

2. Marriage as a Social Institution

By Steven L. Nock

About the author

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.

Summary

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A marriage is much more than the sum of two spouses. It is also a relationship defined by legal, moral, and conventional assumptions and have a variety of close personal relationships and associations. The spouses are united are legally, morally, and socially by various personal and societal connections. Marriage as social institution is examined carefully as a major social structure that impacts the males. In this essay the writer asserts that the position of spouse has a special significance in men's life. The institution of traditional marriage helps men develop their manhood as they get older. In a marriage, a gay grows, maintains, and shows his masculine identity. After marriage the husbands are turned into the household's leader. Fidelity and parenting are the characteristics of a normal marriage. Couples react to each other, culture society and the rules and values that define them as a unit since they are life partners. Married males, in particular, had greater physical and mental health than married women.

The essayist cites French sociologist Emile Durkheim to support his view. Emile believes that marriage benefits men because it is an organ of society. Two people get the chance to enjoy a harmonious and happy life. Marriage improves men's civic virtues and helps them discover their life's purpose. People who are married are less likely to commit suicide than those who are single. Marriage is effective way to rein in one's irrational longings(desires) and wants. Marriage binds a man to the same woman for the rest of his life in order to satisfy his desire for love, which provides moral balance to his life. It is crucial for male to get married because it gives them direction in life and helps them achieve their goals.

Now a days unmarried cohabitation (living together) is in fashion which is not generally and legally recognized since they do not follow normal beliefs, limitations in conduct, no responsibility to each other, no identity and no institutional relationship.

Cohabitation without marriage is living together without marriage. They don't boldly identify themselves as husband and wife. A married pair conforms to patterns, conventions, and rules as husband and wife and receives acceptance from everyone. There are laws, religion, and customs protecting their relationship.

Americans generally agree about six dimensions of marriage. Together, these constitute a normative definition of marriage. They are:

1. Marriage is a free personal choice, based on love.
2. Maturity is a presumed requirement for marriage.
3. Marriage is a heterosexual relationship.
4. The husband is the head, and principal earner, in a marriage.
5. Sexual fidelity (faithfulness) and monogamy are expectations for marriage.
6. Marriage typically involves children.

Marriage establishes a connection based on reliability and trust. Social capital has advantages for the individuals who possess it. The couple meets new blood relatives. The institution of marriage is a personal asset but it is more difficult to maintain since it only exists through relationships with others. There is an obligation to assist and support one other when we are in need. The foundation of the new partnership is built on mutual trust and belief.