**CHAPTER 7**

PREMARITAL AND NON-MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

**CHAPTER FOCUS**

This chapter reviews several explanations of how and why individuals select particular partners, comparing individualistic and interactional theories of mate selection. This chapter also discusses recent trends in dating and hooking up, the growing trend in non-marital cohabitation, and the similarities and differences between cohabiting and married couples.

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

There is considerable cross-cultural variation in the norms and processes guiding mate selection.

1. **Socio-cultural Context of Non-Marital Relationships**

The social structure and cultural meaning systems impact our choices of partners, and the meanings we give those relationships. Early *filter theories of mate selection* saw society as a filter, but then assumed that these forces gave way to individual and interactional needs. Reiss’s *wheel theory of love* [Figure 7.1] recognized the role of socio-cultural influences. Non-marital and premarital relationships have become increasingly ambiguous, as the process is filled with uncertainty and risk; norms regarding mate selection are changing; and there is more emphasis on the *expressive self* and less on institutional regulation.

* 1. Social Construction of Love: Love is a *socially constructed* concept because it takes on different meanings, importance, and behaviors according to the social context in which it is used. Love has emotional, cognitive, relational, and behavioral aspects. The meaning of love has changed over time and across cultural contexts.

1. **Individualistic Explanations of Partner Selection**
   1. Instinctive and Biological Theories: These explanations are rooted in evolutionary instinct, genetic similarity, and unconscious needs and drives.
   2. Parental Image Theories: These theories assume that individuals select mates similar to their opposite sex parent, and are based on Freud’s psychoanalytic theory.
   3. Complementary Needs Theory: These theories assume that choose as mates those who meet their psychological needs. For mate selection to occur based on love, three cultural conditions must exist – voluntary choice of mates, encouragement of premarital interaction between the sexes, and definition of marriage as a friendship and likely source of gratification.
2. **Interactional Processes in Partner Selection**

Socio-cultural or interactional explanations operate at a more conscious level, are more readily testable, and have greater research support than individualistic explanations of partner selection.

* 1. Value Theory suggests that interpersonal attraction is facilitated when persons share similar value orientations, or definitions of what is good and worthwhile, because sharing values validates each person and promotes emotional satisfaction.
  2. Role theory posits that when role discrepancies exist between people, marriage is unlikely to occur; but consensus about *roles*, or the social expectations associated with given statuses (such as “wife”), promotes unions between specific partners.
  3. Exchange theory suggests that some type of transaction or bargaining occurs in the selection of an intimate partner. This theory assumes human behavior is goal oriented and purposive, and individuals attempt to maximize rewards or gains.
  4. Sequential theories, including the stimulus-value-role (SVR) model developed by Murstein, combine several factors to understand the partner selection process. The SVR model asserts that couples pass through three stages prior to marriage.
     1. *Stimulus*: individuals are drawn to each other based on the perception of qualities deemed attractive, such as physical appearance or reputation.
     2. *Value*: If mutual attraction occurs, the individuals engage in value comparison, where they appraise their compatibility by communicating.
     3. *Role*: The partners increasingly confide in each other, fulfill tasks, and evaluate each other’s adequacy as a lover and companion.

1. **Premarital/Non-marital Relationship Dynamics**

All societies have socially-approved, structured procedures to follow in getting married. In the U.S., this process is highly youth-centered and competitive, particularly for first marriages. It entails a series of stages marked by increasing degrees of commitment. Your authors characterize the partner-selection process as a game with different rules, goals, and strategies for males and females. Communication in this game is often in the form of nonverbal cues, signs, gestures, and other symbolic movements.

* 1. Hooking Up and Dating: Glenn and Marquardt’s research indicates that traditional dating among college women is infrequent, while *hooking up* (physical contact without affection or sexual intercourse without commitment) is widespread. This group defined dating as “hanging out,” or engaging in loosely organized activities where individuals do not make their interest in each other explicit.
     1. New forms of partner connections have emerged, such as Internet chat rooms and dating services. An analysis of personal newspaper advertisements revealed that men tend to focus on physical appearance and youth, while women tend to focus on financial security, success, and long-term relationships.
     2. Despite claims of egalitarian attitudes, adults’ dating scripts have retained the traditional dominant male/subordinate female assumption, and men continue to exert greater control over dating situations.
     3. In any dating relationship, Waller’s *principle of least interest* suggests that the partner who is less interested in continuing the relationship is in a position to dominate, and possibly exploit, the other party. For individuals who reject traditional gender norms, this principle suggests that inequality is a key factor involved in the breakup of relationships.
  2. Engagement: *Engagement* implies the final transition in the process of changing status from single to married. As the social marker that designates a change from dating availability to dating exclusiveness, engagement involves rituals that reinforce publicly and privately the importance of the couple relationship. In the U.S., the ring involves a financial commitment from the male and allows the female to publicly communicate her commitment. Formal announcements of the couple’s intent to marry publicly indicate the seriousness of the relationship.

1. **Non-marital Cohabitation**
   1. Also known as living together, unmarried couple households, and consensual unions, this arrangement is increasingly popular in the U.S. and other Western societies. As a modal path of entry into marriage, *nonmarital cohabitation* has become an important step in the courtship process. Although no formal social or legal registration of marriage occurs, cohabiting couples behave much like married couples, sharing residences, bank accounts, and sexual exclusivity.
   2. Incidence and Prevalence of Cohabitation: Over half of the 4.7 million unmarried heterosexual couple households in the U.S. in 2006 contained individuals who have never been married, suggesting that cohabitation is becoming an institutionalized step between dating and marriage, and a key factor in the increased age at marriage. In terms of prevalence—the number of people who ever cohabit—more than half of all first unions in the 1990’s were cohabiting, rather than marriage. As cohabitation rates have risen, marriage and remarriage rates have fallen. While cohabitors tend to be younger couples, the never married, and non-parents, increasing numbers have been married before and have children [Figure 7.2].
   3. Methodological Concerns in the Study of Cohabitation: When doing research comparing cohabiting to non-cohabiting couples, there are two methodological concerns:

1) *Selection versus experience*: There is the likelihood that persons have higher divorce rates not because of cohabitation, but because they have factors that put them at greater risk for divorce in the first place, and because they may hold unconventional attitudes that predict both cohabiting and divorce; and

2) *Meanings of cohabitation* are less clear than the meanings of marriage.

* 1. Interactional Patterns and Outcomes in Cohabiting Relationships: Cohabitors and married couples are different in that cohabitors have more liberal gender roles, are more likely to keep finances separate, are less likely to engage in home ownership, and more likely to report relationship violence. Cohabitors have a lower desire to marry, and are less likely to ever marry. For some, cohabitation serves as an alternative to marriage, and for others, it serves as a prelude to marriage.
  2. Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Most existing data indicate that cohabitation does not serve as a successful trial for marriage. Married couples who previously cohabited report lower-quality marriages and are more likely to divorce (due to the self-selection bias mentioned in C.1. above).

LECTURE LAUNCHERS, CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. As an out-of-class assignment, have students pick two films to watch individually or in groups. One film of their choice can be a ‘love story’ from 1970 or before; another should be a ‘love story’ from 2000 or later. Have them write a short paper examining how depictions of love have changed since 1970. Ask them to use the information in the chapter as a way of situating what they found. Is love portrayed more realistically in contemporary films? Why or why not?
2. If you have Internet access in your classroom, go to Craiglist.org and do a quick analysis of the dating ads from a large city in another state (so as to protect the privacy of your students and posters to the site). What are most of the posters looking for? How many just want to hook up? How many are looking for a possible relationship? For a serious commitment? Use this to launch a discussion not only of changes in dating over the 10 – 20 years, but also to raise issues regarding the safety of Internet dating.
3. Instruct students to visit the following websites prior coming to class. You can have them prepare written answers to the questions posed and submit the work, or have them share their answers in class to generate discussion. Go to the American Bar Association website at <http://www.abanet.org/publiced/practical/books/family/chapter_1.pdf> to learn more about your rights and responsibilities in a cohabiting relationship, which is not automatically protected by the same laws that govern marriage. Also visit <http://www.equalityinmarriage.org/bmagreements.html>, to learn the reasoning behind cohabitation agreements.
4. Working in small groups, students should discuss which things they would expect (or not expect) from a cohabiting partner that they would not (or would) expect from a spouse. For example, would you have your partner/your spouse accompany you on an overnight trip to your parent’s home? Would you go on vacation with your partner/spouse? Would you maintain separate bank accounts or a shared bank account if you were cohabiting? Would you name your partner/spouse as beneficiary on your life insurance policy? Would you have a child with your partner? Have students report the results of their discussions back to the class. Initially, some students claim that because “marriage is only a piece of paper,” they would not distinguish in any way between their cohabiting partner and a spouse. However, when responding to specific questions, most students express discomfort with combining finances and having a child with someone to whom they are not married. This exercise can also be used to illustrate how we form both invisible (emotional) boundaries and concrete (physical and financial) boundaries designating the “self,” the “couple,” and the “family.”
5. Have students watch the film, *Closer* (2004), which explores cohabiting, marriage, and betrayal. How does each couple resolve their differences concerning varying levels of commitment desired by each partner? Does marriage make a difference? Why or why not?
6. Have students write position papers regarding a topic in this chapter. For example, they might choose to write on one of the following questions:
   * Do you believe in love at first sight? Why or why not?
   * Have you cohabited or do you plan to cohabit before marriage? Why or why not?
   * How likely are you to marry in the future, or remain married (if already married)? Explain the reasons behind your answer.
   * Is marriage losing meaning for most Americans? Answer yes or no, and explain the reasons behind your answer.