GENUS

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Young adults' preferences regarding their partner's age, and the importance of age as a partner choice determinant.
Results from a Dutch survey

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of this article regards the rather paradoxal observation that in spite of major social changes in the second half of this century, which have among others strongly affected sex-role relations in society, the long-range historical tendency towards age homogamy within first marriages, apparently has found a hold. In most industrial countries, patterns of age difference between partners concluding a first marriage, appear to be quite similar (Eurostat, 1996), and have, in above, hardly changed significantly during the last decades (Klein, 1996). In The Netherlands, for instance, from 1950 on, the average age difference between marrying men and women varied only between 2.0 and 2.4 years (CBS, 1996). Our main interest in this article is focused on stated preferences of Dutch young adults regarding the age of their (future) partner, and the importance attached to age as a partner choice determinant. Contrary to numerous studies of assortative mating that derive preferences indirectly from actual age differences between spouses, we will measure and analyse age preference directly, controlling hereby for competing partner choice determinants. Positing that, generally speaking, preferences can be considered as useful predictors of behaviour, the main question will be whether a closer insight in stated preferences can contribute to a better understanding of rather constant age differences, as observed in recent decades.

Studying mobility and stratification, social scientists have, for a long period, shown ample interest in the phenomenon of assortative mating. Against this background, homogamy of marriages according to educational, occupational, cultural and religious status of spouses has been studied widely by sociologists (Ultee and Luijkx, 1990; Kalmijn 1991a, 1991b, 1994; Blau, 1994). According to Van Poppel *et al.* (1999) the common denominator of these studies can be found in the general assumption that homogamy based on ascribed status characteristics (like religion and the parents' social status) decreases during the course of the modernisation process, while homogamy based on achieved status characteristics (like educational attainment and occupational status) increases.

Age homogamy, or its counterpart age dissimilarity, has mainly been examined by demographers and family sociologists. For extended review studies see among others Berardo *et al.* (1993), Van Poppel *et al.* (1995), and Klein (1996). Core concepts in the majority of these studies are preferences regarding the age of the partner, the marriage market, and actual partner choice. As a matter of fact, these concepts and their assumed relations reflect the rudimental logical scheme underlying the rational choice paradigm, basically holding that individuals develop a set of hierarchically ordered preferences and, in trying to realise them, will have to cope with restrictions (Elster, 1986).

We will start this article with a concise overview of relevant literature dealing with age preferences, to be used as a resource for our own investigation. Given the primary focus on stated preferences, studies regarding the marriage market and actual partner choice will only marginally be referred to.

In a recent publication, Klein critically reviews the contribution of several sociological and (micro) economic theories regarding the age factor in partner selection (1996). Within the broader framework of action theory, and referring to Weber's concepts of 'wertrationales Handeln' and 'zweckrationales Handeln', Klein makes a distinction between theoretical perspectives emphasising the meaning of substantial rationality (preferences predominantly based on prevailing norms and values), and perspectives stressing the meaning of instrumental rationality (preferences predominantly aimed at fulfilment of personal needs). Important exponents of approaches that elaborate on instrumental rationality (Rationskalküle) are exchange theory and new-home-economics theory. Subsequently, once established, realisation (or adaptation) of preferences regarding the partner's age, takes place at a competitive marriage market. Free choice at this meeting place is restricted by demographic factors (like the phenomenon of historical 'perpetuation' and the occurrence of marriage squeezes), as well as by sociological factors (like social segregation). After a thorough examination of various theoretical models and available empirical data, Klein concludes that the factor age in the process of mate selection, strongly depends on the combination of instrumental rationality based preferences and marital opportunities offered by the market. As regards substantial rationality, theory and data support "the contention that the stable difference in mean age between marital partners has astonishingly little to do with social norms and in no way represents the result of normative constraints" (Klein, 1996, p. 297).

The main principle of exchange theory holds that social interaction is motivated by the exchange of mutual benefits, respectively mutual fulfilment of needs. From this point of view, within the context of partner choice, and stated in simple wording, an exchange takes place of economic resources (like

material security) offered by men, and resources in other domains (like physical attraction and its attendant status and prestige), offered by women. Since, generally spoken, material security is positively related to age and physical attraction negatively, men would be inclined to marry younger women and vice versa (Goode, 1982). Collins and Coltrane (1991) point in this respect to the fact that the 'market' position of women has considerably ameliorated, due to the 'sex-role revolution' in general, and women's growing income potentials more in particular. As a consequence of these developments the exchange at the marriage market should have become more and more symmetric. Shorter, in his historical analysis, presents the view that age related instrumental considerations are losing much in influence, creating more and more opportunity for 'romantic love' as a partner choice determinant (Shorter, 1975).

In new-home-economics theory, the family is considered as a unit that produces, among others, status, economic well-being, and offspring (Becker *et al.*, 1977; Becker, 1981). From this micro-economic point of view, marriage can be considered as an economic bond where partners pool resources to maximize their joint utility. Sociologists add that marriage also generates 'relational goods', like social confirmation and affection. "Marriage is beneficial because these goods can either not be produced individually (e.g., offspring and affection) or can be produced more effectively in a collective fashion (e.g., status and economic well-being)" (Kalmijn, 1994, p. 425). Due to earnings disadvantage of women in the labour market, men and women are said to exchange paid and domestic labour resources. Since, however, women's economic resources are becoming increasingly attractive to men, the situation emerges that men are believed to compete for economically attractive women, just as women have always competed for economically attractive men (Kalmijn, 1994, p. 426). From this point of view it may be expected that the benefit for men to marry a younger women decreases. Apart from economical attractiveness, partner choice is based on preferences regarding cultural resources, like opinions and tastes in domains of child-rearing, the division of paid and unpaid work, cultural literacy, political and religious views, etc. Due to age and cohort effects, one can generally expect that shared values, opinions, and tastes will most frequently be found among partners of the same age group.

Van Poppel *et al.* (1999) examined long-term historical trends in age homogamy among first and second marriages, using vital registration data on marriages contracted in The Netherlands between 1850 and 1993, reaching to the following conclusions. "Age differences between spouses in The Netherlands have become much smaller in the course of the last century and a half. This narrowing of the gap between spouses has been a gradual process starting at least as early as 1850, and continuing until about 1970. After 1970 no clear trend can be discerned. The basic pattern is the same for first and

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second marriages, but some important differences exists as well. The level of age homogamy is much smaller in second marriages than in first marriages. Furthermore, the increase in age homogamy in second marriages ended as early as 1950, and remained at about the same level during the latter half of this century" (p. 41). According to the authors, the observation that the pattern emerging in the last two or three decades is less transparent, could partly be explained by the growing popularity of unmarried cohabitation. In this respect they point to the fact that, after a dissolution of a consensual union, these people have to find a new partner in a less age-homogamous recruiting ground.

In another recent study of historical trends in age homogamy in The Netherlands, covering however the shorter period of 1942-1994, and dealing with first marriages only, the conclusions of Van Poppel et al. are for the greater part affirmed (Smeenk and Ultee, 1997).

After this short historical review, we will now give a short impression of actual, current age differences in The Netherlands. For two reasons we will hereby not make use of recent vital statistics data on concluded marriages. In the first place age differences between marital partners are published in crude 5-year intervals only, and, secondly, no running statistics are available of age differences within consensual unions. That's why we will use survey data from a representative, large scale socio-economic Dutch panel (the so-called SEP), including both married and unmarried couples. The following table summarises the pattern of age differences at the time of the union from the 1995-wave, classified by age of the male partner at the time of the interview.

The figures in the table show by large an usual pattern that emerges when relating age differences to age. Among the younger couples, the mean age difference is somewhat below 1.5 years, and it increases gradually to about 3.2 years for the eldest couples. At the same time, the corresponding standard deviations grow monotonously as well. These tendencies may be explained by mixed age and cohort effects. First of all, higher age groups contain relatively more non-first marriages and consensual unions, which generally show larger age differences than first marriages and consensual unions (age effect). In above, older cohorts show wider age gaps than recent cohorts (cohort effect). The last three columns of the table present the distribution of age differences within each age group. Age homogamy (an age difference of less than 1 year) is highest in the youngest age group, and decreases with age. For the population as a whole (see last row) in about 75% of all existing partnership relations, the age of the man exceeds the age of the woman for at least 1 year.

Based on our main issue of interest, and the experiences and resulting views from earlier studies, the following research questions will be answered.

1. What pattern does emerge when young adults (18- 25 years old) are asked for their preference with respect to the age of their (future) partner? In how far the preference pattern differs between younger men and women,

between the higher, medium, and lower educated, between those who have (had) a partner and those who have not, and between age groups within the category of young adults? These questions will be answered in paragraph 3.

2. How important is the partner's age as compared to other determinants of partner choice? The results will be reported in paragraph 4.

Table 1 – *Age differences in existing partners relations at the time of the interview (The Netherlands, 1995)*

Age group male partner	N	Mean age difference	Stand.dev. age difference	% man younger	% same age	% man older
≤ 34	802	1.449	3.248	18.5	14.5	67.0
35-44	985	2.420	3.445	13.0	11.0	76.0
45-54	740	2.986	4.100	12.3	9.6	78.1
≥ 55	961	3.189	4.495	14.7	8.7	76.6
Total	**3,488**	**2.529**	**3.916**	**14.6**	**10.9**	**74.5**

Source: Sociaal Economisch Panel (SEP): wave 1995.

2. DATA COLLECTION

Since research budgets were insufficient to carry out a classical probability sample from the Dutch population, the selection of respondents was based on a regional quota sample. As education was assumed to play an important role in the analysis, three categories of students and working young adults were chosen to represent the higher, medium and lower educational level. In order to achieve an adequate basis for comparison it was aimed to interview more or less equal numbers from each category.

The fieldwork took place in spring 1997. Instructed university students interviewed a total number of 604 young adults within the age range of 18 to 25 years old, and for the greater part living in the southern province of Noord-Brabant in The Netherlands. As far as the higher educated are concerned, a convenience sample (N=221) was taken from the population of Tilburg University students. Medium educated respondents (N=192) were selected on the basis of a cluster sample from mid-level vocational training institutes with a residence in the city of Tilburg. As the greater part of the low educated between the ages of 18 and 25 years are no longer in schooling institutions, they (N=191) were selected by the interviewers on convenience basis in different settings, like sport events, supermarkets, youth festivals and bars. In general the willingness to be interviewed was quite satisfactory. Partly due to the fact that the interview took on average about 10 minutes, only few refusals were reported.

The composition of the sample according to educational level, gender, and age is shown in the following table.

Table 2 – *Composition of the sample: Dutch young adults aged 18-25 years*

| | Educational level | | | |
	Low	Medium	High	Total
Gender				
Males	106	89	127	322
Females	85	103	94	282
Total	**191**	**192**	**221**	**604**
Age				
Mean age	21.96	20.11	21.78	21.32
Std.dev.	1.99	1.24	1.76	1.90

Based on national population data, combining gender (male/female) and educational level (high/medium/low) for the age group of 18 to 25 years old, a series of 6 weighting factors was determined and applied in order to achieve representability, and thus allowing generalisation. Unless explicitly stipulated, the analyses will be based on the weighted sample.

3. PREFERRED AGE DIFFERENCE BY GENDER, EDUCATIONAL LEVEL, RELATIONSHIP, AND AGE

3.1 Introduction

In this paragraph we describe the relationship between age preference, and the variables *gender, education, having or not having (had) a partner*, and *age*. The choice of gender and age needs no further comment. Educational level has been selected to represent the social background of the respondents, while having or not having a partner should make clear whether individuals, who have already experienced a partner relationship, show different preference patterns as compared to those who have not.

To measure preferred age differences, the respondents were asked to answer the following question, formulated such that competing partner choice determinants are eliminated:

Imagine, you have a choice from 3 partners who, in all possible respects, are equally attractive for you. They are all similar: the only difference, however, is their age.

Which partner would you choose?

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1. *Partner A, wh*
2. *Partner B, wh*
3. *Partner C, wh*
4. *I have no pre*

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[1] Cramér's-V is an associat one obtains a measure tha association).

1. *Partner A, who is 2 years younger than yourself?*
2. *Partner B, who is as old as yourself?*
3. *Partner C, who is 2 years older than yourself?*
4. *I have no preference at all.*

Data analysis will be carried out at different levels. In the first part of this paragraph (3.2) we will describe and interpret relations at a bivariate and trivariate level.

Based on the 4-category classification scheme, one could make a simple and crude distinction between *egalitarian* (age homogeneous) and *non-egalitarian* (age heterogeneous) preference patterns. This distinction is based on the notion that trends towards smaller age differences are to be considered as indicators of a shift towards increasing gender equality (Veevers 1984; Atkinson and Glass, 1985). Viewed in this way, in a non-egalitarian or more traditional pattern, one expects to find a pattern consisting in majority of positive responses to option 1. for men, and option 3. for women. The egalitarian, more modern, pattern should, consequently, for both sexes show positive responses to options 2. and 4. Based on this rough conceptualisation, a crude 'egalitarian- index' *e-i* can be easily calculated by adding the percentages of non-traditional, or modern preferences. As no theoretical nor empirical arguments could be found to classify 'men preferring older women' and 'women preferring younger men' as modern preferences, they will be treated as not-modern.

In the second part of the analysis (3.3) a multivariate, explanatory approach will be applied, based on a binominal logit model. The dependent variable, age preference, will be classified into the categories modern preferences and traditional preferences.

3.2 Bivariate and trivariate relations

3.2.1 Preference and gender

Figure 1.1 shows the distribution of age preference for both sexes. As could be expected there are clear differences in preference between younger men and women. The measure of association Cramér's-V yields a value of 0.588 (p=.000)[1]. For men *e-i* amounts to 73%, for women only to 39%. Going into more detail, we find that (given the stated range of a two-years difference) about 41% of all men - all other considerations being equal - have no

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[1] Cramér's-V is an association measure based on Pearson's χ^2. The transformation is such that one obtains a measure that takes on values between 0.0 (no association) and 1.0 (complete association).

Figure 1 – *Preferred age difference by gender, education, relationship, and age*

1.1 preferred age difference
by gender

1.2 preferred age difference
by gender and education

1.3 preferred age difference
by gender and relationship

1.4 preferred age difference
by gender and age
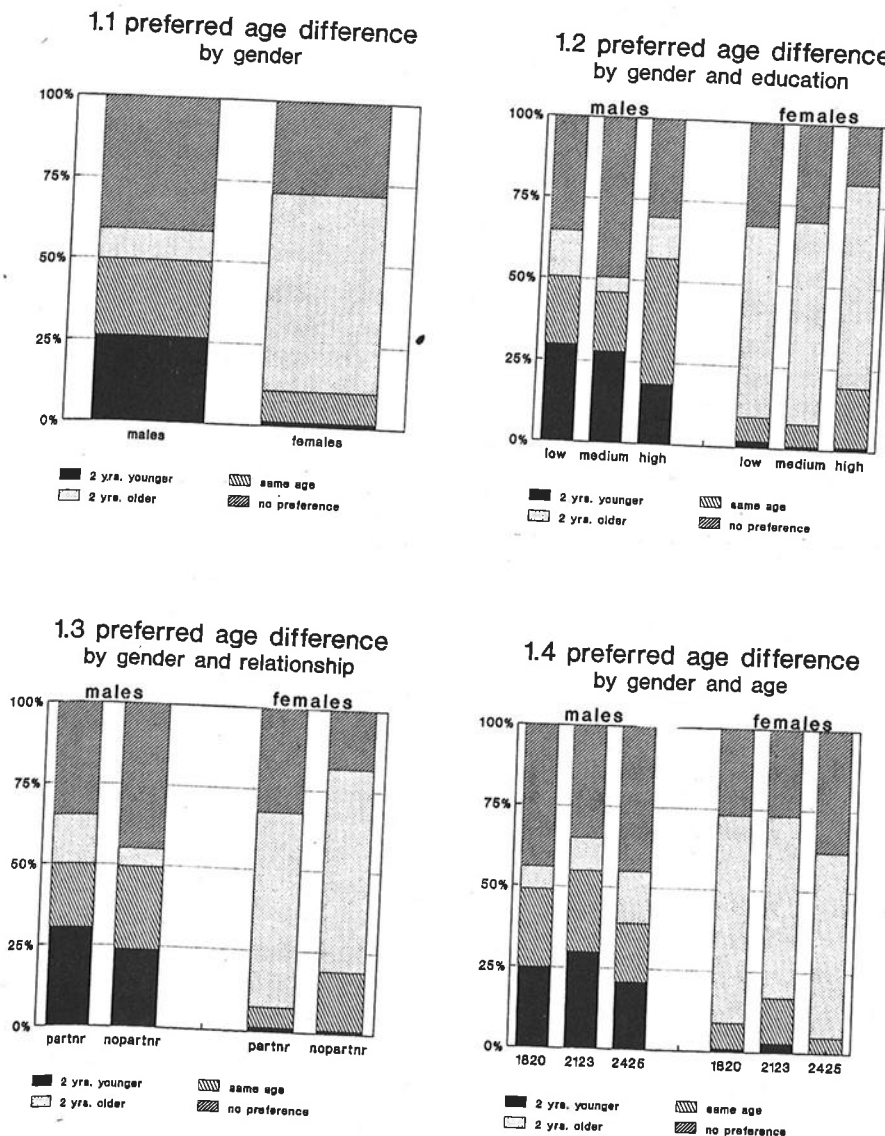
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Same age		
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Source: Sociaa

preference at all, while apparently 29% of all women show indifference about their partner's age. About 61% of all women prefer an older partner, while only 27% of all men prefer a younger partner. Further, we see that men show a greater preference for a partner of the same age (23%) than women (9%). Finally 9% of all men, and only 1% of all women have a 'deviant' preference in the sense that they prefer an older, respectively, a younger partner. The emerging pattern shows clear resemblances with, among others, the French pattern of age related preferences as observed by Bozon (1991).

An interesting question is whether either the males' or the females' preference pattern has the higher 'predictive value'. In other words, who's preferences will be dominant in the actual partner choice process? An exact answer can, of course, only be given by following respondents in their future cohabitation and/or marital behaviour. One can, however, find some indication by making a comparison between the preference patterns as described above, and data on actual age differences within existing marriages and cohabitations. For this purpose a selection was made from the earlier mentioned SEP-panel of relationships in which the male partner was 35 years of age or younger at the time of the interview (N=802). To get a more solid basis, the original two-years preference age intervals were expanded with half the number of the adjacent age categories. So, the category 'man two years older' was calculated by taking the number of existing relationships in which the male partner was actually two years older, together with half of the relationships in which the male partner was three years older, and half of the relationships in which the male partner was only one year older. The same procedure was followed for the categories 'same age' and 'man two years younger'. After this reclassification 523 out of 802 men remained for this analysis. In the following table the resulting distribution is compared with the pattern of those respondents with an explicit preference.

Table 3 – *Preferred age differences in the sample, compared with actual age differences in the SEP panel*

	Preference of men (%)	Preference of women (%)	Actual age difference (%)
Man 2 years younger	15	1	14
Same age	39	13	41
Man 2 years older	46	86	45
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
N	190	200	523

Source: Sociaal Economisch Panel (SEP): wave 1995.

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The figures in the table show that the preference pattern of men is amazingly similar to the actual distribution of age differences in existing relationships of which the male partner is 35 years old or younger. Although the basis of comparison may not be completely pure, one could conclude from these results that preferences of men seem to have more 'predictive' power than preferences of women.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from sex specific differences in age preference.

At first, the male's preference pattern is considerably more egalitarian than the female's pattern (e-i-values of 73% versus 39%). Apparently women expect certain benefits of marrying an older partner, while for men age difference seems to be less rewarding. Secondly, age preferences of younger men clearly show more resemblance with actual age differences than the preferences of younger women. This means that women, more than men, are willing to adapt their original preference when entering the marriage market. This may be an indication that age difference only takes a modest position within the females' hierarchy of partner choice determinants.

3.2.2   Preference by gender and education

Figure 1.2 is showing preferred age differences by educational level, controlled for gender. By first generally comparing the patterns for men (at the left) and women (at the right) it is clear that extending the original bivariate relationship with 'educational level', leads to more variation for males than for females. There is a modest, but significant, difference between educational levels among men (Cramér's-V = 0.200; p = 0.001), while among women differences are less pronounced (Cramér's-V = 0.138; p = 0.074).

E-i-values for low educated, medium educated, and high educated men are, respectively, 70%, 72%, and 81%. For women the corresponding figures are 41%, 38%, and again 38%. So, the highest degree of egalitarianism is found among high-educated men, while only minor differences are found between lower and medium educated men. As far as women are concerned, differences are almost neglectable.

Nearly half (49%) of the medium educated men state to 'have no preference at all'. There is less indifference among higher educated men (30%), and somewhat more among the lower educated (35%). As far as a preference for a two years younger partner is concerned (the traditional pattern), the medium and lower educated men reach higher scores (with percentages of, respectively, 55 and 46) than the higher educated men (27%).

As already remarked, differences are less pronounced for women. There obviously is more homogeneity in this respect than among men. Nevertheless, and in spite of the fact that differences are not quite statistically significant (p =

0.074), some conformities with the male pattern may be noticed. Once again, the most striking disparities when comparing educational groups, are in the first place the relatively low percentage of indifference (18%) among the higher educated, and secondly, the higher tendency among the same group (with a preference), to choose a partner of the same age (22%), as compared to the lower (10%) as well as the medium educated (10%).

Concluding the comments on figure 1.2 we can resume as follows. In terms of the simple distinction between egalitarian and non-egalitarian patterns, lower and medium educated men show less traits of modernity than higher educated men. So, in this respect, higher educated young men are obviously more emancipated. One of the explanatory factors might be that, due to a longer period of sex-mixed education, they are more familiar with women of the same age group (Mare, 1991). In the case of higher educated women prolonged sex-mixed education eventually has a weaker impact on age preference. Apparently these favourable market conditions are counterbalanced by 'traditional' age preference determinants.

Taking all together, this trivariate analysis indicates an interaction effect of sex and educational level on age preference. Later, in the second section of this paragraph, we will test this finding in a multivariate analysis.

3.2.3   Preference by gender and relationship

Respondents were asked whether they have (or have had before) a steady relationship with a partner of the opposite sex. So, no distinction has been made between still existing and meanwhile interrupted relations, nor the number of past relations was asked for. For various reasons one may expect differences in age preference between respondents who are (or were) involved in a relationship, and those who are (or were) not. In the first place it can be argued that among those with a steady partner, some kind of rationalization (justification of the actual choice) might have biased their stated preference. On the other hand, experiencing a relationship may lead either to a consolidation or revision of the original preference, or may lead to the conclusion that age difference in fact doesn't matter at all. As our data do not enable us to analyse these underlying mechanisms, we will only be able to make some crude comparisons between the preference patterns of those with and those without a(n) (earlier) partner. The comparison will be carried out for men and women separately.

At the moment of interviewing 38.3 % (N=113) of the men, and 69.6% (N=214) of the women had (or have had) a steady partner. In figure 1.3 the preference patterns are presented (men at the left, and women at the right). As the graph shows, the relationship is not very strong. Cramér's-V amounts to 0.192 for men, and to 0.216 for women, both relations being statistical

significant at the 1%-level.

Young men without a partner show a somewhat higher degree of egalitarianism (e-i = 76.1%) in their preferences than those with a partner (e-i = 69.6%). Going into more details, we can see that men without a partner are more indifferent (45.0% versus 34.8%). From this observation one might conclude that experiencing a relationship leads to a more explicit preference. At the same time it appears that men with a partner, show a relatively strong interest in older female partners (15.2% versus 5.6%), possibly due either to rationalization or to a positive or negative experience with an older, respectively younger female partner.

In almost all respects, the females' pattern is the reverse of the males' pattern. Younger women with a partner score somewhat higher on the egalitarian-index (39.8% versus 37.2%). At the same time they are considerably more indifferent (32.2%) than their peers without a partner (18.1%). This would mean that the rule, that experience leads to more explicit preferences, doesn't hold for women. Striking too, perhaps, is the observation that only a relatively small proportion of those with a partner is interested in men of the same age (6.2% versus 18.1%).

Let us, finally, compare the patterns of men with a (former) partner and women with a (former) partner. Since data on the actual age of the partners are missing, we can only indirectly look for indications of rationalizing preferences. As a consequence the following interpretation is rather hypothetical and may thus provoke more questions than offer solid, empirically based, answers. In the first place, if rationalization should form a serious source of bias, the proportion of indifference should be rather low. In above, both patterns should yield a reasonable measure of asymmetry. In other words, the proportion of men preferring a younger woman should be rather close to the proportion of women preferring an older man, and so on. Looking at the figures, we indeed see that men with a partner are less indifferent than men without a partner, but as far as women are concerned, as we remarked before, the situation is reverse. Interpreting these findings from a different angle, one could say that men with a partner are realizing that age differences do matter, while women with a partner obviously have come to the opposite conclusion. Comparing the other categories of the distribution, asymmetry indicating rationalization is far from manifest. Among men with a partner and having a preference, 47% prefer a younger women, while 89% of their female counterparts prefer an older man. Preferences for a partner of the same age also differ strongly (30% for men, and 9% for women). For the remaining category (an older women, respectively a younger man) we find percentages of 23 and 2. From this evidence we can, with some restrictions, conclude that rationalization did not strongly bias preferences for both sexes to the same extend. It is plausible to assume that differences between the patterns of those

with, and those without a partner, should be ascribed to the impact of (positively or negatively) experienced relations on preference.

3.2.4 Preference by age groups

Generally speaking, one may expect that preferences regarding age difference may be due to changes when young people are aging from age 18 to age 25. A logical argument would be that in this very age span young adults collect experiences in relationships with the other sex, and, based on these experiences, adapt their original preferences, or get more pronounced preferences. As far as the latter is concerned, one might suppose that, by increasing age, the proportion 'no preference at all', will decrease. Although we don't have the disposal of longitudinal data, a cross-sectional comparison between age groups will, to a certain extend, enable us to test the hypothesis of changing preferences.

The association between age and preference appears to be low, and not significant. For men Cramér's-V amounts to 0.121 with a p-value of 0.713, and for women to 0.146 with a p-value of 0.563. Figure 1.4 (men at the left, women at the right) shows the graph that pictures age preferences by age groups and by gender. For this purpose the respondents were divided into three age categories: 18-20 years old, 21-23 years old, and 24-25 years old. Among men, the highest e-i-score is found in the oldest age category (79%), while among women the mid- and oldest age category show a higher tendency to egalitarism (44%, respectively 43%) than the youngest age category (36%). As the figure shows, there is no systematic decrease in the percentage 'indifference'. For men we find, going from younger to older, percentages of 44, 35, and 45, and for women percentages of 27, 27 and 38. These differences too, prove not to be statistically significant.

So, the expected relationship between age and preference is not supported by our data. As a matter of fact, panel data, enabling to describe transitions between preference categories in time, would be needed to get a conclusive answer regarding the exact relationship between age and preference. Nevertheless, if there would be a substantive relation between both variables, a cross-sectional analysis as carried out here, should have yielded more evidence.

3.3 A multivariate analysis

After describing and interpreting the data at the bivariate and trivariate level, we will now continue the analysis at the multivariate level. More precisely, we will investigate the joint effects of the independent variables gender (G), education (E), having a steady relationship (R), and age (A) on the dependent variable preference (P). Since the dependent variable preference is

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dichotomous (modern/traditional), a logit model (a regression model for categorical data) will be applied (Agresti, 1990). The four independent variables are treated as nominal, which means that no apriori structure is imposed on their effects on the logits.

The procedure followed is exploratory in the sense that we look for the model, defined in terms of first-order (direct) and second-order (interaction) effects, that fit the data best. Model selection is based on the likelihood-ratio chi-squared L^2, which can be used both to determine the absolute and relative fit of a model. In addition, we use an entropy based pseudo-R^2 measure for nominal dependent variables, which approximately indicates the proportion of variation explained by the model (Magidson, 1981).

Table 4 – *Estimated logit models for the probability of having a modern age preference*

Model	L^2	df	p	R^2
1. 0-model, []	118.82	35	.00	.00
2. [E,G,R,A]	49.23	29	.01	.09
3. [EG,ER,EA,GR,GA,RA]	20.56	16	.20	.13
4. [EA,GR]	30.50	24	.17	.12
5. Restricted [EA,GR]	35.75	32	.20	.11

Notes: E = education (high/medium/low), G = gender (female/male), R = steady relationship (yes/no), and A = age (19-20/21-23/24-25).
The analysis is based on the 558 cases that had either a modern or a traditional preference.

Table 4 reports the L^2, df, p, and R^2 values for the five most important models that were estimated. Model 1, which contains only an intercept, serves a reference model (zero-model). Model 2 that includes the main (first-order) effects of the independent variables fits much better than Model 1: the decrease in L^2 value of 69.59 with 6 degrees of freedom is clearly significant (p<.01). The only term that is significant at a 5 percent level is the effect of gender.

The inclusion of all second-order interaction effects improves the fit significantly. This can be seen from the fact that the L^2 of Model 3 is 28.67 points lower than of Model 2, using only 13 degrees of freedom (p<.01). Seemingly, there is a more complicated dependence structure than can be described by a model with only first-order effects.

Model 4, which is somewhat more extended than Model 2, and much more restricted than Model 3, contains the main effects of age (A), gender (G), relationship (R) and education (E), as well as the second-order interactions between gender and steady relationship (GR), and between education and age (EA). This model does not fit significantly worse than Model 3 (L^2=9.94; df=8; p=.27), while at the same time it has a much better performance than Model 2

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(L^2=18.73; df=5; p<.01). This means that we only need to consider two-way GR and EA interactions.

Inspection of the parameters of Model 4 reveals that this model can be simplified considerably. It turns out that the second-order interaction between age and education is only needed because a single education-age combination (E=low-A=21-23) has a much lower probability of having a modern preference than all other education-age combinations. In addition, the GR interaction is needed because among males the preference depends on having a steady relationship. Model 5 is a restricted version of Model 4 that includes, besides an intercept, three dummy's: a dummy for "E=low-A=21-23", a dummy for "G=male-R=yes", and a dummy for "G=male-R=no". Model 5 does not fit significantly worse than Model 4: L^2=5.25 df=6; p=.51. Note that Model 5 has only 3 parameters more than Model 1, which indicates that we ended with a very parsimonious model that describes the data quite well.

Table 5 – *Parameter estimates for Model 5 from table 4*

Parameter	β	s.e.	T-value	exp(β)
Main	- .40	.13	-3.18	.67
E = low A = 21-23	-1.16	.32	-3.66	.31
G = male R = yes	1.10	.24	4.59	3.00
G = male R = no	1.72	.22	7.72	5.59

Table 5 reports the estimated parameters for Model 5. The parameters which are most easy to interpret are the parameter on the odds-ratio scale, *the exp(β)'s*. The value for "E=low-A=21-23" (.31) indicates that this subgroup has a more than 3 times lower odds of being modern than the other education-age combinations. The other two effects indicate that males with and without a partner have 3.00 and 5.59 times higher odds of being modern than females, respectively. Thus, males are more modern than females, and males without a partner are more modern (5.59/3.00 on the odds scale) than males with a partner.

Summarising, the following general conclusions can be drawn:
- as compared to the other education-age combinations, the lower educated belonging to the middle age category have more traditional preferences;
- males have a higher probability of being modern than females;
- men without a steady relationship are more often modern than men without a steady relationship.

As can be seen from table 4, the pseudo-R^2 values are not very high: for instance, 11% for the final model (Model 5). This shows that the selected independent variables gender, education, steady relationship, and age have only

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a modest predictive power regarding the probability of having a modern age preference. What factors may explain the relatively small R^2-values? In the first place there is a mere technical argument. In general, entropy based R^2 systematically yields lower values than its counterpart in linear modelling (Magidson, 1981). Secondly, a preference, as a concept, is a more 'fuzzy' entity than actual behaviour. As a consequence, measuring preferences puts high demands on operationalization in terms of its validity and reliability. In the third place the relatively low proportion of explained variance might be due to the absence of other explanatory variables in our models. In this respect, however, neither theory nor empirical investigations suggest important competing variables. Might this be true, we must conclude that other, basic individual preferences, which are not systematically related to our independent variables, play an important role in the emergence of preference patterns.

Although studied from somewhat different angles, both bi/trivariate and multivariate analyses show more or less consistent results. The descriptive approach enabled us to picture accurately similarities and dissimilarities between subgroups, while the explanatory approach made it possible to offer more nuances, and to reach conclusions about the predictive power of each variable separately.

4. DETERMINANTS OF PARTNER CHOICE: THE MEANING OF AGE DIFFERENCE

4.1 Introduction

In this paragraph, we will answer the second research question, dealing with the relative importance of preferred age difference as compared to other determinants of partner choice. In other words, we will establish the rank of age difference within a hierarchy of partner choice determinants. From literature, a selection was made of variables considered to be relevant in the process of partner choice. The selection is primarily based on a distinction between a partner's economic and cultural resources. The partner's economic resources mainly fulfil a person's material needs, while the partner's cultural resources fulfil a person's need of cultural similarity (Kalmijn, 1994). As a direct indicator of economic resources, the partner's *income* (perspective) has been appointed, while *educational level, social background,* and *age difference* (given a difference of 3 years or less), have been considered as its indirect indicators. Cultural similarity is directly indicated by consensus on *family affairs* (like consensus regarding having and raising children, labour participation, and the division of household work) and by a shared *world view* (opinions regarding important religious and political issues), and indirectly by

educational level, social background, ethnical background, and *age difference.* Besides two other significant determinants were added, *loving each other* (referring to Shorter's 'romantic love') and the *appearance*, or physical attraction of the partner. The terms printed in italics will be used as an abbreviation of the relating item.

The respondents were presented these 9 partner choice determinants, and were requested to express the importance they attach themselves to each item in a score, ranging from 1 (= totally unimportant) to 10 (= extremely important). Besides, they were told that it was allowed to give the same scores to different determinants. Table 6 presents the results.

Table 6 – *Determinants of partner choice: mean score and standard deviation (N=597)*

Determinant	Mean score	Standard deviation
Loving each other	9.53	0.90
Appearance	6.98	1.86
Consensus family affairs	6.79	1.99
World view	5.63	2.48
Educational level	5.23	2.40
Social background	4.87	2.48
Income perspective	4.71	2.34
Ethnical background	4.20	2.75
Age difference	4.07	2.65

As could be expected, loving each other yields the highest score, at a considerable distance followed by appearance of the partner. The direct indicators of cultural similarity (consensus family affairs and world view) show considerably higher scores than the economic resources indicator income perspective. At the end of the ranking, and considered as the most unimportant, we find ethnical background, and the main item under study, age difference. The low valuation of age difference is in contrast with results from earlier studies of, among others, Glick and Landau (1950), Hollingshead (1951), Bean and Aiken (1976), and Jensen (1978). In all these studies the importance of age as a partner choice determinant is strongly emphasized.

Looking at the standard deviations, indicating to some extent the measure of consensus, one crudely observes a positive relationship between the mean scores and this measure of dispersal: the higher the score, the greater the consensus. So, age difference is on average considered to be the least important factor, but at the same time there is a relatively low agreement among respondents on its importance.

To test the internal consistency of the scale formed by the items,

Cronbach's alpha (α) was determined[2]. Since loving each other seems to be rather a constant than a variable, it was removed from the scale. The resulting α amounts to 0.682. Subsequently, we will now look for differences in hierarchical ranking between the sexes, educational levels, age groups, and having (had) a steady relationship.

4.2 Determinants and gender

Differences between the sexes are presented in figure 2.1. Six items show statistical significant differences, four of them at a 0.01 level (loving each other, appearance, family affairs, and world view), and two at a 0.05 level (income perspective and ethnical background).

Females score significantly higher on loving each other (9.74 versus 9.30) and lower on appearance (6.45 versus 7.53). In above they show a higher appreciation of both cultural similarity (consensus family affairs: 7.13 versus 6.44; world view: 6.07 versus 5.17) and economic resources (income perspective: 4.90 versus 4.51). The relatively low ranking of female's economic resources by men (4.51) does not strongly support Collins and Coltrane's view that the market position of women has firmly ameliorated due to their growing income potentials (Collins and Coltrane, 1991). Further, males show a somewhat higher valuation of ethnical background (4.23 versus 4.18), while no meaningful differences were found regarding the appreciation of educational level, social background, and age difference.

From the perspective of exchange theory, and comparing the items appearance and income perspective, some evidence can be found that, to a certain degree, exchange takes place between physical attraction (higher valued by men) and security of subsistence (higher valued by women). When determining Cronbach's α for both sexes separately we observe a minor increase of the reliability in the case of younger women (0.708), and some decrease of the reliability (0.667) in the case of younger men. So, women are obviously somewhat more consistent in scoring partner choice determinants than men. To summarize, cultural similarity and the partner's income potentials are valued higher by women, while they, at the same time, attach less value to physical attraction. As far as our main topic concerns, one can conclude that in spite of the fact that age preferences between men and women differ greatly (see paragraph 3), this difference is not reflected in the weight that is assigned to age difference as a determinant of partner choice.

Figure 2 – Deter

2.1 determinants by ge

loving
appearance
family affairs
world view
educational level
social background
income perspective
ethnical background
age difference

2.3 determinants by age

loving
appearance
family affairs
world view
educational level
social background
income perspective
ethnical background
age difference

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[2] Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal reliability or consistency of the items in a scale. It ranges from 0.0 to 1.0 and indicates how much the items in a scale are measuring a particular variable.
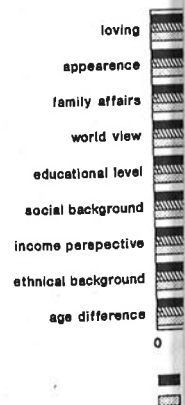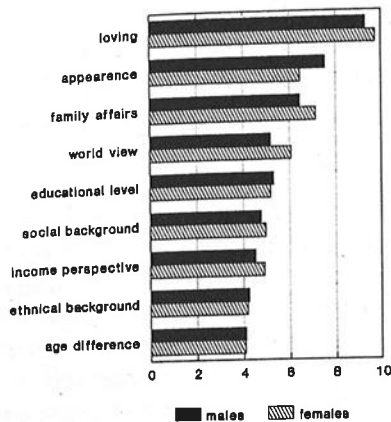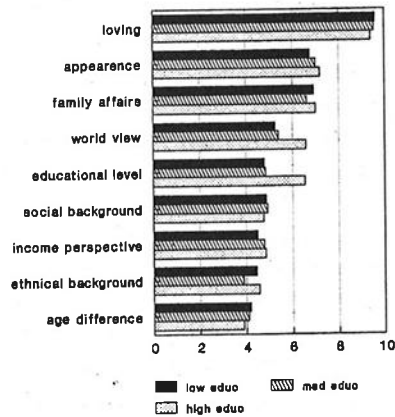
Figure 2 – *Determinants of partner choice by gender, education, age, and partner*
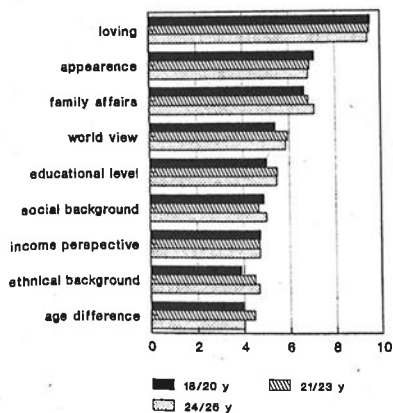

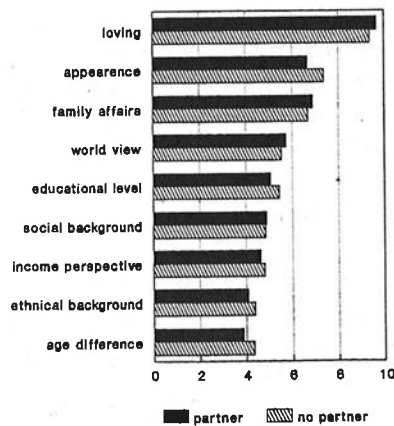2.1 determinants of partner choice by gender

2.2 determinants of partner choice by educational level

2.3 determinants of partner choice by age groups

2.4 determinants of partner choice by partner (y/n)

4.3 Determinants and educational level

Whether educational level brings forth differences can be judged from figure 2.2. Now, only 3 items show significant deviations: world view, educational level (both at the.01 level), and ethnical background (at the.05 level). The higher educated evaluate world view significantly higher (6.57) than lower and medium educated young adults (5.26, respectively 5.39). A quite similar pattern emerges as far as educational level is concerned, with, in the same order, values of 6.53, 4.79, and 4.85. With regard to ethnical background, finally, the lowest score is found among the medium educated (3.88), together with about equal scores for the low (4.45) and high (4.57) educated.

To resume, as can be derived from the higher scores on world view, educational level, and family affairs (although in this case the differences do not meet the statistical criterium), one can conclude that cultural similarity plays a more important role for the higher educated than for both lower educational levels. As far as economic resources are concerned, there are only minor differences. Further, it can be concluded that, like observed in the foregoing paragraph, educational level apparently has a limited explanatory power with regard to age difference.

Controlling the relationship between educational level and the determinants for gender, leads to the following results. For men 3 items show significant different scores, all at the.01 level, to wit: appearance (valuated highest by medium educated), world view (with a substantive higher score for the high educated), and educational level (again most appreciated by the higher educated). As far as women are concerned, we find the largest differences in the educational level-item, where, as by men, the high educated stipulate the meaning of this determinant the most strongly. Significant differences, albeit at a lower level (0.05), are found with regard to world view and ethnical background.

4.4 Determinants and age

In paragraph 3.2.4 we found an only weak relationship between the age preference pattern and age of the respondents. Now the question at stake is whether age groups differ with regard to their valuation of partner choice determinants.

As can be seen in figure 2.3, differences at the bivariate level are not very remarkably. If we compare the three age groups, only two determinants yield statistical significant differences: world view (at the.05 level) and ethnical background (at the.01 level). The highest age group (23/25 years old) scores somewhat lower on loving and appearance, and somewhat higher on the

cultural similarity-items background. Contrasting differences can only be level) and family affairs to be a variable of relativ do not emerge from the

Subsequently, in or into the analysis as a c negative linear relation lower the valuation of a regarding world view (th shared world view). Am was found to differ sign item considerably highe

4.5 Determinants and

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When controlling interaction effects. As significant differences females, however, wo (9.79 versus 9.62: p=. 6.93: p=.006), educatio (3.88 versus 4.51: p=.

Our main goal, in weight, of age differer of partner choice. Alth can conclude that age

cultural similarity-items family affairs, social background, and ethnical background. Contrasting the youngest and the oldest age group, significant differences can only be found with regard to ethnical background (at the.01 level) and family affairs (at the.05 level). So, at the bivariate level age appears to be a variable of relatively minor importance. Significant linear relationships do not emerge from the data.

Subsequently, in order to look for interaction effects, gender was brought into the analysis as a control variable. Among males we find a significant negative linear relation regarding appearance (the higher someone's age, the lower the valuation of appearance), and a significant positive linear relation regarding world view (the higher someone's age, the higher the valuation of a shared world view). Among females only the determinant ethnical background was found to differ significantly between age groups. Older women score this item considerably higher (4.81) than younger women (3.66).

4.5 Determinants and having (had) a steady relationship

To finish subgroup comparisons concerning partner choice determinants we will take a look at differences between those who had a steady partner at the time of the interview, or had such a kind of relationship earlier (partner/yes), and those who were never involved in a steady heterosexual relationship (partner/no).

Like figure 2.4 shows, differences in general are only modest. In the category partner/yes somewhat higher scores are found on loving, family affairs, and world view, while lower scores are found on appearance, educational level, income perspective, ethnical background, and age difference. The criterium of statistical significance in this respect is, however, only met by loving (p=.013), appearance (p=.004), and age difference (p=.021). Since, as discussed in foregoing paragraphs, the interpretation of these differences in terms of rationalization and positive or negative experiences is rather hazardous and speculative, we sustain from further comments.

When controlling this bivariate relationship for gender we observe some interaction effects. As far as males are concerned, none of the items show significant differences between having or not having a steady partner. Among females, however, women with a partner score significantly higher on loving (9.79 versus 9.62: p=.039), and significantly lower on appearance (6.25 versus 6.93: p=.006), educational level (4.95 versus 5.67: p=.013), and age difference (3.88 versus 4.51: p=.047).

Our main goal, in this paragraph, was to establish the relative meaning, or weight, of age difference between partners as compared to other determinants of partner choice. Although the list of selected items may not be complete, one can conclude that age difference in general only plays a modest role. Neither a

specification according to gender, educational level, age, and having (had) a steady partner yielded meaningful differences in the hierarchical order of the items. So, in spite of the fact that age preference patterns as such vary, like we concluded in paragraph 3, their role in the decision making process seems to be of minor importance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article the question was raised whether a closer investigation of stated preferences regarding the partner's age could, to some extent, clarify the remarkable phenomenon of almost constant age differences between spouses concluding a first marriage, in the last few decades.

More specifically two research questions were formulated. First of all we were interested in the current preference pattern of young adults. Survey data, collected among about 600 young adults in The Netherlands, showed that younger males apparently put more value on age homogamy than younger females, who still prefer an older partner to live with. In other words, as regarding age, men are more inclined to egalitarianism than women. In above, it appeared that about 40% of younger males and about 30% of younger females showed indifference about their partner's age. This general pattern was crudely replicated within educational- and age-subgroups, and was neither strongly affected by having or not having a steady partner. Further, a comparison with actual age differences was leading to the conclusion that male preferences were much closer to actual behaviour than female preferences. The picture emerging from the descriptive part of the analysis was in large confirmed by a multivariate logit analysis. Apart from gender, the explanatory power of the selected independent variables was rather poor. The observation that age preference (if studied on cross-sectional data) does hardly vary within the age span of 18 and 25 years, may in this respect be called somewhat surprisingly. However, further investigation based on longitudinal data is needed to verify these findings.

The second research question was dealing with the importance of age difference as compared to other partner choice determinants. Based on theoretical considerations, indicators of the partner's economic and cultural resources were selected, completed by the items loving each other, and appearance of the partner. As could already be expected from high scores on indifference in paragraph 3, age difference (with a maximum of three years) yields the lowest average score, and is thus considered as the least important partner choice determinant. More surprisingly than the undisputed and almost maximum score on loving each other, is perhaps the high valuation of the partner's appearance. However, given the fact that respondents with a partner

show a lower average score on appearance (6.65) than respondents without a partner (7.38), one may expect that once a partner is actually going to be chosen, the valuation of appearance decreases. Further, the cultural similarity indicators consensus on family affairs and a shared world view, both scored higher than the economic resource's indicator income perspective. This may be ascribed to the fact that the two-earners household gradually has become the common family type, warranting an income, sufficient to satisfy most material needs. When specifying the results according to gender, it was observed that cultural similarity as well as economic resources are valued higher by women. The latter may point at the perception of a still existing economic dependency of women. Further it appeared that cultural similarity is stronger valued by the higher educated young adults. Whether there is an intrinsic reason for this relationship is not clear. As a competing explanation one could bring forth that the higher educated have, as such, favourable income perspectives and can thus permit themselves to give cultural similarity a higher place in the hierarchy of determinants.

The central question that remains to be answered is whether our investigation contributes to a better understanding of the hold in the historical process towards age homogamy, as observed in recent decades. In our view there is no misunderstanding about the fact that a number of factors, that can be hold responsible for diminishing age differences in the past, have lost their influence. Individualization, emancipation and growing economic independence have opened the way to a more and more free marriage market. On the other hand, however, age preference patterns of younger men and women appear to be significantly different. While men care less about their partner's age, women do. It is obvious that the latter - regardless age and social background - still expect certain benefits from living with an older partner. Within the same research project, respondents were asked for their perception of the arguments explaining why, in general, men marry younger women, and vice versa. Results, reported in Vossen (1999), showed that the emotional need of protection and difference in maturity play an important role. Both being rather constant, universal factors, we expect that - in spite of the fact that age difference takes a low position in the hierarchy of partner choice determinants - a situation of complete age homogamy will not be a realistic perspective for the future.

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