Exogamy

JAN SAARELA
University of Helsinki, Finland and Åbo Akademi University, Finland

In sociology, exogamy refers to the custom or act of marrying a person who belongs to another tribe, clan, or similar social unit. The concept implies a social arrangement outside a social group, according to which the social group defines the scope and extent of the phenomenon. The continuity of exogamy in a population is ensured by rules and enforcement mechanisms.

In social studies, exogamy is viewed as a combination of biological and cultural aspects, which means that the concept is usually defined through kinship rather than race, ethnicity, religion, or class. The biological concept of exogamy generally refers to the mating of individuals who are not closely related in genetic terms. Outbreeding of this kind, as opposed to inbreeding, benefits the offspring by minimizing the chance of inheriting two copies of a defective gene and by increasing the genetic diversity. Yet the practice of exogamy does not ensure that spouses have no genetic relationship.

Historically, the cultural aspect of exogamy, which refers to the custom of marrying outside a specific group of people to which a person belongs, comes from the aversion to marriage between blood relatives or near kin. Exogamy was introduced to prevent marriage between blood relations and to maintain the survival of family groups, and it helped to maintain the political power of single families as units increased in size. Engagement in exogamy via the exchange of men or women could also serve to unite populations as it built alliances and improved cultural and economic exchange.

In contemporary sociology, a form of exogamy commonly studied is interracial marriage. It occurs when two persons of different racial groups marry but can also be seen in the broader context of miscegenation in terms of mixing in cohabitation, sexual relations, or procreation. At the beginning of the 2010s, approximately 15 percent of all new marriages in the United States were between spouses of different races (Wang, 2012). In many other western countries, the proportion of mixed marriages is at least as large. Forms of exogamy similar but not necessarily analogous to interracial marriage are those involving people with different ethnic, religious, or linguistic backgrounds.

Apart from potential genetic advantages for the offspring, exogamy can have political and social benefits for the people involved. Diversity within a family system through exogamy may also enhance open communication, which cultivates mutual understanding between peoples, helps to prevent prejudice and discrimination, and may even improve economic efficacy through reduced trade barriers.

Unfavorable outcomes associated with exogamy are often studied. Many exogamous couples face barriers that married couples of the same race, ethnicity, culture, or religion are not exposed to. Acceptance of the family and the society are the most common external factors that influence exogamous marriages, creating dissonance and disagreement in the relationship. Different cultures have diverse moral, ethical, value foundations, and communication styles, which in turn influence perceptions of individual, family, and societal lifestyles. If these foundations operate alongside different cultural roots, which they do not necessarily always do, marital problems can occur.

An important research area within family sociology concerns the interrelation between exogamy and divorce. Some scholars have found that the divorce risk in exogamous marriages is higher than that of endogamous marriages (Kalmijn, de Graaf, and Janssen, 2005). This is referred to as a strong exogamy effect, and is interpreted as reflecting distinctive attitudes toward marriage, the family, and divorce, which can make it more difficult for the partners to understand each other, reduce the number of activities they enjoy doing together, and limit the degree to which they can confirm each other’s
values and worldviews. In contrast, convergence toward the mean, or a weak exogamy effect, would mean that some behavioral adaptation has taken place.

So far most studies on exogamous unions have been concerned with formal marriages and divorce risks. It is reasonable, however, to expect exogamy effects for other types of relationships and transitions as well. Cohabitation is generally considered to provide a staging ground for evaluating potential marital partners and fostering better matches in marriage. Because the formation and continuation of a relationship is a process, insight into the effects of exogamy can therefore be gained by examining transitions between different states in the process. This is essential because most people in unions in the contemporary western world start out as cohabiters, many children are born within cohabiting unions, and a considerable share of intact cohabiting unions never proceed to marriage. There have been some recent developments in this area, which indicate that exogamy effects are also present with respect to the formation and the dissolution of relationships (Saarela and Finnäs, 2014).

Another important avenue for future study concerns the offspring of exogamous unions. Additional insights into the relationship between exogamy and union stability can be gained by utilizing information about how the offspring is affiliated, because the decisions made after union formation may be more thoughtful than behaviors before mating. If parents are forced to make a decision about the racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation of their children, a conscious choice has to be made and this choice can reflect some agreement based on parental preferences. The increasing number of exogamous families worldwide implies that this strand of research is of utmost societal importance.

SEE ALSO: Culture; Divorce; Endogamy; Ethnicity; Race.

References


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ABSTRACT
In sociology, exogamy refers to the custom or act of marrying a person who belongs to another tribe, clan, or similar social unit. The concept implies a social arrangement outside a social group, according to which the social group defines the scope and extent of the phenomenon. In contemporary sociology, the form of exogamy most extensively studied is interracial marriage. It occurs when two persons of different racial groups marry, but can also be seen in the broader context of miscegenation in terms of mixing in cohabitation, sexual relations, or procreation. Forms of exogamy similar but not necessarily analogous to interracial marriage are those involving people with different ethnic, religious, or linguistic backgrounds. The most studied consequences of exogamy in the field of family sociology concern divorce risks in exogamous marriages, although there have been some recent developments for studies of cohabitation unions as well.

KEYWORDS
demography and population studies; ethnicity; race; race and ethnicity; sociology of family