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**EU-Citizenship as a Resource in Marriages  
With Women From Less Developed Countries.  
An Analysis of Transnational Assortative Matching  
Based on the German Socio-Economic Panel**

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Die „Berliner Studien zur Soziologie Europas“ des Lehrstuhls für Makrosoziologie der Freien Universität Berlin verstehen sich als ein Ort zur Vorpublikation von Beiträgen, die später in Fachzeitschriften und Sammelbänden veröffentlicht werden sollen. Die Beiträge sollen helfen, eine Soziologie Europas zu profilieren; sie stehen auch im Kontext des Master-Studiengangs „Soziologie – Europäische Gesellschaften“.

Gegenstand der Reihe sind Beiträge zur Analyse der Herausbildung einer europäischen Gesellschaftsstruktur und -kultur, vergleichende Analysen, die die Unterschiede und Gemeinsamkeiten zwischen verschiedenen europäischen Gesellschaften thematisieren, sowie theoretische Versuche einer Soziologie Europas.

Ziel der Reihe ist es, durch die frühe Verbreitung dieser Arbeiten den wissenschaftlichen Gedankenaustausch zu fördern. Die Beiträge sind nur über das Internet als pdf-Datei zu beziehen.

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**Abstract**

For people from economically weak countries, one possible way of migration to the European Union is marriage with a EU-citizen. This paper examines which factors lead to marriages between German men and women from countries which are less developed. Two hypotheses deduced from exchange theory and the economic theory of the family are tested: 1. Low physical and social attractiveness as well as reduced opportunities to meet German partners lead to marriage with a woman from a poorer country. 2. Because of the economic gap between their countries of origin, German men can marry comparatively more attractive women on the international marriage market than they could hope to attract within Germany. The analysis uses data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP, 1984-2005). The results show that men with wives from poorer countries do not differ from men with German wives with regard to their attractiveness and social contacts. A better explanation for these marriages lies in the age-related “marriage squeeze” encountered by German men older than 30 years. Only on account of their age do these men struggle to find a spouse on the German marriage market, which in turn increases the likelihood of them seeking marriage with women from poorer countries. Furthermore, the results do offer strong evidence that the economic gap between their countries of origin does allow German men to marry more attractive women when they opt for partners from poorer countries.

## 1. Introduction\*

Since the late 1970s, the Western European marriage markets have internationalized to an until then unknown degree. Marriages between men from these societies and women from far away countries became common; in these marriages, the wedding usually coincides directly with the woman's migration to the man's home country. In the past 15 years, several developments like the fall of the iron curtain, the spread of the internet, and cheap international flights have boosted marriages between men from highly developed countries and women from less developed countries. Today, in these marriage constellations the wives' most common regions of origin are Eastern Europe, South-East Asia and South America (del Rosario 1994; Klein 2000).<sup>1</sup> In the public discussion, a certain stereotype is attached to these marriages: The man is middle-aged, has a heavysset appearance and a pronounced underclass habitus. He is someone one would not expect to be very successful with women, but in his arms he holds a much younger, beautiful, graceful woman with exotic traits.

These couples have been subject of scientific research since the 1980s. They concentrate mostly on the factors that lead to these marriages on the part of the wife. The explanation is seen in the economic gap between the countries of origin of both partners: Low-skilled persons from underdeveloped countries, who want to participate in western prosperity, are faced with growing immigration restrictions. In the early 1990s, Germany tightened its immigration laws to slow down immigration from Eastern Europe (Herbert 2001: 315ff.). At the Tampere EU summit of 1999 the European Union decided the development of a common asylum and immigration policy. In the 2004 "Hague Programme" the EU concretizes its efforts for stricter actions against illegal immigration, the creation of a European asylum regulation and visa policy. These measures further restrict the opportunities to immigrate to the European Union for people from low developed countries. One of the few remaining migration opportunities for these persons is marriage migration. Empirical works on marriage migration arrive at the unisonous conclusion that for women from underdeveloped countries marriage with a husband from a highly developed country fre-

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<sup>1</sup> These are the main areas of origin of the foreign wives of German men (Statistisches Bundesamt 2004). These are apparently also the regions preferred by men from other western countries, including the USA, looking for a wife from a less developed country through an agency. A search for 'mail-order brides' on the internet leads to agencies who offer contacts to women from these parts of the world.

quently serves immigration (Beer 1996; del Rosario 1994; Müller-Schneider 2000; Ru-enkaew 2003).

But what are the factors that lead to these marriages on the part of the man? In existing studies on marriage migration the men are not taken into account in detail. They are treated only casually, and in a remote diagnosis manner they are described as persons with psychological deficits, who marry an inferior woman to compensate for inferiority complexes (for the German discussion cf. Meerwein 1988; Niesner, Anonuevo, Aparicio, and Sonsiengchai-Fenzl 1997). But can this image of the unattractive, socially powerless underclass man be verified in an empirical survey?

This study analyzes systematically which factors on the part of German men lead to the marriage with a woman from an underdeveloped country. The question is examined in two main respects, which are derived from general theories of the marriage market and earlier research results in section (2). First, it will be asked whether men who have remained unsuccessful on the German marriage market due to low attractiveness and low social contact choose marriage with a woman from an underdeveloped country as emergency solution. Second, it is examined whether German men use these marriages to find more attractive partners than it would be possible for them on the German marriage market. The data are presented in section (3). The analysis of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) in section (4) shows that the marriage of a woman from an underdeveloped country is hardly connected with low chances on the German marriage market. The assumption that German men marry more attractive women in these marriages, however, proves right. Section (5) discusses methodological problems and possible improvements of further studies in this field.

## **2. Dynamics of the marriage market and their implications**

Which factors have influence on the marriage between German men and women from poorer countries? Research literature on mate selection gives us directions to the answer. There are two main groups of partner choice theories. One is based on the theory of action, dealing with the incentives for a person to marry another person (2.1); the other group concentrates on the structural opportunities of a person to find a partner (2.2). These theories can be combined with the results of empirical research on marriage migration, according to which low chances on the German marriage market lead to marriage with a wife from a poorer country. Mate selection theories and empirical results also suggest that these marriages serve the maximization of the partner's attractiveness, which has not been considered as an incentive in earlier research (2.3).

## 2.1 The role of attractiveness for success on the marriage market

In the research of the marriage market, two theories based on the theory of action have been developed:

a) The exchange theory assumes that out of all available partners, a person will choose the partner, with whom the most effective social exchange is possible. In a partnership, both partners serve each other as providers of resources. For the exchange of resources at the beginning of a partnership, the inequality of central features is an important precondition. Both partners win by becoming a couple, as they come to share resources of their respective partner. According to Edwards, an individual's chances on the marriage market are determined first by its social status and second by "interpersonal skills and personal assets" (Edwards 1969: 523). It has not been elaborated which social spheres and which personal qualities are relevant to increase the value of the potential partner on the marriage market. Research applying this theory has translated the personal resources mainly as physical attractiveness (Buss 1985; Franzen and Hartmann 2001; Taylor and Glenn 1976; Udry 1977).

b) The economic theory of the family also views singles on the marriage market as rational actors, who try to maximize their benefit by the partner choice. Here, the person is a producer of commodities which cannot be bought on the market. The theory defines commodities as goods and conditions that directly produce benefit and satisfaction. A large part of these commodities, like children, prestige, altruism, companionship and love, cannot be produced by the actor alone, but only together with a partner. Production is generally most efficient with a partner who has high resources (Becker 1991: 113). Higher education increases the income and the children's education, an individual with high prestige transfers this in a relationship to its partner, and high physical attractiveness of a partner means high intrinsic and social benefit (Hill and Kopp 2001: 18).

These theories allow us to determine what makes a person attractive on the marriage market. Basically, both theories arrive at the same conclusion: People aim at maximizing the benefit of their partnership. A partnership's utility grows with the resources of the partners. Thus, on the marriage market, those individuals are attractive who have high social and personal resources. For a clear definition of the relevant features – which are not given by mate choice theories – two further theoretical approaches will be brought in.

c) Bourdieu's theory of capital is used for the concretization of social status. According to Bourdieu, an individual's social position is determined by three types of capital. *Economic capital* exists in the shape of property. *Cultural capital* is described as all forms of education. A person has *social capital* by being member of a group, which gives it the possibility to use the group's resources, social networks and services (Bourdieu 1983: 192). This concept lends itself to the measurement of social stratification and will be used for the description of differences in social attractiveness.

d) For a concretization of personal features this paper restricts itself to biological/physical characteristics. Theories about the meaning of physical features for partner choice are found in the works of evolutionary psychology, according to which it is the goal of partner choice to find a partner who seems most capable of raising children. A person assesses a potential partner as attractive whose body features promise that reproduction with this person will be successful. Two body features are central for this assessment: *health* is an important prerequisite for healthy children, *youthfulness* promises fertility and makes sure that the parent will be able to provide for the children long enough.<sup>2</sup>

Let us now have a look at empirical research on marriage migration. The results of this – almost exclusively qualitative – line of research are consistent with the assumptions of mate selection theories. One central result is that men from wealthy countries marry women from poorer countries because they have remained unsuccessful on their national marriage market. It has been found that these men are unattractive physically or with respect to social status. Ruenkaew and Beer report that these men have low income and conclude that they are too unattractive for German women (Beer 1996: 163; Ruenkaew 2003: 237). Both studies refer to physical unattractiveness, Ruenkaew explicitly naming overweight (Beer 1996: 163; cf. del Rosario 1994; Ruenkaew 2003: 197).

From the above information we can draw a first hypothesis. According to mate selection theories, attractiveness is an important factor in the search for a partner. Qualitative research concludes that German men marry women from poorer countries because they cannot find a German wife due to relative unattractiveness. The first hypothesis (H1) thus is: *the lower a German man's attractiveness in comparison with his competitors on the German marriage market, the more probable is his marriage with a woman from an economically weaker country.*

## 2.2 The role of opportunities for success on the marriage market

Chances to find a partner do not only depend on an individual's attractiveness. Two further conditions have to be fulfilled: a) the marriage market has to offer a suitable partner, and b) the person seeking a partner must be able to find that partner.

a) Like every market, also the marriage market can be imbalanced, e.g. due to a general lack of men after a war. The marriage market imbalance relevant here is given only within a certain social group. On every marriage market, age-groups marry endogamously, which means that the larger the age difference between two

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<sup>2</sup> Psychological research has shown that especially for women youthfulness is important for them being perceived as attractive; the older a woman the less beautiful she is judged by men and women. And the judgment of a woman's beauty correlates positively with the age of the person judging – young women's attractiveness is judged highest by older men (Henss 1992: 293f.).



people, the more improbable it becomes that they marry (Martin 2001: 305). Therefore, an imbalance of the marriage market can also exist for age-groups, when in a certain age-group there are more singles of one sex than the other. In Germany, single men above the age of about 30 years are confronted with a lack of single women in their age-group (Martin 2001: 310). German men above this age have growing difficulties to find a woman. Empirical studies on marriage migration have found that German men who marry women from poorer countries are on average considerably older than those men who marry German women (Beer 1996: 229; Heine-Wiedenmann and Ackermann 1992: 125f.; Ruenkaew 2003: 196). However, this fact has not yet been interpreted as a factor that leads to the marriage in the first place. Considering the marriage market imbalance to the disadvantage of German men older than 30 years, this paper proposes that – if this higher marriage age will be shown here as well – age can be a factor that leads to marriages with women from poorer countries.

b) Another factor which is deciding for success on the marriage market is the participation in opportunity contexts. People get to know each other in social contexts, such as the circle of friends, the family, the workplace, public events and the like. In order to find a partner, it is necessary to participate in such contexts, since “who does not meet, does not mate” (cf. Feld 1981: 1019). Whereas these mating contexts were usually organized by the family in earlier times, in the individualized society every person is responsible for the participation in these contexts him- or herself (Bozon and Héran 1989: 94). Studies on the marriage market have shown that 63 per cent of all couples meet in the contexts ‘friends/acquaintances’ and ‘going out/dancing’ (cf. Bozon and Héran 1989; Franzen and Hartmann 2001: 192).

Qualitative studies on marriage migration come to the conclusion that opportunities on the marriage market play a deciding role for the marriage of a wife from a poorer country. They found that German men who opt for these marriages have a lack of social contacts. They are either too shy or have too little time to build up a circle of friends where they could meet a woman (Beer 1996: 185; Ruenkaew 2003: 212).

Men, whose partner search on the German marriage market fails due to a lack of opportunities, can alternatively search on the international market. Accordingly, the second hypothesis (H2) is: *German men who have – in comparison with their competitors on the German marriage market – a lack of opportunities to meet potential partners, tend to marry women from economically weaker countries.*

### **2.3 A way to maximize the partner’s attractiveness**

Beside low chances on the national marriage market, I suggest that there is a further incentive for men from wealthy countries to marry women from poorer countries. This choice allows them to marry comparatively more attractive women than it is possible in marriages with women from their national marriage market.

a) Age difference. Empirical studies have found that in the respective marriages, the average age difference between the partners is considerably higher than in same-nation marriages. In marriages with two German spouses, the man is on average 3 years older than his wife (Klein 1996: 354). In marriages with women from poorer countries, the observed average age difference ranges between 8.8 years (Niesner, Anonuevo, Aparicio, and Sonsiengchai-Fenzl 1997: 92) and 11.0 years (Beer 1996: 228).

b) Difference in education. The couples studied here vary from German couples in their difference in education. Whereas in marriages with two German partners we find a strong trend towards educational homogamy, couples with German men and women from poorer countries tend clearly towards educational hypogamy. Here, women marry men less educated than themselves. In Niesner et al. (1997: 33), 68.5 per cent of the Filipino women and 60.2 per cent of South American women have completed a university degree, while only 15.8 per cent of their German husbands have acquired this level of education.

These results suggest a further explanation for the research question. The international marriage market might be more than a makeshift solution for unsuccessful men. According to the exchange theory and the economic theory of the family, actors on the marriage market aim to maximize the attractiveness of their partners. A number of studies have shown that income, education and professional prestige of a man have a positive effect on the attractiveness of his wife (Schoen and Woolredge 1989; Taylor and Glenn 1976; Udry 1977). This study assumes that in the partnerships examined here, the husband's (his country's) economic resources are exchanged against non-economic resources of the wife. Therefore, the third hypothesis (H3) is: *the higher the husband's country of origin's economic capital in comparison to the wife's country of origin's economic capital, the higher is the wife's education and physical attractiveness compared to the husband's education and physical attractiveness.*

### 3. Data, methods, variables

This study uses data from the waves 1984-2005 of the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP). Three samples were extracted from the panel. The central sample contains German men with wives from economically weaker countries, whose marriage behavior is to be compared with that of the men in the other two samples. The second sample consists of German men with German wives, i. e. men who have married on the national marriage market. The third sample contains German men with wives from economically strong countries, which is used as control group for the assumption of the economic incentive for women from poorer countries to marry a German man – for women from economically strong countries this incentive should

not exist.<sup>3</sup> The samples with foreign wives only contain women who were not born in Germany and who did not hold German nationality at the time they were interviewed, whereas the opposite criteria are used for the men. In the sample with German wives, both partners were born in Germany and hold German nationality.<sup>4</sup>

By these criteria, 99 couples with wives from economically weaker countries and 76 couples with wives from economically strong countries were extracted from the GSOEP. Tables 1a and 1b show the wives' countries of origin.

In the GSOEP data are available from multiple waves for most couples. For an analysis of partner choice it is best to use data that were recorded as close to the marriage as possible. Therefore, data were used from the wave in which the couple was first included.

The hypotheses will be tested in two sections. The first part (4.1) checks hypotheses H1 and H2, which assume an interrelation between a German man's chances on the German marriage market and his marriage with a wife from an economically weaker country. The second section (4.2) analyses hypothesis (H3), which assumes an exchange process between the husband's country's wealth and the wife's physical attractiveness. Both sections are divided into two parts. The first part is descriptive and compares the mean values of the particular indicators between the three groups of German men. The second part is explanatory, using regression models. In section 4.1, the marriage of a wife from an economically weaker country is regressed on the various dimensions of a German man's attractiveness and opportunity. In section 4.2, linear regressions show the influence of the wife's country of origin on the difference in education and physical attractiveness between the partners.

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<sup>3</sup> The classification into highly developed and less developed countries follows the example of Müller-Schneider (2000: 15ff.) who names the classic immigration countries Canada, USA and Australia as well as a number of highly developed countries in Western and Southern Europe as countries that attract migrants. Müller-Schneider argues on the basis of immigration numbers, but does not propose a clear measure for the economically high position of the immigration countries. The study at hand employs the 2002 Human Development Index (HDI) as indicator of welfare and quality of life of countries of origin of German men's wives (United Nations Development Programme 2002). Western welfare states and the whole European Union with 15 member states as it existed up to May 2004 are categorized as economically strong immigration countries here.

<sup>4</sup> Couples with wives from the GSOEP guest-worker sample (families from Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy and Spain) were not included as marriages with a foreign wife, because from 1978 onwards, immigrant workers could apply for a permanent residence permit, so that it is improbable that such marriages serve for the attainment of a residence permit.

Table 1a: Women from economically weaker countries – countries of origin

	Frequency
Poland	14
Philippines	12
Russia	10
Thailand	6
Croatia	5
Rumania	5
Hungary	5
Ukraine	4
Columbia	3
Czech Republic	3
Turkey	3
Byelorussia	3
Armenia	2
China	2
Iran	2
Cuba	2
Mexico	2
Bolivia	1
Brazil	1
Bulgaria	1
Ex-Yugoslavia <sup>a)</sup>	1
Indonesia	1
Jordan	1
Cameroon	1
Macedonia	1
Namibia	1
Nigeria	1
Peru	1
Zambia	1
Sri Lanka	1
South Africa	1
Venezuela	1
Vietnam	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>

Table 1b: Women from economically strong countries – countries of origin

	Frequency
Austria	16
France	9
Switzerland	8
United Kingdom	7
Italy	7
Netherlands	6
Belgium	3
Sweden	3
Spain	3
USA	3
Denmark	2
Finland	2
Greece	2
Japan	2
„Benelux“ <sup>a)</sup>	1
Ireland	1
Canada	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>

Source: GSOEP 1984-2005.

<sup>a)</sup> As labeled in the GSOEP.

I will now briefly explain the GSOEP variables used below. Physical attractiveness is measured by the *body mass index (BMI)* and *satisfaction with health*. For the BMI, which is calculated by a person's height and weight, two categories are constructed: respondents with a value up to 25 are categorized as being of normal weight, those with a BMI over 25 are categorized as overweight (World Health Organization 2004).<sup>5</sup> The only question on health available for all waves, "How satisfied are you

<sup>5</sup> The dataset contains 23 underweight husbands (BMI under 18.5), of which 22 are in the sample with German wives and one is in the sample with wives from poorer countries.

today with your health?" could be answered on a scale from 0 ("totally unhappy") to 10 ("totally happy").<sup>6</sup>

Two of Bourdieu's types of capital will be used for the measurement of social status. The economic capital is represented by the metric variable *monthly income*. The cultural capital is measured by a person's *level of education* as given by the internationally comparable CASMIN-classification (Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations). The variable is coded in 9 levels from (1) "no educational attainment" to (9) "university degree".

A person's opportunities to find a partner on the marriage market are represented by the *marriage age* and the *participation in important marriage market segments*. A dichotomous variable distinguishes between men of up to 30 years of age (0) and those men who are affected by the marriage squeeze for German men over the age of 30 years (1). The participation in important marriage market segments is measured by the frequency with which people "Meet friends, relatives, neighbors" and "Go to pop concerts, dance events, discos". The answers are coded as 1 = "rarely, never", 2 = "at least once per month" and 3 = "at least once per week".

## 4. Empirical analysis

### 4.1 Lack of chances on the national marriage market

In this chapter, the hypotheses will be tested that German men with low attractiveness (H1) and a lack of opportunities to meet a woman on the German marriage market (H2) are more likely to marry a woman from an economically weaker country than their competitors.

Table 2 compares the average values of the men in the three samples regarding the various attractiveness and opportunity dimensions.

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<sup>6</sup> The answers to this rather subjective question show a clear correlation with the more objective items "How would you describe your current health?" (.751) and "How often have you gone to a doctor within the last three months?" (.382). Pearson's  $r$ , significant on 1 per cent-level in two-tailed test, full GSOEP sample 2005 (N=2940).

Table 2: Physical attractiveness, social Status, and opportunities on the marriage market of German men by wife’s country of origin

	<i>Physical Attractiveness</i>		<i>Econ./Cult. Capital</i>		<i>Opportunities</i>		Marriage age > 30 Years in %
	Body Mass Index  > 25 in %	Satisfaction with health  Mean	Income  DM Mean	Education < university entrance di- ploma in %	Social activities with friends etc.  Mean	Cinema, pop concerts, danc- ing  Mean	
Wife from econ. weaker country	40.0	7.06 (1.98)	5,616 (4,151)	66.3	2.07 (0.78)	1.22 (0.51)	65.1
Wife from econ. strong country	42.9	7.39 (1.91)	7,713 (7,707)	47.4	2.10 (0.76)	1.21 (0.44)	29.2
Wife from Ger- many	52.8	6.92 (2.37)	4,929 (5,370)	70.4	2.13 (0.72)	1.21 (0.49)	30.0
N	6459	10051	7693	9978	9290	9151	9740

Source: SOEP 1984-2005. Standard deviations in parentheses.

First of all it can be concluded that the marriage with a woman from an economically strong country is connected with a high social status. Men in those marriages have a below average BMI and they are healthier than average German married men; also, they clearly have a higher income and are more educated than the men in the other two samples.

Let us focus on the upper and lower group. The assumption that physical unattractiveness leads to the marriage with a wife from an economically weaker country is disproved. Men in those marriages are less often overweight and they are healthier than men with German wives. The same is shown for the social status: men with women from poorer countries have a slightly higher income than men with German wives and a slightly higher proportion has achieved the general university entrance diploma (CASMIN level 6). Also the indicators for participation in the marriage market show only marginal differences between the two groups. Men with wives from poorer countries meet friends slightly less often, but they engage in social activities virtually as often as men with German wives. Social involvement seems to have no impact on the concerning marriage behavior.

Looking at the marriage age, however, we can see a clear confirmation of the hypothesis. Of the men who have married women from economically weaker countries, indeed a noticeably higher proportion was older than 30 years at the time of marriage than in the two other samples. Almost two third of the men in this group were affected by an age-related marriage squeeze when they married a woman from a poorer country. This value is far higher than the results for the other two samples.<sup>7</sup> The strength of this effect in various age groups is additionally analyzed in a logistic

<sup>7</sup> The high marriage age for men with wives from poorer countries is strongly connected with earlier marriages. Of these men, 37.2 per cent were married before. This value lies at only 6.9 per cent in the sample with wives from economically strong countries and at 18.7 per cent for men with German wives. However, no further conclusions will be drawn from this fact here, since the data at hand offer no information on how these numbers are related to partner choice.

regression with the dependent variable “marriage with a wife from a poorer country”. Table 3 gives the probabilities of these marriages for men in different age groups in contrast to the age group 23-25.

Table 3: Marriage with a wife from a poorer country  
(logistic regression with marriage age groups)

< 23 years	-1.059	N = 1538
26-28 years	.076	N = 1983
29-32 years	1.255**	N = 1461
33-37 years	1.481***	N = 800
38-42 years	2.069***	N = 485
43-52 years	2.111***	N = 499
> 52 years	1.045*	N = 568

Source: SOEP 1984-2005. The table gives the standardized effect coefficients (\*\*\*:  $p < .001$ , \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*:  $p < .05$ ). Reference category: 23-25 years (N = 2406).

The regression shows that the probability of marriage with a woman from a poorer country rises with increasing age and only falls after the age of 52. The age-related probability of these marriages is thus congruent with the age-related marriage squeeze of German men (Martin 2001).

The influence of all indicators from Table 2 on the marriage with a wife from a poorer country is analyzed in a multivariate model in Table 4.

Table 4: Influence of chances on the marriage market on the probability to marry a woman from a poorer country (logistic regression)

<b>Physical attractiveness</b>	
Overweight (Body Mass Index over 25)	-.212
Satisfaction with health	.262
<b>Attractiveness by Bourdieu's sorts of capital</b>	
Income	.040
Education	-.178
<b>Opportunities on the marriage market</b>	
Social activities with friends, relatives, neighbors	.016
Visits to pop concerts, dances, discos	-.085
Marriage age over 30 years	.908***
<b>Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)</b>	.097
<b>N<sup>a)</sup></b>	4612 (58/48)

Source: GSOEP 1984-2005. The table gives the standardized effect coefficients (\*\*\*:  $p < .001$ ).

<sup>a)</sup> The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of marriages with women from economically weaker countries and marriages with women from economically strong countries contained in N.

Most of the included areas have – as could be expected after the bivariate results in Table 2 – no significant influence on the decision for marriage with a wife from an economically weaker country. The indicators of physical attractiveness, social status

and social contacts have non-significant effects. Furthermore, their coefficients indicate – with the exception of education and frequency of visits to concerts and discos – the opposite of the expected correlations.

A man's age has by far the strongest explanatory power for the marriage with a woman from an economically weaker country. Men over 30 years of age are subject to structural restrictions to finding a woman on the German marriage market. The choice of a woman from an economically weaker country is the way out of this situation.

## 4.2 Exchange of resources

Table 5 tests if and to what extent the economic resources of the husband are exchanged with non-economic resources of the wife in the marriages analyzed here. This is the case when in marriages with wives from poorer countries the wife is more attractive compared to the husband than in German-German marriages.<sup>8</sup>

Table 5: Difference in physical attractiveness and cultural capital between the spouses (mean value)

	Age difference (in years)	Difference in BMI	Difference in education (CASMIN)
Wife from econ. weaker country	7.91 (9.13)	3.44 (3.94)	-.55 (3.07)
Wife from econ. strong country	2.12 (4.89)	2.36 (4.27)	.49 (2.94)
Wife from Germany	2.76 (4.22)	1.67 (5.07)	.46 (2.23)
N	10140	6083	9978

Source: GSOEP 1984-2005. Standard deviations in parentheses.

The table shows that the assumptions are correct. The age difference between the partners shows a clear result. In marriages between German men and women from economically weaker countries the age difference of 7.91 years is almost three times as high as in German-German marriages. A similar result can be seen for the body mass index. Men who marry women from economically weaker countries have a higher BMI in relation to their wives than in the other samples; the difference is more

<sup>8</sup> The attractiveness of the wife will be measured here not in absolute numbers, but as difference between the values of the wife and the husband. For all variables, the value given for the wife is subtracted from the value given for the husband. For the age difference and the difference in the BMI, a higher value means that the wife is more attractive compared to the husband. The opposite is the case for the education variable, since high values in the CASMIN-classification mean high education and therefore attractiveness.



than twice as high as in the German-German sample. Also, as can be seen in the last column, on average women from poorer countries marry German men with lower education, whereas the opposite is the case for German women and women from rich countries.

Table 6 tests whether the influence of the economic gap between the countries of origin remains stable when the individual resources of the husband are controlled for.<sup>9</sup>

Table 6: Explanation of age difference, difference in BMI and difference in education (linear regressions)

	Age difference	BMI difference	education difference
<b>Economic gap between countries of origin</b> <sup>a)</sup>			
Wife from economically weaker country	.133***	.040**	-.050***
Wife from economically strong country	-.008	.011	-.012
<b>Individual attractiveness of husband</b>			
Income	.007	.051***	-.058***
Education	.011	.149***	.533***
BMI	-.019	.541***	.030*
Health	-.003	.036**	.008
Age	.194***	-.097***	.166***
R <sup>2</sup>	.054	.301	.297
N <sup>b)</sup>	4983 (66/53)	4708 (60/51)	4983 (66/53)

Source: GSOEP 1984-2005. The table gives the standardized beta coefficients; (\*\*\*:  $p < .001$ , \*\*:  $p < .01$ , \*:  $p < .05$ ).

<sup>a)</sup> The reference category for these two indicators are marriages with German wives.

<sup>b)</sup> The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of marriages with women from economically weaker countries and marriages with women from economically strong countries contained in N.

A look at the first two indicators, i. e. the countries of origin of foreign wives, shows that an economic gap between the countries has a significant influence on the difference of age, BMI and education between the partners. This results remains true when controlled by the individual resources of the German husband. In marriages with wives from economically weaker countries, the age difference and BMI differences are higher than in German marriages. The influence on the difference in education is negative as expected, indicating a marriage with comparably more educated wives. The results for marriages with women from economically strong countries are much weaker and not significant, which emphasizes the salience of the economic gap.

<sup>9</sup> The husband's age, BMI and education that were used to calculate the dependent variables have been included in the models for the sake of completeness. A test for multi-collinearity shows acceptable values. Pearson's  $r$  for age with age difference (.192), BMI with BMI difference (.508) and education with difference in education (.514) are clearly under the threshold of .80 given by Berry/Feldman (1985: 43). The tolerance values also do not indicate multi-collinearity.

We see that beside the economic gap between the countries of origin, the only further variable with a significant effect on age difference is the husband's age. This is to be expected, since young men can marry only slightly younger women; this value can rise only with the husband's age, which is the case here. Analogous mechanisms explain the strong interrelations between BMI and BMI difference as well as education and difference in education. What else can be seen: High monthly income and high education are factors that lead to marriage with slimmer women. This result is congruent with the findings of Franzen and Hartmann (2001), who show that men with higher social status marry physically more attractive women. Also, good health, an indicator for physical attractiveness, leads to marriage with a woman with a comparably lower BMI. The negative influence of age on BMI-difference can probably be explained by the gender-specific development of body fat in the life-circle; with rising age, this value increases stronger in women than in men (Casey, Dwyker, Coleman, and Valadian 1992: 17). The third regression shows that socially and physically attractive men marry comparably more educated women. The negative influence of income on the difference in education can be interpreted as an exchange between the man's economic capital against the wife's cultural capital (cf. Kalmijn 1998). Men with a higher BMI, i. e. physically less attractive men, marry less educated women.

The three regressions have made clear the influence of the economic gap between the partners' countries of origin on the marriage structure. People aim to maximize their partner's attractiveness. Here it could be shown that German men increase their partners' attractiveness by choosing a wife from a poorer country instead of a German wife.

## **5. Conclusion and outlook**

This study has asked which factors can explain German men's decision to marry women from economically weaker countries. Two approaches were chosen. First, it was analyzed whether men with low chances on the German marriage market choose women from these countries. This hypothesis has been largely disproved. Physical unattractiveness, low social status and a lack of social contact do not lead to these marriages. However, a strong influence could be shown for the marriage age of German men. The data at hand allow the conclusion that (divorced) German men marry women from poorer countries when they have age-related difficulties to find a (new) German wife (see footnote 7).

Second, the study tested whether the possibility to increase the partner's attractiveness is an incentive for German men to marry women from poorer countries. This hypothesis was fully confirmed. In these marriages, the wives are younger, slimmer and more educated compared to their husband than in German-German marriages. This observation remains stable also when controlling for the husband's individual resources. This proves that an exchange of resources can not only take place between

the direct features of marriage partners, but also between the individual feature of one partner and the economic wealth of the other partner's country of origin.

The results disprove to a large part the conclusions of earlier studies. The assumption of del Rosario (1994), Beer (1996) and Ruenkaew (2003) that physical unattractiveness, social isolation and a low social status lead to the marriages analyzed here, has been proved wrong. These men are not part of a fringe group, but partly possess even higher resources than the German average. In single cases, physical and social unattractiveness may be an explanation, but does not offer a statistically verifiable factor.

The methods employed here allow for various recommendations for further studies in this field. First, a better, especially larger sample would mean a major improvement. Beside a better reliability, this would permit a differentiation between foreign wives' countries of residence. The data collection should also be carried out as close to the point of marriage as possible or at least retrospectively for this time to record the situation of both partners at the moment when the decision for marriage was made.

Second, a better operationalization of social contacts as indicator for chances on the marriage market would be useful. In this study, only the frequency of contacts was measured, but this does not give any information about the person's behavior in these contexts, which also influences the chances of finding a partner. This could be improved with methods from psychology, e. g. with the measurement of characteristics like openness vs. introversion.

Third, a similar aspect which could not be followed here, is the influence of attitudes towards gender roles. In qualitative studies, men with South-East Asian wives said they had married their wife because they did not get along with the emancipated way of German women. It would be worth examining to what extent conservative attitudes towards gender roles influence the marriage to a foreign wife.

Fourth, the influence of cultural closeness could be taken into account. In a first step it would have to be examined whether a divergence between the cultural patterns of the man and potential German mates lead to the choice of a foreign wife. In a second step it could then be examined whether German men choose those foreign wives that are culturally close to them.

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