

# Psychology Factsheets



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## The influence of culture on romantic relationships

This Factsheet reviews approaches to the study of the effects of culture on romantic relationships and describes a selection of the relevant research. Guidance is given on writing effective examination answers on this topic and the terms in bold are explained in the glossary. You will also be able to test your knowledge in exam style questions.

The examiner will expect you to be able to,

1. Describe some of the different approaches to studying culture and relationships.
2. Support your answer by reference to research studies.
3. Understand some of the limitations of the research.

### A. What is culture?

Culture is what makes one society different from another. It consists of social rules (or **norms**) and the beliefs (or **values**) that support them. Norms and values are visible in behaviour and the patterns of relationships found in different cultures.

As Abusag et al. (2002) point out, different cultures perceive romantic relationships in different ways and this influences how relationships are begun, maintained and ended in any specific society.

To understand how culture can influence relationships we must compare different societies. However, societies are complex and making comparisons between them can be a complicated process. Partly for this reason, social scientists that study culture and relationships try to identify key differences between societies that seem to be linked to how their relationships operate. Some of these are discussed below.

**Individualistic** societies are those that are characterised by norms and values that promote individuality and personal independence. In these societies, the individual is the most important unit and people are encouraged to be independent, to rely on themselves and make their own decisions. In these societies people are expected to make their own decisions about forming and ending relationships.

#### *British man drinking alone in a pub*



**Collectivistic societies** on the other hand are those in which norms and values assert that the family and the community are more important than the individual. Here, the emphasis is on inter-dependence and doing what is best for the family unit and the community as a whole rather than following one's own inclinations. In these societies there is the expectation that family members will contribute significantly to decisions about relationships. There is empirical evidence that societies do, in fact, differ in this way.

#### *Indigenous people of Dakar*



Hofstede (1980) for example, found that individualism varied across cultures. He studied 116,000 employees of IBM across the world and found that the US, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands, (in that order), had the most strongly independent individuals while people from Venezuela, Colombia, Pakistan, Peru, and Taiwan were the most inter-dependent.

An approach that focuses a little more on relationships differentiates between societies in terms of whether, in general, relationships have a voluntary or **non-voluntary** character. This difference maps closely onto another key distinction, which is whether a society is primarily urban or rural. In western societies, which are mainly urban in character, there is a high degree of social and geographical mobility and norms and values strongly support independent behaviour. Here, relationships are typically voluntary. There are many opportunities to meet and interact with new people and few restrictions on how or where they can be met. This allows people to make new relationships without reference to family members and there is a large 'pool' of potential partners. Consequently, arranged marriages are rare in these societies.

#### *Individualism is the norm in urban societies*



On the other hand, in societies where there is a larger rural population and less social and geographical mobility, (such as India and Pakistan), relationships are more likely to be non-voluntary. In these societies people have fewer choices about whom they interact with. Interactions with strangers is less common and there are fewer opportunities to meet and interact with new people. Under these conditions, beginning a romantic relationship is more difficult. Because individuals are embedded in an extended family network there is pressure to take the needs and wishes of other family members into account. Consequently, in India, about 90% of marriages are arranged by the families of the couple compared to about 5% in the USA.

A third way of looking at different societies was used by Hsu (1953). He contrasts the relationships found in Western and non-Western cultures, and relates the differences that he finds to the presence of deep-rooted cultural attitudes concerned with social stability and change. He argues that in non-Western culture, such as China, there is an emphasis on continuity, with heritage and ancestry seen as essential aspects. Therefore, relationships in these cultures are more likely to be permanent. Western societies, such as the USA, on the other hand, emphasise progress, change and discontinuity, and consequently divorce is more common and relationships are relatively short-lived

**Exam Hint:-** The examiners have pointed out that better answers show an awareness of different approaches to comparing societies.

## B. Societies and norms

Culture is the difference between one society and another. Social norms influence the way that relationships are formed and maintained by influencing the behaviour, attitudes and expectations of the people involved. There is evidence that different societies have different rules about relationships. Moore and Leung (2001), for example, compared 212 students born and studying in Australia, with 106 students born in China but studying in Australia. They found that 61% of the Australian students were in relationships compared to only 38% of Chinese students. They also found that Australian males were more casual about relationships than Australian females whereas both Chinese males and females showed similar levels of romantic commitment. This research shows how different norms and values affect relationships – the cultural difference between native Australian and Chinese-born individuals is evident. Similarly, a study by Argyle et al. (1986) looked at the social rules governing relationships in the UK, Hong Kong, Italy and Japan and found similarities and differences. The similarities concerned the importance given to courtesy and mutual respect in relationships, but the differences were more varied. In the UK, Hong Kong and Italy there were more rules governing intimate relationships and more rules concerned with the expression of emotions and affection than in Japan. Japan, on the other hand, had more rules than the other three countries about non-intimate relationships such as those with co-workers, or teachers.

**Exam Hint:-** You should make sure that all the studies you discuss are relevant to romantic relationships. The best way to achieve this is to provide an explanation as to how they are relevant.

## C. Are relationships more successful in one culture rather than another?

One measure of the success of a relationship is the happiness experienced by the people in it. To what extent does culture predict marital happiness? One way of testing this is to compare relationships in a culture where arranged marriages are the norm with a culture where people mostly marry for through choice.

### Indian Hindu wedding



In fact, it seems that how a relationship is begun makes little difference to the happiness of the partners. A study by Batabyal (1992) found that Indian females from both professional and non-professional backgrounds reported themselves to be happy whether they had made a love-match or had an arranged marriage. This was confirmed by Epstein (2005) who found no difference between the level of marital satisfaction reported by couples in non-arranged marriages in the US and those in arranged marriages in India. However, these findings are contradicted by research done in another traditional society. Xiaohe and Whyte (1990) obtained interview data on the marital satisfaction of 586 females aged 22–70 years who had married between 1933 and 1990 in arranged and free-choice marriages in China. Questions that were asked included the type of marriage, factors in mate choice, how the husband had been met, and the degree of feeling in love when first married. They found that women who married for love were more satisfied with their marital relationships than those in arranged marriages, regardless of the length of the marriage and this difference could not be attributed to the influence of background factors such as parental involvement in their choice of mate.

**Exam Hint:-** Try to select the evidence that is most appropriate to the way the exam question is posed. If it mentions romantic relationships, for example, only use evidence involving that type of relationship.

Another approach to measuring the success of relationships is to look at whether couples still love each other as much as time goes on. Gupta and Singh (1982) set out to explore this question in a longitudinal study of 100 couples living in India. Half the couples were in arranged marriages and the other half were in love marriages. All were asked how much they 'liked' and 'loved' their partners after 1, 5 and 10 years of marriage. Gupta and Singh found that liking and loving in non-arranged marriages was very high initially but decreased over time. In the arranged marriages, however, levels of 'liking' and 'loving' were found to be higher after 10 years than they were at the beginning.

Finally, the divorce rate in different cultures can give another indicator of marital success because resorting to divorce indicates that one of the partners at least has given up on the relationship. In general, the highest divorce rates are found in countries in the industrialised west, such as USA (53%), and UK, (47%) whereas the lowest divorce rates are found in India (1.1%) and Japan (1.9%).

## D. Evolution as an alternative explanation

Culture, the norms and values of a society, is unlikely to be the only influence on relationships. Given that romantic relationships serve a biological purpose, evolution is also likely to play a significant part and there is evidence that supports this. For example, Jankowiak and Fischer (1992) found evidence of romantic love in all but one of the 166 pre-industrialised societies they studied, suggesting (a) that it is a universal characteristic of human relationships and therefore (b) a product of evolutionary rather than cultural factors. Pinker (2008) offers an explanation for this that draws on evolutionary psychology. He suggests that romantic love exists because it provides a reason for individuals to commit to a partnership (i.e. because of their affection for the other person). In purely biological terms, there are clear reproductive benefits to such commitment. Not only are families likely to be larger, but also there is a higher probability that offspring will receive the care they need to survive to adulthood and carry their parents' genes into the next generation.

**What do men and women look for in a romantic partner?**

The related question of what males and females look for in a marital relationship was studied by Buss (1989) in a research project that involved over 10,000 people from 37 different cultures. He found that in all but one culture women looked for ‘financial security’ in a potential male partner more than men did in a potential female partner. Men placed more importance on physical attractiveness than women. This consistent difference in what people of each sex look for in a prospective partner strongly implies that evolution influences the formation of relationships.

**E. Evaluating research across cultures**

You should be aware of the following issues when you are using cross-cultural data to support your discussion of the influence of culture on relationships.

**1. Oversimplification**

Research that seeks to contrast two opposing types of culture may fail to recognise that (a) culture is complex and many-faceted and (b) can probably best be represented as a continuum. Different societies that appear to be quite different on the surface may actually be quite close to each other in some respects. For example, Li (2002) examined family and friendship attitudes in a collectivist culture (Chinese) and an individualist one (Anglo-Canadian). While he found some differences between Canadian and the Chinese feelings about relationships he also found that Canadians were just as close to their friends as the Chinese.

**2. Ethnocentrism/Cultural bias**

Cultural bias occurs when researchers assume that the way things are done in their own culture is the norm and apply ideas from their own culture to others where they may be less applicable. For example, in the work by Argyle et al. (1986) mentioned earlier, the list of rules used was constructed in the west and may not have contained any that were specific to the particular cultures studied.

**3. Historical bias**

Historical bias may be present when data from the past is claimed to throw light on the present. This may matter little when the rate of cultural change is low, but in the 21st Century the rate of social change is accelerating as economies become more globalised. Thus, **globalisation** has resulted in much more contact between China and the west and one could argue that, as a result, China has become more receptive to western ideas about relationships.

**4. Demand characteristics**

Demand characteristics are those features of the research method that have the effect of guiding the data in a particular direction. For example, Epstein’s (2005) research included a question about whether the spouses in arranged marriages had subsequently fallen in love with their partners. The majority of those questioned said that they had, and although these *may* have been accurate responses, it is also possible that some respondents had been “led” by the structure of the question to provide positive answers when the true response was negative.

**Exam Hint:-** Comments about research methodology should include more general issues such as the possible sources of bias, like those mentioned above, as well as discussions of the limitations of the data collection methods employed.

**F. Conclusions**

1. The evidence is strong that culture can exert an influence on romantic relationships and especially in shaping the way that those relationships are started and whether or not they end in divorce. The evidence is less clear about whether, or how, culture might influence marital happiness and emotions although some studies, such as Gupta & Singh (1982) suggest that relationships that conform closely to social norms and values may be stronger and happier than those that don’t.
2. Culture is not the only factor that influences romantic relationships. Studies by evolutionary psychologists on the factors that influence interpersonal attraction, for example, have shown how physical appearance plays a key role in deciding whether a relationship is begun (see also FS on Interpersonal Attraction).
3. The collection and interpretation of data taken from different cultures has a number of potential pitfalls, which should be borne in mind when assessing the evidence about the influence of culture on romantic relationships.

**Glossary:**

**Collectivistic:** The view of human relations that values the group above each individual member.

**Divorce Rate:** The ratio of divorces to marriages. A divorce rate of 20% means that there are five times as many marriages as divorces in a given year. Note that it does not mean that 1/5 of all marriages will end in divorce.

**Globalisation:** The process by which countries around the world are becoming increasingly interconnected as a result of massively increased trade and cultural exchange.

**Individualistic:** A view of human relationships that emphasises the independence and value of each separate person as opposed to any human group.

**Longitudinal Study:** Research that tracks data over a period of time.

**Non-voluntary relationships:** Relationships about which there is little or no choice and which cannot be easily ignored or avoided. The clearest examples of these are kinship relationships, but in a small rural community relations with non-kin such as neighbours are also likely to be non-voluntary since they cannot be avoided.

**Norm:** A way of behaving that is generally accepted by most members of society.

**Value:** A statement about the worth or importance of some aspect of life, such as fidelity or honesty in relationships.

**Voluntary relationships:** Relationships about which the participants have choice. Typically, people living in an urban setting are offered a wide choice of relationships and can easily avoid particular individuals if they wish to do so.

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