where the man had been married before, the median age gap was much larger – 6 years in 1963. This fell to 5 years in 1998 and there were also 1 year falls in the median age gap where the man was marrying for the first time and where the woman had been married before.

The absence of much change in median age gaps is perhaps surprising given the trends in age at marriage and in the proportion of marriages which are second or subsequent marriages. More detailed analysis of changes in the distribution of age gaps and in the relationship between age at marriage and mean age gap is therefore warranted.

DISTRIBUTION OF MARITAL AGE GAPS

Figure 2 shows that although there was no change in the median age gap, the distribution of age gaps was more dispersed in 1998 than in 1963. The proportion of marriages in each single year age gap where the man was younger than the woman was higher in 1998 than in 1963, as were the proportions where he was at least 7 years older than the woman. In between these points the proportions fell. The distribution of age gaps for men marrying for the first time (Figure 3) shifted to the left between 1963 and 1998; the proportions who were 2 or more years younger than their wives rose while the proportions who were 1 to 7 years older than their wives decreased. For women there were increases in the proportions marrying men younger and 7 or more years older than themselves

(Figure 4). The distribution of age gaps for people who had previously been married is more dispersed than for first marriages. For remarrying men (Figure 5), the proportions who were younger than their wives or up to 7 years older increased between 1963 and 1998. Changes in the distribution of age gaps for remarrying women (Figure 6) were similar but less marked.

Table 2 summarises the changes in the distribution of age gaps by categorising age gaps according to where they fall in relation to the difference between the current state pension ages of men and women. This yields three categories: marriages where the man was 0–5 years older than the woman; marriages where the man was younger than the woman; and marriages where the man was 6 or more years older than the woman. Taking all marriages together, the percentages of age gaps in the last two of these categories both increased. The larger increase was in the percentage of marriages where the man was younger than the woman, which rose from 15 per cent to 26 per cent. The proportion where the man was 6 or more years older than the woman increased from 21 per cent to 25 per cent. Thus by 1998 just over a half of all marriages involved age gaps outside the five year difference in male and female state pension ages, compared with 36 per cent in 1963.

Remarriages are more likely than first marriages to involve age gaps outside the 5-year difference in male and female state pension ages. The percentage in which the man was younger than the woman increased between 1963 and 1998 – from 16 per cent to 20 per cent for remarrying men and from 36 per cent to 39 per cent for remarrying women. However, marriages in which the man was six or more years older than the woman accounted for a lower percentage of remarriages in 1998 than in 1963 – 45 per cent compared with 53 per cent for men and 26 per cent compared with 30 per cent for women.

Figure 2 Distribution of marital age gaps, 1963 and 1998: all marriages

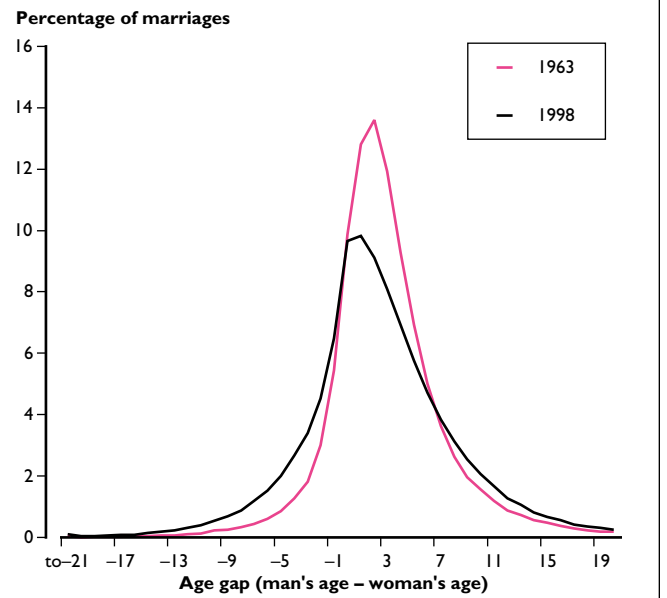


Figure 3 Distribution of marital age gaps, 1963 and 1998: first marriage for man

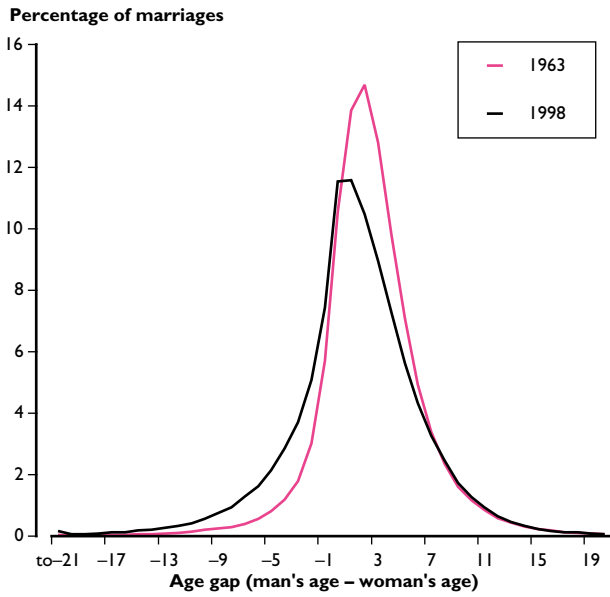


Figure 4 Distribution of marital age gaps, 1963 and 1998: first marriage for woman

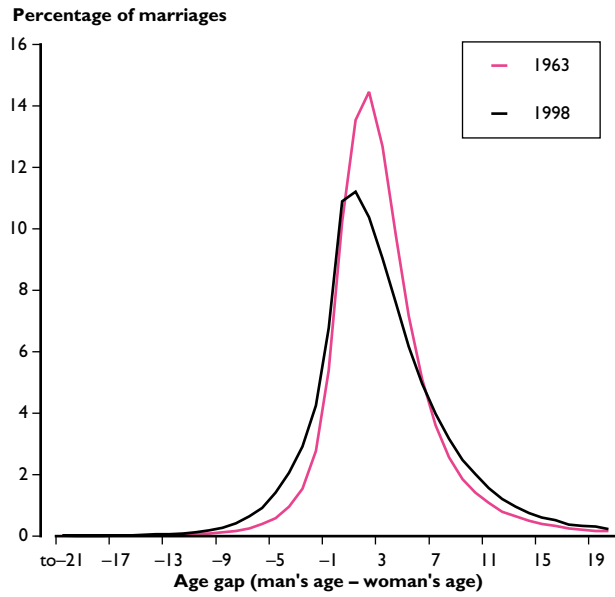


Figure 5 Distribution of marital age gaps, 1963 and 1998: man previously married

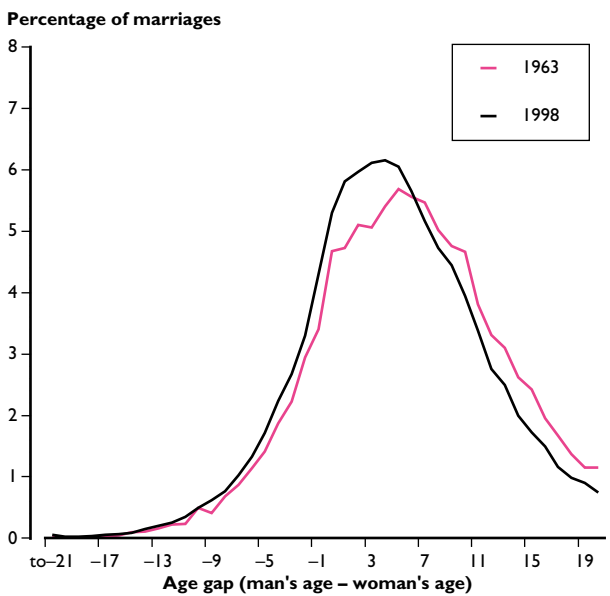


Figure 6 Distribution of marital age gaps, 1963 and 1998: woman previously married

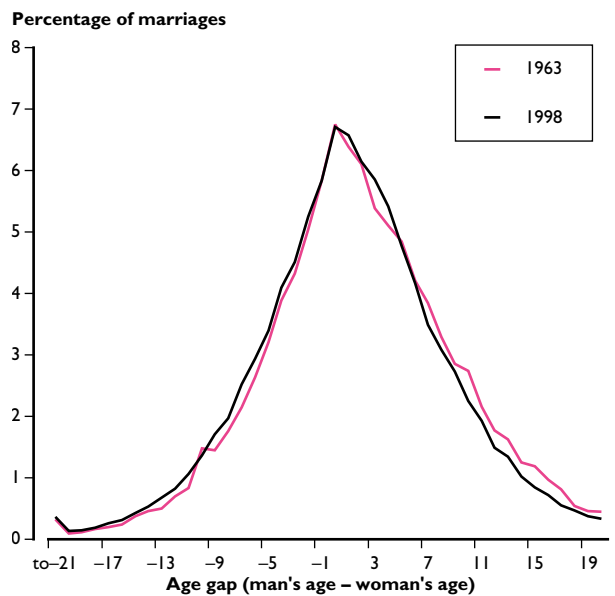


Table 2 Prevalence of age gaps falling either side of the five year difference in men's and women's state pension age, 1963 and 1998

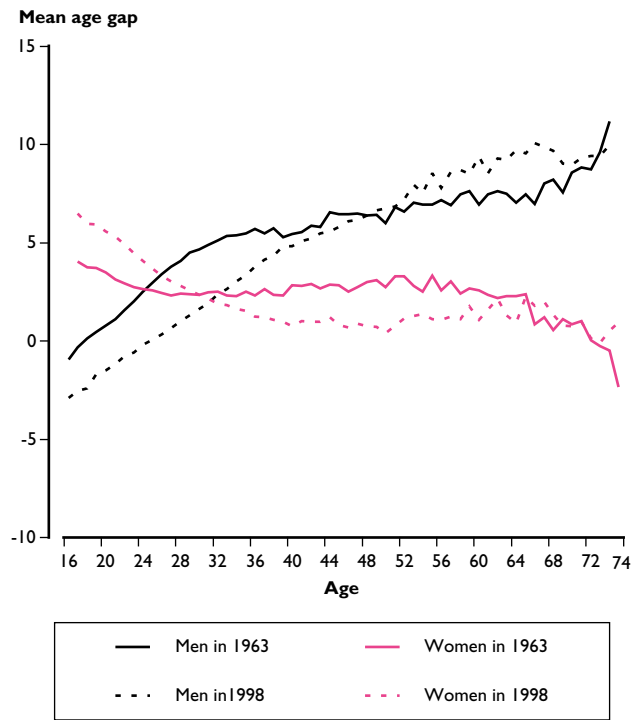
| | | Per cent | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|------|
| | | 1963 | 1998 |
| Man 6 or more years older than woman | All marriages | 21 | 25 |
| | Man not previously married | 17 | 16 |
| | Woman not previously married | 20 | 24 |
| | Man previously married | 53 | 45 |
| | Woman previously married | 30 | 26 |
| Man younger than woman | All marriages | 15 | 26 |
| | Man not previously married | 15 | 28 |
| | Woman not previously married | 13 | 20 |
| | Man previously married | 16 | 20 |
| | Woman previously married | 36 | 39 |

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGE AT MARRIAGE AND MEAN AGE GAP

Figure 7 shows the relationship for men and women between their age at marriage and the mean age gap between partners. It confirms that for men, on average the size of the age gap increases with age. However, the graph also indicates a change between 1963 and 1998 in the relationship between the man's age and mean age gap. In 1963, on average, men married women older than themselves only if they themselves were aged under 18, which accounted for a very small proportion of all marriages. In 1998, on average, men aged up to 24 years married older women. Men between the ages of 24 and 48 who married in 1998 were on average older than their wives but by less so than in 1963. From the age of 48 onwards the age gap was higher in 1998 than in 1963.

Turning to women, Figure 7 shows that the mean age gap was positive at all ages except for the small numbers of women who married at the

Figure 7 Mean age gap for all men and all women by age at marriage



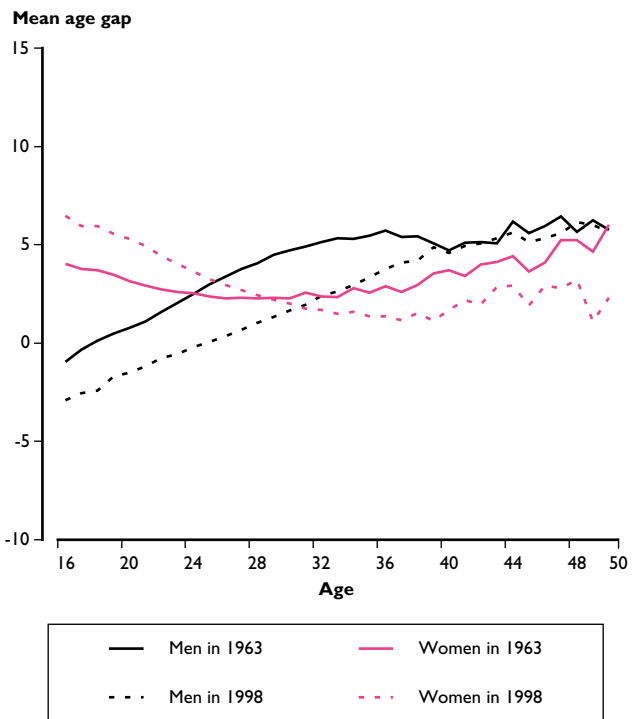
Source: ONS marriage registration data

Figure 9 Mean age gap for (i) men remarrying and (ii) women remarrying, by age at marriage



Source: ONS marriage registration data

Figure 8 Mean age gap for (i) men marrying for the first time and (ii) women marrying for the first time, by age at marriage



Source: ONS marriage registration data

oldest ages. The mean age gap was higher in 1998 than in 1963 for women who married before age 29; in 1963 this represented the great majority of all marriages by women but the proportion was just over half in 1998 (Figure 1). The mean age gap for women marrying from age 30 onwards was lower in 1998 than in 1963 (Figure 7). Graphs plotting the relationship between age and mean age gap for first (Figure 8) and subsequent (Figure 9) marriages are similar to those for all marriages.

DISCUSSION

At 2 years, the median age gap was the same in 1998 and 1963, but the distribution of age gaps was more dispersed. In 1998 just over a half of all marriages involved age gaps outside the five-year difference in male and female state pension ages, compared with 36 per cent in 1963. In particular, the proportion of marriages where the man was younger than the woman almost doubled (from 15 per cent to 26 per cent).

Underlying these changes for marriages taken as a whole, are differences between first and subsequent marriages. Between 1963 and 1998 the proportion of first marriages fell by 20 per cent. The median ages of men and women who married for the first time increased by 5 years for each. The percentage of men marrying for the first time who were younger than their wives rose from 15 per cent to 28 per cent; the equivalent rise for women was from 13 per cent to 20 per cent. The proportion of marriages involving remarriage trebled and these marriages occurred at younger ages: there was a fall of 6 and 4 years respectively in the median ages of men and women who were marrying for a second or subsequent time.

Marriage registration data, of course, do not include cohabiting couples and thus many unions, some long-standing, are omitted from our analysis. Other work in the project on which this article is based indicates that informal unions are substantially more likely than legal marriages to have age gaps outside the norm.²² For example, analysis of General Household Survey data shows that legally married men aged 30–59 have a predicted probability of 0.17 of being six or more years older than

their wives, whereas the probability rises to 0.24 if they are cohabiting; for women in the same age group, the predicted probability of being six or more years younger is 0.17 for the legally married but 0.39 for those cohabiting.

One consequence of the increase in marriages where the man is younger than the woman might be an increase in the proportion of women who remain married in old age. Expectation of life remains higher for women than men but the gap is steadily diminishing; a woman born in England or Wales in 2000 could expect to outlive her male counterpart by 4.7 years, while in 1981 the difference was 6 years.²³ The joint action of reducing sex differences in mortality and greater proportions of marriages with younger husbands may lead to a higher proportion of older women still married and a lower proportion of widows. This tendency will be counterbalanced by the long-term effects of the past increase in divorce rates; a woman married at age 25 in 1970 and divorced in 1985 may still be unmarried (whether lone or cohabiting) when she reaches the age of 75 in 2020, whereas a woman married at age 25 in 1950 had a higher likelihood of surviving in that marriage when she reached the age of 75 in 2000. Even if the rise in married women in old age is small, the social and health effects of marriage may be shared by an increasing proportion of older women in informal unions.

Another consequence would be a tendency for spouses to reach the current state pensionable ages at different times; at present, a man who is two years younger than his wife will reach state pensionable age in Britain seven years later than she will. However, when the difference has been phased out a small marital age gap will result in well-synchronised arrival at state pensionable age. For couples where the man is six or more years older, the change in entitlement to state pension will bring about a greater time lapse between their attainment of the appropriate age. As Table 1 showed, men who are in a second or subsequent marriage have a considerably larger median age gap than men in their first marriage. With the current high divorce rate this group is growing, and may produce increasing numbers of retired men with working wives or men working past state retirement age. Men with children by more than one wife or who continue having children into middle age may be more likely to continue working if they are able, for financial reasons.

The mean age gap between marital partners generally increases with the age of the man but decreases (at first) with the age of the woman. Despite some changes between 1963 and 1998, this general pattern held in both years. Moreover, the pattern held for first marriages and for subsequent marriages. This suggests that it is age at marriage rather than whether the marriage is a first or subsequent marriage that influences the age gap. However, trends in divorce and remarriage clearly affect trends in ages at marriage.

Changes in the distribution of marital age gaps have occurred at the same time as increases in the proportion of marriages in which one or both partners are marrying for a second or subsequent time. Age gaps outside the five-year difference in male and female state pension ages remain more common in second and subsequent marriages than in first marriages. But falls in the median ages of remarrying people and some shift in the relationship between mean age gap and age at marriage, indicate that changes in the distribution of marital age gaps cannot be interpreted as the simple result of the increased proportion of remarriages. It has not been our aim to investigate whether people's preferences for the age of their marriage partners have changed but that cannot be ruled out either.

There is a rich literature stressing the connection between age gaps between spouses and the status of women²⁴; comparing a set of different developing countries, it has been noted that where the process of

modernisation has improved the status of women, the age difference is smaller than in more traditional societies. Furthermore it has been hypothesised that the older partner is generally the most dominant²⁵ so the norm that the husband is generally older than the wife "has been viewed as an avenue for younger women to gain security and status".²⁶ Our findings may suggest that in England and Wales, people's reasons for marrying may be becoming less concerned with social status and more with the fulfilment of individual goals.

Box one

POSSIBLE DEMOGRAPHIC REASONS FOR CHANGE IN THE AGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SPOUSES AT MARRIAGE

- First marriage at a later age will allow a person marrying to identify a partner in an age group younger than himself or herself.
- Populations can become deficient in one sex of a certain age group, for example through loss of young men due to war or migration. Members of the remaining sex in the same age group will be likely to consider a greater age range of possible spouses.
- Other findings from the project on which this article is based show that cohabiting partners typically have a greater age difference than do marital partners. An increase in cohabitation rates might therefore affect marital age gaps, either positively or negatively.
- A rise in the proportion of marriages which result in divorce will increase the number and age range of possible spouses for young people reaching marriageable age.
- Extension or diminution of the age at which childbearing is possible or probable (for either sex) will mean that the age range of possible partners for a would-be parent will extend or diminish.
- This article reports that second or subsequent marriages, at least for men, show larger age gaps than first marriages. An increase in the proportion of such marriages might cause marital age gaps, take as a whole, to increase. At the same time, rates of remarriage after divorce have been falling since the mid-1970s; this could affect marital age gap either positively or negatively.
- As the difference between the sexes in expectation of life narrows, the period of life after widowhood (and therefore of opportunity to remarry with someone younger) will be reduced for the partner who does not die first.

Box two

The **median** is the central number in an ordered array of data above and below which an equal number of observations can be found. For example, for a group of people aged 19, 24, 27, 29 and 32, the median age would be 27. It is often used in preference to the mean because it is less affected by extreme values; in the example given above, the median would remain 27 even if the oldest person was 64 rather than 32.

Key findings

- At 2 years, the median age difference was the same in 1998 as in 1963 (see Box Two for definition of median).
- In the same period the median ages of men and women who married for the first time increased by 5 years each.
- There was a fall of 6 and 4 years respectively in the median ages of men and women who were marrying for a second or subsequent time.
- The distribution of age gaps was more dispersed: in 1998 just over a half of all marriages involved age gaps outside the five year difference in male and female state pension ages, compared with 36 per cent in 1963.
- The proportion of all marriages where the man was younger than the woman almost doubled (from 15 per cent to 26 per cent).
- There was a marked increase in the proportion of first marriages in which the man was younger than the woman: from 15 per cent to 28 per cent where the man is marrying for the first time, and from 13 per cent to 20 per cent where the woman is.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The analysis here reported has been made possible by the kind support of John Haskey and Ramish Ramroop of the Office for National Statistics, who supplied the data. Marriage registration data are Crown Copyright and used with permission.

This article arises from a research project entitled *Age Gaps between Marital Partners: Implications for Retirement, Pensions, Care and Support of Older People* for which the financial support of the Nuffield Foundation is gratefully acknowledged. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. The other members of the project team are Professor Janet Askham and Dr. Patricia Connell of the Institute of Gerontology at King's College London, and Geraldine Barker of the Nuffield Community Care Studies Unit, University of Leicester; Dr. Karen Glaser of King's College London has offered valuable advice.

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