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The Globalisation of Marriage Fields: The Swedish Case

Thomas Niedomysl, John Östh and Maarten van Ham

Marriage fields—the geographical areas where people meet to partner—traditionally tend to be relatively small and local. Increasing international travel and the use of the internet have broadened the geographical opportunity structure of potential partners. This increases the chances of meeting a partner from abroad, possibly resulting in a rise in international marriage migration. This paper uses unique longitudinal population data for the whole of Sweden to explore the globalisation of Swedish marriage fields. The results show an increase of ‘marriage migrants’ in Sweden between 1990 and 2004, although absolute numbers remain relatively low. The paper yields two new insights not previously recorded in the literature. First, we found a substantial proportion of all marriage migrants in Sweden to be males, while most existing literature on marriage migration focuses almost exclusively on females. Second, the pattern of geographical origins of marriage migrants is highly gendered, with male and female marriage migrants in Sweden originating from different regions in the world. This suggests that different mechanisms underlie male and female marriage migration.

Keywords: Marriage; Migration; Globalisation; Sweden

Introduction

The geographical area where people meet to partner—marriage fields—are traditionally quite small and local (for an overview of the literature see Houston *et al.* 2005). Bossard (1932), for example, shows that one third of all couples who married in a metropolitan region in the US lived within five blocks of each other. Similarly, Coleman and Haskey (1986) found that most people who form a couple in the UK previously lived reasonably close to each other. In order to find a partner, people need to be able to meet and interact (arranged marriages are an exception).

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Proximity makes frequency of interaction easier and therefore increases the chances of contacts that lead to long-term relationships (e.g. Bossard 1932; Clark 1952; Coleman and Haskey 1986; Kalmijn and Flap 2001). The fact that people spend most of their time in small functional units—school, neighbourhood or workplace (Kalmijn 1998)—and have limited spatial activity (Hägerstrand 1970), produces the generality that individuals often marry the ‘boy or girl next door’ (Houston *et al.* 2005). There is, however, evidence that the range of contexts where people meet is growing and that the local context (the neighbourhood) is losing importance as a marriage field (Bozon and Heran 1989; Kalmijn and Flap 2001).

On a national scale, people are increasingly mobile for work and leisure, and modern technology—mobile phones, the internet—allows us to interact in real time with people in different locations. If one meets a potential partner outside one’s own local area, communication technology allows the building-up of a relationship without regular physical contact. Singles are increasingly making use of partnering websites—covering whole nations—which bring them into contact with potential partners whom they would otherwise not ‘meet’ locally. These developments take the geography out of the initial phases of partnering and broaden marriage fields for at least a part of the population, although it is interesting to note that many partnering websites have the option to search only in a member’s own region.

People are also more mobile on an international scale. Increasing ease of air travel for work and holidays, rising numbers of individuals studying, working and travelling abroad, and the emergence of international partnering websites can be expected to increase the ‘risk’ of meeting a potential partner from abroad (Piper 2003). Globalisation could—through reshaping the geographic opportunity set of potential partners—lead to a globalisation of marriage fields for some interested parties. In addition, processes of modernisation mean that people are more likely to have a positive attitude towards marrying someone from outside their own ‘group’ (Hendrickx 1994; Uunk 1996) and, in this ‘age of migration’ (Castles and Miller 1998) moving to another country becomes more common. Together, these developments can be expected to make people more open to the concept of partnering with someone from abroad.

There is an increasing body of literature on international marriages. Some focuses on the experience of well-educated middle-class couples in the US and Europe (Breger and Hill 1998; Johnson and Warren 1994; Schreiber 1992). An increase in the number of international marriages does not necessarily mean that marriage fields are globalising. It may simply indicate that more and more people live outside their country of origin, and still meet locally. Other literature looks at immigrants who recruit a partner from their country of origin, generally seen as evidence of immigrants not integrating in their host society (González-Ferrer 2006). This is a form of marriage migration, but not the main focus of this paper. A literature that more explicitly deals with geographically expanding marriage fields is that on marriage migration linked to the commercialised marriage mediation industry. This industry has greatly expanded since the 1960s and spread across borders (Kojima 2001). Most of these commercially

‘arranged’ marriages involve women from less-developed countries—sometimes referred to as ‘mail-order brides’—who are ‘recruited’ by potential partners in more-developed countries (Piper 1999, 2003).

There is some evidence that a growing group of people ‘recruit’ their partner from geographically distant locations (Cottrell 1990; Johnson and Warren 1994), but information on volumes and changes over time are not available, as most studies are qualitative and based on small samples. Moreover, our knowledge of marriage migration is biased towards examples from the commercial marriage industry; as a result, there is a lack of insight into more general patterns of marriage migration, especially for males. We aim to fill this gap by studying changes in volumes of marriage migration in Sweden between 1990 and 2004 by country of origin and gender. We will answer the following two research questions. First, how can we describe the geography of international marriage migration to Sweden and are there any signs of a globalisation of Swedish marriage fields between 1990 and 2004? And second, is there any variation in demographic (age and sex) or socio-economic (education) characteristics of partners from different countries of origin? In our analysis we focus on couples consisting of one partner native to Sweden who ‘recruits’ a partner from another country.

There are two reasons why Sweden is a particularly well-suited country. The first is that Sweden has unique, high-quality longitudinal population data for the whole Swedish population (1990–2004), making it possible to study changes over time in volumes of immigration, by country of origin and demographic characteristics of the immigrant. The second reason is that Sweden has, for some time now, been considered as one of the world’s most globalised countries (Dreher 2006). Swedes are frequent international travellers for both business and leisure and the country is very well connected to the internet (Ellegård and Vilhelmson 2004). This makes Sweden an interesting country on which to test our hypothesis on the globalisation of marriage fields. If such an effect exists, it should be visible in Sweden.

Theory and Research Context

The Marriage Market

To understand patterns of partnering behaviour (including geographical patterns), researchers often use the metaphor of the market (Blau 1977; Kalmijn 1998). The marriage market consists of a demand side where individual preferences play a role—with regard to love, physical attraction, income, social status, age, ethnicity, religion etc.—and a supply side, the opportunity structure of the market. The opportunity structure determines the probability that someone is able to realise his or her preferences. The choice of partner is constrained by the demographic composition of the search area and the type and number of meeting places people frequent (Blossfeld and Meyer 1988; Kalmijn and Flap 2001). A literature review by Houston *et al.* (2005) shows that the marriage-market metaphor is used to study the relative availability of

suitable partners at the local (Ní Bhrolcháin *et al.* 2002), regional (Bratter and Zuberi 2001; Lichter *et al.* 1991), national (Ní Bhrolcháin 2001; Rosenfeld 2002), and international scales (Adams and Ghose 2003; Piper 1997).

There are several things we can learn from the metaphor of the market about the geography of marriage migration. First, the opportunity structure of the marriage market plays an important role in our understanding of the type of partner people choose (Kalmijn 1998). This opportunity structure has broadened enormously for (frequent) international travellers and internet users, and we expect it to be reflected in marriage patterns. We can expect marriage migrants in Sweden to originate from countries relatively close to Sweden and countries frequently visited by Swedes. Second, according to Becker's (1973) model of marriage migration, marriage markets in different countries are competitive and an individual looking for a partner has to choose between alternative markets. When an individual decides to search outside his or her local market this shows that the utility of a match in the foreign market is higher than with someone from the local market (Çelikaksoy *et al.* 2006). We can expect there to be a category of people who deliberately search for a foreign partner because they look for characteristics they cannot find locally. Whether or not such a partner is found, and from which country this partner originates, depend partly on the supply of potential partners.

Commercial Marriage Industry

The scale of the commercial marriage industry—one of the main channels through which people actively search for a foreign partner—has increased significantly since the 1960s (Ford 2004). Globalisation is leading to a commercialisation of marriage migration. The internet is becoming more and more important as a marriage market, both on the national and the international scale (Lu 2005). The use of commercial websites is relatively new, but the concept of 'mail-order brides' existed long before the internet existed. The availability of services through the internet means that people can explore commercial websites in the privacy of their own home, lowering the threshold to use these services. With our data we are unable to research the extent of 'mail-order brides' (or 'mail-order grooms') but, given much of the recent literature, this is a phenomenon to which attention should be accorded.

According to Lu (2005), scholarly attention to mail-order brides started about 15 years ago (Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Robinson 1996). This early work links the mail-order-bride phenomenon to sex tourism and trafficking (Barry 1995); more recent literature considers mail-order brides in the context of female labour migration for domestic work (Lu 2005). Most mail-order brides originate from South-East Asia, South America and Russia, and the male partners they seek come primarily from the United States or Western Europe (Paez Minervini and McAndrew 2006). Lu (2005) warns that mail-order brides should not be stigmatised as many women benefit, and 'true love' may well play a role. Neither is there any information available about the volume of cross-border marriages that are commercially arranged, since people meet

also during business and leisure travel, and through non-commercial dating websites; this is likely to be far more common than commercially arranged marriages. What is interesting about the term 'mail-order bride' is that it is used almost exclusively with reference to women from economically less-developed countries who partner with men from richer countries. When a woman from a Western country finds a partner through a commercial site we generally do not speak of a mail-order bride or groom (Lu 2005).

The Gendered Nature of (Marriage) Migration

In our paper we question why the mail-order-bride literature focuses almost exclusively on female and not on male marriage migrants. A simple explanation could be that international male marriage migrants are very rare. Surfing international matchmaking sites on the internet shows that most partners 'on offer' are female; very few men use the internet to 'advertise' themselves internationally to potential partners. Alternatively, the attention for female marriage migrants might be explained by an academic interest in (sexual) exploitation and gendered inequality. As Osipovich (2004) points out, mail-order brides have been portrayed mainly as victims. Issues of exploitation are likely to be of less importance in the case of male marriage migrants.

There is also a gender dimension in the geography—or origins and destinations—of marriage migrants. In the literature most are women from relatively poor countries moving to more affluent countries. The main explanation used is one of poverty and exploitation, where women in poor countries are 'forced' to 'sell themselves' in exchange for a better life. Johnson (2007), in a study of Russian mail-order brides, offers a much more nuanced explanation. In her research, Western husbands of mail-order brides stated that they were looking for a partner with traditional family values, something they could not find locally. The mail-order brides stated that they were looking for a stable husband willing to build up a family, a type of husband hard to find in their home country. Our research, however, shows that mail-order brides are not necessarily poor women trying to escape unfavourable living circumstances, but also middle-class women unable to find a suitable partner in their own country (Paez Minervini and McAndrew 2006).

Alternative explanations of marriage migration see marriage as a means of obtaining legal residence status in a Western country. Geographic patterns of marriage migration may also be reinforced through chain migration and explained using network theory (Montgomery 1991). For Montgomery, marriage migrants share (positive) experiences with people in their home country which encourages more people (mainly women?) to follow in their footsteps. Another explanation of gendered patterns of marriage migration is risk-sharing behaviour in families in poor countries where daughters in particular are encouraged to marry abroad (Stark 1991).

Positive and Negative Assortative Mating

Studying the socio-demographic characteristics of marriage migrants and their native Swedish partners may shed some light on the mechanisms underlying marriage migration, especially its gendered nature. In general, people choose a partner from their own group—endogamy—and close in social status—homogamy (Kalmijn 1998). The result is that partners are often very similar in terms of age, level of education, ethnic background, religion and social status (Smits 1996), although women are generally slightly younger than their male partner (Buunk *et al.* 2001; Kenrick *et al.* 1993). Part of these marriage patterns can be explained by the fact that peoples' choice of partner is constrained by the opportunities available (the supply-side argument, see Fisher *et al.* 1977; Flap 1999; Kalmijn and Flap 2001). Preferences also play an important role: people simply seem to prefer a partner from the same social background (positive assortative mating). Marriage patterns are also connected with the mutual satisfaction of needs—age, physical attractiveness, economic security, charm or the attainment of a residence permit (Górny and Kepinska 2004).

According to Çelikaksoy *et al.* (2006), in theory, both negative and positive assortative mating on age and education can occur (see also Becker 1973). Negative assortative mating would provide evidence for the social exchange hypothesis (Merton 1941; Schoen and Wooldredge 1989) that partners exchange resources through marriage to improve their social status. They may, for example, compensate unfavourable characteristics (being poor) by a more favourable characteristic (physical attractiveness, being young, or having a high educational level). Evidence can be found of negative assortative mating as a consequence of this exchange of resources between the relatively wealthy native Swedes and the recruited partner (Çelikaksoy *et al.* 2006).

Hypotheses

The above literature review leads to several 'hypotheses' on international marriage migration. First, we expect to see an increase of marriage migration to Sweden since the early 1990s. As most of the literature focuses on the experiences of women moving abroad, more women than men should move to Sweden to partner with a native Swede. The literature is not very clear on the volume or origin of the male marriage migration we can expect to find. With regard to the countries of origin we expect that, in general, nearby regions with the least cultural distance (the Nordic countries, Western and Eastern Europe) will be the most important suppliers of partners for both men and women. Social exchange theory leads us to expect to find evidence of negative assortative mating. In particular we should expect female partners from low-income regions to be much younger and more highly educated than their native Swedish partners. The literature is less clear about what to expect for male partners from abroad.

Data and Research Design

For this project we used a longitudinal micro-database of the entire Swedish population drawn from a number of different administrative registers (Statistics Sweden 2005). From an international perspective the database is unique, as it consists of linked annual demographic, geographic and socio-economic data for each individual living in Sweden, for the whole 1990–2004 period.

In this paper we focus on couples consisting of a native Swede and a foreign partner. We are only interested in those partnerships where the first contact is likely to have been made before the foreign partner moved to Sweden. Hence, we are not interested in couples which were formed while both partners lived in Sweden. Because of the nature of the data we have to assume that, if people enter the country in a given year and have formed a partnership by the end of that year, they have entered the country to form a relationship. We define Swedish natives as people born in Sweden whose parents were also born there. This excludes second-generation immigrants who recruit a partner from the homeland of their parents. We define couples as either cohabiting or married. Because cohabitation is not formally registered, we assume that a male and a female living in the same residential location form a cohabiting couple. We excluded same-sex couples from our analysis.

From 1990 to 2004, a total of 485,473 people migrated to Sweden, which has a population of around 9 million. Of those who entered Sweden, 9 per cent (43,862 individuals) married or cohabitated with a Swede within one year of arrival; this is the population we extracted from the database. Nine per cent of these marriage migrants (3,694 individuals) partnered with a non-native Swede. This left us with a population of 40,168 couples consisting of a native Swede and a foreign partner, formed within a year after the foreign partner entered Sweden. We summarised the countries of origin into nine world regions, using definitions from Statistics Sweden. We also used a classification from the World Bank (2007) in which countries are divided into low-, middle- and high-income according to their gross national income—thought to be indicative of their economic level of development.

Note on Ethics

The nature of our project and the type of data we use raise questions about research ethics. Since much of the literature on international marriage migration has portrayed stories of abuse and human tragedy, there is the risk of stigmatising individuals from certain countries of origin. It is therefore important to stress that the data we used in this project do not tell us anything about people's motivations to migrate, their feelings for their new partner, or whether or not they moved of their own free will. The data are purely quantitative, indicating only the number of immigrants, their countries of origin and their characteristics.

The results of our study should therefore be interpreted in light of other relevant literature, with care taken not to produce or reproduce any stigma based on prejudice or anecdotal evidence. We must also be aware that what may be considered normal or

abnormal, right or wrong, in one country or region, may be perceived differently in another country or even another region within the same country. For example, a relationship between a young woman from a developing country and a much older man from a developed country might be stigmatised as a case of exploitation. But the same situation might be beneficial for both partners, simply out of love, or perhaps to provide the woman with status in her home country and the opportunity to escape living circumstances she found undesirable.

Results

Volume of Immigration and Region of Origin

Figure 1 shows how the volume of immigration to Sweden has developed since 1990. The left-hand scale refers to the total number of immigrants and the scale on the right to the number of marriage immigrants. The total number of immigrants shows a 17 per cent increase between 1990 and 2004 (from 32,753 in 1990 to 38,376 in 2004), with a peak in 1993 following the war in the former Yugoslavia. The number of immigrants who moved to Sweden and married or cohabited with a native Swede increased by 37 per cent (from 2,519 in 1990 to 3,449 in 2004). For the general Swedish population both the rate of marriages and the share of single households have remained the same during this period (Statistics Sweden 2007a, 2007b). The relatively strong increase in the number of marriage immigrants compared to the total number of immigrants gives some support for the 'globalisation of marriage fields' hypothesis, although the absolute number of marriage migrants per year remains low.

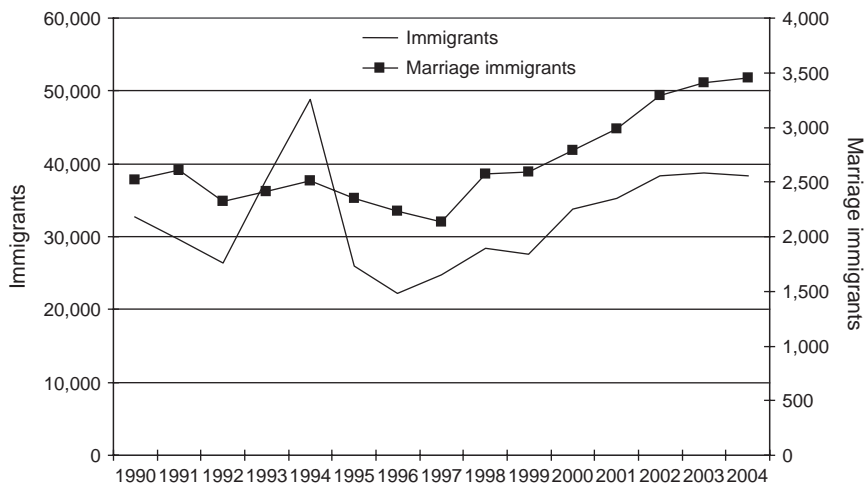


Figure 1. Total number of immigrants and marriage migrants moving to Sweden, 1990–2004.

When we break down the number of marriage immigrants by gender we see that the number of men who moved to Sweden and married a Swedish woman increased from 1,136 in 1990 to 1,455 by 2004, an increase of 28 per cent. The number of women who moved to Sweden to marry a Swedish man increased from 1,383 to 1,994, a 44 per cent increase. In 1990, 45 per cent of all marriage immigrants were male but by 2004 this had dropped slightly to 42 per cent. This is a fairly equal gender balance compared to Japan, for example, where Piper (2003) found that 75 per cent of all international marriages involve Asian women and Japanese men. In Poland, 68 per cent of all international marriages involve foreign women (Górny and Kepinska 2004). Given the emphasis on female marriage migrants in the literature, it is surprising to find relatively large numbers of male marriage migrants in Sweden. It has been suggested that some of these marriages involving men might be arranged marriages to help these men to get a legal residence status in Sweden.

Figure 2 shows three maps of the geographic origin of immigrants over the 1990–2004 period. Map A shows the origin of all immigrants. The largest group of immigrants comes from Eastern Europe and Russia (25 per cent), followed by North Africa and the Middle East (22 per cent), other Nordic countries (18 per cent) and, South-East and Other Asia and Western Europe (both 10 per cent). Maps B and C show the geographic distribution of marriage immigrants by gender. Map B shows that 24 per cent of all immigrant men who migrate to Sweden to partner a native Swede originate from Western Europe, 19 per cent from North Africa and the Middle East, 12 per cent from the Nordic countries and 11 per cent from both North America and Eastern Europe and Russia. For immigrant women the picture looks very different. A total of 29 per cent originate from South-East and Other Asia, 26 per cent from Eastern Europe and Russia, 11 per cent from the other Nordic countries, 10 per cent from South America and 9 per cent from Western Europe.

The right-hand column in Table 1 gives an alternative view of the gendered geography of marriage migration by showing the percentage of immigrants by region and gender of all marriage immigrants. More than 16 per cent of all marriage immigrants to Sweden are women from South-East and Other Asia, and 15 per cent from Eastern Europe and Russia; 10 per cent are men from Western Europe. The table further shows that since 1990, twice as many men than women came from Western Europe; three times as many women than men from Eastern Europe and Russia; six times more men than women from North Africa and the Middle East; and eight times more women than men from South-East and Other Asia.

To shed more light on the gendered geography of marriage migration, Table 1 takes a more dynamic approach by investigating trends in marriage migration over time (1990–2004) by country of origin and gender. We calculated an index figure with a base of 100 in 1990 for each region by gender. The results show that the fastest-growing group of marriage migrants to Sweden are women from North Africa and the Middle East (from 100 to 293), although absolute numbers remain small. Then come women from South-East and Other Asia (from 100 to 240) and South America (238); these are followed by men from South America (172); Africa (161); and North

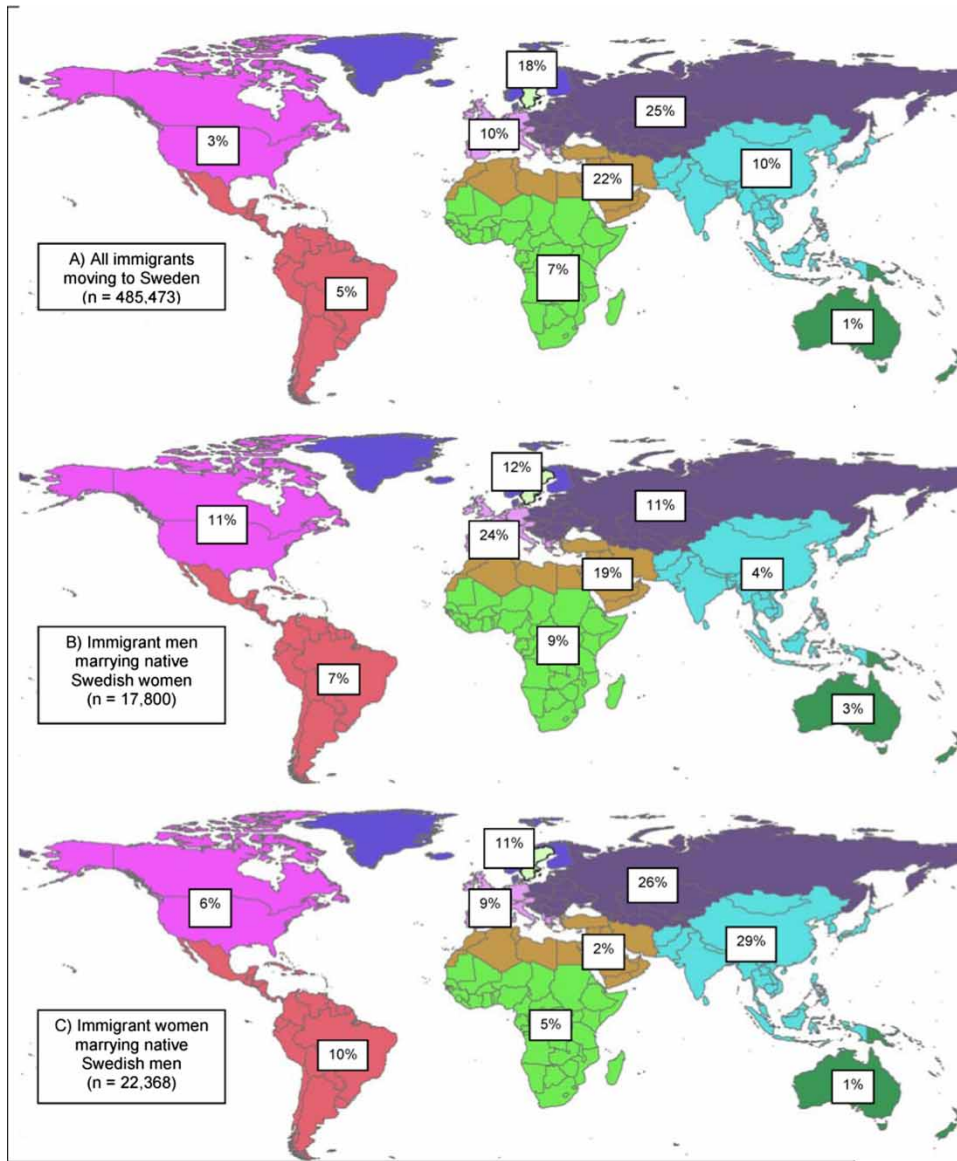


Figure 2. Regions of origin of A) All immigrants to Sweden; B) Immigrant men marrying native Swedish women; C) Immigrant women marrying native Swedish men. Totals volumes for 1990–2004.

Africa and the Middle East (158). Table 1 also shows that some regions deliver fairly constant numbers of marriage immigrants per year between 1990 and 2004—North America for both men and women; Western and Eastern Europe and Russia for women. For ease of presentation we had to present our data summarised in fairly large regions instead of individual countries. Within these regions there may be

Table 1. Annual number of marriage immigrants by region and gender 1990–2004, index figures (1990 = 100%) and totals

		1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total n	% overall total
Nordic countries	Women	100	73	77	68	67	68	62	62	82	84	85	101	90	84	76	2,506	6.2
	Men	100	91	82	92	92	99	117	92	127	128	151	177	179	158	142	2,171	5.4
Western Europe	Women	100	89	76	99	83	90	84	70	94	89	99	97	84	95	109	2,021	5.0
	Men	100	82	70	76	76	104	97	81	97	84	117	111	111	105	134	4,234	10.5
Eastern Europe/ Russia	Women	100	103	100	95	101	82	70	72	81	92	92	91	110	96	103	5,922	14.7
	Men	100	145	96	175	213	137	103	125	103	64	71	88	75	101	82	1,978	4.9
Mid-/South Africa	Women	100	112	93	84	116	93	111	102	182	128	107	125	151	135	142	1,015	2.5
	Men	100	137	129	133	149	170	122	124	120	132	109	95	137	144	161	1,607	4.0
North Africa/ Middle East	Women	100	264	207	243	171	193	193	136	229	364	250	343	400	421	293	533	1.3
	Men	100	152	116	102	106	62	69	71	92	93	86	105	108	150	158	3,389	8.4
South-East/ Other Asia	Women	100	111	97	111	99	93	84	86	115	132	155	164	217	254	240	6,547	16.3
	Men	100	94	64	84	91	89	86	81	91	91	58	61	80	84	66	780	1.9
North America	Women	100	76	84	73	75	71	93	80	97	86	125	116	142	112	111	1,326	3.3
	Men	100	68	87	65	87	94	86	84	79	95	91	111	116	104	99	1,927	4.8
South America	Women	100	132	126	103	132	124	149	133	164	154	186	193	207	204	238	2,252	5.6
	Men	100	122	78	105	97	131	131	123	131	142	134	180	152	161	172	1,254	3.1
Australia/Pacific	Women	100	112	82	88	65	76	71	94	100	88	94	94	153	129	100	246	0.6
	Men	100	49	69	54	59	44	69	49	95	95	100	92	92	131	74	457	1.1
World	Women	100	101	95	95	95	87	83	81	103	108	117	123	143	144	144	22,368	55.7
	Men	100	107	89	97	106	101	95	90	101	97	103	113	116	124	128	17,800	44.3
	Total	2,519	2,611	2,319	2,412	2,510	2,351	2,231	2,132	2,572	2,588	2,792	2,985	3,292	3,405	3,449	40,168	100

considerable differences between countries. For example, Alm Stenflo (2001) has shown that, during the 1970s and 1980s, the level of immigration to Sweden of Polish women who married Swedish men was much higher than is currently the case (see also Cretser 1999). Immigrants from Russia and the Baltic States are a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden (since the fall of the Iron Curtain) and compensate for the now much lower volumes of Polish women.

Two overall conclusions can be drawn from the above. The first is that, given the emphasis on female marriage migrants in the literature, surprisingly many male marriage migrants come to Sweden. The second is that the geography of marriage migration is highly gendered, with males and females originating from different parts of the world. The two largest suppliers of male marriage migrants are Western Europe and North Africa and the Middle East, while the largest suppliers of female marriage migrants are South-East and Other Asia, and Eastern Europe and Russia.

Age Differences Between Partners

The mail-order-bride literature suggests that there is a category of men who deliberately search for a foreign partner because they have a preference for certain partner characteristics (a young and attractive female with traditional family values) which are difficult to satisfy on the local marriage market. In this section we focus specifically on age. We know that, in the general population, women within a relationship are on average slightly younger than their male partner. The literature suggests that female marriage migrants from low-income countries are on average much younger than their male partner.

Figure 3 consists of two sets of population pyramids showing age structures of marriage migrants and their Swedish partner by gender and type of country (low-, middle- and high-income, as defined by the World Bank). For comparison we have added a population pyramid for Swedish–Swedish couples, showing no notable age differences between partners. The three pyramids for Swedish women and their foreign partner show only small age differences, with native women generally younger than their male foreign partner. The three pyramids showing the age composition of Swedish men and their foreign partner show a much more diverse picture, with Swedish men on average 11 years older than their partner from a low-income country, 9.6 years older than their partner from a middle-income country, and 2.7 years older than their partner from a high-income country.

Table 2 shows the average age difference in years between partners by region of origin of the marriage immigrant. Again, as expected from the existing mail-order-bride literature, there are no large age differences between native Swedish women and their foreign partner, but striking age differences between Swedish men and their foreign partner—on average respectively 13, 11.2 and 9.5 years older than their partner from Africa, South-East and Other Asia, and Eastern Europe and Russia. The fact that there are hardly any age differences between Swedish women and their foreign partner

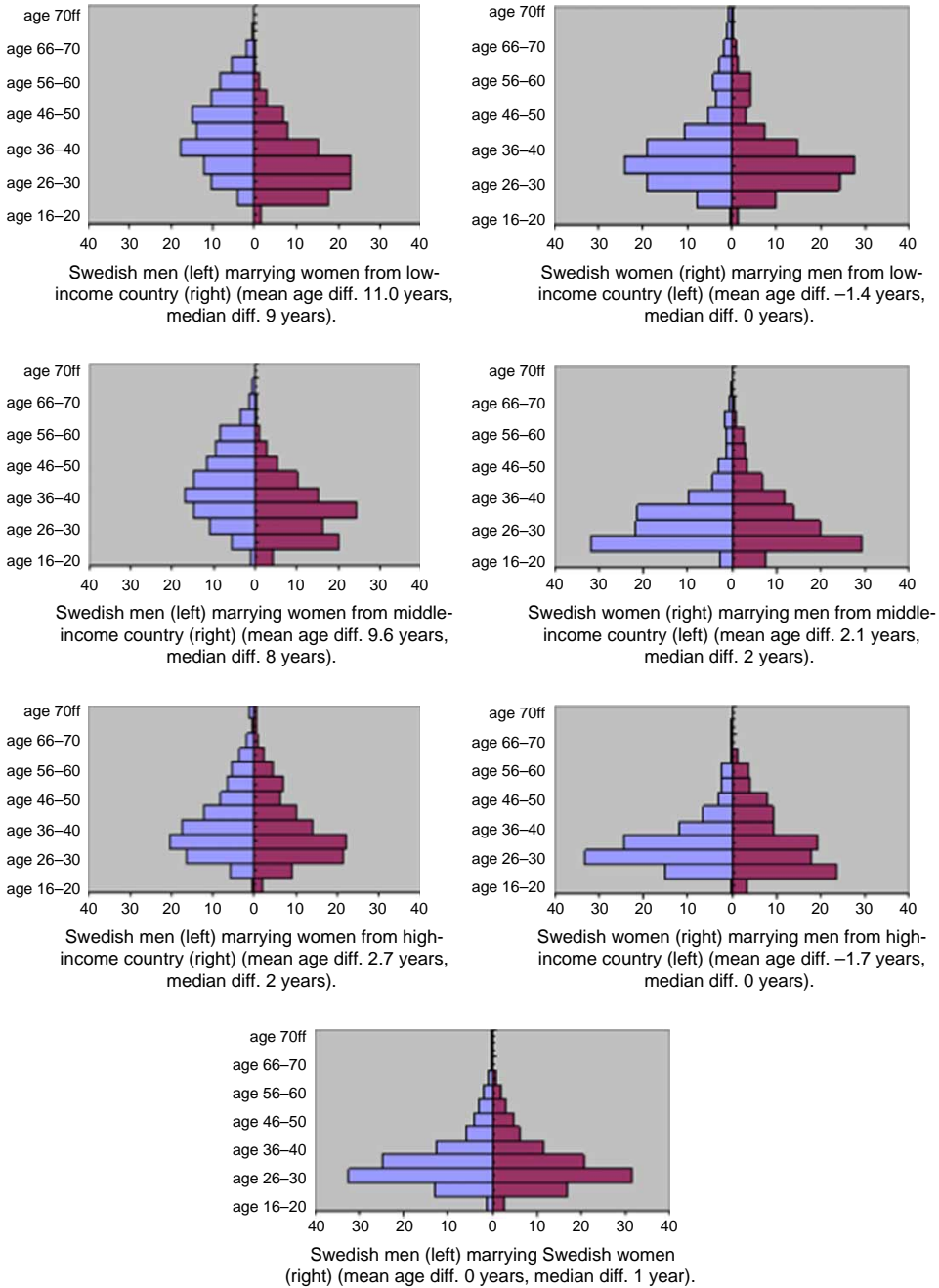


Figure 3. Population pyramids showing age structures of immigrants who marry or partner with a native Swede, 2004.

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Table 2. Age differences per region between immigrant men and women marrying a Swede, 2004

	Swedish men marrying women from:		Swedish woman marrying men from:	
	Mean age diff. in years	Median age diff. in years	Mean age diff. in years	Median age diff. in years
Sweden	0.0	1	0.0	1
Nordic countries	2.7	2	2.1	2
Western Europe	3.8	3	1.9	2
Eastern Europe	9.5	8	-0.4	1
Mid-/NorthAfrica	13.0	11	-2.4	-1
North Africa/Middle East	4.6	4	-2.0	0
South-East/Other Asia	11.2	10	-0.1	3
North America	1.2	1	2.8	2
South America	6.7	4	-0.3	0
Australia/Pacific	0.0	1	1.4	1

and Swedish men and partners from Western countries might help us to understand some of the mechanisms behind the gendered geography of marriage migration.

Educational Differences Between Partners

In this section we zoom in on differences in level of education between the native Swede and the foreign partner. We know from the literature that, in the general population, men in a relationship have, on average, a higher level of education than their partner. We also know that, increasingly, couples are formed between partners of equal educational level. Table 3, using the same low-, middle- and high-income categories of countries, shows the level of education of the imported partner by gender and region of origin. The results are surprising in that both male and female marriage immigrants from low-income countries have on average a higher level of education than those from high-income countries—63 per cent of women from low-income countries marrying a native Swedish man have post-secondary education compared to only 42 per cent from a high-income country. This finding supports the idea that migrant women from poor countries might be relatively highly educated, but unable to find a suitable partner in their own country (Paez Minervini and McAndrew 2006).

Table 4 further explores the educational level of marriage immigrants by geographic region of origin. A relatively high percentage of women from North Africa and the Middle East and from South-East and Other Asia have a low level of education (only compulsory school), whereas women from Eastern Europe and Russia, North America, South America and Australia and the Pacific have a high level (post-secondary or higher). For male marriage immigrants the picture is very similar, with the exception of partners originating from Eastern Europe, where a high percentage of men have a low level of education and very few have a high level. The results from Tables 3 and 4

Table 3. Level of education of immigrant men and women marrying a Swede by development state of the region of origin, 2004

	Percentage of Swedish men marrying immigrant women with		
	Compulsory schooling	Upper-secondary schooling	Post-secondary/tertiary schooling
Low-income country	14	23	63
Middle-income country	26	18	56
High-income country	15	43	42
	Percentage of Swedish women marrying immigrant men with		
	Compulsory schooling	Upper-secondary schooling	Post-secondary/tertiary schooling
Low-income country	16	33	51
Middle-income country	22	31	47
High-income country	15	44	41

Table 4. Level of education of immigrant men and women marrying a Swede by region of origin, 2004

	Percentage of Swedish men marrying immigrant women with		
	Compulsory schooling	Upper-secondary schooling	Post-secondary/tertiary schooling
Nordic countries	8	41	51
Western Europe	13	39	48
Eastern Europe	11	27	62
Mid-/South Africa	20	39	41
North Africa/Middle East	26	51	23
South-East/Other Asia	36	18	46
North America	5	30	65
South America	8	36	56
Australia/Pacific	2	41	57
	Percentage of Swedish women marrying immigrant men with		
	Compulsory schooling	Upper-secondary schooling	Post-secondary/tertiary schooling
Nordic countries	11	37	43
Western Europe	10	32	59
Eastern Europe	20	45	35
Mid-/South Africa	14	40	46
North Africa/Middle East	24	35	41
South-East/Other Asia	20	54	27
North America	4	31	65
South America	11	43	46
Australia/Pacific	8	32	61

show that, on average, marriage immigrants have relatively high levels of education (see also Górný and Kepinska 2004), especially women from low-income countries.

Table 5 explores the distance in educational level between partners by gender and region of origin. According to the homogamy hypothesis we can expect to find that partners have fairly similar levels of education. However, Table 5 shows a more complex and to some extent a more surprising picture, showing that, in the majority of couples with a partner from a high-income country, both partners have an equal level of education (60 and 53 per cent) or the imported partner has a higher level of education (30 and 34 per cent). For couples with a partner from a middle-income country the picture is more diverse: although the equally educated couples are a large group (38 and 36 per cent), for 39 per cent of these couples the imported partner has the highest level of education (for both men and women). Almost the same picture emerges for those couples with a partner from a low-income country. Our results evidence the homogamy hypothesis for partners from high-income countries and the negative assortative mating hypothesis—derived from the social exchange theory—for partners from middle- and low-income countries.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper set out to explore the globalisation of Swedish marriage fields. The central idea was that increasing international travel and use of the internet have broadened the geographical opportunity structure of potential partners for Swedish residents, increasing the chances of meeting a potential partner from abroad. We therefore expected to see an increase in marriage migration to Sweden over the last decade and a half. The unique feature of this paper is that we have used longitudinal registration

Table 5. Educational distances between partners, 2004

	Percentage of Swedish men marrying immigrant women		
	Low-income country	Middle-income country	High-income country
Immigrant much more educated	11	9	5
Immigrant more educated	25	30	25
Equally educated	40	38	60
Swede more educated	20	20	9
Swede much more educated	4	4	1
	Percentage of Swedish women marrying immigrant men		
	Low-income country	Middle-income country	High-income country
Immigrant much more educated	8	9	5
Immigrant more educated	28	30	29
Equally educated	40	36	53
Swede more educated	17	21	11
Swede much more educated	7	5	1

data for the whole Swedish population, enabling us to quantitatively explore changes over time in the volume and geography of marriage migration for a whole country, where most previous studies have used qualitative methods. The results show that, although the increase of international migration to Sweden was relatively modest during the years 1990–2004 (an increase of 17 per cent), the number of international marriage migrants has increased substantially—by 37 per cent. However, given the relatively small numbers of marriage migrants (2,519 in 1990; 3,449 in 2004), it is debatable whether we have found enough evidence to make claims about a ‘globalisation of Swedish marriage fields’.

This paper has yielded two major new insights into patterns of international marriage migration not previously recorded in the literature. The first is that we found a substantial proportion of all marriage migrants in Sweden to be males. This is surprising given that the literature is strongly biased towards female marriage migration and the experiences of mail-order brides in particular. Our results show that there is a large gap in our knowledge of marriage migration, as we know very little about the mechanisms behind male marriage migration. The second major insight arising from our empirical work is that the pattern of geographical origins of marriage migrants is highly gendered, with male and female marriage migrants in Sweden originating from different regions of the world. We also observed large gender differences in patterns of change in volumes of marriage migrants by region of origin between 1990 and 2004. These findings underpin the need for more work to be done on male marriage migration, as explanations of female marriage migration are unlikely to be valid for males.

The over-representation of female marriage migrants in our data from South-East and Other Asia, Eastern Europe and Russia, and South America concurs with the literature on mail-order brides, as do age and educational differences between partners from these regions and native Swedish men. The patterns found are likely to reflect both the supply-side and the demand-side of the marriage market. The supply-side consists only of females from traditional mail-order-bride regions who advertise themselves as potential partners on commercial matchmaking websites. Some of the couples might also have met in the country of origin of the foreign partner, for example in Thailand, which is a popular holiday destination for Swedes. This might explain the existence of (small numbers of) male marriage migrants from the traditional mail-order-bride regions. The demand-side for partners from the mail-order-bride regions consists of Western men with a preference for relatively young females with traditional family values. These men cannot find a local match, as both Swedish (and Western) women are, on average, looking for modern male partners of roughly their own age.

Our research is the first to quantify the age differences between marriage migrants and their native Western partners on the scale of a whole country. Our results show that female marriage migrants are on average much younger than their Swedish male partner and that there is a strong relationship between the income level of a country and age differences between the female marriage migrant and the Swedish male. The largest age differences can be found in couples with partners from the poorest

countries. These findings raise important questions about the potential exploitation of some women by Western men. Also the fact that marriage immigrants from even the poorest countries often have an equal or a higher level of education suggests that many migrants use marriage as a means to escape their home country, causing some degree of 'brain drain'.

Male marriage migrants are over-represented among those originating from Western Europe, Africa and the Middle East, North America and Australia. Couples with an imported male partner from Western and high-income countries show very similar characteristics to Swedish–Swedish couples, suggesting that the couples have formed in very similar ways and that the match between partners might have been made during employment- or leisure-related travel. Some might have met in Sweden while the foreign male was on a business trip. The male bias in marriage migrants originating from Africa and the Middle East is intriguing. The pattern found does not fit existing explanations of marriage migration. The pattern might be linked to preferences for African men by a specific category of Swedish women or, as has been suggested, to arranged marriages linked to obtaining legal residence permits.

Our findings show that the traditional distance decay of interaction on local marriage markets is less valid for contemporary international marriage migration to Sweden. For example, only 20 per cent of the immigrant women who moved to Sweden to partner with a native Swedish man came from the Nordic countries and Western Europe, compared to 29 per cent of immigrant women coming from South-East and Other Asia. The complex gendered geographical pattern of marriage migration suggests that some forms of marriage migration are conceptually closely linked to other forms of migration. Therefore, explanations of the geography of marriage migration have to be found in combining literatures on mail-order brides, international migration, and job- and leisure-related travel. Research on marriage migration should move beyond studying mail-order brides and flows of marriage migrants from poor to wealthy countries. More qualitative work is needed on the background and motives of, especially, male marriage migrants.

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