Marriage, Kinship, and Family

Things to consider in this unit are; how people are related, how kinship relationships are formed, how kinship is connected to the idea of the nation-state, and how kinship is changing in an era of globalization.

Marriage can be defined as a culturally sanctioned union between two or more individuals that creates rights and obligations between those involved, including any children that might result from a marriage, and any interactions with other relatives, such as in-laws. In addition to establishing kinship ties, marriage is a system connected to regulating sexual access in societies around the world. Every society regulates how children are raised, how households are arranged, and how gender relations and identity are determined. Familial organization and marriage customs play a fundamental role in determining these societal structures and arrangements. One type of marriage or family structure is not inherently superior to another.

Sexuality is not always related to marriage. An analysis of sexuality in the Trobriand Islands provides anthropologists an example of premarital interest in sex at an early age. By the age of 7 or 8 Trobriand boys and girls play erotic games, imitating adult behavior and attitudes. By age of 12 or 13 they begin experimenting with sexual partners. Youth of most cultures spend time attempting to look as attractive and seductive as possible. Trobriand girls paint their faces and wear adornments. Sexualized behavior at such an early age would be considered unacceptable by some in Western culture. However, Western cultures have gradually moved toward more sexual promiscuity before marriage.

Another culture that encourages sexual permissiveness is the Nayar of Southwest India. They have a marriage system with unusual features. Nayar society revolves around a corporation or an organization of kinsmen, all related to one another through the female line. At an early age, a young woman or girl takes on a ritual husband, and they might or might not have sex. This relationship establishes the adult
status of the female. This “ritual marriage” comes to a quick end, and the girl, now as woman, enters into a sexual relationship with another male, approved by the family. This male is a “visiting husband.” Nayar women may have sex with more than one male, and if they become pregnant one of the men will be accepted as the father. The father presents a gift to the mother, ending their responsibility. Support and care for the child is the responsibility of the mother other members of her household organization.

**Nayar women in traditional clothing**

Marriage in its many forms provides one of the societal structures that regulates who gets to have sex with whom. A non-ethnocentric definition of marriage is to describe it as “a culturally sanctioned union between two or more people that establishes certain rights and obligations between people, between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws.” Marriage is a social phenomenon, to be distinguished from "mating," which is biological.

**Bonobos, promiscuous behavior is common.**

Marriage is an important institution across cultures. It helps builds alliances between and among family groupings. Marriage extends familial ties beyond consanguineal kin, which literally means "blood" relatives. Through the conjugal bond, or marriage affinal kin bonds are also established. Societies follow endogamy or exogamy marriage rules in determining marriage partner selection restrictions. Exogamy rules require marriage with someone outside of a defined social group. Endogamy requires that marriage with someone who is a member of a group, such as the local community. Exogamy tells you who you cannot marry. Endogamy identifies preferred marriage partners. In many cultures both types of rules operate at the same time.

**Casanova**
In Western cultures, sexual relations outside of marriage are often discouraged for women. A “double-standard” encourages men to seek sexual opportunities outside marriage. The birth control pill ushered in a sexual revolution of the 1960s, with attitudes toward premarital sex have changing dramatically. Religious conservatives typically retain a traditional view regarding premarital sex. Statistics regarding premarital sex demonstrate only small percentage of Americans, and other Westerners, completely avoid sexual relations before marriage.

Rules exist in most cultures to limit incest. The incest taboo is widespread, but varies by culture. Endogamy rules are related to prohibitions against incest. Such rules promote exogamy, or marriage outside a particular group. But again, societies practicing exogamy may also practice endogamy. Societies on which relatives are covered by rules of exogamy. For example, in the U.S., states vary in laws regarding marriage between cousins. First cousin marriage is legal in some states, while in other states only second or third cousins can marry. Marriage between cousins has historically is common, especially at elite levels of society, like the nobility of Europe.

The Toda people of Southern India traditionally practiced fraternal polyandry, but more recently monogamy has become more common.
Many forms of marriage exist. Monogamy is the most common. Polygyny (marriage to multiple wives) is also quite common. Many societies allow polygamous marriage relationships. Polygyny is the correct term for a polygamous marriage between one man and two or more women. Another form of polygamy is polyandry. In polyandry, one woman is married to two or more husbands. Polyandry is a relatively rare, found in Tibet and the Indian subcontinent, and on some Pacific Islands. Polygyny is widely practiced, especially in Muslim countries. Muslim cultural traditions discourage men from marrying more than 4 women. Men are expected to only marry the number of women for whom the can provide.

In the mid-19th century a commune was established in upstate New York known as the Oneida Community. This community practiced a form of group marriage known as Complex Marriage.

Group marriage is another rare form of marriage. In a group marriage several men are all members of the marriage group, with sexual access to one another. Another cultural tradition exists requiring a brother to marry and provide for the widow of his male sibling. In a related cultural tradition, called a sororate, a widower marries his wife's sister. In western societies divorce is common. Serial monogamy is now a frequent occurrence.

In addition to the variety of marriages, there multiple ways to determine proper marriage partners. The romantic love complex of the West, a relatively recent development, is fairly unique. Families determine marriage partners in most cultures. Marriages bind two families together as allies, hence the need for marriage to be a family decision. There are cultures where matrilateral cross-cousins, or the mother's brother's son or daughter, are the preferred marriage partner. Patrilateral parallel-cousins, or the father's brother's son or daughter, are the preferred marriage partners in some cultures. Marriage patterns are often related to economics, and control of property.

A 15th century Italian hope chest

Economic exchanges often accompany marriage. A bride price is when the family of the groom pays money to the family of the bride. In bride service the family of the groom works for the family
of the bride for a specified period of time. A dowry is the payment of the inheritance of a woman at the time of marriage. In some Western cultures, a dowry chest, or “hope chest” is a tradition. The chest often contains personal family items with a special meaning, a way of ensuring that these “treasures” are passed from one generation to the next.

Two men getting married in the Netherlands where same-sex marriage has been legal since 2001

Numerous cultures have traditional customs related to same-sex relationships. For example, same-sex marriages are prevalent among Nandi women of western Kenya. Traditionally in Western cultures same-sex relationships were kept private, or “in the closet”. This is changing. Same-sex marriages are now legal in many Western countries. Opposition to same-sex marriage is often connected to religious beliefs. But, in most Western cultures marriage is only a religious institution for some people. Civil marriage ceremonies, without any religious connection, are common. Marriage is also a legal arrangement, thus the requirement in most societies for a government issued marriage license.

Civil same-sex marriage ceremony being performed in San Francisco City Hall

Two people, in a monogamous relationship is the most common household arrangement in America. The nuclear family, or husband, wife and children, is the ideal many Americans strive to achieve. The nuclear family, however, is a relatively recent development, and is not quite as common as many believe. A definition of the term family that avoids an ethnocentric view of what it means to be a family, is to think of a family as “two or more people related by blood, marriage, or adoption.” The concept of family in America is rapidly evolving, and the common definition of what constitutes a family in America now encompasses many different combinations of individuals and relationships.

An American nuclear family
In modern Western cultures a variety of nontraditional families exist. These include single-parent families, usually headed by a female, but not always. Female single-parent households are on the rise in other countries as well. Other examples of nontraditional families include the growing number of same-sex relationships. Many same sex couples adopt children, and some lesbian women have children of their own, either through a previous relationship with a male or through artificial insemination.

A sperm being inserted into an egg

Anthropologists distinguish between the family of orientation, the family into which a person is born and raised, and the family of procreation, which refers to the family that forms when someone becomes a parent and raises one or more children. Domestic arrangements exist involving the household, the basic residential unit where economic activity, consumption, and child rearing are carried out. A conjugal is based on a marriage tie, while a consanguineal family is one that consists of related women, their brothers, and dependent children. A blended family is one that consists of a married couple raising children together from previous unions. Family forms are more complex today due to the new reproductive technologies (NRT) such as in vitro fertilization, as well as practices like open adoption. As new family arrangements develop, anthropologists develop terms and definitions for these ever evolving relationships.

Polygamy in America. Joseph Smith’s extended family in the 19th century. His heir to leadership of the Mormon Church was Brigham Young, who had 55 wives.

Kinship Systems

What Is Kinship? Anthropologists recognize six models for tracing kinship. They include the Eskimo, Hawaiian, Sudanese, Omaha, Crow, and Iroquois models. “Kinship is the system of meaning and power that cultures create to determine who is related to whom and to define their mutual expectations, rights, and responsibilities. In short, we are talking about family.” (Guest, 2019) How Are We Related to One Another? Cultural traditions influence who we are related to, and biology also plays a role. Through marriage systems, we construct new set of relatives. When it comes to the idea of a family, who belongs? Who do you think of as your family? Obviously, family is much more than just a biological connection.
In the study of relationships, Anthropologists explore kinship and descent patterns and other elements of social organization. Anthropologists examine what exactly kinship is, what are some of the different types of descent groups, and what kind of functions various descent groups serve. Many societies face challenges that are beyond the coping ability of family and household to survive. In nonindustrial societies, these problems are often dealt with through kinship, a network of relatives within which people have mutual rights and obligations.

Kinship terminology is related to the kinds of kinship groups that exist in a society. The terms used classify and separate different kinds of individuals, emphasizing sex, generational differences, or genealogical differences. Kinship terminological systems emphasize the basic idea that family and kinship relationships are culturally determined.

Societies are commonly organized through descent groups. A descent group is "any publicly recognized social entity requiring being in the direct line of descent from a particular real or mythical ancestor for membership." Two basic forms of descent group are lineages and clans. A lineage is a corporate descent group, a body of consanguineal relatives who link themselves genealogically to a common ancestor and associate for a shared purpose. A clan, typically composed of several lineages, is a noncorporate descent group whose members assume descent from a common ancestor, but cannot trace exact links.

Descent group memberships are restricted to clearly establish loyalties. In unilineal descent, group membership is defined exclusively through either the mother's or the father's line. Matrilineal descent is traced through females, while patrilineal descent is traced through males. A close relationship exists between descent systems and economics. Patrilineal systems predominate in pastoral societies, and within intensive agricultural societies. Matrilineal descent systems predominate in horticultural societies where women's subsistence work is especially important.
Double descent systems also exist. In these systems descent is reckoned patrilineally for some purposes and matrilineally for others. In an ambilineal descent system, an individual may choose to affiliate with either the mother's or the father's descent group. Some New York City Jewish people maintain "family circles" and "cousins clubs" to explain how ambilineal descent systems function. In the majority of Western cultures, descent is ambilineal, but the paternal line is favored. In nonindustrial societies, descent groups are economic units. They provide essential services for survival. They help support the elderly, assist with marriages and deaths, regulate marriage, and maintain unifying religious traditions. As lineages grow too large, fission occurs and they split into smaller units. Eventually, a larger kind of descent group -- the clan -- emerges. Clans are often ceremonial or political, and unlike lineage systems they are not connected to property ownership. Symbols, called totems, provide clan members with identity. Totemism is a set of customs that creates a special relationship between the society and animals, plants, and other common natural phenomena.

Tradition kinship systems are challenged in the modern era. And, globalization is affects the dynamics of how kinship is studied. People always adjust to new circumstances. For example, in Chicago kinship networks have evolved in response to the reality of urban poverty. Difficult economic circumstances contribute to redefining kinship as the community’s support network develops. Fostering children, helping neighbors, sharing clothes, food, and loaning money are aspects of this evolving kinship system. People acting as family, and standing up for each other another in times of need create ties of kinship. Shared experiences lead to mutual support systems, become powerful survival tools, and elements of the construction of kinship relationships. (Guest, 2019)

Kinship systems, and other group membership systems, are elements of the evolution of human societies. In considering this fact, let’s think about how kinship may be linked to the development of the nation-state system. Kinship ties are directly connected to the very idea of nationalism. According to Anthropologist Janet Carsten, nationalism depends upon our kinship ideas of kinship Based on this perspective, as citizens of a nation, we are born into one big national family. Beyond the right of birth,
one can become a member of a nation in a variety of ways, and this varies from one country, or culture, to another. Some peoples, or nations, are resistant to people joining their nation. Marriage and immigration provide opportunities for some, but not all nations are open to the idea of expanding membership. As with other issues related to kinship, the ideas and attitudes relation to nation-states and nationalism, are evolving in the modern era of globalization.

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