

MIXED MARRIAGES - THE DEMOGRAPHER'S VIEW

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Introduction

Time and again, students of the diaspora use a terminology like the "*alarming*" spread of mixed marriages⁽¹⁾ or "the *beneficial* influence ... in reducing the trend toward exogamy..."⁽²⁾ I would like to take advantage of the present gathering of Jewish demographers to make some comments about two aspects of the choice of this kind of wording, by demographers among whom it is rare and by other scholars among whom it is common.

(1) It is outside the competence of the demographer as a scientist to qualify demographic events, levels or trends as "good" or "bad", "desirable" or "regrettable", etc.

(2) Politicians, historians, community leaders, welfare workers and others may wish to qualify the demographer's findings about mixed marriages by value statements. However, if they rely on the full gamut of the results of an unprejudiced and comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, their opinions will certainly be mixed.

It should perhaps be emphasized, in the context of this introduction to our demographic ponderings, that all the social sciences are claimed not to be normative. But demography is probably even less so than both its big brothers: sociology and economics. For example, economists claim not to attach necessarily intrinsic value to, say, the satisfaction of basic needs, to the efficient use of resources or to rising levels of living. I am however afraid that, in practice, few economists are able to free themselves of a perhaps subconscious preference for an economic system which ensures a maximum level of living to a maximum of people. And sociologists are concerned with what they call "deviant" behaviour which society tries to prevent by "social control". Here again, an attempt is made to avoid attaching value judgements to deviant as against conformant role performance; but it is hard to overlook the normative origin of the concepts.

(1) See, e.g. Davis, M. "Mixed Marriages in Western Jewry: historical background to the Jewish response". In: *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 10, pp. 177-220, 1968.

(2) Della Pergola, S. *Jewish and Mixed Marriages in Milan, 1901-1968*. Jerusalem, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, 1972. p.47.

In demography, it is relatively easy to avoid value judgements because of the peculiar position of this discipline among other sciences. For instance, a statement like "in developing countries, very rapid population growth is undesirable, because it prevents economic growth", is certainly a value statement; but the demographer easily claims that the value aspect does not relate to the demographic content of the sentence; it is introduced only by the economic interpretation. That population growth may prevent economic development is a demographic statement without normative content; the idea that this is undesirable is introduced by the economist who considers economic development as desirable. Thus, rapid population growth is undesirable from the economist's point of view, not from that of the demographer. He remains aloof of value judgements.

Determinants and Consequences of Population Trends

That, in spite of wide agreement among demographers about this aspect of their science, the terms used in the description and analysis of mixed marriages risk being those of value judgements may obviously be a failure in the choice of wording rather than in concepts. But what is, in fact, the aim of demographic description and analysis, if it is not to find out what is good and bad, valuable or worthless, deplorable or beneficial? I would propose **grouping** the work of the demographer under three headings: (1) Description of levels and trends of a phenomenon (e.g. mixed marriages); (2) Causes of levels and trends; (3) Consequences of levels and trends.

This is obviously a scheme which applies to many empirical sciences: they are all concerned with the description of phenomena and the analysis of their causes and consequences. But in demography, and most particularly in the study of mixed marriages, this scheme is of special importance, since the frequency of mixed marriages is often used as an indicator of the existence of the circumstances which are assumed to be their causes and even as a quantitative measure of the prevalence of these circumstances which may, otherwise, not be easily quantifiable⁽³⁾. As a consequence, the causes of mixed marriages are sometimes misinterpreted as if they were their results. The scheme helps therefore to distinguish clearly between the phenomenon itself, what it is able to measure, and its real causes and consequences.

Among both causes and consequences, we may distinguish between demographic and non-demographic factors, where "demographic" relates to the size of the population involved and its sex - age - marital status structure, its labour-force participation, school enrolment, etc., as well its fertility, mortality and residential mobility. All other factors are non-demographic.

(3) Price, C.A. and Zubrzycki, J. "The use of intermarriage statistics as an index of assimilation". In: *Population Studies*. Vol. 16, pp. 58-69, 1962.

Levels and Trends in the Phenomenon

With regard to mixed marriages, the demographer takes an interest in levels and trends not only of the phenomenon itself but of a series of more specific events such as that of a Jewish man marrying a non-Jewish woman, or of a non-Jewish man marrying a Jewish woman. If in this context the attributes Jewish and non-Jewish refer to religion of a person at birth, conversions before and after marriages of each type are a second class of events to be studied and the religion in which the children of the different types of marriages are brought up and their eventual preference for the choice of a mate of one religion or another are also of interest. Obviously, age at marriage of bridegroom and bride and their social and economic characteristics (e.g. education, mother tongue, occupation, etc., of bridegroom, bride and their parents) are further aspects to be included in the description of levels and trends. And many others might be listed.

Causes

Let us now look at the causes of mixed marriages and take demographic factors first. The foremost to be considered is certainly the numerical equilibrium in the sex - age structure of the community, since disequilibrium is liable to lead to a shortage of persons of either sex who would be prospective mates of preferred characteristics for certain marriageable persons of the other sex. Such shortages occur easily as a consequence of random fluctuations in a small community of low external mobility, and they may become very serious, since the two factors would limit the marriage market from which spouses may be selected.

Another group of factors includes school enrolment, labour force participation, etc. where special attention must be given to the differentiation between general and parochial schools, working places where all, many, few or none of the business contacts are with Jews, as well as to the status in the occupation (e.g. employer, managerial, professional, clerical, operative, etc.) Indeed, at least the difference in the frequency of the two types of mixed marriages (Jewish husband and non-Jewish wife as against non-Jewish husband and Jewish wife) is certainly affected by the relative frequency of Jewish men and women with non-Jewish employers, co-workers and assistants. The sign of the difference in the frequency of the two types of mixed marriages is of particular interest, if it may be assumed that, as a general rule, men have a tendency to marry down rather than up with regard to education, social status⁽⁴⁾, etc. and that this is a true preference and does not reflect merely the availability of spouses (since in all societies with which we are concerned here, men attain in general higher educational,

(4) See, e.g., Rubin, Z. "Do American women marry up?" In: *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 33, pp. 750-760, 1968, and Heer, D.M. "The prevalence of black-white marriages in the U.S. 1960 and 1970". In: *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Vol. 36, pp.246-258, 1974.

professional and economic status than women). Under this assumption, in a society where Jews enjoy a relatively high social status, we should expect more mixed marriages of the type Jewish husband and non-Jewish wife, than of the opposite type. And inversely, a higher tendency of men to marry out, than that of women, can be assumed to indicate a relatively high status of the Jewish community, although the possible effect of other factors, and in particular, non-demographic ones, should never be disregarded. Nevertheless, the relative frequency of the two types of mixed marriages has been proposed to serve as a criterion for hierarchically ranking social groups(5).

With regard to the non-demographic factors affecting the frequency of mixed marriages, it may be useful to differentiate here between three groups of such factors, namely those acting on (i) the Jewish side, (ii) the non-Jewish side and (iii) the general societal level.

Assimilation is obviously the social factor acting on the Jewish side to which mixed marriages are most commonly ascribed. The loss of the Jewish identity, loosening of ties with the community organization, lack of religious conviction and observance are other often cited factors(6). But many students of the diaspora who are interested in mixed marriages forget that there is always also a non-Jewish partner involved in a mixed marriage, and forces which lead him (or her) to marry a Jew must also be taken into account, when the frequency of mixed marriages is to be explained. The foremost of these is the absence of anti-semitism, accompanied or not by a lack of religious, "racial" or ethnic prejudice, by a low degree of residential, educational, social and economic segregation and by the appreciation of other persons primarily as human beings. Looking at society at large, mixed marriages will be frequent in a society in which the emancipation of Jews has reached a high level, in which all kinds of discrimination are rare, and subcultures are not closed or segregated. It is thus a liberal, democratic and secular society, in which mate selection is left largely to the discretion of the prospective spouses, religion is considered as a matter of personal conscience and the community avoids getting involved in the private life of its citizens. The amount of Jewish mixed marriages is certainly an indicator of the degree of emancipation of Jews, and, in a more general way, intermarriage has been proposed as a measure of the degree of integration of a society.(7).

(5) Muhsam, H. V. "Une hierarchie des religions bas e sur le choix du conjoint". In: *Canadian Studies in Population*. No. 1, pp.246-255, 1974.

(6) Lazerwitz, B. "Intermarriage and conversion, a guide to research". In: *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 13, pp. 41-64, 1971.

(7) Kornacker, M. "Cultural significance of intermarriage: a comparative approach". In: *International Journal of Sociology and Family*. Vol. 2, pp. 147-152, 1971.

Consequences

And what about the consequences of mixed marriages? Let us look first at the demographic consequences. The most direct of these relate to the field of nuptiality. From this aspect, there can be no doubt that in the presence of the possibility of marrying out more persons are able to find a spouse than in the absence of this choice. However, the question must be asked, whether in spite of the improved chances of finding a spouse for the population at large, certain restricted groups of the Jewish population of either sex are not discriminated against, because their preferred mates may show a relatively strong tendency to marrying out. Furthermore, it is of interest to see whether persons marrying out marry earlier or later, etc., and whether mixed marriages are less, or perhaps more, stable than endogamous ones, i.e. whether they are exposed to a higher⁽⁸⁾ or a lower⁽⁹⁾ risk of ending in divorce.⁽¹⁰⁾ This last aspect is of particular importance if we consider it as the main function of marriage to constitute the basis of a stable and lasting family. A low risk of divorce for a given type of marriage is then an indicator of the chances of success of such marriages to perform this role. The successful socialization of children is another indicator of the same character, but should perhaps not be discussed under the heading of demographic consequences of mixed marriages.

However, as soon as children born in such marriages are taken into account, the fact that the marriage is mixed is liable to affect population size and its growth or decline, and this is often considered to be the most important, if not the only demographic consequence of mixed marriages. It should indeed be stressed that mixed marriages *per se* have no direct effect on population size, as long as none of the spouses converts because of the mixed marriage. However, even if no legal conversion takes place, one of the spouses often loses most of his (or her) bonds with the community to which he/she belonged before marriage; if this happens more often to the Jewish spouse than to the non-Jewish one of a mixed marriage, it causes a loss to the numerical strength of the Jewish community⁽¹¹⁾.

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- (8) Muhsam, H.V. "A Note on the Use of Divorce Statistics to Measure Ethnical Cleavage in Israel". In: Schmelz, U.O. et al., eds. *Papers in Jewish Demography, 1973*, Jerusalem. Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University, 1977. pp. 369-373.
- (9) Petrovic, R. "Etnicka Heterogamija i Stabilnost Braka". *Sociologija*. Vol. 10, pp. 39-58, 1968.
- (10) Monahan, Th. P. "Are Interracial Marriages Really Less Stable?" In: *Social Forces*. Vol. 48, pp. 461-473, 1970.
- (11) Goldstein, S. and Goldscheider C., *Jewish Americans - Three generations in a Jewish community*. Engelwood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968.

But let us come back to the more important impact of mixed marriages on population size and growth, namely that related to children born in such marriages. The importance of this effect depends obviously on the number of children born and more significantly on their religious affiliation. Indeed, mixed marriages often differ from endogamous ones in the former aspect and the two types of mixed marriages differ in general from one another and from endogamous ones in both these aspects. If the religious affiliation of children in all mixed marriages is, for instance determined according to the Halakha, the effect of mixed marriages on the size of the Jewish population depends on two conditions: (i) would the woman who actually married out have found, *ceteris paribus*, also otherwise an acceptable spouse? and (ii) if she could have found such a spouse, would they have more or less children? If condition (i) is fulfilled, the effect of mixed marriages on population growth depends still on the situation with regard to condition (ii). And finally we should ask ourselves whether there are perhaps women who are not ready to marry out although they could have found non-Jewish spouses and would have had children with them; if this is so, the absence of mixed marriages slows population growth down. However, in practice, the effective religious affiliation of children born in mixed marriages is, in general, not determined according to the Halakha, but by a wide variety of criteria which can neither be listed nor discussed in the present context. In the extreme case, where children born in mixed marriages adopt the religion of the non-Jewish spouse the loss to population growth, or the risk of population decline is maximal. Most other circumstances place themselves between the case of the Halakha and that of total loss.

However, two points should not be overlooked: what are, in fact, the chances for the children of a person who is so little integrated in the Jewish community that he (or she) actually marries out, to be re-integrated into the community if the person who, in fact, married out, had, by constraint or otherwise, married endogamously? On the other hand, there are probably cases where the non-Jewish spouse of a mixed marriage becomes, after marrying a Jew, more strongly attached to Judaism than a Jewish spouse would, and children born in such marriages may be better integrated in the Jewish community than children born in some endogamous marriages⁽¹²⁾. In other words, the demographic consequences of mixed marriages should not be assessed by comparing the outcome of such marriages with that of some kind of "ideal" endogamous marriage, but with that of the type of endogamous marriage which the outmarrying spouse can realistically be assumed to contract under the given circumstances, or with that of remaining ultimately unmarried, instead of marrying out.

Thus, the frequency of mixed marriages may be an *indicator* of the degree of assimilation and disintegration of a Jewish community, rather than a contributing factor in this process⁽¹²⁾. It is, however, not

(12) Lazerwitz, B. *op. cit.*

easy to collect direct evidence on the alternative. And even the claim that each mixed marriage is an irreversible step in the process, while other steps are, in principle, reversible, requires empirical corroboration.

There remain still the non-demographic consequences of mixed marriages. Only two of the many such consequences will be mentioned here: (i) in the case of a small and isolated Jewish community, mixed marriages are one of the ways of breaking up the genetic "isolate" which such communities often constituted for centuries. And (ii) in the long run, mixed marriages destroy the identity of the Jewish community as a separate social and cultural unit, and may lead to its complete and final amalgamation in the non-Jewish surroundings.

Conclusions

We may now come back to the question, under which assumptions, from which aspect and in view of which criteria, mixed marriages are "good" or "bad". The demographer's responsibility is obviously terminated, as soon as a complete list of determinants (for which the frequency of mixed marriages serves as an indicator) and consequences has been established, taking into account all the specific conditions and circumstances of the community under consideration. It should be stressed, that the above discussion is not claimed to be a complete guide for the required listing.

When the list is established, every person has the right to express opinions on the basis of his own norms and criteria.

Let us consider as an example, the opinion of the marriage counsellor, who may be consulted by the prospective spouse of a mixed marriage. If his advice is concerned only with the personal fate of the prospective spouse, it depends, as far as it relies on demographic considerations, (and these are the only ones which interest us here) on two criteria: what are the chances of finding a Jewish spouse for the Jewish party who is about to contract the mixed marriage, and what are the chances of the mixed marriage to become a failure (say, in terms of the actuarial risk of ending in divorce) in comparison with those of an endogamous marriage which the person concerned may eventually contract, if the mixed marriage is rejected. Thus, the advice may be in favour or against the mixed marriage, according to circumstances.

The social welfare worker or the sociologist may wish to use the data on mixed marriages to measure the prevailing levels of emancipation, antisemitism, prejudice and segregation, and he will consider a high frequency as a sign of progress and improvement in these fields.

Finally, a community leader will consider the risk of a decreasing numerical strength of the community as a so extremely undesirable consequence of mixed marriages, that he will be inclined to disregard any other possible aspects.

It should therefore, perhaps, be repeated, in conclusion, that some persons seem to have good reasons to consider mixed marriages, from the demographic point of view, as a blessing, while others - as a curse. The professional demographer should avoid identifying himself with the considerations of either party or its conclusions: if he did so, he would lose his wide, comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Be mixed marriages forbidden by law, despised by community leaders, shunned by society and deplored by the families concerned, or rather the highest aspiration of a few or the many, the responsibility of the demographer is not concerned with censuring or praising their occurrence. His professional duty consists merely in measuring properly their frequency and in studying, in the societal setting concerned, all the factors which cause such marriages as well as the broad spectrum of consequences to which they lead.