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## BOOK REVIEW

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Stockard, Janice E. (2002) *Marriage in culture: Practice and meaning across diverse societies*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt. 129 pp. Soft cover ISBN: 0-15-506386-3.

Anthropologist Janice Stockard has aimed this book at the classroom. In her preface, she notes that the idea for the book “had its origins in many classrooms. . . where I have taught anthropology.” She goes on to say that she “wanted a book that could be used as a core integrating text. . . as well as provide a ready platform for a cross-cultural comparative analysis of marriage.” Further, her aim was to develop a book that could be used in a variety of settings in a range of disciplines. She has been very successful in attaining these goals.

This excellent book would be useful in a variety of classes, including introductory and upper-level courses in anthropology, family studies, international studies, sociology, and women’s studies. I have used the book for three years in an upper division family sociology course. It is one of four books that each student reads in the course. [In the course I teach, students also read two research monographs (chosen from a set of six) focusing upon cultural variation in families and contemporary family issues, and a reader in family sociology that includes nearly 40 empirical articles on a variety of topics related to families.] Stockard’s book works very well at the beginning of the course as one tool for helping broaden students’ conceptions of family life. It stimulates discussion and helps students understand a wide variety of concepts in family studies.

Stockard writes in an engaging style. The book is highly readable and students have consistently given it very positive evaluations at the end of the semester. Photographs in *Marriage*

*in Culture* help bring the text to life and illustrate that the anthropological work is talking about real people. Maps in the book also help place each culture geographically.

The book carefully examines the cultural context of marriage in four different settings. The four cultures that are chosen span the globe—the !Kung San of southern Africa, traditional China, the historical Iroquois of North America, and the polyandrous Nyinba of Nepal. Stockard argues for the importance of linking marriage practices to the social organization of a culture as well as its subsistence adaptation. Thus, she includes cultures at different levels of technological development—hunting and gathering, horticulture, and plow agriculture.

*Marriage in Culture* highlights the importance of a holistic approach to studying marriage, arguing that “one can understand the meaning of any custom or practice only from within the complete context of the culture in which it occurs” (Stockard, p. 2). Further, Stockard points to the critical importance of using a gendered perspective to understanding the complex interrelationships between marriage, kinship and residence patterns. She particularly highlights how post-marital residence practices are key to understanding the roles of women and men and the meaning of marriage in different cultural settings.

After setting the stage for the book by talking about this holistic approach to studying marriage practices, Stockard carefully examines the ethnographic literature on each of the four cultures. After each group is placed within its environmental context, the interconnections between a wide range of family variables are explored. In addition to talking about post-marital residence practice and kinship systems, she examines variables such as age at marriage, power dynamics within the marriage and the broader family system, marriage form, division of labor, class and inequality, and gender socialization within each culture. A chapter is devoted to each of the four cultural groups. The monograph concludes with a brief epilogue that very clearly reviews the

arguments presented in the book and reminds the reader of key points about patterns in each of the four cultures used in this examination of marriage within cultural context.

Stockard does an excellent job of presenting a rich array of materials and concepts in a short book of only slightly more than one hundred pages. She convincingly argues for the importance of a gendered perspective, using the ethnographic tools of an anthropologist dedicated to a holistic approach for understanding marriage and families. At the same time that she shows the utility of examining the full range of family variables, she provides a coherent theoretical framework that points to the critical role played by two key variables—subsistence technology and post-marital residence practice. The book gives students a set of concepts and tools that are very helpful in analyzing not only marriage, but a wide range of family issues.

This book is one that delivers on its promise. Near the beginning of the book, Stockard states that “In short, marriage can be understood only as a product of a specific culture, within a particular history and environment.” Upon completing this book, the reader understands that argument, yet at the same time is also convinced that there are interconnections between and patterns among social variables that help us analyze families in many historical and cultural settings. It is rare to find a book that does such a good job of balancing a nomothetic and an ideographic approach to analyzing families.

This book helps students learn a wide range of important concepts about families. It stimulates discussion and gets students excited about studying families. One of its biggest strengths is that students move away from memorizing kinship systems and types of residence patterns and toward integrating these concepts into a more sophisticated conceptual map for analyzing the social world. In twenty years of teaching family sociology, this is the best book I’ve found for helping students truly understand concepts related to cultural variation in family patterns.

Another strength is that Stockard consistently weaves references to American cultural practices into her stories of marriage in these four disparate cultures, showing the relevance of the analysis to our lives in the contemporary United States.

As an anthropologist who has done fieldwork in China, Stockard writes in an engaging manner. She breathes life into material from work by a wide range of anthropologists who have studied these four cultures, and weaves that research into one coherent story about marriage within cultural context. One criticism might be that the book is too short. In contrast, I would argue that is one of its strengths. Students finish the book wanting to read more to expand their understanding about family issues in other times and places. The book is densely packed with material, but not in such a way that it is difficult to read. The theory and research in the book is well documented so that students can read more about any of the topics that are presented.

*Marriage in Culture* is an excellent resource in the study of families. It helps students appreciate cultural variation in family life as well as the strengths of anthropological fieldwork. While it is written by an anthropologist and uses the methods and theories of that discipline, it would fit well in courses at a variety of levels in a number of disciplines. Rather than asking students to memorize terms, it challenges them to develop an excitement about studying families in a systematic fashion. It highlights the importance of a gendered perspective for looking at the social world, and stands as a model of what teacher/scholars want to do with their work.

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