

How Love Emerges in Arranged Marriages

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Article of the Day:

How Love Emerges in Arranged Marriages – Two Cross-cultural Studies

by Epstein, R., Pandit, M., & Thakar, M. (2012)
(*Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 44(3), 341-360.)

Background & Research

Despite the prevalence of autonomous (“love”) marriages in “Western” countries, most marriages in the world are still arranged by parents or matchmakers. Quite a number of studies have been conducted comparing and contrasting arranged marriages and autonomous marriages. Such studies have arrived at somewhat mixed results as regards love and (marital) satisfaction in these two types of marriages. However, overall, most of the evidence suggests that there is at least as much love (later on) in arranged marriages as in autonomous ones, and that love in such marriages grows over time as opposed to autonomous marriages where it tends to diminish over time. Similarly, satisfaction seems to be at the same level or better in arranged marriages as in autonomous ones.

In previous research, it has been challenging to pinpoint the exact factors contributing to satisfaction and love in marriage. Factors that have typically been found to strengthen love have included self-disclosure, accommodation (by the other partner of one’s wishes, etc.) and physical arousal. Other variables, such as family support and social values, and even genetic and environmental variables, seem to matter, too. In the authors’ view, studying successful arranged marriages would be especially useful for pinpointing factors contributing to love and satisfaction, as by looking at such marriages we may begin to see how love can grow over time even when the partners are usually not in love initially, at the time of betrothal.

The aim of the two studies (one qualitative, one partly quantitative) reported on in this article was thus to examine how and through which mechanisms or events love grows over time in arranged marriages when it does. The authors state this is interesting for two reasons, 1) to present a different model of marriage especially for “Western” audiences, and 2) to reveal strategies for building love over time that could be more generally applied.

Results & Discussion

In the first study, the authors interviewed an international, multicultural sample of 30 individuals in arranged marriages where love had increased over time, and studied their answers qualitatively. The factors most often mentioned to have contributed to growing love were, in this order: commitment, communication, accommodation by partner, parenting and physical intimacy. On average, the level of love when getting married was rated 3.9 (scale 1-10), while love at the time of interview (on average 19.4 years later) was rated 8.5.

In the second study, a different multicultural sample of 22 individuals in arranged marriages where love had increased over time rated 36 factors on a 13-point scale (-6 to +6) according to how much each factor had strengthened or weakened love in their marriage. Factors ranked as most promoting love in marriage were “seeing your spouse make sacrifices for you” and “expressing strong commitment for each other”. Divided by gender, women ranked Children, Commitment, Thoughtfulness, Forgiveness and “Being helped when ill” the highest, while men ranked Sacrifice(s made by the partner), Intimacy, Humor, Commitment and Comfort the highest.

For this sample, love at the time of betrothal was 5.1, and now, on average 16.4 years later, 9.2. There was a correlation between length of marriage and degree of increase in love. Of note is that 13 out of 22 of these participants had not met their future spouse before the wedding day. Open questions studied qualitatively further showed that most participants had not been in love when they got married and were not initially particularly physically attracted to their spouse, and that nearly all participants considered their love to have grown gradually.

Discussing these results, the authors first admit that they do not represent arranged marriage as a whole: not all arranged marriages are successful, and some are even abusive or coercive; love emerges in perhaps only half of them. But these studied marriages where love had grown, even if somewhat atypical, do demonstrate that love can grow over time in arranged marriage and can show us what factors that growth might depend on.

Commitment again emerged as one of the most important factors, and many participants emphasized the intentionality of building love in their marriage. According to the authors, this contrasts strongly with notions of “mysterious forces of love” or “blind love” common in romantic (“Western”) conceptualizations of love and marriage. It appears that in cultures where arranged marriage is common, people entering marriages are more likely to

believe that they can exercise positive control over their love and satisfaction, and this may (partly) explain the growing of love and lower divorce rates in such marriages.

The authors also state that their findings are consistent with a vulnerability theory of emotional bonding, the idea that emotional bonds are strengthened when people feel vulnerable and open in each other's presence. For the most part, the factors identified as important to growing love here agree with more laboratory-type studies that have demonstrated the emotional bonds between people to grow under high-anxiety and typically "threatening" conditions, and by disclosing secrets to each other. Emotional bonding through vulnerability is employed in some forms of couple therapies as well.

The take-home message by the authors is that the discovered techniques and practices of promoting love in arranged marriages share a common element: deliberateness. It is possible to deliberately do things to make love grow, and a strong commitment to regularly practice techniques to strengthen love does seem to let love grow over time, even when it is initially nowhere to be seen.

Commentary

The studies this article reports on are certainly not very convincing from a methodological point of view, but examine an interesting, deeply human topic that is difficult to research employing stricter methods.

A few important limitations to the generalizability of the results obtained here must be pointed out. First, the samples were non-random and tiny. Second, as the authors readily admit, the marriages studied here may have been atypical even of arranged marriages. Indeed, arranged marriages may include elements of force, compulsion and threat, and no distinction was made here between forced arranged marriage and consensual arranged marriage. The non-randomized participants are likely to have had more positive views of arranged marriage (as they were specifically selected to be those whose love has grown, i.e., the marriage has been "a success"), and were probably more highly educated and affluent too. The third problem relates to the concept of "love". The authors state they did not wish to define love in their research, but instead leave it to each participant to use his/her own understanding of it. I find it likely that there exist immense differences in understanding the idea of "love", especially between people in arranged and "autonomous" marriages, whose experiences of falling in love, dating, relationships and heartbreaks may be so radically different.

These caveats aside, it is not surprising to me that commitment again emerged as the most important factor here. I believe people can learn to love (at least in some sense of the word) almost anyone, if they have the motivation, time and chances to do so. That factors relating to vulnerability and disclosure were crucial to growing love seems also in agreement with what is known about the emergence of emotional bonds. The fact that parenting was thought to contribute to growing love in these samples is quite interesting, as the arrival of children has usually been found to be a particularly challenging time and a risk factor for the success of autonomous marriages in other studies. It may be that having children brings the partners closer to each other in an arranged marriage where there initially had been some distance between them, whereas in a “love” marriage, children may pull the previously very close partners apart.

Seeing that arranged marriages can work, and tend to lead to fewer divorces, the authors lament the decline of arranged marriage in many cultures and the rise of autonomous “love” marriages. This begs the question whether “the stability of marriage” is really a value in itself to be fostered and protected. Is there some intrinsic value in having long-lasting relationships, for the individual, or for society at large? At the very least, research suggests that older people are happier and live longer in relationships, and seeing as most of those relationships were formed earlier in their lives, a long-lasting relationship/marriage would seem “beneficial” in this sense. But of course all this tends to apply to relatively happy and healthy relationships only. Further, though it is very possible for children to grow up just fine in all sorts of families, their development does seem to benefit from the security and predictability of a stable relationship between the parents/caretakers. However, it is far from clear which type of marriage would better provide for a stable, nurturing environment, even if arranged marriages tend to last longer overall.

In a sense, I believe there is a more fundamental difference at work here, one relating to the purpose and meaning of marriage itself. The biggest cultural differences may lie not in **how** people get married, but **why**. In many cultures where arranged marriage is still more widespread, marriage is often an economic arrangement, a joining of two families, a rite of passage, and/or a social or cultural must resulting in huge changes in social roles. In cultures where autonomous marriages are most common, getting married may today be seen more as celebrating, announcing or cementing a love that has emerged, a fun tradition or just a practicality. It has less to do with others (such as the partners’ families) and results in much less change in social roles, as compared to arranged marriages. In the absence of social/cultural pressures to get or stay married, I feel it is the specific promises that people make to each other that

matter. If those promises include a commitment to stay together as long as possible and/or stay in love, then it would be wise to take into account the possibility of deliberately fostering and promoting love and satisfaction through techniques made apparent by both real-life and laboratory research, whether by the couple by themselves or, e.g., in couples therapy.