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Marriage: an evolutionary perspective.

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Abstract

Marriage is universal, and pair bonding is found in other species too with highly dependent young. So marriage functions as a reproductive social arrangement that traditionally involved the extended family. The sexes are not identical in their biological contributions to children's survival, so they seek somewhat different attributes in a mate. Men seek a young, attractive, sexually faithful bride. Women seek a man who is older, taller, and (as in many other species) socially dominant. Both sexes prefer a kind, healthy, attractive, similar mate who is emotionally attached to them. A spouse who fails to maintain sufficiently high mate value is vulnerable to divorce. Infertility and sexual dissatisfaction predict divorce, as does death of a child, but the more children, the stabler the marriage. Cross-cultural data suggest that cruel or subdominant men (e.g., poor providers) and unfaithful women are prone to divorce. Marriages in which the wife dominates the husband in economic contributions, nonverbal behavior, and decision making tend to be less satisfying. In societies in which wives are economically independent of husbands, divorce rates are high. As women's economic power has risen with industrialization, divorce rates have climbed. Economic and fitness considerations also help explain cultural differences in polygyny, age at marriage, arranged marriage, concern with the bride's sexual chastity, and marriage ceremonies. Other factors also affect marital dynamics, such as state subsidies to families, the sex ratio, and influence of the couple's parents.

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