

Psychology Factsheets



www.curriculum-press.co.uk

Number 90

Cultural and Sub-cultural Differences in Relationships

This Factsheet summarises cultural and sub-cultural (inter- and intra-cultural) variations in relationships. It looks at both their characteristics (voluntary/involuntary) and the ways in which they are formed, maintained and dissolved. It also defines individualist and collectivist cultures and their interpretation of the notion of romantic love. Analysis and evaluation is considered through supporting research and its methodology including issues and debates such as cultural bias and nature and nurture.



Relationships

- A social relationship may be permanent or impermanent, it may be formal or informal and, as in marriage, it may be institutionalised.
- Relationships involve two people who maintain a bond that endures over a period of time.
- Characteristics include giving and receiving, responsibility and role taking, rules and expectations.

Culture

- This can be defined as a recognised set of values and beliefs shared by a given group of people. Hofstede describes culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another”.
- He goes further to define culture on several dimensions:
 - Individualism/collectivism (see table below): based on wealth, religious belief and geographical proximity.
 - Power-distance: based on equal or unequal distribution of power within organisations.
 - Masculinity/femininity: masculine cultures based on achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material success. Feminine cultures based on nurturing, modesty care of the weak, etc.
 - Uncertainty avoidance: how threatened a culture is by unknown situations (novel or new experiences, etc).

<i>Individualist culture</i>	<i>Collectivist culture</i>
Generally speaking these are found in capitalist, Western countries (e.g., USA, UK, Europe)	These are non-western developing or socialist countries (e.g. China, India, Korea)
Based on the rights of the individual (“I”)	Based on the notion of shared responsibility (“We”)
Independent and autonomous – based on the needs of individual.	Based on community, collectiveness and co-operation. The needs of the group are more important.
Low power-distance; only use power when necessary.	High power-distance; power given to individuals to reflect higher status.
Masculine.	Feminine.
Economic status – wealthy.	Economic status – not so wealthy.
Religion – Christianity based on individual’s union with god.	Religion – tend to be based on communal harmony and well being.

Inter-cultural differences occur between two or more different cultural groups, e.g., British people and Chinese people.

Intra-cultural differences occur within sub-groups of one culture, e.g., British working classes and British middle classes.

A. The nature of cultural differences in relationships

- Marriage in one form or another appears in most cultures. However the structure of, and attitudes towards, marriage vary from culture to culture.
- These cultural variations fall into three broad categories:
 - Voluntary or involuntary relationships.
 - Monogamous or polygamous
 - Permanent or impermanent.

1. Voluntary or involuntary relationships:

- Extremes range from arranged marriages (involuntary) where a person has no choice over their marriage partner to voluntary marriages where a person has complete freedom over their choice

of partner. However these extremes are rare. It is more common to find marriage styles that fall between the two, maintaining some of the characteristics of each.

- Arranged marriages are the most prevalent form of marriage across the globe and are found in the Middle East, South Asia, Japan, and parts of rural North and South America, as well as amongst immigrant communities (Ingoldsby, 1995).
- Evidence indicates that couples in arranged marriages are as happy as those who got together voluntarily (Yelsman and Athappily, 1988).

Exam Hint:- Give an example. Remember you can highlight similarities as well as differences. For example, consider the Western teenager who seeks parental approval and/or blessing for their choice of partner. Or indeed the custom of asking for paternal permission, which still persists in Western society today. Compare this with the Asian family who introduce a range of suitors they deem acceptable for their son or daughter to choose from.

2. Monogamous or polygamous:

- Monogamy (i.e., one sexual partner at a time) forms the basis of Western marriages and/or romantic relationships.
- Polygamy is any marriage that permits more than one sexual partner. It is found in 84% of non-Western societies across the world (Smith, 1994).
- There are two types of polygamy: (i) polygyny - man married to more than one woman; and (ii) polyandry - a woman married to more than one man (less common but found in some areas of Tibet where living conditions are harsh).

Evaluation and synopticity: the evolutionary approach can explain the distribution of polygamous societies. They tend to be in cultures where food is scarce, conditions harsh and infant mortality high. Marriages with several fertile female partners will increase the likelihood of one or more offspring surviving. Can you use the evolutionary approach to account for polyandry in a similar way?

3. Permanent/impermanent:

- Divorce is provided across the majority of cultures, although its prevalence varies from culture to culture. Collectivist cultures tend to see divorce as shameful both for the parties involved and their families. This is reflected in lower divorce rates in countries such as China compared to USA or indeed the UK.
- Moghaddam et al. (1993) believed that collectivist cultures had a different set of concerns surrounding relationships that affect the **dissolution process** (see glossary). Models such as Duck's Stage Theory and Lee's Phase Theory of the dissolution of relationships may not apply in the same way. This is evidence of cultural bias, which is basing a theory on one culture's perspective and then applying this across other cultures (**imposed etc**) and assuming it has relevance.
- Rules of relationships: differences exist in friendship rules. Most cultures believe in respect and courtesy (Argyle, 1986). However non-Western friendships are characterised more by a sense of duty and obligation, particularly in relation to the **norms of reciprocity**. Whereas in Western friendships giving and receiving are seen as voluntary aspects of the relationship.

Exam Hint:- Contextualize your answer with social differences that affect relationships. For example:

- ~ Recent changes in social policy and industrialisation of China have led to a sharp increase in the number of divorces. As the wealth of their society changes, so the ethos and social policies change to reflect this.
- ~ Saudi Arabia - in law a man does not need to give grounds for divorce. Women may lose custody of children.
- ~ In Africa, an increase in the divorce rate has occurred at the same time as industrialisation and educating girls has become more common.
- ~ There are, however, similarities; common grounds for divorce are infidelity (usually on the woman's part), sterility and maltreatment (usually on the husband's part) (Betzig, 1966).
- ~ Goodwin (1990) on the other hand identified cross-cultural differences in reasons for divorce. These often reflect particular social issues for the countries involved. For example, Polish women usually file for divorce on the grounds of maltreatment by their husbands due to alcohol abuse.

Exam Hint:- AO2 tip! It is worth noting here that parents and other relatives have an emotional investment in the success of the marriage, in particular where they have been involved in its arrangement. They may act as a valuable support group to the couple. Note: By elaborating on cultural differences to analyse the implications you can gain AO2 credit. The breakdown of a relationship involves **negotiation** or a **social phase** according to models of dissolution (Duck's and Lee's). This may differ in collectivist cultures, where family are more closely involved as they may offer greater support when a relationship hits a difficult time and thus prevent its breakdown.

B. Differences in the concept of love and friendship

In terms of marriage, love is seen as an important part of the equation in Western society. Media, magazines, films and so on portray the idea of an all-consuming passion that is paramount in choosing a life partner. However, Non-Western society does not place any emphasis on the "desires" of the individual, but rather on how others might view such a union, who may benefit and suitability.

<i>Individualist</i>	<i>Collectivist</i>
Love seen as important for marriage (Levine et al., 1995).	Love not seen as necessary for marriage.
"How does my heart feel" (Hsu, 1981).	"What will others say?"
Have more friendships but these tend to be less intimate (Goodwin et al., 1995).	Have fewer friendships but these are closer – no barriers "shin yin" (Salamon, 1977).

Summary table

<i>VOLUNTARY RELATIONSHIP</i> <i>Individualist culture</i>	<i>INVOLUNTARY RELATIONSHIP</i> <i>Collectivist culture</i>
Least common form of marriage.	Most common form of marriage.
Based on notion of romantic love.	Based on a good match between families.
Marital satisfaction similar.	Marital satisfaction similar.
Some level of restriction may be imposed, i.e., parental blessing.	Usually parents selecting.
Divorce rate higher 40% in US (US Bureau of Census, 1992).	Divorce rate lower below 4% in China (Goodwin, 1999).
Less taboo over divorce as emphasis is on finding ideal partner. (Simmel, 1971).	Greater taboo and stigma about divorce as emphasis is on family honour.

C. Differences in maintenance of relationships

- Remember theories of the maintenance of relationships? Reinforcement-need theory states that relationships are rewarding so we are driven to maintain them. Rewards come in all sorts of ways; sex, companionship, financial, etc. Some of these factors may vary from culture to culture. For example, wealth may be more important in less developed countries, whereas self-esteem may be more rewarding for individualist cultures. It is also likely that having one's own needs met is more relevant in individualist, self-centred cultures.
- Economic theories, such as **social exchange** and **equity theory** may have relevance in different cultures. Tower et al., for example, found that individualist cultures are more likely to base relationship rules on equity (what you put in should equal what you get out). Collectivist cultures tend to use equality (rewards shared equally regardless of individual input).

Again we see evidence of cultural bias. Lujansky and Mikula (1983) found no evidence of equity effects in non-western cultures. Moghaddam (1993) believed that theories of maintenance had been based on dominant values of the west.

D. Sub-cultural differences

- In the exam, you can refer to both inter-cultural differences (those differences that exist between different cultures) as well as intra-cultural differences (those that exist within a particular culture). This will arise as a result of individual differences, ethnic origin and religious beliefs. Remember these are differences found within one society or culture that relate to sub-groups within that society.

Men and women

Homosexual and heterosexual. (You can include understudied relationships here)

Asian, Afro-Caribbean and White

Socio-economic group (middle class, working class)

- For example, an intra-cultural difference exists in Britain today. Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in the UK (and Canada) commonly practice arranged marriages (Ghuman, 1994). However only 8% of Gujarati Hindus in Leicester have experienced completely arranged marriages, although introduction via a third-party was common.

Exam Hint:- AO2 tip! Apply your common sense here – how different is this to British upper classes who “select” eligible suitors for their offspring, based on class, wealth status, etc?

Class differences in relationship styles in the UK

UK Sub cultural group	Friendship	Marriage
Working Class	These are viewed as more important. Friends are from local area and are part of tight-knit groups that support each other in hard times.	Tend to have separate social activities. More authoritarian in parenting style.
Middle class	Family relationships are viewed as more important. Friends are work colleagues or members of the same activity or leisure groups etc.	Based on equality – similar leisure activities and shared friendship groups and decision-making. Egalitarian in child rearing practice.

Example Exam Questions

1. Discuss the nature of relationships in different cultures. Use research studies in your answer.

- ~ AO1 marks are gained in describing the nature of relationships in different cultures – this can relate to attraction and formation (voluntary/involuntary), through maintenance (reinforcement-need; equity/equality) to dissolution (permanent/impermanent).
- ~ AO2 - research studies that illustrate this can be used as either AO1 if simply stated, but will gain AO2 credit if used to comment on these differences. Comments and evidence that relate to similarities can also be included. Many theories are heavily based on experimental research and evaluation of the methodology can be used as analysis and commentary on theories.
- ~ Better candidates are able to describe research studies such as Hofstede, Moghaddam, etc and evaluate these methodologically as well as link their findings to cross-cultural issues. Being able to apply these findings to address the question rather than simply state them will get you more marks.
- ~ You can use material on understudied relationships, such as gay and lesbian relationships, here too but the link to culture must be clear.

2. Discuss research into cultural and sub-cultural differences in the formation and/or maintenance of relationships.

Remember to include as much detail of research studies as well as theories. You will need to use some of the information about formation and maintenance from Western research (AO1) and apply evaluative techniques to this (AO2). You can highlight both similarities and differences in this question, for AO1 credit. Or you can use differences for AO1 and similarities as commentary for AO2. Your AO2 credit will come from any commentary on the research you have mentioned. This can be in terms of counter evidence that points to similarities rather than differences, evidence of changing cultures and methodological criticisms.

E. The evidence (AO2 evaluation)

In the exam, you will be expected to evaluate the differences you have described in relationships styles either between different cultures or within sub-cultural groups from one society. You can do this by:

- Highlighting the artificiality of cultural categories/cultural bias.
- Providing evidence for real differences.

- Providing evidence against those differences.
- Highlighting cultural change and globalisation.
- Evaluating the methodology of research evidence.
- Reliability and validity of research.
- Discuss the ethical issue of ethnocentrism.

AO2 Evaluating the evidence:

Categorizing Culture	AO1 Point Hofstede (1994) categorised culture on five dimensions.
Positive criticism AO2	Hofstede's study is one of the largest –over 100, 000 employees in 50 different countries. Goodwin identified USA has highly individualist on these dimensions.
Negative criticism AO2	Western bias of categories. Variations occur within culture. Context – behave differently in different situations.
Voluntary vs. involuntary relationships	AO1 Point Collectivist cultures use arranged marriages more than individualistic cultures.
Positive criticism AO2	Ingoldsby (1995) arranged marriages are the most common form worldwide. Sikhs Hindus and Muslims in UK and Canada commonly use arranged marriages.
Negative criticism AO2	But cross-generational conflict is occurring as young British Asians begin to value individual choice above family. Muslims are least likely to accept arranged marriages. Only 8% of Hindu Gujarati couples in Leicester has arranged marriages (Goodwin et al., 1997).
Monogamous vs. Polygamou	AO1 Point Polygamy is the most found arrangement worldwide.
Positive criticism AO2	Makes sense in countries where survival is difficult and infant mortality is high.
Negative criticism AO2	Highlighting these differences may result in one culture being seen as inferior to another – cultural bias if monogamy is seen as the norm!
Permanent vs. Impermanent	AO1 Point Collectivist cultures have a lower divorce rate.
Positive criticism AO2	Evidence of low rates in China (Goodwin, 1999).
Negative criticism AO2	However it is only recently that divorce has become so common in the West. Also, as globalisation occurs, once traditionally collectivist cultures' are increasing in wealth and industry levels and their divorce rates are now rising.
Love	AO1 Point Not valued in non-Western cultures but strongly valued in the West.
Positive criticism AO2	Evidence (Levine et al., 1995) that Indians and Pakistanis were more likely to marry someone they did not love but who possessed other qualities they were looking for.
Negative criticism AO2	Media influence - Love is creeping in to non-Western cultures. The more a society becomes urbanised and industrialised the more it accepts the notion of romantic love (Moghaddam, 1998).
Sub cultural Differences	AO1 Point Differences within cultures of style of relationships, e.g., class in UK, religion in India.
Positive criticism AO2	Argyle 1994 – evidence to support consistent class differences.
Negative criticism AO2	Second and third generation immigrants do not use arranged marriages to such an extent – sub-cultural differences seem to be reducing.

F. Further AO2 evaluation and AO3 how science works

- You are required to explain and evaluate methodology. This means looking at the type of research done, where and when, and commenting critically on this.
- You can also demonstrate synopticity here by linking your argument to issues and/or debates and approaches. Clearly in this topic area, we have a case for culture-bias; i.e., the ethnocentricity of research based on Western perspective (**emic**), which is then applied to other cultures (**imposed etic**).
- Also, often sub-cultural differences have been overlooked. For example, friendships in the UK and Western cultures are more important to middle class than working classes, or the findings of Shucksmith et al. (1993) that middle-class youth spend more time in mixed-sex friendship groups than working class youth.
- You can also mention approaches, such as the evolutionary approach, and how it can explain polygamous relationships.

Acknowledgements: This Psychology Factsheet was researched and written by A Tudor.

Worksheet: Cultural and sub-cultural differences in relationships

Name _____

1. Outline what is meant by the terms 'relationship' and 'culture'.

2. Outline the main differences between individualist cultures and collectivist cultures.

3. Match the term to its definition:

Intra-cultural differences	These occur between two or more different cultural groups, i.e., <i>Western</i> and <i>non-Western</i> .
Inter-cultural differences	These occur within sub-groups of larger cultural groups, i.e., <i>British Asians</i> and <i>white British</i> .

4. Outline three ways in which relationships can differ from culture to culture.

1. -----

2. -----

3. -----

5. Summarise research findings for similarities and differences in the nature of relationships.

<i>Similarities</i>	<i>Differences</i>
Yelsman and Athappily (1988) found that levels of marital satisfaction are similar.	Ingoldsby (1995) found that arranged marriages (involuntary) are the most common form of marriage.

Glossary

Dissolution: the breakdown of a relationship.

Emic: a universally applicable theory, measure or construct (e.g. all cultures engage in some form of relationship behaviour).

Equity theory: a theory of the maintenance of a relationship based on a proportionally fair exchange of costs-rewards.

Etic: a theory, measure or construct that only applies in certain cultures (e.g., monogamous marriages are specific to certain cultures).

Imposed etic: using a theory, measure or concept that has been developed in one culture and applying it to another.

Negotiation: one of Lee's stages in the breakdown of relationships characterised by a discussion of problems.

Norms of reciprocity: socially bound norms that relate to disclosure of personal information and the rate of exchange of this information between people in a relationship.

Social exchange: a maintenance of relationship theory based on the exchange of costs and rewards on a 'what you give is what you get' basis.

Social phase: one of Duck's stages in relationship breakdown that involves thinking of face-saving accounts.