

MARRIAGE, CULTURAL NORMS

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The institution of marriage creates and binds families, thus determining the social and economic fabric of our lives. Marital patterns differ markedly across societies and over time for each stage of marriage.

To start, variants of two modes of mate selection are observed across cultures—self-choice (or ‘love’ marriages) and family-arranged marriages. In love marriages, young people autonomously choose their own spouses based on mutual compatibility. On the contrary, parents and extended families exert significant control over the mate choice in arranged marriages. The distinction is not strictly dichotomous due to considerable variation in the extent of parental involvement. Historically, arranged marriages were the norm in most pre-industrialized societies. The rise of the Catholic Church and rapid industrialization led to the decline and subsequent disappearance of arranged marriages, paving the way for love matches in contemporary Western societies. However, family-arranged marriages have remained the dominant form of matchmaking in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Several factors explain the continued prevalence of arranged marriages in the present developing world. Of primary importance are the insurance gains from marrying within the social network. In agrarian societies, such alliances help offset the risks associated with variance in agricultural income thereby helping with smoothing consumption. Household structure is another determinant. Due to the emphasis on the nuclear family in Europe, the young adults are able to exert autonomy over their choice of spouse. In contrast, young men in Asia and Africa in multi-generational households depend on the older generation to acquire their partners, where parents choose spouses

for their children in a manner that would enable them to maintain authority and control over the resources of the extended household. Parental involvement in children's mate search is also high in societies where assets are transferred to children at the time of marriage. The demand for and desirability of female chastity in the marriage market also leads parents to exercise control over a daughter's spousal choices. Overall, though, a worldwide decline in family-arranged marriages has been observed. This trend is positively correlated with increasing levels of education, urbanization, female employment outside the household, and decline in the importance of agriculture.

Marriage customs also determine whether spouses are similar (*homogamy*) or dissimilar (*heterogamy*) to each other in terms of social status or education, for example. In heterogamous marriages, *hypergamy* results if a person marries someone belonging to a higher class or status than themselves; *hypogamy* is the opposite. Similarly, marriage systems dictate whether individuals marry outside their group (*exogamy*) or within their group (*endogamy*).

A key feature of marriages in contemporary low-income countries is bride-to-groom (*dowry*) or groom-to-bride (*bride price*) transfer of resources—monetary or in kind—at the time of marriage. These transfers can be substantial, and have the potential to affect the society's wealth distribution. Marital payments have existed in most societies at some point in time, typically co-appearing with arranged marriages. Bride price occurs most commonly in Sub-Saharan Africa, and has also been prevalent in rural China, Thailand, Egypt, Iran, and Turkey in recent times. Dowry, on the other hand, is mostly found in the South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Both dowry and bride price have coexisted in China and Taiwan, and Bangladesh is an example of a society where the bride price system has been fully replaced by dowry. Dowry and bride price are not necessarily flip sides of each other, however. In part, this is due to the fact that dowry may be more than just a "groom price." Historically, when daughters did not inherit property, dowry was considered a pre-mortem bequest to the daughter upon leaving the natal home after marriage. Empirical evidence suggests that bequest dowries have declined in prevalence and in amount over time. Studies have also shown that marriage payments impact fertility, investments in children's health and education, and household financial decisions, such as savings.

Consanguineous and polygamous marriages are two marriage practices that are currently largely confined to the developing world. Consanguineous marriage is marriage between biological relatives, for example, first cousin or uncle-niece unions. The highest rates of such marriages prevail in the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, particularly in regions characterized by high poverty, early age at marriage, and low levels of female education. While the contribution of consanguinity to a gamut of genetic disorders has been well documented, this practice has probably persisted due to the counteracting social and economic gains, such as lower spousal search costs, greater spousal and in-law compatibility, greater female autonomy, lower likelihood of divorce, lower marriage payments, and larger female inheritance.

Polygamy has been widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa, and although its prevalence has been declining, it remains substantial. In the so-called ‘polygamy belt’, an area between Senegal and Tanzania, between 30-50% of all married women belong to polygamous unions. Polygamy can be of two types: when one man marries multiple women, it is known as *polygyny*, while the marriage of one woman with multiple men is called *polyandry*. Polygyny is the relatively more common type. The two primary determinants of polygyny are the relative economic contribution of women and inequality across men in the marriage market. It has been hypothesized that richer men have more wives both because they can afford the bride prices and because these wives are more productive on their farms than on a poor man’s farm. Polygyny has several consequences. Reproductive rivalry between cowives potentially explains the high fertility levels prevalent in Africa. Polygyny can also explain the low levels of development in Sub-Saharan Africa—research estimates reveal that banning polygyny could decrease fertility, reduce the spousal age gap, reverse the direction of marriage payments, and increase savings and output per capita.

Further Readings and References

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