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Q7(a)

How the study of variation in forms of marriage led to rethinking on the concepts of social reproduction, kinship and family?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Family

2.4 Family: Definition and universality; Family, household and domestic groups; functions of family; Types of family (from the perspectives of structure, blood relation, marriage, residence and succession); Impact of urbanization, industrialization and feminist movements on family.

Core demand of the question

- Show that marriage forms vary widely in the ethnographic record
- Explain how that variation forced a rethink of kinship
- Explain how it forced a rethink of family
- Explain how it forced a rethink of social reproduction
- Use named thinkers and living examples

Revision summary

Marriage forms include woman-marriage, ghost marriage, polyandry, visiting unions, same-sex marriage and medically assisted parenthood.

Evans-Pritchard's Nuer and Nayar ethnography already split sex, residence and legitimacy.

Schneider and Strathern treated kinship as cultural assignment, not bare biology.

Family is not universally the Parsons nuclear unit.

Social reproduction is how children, labour and status are placed across generations, as Engels and later feminist anthropologists argued.

Living examples include IVF, surrogacy debates and chosen families.

Introduction

If marriage were only one man, one woman and their legitimate children, kinship would be a simple household chart. Ethnography found woman-marriage, ghost marriage, walking marriage, polyandry, same-sex unions and chosen families. That variation forced anthropology to reopen what kinship, family and social reproduction mean.

Body

Variation in forms of marriage

E. E. Evans-Pritchard described **Nuer woman-marriage**, in which a woman can take a wife and the children belong to her lineage. Nuer ghost marriage can attach children to a dead man. **Tibetan and Himalayan polyandry** (as in **Prince Peter** and later ethnographers) puts brothers in one marital set. The Mosuo "walking marriage" of southwest China stresses visiting unions more than a co-resident husband. **Lévi-Strauss** had already treated marriage as alliance between groups, not as a private couple. **Kathleen Gough** on Nayar unions in

Kerala troubled the idea of a universal resident father.

Contemporary law and practice add civil same-sex marriage, live-in partnerships, and IVF parenthood. "Marriage" is a bundle of rights - sexual access, legitimacy, labour, residence - that can be split and recombined.

Rethinking kinship

David Schneider argued that American kinship is a cultural system of blood and law, not a universal biology. If Nuer children belong through cattle and woman-marriage, then descent is a social assignment. **Marilyn Strathern** on new reproductive technologies showed that a genetic parent, a gestational parent and a caring parent need not be one person. **Janet Carsten** on relatedness in Langkawi stressed feeding and living together. Pedigree and genealogy must stay distinct here: biology does not automatically equal kinship.

Rethinking family

The nuclear family of **Talcott Parsons** cannot be the human default once joint families, matrifocal households (**Oscar Lewis**, Caribbean files), and queer chosen families are in view. Family is the set of people who share consumption, care and legitimacy under a local rule, not a timeless father-mother-child molecule.

Rethinking social reproduction

Social reproduction means how a society replaces people, labour and status across generations. **Friedrich Engels** tied family form to property. Later feminist anthropology (**Gayle Rubin**, **Claude Meillassoux**, **Sylvia Yanagisako**) asked how marriage organises women's labour and the next generation's belonging. If marriage can be woman-to-woman, or visiting, or medically assisted, then reproduction is not only heterosexual coitus inside a recognised couple. It is the social arrangement that places a child in a line of rights.

A current Indian illustration is surrogacy law, live-in recognition in some judgments, and hijra or chosen-family care.

Flow diagram

Marriage variation -> Kinship as social
Marriage variation -> Family as care unit
Marriage variation -> Social reproduction of rights
Kinship as social -> Schneider / Strathern

Conclusion

Variation in marriage showed that kinship is assigned, family is a local care unit, and social reproduction is the placing of children and labour in a structure of rights. Evans-Pritchard, Schneider, Strathern and feminist kinship theory are the spine. The couple-and-blood model is one cultural case, not the definition.

Facts & figures

Nuer woman-marriage

Evans-Pritchard described a Nuer practice in which a woman marries a wife and the children are socially hers through lineage rules.

David Schneider

He analysed American kinship as a cultural system of blood and law, undermining the idea that kinship is simply biology.

Marilyn Strathern

Her work on reproductive technologies showed that genetic, gestational and social parenthood can be separated and recombined.

Lévi-Strauss on alliance

He treated marriage as a relation between groups through the exchange of spouses, not as a private nuclear fact.

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