

MARRIAGE

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October 13, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *MARRIAGE*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=46928>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Anthropology, Law, Psychology, History.

1. Core Definition

Marriage is fundamentally understood as a social construct or convention that formalizes an intimate, often sexual, relationship between two or more people, leading to a recognized union. Although historically defined narrowly as the union of a man and a woman, the modern understanding acknowledges its diversity across cultures and legal systems, often centering on the establishment of mutual rights and obligations. The source material correctly identifies marriage as a process wherein parties willingly enter into either a religious or civil legal contract. This contractual element is critical, distinguishing mere cohabitation from the institutional structure of marriage, as the contract typically confers legal standing, privileges, and duties regarding property, inheritance, and shared resources. Furthermore, the psychological dimension of marriage involves commitment, emotional bonding, and the establishment of a core family unit, which serves as a foundational building block for larger societal structures, making it a pivotal institution studied across numerous academic disciplines.

The definition of marriage is inextricably tied to its recognition by an external authority, whether that authority is the state (civil marriage) or a religious body (sacramental or religious marriage). This official recognition is what validates the relationship, transforming a private partnership into a public, legally defensible, and socially accountable institution. Historically, the primary function of this recognition was to regulate legitimate procreation and the orderly transfer of property and lineage, ensuring that children born within the union possessed defined rights and statuses. While contemporary Western definitions have broadened to emphasize companionate love and individual fulfillment, the inherent function of establishing defined kinship relations and regulating economic interdependence remains a central pillar of the marriage concept. Thus, marriage is simultaneously a deeply personal commitment and a highly regulated legal contract.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term 'marriage' derives from the Old French word 'mariage,' which itself stems from the Latin 'maritare,' meaning 'to furnish with a husband or wife,' or 'to wed.' This linguistic root highlights the historical emphasis on the act of joining individuals to establish a socially recognized family unit. Throughout history, the purpose and form of marriage have been highly fluid, reflecting prevailing economic and political conditions. In ancient societies, particularly those driven by agrarian economics or tribal structures, marriage was frequently utilized as a strategic tool for alliance formation between families or clans, often involving the exchange of goods, known as the bride price or dowry, which solidified the economic commitment and demonstrated the new union's

viability.

The evolution of marriage has seen significant shifts depending on the dominant legal or religious framework. Roman law established many precedents for property rights and legal standing within marriage, focusing on the concept of coverture, where the wife's legal identity merged with her husband's. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church progressively consolidated authority over marriage in Western Europe, defining it as a sacred, indissoluble sacrament, a definition that profoundly shaped Western legal and social norms for over a millennium. The Protestant Reformation challenged the sacramental status of marriage, reclassifying it primarily as a civil contract permissible through church rites, paving the way for eventual state control and the introduction of divorce. The Enlightenment further accelerated this secularization, establishing the precedence of civil marriage and focusing legal definitions less on lineage and more on the mutual consent of the individuals involved, leading to the development of the modern concept of marriage as a choice based on mutual affection.

3. Key Characteristics of the Institution

The institution of marriage possesses several universal characteristics, although their specific application varies drastically by culture. Firstly, formal recognition is paramount; the relationship must be acknowledged publicly and officially, typically through rituals (religious or secular) and registration with legal authorities. This public recognition separates marriage from less formal unions and grants the partners access to a defined set of institutional benefits and protections. Secondly, marriage establishes a system of reciprocal rights and duties between the spouses. These duties historically included sexual exclusivity, economic support, cohabitation, and shared responsibilities regarding children; modern law tends to focus heavily on equitable economic distribution and mutual support during the union and upon its dissolution.

A third characteristic is the creation of new kinship structures, specifically the establishment of 'affinity,' which links the families of the spouses. This expansion of the social network is crucial for communal cohesion and support, especially in societies reliant on extended family ties. Fourthly, marriage often implies a degree of intended permanence; although divorce is widely available in many modern societies, the contract is initially entered into with the expectation that the union will endure indefinitely. The fifth key characteristic relates to the regulation of parenthood. Marriage traditionally provides the social and legal framework for legitimizing children, ensuring their lineage is recognized, their inheritance is secured, and their care is legally mandated, thereby functioning as a crucial mechanism for the orderly continuation of society.

4. Legal and Societal Functions

The legal function of marriage is one of its most defining features, serving as a complex regulatory

framework managed by the state. Civil marriage grants couples hundreds of rights and responsibilities that are not automatically afforded to cohabiting partners, encompassing tax benefits, social security survivor benefits, medical decision-making authority, and the right to inherit property automatically upon the death of a spouse. These legal provisions underscore the state's interest in incentivizing stable family units, recognizing them as the most efficient structure for the socialization of children and the provision of mutual care for adults. The legal definition ensures clarity in property distribution and child custody upon separation, reducing social ambiguity and conflict.

Societally, marriage performs critical functions related to stability and social order. It serves as the primary mechanism for the legitimate transfer of wealth and property across generations, securing the economic future of families. Furthermore, marriage is a profound source of emotional and psychological support, providing individuals with stability, companionship, and a buffer against isolation, which contributes to overall public health and well-being. From an anthropological perspective, marriage is instrumental in defining gender roles and labor division within a household, though these roles are constantly negotiated and challenged in contemporary society. By institutionalizing relationships, society ensures that the duties of care and maintenance are performed, ultimately reducing the burden on public services.

5. Typologies and Forms

While the Western model predominantly focuses on monogamy (the union of two individuals exclusively), global marriage practices exhibit significant diversity, challenging a singular definition. Historically and contemporarily, numerous cultures practice various forms of polygamy, which involves a plurality of spouses. Polygyny, the most common form of polygamy, involves one man marrying multiple women, often seen in societies where labor or lineage continuation is highly valued. Conversely, polyandry, where one woman marries multiple men, is rare but found in specific, typically resource-scarce, environments. These varying forms highlight that the structure of marriage is often dictated by ecological, demographic, and economic pressures rather than purely emotional ones.

A major evolution in recent decades is the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. This development fundamentally alters the historical definition of marriage as a heterosexual union designed solely for procreation, shifting the emphasis entirely toward consent, mutual commitment, and legal partnership, separating the concept of marriage from the concept of biological reproduction. Additionally, differences exist between civil marriage, where the union is purely a state-sanctioned contract with no religious component, and religious marriage, which may or may not be recognized by the state depending on jurisdiction. In many Western nations, a civil ceremony is a legal prerequisite, even if a couple chooses to undergo a subsequent religious ceremony, illustrating the state's ultimate authority over the institution's legal standing.

6. Debates and Criticisms (Modern Challenges)

The institution of marriage faces numerous modern debates, primarily concerning its necessity, its exclusivity, and its inherent biases. A major criticism revolves around the historical imbalance of power, often codified in law, which subjugated wives and maintained rigid gender roles. Although legal reforms in the 20th century largely eliminated coverture and granted women independent legal status, feminist critiques argue that the societal expectations embedded in the marriage structure continue to reinforce unequal labor divisions and social burdens. The high rates of divorce in industrialized nations also prompt debate about the contract's permanence and the effectiveness of marriage as a stable institution in an era of rapid social change and greater individual economic independence.

Another significant area of contention concerns the state's role in defining and conferring benefits through marriage. Critics argue that linking essential benefits (such as healthcare access or tax breaks) exclusively to marital status unfairly discriminates against single individuals or those who choose to cohabit without formalizing their relationship. The political and legal battles surrounding same-sex marriage focused precisely on this issue--the exclusion of certain groups from a fundamental civil institution--forcing societies to re-evaluate whether marriage exists primarily for the good of the state or for the good of the individuals involved. Ultimately, while marriage remains a powerful social ideal, contemporary debates question whether the institution itself needs to be radically redefined or whether its core legal functions should be unbundled and applied more broadly to all committed relationships.

7. Further Reading

[Marriage \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Marriage - Institution and Definition \(Britannica\)](#)

[Psychology of Marriage](#)