**CHAPTER 6**

**PARTNERING AND MARRIAGE FORMATION**

# CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter discusses structures and processes involved in selecting intimate partners and creating marriages. It opens by examining rates of marriage and exploring the reasons why people marry. Then, it investigates how marriage systems differ between our society and other societies, and within our own society over time. The chapter concludes by discussing factors shaping patterns of partner selection and choice, factors leading to non-normative choices, and the consequences of these choices.

# CHAPTER OUTLINE

## Marriage Trends and Characteristics

According to the U.S. Census, 58.2% of the U.S. population was married in 2007. The *crude marriage rate* of 7.3 for 2007 is the number of marriages per 1,000 persons in the population during that year. Since this rate can be affected by the age distribution of the population, demographers developed the *general marriage rate* (40.7 in 2005), based on the number of persons in the population who are eligible to get married, and correcting for the fact that two people are involved in every marriage. Marriage rates [Figure 6.1] fluctuate with macro level factors such as war, changing economic conditions, and the composition of the marriageable population. Median ages at first marriage have increased for both men and women [Figure 6.2].

A. Structural Constraints on Marriage Rates: Marriage rates are constrained by such factors as the *marriage squeeze* (an imbalance in the sex ratio), varying economic conditions, war and social conflict, and the changing composition of the marriageable population.

B. Variations in Marriage Rates: Marriage rates vary by geographic regions of the country due to state-by-state variations in marriage laws, and by season and day of the week due to social and religious norms governing marriage ceremonies.

## II. Purposes and Consequences of Marriage

A. Why Marry? Cross-culturally, the reasons for and consequences of

marriage differ, as does the structure of marriage.

* + 1. When marriage is specifically an extension of the kinship system, the basic functions of marriage are procreation and passing on the family name and property.
    2. Marriage within the U.S. family system fulfills functions such as personality formation, status ascription, nurturant socialization, tension management, reproduction and replacement of members, economic cooperation, and stabilization of adults.
    3. Marriage patterns in the U.S. include: 1) *Sequential monogamy*, or the pattern of marriage, divorce, remarriage; 2) Lifelong marriage, with a satisfaction of sexual/emotional needs outside the marriage; and 3) *Non-marital cohabitation*. Arguments exist over whether the last two patterns signal a breakdown—or a reshaping—of marriages and families.

1. Marital Status and Well-Being: Research consistently shows that married people are generally happier, healthier, and engage in fewer risky behaviors than do unmarried people, a finding referred to as the “marriage protection hypothesis.”
2. For women, marriage may be an “economic safety net,” resulting in better access to resources and lower stress levels.
3. Men receive greater mental health benefits from marriage, a result of the emotional support provided by their wives.

Experts do note, however, that the differences between married and single persons are decreasing, and that the benefits of marriage could be *spurious* (i.e. healthier, more stable people may be more likely to marry)*.*

# III. Systems of Partner Selection and Choice

All societies have systems of norms and rules about who may marry whom, and how intimate partners are selected. These range from *arranged marriage* to *autonomous marriage*.

A. Patterns of Selection and Choice: The terms *homogamy* and *endogamy* refer to the extent of intermarriage among people who share similar characteristics. *Exogamy* describes marital relationships with people who are outside of specifically defined social groups. There are five normative structures surrounding the selection of intimate partners in the United States – age, class destination, class origin, religion, and race/ethnicity.

1. Intermarriage

1. Defining intermarriage (also called *mixed* marriage) is problematic due to inconsistency in the *operational definitions* used by researchers.

2. Reporting intermarriage is problematic due to the existence of two different **marriage rates**, one based on the total number of *marriages* and one based on the percentage of married *individuals*.

3. Factors that foster intermarriage include group size, community heterogeneity, sex ratio, group controls (sanctions), and the romantic love complex.

## Dimensions and Consequences of Homogamy and Intermarriage

* + 1. Age at Marriage: The age at which people marry is an important social/structural characteristic, influencing family/kin networks, birthrates, and education advancement. In turn, age at marriage is influenced by social class, women’s roles, occupational/educational opportunities, and other factors. Age at marriage has been steadily increasing since the 1950’s.
       1. The median age at marriage is higher for grooms (27.7) than brides (26), and age heterogamous marriages tend to be characterized by lower education levels, occupational statuses, and family incomes.
       2. Laws establishing age requirements for marriage vary by state. Minors can marry with parental consent or judicial permission.
    2. Social Status: Class endogamy is a social norm in the U.S. and elsewhere. It preserves family lineage and status.
       1. *Class homogamy* is related to a high rate of educational endogamy, which has increased in the United States since 1930.
       2. Marriage with a person of lower social position is referred to as *mesalliance*. *Hypogamy* occurs when a woman marries into a lower social stratum. *Hypergamy*, which is more prevalent, occurs when a woman marries into a higher social stratum.
       3. When people marry outside their social class, men tend to “marry up,” while women tend to “marry down,” a tendency called the *mating gradient*. A result is that more unmarried men are of lower status, and more unmarried women are of higher status.
    3. Religion and Intermarriage: Although religious endogamy in the U.S. is strong, especially for Jews, there was a dramatic increase in intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants during the twentieth century.
       1. Defining interfaith marriage can be problematic because measures of religious affiliation and religiosity are inadequate.
       2. Religiously homogamous marriages tend to be the most satisfying and stable, but religiously heterogamous marriages have less divorce and martial instability than “no religion” marriages.
       3. There is little empirical support for claims that interfaith marriages have a secularizing effect on children.

D. Race/Ethnicity and Intermarriage: In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court declared laws prohibiting interracial marriage unconstitutional; however, norms discouraging interracial marriage are still rigorously enforced.

1. The frequency of interracial/interethnic marriage is determined by census data, which is based on respondents’ self-reported race. While the number of interracial marriages has increased, less than 4 percent of all marriages were interracial, and few of these marriages were between Blacks and Whites [Figure 6.3].
2. Census data indicate that most interracial marriages occur between White men and Native American, Japanese, or Filipino women. When Black/White marriage does occur, it is almost always between a Black man and a White woman.
3. The success or failure of an interracial/interethnic marriage is influenced by age, religious beliefs, education level, residence location, and degree of support from family members. Research indicates that children of mixed heritage do *not* have lower self-esteem or experience greater stress than their single-heritage peers.

LECTURE LAUNCHERS, CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Have students watch one of the many popular films dealing with love and marriage, and ask them to conduct a media analysis of the film using the guidelines presented in Chapter 5 of the *Instructor’s Manual****.***

2. Position papers are often a good way for students to clarify their own attitudes and beliefs. Ask the class to write position papers on marrying across one of the following lines:

* Race/Ethnicity
* Age
* Religion
* Social Class

Then discuss with the class which of these they would be most likely to marry across and which they would be least likely to marry across. Relate the students’ comments back to the information presented in this chapter.

3. Watch the film, *Out of Faith* (2008), about interfaith marriage, and discuss with students why Leah takes the position that she does, and why her grandchildren take the positions that they do. Brainstorm as a class regarding how interfaith marriages can be made less traumatic for the families and individuals involved.

4. Have students visit the sites [www.cousincouples.com](http://www.cousincouples.com) and <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/LAW/04/columns/fl.grossman.incest.04.09/>, before coming to class. Then, discuss with them the reasons that people give for marrying close cousins. What are the advantages of this? What are the disadvantages? Use this discussion to introduce the idea that cousin marriages are the norm in many societies (and were common in the rural U.S. in the past). Does marrying a cousin violate the “Incest Taboo?” Why or why not?