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Before reading

Answer the following questions.

- What types of marriages are in practice in your culture?
- Do you think marriages are different from culture to culture?

Steven L. Nock (March 11, 1950 – January 26, 2008) was a researcher, author, and the Commonwealth Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia. He wrote extensively on the role of marriage in society, and worked in the Federal Department of Health and Human Services as a consultant on American family policy. He authored textbooks and articles about the causes and consequences of change in the American family. He investigated issues of privacy, unmarried fatherhood, cohabitation, commitment, divorce, and marriage. His book, *Marriage in Men's Lives* won the William J. Good Book Award from the American Sociological Association for the most outstanding contribution to family scholarship in 1999.



In this essay, the author examines the national marriage debate by reviewing the social and demographic trends that have changed the role of marriage and the family. He views that marriage and parenthood are private matters, relevant only to the individuals directly involved.

He points out the programs that have strengthened marital relationships, lowered divorce rates, reduced out-of-wedlock births, and encouraged responsible fatherhood.

A marriage is much more than the sum of two spouses. It is also a relationship defined by legal, moral, and conventional assumptions. While one can imagine a variety of close personal affiliations uniting two adults, the variety of marriage affiliations is much narrower because marriage is an *institution*, culturally patterned and integrated into other basic social institutions, such as education, the economy, and politics. Marriage has rules that originate outside any particular union of two spouses and that establish *soft boundaries* around the relationship that influence the partners in many ways. The boundaries around marriages are the commonly understood allowable limits of behavior that distinguish marriage from all other kinds of relationships. The social norms that define the institution

of marriage identify married spouses in ways that distinguish them from others. Married couples have something that other couples lack: they are heirs to a vast system of understood principles that help organize and sustain their lives.

One explanation for how marriage matters to men is that it provides structure to their lives and organizes their ambitions. This is an old argument, first suggested a century ago by Emile Durkheim, who demonstrated the protective role of marriage in preventing suicide. Durkheim observed that since basic human necessities (food, housing, clothing) are more or less available in all advanced societies, desires among modern humans are focused on well-being, comfort, luxury, and prestige. Sooner or later, however, the appetite for such rewards becomes sated. One of the central problems in modern society, therefore, is establishing legitimate boundaries around such desires. This, Durkheim believed, can be accomplished only by social institutions such as marriage.

Durkheim explained the function of marriage for men by noting how unrestrained longings and desires must be checked. Marriage benefits men, Durkheim believed, because, as an organ of society, it restrains their otherwise uncontrollable impulses. Discussing such desires and impulses, Durkheim observed:

By forcing a man to attach himself forever to the same woman, marriage assigns a strictly definite object to the need for love, and closes the horizon. This determination is what forms the state of moral equilibrium from which the husband benefits. Being unable to seek other satisfactions than those permitted, without transgressing his duty, he restricts his desires to them. The salutary discipline to which he is subjected makes it his duty to find his happiness in his lot, and by doing so supplies him with the means. (1951: 270-71)

Two people may enjoy a harmonious and happy life without the benefit of marriage. In fact, growing numbers of Americans appear to believe that unmarried *cohabitation* offers something that marriage does not: freedom from the rules of marriage because there are no widely accepted and approved boundaries around cohabitation. Unmarried partners have tremendous freedom to decide how they will arrange their relationships. Each partner must decide how to deal with the other's parents, for example. Couples must decide whether vacations will be taken together or separately. Money may be pooled or held in separate accounts.

And the parents of a cohabiting couple will also need to create a relationship with them with little guidance. Is the cohabiting couple to be treated as a married pair? In such small ways, cohabiting couples and their associates must create their relationship. Married couples may also face decisions about some of these matters. However, married spouses have a pattern to follow. For most matters of domestic life,

marriage supplies a template—what cohabiting couples lack. They are exempt from the vast range of marriage norms and laws in our society.

A man can say to his spouse: "I am your husband. You are my wife. I am expected to do certain things for you, and you likewise. We have pledged our faithfulness. We have sworn to forego others. We have made a commitment to our children. We have a responsibility and obligation to our close relatives, as they have to us." These statements are not simply personal pledges. They are also enforceable. Others will expect these things of the couple. Laws, religion, and customs bolster this contract. When this man says to someone, "I would like you to meet my wife," this simple declaration says a great deal.

Consider an unmarried couple living happily together. What, if any, are the conventional assumptions that can be made? What are the limits to behavior? To whom is each obligated? Whom can this couple count on for help in times of need? And how do you complete this introduction of one's cohabiting partner: "I would like you to meet my ..."? The lack of a word for such a partner clearly indicates how little such relationships are governed by convention. Alternatively, we may say that such a relationship is *not* an institution.

Marriage is a form of "capital" just as surely as any other resource. "If physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form, and human capital is less tangible, being embodied in skills and knowledge acquired by an individual, *social capital* is less tangible yet, for it exists in the *relations* among persons. Just as physical capital and human capital facilitate productive activity, social capital does as well" (Coleman, 1988: S100-S101). Social capital consists of extensive networks of individuals linked by bonds of trustworthiness and trust.

This type of capital is produced in relationships predicated on the belief (i.e., trust) that obligations will be incurred *and* repaid. Through their marriages, husbands and wives become connected to new kin (and friends of new kin). Kinship ties forged through marriage differ from those in more casual relationships. Such relationships are extensively woven with threads of obligations. In times of need, one may call upon relatives and expect assistance. The enduring nature of kinship obligations means that such debts persist and bind relatives together in an ongoing relationship. Social capital also embeds individuals in networks that channel valued knowledge and information among all members. Such networks are sustained by social norms and social sanctions (honor, status, etc.) that facilitate certain actions and constrain others. Individuals benefit just as much from the accumulation of social capital as from other types of capital. Yet social capital cannot be separated from the configuration of institutions and communities (other people) that give it meaning and consequence. In

short, the institution of marriage is an individual asset. Although intangible, it is no less important than other assets, yet more difficult to sustain (or accumulate) because it exists only *as* relationships with others.

The soft boundaries of marriage distinguish it qualitatively from all other forms of relationships. Therefore, to understand how marriage affects spouses, one must consider the various rules that define it. Thus, it would be well to reemphasize here the six dimensions that define normative marriage in America: marriages are entered *voluntarily* by *mature, heterosexual* adults with the expectation that husbands will be the *principal earners*, that both partners will be *sexually*

faithful, and that married partners will become parents. Although many marriages depart from these ideals, the ideals still constitute the core of normative marriage as it is expressed in law, religion, and custom. Normative marriage is a form of social control, a way by which behaviors and aspirations are channeled appropriately. It is a force greater than the individuals involved because it represents the collective sentiments of others. Marriage in this view is qualitatively different from other intimate relationships. Much of the meaning of marriage in men's lives will be found in these rules. Together, these six premises provide a definition of marriage that will inform the rest of this work.

Glossary

institution (n.): an established custom

boundaries (n.): dividing lines/lines that make limits

heir (n.): a person with the legal right to receive property or money when the owner dies

appetite (n.): physical desire esp. food or pleasure

unrestrained (adj.): not controlled

impulses (n): sudden urge to act without thinking about the results

transgressing (v.): going beyond the limits of (what is morally, socially, or legally acceptable)

cohabitation (n.): the state of living together and having a sexual relationship without being married

bolster (n.): a thick pillow shaped like a long tube

intangible (adj.): that cannot be easily or clearly understood

normative (adj.): describing or setting standards or rules of language or behavior which should be followed

Understanding the text

Answer the following questions.

- a. According to the author, what is marriage?
- b. How is marriage an institution?
- c. What are the rules that a marriage has?
- d. Why does marriage matter to men?
- e. What is one of the central problems in modern society?
- f. What does social capital consist of?
- g. What is normative marriage? Explain.

Reference to the context

- a. Discuss six dimensions that define normative marriage in America.
- b. Do marriages differ according to culture? How is your marriage practice different from marriage in America?

Reference beyond the text

- a. Write an essay on the marriage practice in your own culture.
- b. Is marriage a social institution? Discuss.