Marriage

Marriage is the legally and socially sanctioned union of sexually intimate adults. Traditionally, the marital relationship has included economic interdependence, common residence, sexual fidelity, and shared responsibility for children. Although the institution of marriage remains popular, it sometimes seems to be under assault from shifting social trends

1. Increased acceptance of singlehood. Remaining single is a trend that has been on the rise for several decades (Morris & DePaulo, 2009). In part, this trend reflects longer postponement of marriage than before.

Thus, remaining single is becoming a more acceptable lifestyle. As a result, the negative stereotype of people who remain single—lonely, frustrated, and unchosen—is gradually evaporating

2. Increased acceptance of cohabitation. Cohabitation is living together in a sexually intimate relationship without the legal bonds of marriage. Although many people continue to disapprove of the practice, negative attitudes toward couples living together have clearly declined (Cherlin, 2004). The prevalence of cohabitation has grown dramatically in recent decades. Moreover, cohabiting relationships increasingly include children (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009).

3. Reduced premium on permanence. Most people still view marriage as a permanent commitment, but an increasing number of people regard divorce as justifiable if their marriage fails to foster their interests. Accordingly, the social stigma associated with divorce has lessened, and divorce rates are about 45% (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001).

4. Transitions in gender roles. Gender-role expectations are different for people entering marriage today than they were a generation or two ago. The traditional breadwinner and homemaker roles for the husband and wife are being discarded by many couples as more and more married women enter the workforce (Halpern, 2005).

Role expectations for husbands and wives are becoming more varied, more flexible, and more ambiguous. Many people regard this trend as a step in the right direction. However, changing gender roles create new potential for conflict between marital partners.

5. Increased voluntary childlessness. In the past two decades, the percentage of women without children has climbed in all age groups as an increasing number of married couples have chosen not to have children or to delay having children (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004; Shaw, 2011). Researchers speculate that this trend is a result of new career opportunities for women, the tendency to marry at a later age, and changing attitudes (such as a desire for independence or concerns about overpopulation) (Hatch, 2009).

6. Decline of the traditional nuclear family. As McGraw and Walker (2004), put it, “Many people today, both in academic settings and popular culture, continue to idealize the image of the traditional nuclear family—one consisting of a breadwinner father and a homemaker mother. . . . Because this ideology remains strong, a dearth of support exists for families that do not conform to the image” (p. 177). In reality, this image was never all that accurate, and in 2010 only 66% of children under the age of 18 lived with two married parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The increasing prevalence of single-parent households, stepfamilies, childless marriages, and unwed parents make the traditional nuclear family a highly deceptive mirage that does not reflect the diversity of family structures in America. Interestingly, this change is reflected in the fact that many television shows today depict alternative family structures (for instance, Two and a Half Men and Modern Family).

In summary, traditional marriage is no longer the only acceptable lifestyle that defines a family (Laumann, Mahay, & Youm, 2007). The norms that mold marital and intimate relationships have been restructured in fundamental ways in recent decades.

Thus, the institution of marriage is in a period of transition, creating new adjustment challenges for modern couples. Support for the concept of monogamy remains strong, but changes in society are altering the traditional model of marriage.

Deciding to Marry

Cultural Influences on Marriage

Although it appears that romantic love is experienced in all cultures, there are cultural differences in romantic attitudes and behaviors (Hatfield & Rapson, 2010). For instance, cultures vary in their emphasis on romantic love as a prerequisite for marriage. Modern Western cultures are somewhat unusual in permitting free choice of one's marital partner.

According to Elaine Hatfield and Richard Rapson (1993), "Marriage-for-love represents an ultimate expression of individualism" (p. 2). By contrast, marriages arranged by families and other go-betweens remain common in cultures high in collectivism (Merali, 2012), such as those in India (Gupta, 1992), Japan (Iwao, 1993), China (Xiaohe & Whyte, 1990), and West African countries (Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004).

In fact, experts estimate that up to 80% of world cultures have arranged marriage (Pasupathi, 2009). This practice is declining in some societies, especially in urban settings, as a result of Westernization (Moore & Wei, 2012). Still, when people in collectivist societies contemplate marriage, they strongly weigh the impact the relationship will have on their family, rather than relying solely on what their heart says (Triandis, 1994).

Cultural views of marriage are linked to both a country's values and its economic health. In one study, researchers asked college students in eleven countries the following question: "If a man (woman) had all the other qualities you desired, would you marry this person if you were not in love with him (her)?" (Levine et al., 1995).

Students in countries with more individualistic values and higher standards of living were significantly more likely to answer "no" to the question than were those in countries with more collectivist values and lower standards of living.

People from Western societies often hold a simplistic view of collectivist cultures' deemphasis on romantic love and their penchant for arranged marriages, assuming that the modern conception of romantic love as the basis for marriage must result in better marital relationships than collectivist cultures' "antiquated" beliefs and practices (Grearson & Smith, 2009).

However, there is little empirical support for this ethnocentric view. Take, for example, a study of couples in India, which found that love grew over the years in arranged marriages, whereas it declined among couples who married for romantic love (Gupta & Singh,1982).

Another study found that Indian couples in arranged marriages living in the United States reported higher marital satisfaction than U.S. couples who married by choice (Madathil & Benshoff, 2008). It appears that smug assumptions about the superiority of Western ways are misguided, given our extremely high divorce rates.

Culture is but one influence on marital decisions; let’s look at some specific factors that influence one’s choice of a mate.

Monogamy and Polygamy

Monogamy is the practice of having only one spouse at a time. In our society, monogamous marital relationships are the norm and the law. Many cultures, however, practice polygamy, having more than one spouse at a time.

Endogamy and Homogamy

Endogamy is the tendency for people to marry within their own social group.
Homogamy is the tendency for people to marry others who have similar personal characteristics

Gender and Mate Selection Preferences

Research reveals that males and females exhibit both similarities and differences in what they look for in a marital partner. Many characteristics, such as physical attractiveness, intelligence, humor, honesty, and kindness, are rated highly by both sexes (Lippa, 2007). Both male and female college students gave high ratings to the traits of honesty and trustworthiness for marriage partners (Regan & Berscheid, 1997).

However, a few reliable differences between men's and women's priorities have been found, and these differences appear to be nearly universal across cultures.

Women tend to place a higher value than men on potential partners' socioeconomic status, intelligence, ambition, and financial prospects.

In contrast, men consistently show more interest than women in potential partners' youthfulness and physical attractiveness (Buss & Kenrick, 1998).

Fletcher (2002) asserts that mate selection criteria can be grouped in three major categories: warmth/loyalty, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources.

Compared to men, women tend to place a greater emphasis on warmth/loyalty and status/resources and less of an emphasis on vitality/attractiveness.

This gender difference is greater for long-term as opposed to short-term mate selection (Fletcher et al., 2004). Most theorists explain these gender disparities in terms of evolutionary concepts (Buss, 2009).

Predictors of Marital Success

There are some premarital predictors of marital success, such as family background, age, length of courtship, and personality, but the relations are weak. The nature of a couple's premarital communication is a better predictor of marital adjustment. Stressful events surrounding the marriage influence marital stability

THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

Family life cycle stage	Key developmental task	Additional changes in family status required to proceed developmentally
1. Between families: The unattached young adult	Accepting parent/offspring separation	a. Differentiation of self in relation to family of origin b. Development of intimate peer relationships c. Establishment of self in work
2. The joining of families through marriage: The newly married couple	Commitment to new system	a. Formation of marital system b. Realignment of relationships with extended families and friends to include spouse
3. The family with young children	Accepting new members into the system	a. Adjusting marital system to make space for child(ren) b. Taking on parenting roles c. Realignment of relationships with extended family to include parenting and grandparenting roles
4. The family with adolescents	Increasing flexibility of family boundaries to include children's independence	a. Shifting of parent-child relationships to permit adolescent to move in and out of system b. Refocus on midlife marital and career issues c. Beginning shift toward concerns for older generation
5. Launching children and moving on	Accepting a multitude of exits from and entries into the family system	a. Renegotiation of marital system as a dyad b. Development of adult-to-adult relationships between grown children and their parents c. Realignment of relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren d. Dealing with disabilities and death of parents (grandparents)
6. The family in later life	Accepting the shifting of generational roles	a. Maintaining own and/or couple functioning and interests in face of physiological decline; exploration of new familial and social role options b. Support for a more central role for middle generation c. Making room in the system for the wisdom and experience of the elderly; supporting the older generation without over-functioning for them d. Dealing with loss of spouse, siblings, and other peers and preparation for own death; life review and integrations

Vulnerable Areas in Marital Adjustment

Gaps in expectations about marital roles may create marital stress. Disparities in expectations about gender roles and the distribution of housework may be especially common and problematic. Work concerns can clearly spill over to influence marital functioning, but the links between parents' employment and children's adjustment are complex. Wealth does not ensure marital happiness, but a lack of money can produce marital problems. Inadequate communication is a commonly reported marital problem, which is predictive of divorce.

Gaps in Role Expectations

When heterosexual individuals marry, they assume new roles—those of husband and wife. Each role comes with certain expectations that the partners hold about how wives and husbands should behave. These expectations may vary greatly from one person to another. Gaps between partners in their role expectations can have a negative effect on couples’ marital satisfaction.

Work and Career Issues

The possible interactions between one's occupation and one's marriage are numerous and complex. Although the data on the effect of income and employment on marital stability are inconsistent (Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006), individuals' job satisfaction and involvement can affect their own marital satisfaction, their partner's marital satisfaction, and their children's development.

Work and Marital Adjustment

Many studies have compared the marital adjustment of male-breadwinner versus dual-career couples. The interest in this comparison arises from traditional views that regard men's lack of employment and women's employment as departures from the norm. Typically, these studies simply categorize women as working or nonworking and evaluate couples' marital satisfaction.

Most of these studies find little in the way of consistent differences in the marital adjustment of male-breadwinner versus dual-career couples, and they often find some benefits for dual-career couples, such as increased social contacts, self-esteem, and egalitarian attitudes (Haas, 1999; Steil, 2009). Although dual-career couples do face special problems in negotiating career priorities, child-care arrangements, and other practical matters, their marriage need not be negatively affected.

Parents' Work and Children's Development

Another issue of concern has been the potential impact of parents' employment on their children. Virtually all of the research in this area has focused on the effects of mothers' employment outside the home. In 2010, approximately 21 million mothers were employed (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011b).

A meta-analysis of 69 studies found no link between maternal employment and children's achievement or behavioral problems (Lucas &Thompson, Goldberg, & Prause, 2010).

Additionally, studies generally have not found a link between mothers' employment status and the quality of infant-mother emotional attachment (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997).

In a longitudinal study spanning two decades, early maternal employment showed no "sleeper effects." That is, there were no negative outcomes that showed up later in life, leading researchers to conclude that the adverse outcomes of maternal employment are a "public myth" (Gottfried & Gottfried, 2008, p. 30).

Financial Difficulties

Neither financial stability nor wealth can ensure marital satisfaction. However, financial difficulties can cause stress in a marriage, and finances are one of the top concerns for newlyweds (Schramm et al., 2005). Without money, families live in constant dread of financial drains such as illness, layoffs, or broken appliances. Spontaneity in communication may be impaired by an understandable reluctance to talk about financial concerns. Indeed, money is a “taboo” topic for many couples (Atwood, 2012).

Thus, it is not surprising that serious financial worries among couples are associated with increased hostility in husbands, increased depression in wives, and lower marital happiness in both husbands and wives (White & Rogers, 2001). Similarly, husbands' job insecurity is predictive of wives' reports of marital conflict and their thoughts of divorce (Fox & Chancey, 1998). Moreover, evidence consistently demonstrates that the risk of separation and divorce increases as husbands' income declines (Ono, 1998).

Inadequate Communication

Effective communication is crucial to the success of a marriage and is consistently associated with greater marital satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Further, the marital communication–satisfaction link seems to be robust across cultures (Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007). In a study of couples in the process of divorce, researchers found that communication difficulties were the most frequently cited problem among both husbands and wives (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Cleek & Pearson, 1985).

Gottman’s communication patterns

Gottman (1994, 2011) identifies four other communication patterns, which he calls the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” that are risk factors for divorce: contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling.
Contempt involves communicating insulting feelings that one’s spouse is inferior.

Criticism involves constantly expressing negative evaluations of one’s partner. It typically begins with the word you and involves sweeping negative statements.

Defensiveness refers to responding to contempt and criticism by invalidating, refuting, or denying the partner’s statements. This obstructive communication escalates marital conflict.

Stonewalling is refusing to listen to one’s partner, especially to the partner’s complaints.

Gottman eventually added a fifth troublesome communication pattern, belligerence, which involves provocative, combative challenges to the partner’s power and authority (Gottman, Gottman, & DeClaire, 2006)

Alternative Relationship Lifestyles

Gay Marriage

Same sex marriage

Comparison to heterosexual couples

Gay parenting

Cohabitation

Remaining single

Same-Sex Marriage

Gay couples in most states cannot choose to legally formalize their unions by getting married. They are therefore denied many economic benefits available to married couples. For example, they can't file joint tax returns, and gay individuals often can't obtain employer-provided health insurance for their partner. Thus, gay and lesbian rights raise major political issues that affect gays and lesbians both socially and psychologically (Fingerhut, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2011).

Comparisons to Heterosexual Couples

Devoting a separate section to gay couples may seem to imply that the dynamics of their close relationships are different from those seen in heterosexual couples. As Garnets and Kimmel (1991) point out, gay relationships “develop within a social context of societal disapproval with an absence of social legitimization and support; families and other social institutions often stigmatize such relationships and there are no prescribed roles and behaviors to structure such relationships” (p. 170).

Although gay relationships evolve in a different social context, research has documented that close relationships, gay or heterosexual, function in similar ways (Herek, 2006).

Both heterosexual and homosexual couples hold similar values about relationships, report similar levels of relationship satisfaction, perceive their relationships to be loving and satisfying, and say they want their partners to have characteristics similar to theirs (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

Furthermore, homosexual and heterosexual couples are similar in terms of the factors that predict relationship satisfaction, the sources of conflict in their relationships, and their patterns of conflict resolution (Kurdek, 2004; Peplau & Ghavami, 2009).

Given the lack of moral, social, legal, and economic support for gay relationships, are gay unions less stable than heterosexual unions? Researchers have not yet been able to collect adequate data on this question, but the limited data available suggest that gay couples' relationships are somewhat briefer and more prone to break-ups than heterosexual marriages (Peplau, 1991). If that's the case, it might be because gay relationships face fewer barriers to dissolution—that is, fewer practical problems that make break-ups difficult or costly (Kurdek, 1998).

Gay Parenting

Children reared by gay and lesbian parents do not appear to suffer any special ill effects and do not seem noticeably different from other children.

Decades of research indicates that the quality of child-parent interactions is much more important to a child's development than parental sexual orientation (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008; Patterson, 2006, 2009).

Cohabitation

Cohabitation refers to living together in a sexually intimate relationship outside of marriage. Recent years have witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of cohabiting couples.

Cohabitation tends to conjure up images of college students or other well-educated young couples without children, but these images are misleading. In reality, cohabitation rates have always been higher in the less educated and lower-income segments of the population (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Moreover, many cohabitating couples have children (Bianchi, Raley, & Casper, 2012).

Although many people see cohabitation as a threat to the institution of marriage, many theorists see it as a new stage in the courtship process—a sort of trial marriage.

Research shows that most individuals cohabitate for practical reasons (such as financial necessity, convenience, or to meet housing needs), rather than as a trial marriage (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Conceiving a child during cohabitation tends to increase couples' chances of staying together (Manning, 2004).

As a prelude to marriage, cohabitation should allow people to experiment with marital-like responsibilities and reduce the likelihood of entering marriage with unrealistic expectations, suggesting that couples who cohabit before they marry should go on to more successful marriages than those who do not.

Although this analysis sounds plausible, researchers have not found that premarital cohabitation increases the likelihood of subsequent marital success.

Infact, studies have consistently found an association between premarital cohabitation and increased marital discord and divorce rates (Teachman, 2003).

This association is referred to as the cohabitation effect (Jose, O'Leary, & Moyer, 2010), and it holds true even for second marriages (Stanley et al., 2010).

However, preliminary research suggests that the cohabitation effect might be weakening for recent cohorts of married couples (Manning & Cohen, 2012).

What accounts for the cohabitation effect?

Many theorists argue that this nontraditional lifestyle has historically attracted a more liberal and less conventional segment of the population with a weak commitment to the institution of marriage and relatively few qualms about getting divorced.

This explanation has considerable empirical support (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004), but some support also exists for the alternative explanation—that the experience of cohabitation changes people's attitudes, values, or habits in ways that somehow increase their vulnerability to divorce (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Seltzer, 2001).

Remaining Single

The pressure to marry is substantial in our society (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). People are socialized to believe that they are not complete until they have found their “other half” and have entered into a partnership for life. And reference is often made to people’s “failure” to marry.

In spite of this pressure, an increasing proportion of young adults are remaining single (Morris & DePaulo, 2009). In 2010, over a quarter of all households in the United States were one-person (Lofquist et al., 2012)

Does the greater number of single adults mean that people are turning away from the institution of marriage?

Perhaps a little, but for the most part, no. A variety of factors have contributed to the growth of the single population. Much of this growth is a result of the higher median age at which people marry and the increased rate of divorce. The vast majority of single, never-married people do hope to marry eventually. In a national survey of never-married adults, only 12% reported that they did not want to eventually get married (Cohn et al., 2011).

Singles continue to be stigmatized and plagued by two disparate stereotypes.

On the one hand, single people are sometimes portrayed as carefree swingers who are too busy enjoying the fruits of promiscuity to shoulder marital responsibilities.

On the other hand, they are seen as losers who have not succeeded in snaring a mate and they may be portrayed as socially inept, maladjusted, frustrated, lonely, and bitter. These stereotypes do a great injustice to the diversity that exists among those who are single.

In fact, the negative stereotypes of singles have led some researchers to coin the term singlism to capture how single people can be victims of prejudice and discrimination (DePaulo, 2011; DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006).

Moving beyond stereotypes, what do scientists know about singlehood? It is true that single people exhibit poorer mental and physical health than married people (Waite, 1995), and they rate themselves as less happy than their married counterparts (Waite, 2000).

However, we must use caution in interpreting these results; in many studies, “singles” include those who are divorced or widowed, which inflates this finding (DePaulo, 2011; Morris & DePaulo, 2009). Furthermore, the differences are modest, and the happiness gap has shrunk, especially among women.

The physical health benefits of being married appear to be greater for men than for women (Amato, 2010).

But most studies find that single women are more satisfied with their lives and less distressed than comparable single men, and various lines of evidence suggest that women get along without men better than men get along without women (Marker, 1996). When interviewing life-long single women between the ages of 65 and 77, Baumbusch (2004) found that these women expressed satisfaction with their decision to remain single and emphasized the importance of their independence.

In sum, as traditional married households become less common in modern life, psychological researchers must answer the call to explore and understand alternative relationship lifestyles and their impact on families.