

## Discussing Marriage Cross-culturally<sup>1</sup>

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This is a structured discussion exercise I've used for years in my community college introductory and cultural anthropology classes. It compares the advantages and disadvantages of different marriage and family patterns and demonstrates that they are based in culture. It also reveals some of the sources of stress on contemporary American families. The exercise is suitable for general introductory and cultural anthropology courses. Though designed for classes of 30 or fewer students, it is adaptable to larger classes by using a small-group discussion format. It is ideal for two hour-long class sessions, but could be tailored to one or expanded to three.

### The Exercise

Write the following question on the chalkboard or transparency sheet: "*What are the qualities or characteristics you want most in a spouse?*" Tell students you want each one in turn (right to left, row by row, for example) to answer the question first before the class engages in general discussion. Write the key responses on the board as each student answers. This technique allows each student—talkative and shy alike—to have a say. In a class of 30 students, you'll find that after the first ten or so have responded, the answers will tend to repeat or cluster into certain categories, even though students may choose different descriptors. Nonetheless, it's important to write down the actual words or descriptors the students use. You can lump and categorize after all have responded.

After you've done this with a few classes, you'll discover that (to you, though not necessarily to each group of students) responses will be quite predictable. In discussion, ask students to offer suggestions for combining and categorizing the responses (if you have any board space left, create a working chart of these categories). For example, one—perhaps the most mentioned category—will likely involve *companionship* (or whichever term you choose): "*I want my spouse to be a good companion, best friend, someone with whom I can share my problems, hopes, fears. I want him/her to be honest with me, someone I can trust,*" etc.

### Comments

However the discussions and categorizations go, you and your students will eventually see a pattern emerge, a pattern that reflects the importance of interpersonal relationships between spouses as central to U.S. marriages. The American family is *nuclear* (mom, dad and the kids) or sub-nuclear (one parent and children). It practices serial *monogamy*—one spouse at a time—and individuals select their own spouses. Typically, these families comprise individual households. Occasionally, a family household may include an aging parent, but rarely (except for recently immigrated families) a sizeable number of extended relatives.

Therefore, in selecting spouses, students want someone who is a "best" friend, life-long companion ("till death do us part"), exclusive lover, someone with whom they can "be honest," share their innermost thoughts and feelings and who will reciprocate this honesty. And of course, encouraged by our romantic literature, movies and advertising media, students want to "fall in love." Typically, young married couples establish their own households separate from those of their parents and relatives, sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles away. Parents are exclusively responsible for the economic wellbeing, education and moral upbringing of their children. In many families, both parents must be employed in order to meet these obligations. In some cases, couples may be able to rely on their own parents or relatives for financial help, but this depends on individual relationships and circumstances. While we inherit our surnames from our fathers, we do not automatically inherit parental wealth.

At this point you will want to talk about how these matters are handled by some other cultures of the world. In Mexico and some other Latin American countries, extended family households are common. Child care and rearing are often shared among grandparents, aunts, uncles and older siblings under the same roof, next door or down the street. In addition, they have a "godparent" system that provides even

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<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of this exercise appears in *Strategies in Teaching Anthropology*, 4th edition, Patricia C. Rice and David W. McCurdy, editors. Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson-Prentice Hall, 2006.

more adults who offer care and security to children. A practice that has been common in India is for parents to choose husbands for their daughters. Often the choice is made when the child is very young. It is believed that with their mature wisdom, love and concern for their daughters' wellbeing, parents are best qualified to make this choice.

Many African societies do not view families as nuclear but rather as extended lineages of fathers and their children (*patrilineal*). Hence one's family will include father, father's father and siblings, father's brothers and their children, and father's sisters (but not their children, who are members of their fathers' lineages). A number of Native American societies are *matrilineal*, wherein one belongs to one's mother's lineage. These *unilineal* systems create two different kinds of first cousins. Among the Hopi, a matrilineal society in the Southwest U.S. for example, *parallel cousins* are your mother's sisters' children; you and they are in the same lineage, i.e., you're "family." However, your *cross cousins*—mother's brothers' children—are not in your family but rather are in their mothers' lineages, respectively. A Hopi man cannot have sex with or marry a parallel cousin; that would be incest. But he can have sex with and marry a cross cousin! This information will fascinate your students, because as good Americans they've been brought up to believe that incest has to do only with biological proximity.

### Some Points for Comparison

#### American families

Nuclear families live in individual **households** sometimes far from relatives. Advantages: children and parents both have greater personal freedom and access to private space. Children can receive more individual attention, and (resources permitting) enjoy a longer childhood with fewer responsibilities. Drawbacks: children can be neglected more easily. Monitoring their behavior and detecting potential delinquencies is also more difficult. Parental abuse of children can occur longer without detection.

**Spouse selection**, especially in first marriages among young people, is based primarily on the principle of romantic love. No prior education or training for marriage is required. While family involvement can range from zero to considerable, the final decision rests with the couple. Advantage: overwhelming freedom of choice. Drawback: nearly 50% of all first marriages fail.

#### Extended and lineage-based families

Households commonly contain adults and children in addition to the biological nuclear family. Advantages: children have multiple caregivers and adult role models. They have other children of varying ages to play with. Parents can share the burdens and responsibilities of child rearing. It is more difficult for children to be mistreated or abused. Drawbacks: children must share with each other. They have more prescribed roles and responsibilities at earlier ages. They generally have less privacy.

Spouse selection practices vary widely but almost always involve other members of extended families and lineages. This is because marriage is most often viewed as a linking of these entities. Divorces do occur but not easily, since they break up family alliances and in some cases, *dowries* or *bride prices* (marriage payments by the groom's family to the bride's family) must be returned. Advantages: when "being in love" is not an overriding criterion for marriage, couples tend to have more realistic expectations of what married life will be like. With family and lineage members close by, they face fewer of life's problems alone. Drawbacks: more structured (at times, restricted) relationships with others. People must behave more or less formally, more or less deferentially, to others depending on their family and kin relationships. Siblings sometimes have different statuses based on age, and one may have to wait a long time to achieve power or wealth within a lineage or extended family structure.

Married couples have complete responsibility for their **economic success (or failure)** as well as for their children's economic wellbeing. Advantage: "the sky's the limit," and some families do achieve remarkable financial success in the U.S. Drawback: statistics do belie the "American Dream" myth. Money matters contribute at least as much to American divorces as do sex-related issues.

Economic wellbeing is much more a family or lineage matter. A man may work on his father's farm or in an uncle's business. A woman may do a *bride service* in her mother-in-law's home, exchanging household chores for help with childrearing. Sometimes lineages or extended families resemble corporations where economic benefits as well as responsibilities are distributed among all. In many lineage systems, men may have multiple wives (*polygyny*) if they can afford them. Advantage: couples and their children have a ready-made cushion of support. They are less likely to go hungry or "fail" economically in the Western sense. Drawback: overall economic success of the family or lineage may thwart individual ambitions for economic gain.

After making these comparisons, I would say to my students something like the following (based on their initial responses):

*Let's look at some of the pressures on the contemporary American family that your responses suggest. Spouses expect each other to be best friends, life-long companions and exclusive lovers (no extramarital sex). We expect our spouses to be honest, trustworthy, attentive, loyal, supportive, faithful and to share our interests. As men, we expect our wives to be attractive to others as well as to ourselves, to keep the house clean and to take primary responsibility for the children. We also expect them to work outside the home to supplement (but not equal) our income. As women, we expect our husbands to be successful at their work and adequately support the family. We expect them to share equally with us the responsibilities of housework and child rearing, and to be sensitive lovers.*

*Are these expectations realistic? Is it possible for couples to meet all or even most of them? Men and women often become jealous if their spouses have "platonic" friends of the opposite sex, even if it's lunch or drinks after hours with a colleague from work. Couples and their children spurn living under the same roof with grandparents, even though it would be more economical. The "empty nest" grandparents often resent the kids moving back in, feeling that they have finally earned their freedom. Domestic battles break out when men feel intense pressures to succeed or advance at their work in order to earn more money. Working women become frustrated when they are left with most or all of the housework and childrearing responsibilities. Young couples, deep in the throes of romantic love, tend not to discuss and agree on these matters before they marry.*

*It's important to realize that American culture and not people's unfortunate choices create these pressures. Public schools, welfare and human service agencies, among others, provide support in lieu of extended families or lineages. Nonetheless, access to these services depends on individual status, wealth, relationships and luck.*

*We often ask why the divorce rate is so high in the U.S. Why do nearly half of all marriages end in divorce? Perhaps a better question is: With all these pressures, why do nearly half of the marriages succeed?*

By this time, my students would usually be quite engrossed in the issue. They were interested from the start because some had divorced parents and some were already engaged. The older, married students would often nod eagerly and offer additional comments. Inevitably, someone would remark that the American marriage system seemed to be doomed. I would then reinforce some of the earlier points: no system is perfect, each has advantages and drawbacks and each is integrated into the larger culture of its society. And, of course, the purpose of the exercise is to gain a comparative understanding of different marriage systems, not to trash the American nuclear family.

Sometimes discussions would segue into ways of changing the system. What should engaged couples talk about or agree upon before they marry? What about marriage contracts? If time allows, these can be productive, as students can now think about marriage in a broader, cross-cultural context.

Additional "spin-off" discussion topics could include current trends in relationships among college students. You may wish to ask questions like the following: Do students increasingly prefer to hang out in groups rather than date as couples? Do they tend to distinguish "friends" from "friends with benefits"?

(sexual partners)? Do they intend to delay marriage until they achieve their career goals and acquire some financial security?

## Appendix

You may wish to reproduce the two accompanying kinship charts, Nyoro Patrilineages and The American Nuclear Family, as handouts and/or transparencies. Following is some additional information to accompany these charts.

A society's language assigns specific terms to different family members. Kin terms tell us how we're related and (less directly) how we ought to behave toward different relatives. In the U.S., for example, our kin terms include mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, cousin, and so on. They distinguish sex and generation (except for "cousin"), but do not distinguish sides of the family. Mom's sister, Aunt Olivia, and Dad's sister, Aunt Josephine, are still "aunts." Our treatment of each depends on the individual relationships we develop rather than on any prescribed rules.

The Nyoro, an East African patrilineal society, places fathers' brothers' children and fathers' sisters' children in different categories. As a Nyoro man, for example, your father's brother's daughter is a member of her father's (and therefore of your father's and your) patrilineage. She's family (a *parallel cousin*) and you treat her as a sister. Your father's sister's daughter, however, belongs to her father's patrilineage, different from yours. She's a *cross cousin*. Therefore, as with any woman outside your patrilineage, you may have sex with her and may even marry her.

The Nyoro call their fathers' brothers "father," their fathers' brothers' children "brother" or "sister" and their fathers' sisters "female father." In fact, all members of the patrilineage are called "fathers," "grandfathers," "brothers," "sisters," "children," or "grandchildren." The patrilineage is the family. A Nyoro calls his mother's sisters "mother," his mother's brothers "female mothers," and his mother's brothers' children "little mothers." A Nyoro is expected to address his biological father as (the equivalent of) "sir," treat him with respect, deference, formality, and obey him. Accordingly, a Nyoro behaves similarly toward all members of his father's patrilineage. Conversely, a Nyoro expects love, nurturing and indulgence from his mother, and thus may be informal, laid back and casual with his mother and all those in her patrilineage. (The Nyoro say that "a man rules his mother's brother" as the latter is expected to honor the former's demands.)

This kind of kinship system is called "classificatory" because it classifies a wide range of relatives in just a few categories and provides rules for behavior based on the categories.