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.

Types of Marriage

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 mate choice in arranged marriages. The distinction is not strictly dichotomous, owing to considerable variation in the extent of parental involvement. Historically, arranged marriages were the norm in most preindustrialized societies (Goody 1983). 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 (Goode 1970; Goody 1983). However, family-arranged marriages have remained the dominant form of matchmaking in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Hamon and Ingoldby 2003).

Several factors explain the continued prevalence of arranged marriages in the developing world. Of primary importance are the insurance gains from marrying within the social network (Rosenzweig and Stark 1989). In agrarian societies, such alliances help offset the risks associated with variance in agricultural income, thereby helping to achieve the desire to attain a stable path of consumption. Household structure is another determinant. Owing to the emphasis on the nuclear family in Europe, young adults are able to exert autonomy over their choice of spouse. In contrast, young men in Asia and Africa in multigenerational households depend on the older generation to acquire their partners; 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 (Edlund and Lagerlöf 2004). Parental involvement in children’s mate search is also high in societies where assets are transferred to children at the time of marriage (Fafchamps and Quisumbing 2008). The demand for and desirability of female chastity in the marriage market also leads parents to exercise control over a daughter’s spousal choices (Edlund and Lagerlöf 2004). Overall, however, a worldwide decline in family-arranged marriages is evident (Rubio 2014). This trend is positively correlated with increasing levels of education, urbanization, and female employment outside the household and a decline in the importance of agriculture (Rubio 2014).

Marriage customs also determine whether spouses are similar (homogamy) or dissimilar (heterogamy) to each other in terms of, for example, social status or education level. In heterogamous marriages, hypergamy results if a person marries someone belonging to a higher class or status than theirs; hypogamy is the opposite. Similarly, marriage systems dictate whether individuals marry outside their group (exogamy) or within their group (endogamy) (Anukriti and Dasgupta 2018).

Marital Payments

A key feature of marriages in contemporary low-income countries is bride-to-groom (downy) 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 appearing
in the context of arranged marriages. A bride price is given most commonly in sub-Saharan Africa and has also been prevalent in rural China, Thailand, Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. Dowry, by contrast, 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 because dowry may be more than just a “groom price.” Historically, when daughters did not inherit property, dowry was considered a premortem 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 (Arunachalam and Logan 2016). Studies have also shown that marriage payments affect fertility via selective abortion of girls, investments in children’s health and education, and household financial decisions, such as savings (Ashraf et al. 2016; Bhalotra, Chakravarty, and Gulesci 2016; Alfano 2017; Anukriti, Kwon, and Prakash 2016) as they alter the costs and benefits from having a girl versus a boy.

Consanguineous and Polygamous Marriage

Consanguineous and polygamous marriages are two marriage practices that are largely confined to the developing world. Consanguineous marriage is marriage between biological relatives, for example, between first cousins or an uncle and niece. The highest rates of such marriages prevail in the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, particularly in regions characterized by extreme poverty, younger age at marriage, and low levels of female education (Bittles 1994; Bittles and Black 2010). While the contribution of consanguinity to a gamut of genetic disorders has been well documented, this practice has probably persisted owing to the counter-acting social and economic gains, such as lower spousal search costs, greater spousal and in-law compatibility, more female autonomy, less likelihood of divorce, lower marriage payments, and larger female inheritance (Bittles 1994; Weinreb 2008; Sandridge et al. 2010).

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 and 50 percent of all married women belong to polygamous unions (Jacoby 1995). Polygamy can be of two types: When one man marries several women, it is known as polygyny, while the marriage of one woman with several men is called polyandry. Polygyny is the 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 co-wives potentially explains the high fertility levels prevalent in Africa (Rossi 2016). Polygyny also can 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 (Tertilt 2005).

Conclusion

The literature presented here highlights the variety in the types of marriage market institutions and modes of matchmaking around the world. Differences in social and cultural norms surrounding marriages and family formation have profound implications for intra-household decision-making, welfare of children, and other macroeconomic elements. Given this, a focus on understanding the contribution of marriage markets to changing economic and social structures also becomes extremely policy-relevant.

SEE ALSO Marriage Rates; Marriage Rituals and Ceremonies; Relationship Forms, Intimate and Marital.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Marriage and Health

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Leading scientists have long argued that involvement in social relationships promotes health and well-being. Of various social relationships, marriage has been identified as the one that affects health most significantly during adulthood (Umberson and Montez 2010; Liu and Waite 2014; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Various types of data consistently show that being married, especially happily married, is associated with longer life expectancy and better mental and physical health (Carr and Springer 2010; Umberson, Thomeer, and Williams 2013; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Warner and Kelley-Moore 2012). The health effects of being happily married (compared with being unmarried) is suggested to be equivalent to other traditional health protective factors, such as being a nonsmoker or having a healthy body mass index (Sbarra 2009).

Theoretical Frameworks Linking Marriage and Health

Although some studies focus on the possibility of selection effects, suggesting that individuals in better health or with more favorable health characteristics are more likely to get and stay married (Forthofer et al. 1996; Joung et al. 1998; Power, Rodgers, and Hope 1999), most researchers emphasize two theoretical models to explain how marital relationships shape health: the marital resource model and the stress model (Waite and Gallagher 2000; Williams and Umberson 2004). The marital resource model suggests that marriage provides unique social, psychological, and economic resources that cannot be obtained from other types of relationships (e.g., cohabiting relationships) and, in turn, promotes physical health and longevity (Umberson, Thomeer, and Williams 2013; Waite and Gallagher 2000). For example, marriage may promote economic resources through specialization, economies of scale, and the pooling of wealth (Becker 1981). Economic resources may enhance health by improving nutrition, providing care in the event of illness, and allowing the purchase of medical care or other health-enhancing resources (Waite and Gallagher 2000). Moreover, marriage may enhance access to social support (e.g., love, advice, and care), social integration.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some possible health outcomes of married couples? Support your answer with details from the text.
2. Is it possible for a married couple to exhibit signs of a healthy marriage but still be unhappy? Please explain.
3. In your opinion, do you think the findings of marriage and health are the similar for same-sex marriages? Why or why not?
4. How may marriage influence a child’s development? How may children influence the health of married couples?