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Arranged Marriages: An Inappropriate Fabrication

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Abstract

This paper explores what an inappropriate relationship is and the taxonomy scale used to evaluate different relationships, specifically, arranged marriages. Arranged marriage is a topic that is considered taboo depending on global location. It is more prevalent in Eastern nations such as India, China, Oriental countries, and the Middle East. However, Western influence plays a significant role on what is and is not acceptable, as societal norms differ from place to place. What is defined as normal by culture is what helps to define if a relationship is or is not viewed as inappropriate. This paper is designed to explore arranged marriages and determine, based upon a preexisting classification system, whether they are appropriate or inappropriate. When analyzed as a whole, arranged marriages do not seem to fit the categories or aspects that make a relationship inappropriate.

Arranged Marriages: An Inappropriate Fabrication

An inappropriate relationship can be labeled as a connection that “reflects abstract” or “against the social norm” views of a relationship (Goodwin & Cramer, 2002). For example, there are numerous societal expectations on the appropriateness of a relationship, whether intentional or not. Goodwin et al., explained, “It is expected that marriage is normative between ages of about 22 and 28; that partners are both likely to be about the same age and very likely from the same social, demographic, religious, and ethnic groups; and that partners are, of course, required to meet the social criteria for mental fitness to conduct the enterprise” (pp. 13-14). While all of these criteria may be met, the relationship may not be deemed appropriate. For instance, the two partners may be of the same gender, which is various cultures and groups is still considered to be inappropriate.

In essence, societies—and the individuals that make up those societies—subjectively create the definition of relationships that are deemed appropriate or inappropriate. A relationship is not simply inappropriate “merely because it includes unskilled people or bad behavior, but also because the behaviors are inconsistent with social expectations for that relationship type” (Goodwin et al., 2002, p. 17). According to Goodwin et al., defining an inappropriate relationship comes down to two main viewpoints – “first, the outsiders’ views that define what is typically condemned in a given society and rely on shame caused by public awareness of otherwise private behavior; and second, insiders’ internalization of those views by reason of their membership in society” (pp. 12- 13).

These views of the relationship are what allow them to be classified as inappropriate under the categories of being a) unconventional, being the least opprobrious, b) disapproved,

or c) forbidden, which is the most scorned (Goodwin et al., 2002). Relationships that are said to be on the unconventional end of the scale stretch norms enough to encourage light gossip and attention. These relationships include couples such as ones with visibly large age gaps or cultural differences. Disapproved relationships are considered a bit more risqué and are broken down into two subsections: notable and scandalous. Some examples of notable relationships would be those that include prostitution or green card weddings, while scandalous disapproved relationships are those damaging to social reputations and ones that require institutional convention, such as are in the case of teacher-student sexual relationships or extramarital affairs. Lastly, forbidden relationships are those that are considered intolerable or most taboo, which tends to lead individuals in these relationships to face a formal form of punishment, examples being incest, pedophilia, and necrophilia. Through this taxonomy, relationships can be evaluated as to whether and which type of inappropriate relationship they are.

Arranged Marriages

Although it is a bit outdated, arranged marriages still remain a common practice today to create families for many Eastern cultured nations such as India, Nepal, Oriental countries, and many other countries in the Middle East (Jones & Jones, 1997). In fact, in 1995, about 30% of all marriages in Japan were arranged (Applbaum, 1995). An overwhelming 90% of marriages that occur in India and about 60% of all marriages around the world are arranged (Toledo, 2009). To Western individuals, arranged marriage may seem like a foreign practice. However, for people living in these countries, such as Nepal, marriage is considered not only obligatory, but also sacramental for young adults. It is more about creating bonds and joining two families rather than the couple, which is why families are often the ones invested in arranging a perfect

match (Allendorf, 2013). According to individuals in arranged marriages, marriage is about more than just the two people in the marriage—it includes their extended families and the society as well (Toledo). In Muslim cultures arranged marriage “is [seen as] a way to honor the family,” and engaging in a love match marriages would actually be “less valued” or honorable (Fox, 1975). In a case like this, a love marriage would be considered inappropriate to that society and start gossip, while for the rest of the world it is the norm.

Fox (1975) conducted a study on arranged versus love marriages in Turkey and found that those women who engage in arranged marriages were said to have a “smaller world view” than those in love match marriages (p. 191). However, those in love match marriages were considered to be more traditional in marital behavior than those in arranged. It was also shown that the education level of women has a “direct impact on deviation from traditional marital arrangements” (p. 185). This goes hand in hand with age as well – the older women are when they get married, the higher level of higher education they have. This experience tends to lead these women to a higher probability of engaging in love marriages versus traditional arranged ones.

However, unless occurring outside of the countries where this culture is rooted, marriage most often goes beyond the individuals. “Kin- arranged marriage” reflects concerns with the impact of the potential mate “on the total family unit,” because that is seen as more important (Fox, 1975, p. 186). Fox explained that elders in arranged marriage preferred cultures tend to think that “young people in love are less inclined to haggle about such matters” as wealth, socioeconomic status, permanence of union, and other similar indications of a “good match” (p. 186). Normally, parents or well-wishers who are arranging the marriage for the

young adults will look for “the kind of things that create a stable marriage” in a potential spouse, such as someone “who is generally from their social background, with the same general level of intelligence and education, [and] deep family connections” (Toledo, 2009). This seems to be similar to what would universally be considered a societally accepted, appropriate relationship. Allendorf (2013) found that what seems to provide the most positive marital quality for those in arranged marriages were gender, education, and spouse choice.

The emotional experience of the potential spouses is not usually taken into consideration until the priorities and proper background have been approved. Oftentimes, those that are arranged are complete strangers before officially being engaged, which is one of the biggest differences between arranged and love marriages (Jones & Jones, 1997). It is commonly said in countries such as India, “first comes marriage, then comes love” because with living with someone and growing together will eventually lead to the two partners falling in love with one another (Toledo, 2009). Even though love is not present at the start of the relationship, the process of marriage beforehand seems to be successful – the divorce rate for individuals in arranged marriages is only about 5 – 7% (Toledo). One reason for such a low divorce rate is that arranged marriages tend to occur in countries that have legal or societal prohibitions against divorce. In love marriages, depending on the country, these numbers jump dramatically and can be as high as 50% (Toledo). This success might be due in part to the various societies believing that marriage should not be predicated on love but on a more utilitarian facet (Gupta, 1976). On the other hand, perhaps, love acts as a “disruptive element,” showing more allegiance to a singular person than to the family, which is a big part of culture as well and could cause potential dilemmas (Gupta).

Western versus non-Western Cultural Norms

What makes match making such as this such a unique phenomenon is its open acceptance and practice in one nation, but reluctance and scarcity in another. Prouty, Markowski, and Barnes (2000) had to alter certain tests that are normally done to evaluate marital relationships depending on the countries being researched because of these cultural discrepancies. The Dyadic Adjustment scale in particular was used, and in the test, questions such as “Do you kiss your mate,” or “too tired for sex, yes or no” were asked (Prouty, Markowski, & Barnes, 2000). Although this may seem like a good method to get an overview of a relationship, elements such as kissing or sex are not signs of affection that are openly shown or discussed in countries like China, in which arranged marriages are also very common (Allendorf, 2013).

What is considered appropriate in Western culture is not adopted universally and vice versa. However, Western ideas are very influential and because of it there has been a surge of independence in more recent years – Taiwan, which used to have 2/3 of marriages be arranged in the mid-1900s, now barely has 1/10th of marriages as arranged because of Western influence (Jones & Jones, 1997). This not only affects individuals in the country but also changes the overall culture of the nation as a whole. Love marriages are a more modern independent view on lifelong commitment and is quickly spreading to many of these Eastern countries. More women are choosing to focus on careers instead of the home, leading to families allowing longer schooling instead of quickly moving onto marriage, which was previously considered a cultural rite of passage. In fact, Jones and Jones explained that “there are proven to be higher

rates of non-marriage for educated women,” which also changes families and society as a whole (p. 66).

As these Western culture and ideas spread, love marriages tend to become more popular along with it. This newer generation of independent, career driven individuals are quickly on the rise, and with change comes a new mindset. With Western civilization cultural views, arranged marriages are becoming less and less normal. Love marriages are quickly taking their place and arranged marriages are becoming less popular by the year. However, does this change in mindset and attitude towards arranged marriage, and overall decrease in prevalence help it to become more taboo?

Are Arranged Marriages Inappropriate?

A relationship can be deemed appropriate or inappropriate based on the society and the individuals that make it up: the outsiders’ viewpoint and the insiders’ internalization of the relationship. Arranged marriages are not common in nations such as the United States and are becoming less popular in some of the countries that they originate from as well. Hearing about it often comes with questioning by peers and often is not considered by many Western civilized millennials of today. Does that mean that it could be considered inappropriate?

There are three different types of inappropriate relationships that can be used to help classify and evaluate an inappropriate relationship: unconventional, disapproved, and forbidden (Goodwin et al., 2002). Arranged marriages are allowed and do not face harsh punishments, which means that they definitely would not be placed under the forbidden category – it is too extreme. If an individual were to decide to partake in an arranged marriage, reputation of an individual would not be harmed. Questioning by peers might come along with

it, but in some countries, it might even lead to a better reputation as someone who respects their roots. Therefore, in that case, arranged marriages would not fall under notable nor scandalous disapproved relationships either. That leaves the last and least taboo category, unconventional. In Western culture, arranged marriages are unconventional in the sense that the method for choosing a spouse through family is outdated. It is not as frequent today as it used to be, and some looking in might be confused as to why. Universally, it would not particularly instigate gossip or seem too awry amongst society, conceptually or aesthetically – it is mainly a cultural difference or individual preference.

Arranged marriages do not seem to fall into any of the categories that help to define an inappropriate relationship. Although arranged marriages might be unconventional for some areas in Western culture and have become less popular, overall, arranged marriages are still very prevalent in non-Western cultures and it is a common practice for many people. Previously, arranged marriages were done in order to enhance families or as part of custom (Jones & Jones, 1997). However, in today's era, when it comes down to the individual, it is all about if they want to pursue finding love on their own or with the help of their family, whether it be because of culture or individual choice. Although it seems like an intimidating concept, perhaps arranged marriage is not as foreign or unfamiliar as it first comes across as.

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