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Alliance theory distinguishes three of these basic types of marriages. The most basic is called 'direct exchange' or the 'elementary system'. The second type is 'indirect exchange', and the third type is called the 'complex system'. In the direct exchange system, marriages place people and groups in a symmetric relationship. ♀ Females of group A, for example a clan, marry males of group B and females of group B marry males of group A. Group A thus exchanges women or men with group B in a direct and reciprocal way. This exchange system can be linked to the terminological systems mentioned earlier in this chapter. Most often, direct exchange systems occur where the terminology is of the Dravidian or Iroquois type. Let me detail the principles, asking the reader to go back to Fig. 9.1 if necessary, and combine terminology, descent system, and alliance theory in one fictitious example.

Let us say that the descent system is patrilineal and that we have two clans, A and B. Clan A is composed of my father, my father's brother, my father's sister, and other people related through the male line. Clan B is composed of my mother, my mother's brother, my mother's sister, etc. My father, who is from clan A, married my mother from clan B (exogamy). His children thus belong to clan A. In exchange, my mother's brother, who is from clan B, can marry my father's sister, who is from clan A. Their children belong to clan B. Since I can only marry people from clan B (exogamy), I call these children cross-cousins or wife, and not sibling. My children will be of clan A and will marry people from clan B, and so on. What results from direct exchange systems is that a person marries someone he or she calls cross-cousin, and the spouse's sibling is also the sister's or brother's spouse. In practice, as we will see, people only rarely marry their actual cross-cousin but do nevertheless marry a person of the same category.

The second type is the indirect exchange system, which is found in, but is not exclusive to, Crow and Omaha terminologies. Marriage in these cases is either patrilateral or matrilateral: a person can marry a cross-cousin from either the father's side or the mother's side respectively, but not from both. In terms of clans or descent groups, it means that there are at least three exchanging units: clan A marries into clan B, who marries into clan C, who marries back into clan A. The exchange is no longer direct but indirect.

The last and least systemic exchange system is called the complex system. Marriage is here no longer a system of exchange on its own, but merges into other types of exchanges, social structures, and ideologies. An example of a complex system is the modern European system where alliances (repetitions of identical marriages) are very rare, since children of the same family may marry in different ways into the most diverse family backgrounds. Statistically, of course, there are some regularities even among complex systems, but, as already mentioned, they are relevant for social factors other than rules of marriage alone. For example, people of a certain social class tend to marry into the same social class, and people in rural areas tend to marry following strategies that retain the coherence of landownership over time. Complex marriage systems are usually associated with limited, not extensive, terminologies, in which kinship terms are only applied to close or very close kin.

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The theories of descent and alliance do not need to be understood as exclusive paradigms but are in fact complementary aspects of similar social and cultural characteristics and practices. Marriage and marriage rules are needed to create more or less stable structures, of which clans and lineages are examples; and clans and lineages are needed if marriage is to be exogamous and link people of different ascent. Descent differentiates and distinguishes people as groups within a society, while marriage upholds the connection between these groups. Data in this respect needs to take into account two distinct explanatory sources: first, actual marriage practices and the choice of partners, and second, discourses about marriage rules. In some cases, practices and discourses may overlap (people actually doing what they say they are supposed to do). In other cases, discourses rather reflect an ideal type of practice which does not happen very often, if at all. Let us look briefly at the main constituents of discourses about marriage rules.

Two types of rules can be expressed in discourses about marriage rules. The first type defines prescriptive practices, the second describes proscriptive marriages. Prescriptive rules are rules that express what one is