

MARRIAGE

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International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. 2008.
William A. Darity, Jr. (ed). 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA. Vol. 4: 612-616.

Transformations in marriage during the twentieth century have inspired a large body of research. Marriage is both a social and legal institution. Although the criteria for who can be legally married vary cross-culturally, marriage is a conjugal state that generally has been reserved for two individuals of opposite sexes, of consenting age, and of no blood relation. Historically, the reasons for, function of, and frequency of marriage has varied by race or ethnicity, class, gender, and the social and economic structures of society. Regardless of such differences, the institution of marriage is viewed by social scientists as one of the most fundamental elements in the maintenance and reproduction of society itself.

Marriage differs in its relation to church and state, though both infer rights and obligations to members of the marital union. Religions often view marriage as a sacrament that reaffirms religious commitment, whereas wedlock is the legal state of matrimony. Even if a marriage is recognized by the state, it may not be recognized as valid by the church. In practice, church weddings often provide both a legal and religious contract between marriage partners.

Although marriage is defined most often as a union between two opposite-sex individuals, some societies and religious traditions allow for marriage between multiple partners: *polygamy*. Two forms of polygamy exist. Polygynous unions, in which a man is married to more than one wife, are the most common. Polygyny is currently practiced in some West African countries, particularly among more traditional members of society. When less formal arrangements are included in the definition—such as a man simultaneously being legally married to one woman while engaged in formal consort relationships with other women that are also expected to produce children—the prevalence of polygyny increases substantially. This latter type of polygyny, for instance, is found among wealthier Chinese in China, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and North America. Polyandrous marriages, in which a woman is married to more than one husband, are relatively uncommon. Polyandry in the form of marriages to fraternal cohusbands has been reported in some areas of India.

Over time, there has been a shifting focus toward the emotional aspect of marriage in European and North American countries. In the United States prior to the twentieth century, marriage was viewed as a legal contract by which individuals joined in a marital union for social and economic reasons. During this time, marriages were more likely to be arranged by persons not party to the union itself. Following World War I, Americans

began to place a greater emphasis on the emotional nature of marriage, and the notion of romantic love in marriage became more important. Furthermore, married persons were expected to invest their emotional energy into the spiritual growth of their marriage partners. The concept of marrying for love varies by cultures today. More industrialized societies are more likely to view love as the primary reason for forming a marital union, whereas less industrialized societies sometimes practice arranged marriage.

Marriage has long been associated with various benefits, including increased health and longevity. Married men in particular are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use. Emotional satisfaction and increased economic well-being are also associated with marriage. Married people are less likely to experience anxiety and depression. Some theorists argue that there is something unique about the institution of marriage that bestows these benefits on the married couple. For instance, a spouse may serve as a monitor of their partner's health. This is supported by findings that married men are more likely than unmarried men to visit the doctor on a regular basis. Other theorists, however, argue that the benefits of marriage are more a factor of selection bias—that is, people with higher socioeconomic status and better health and emotional well-being are more likely to marry, whereas those lacking these characteristics are more likely to have short-lived marriages that end in divorce, or to forgo marriage altogether.

Demographic Trends in Marriage

Over time, demographic trends in legal union formation have included changes in legal age restrictions, an overall retreat from marriage in western societies, and women's increased investment in their own human capital.

Legal age restrictions on who is eligible to marry have varied over time, cultures, and ethnicities. Historically, marriageable age has been closely tied to puberty, and it remains so in many less industrialized countries today. Currently, most North American and European countries have a minimum age of marital consent, usually age eighteen. The U.S. state or jurisdiction allowing for the youngest age at marriage without parental consent is Mississippi at age fifteen for women and age seventeen for men, whereas Puerto Rico requires both genders to be at least twenty-one. However, most states do allow for parental consent, and other statutory requirements may override these minimum age requirements for marriage. For instance, in Massachusetts if parents consent, women can marry as young as age twelve and men as young as age fourteen, whereas other states such as West Virginia, Kentucky, and Louisiana maintain the relatively advanced age of eighteen even with parental consent.

The marriage rate has been in decline in the United States and Europe since the end of World War II. Although the vast majority of people still report a desire to be married (80% of women and 78% of men), and most will eventually do so, there is a continuing trend to delay this step in the adult life course. The median age of first marriage in 1970 was twenty-three for men and twenty-one for women; by 2003 the median age of first marriage had risen to twenty-seven for men and twenty-five for women. (As these figures

imply, the age difference between husbands and wives in most developed nations—including the United States—is small.)

A primary factor thought to at least partially account for the decreasing prevalence of marriage in the United States is the increase in women's human capital. Specifically, women have increased their investment in education, participation in the labor force, and relative annual earnings compared to men. Currently, more women (and men) go to college, thus delaying their economic stability and, subsequently, their transition to marriage. In 1970, 13 percent of American women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 30 percent of women aged twenty-five to thirty-four in 2000.

The decline in marriage in more industrialized countries has accompanied an increase in female labor force participation. For instance, American women aged twenty-five to thirty-four increased their participation in the labor force from approximately 41 percent in 1970 to 70 percent in 2004. Marriage benefits also vary by gender. Despite their hours worked outside the home, women typically perform the majority of household chores—about 70 percent in the United States. Additionally, married men benefit in the job market more than married women do. Men (especially fathers) often have been afforded a “family wage”—that is, more money to support their families—because of their traditional role as family breadwinners. Women, too, have to deal with social norms, which often view the roles of wife and mother as incompatible with the role of worker. In many Western societies, women's increased participation in nonfamilial roles and investments in their own human capital has begun to close the gap in men's and women's contributions to family income. For instance, in 1987 only 24 percent of all married women earned more than their husbands, but by 2003 32 percent did.

Theories of Marriage

Different explanations exist as to how we select mates to form a unique marital bond. Social-exchange theories focus on the contextual characteristics of the larger marriage market, where individuals compare the assets and liabilities of prospective spouses. Mate selection criteria include income, wealth, home- versus labor-market production, and physical attractiveness. Once the benefits of marriage outweigh the benefits of remaining single for both partners, a legal union is formed. The specialization and trading model adopts a rational-choice perspective that views men and women as attempting to maximize personal gains through marriage. This model asserts that individuals exchange personal assets—be it income, wealth, home production, child rearing skills, or physical attractiveness—for a partner with the highest overall value on a related set of assets. Historically, men have specialized in and traded on their economic production, whereas women have specialized in and traded on their domestic production.

Career-entry theory is derived from job-search theory, which asserts that potential workers look for employment in the labor market until they find a job that satisfies the minimum qualifications necessary for acceptable employment. From the perspective of the worker, the sorting of individuals into jobs is maximized when the number of jobs

available in the market increases. An analogous situation occurs during the process of spousal selection. A person wishing to form a marital union searches for a spouse in the marriage market. As with employment, individuals usually have a predetermined idea of the minimal characteristics necessary before a potential spouse is deemed acceptable. Once in the marriage market, individuals compete with others to find a spouse. High levels of human capital in women decrease the probability of marriage by extending women's marital search process and simultaneously raising their reservation wage for potential husbands. More importantly, from a career-entry perspective, men's economic volatility lowers the probability of marriage by creating long-term financial uncertainty for both men and the women who choose to marry them.

Psychodynamic theories often focus on how childhood experiences and family background influence partner selection. Individuals may model their potential spouses after their opposite-sex parents, or they may create images of the ideal spouse based on childhood experiences. Filter theory posits that we sift through potential mates based on predetermined criteria—often ascribed characteristics such as race and class. Homogamy filters include finding a potential mate that matches your characteristics such as propinquity, physical attractiveness, race, education, income, and religion. Propinquity is typically the strongest homogamy filter. Heterogamy filters include selecting a mate based on characteristics that are opposite such as gender.

Other researchers point to the historical roots of marriage in the system of patriarchy, which views wives as the property of their husbands. For instance, the tradition of wedding rings historically served to solidify a woman's status as the property of her husband. Until recently, legal views of rape and sexual assault within marriage supported the notion that wives were the property of their husbands. In 1736 the English chief justice Sir Matthew Hale stated that "the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract" (cited in Russell 1990, p. 17). This statement, which came to be known as the "Hale Doctrine," was accepted by the U.S. legal system in 1857 under the *Commonwealth v. Fogarty* decision. Marital rape is now illegal in the United States and in all countries represented at the United Nations's women's conference of 1995. In the United States, however, current laws continue to treat marital rape as a crime less severe, with more lenient sentencing, than other forms of rape.

Nonwestern traditions also support the notion of women as property. The practice of paying a dowry is one example of how women have been seen as property to be transferred from their parents to their husbands. Under the dowry system, women are an economic liability. To increase a woman's attractiveness to a male suitor, the family of the bride produces various gifts of economic value to the potential groom and his family. Although this practice is becoming less common under the global capitalist system, various cultures around the world still adhere to the dowry system.

Anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss also note that marriage has been used as a structural tool to form political or commercial alliances across groups. Referred to as *alliance*

theory, it maintains that the universal incest taboo motivates exogamy in marriage through a series of intimate kinship group exchanges of women as the wives of men who are members of a different group. Through this type of generalized exchange a marriage alliance between the two groups is formed and reciprocity is expected. Alliance theory argues that groups' circulation of women through the practice of trading wives links various social groups together to form complex structures of kinship, and ultimately, society itself.

Marriage Alternatives

The drop in the marriage rate and the trend in delaying marriage have been accompanied by an increase in alternatives to traditional marriage. Marital dissolution (divorce), cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and gay marriage have become increasingly evident in European and North American countries. Marital dissolution in the United States, for instance, increased steadily during the decades following World War II, and began to level off during the 1990s with one in two U.S. marriages ending in divorce.

Cohabitation also has become an increasingly prevalent form of union formation in more-developed countries. Increases in cohabitation rates have spawned public debate regarding social policies that support the traditional marital union of a husband and wife, and have implications for the popularity of marriage as a larger social institution. Although modern forms of cohabitation were relatively unheard of before the 1960s, by 2003 4.6 million U.S. households were comprised of unrelated opposite-sex partners who were not married. Cohabitation types vary from short-term arrangements, to precursors to marriage, to replacements for legal union formation that is condoned by both church and state. In Sweden, for example, approximately 85 percent of partnered adults aged twenty-five to thirty-four were cohabiting as opposed to living as married couples. In other countries such as the United States, cohabitation is often a short-term arrangement followed by marriage or dissolution of the union. For instance, approximately 70 percent of cohabiting American women marry their residential partner within five years of cohabitation. At the other extreme, 49 percent of cohabiting women dissolve their residential union during the first five years of cohabitation (this figure includes cohabiting women who both marry and divorce within the first five years of the original cohabitation).

As cohabitation has increased, some countries have begun to treat marital and cohabiting unions as legally equivalent. Legal rights inferred to cohabiting couples may include inheritance rights, alimony upon dissolution, retirement benefits for spouses, and streamlined adoption processes. Some other countries, including the United States, continue to distinguish marriage from cohabitation in social and legal policies. A bridge between cohabitation and marriage is available in some U.S. states: Certain states recognize common-law marriages. Under explicit (but varying) criteria—such as the length of time the couple has co-resided, whether they hold joint accounts, assets, and liabilities, and whether the partners refer to each other as “spouses”—cohabiting couples may be considered similar to legally married couples. However, allowances and the requirements needed to establish a common-law marriage vary from state to state.

Rates of childbearing outside of marriage also have been increasing, due in part to the more liberal acceptance of sex outside of marriage and increases in cohabitation and divorce. For instance, in Sweden most children are now born outside of marriage, mostly to cohabiting couples. In the United States, 5 percent of children were born to unmarried mothers in 1960 and this percentage increased to just fewer than 37 percent in 2005. Among non-Hispanic blacks nonmarital childbearing represents nearly 70 percent of all births. Social acceptance of premarital sex also has increased significantly since the 1960s. Despite these trends, people still report that marriage is the ideal situation in which to raise a child. In a survey of high school seniors in 1997 to 1998, only 8 percent of high school seniors stated that unmarried childbearing is a worthwhile alternative lifestyle.

Although marriage often is religiously and legally restricted to the union of two opposite-sex individuals, alternative expressions of intimate-adult commitment are increasingly common. One aspect of marriage that has been gaining public exposure during the twenty-first century is gay marriage. Although the United States generally restricts marriage to a union between opposite-sex adults, other countries allow for individuals of the same sex to marry. In 2001 the Netherlands became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage. Belgium and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and British Columbia followed suit in 2003. In 2004 Massachusetts became the first and only state in the United States to grant marriage licenses to two persons of the same sex.

Another legal option available to some same-sex couples is the civil union, which is a marriage-like union available in some European countries and in some U.S. states. One example is Germany's Registered Life Partnership, which grants to same-sex couples legal rights such as sharing a surname, the ability to enter together into contracts regarding property and finances, the right to refuse to testify against your partner, priority in immigration consideration, and health benefits. In 2000 Vermont was the first state in the United States to allow civil unions. Some states (such as California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, and Vermont) allow for domestic partnerships or joint tax returns for same-sex couples. However, many U.S. states have reaffirmed the historical and religious sacrament of marriage between only a man and a woman. Currently, twenty-seven U.S. states have banned same-sex marriage. Eighteen of these have also banned civil unions.

SEE ALSO *Childlessness* ; *Children* ; *Cohabitation* ; *Divorce and Separation* ; *Dowry and Bride Price* ; *Family* ; *Feminism* ; *Fertility, Human* ; ***Marriage, Interracial*** ; ***Marriage, Same-Sex*** ; *Reproduction* ; *Rituals* ; *Romance*

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