

The Shidduch Study: An Explanation

By: Yosef Sokol PhD

David couldn't sleep. He lay in bed in his dark room, feeling that familiar sinking feeling. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep until he finished looking at the list of potential matches on his phone. But it was so hard. Each name on the list reminded him of his ongoing struggle to find a suitable match. He had tried many times, each time hopeful, only to end up disappointed. He had long started to wonder if there was something fundamentally wrong with him that was keeping him from finding a wife.

As he glanced through the list, he remembered all the awkward conversations and failed dates. He thought about his first date with one young woman and how he realized they had completely different future plans. He remembered meeting another, feeling excited, and then getting rejected the next day.

With these memories surfacing, his disappointment seemed to weigh even heavier. The nagging worry that he might never find someone to marry was impossible to shake off.

Sarah sat alone at the kitchen table, staring at her laptop screen. It was past midnight, and she was filled with mixed emotions. She couldn't go to sleep before updating her Shidduch Resume yet again. This repetitive task had become a constant source of disappointment. After so many years of dating, she just felt drained and fed up.

"Why is it so difficult to find someone who gets me, shares my values, and wants to build a future with me?" she wondered. "Is that too much to ask for?"

Stories such as those above are all too familiar to many in the Orthodox Jewish community, where single men and women often struggle to find their marriage partner. This shidduch crisis has led to a range of initiatives aimed at addressing the issue. However, despite these efforts, the crisis persists, leaving many people grappling with the pain and frustration of being single.

This has led some to question whether the standard theories about the causes of the crisis are accurate. One prominent theory, the age gap theory, explains that men tend to date and marry women who are younger than them (for example, a 23-year-old man marrying a 19-year-old woman). As the population increases and more children are born, there will not be as many 23-year-old men as there are 19-year-old women. Over time, many women will be unable to find a spouse.

This age gap theory assumes that due to community growth of approximately 5% per year, combined with a 4-year age gap, more women enter the dating pool and are available than men, leading to a significant number of women remaining single.

However, despite efforts to reduce the age gap, the crisis persists, and many people continue to struggle with the pain and frustration of being single. This has led some to question the accuracy of the assumptions made about the causes of the crisis. Is it really true that so many more men than women get married? It has also been claimed that "10-20% of young girls will never get married" and "girls over the age of 25 are unlikely to ever get married." Are these claims true? These claims are not obvious and do not seem to be based on real numbers and solid research.

Fear-inspiring claims like these led to a study conducted by myself and fellow community researchers - as part of a grass-roots research group called DAAS (Data Analytics Addressing Shidduchim) of which I was the project leader. The study aimed to explore this area by conducting a thorough examination of the timing of marriage for men and women in our community.

We collected data on over 8,000 men and women with the eventual goal of helping singles get married as quickly and painlessly as possible. Since collecting and analyzing the data, publishing the findings in a peer-reviewed academic journal, and publicizing the main findings in Frum newspapers a few months ago, we have been asked many questions about what we did, what we found, and what the findings mean. As the academic journal article was somewhat difficult to understand and the brief reports in the Frum newspapers required simplification, some of those in our community have misinterpreted the study, its findings, and how I and the research team interpreted them. This article will hopefully explain what we did, what we found, and what we think it means.

The study

This section describes the methods we used in the study. For those who are more interested in the study findings, feel free to skip to the next section.

Our study engaged Orthodox Jews through an online survey. The survey assessed the demographic characteristics of our participants, such as age, gender, and family size, as well as the community they affiliated with, and their views on the Orthodox system of finding a spouse. When selecting communal affiliation, we asked participants to identify their Orthodox community, providing the following options: Yeshiva Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Chassidic, and Chabad Lubavitch. We aimed to ensure that these categories would encompass the broad landscape of observance while delineating clear distinctions between groups for comparison.

One major challenge was the creation of objective criteria for classifying people. Initially, we considered using the institutions they had attended for this determination, but this method proved unreliable. While some institutions are clearly within one kehillah or another — for example, BMG is primarily a Yeshiva Orthodox institution, and YU is a Modern Orthodox institution — many institutions do not strictly align with one community. Additionally, the fact that many individuals have attended multiple institutions, with some having been at both BMG and YU at different times in their lives, further complicated the use of institutions attended as a determining factor for classification.

In the end, we determined that the best method was to simply ask participants to identify the group with which they and their families associate. Although not a perfect solution, this approach was the closest we could get to understanding the diverse tapestry of the Orthodox Jewish community and the

unique challenges faced by each sub-group within it. For instance, if individuals indicated that they were raised Yeshiva Orthodox and have remained Yeshiva Orthodox, it is quite reasonable to assume they belong to that community.

Finding the right name to encompass the non-Modern Orthodox Litvishe community was a challenge. We considered options like Yeshivish, Yeshiva world, and Chareidi, but each had its own drawbacks and didn't fully encompass the "yeshiva" community. For example, many people consider Chareidi to be a culture specific to Israel, not applicable to people in the USA. Additionally, people may consider themselves "not Yeshivish" but still be part of the overall Yeshiva Orthodox community. We chose Yeshiva Orthodox as a broad term that people would recognize as relating to the Yeshiva world and contrasting with Modern or Chassidish Orthodoxy. We piloted this term with over 50 people from various communities before launching it. While individuals didn't necessarily enjoy selecting an option, they didn't have trouble understanding the terms and determining which best fit them. Following the study, thus far, we have not heard from anyone who was unable to complete the survey due to uncertainty about which option to select.

Initially, we hoped to gather lists of alumni from high schools and seminaries and track who got married. Unfortunately, this method proved challenging. High schools and seminaries were often unwilling to share their lists, and many Yeshivas didn't have records of their alumni's marital status or current phone numbers. Our best option was to gather information directly. However, this posed its own challenges - some families might have multiple members filling out the survey, leading to duplicate information. To address this, we used the survey questions and additional identifiers, such as the last two digits of each family's phone number, to determine who was part of the same family unit.

It was crucial for our study to avoid sampling bias to ensure the results are representative of the population. Sampling bias occurs when a specific group of people is more likely to participate in a survey, resulting in a sample that does not accurately reflect the population. In our study, we anticipated that sampling bias might be a concern because people who married earlier or later than average may be more likely to participate. Moreover, those who do not use social media might be less likely to complete a survey primarily collected through traditional methods.

To limit sampling bias, we employed multiple techniques, including "snowball sampling", when distributing the survey to recruit participants. This method involved asking initial participants to invite other members of the community to take the survey. We also asked respondents to answer demographic questions about themselves and their family members, and later excluded their self-references from our analyses to further minimize bias. We tried to publicize the survey using a variety of methods to reach as wide a section of the community as possible. These methods included email blasts from marketing agencies, Yeshiva World News, and articles in the 5 Towns Jewish News, each providing links to the study.

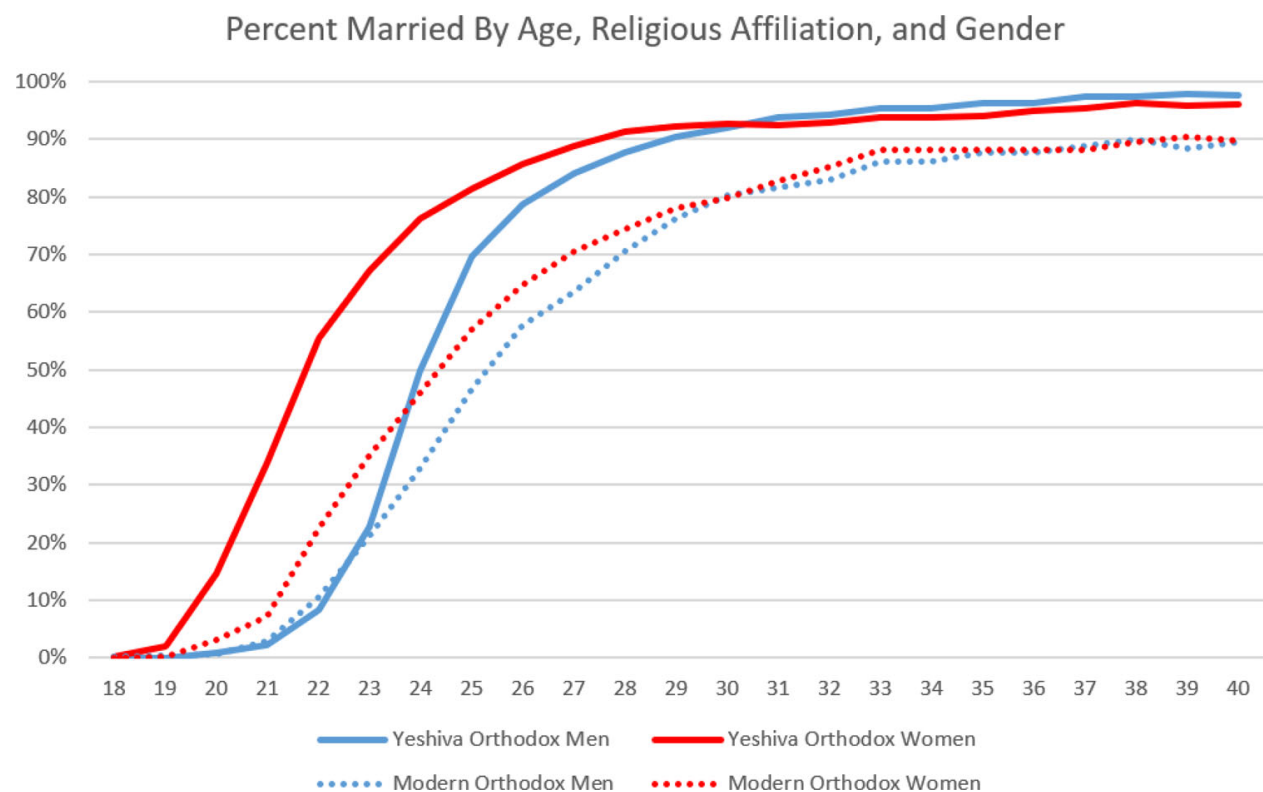
Of course, we remained concerned about whether we reached the more right-wing Yeshiva community, some members of which do not have internet access. While we cannot be certain, we believe that our methods - including using snowball sampling and requesting information about family members - helped to minimize this concern. For instance, it seems improbable that relatives of women who are not part of WhatsApp groups would be less likely to marry than those who are. Furthermore, even if we

didn't reach every segment of the community equally, the shidduch system is interconnected. As long as we reached major parts of the Yeshiva Orthodox world, it appears unlikely that there would be significant differences between the people we reached and those we did not. Our final sample included 2900 participants from Brooklyn, 1500 from the Monsey area, 360 from Far Rockaway, and 360 from Lakewood. We also had participants from Yeshiva Orthodox communities all over the US, including LA, Miami, Chicago, Baltimore, and Cleveland. This demonstrated that our survey was capable of reaching a diverse group of people, giving us a comprehensive perspective of the community. It's important to note that Lakewood has experienced significant growth in recent years. Our survey investigated the origins of people aged 18-55, spanning the past 25 years.

Study Findings

Our study uncovered a trend of delayed marriages within the Yeshiva Orthodox Jewish community, leaving many, like David and Sarah, feeling lost and grappling with the pain and frustration of being single. While the majority of men and women eventually find their bashert, for many, it happens much later than desired. To illustrate, 70% of men and 81% of women aged 25 have been married. By age 35, these numbers jump to 96% for men and 94% for women.

Here is a graph to provide a more detailed visualization of the findings:



Due to the greater emphasis on the shidduch crisis in the Yeshiva Orthodox world, while the study provided information about the Yeshiva Orthodox and Modern Orthodox communities, in this article we focus on the Yeshiva Orthodox side to better understand this aspect of the Shidduch Crisis.

This data paints a picture of a specific type of crisis - one where many like Sarah and David are struggling to find a partner and taking longer than desired. Accordingly, the real crisis is the pain and struggle that comes with an unduly prolonged dating process, rather than the technical number of men and women in the dating pool. Our findings contradict a previous assumption that there are too few men and suggest that a new approach is needed to tackle this issue. Of course, more research is needed to solidify these findings, and many questions remain, including why some people in the community are having a much harder time getting married. However, this initial data suggests that most people do eventually get married, and there isn't a significant disparity between the number of men getting married versus women.

Our study calls into question the age gap theory, as our data shows that both men and women are getting married at similar levels and that most do eventually get married. In addition, the theory's assumption of a 4-year age gap in marriage rates is not supported. Instead, our data shows a 2.2-year difference. A few more additional points are worth making. The theory assumes that the same number of boys and girls are born each year, but this is not the case. Globally, around 5% more boys are born each year. In fact, data from Lakewood schools in 2013 shows that there are approximately 10% more Lakewood boys than girls enrolling in each grade. Furthermore, the theory also assumes a population growth rate of 5% for the Yeshiva Orthodox community, while the actual rate may be smaller. Based on the Avi Chai census of schools, the Yeshiva Orthodox community has seen an average growth rate of 3.7% per year over the last 20 years.

All of these factors combined suggest that the numbers in the mathematical model used in the age gap theory are flawed, and it is therefore not surprising that our study didn't show a large proportion of women being unable to get married due to a lack of eligible men.

Explaining the discrepancy between the perceived and actual shidduch crisis

1. The data shows that while most people are getting married and there isn't a big difference in numbers between men and women, when we look at those over the age of 30 who have remained in the Yeshiva Orthodox community, there are slightly more unmarried women than men - about 2%. There are slightly more unmarried women than men, with a gap of about 2%. This difference may seem small, but when considering the pool of singles over 30, its implications become more pronounced. Despite this age group making up a small fraction of the total population, due to most individuals marrying earlier, it nonetheless shows a notable percentage disparity in the number of unmarried women and men. For instance, among people over 35, the number of unmarried women could be 50% more than men.
2. Additionally, the age gap between the dating pool and married couples is different. In the Yeshiva Orthodox community, while the age gap at marriage averages around two years, it tends to be wider among those currently dating. As women often enter the dating pool earlier than men, and as the population grows, more women become available for dating. However, this should be understood more as a matter of perception and ease of dating rather than a true impediment to marriage. Our data suggest that women typically end up marrying men close to their age.
3. In the Yeshiva Orthodox communities, the prevalent practice is for men to receive shidduch resumes first, shifting the responsibility to initiate the shidduch dating process onto women. As

a result, women frequently find themselves sending resumes to multiple men, often experiencing rejection. Men, conversely, typically receive several resumes, rejecting most. This dynamic fosters a perception of a ten-to-one female-to-male ratio, which does not reflect reality.

4. The 'availability heuristic'—a mental shortcut used for quick judgments about the likelihood of events—may be relevant here. This heuristic posits that if examples of a situation are easily recalled, we tend to believe it's a common occurrence. A drawback of this heuristic is that when negative incidents receive more media coverage, we tend to overestimate their prevalence. With increased community and media focus on older, unmarried women as opposed to men, the availability heuristic may be triggered, leading to skewed perceptions. However, a more thorough assessment might reveal a more balanced count of single men and women over a certain age.

Based on these four points, it is unsurprising that there is a sense of a shidduch crisis with so many more women than men. However, the study data suggest that while there is a crisis, the crisis is that men and women are getting married later than they could be, not that there are fewer available men.

Major Takeaways

1. The newly defined crisis

Our study gives some more clarity to the shidduch crisis, revealing that while most men and women eventually get married, it's happening much later than desired. This redefines the crisis as a difficult process of finding the right person, rather than a lack of eligible partners. Statements made in widely disseminated Jewish publications such as "10-20% of young girls will never get married" and "single girls over 25 will almost certainly never get married" are inaccurate. If we can figure out a way to get them married closer to their desired timeline, we can alleviate so much suffering and angst.

Another important point to mention is that the shidduch crisis is not limited to one gender. There are about as many Davids out there struggling as there are Sarahs. While efforts surrounding the shidduch crisis have focused on the single women of our community, they have largely ignored the plight of the single young men of our community.

2. How do we approach this newly defined crisis?

As previously stated, this study does not suggest that there is no crisis in singles finding their bashert; rather, the findings suggest we redefine the crisis. Therefore, efforts to help men and women in shidduchim should shift to finding ways to shorten the average amount of time people spend looking for their bashert and making the process less painful.

It's important to mention that while the data provides insight into the current situation, it does not dictate what solutions should be implemented. Researchers can use scientific methods to determine the true circumstances of a communal situation, but the decision of what should be done about it is for those who best understand how the community works: Rabbanim, community members and leaders,

and Gedolim—the "Einai H'aida"—to make. Therefore, while we enumerate several suggestions to improve the dating process, these are merely suggestions that any member of our community can make.

One possible approach is to provide training and resources to help single people date more effectively. This may include classes for men and women before they begin dating, training for shadchanim and/or dating coaches, and community shadchanim who are salaried and work without commission. This may be enhanced through developing a cross-community database of individuals in the parsha that shadchanim have access to, and the use of AI-based suggestions within the database that shadchanim can use to get ideas for the members of their community. Another possible step is having more community-wide single events in the Yeshiva Orthodox world so that more couples can meet. This might take away some of the pain and time that the shidduch process often includes for so many.

Another point to make is that we live in a world that is constantly on the lookout for negative "warning signs" or "red flags." While this is very important for avoiding problems or challenges, it is also important to know how to look for "green flags"—signs that dating might be successful. When we are focused on looking for red flags without knowing how to look for green flags, we may not allow ourselves to recognize the possibility of successful dating.

In addition to this, people have a bias toward negative information. Psychology research has shown that it takes three positive experiences to counteract one negative experience because, as people, we naturally focus on the negative more than the positive. In dating, it is that much more important to try and recognize the positive and focus on the larger picture (of course, without ignoring red flags).

Another possibility is to focus on keeping men who leave Yeshiva connected to the community. The data suggests that among those who remain in the community, a higher percentage of women than men are married up to the age of 30. But beginning with age 31, a higher percentage of men than women are married. A possible explanation, which is supported by the data about who is remaining and leaving the community, is that, unfortunately, when people are 30 and not married in our community, they are less likely to remain in their community (they either shift to the left or right or leave altogether)—and based on the data in this study, this happens more with men than women.

Increasing efforts to encourage single men to stay connected to their community after they leave Yeshiva is important in general, and it may also help increase the number of men available. Initiatives such as night seders, as well as events that include singles and are not primarily for families, may prove helpful. Overall, our community can work towards supporting and including singles by giving them respect for who they are and their accomplishments while also giving them ways to contribute to bettering our community. These times are often terribly difficult and lonely, and this is especially true when an emphasis is placed on the shidduch crisis and marriage. To help withstand this challenging stage, it is important for single men and women to develop and sustain sources of meaning in their lives, stay connected with family and friends, and stay focused on aspects of their life they find valuable and fulfilling, such as continuing to grow in their Yiddishkeit.

However, as noted above, what approaches to implement should be decided by community experts.

Conclusion

Our study sheds light on the shidduch crisis, as our findings reflect that while most men and women eventually get married, it is happening much later than desired. This redefines the crisis as a difficult process of finding the right person, rather than a lack of eligible partners.

It is important to realize that the study findings do not provide a definitive understanding of the shidduch crisis but rather serve as a starting point for further research. It is crucial that our community continues to invest in obtaining accurate data and understanding the dynamics of our community on a macro level in order to effectively focus our time, energy, and resources toward finding solutions. The stories of Sarah and David should serve as powerful reminders of the emotional challenges that arise during this process for both men and women. By gaining a deeper understanding of the crisis and its effects on individuals, we aim to inspire action that will ultimately result in more fulfilling and successful marriages.

We hope this will serve as a call to action for our community members, leaders, educators, and researchers to continue the quest to understand the shidduch crisis and work towards finding solutions that will ultimately benefit all members of our community.