

March 18, 2004

MARRIAGE: DEFINITIONS, FUNCTIONS, VARIABILITY

Read: Kamen: Modern Marriage: From Meal Ticket to Best Friend
Coontz: The Future of Marriage
Furstenberg: The Future of Marriage
Sanchez, Nock, Wright and Gager: Setting the Clock Forward or Back? Covenant Marriage and the “Divorce Revolution”

I. Definitions of marriage

A. In most societies we can say that marriage

1. Transforms the status of a man and woman
2. Stipulates the degree of sexual access the married partners may have to each other (exclusive, preferred)
3. Establishes the legitimacy of children born to the wife
4. Creates relationships between the husband's and wife's kin
5. Specifies economic duties of husband and wife

B. But not all; Kathleen Gough offers a universal definition, one she claims works for all societies

1. “Marriage is a relationship established between a woman and one or more other persons, which provides that a child born to the woman under circumstances not prohibited by the rules of the relationship, is accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum.”¹
2. Definition is so complicated because in some societies sexual rights, economic responsibilities, or socialization of children are not derived from relationships in marriage

¹ Kathleen Gough, 1968. The Nayars and the definition of marriage. In Paul Bohannan and John Middleton, eds., *Marriage, Family and Residence*. New York: The Natural History Press: 68

- a. Rather, they are the rights (and responsibilities of other groups)
 - b. One reason Gough came up with such a labored definition
 - c. Was her research on a caste in S. India: The Nayar
 - 1) Matrilineal, matrilocal
 - 2) Brothers and sisters lived together in a large residence throughout their lives
 - 3) Women would get impregnated by lovers...could have multiple ones
 - 4) Had to observe caste regulations regarding appropriate lovers
 - 5) The only thing resembling a wedding was a pre-puberty ceremony the girls went through
 - 6) Involving members of another matrilineal clan
 - 7) But no one specific male person
 - 8) Obligations of this clan was to provide a shroud when the girl died
 - 9) Then she could take lovers
 - d. Discuss: is this a wedding?
 - e. Do the Nayars have the institution of marriage?
- C. Clearly, defining marriage in universal terms and with respect to a single society requires very different definitions

1. In our society, marriage does many, many things besides legitimize offspring from a sexual union
2. And yet we see the core of marriage as being about consensual sexual intercourse
 - a. We annul marriages if they haven't been consummated
 - b. Or if there was coercion
3. When Dolly, the cloned sheep was discussed in the press some interesting comments were made in the press
 - a. "Imagine a world with no need for marriage"
 - 1) Something should strike you about that comment as odd
 - 2) Another article said that "Men wouldn't be necessary anymore"

D. More cross-cultural examples

1. The Nuer of Sudan: a woman married another woman and became the "father" of the children the wife bore
 - a. Making explicit the distinction between pater and genitor: biological father and social father
 - 1) We make this distinction for adopted children
 - 2) But for us, fathers are always men
 - b. But the female husband, if she has cattle to use for bridewealth payments to the wife's lineage, can marry
 - 1) Some man, a kinsman, friend, neighbor, impregnates the wife

- 2) Female husband cannot have children herself
- 3) But she can have several wives if she is wealthy
- 4) When her children marry, she receives bridewealth

2. Ghost marriage among the Nuer

- a. If a man died without heirs left an unhappy and angry spirit
- b. So a woman would be married to this deceased man's "name"
- c. Bridewealth cattle paid in the name of the dead man
- d. She resided with his living kinsman (brother, brother's son) who acts as though he were the true husband
- e. He impregnates her; officially they are the children of the dead man
- f. Both kinds of marriage are logical once you understand the social system and what's at stake

E. Wedding ceremonies will reveal values about marriage, functions in a society

1. Bedouin weddings in Egypt

- a. The groom will forcefully take the woman's virginity
- b. Hostile ritual symbolizing antagonism between the kin groups;² he's taking her away from her kin

2. Where I did fieldwork in the Northwest Amazon there was a

² Lila Abu-Lughod, 1993. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 167-202.

kind of “anti-wedding”

- a. No ceremony at all, just the arrival of the woman and everyone very tense
 - 3) In the past there was “bride-capture” sometimes
 - 4) Sometimes there are ceremonial bride captures
 - a) Like the Bedouin, two potentially hostile groups coming together, creating an alliance
 - 3) There are risks, everyone is on guard, don’t want to lose face
- b. Tense because the woman is leaving her family, her home
 - 1) To join her husband’s kin group, make it strong with the next generation

II. Western ideology about marriage?

A. Legitimizing children

- 1. Some tiny bit of symbolism at weddings: rice a symbol of fertility
- 2. Individual people will sometimes say “both of us wanted to be parents”
- 3. Unless they’re getting married because the bride is pregnant
- 4. A couple, the O’Neills, wrote *Open Marriage* in 1972
 - a. A scandalous book of its day
 - b. They said marriage is necessary for the people who are married

c. It has nothing to do with producing legitimate children

5. Whereas earlier when John Knox, the founder of the Quakers, and 45 years old

a. Married a fifty-five-year old woman he was criticized because marriage was for the purpose of begetting children

B. Sex

1. Remember Morgan's conclusions about the New England Puritans?

a. Who saw sex as appropriate in a marriage—for both partners—with no necessary tie-in to reproduction

b. Both partners need and are entitled to sex

2. A minister, criticizing a book published in 1927 called *The Companionate Marriage*

3. Wrote:

Marriage is after a fashion, a trades union of women for their own protection. The prostitute and the vamp are the scabs who underbit the union wage...Married women will do well to reserve their union cards, and keep their dues well paid, and also keep up the high quality of their goods. They have competition.³

a. This person accepts that there is a trade of sex for support; sex is a device a woman should use to protect her marriage

³ Nena O'Neill and George O'Neill, 1972. *Open Marriage: A New Life Style for Couples*. New York: M. Evans and Company. Excerpted in Kenneth C.W. Kammeyer, 1975. *Confronting the Issues: Sex Roles, Marriage, and the Family*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.: 61.

- b. Fits in with some feminists who maintain that traditional marriage is a form of prostitution
 - 1) Sex for non-sexual ends
- c. At that time no one countered by saying women needed and are entitled to sex as much as men

C. Money

- 1. Marrying for money is a no-no (especially if you're a man)
 - a. The whole plot of *Philadelphia Story* concerns how two people in love (Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn) can get married
 - 1) She's fabulously wealthy
- 2. Yes, in the film "Asian Heart"—the women
- 3. Do we still think in these terms?
 - a. Wives making more money than their husbands?
- 4. Certainly present in the opinions of the conservative family values proponents, as described by Coontz

III. Conclusion: how to define marriage

- A. Should do it in terms of how people in a given society see it
 - 1. In terms of the functions it performs for society
 - 2. And understand what it *is*, rather than in terms of what it "ought" to be
 - a. Although certainly what people say marriage ought to be is important information for any analysis

- b. Often the gaps between what is and what ought to be are extremely revealing
 - 1) Examples in our own society?

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