Age differences at marriage and divorce

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Introduction

Population Trends

have changed over time. The remainder of the article builds upon previous work by looking at age differences at divorce. This includes a comparison of age differences at marriage and divorce to consider whether marital age difference has any association with likelihood of divorce.

This article uses marriage and divorce data for England and Wales from 1963 to 2005.[5] The article is based on all marriage and divorce events recorded over this period rather than a sample survey, which means that conclusions are not subject to sampling error. Importantly, a direct comparison can be made between aggregate marriages and divorce because the year of marriage is recorded when couples divorce. However the analysis is unable to take account of migration or events that took place outside England and Wales.[5] To illustrate the general ndings clearly, two or three years of marriage are selected and compared. The results may not therefore be completely representative of intervening trends, and do not cover trends in age difference at marriage prior to 1963. Data has been collated for each marriage cohort since 1963 and some discussion is provided where information is known from other work, or from this dataset. Throughout this article, age differences are calculated by subtracting the wife's age from the husband's.[6]

Marital age differences

As suggested in previous research,[7] there is a contrast between the relative stability of the mean age difference and the substantial variability in age difference distributions. This is also illustrated by **Fig 1**, which shows the distribution of age differences for all marriages in three different years: 1963, 1983 and 2003.[8,9] For the purpose of this report it is worth highlighting the notable shift in the distribution of age differences over the last forty years.[10] Changes in the mean age difference conceal this shift to a more varied distribution of age differences (and smaller frequency of the most common values) for recent marriages. This is also shown by calculating, as a measure of spread, the standard deviations of each of the distributions. The standard deviations for the three years 1963, 1983 and 2003 are 4.8, 5.4 and 6.3 years age difference respectively.[11]

Marital age differences and previous marital status

When looking beyond overall age differences it is important to consider data separately by wives and husbands.[12] Separating the data by sex is particularly appropriate when considering the previous marital status of marrying couples. This is because both partners may or may not have the same previous marital status. For example, a divorced woman may marry a single (never-married), widowed or divorced man.

One of the reasons for examining previous marital status is because of recent increases in the proportion of remarriages. **Table 1** shows that between 1963 and 2003 the proportion of marriages involving divorcees increased by over 20 percentage points. Alongside this change, there has been a drop of almost 20 percentage points in the proportion of marriages to single individuals (slightly less for men compared with women).

Fig 2 shows the distribution of age differences for women according to their marital status before marriage. The change noted in Figure 1 between 1963 and 2003 is apparent in the difference between single brides, where the distribution of age difference is very similar to the distribution for all marriages. This is unsurprising given that the majority of marriages involve single brides, 90 per cent in 1963 and 71 per cent in 2003 (Table 1). On the other hand, brides who were previously widowed or divorced do not show any substantial change in age differences between 1963 and 2003. This is of particular interest given the recent

Fig 1

increase in remarriages. It suggests that there are two main reasons for the changing pattern in overall age differences. The rst is the change in the distribution of age differences for single women. The second is the increase in the proportion of remarriages for divorced women. The age difference pro le is broadly unchanged for this group, but they remain more likely than single women to marry a man of a similar age, so their increased proportion will weight the overall age difference pro le towards their distribution.

Is this also true for men? **Fig 3** suggests that the answer is not simple (Figure 3 is the same as Figure 2, but for marrying men). There is a similar change in the distribution of age differences for single men. This suggests that changes in the age difference distribution for single men have contributed to the overall change in age differences in the same way as single women. However, when it comes to the increase in the proportion of remarriages for divorced men, the in uence upon overall age differences is not the same as for divorced women. To begin with, the distribution of age differences for divorced men is less similar to the overall distribution than the distribution for single men. Also, there is another difference between men and women shown in Figure 3. Between 1963 and 2003, the most common (mode) age difference for divorced men has fallen from husbands who are ve years older in 1963 to husbands who are two years older in 2003. This shift suggests that divorced men may be making an additional contribution to the overall age difference pro le.

Table 2 is similar to Table 1, but shows the proportion of marriages in 1963 and 2003 by combinations of marital status. It highlights the fact that there has been an almost equivalent rise in the proportion of single women marrying divorced men as for single men marrying divorced women. So in terms of weighting, the increased contribution of marriages where one member is divorced and one member is single has been similar for males and females.

Divorces by previous marital status

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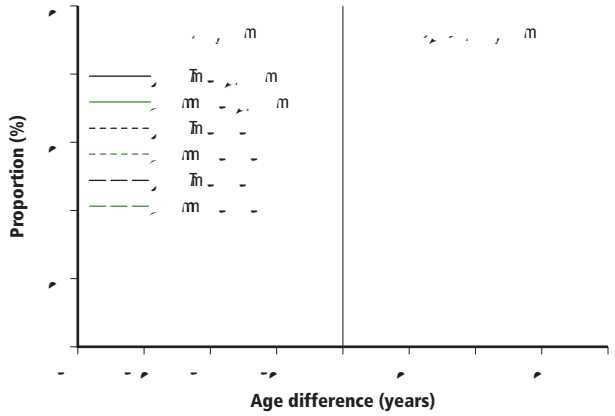

Summary and discussion

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