3.   Anthropological perspectives on partnering
Julia Pauli

Anthropological perspectives on partnering have largely focused on marriage. But marriage is used in anthropology to capture a wide range of forms and practices of partnering. These cross-cultural variations make it difficult to define marriage. I start this chapter with a discussion of definitions of marriage in anthropology, including some examples of the variety of partnership forms that anthropologists have summarized under the category "marriage". Next, I outline some of the major changes in theorizing marriage in anthropology. Earlier approaches conceptualized marriage mostly heteronormatively and as a legal and ritualized institution, while contemporary perspectives highlight the lived experiences of becoming, being, and not being married. I then discuss some contemporary themes in the anthropological study of partnering and marriage. I focus on variations of the lived experiences of intimacy, the public celebration of partnership in form of weddings, the entanglement of marriage with wider political and economic contexts, and the opting out of marriage in contexts where marriage is still largely normative. My reflections of this vast field of anthropological research are necessarily partial and very much framed by my positionality and my own research interests. Since the mid-1990s, I have carried out ethnographic research on kinship and reproduction in rural Mexico and, since 2003, on marriage in rural and urban Namibia (Pauli, 2020). Some examples given in this chapter come from these regions.

Many anthropological definitions of marriage come from ethnographic research in Africa. An early example of different forms of partnering summarized as "marriage" is provided in Meyer Fortes's *Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* in West Africa (Fortes, 1949). Among the Tallensi, Fortes writes, it is common that many first unions dissolve after some time. He classifies these as "experimental marriages" (Fortes, 1949, p. 84). Philip Burnham (1987) builds on these insights and other research on African marriages to suggest that we think of marriage not as a stable category but as a "bundle of interactional possibilities" (p. 50). This resonates with Edmund Leach's (1961) earlier definition of marriage as a "bundle of rights" (p. 104), in which no specific set of rights can be assumed to be universal (Mody, 2015). For Burnham, a range of different forms of conjugal unions can be understood as marriage, including informal cohabitation, church marriage, registry marriage, or customary marriage. Along similar lines, David Parkin and David Nyamwaya (1987) observe for marriages in Africa that "[t]his idea of all types of 'marriage' as representing a range of interactional possibilities for individuals and their groups complements that which sees marriage as the product of strategies: the logical possibilities are there, and people can strategize within them" (p. 4). Partnering thus came to be viewed as a (strategic) activity navigating between different marital forms. This perspective has moved anthropological theorizing of marriage beyond the narrow structural and institutional approach to one that focuses on agency and choice (Pauli, 2016).

That marriage is conceptualized so broadly in the study of marriage in Africa – thus making it difficult, maybe even impossible to define (Mody, 2015) – is also prompted by specific characteristics of marriage in many African contexts. Although polygyny has officially declined across the continent (in some countries it has even been prohibited), transformations of the

practice continue to be common until today (Anderson, 2000; Blanc and Gage, 2000; Karanja, 1994; Lewinson, 2006; Spiegel, 1991). Bledsoe and Pison (1994) conclude: "Many of the new marriage forms that outwardly resemble monogamy actually follow patterns of *de facto* polygyny" (p. 7). Anthropological studies thus describe a wide range of partnerships under the label of "marriage", covering various customary practices, residence arrangements, state and religious laws, sexual and other types of interactions.

In many Western countries, the marital status of a person changes immediately through a delimited and once-off ritualized event, a civil or a religious wedding. In these contexts, a person is either unmarried or married, but cannot be anything in between. In contrast, in many African contexts marriage is a gradual change of status, a process where it is indeed possible to be increasingly married. Through repeated economic transactions, very often of what tends to be called bridewealth – that is, the repeated giving of cattle or other valuables from the groom's kin group to the bride's kin – partners become gradually more and more married (Bledsoe and Pison, 1994; Comaroff and Roberts, 1977; Guyer, 2000; Kuper, 2016). Although bridewealth is generally transferred from the groom's kin to the bride's kin, in what E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1951) describes as "woman marriage" for the Nuer (in present-day South Sudan), a woman's transfer of cattle as bridewealth to another woman's kin makes the former husband and father (p. 107; see also Mody, 2015, p. 600).

This fluid and fuzzy construction of marriage has challenged demographic inquiries that work with clearly defined categories of being either married or unmarried (Mokomane et al., 2006). It can be difficult to define at what point in time someone is married and when a union begins. However, through the influence of colonialism and Christianity, the fluidity of bridewealth payments has in some places become transformed into ritually defined stages of marriage. These stages resemble the Western, Christian practice of engagement and wedding. In my work on marriage in rural Namibia (Pauli, 2019, pp. 136–45), I describe the so-called asking ritual (*!game#gans* in the local Khoekhoegowab language). In pre-colonial times, this ritual was the only one that brought the two kin groups together. Over several days, the groom's kin repeatedly had to ask for the bride and engage in negotiations about bridewealth. After the ritual, the already a little bit married couple became more married as more and more of the bridewealth was given. Today, however, the asking ritual has changed into an engagement, that is, a ritual that comes *before* marriage. Months later, it is followed by a civil and a religious wedding (for more details, see Pauli, 2019, pp. 145–57), with which the couple is considered fully married.

Although the early research on African marriages has thus touched upon a remarkably diverse range of partnering forms, important perspectives are also missing. Feminist and queer critiques of the study of marriage by British social anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown have pointed out the heteronormativity of that line of research and how it ignores queer and non-normative forms of partnering (Basu, 2020; Blackwood, 2005; Boellstorff, 2007b; Borneman, 1996; Mody, 2015). More recently, the anthropology on partnering is opening up to the challenges posed by feminist, gender and queer studies and engages with concepts like love and intimacy.

3.1   FROM RITUALS AND REGULATIONS TO PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

From the beginning of anthropology as a discipline in the nineteenth century, marriage was a core concern of research and theorizing. Comparative and cross-cultural approaches at that time were largely based on racist and sexist assumptions about the "naturalness" of marriage (Borneman, 1996; Carsten et al., 2021a; Mody, 2015), framing marriage as heterosexual and evolutionary in nature. Until approximately the 1960s, marriage continued to be one of the most central phenomena for theorizing in anthropology. Two paradigmatic and contrasting theories – descent theory and alliance theory – explained social order and political organization in non-Western societies without state structures through the regulating power of marriage and kinship (Dumont, 1971[2006]).

First, in descent theory of British structural-functionalism, based mostly on ethnographic work in colonial Africa, descent groups were seen as the central political units. Their reproduction was guaranteed through specific rules of descent and marriage, such as descent through female ancestry (matrilineal societies) or through male ancestry (patrilineal societies). Descent theory saw marriage as a universal, stable, timeless, and recursive institution (Borneman, 1996, p. 220; Pauli, 2016). It was assumed that all members of a society would eventually marry and be an integral part of the reproduction of descent groups and the rearrangement of social structure (Fortes, 1949; Radcliffe-Brown, 1987[1950], p. 81). Marriage was mainly defined in legal terms and conceptualized as a "legitimization" of children, granting the husband and his kin "certain rights in relation to his wife and the children she bears" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1987[1950], p. 50). Radcliffe-Brown stressed that African marriage always involved two "bodies of kin" (p. 46), that is, two kin groups that through marriage reproduce and rearrange social structure. Second, alliance theory, developed by French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, emphasized how, through marriage, different groups formed alliances (Lévi-Strauss, 1981[1949]). According to Lévi-Strauss (1981[1949]), through the systematic exchange of brides among different ethnic groups in Brazil, marriage created and regulated social connections and cohesion (Carsten et al., 2021a, p. 7). Both British descent theory and French alliance theory have been criticized for their focus on the "heterosexual, married human" (Blackwood, 2005; Borneman, 1996, p. 221) and their underlying evolutionist assumptions (McKinnon, 2013). While this critique is certainly appropriate and important, both approaches nevertheless had the merit of demonstrating that marriage "is not only about spouses, but also about groups and societies, and about creating change in their political relationships" (Carsten et al., 2021a, p. 7). Researching marriage (and partnering) through kinship, class, religion, law, and politics continues to shape anthropology's take on the phenomenon (e.g., Abeyasekera, 2016; Maqsood, 2021).

Peervez Mody (2015) has poignantly remarked that, until approximately the mid-twentieth century, anthropological studies of marriage were driven either by its ritual significance or by the institution's regulative importance, "with little consideration of how people actually experienced the processes of marrying and making kin" (p. 599; see also Humphrey, 2015). This very much echoes the general critique of kinship studies that led to the formation of "new kinship studies" from the 1990s onwards (Carsten, 2004; Franklin and McKinnon, 2001; Howell, 2003; Weston, 1991). This new approach revitalized the field by focusing on everyday practices and experiences of relationships, denaturalizing kinship through feminist and queer theorizing, and developing new concepts to think about social connections, especially

"relatedness" (Carsten, 2000) and "kinning" (Howell, 2003). However, "much of this work has privileged the study of birth and reproduction over marriage" (Carsten et al., 2021a, p. 7). Consequently, Janet Carsten and her collaborators (2021a) have called for a denaturalization and rethinking of marriage through ethnographic and comparative anthropological studies, paying close attention to lived experiences and non-normative practices. Their comparative study of marriage in six different cultural contexts (Botswana, the United States, Greece, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia) shows not only that marriage is affected by societal transformation but also that it stimulates social change (Carsten et al., 2021b).

Another substantial contribution toward a practice-based, inclusive, and decolonial anthropological understanding of partnering and partnership comes from anthropological studies of love, as Mody's (2022) recent overview of studies of intimacy and the politics of love in anthropology attests. In the 1990s, sociological studies on love, sexuality, and romantic relationships (e.g., Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997) crucially reconfigured the thinking on partnering in the social sciences. Until then anthropology had "devoted considerable attention to kinship, courtship, and marriage but shunned examinations or explicit theorization of love" (Thomas and Cole, 2009, p. 6). This changed with the early 2000s. Since then Mody (2022) observes "an explosion in the anthropological study of love globally with attention focused more sharply on the gendered and emotional content and meanings of love, intimacy, sexuality, and desire" (p. 273). These ethnographic studies, however, strongly question the assumption of a global "westernization" and "modernization" of love and marriage, as proposed by sociologists like Anthony Giddens, which "uncomfortably homogenized the particularities and complexities of the non-Western world" (Mody, 2022, p. 273). Instead these studies show a tremendous diversity of local responses to the "globalization" of intimacy, sexuality, and love (Cole and Thomas, 2009; Hirsch, 2003; Hirsch and Wardlow, 2006; Hirsch et al., 2009; Hunter, 2010; Padilla et al., 2007; Spronk, 2012).

My brief outline shows that, today, there is a much greater diversity in conceptually describing intimate relationships in anthropological studies, using concepts like love, conjugality, intimacy, or proximity (Obadia, 2020). However, marriage has not lost its importance for the study of partnering in anthropology. Much contemporary anthropological work on love also addresses marriage (e.g., Freeman, 2020; Haenn, 2020; Hirsch, 2003; Hunter, 2010; Mody, 2008). Contemporary anthropological studies of partnership as marriage stress marriage's ambiguities, raptures, complexities, and uncertainties. Carsten and her collaborators (2021a) observe that it is exactly this ambiguity that caused earlier generations of anthropologists like Leach to struggle to define marriage. Marriage, according to Carsten et al., "is an unusually flexible and expansive institution – it can take many forms, sometimes simultaneously" (p. 26). Consequently, there are many subfields in the contemporary anthropological study of marriage, love, intimacy, and partnering. In the following I concentrate on summarizing some recent anthropological perspectives on (a) forming and living intimate relationships; (b) ritualizing and celebrating intimate relationships; (c) framing intimate relationships; and (d) opting out of marriage. There are other important fields of the anthropological inquiry into partnering, such as the influence of social media on intimate relationships (see Mody, 2022, p. 278), which I am unable to cover here.

3.2   CONTEMPORARY THEMES, THEORIZING, AND FINDINGS

3.2.1   Forming and Living Intimate Relationships

The vantage point of much contemporary anthropological work on intimate relationships is to ask when and under what conditions intimacy is being experienced. Marriage might or might not be relevant: "Rather than assume the centrality of marital relations, anthropologists need to demonstrate in particular cases whether marriage constitutes the focal relationship or not" (Blackwood, 2005, p. 15). This implies an ethnographic openness to all dimensions of partnering. Scholars no longer assume but ask who interacts with whom intimately and why, in what situations, and under what political and social conditions, and how specific kinds of intimacy are being made and remade.

Especially feminist and queer studies of kinship, love, and relatedness have substantially expanded anthropological knowledge and thinking about partnering (Boellstorff, 2007a; 2007b; Mahmud, 2021; Weston, 1993). Early and influential examples are Kath Weston's (1991) study of gay and lesbian practices and notions of kinship, love, and friendship in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1980s and John Borneman's (2001) ethnographic work on queer kinship and care in East Berlin in the 1990s. Borneman shows how his interlocutors (that is, the persons he got to know well during his ethnographic fieldwork and from whom he received many crucial insights) had to use different notions of kinship, especially ideas of affinity and descent, to live their intimate relationships publicly. Criticizing the normative forces of state and society that impinge upon his interlocutors, Borneman (2001) suggests a radical rethinking:

> This suggests that I am identifying a shift in the object of anthropological research already well under way, away from either the institution of marriage or categories of kinship, sexual identities, gender inequality, or of power differentials generally, to a concern for the actual situations in which people experience the need to care and be cared for. (p. 43)

The foundational importance of care for the formation and continuation of intimate partnering is also demonstrated in Elisabeth Kirtsoglou's (2004) research on a lesbian secret society of married and unmarried women calling itself a "parea" that had its base in a small-town bar outside Athens. Mody (2022) provides some recent ethnographic examples of the relevance of care (but also its opposite, domestic abuse) in heteronormative partnering in India. Emerging ethnographic work on polyamorous partnering also emphasizes the relevance of care (Roodsaz, 2022).

Rahil Roodsaz's (2022) ethnographic research on polyamorous partnering in the Netherlands, however, also highlights more troubling aspects of contemporary intimacies and partnering. Sustaining a polyamorous relationship demands materializing "contemporary late-capitalist demands of self-management and self-improvement" (p. 12). Roodsaz's interlocutors speak of "hard work" to describe how they experience their partnering. This resonates with other ethnographic research on the neoliberalization of love, marriage, and partnership (Freeman, 2014; 2020; Pauli, 2022c) and the anthropological critique of an idealization of "Western" notions of love, romance, and companionate relationships (Mody, 2022, p. 273). Mody (2022) observes that "many anthropologists have been at pains to point out the parlous state of uneven distribution of the intimacy grid" (p. 273). Heterosexual couples in urban Namibia, for example, meander between their temporary successes at self-optimization – enjoying, for example,

a slimmer body – and the anxiety that all could be in vain, their efforts and hard work not being enough (Pauli, 2022c). This line of research indicates that, in different regions of the world, intimacy and partnering are increasingly becoming never-ending projects of self-improvement, a dynamic which too often is experienced with "cruel optimism", as Laurent Berlant (2011) so aptly points out. If couples become parents, neoliberally inspired techniques of optimization might also be extended toward their children (Pauli, 2022c). Parenthood is thus another important field of inquiry for anthropological studies of marriage and partnering (which cannot be addressed in more depth here, but see McKenzie, 2022).

3.2.2 Ritualizing and Celebrating Intimate Relationships

Weddings globally have been transformed by changing ideas about the self and the collective. In her research on marriage in Botswana, Jaqueline Solway (1990; 2016) notes that a new form of personhood, embedded in capitalist modernity, is becoming visible in wedding celebrations (see also Pauli, 2011; 2022b; Reece, 2019; Van Dijk, 2017). Changing consumption rituals, often hybridizing local practices of celebrating with global forms like the white wedding dress, have in many regions of the world substantially raised the costs of getting married (Argyrou, 1996; Kendall, 1996; Lankauskas, 2015; Mupotsa, 2014; Pauli, 2019; Pauli and Van Dijk, 2016). These new forms of ritualized consumption are not only found in weddings but also inform non-marital intimate relationships. In rural Namibia, for example, cohabiting couples have specific expectations of care and gift giving toward each other (Pauli, 2019, pp. 227–50).

Ethnographic work from Southern Africa shows that these developments have triggered complex reconfigurations of kinship. While marriage in Southern Africa used to be largely based on the negotiations between two kin groups (Kuper, 1982; 2016), with the marrying couple playing a rather minor role, in recent times the influence of the spouses on their wedding process has increased substantially (Gulbrandsen, 1986; Solway, 1990; 2016; Van Dijk, 2017). More and more marrying couples from the emerging African middle classes want to decide by themselves how to celebrate their weddings and how much they want to pay for it, thus questioning the authority of their kin. This leads to conflict with their kin (Williams Green, 2021; Pauli, 2022c; Reece, 2021). The material and financial empowerment of spouses demonstrates a more general reconfiguration of the region's political economy, with power shifting from senior to junior generations (Gulbrandsen, 1986; Solway, 1990). These dynamics also show how strongly marriage and partnering continue to be framed and formed by economic and political conditions.

3.2.3 Framing Intimate Relationships

Contrary to "love's apparently allergic relationship to capitalism, commoditization, and economic exchange" (Mody, 2022, p. 274), numerous anthropological studies have shown the multiple entanglements between the economic and the intimate. Earlier research on kinship and marriage focused on household structures, generations, and the gendered division of labor, scrutinizing, for example, how residence patterns after marriage (that is, norms where newlyweds should live) shape economic strategies of households and families (e.g., Robichaux, 1997; Wolf, 1972). Ethnographic studies have demonstrated how patrilocal residence – with the wife moving to the household of her husband's kin – helps to keep the work force of father, sons, and brothers together. At the same time, this pattern causes major suffering for many

incoming daughters-in-law (Dickerson-Putman and Brown, 1998; Gammeltoft, 2021; Pauli, 2008). Until the late 1990s, wives in Central Mexican villages lived many years, and suffered, in the houses of their mothers-in-law. Migrating husbands remitted to their mothers, seldom to their wives. Since then the pattern of migration and sending of remittances has changed and with it the interactions between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law (Pauli; 2008, 2013). Couples now plan the husband's migration, and husbands remit to their wives. The couples use the income to construct their own houses, thus investing in their future, and they often skip patrilocal residence after marriage (Pauli and Bedorf, 2018). This shift also indicates that new forms of companionate marriage and partnership have developed, enhancing the agency of younger couples and wives (see also Haenn, 2020; Hirsch, 2003; LeVine and Sunderland Correa, 1993).

The economic entanglements between marriage and migration are a major theme in current anthropological work on partnering and intimate relationships. Caroline Brettell (2017) summarizes major trends and practices, ranging from so-called "mail-order brides" to transnational partnering and kinship (see also Cole, 2016; Constable, 2005; Drotbohm, 2009; Lapanun, 2019; Luncă, 2020; Yamaura, 2020). Dinah Hannaford's (2017) work on transnational migrants from Senegal working in Europe, for example, highlights how eligibility for partnering and marriage is tied to economic success achieved through migration and is expressed through the building of a house.

Another modern myth of intimacy, the assumption that "modernization makes intimacy or love less political as it becomes more individual" (Mody, 2022, p. 281), is also forcefully debunked by anthropological research. Mody (2022) discusses a number of recent ethnographic studies on the political aspects of love, marriage, and partnering, primarily from South Asia. An especially telling example of such a politicization of love and marriage is the so-called "love jihad", an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory fostered by Hindu religious nationalists who combine "the idea of love with a religious war waged by Muslims against Hindus" (p. 279). This and many other ethnographic examples powerfully demonstrate the impossibility of separating partnering and marriage from their economic and political framings and conditions.

3.2.4   Opting Out of Marriage

While earlier generations of anthropologists like Radcliffe-Brown or Lévi-Strauss assumed that marriage forms and sustains social and political order, many contemporary anthropologists show how fragile the institution in fact often is. Recent anthropological research describes and theorizes the multiple ways of "opting out of marriage" in different parts of the world (Davidson and Hannaford, 2022). Separation and divorce have become important fields of anthropological inquiry, opening up new ways of thinking about kinship, relatedness, and partnering (Alexy, 2020; Macfarlane, 2012; Medeiros, 2018; Simpson, 1998).

Further, marriage globally is increasingly being delayed (Inhorn and Smith-Hefner, 2021; Smith, 2020), leaving many people in a state of "waithood" (Honwana, 2012; Singerman, 2021). The reasons for the postponement of marriage and partnering are complex. To stay single can be the outcome of deliberate choice (Allerton, 2007; Lamb, 2018) or the result of the contingencies of life (Pauli, 2022a). In many unequal and economically stratified societies around the globe, weddings have turned into markers of class distinction. Conspicuous and expensive weddings make it near impossible for many people to marry (Pauli and Van Dijk,

2016). Some might go into debt for their weddings (James, 2017), while others labor to get married with the help of friends and kin (Pauli and Dawids, 2017). The majority, however, delay or stop marrying (e.g., Baral et al., 2021; Masquelier, 2005; Pauli, 2019; Posel et al., 2011), living in other forms of partnership outside and beyond marriage. In several regions of Southern Africa, for example, cohabitation is now more common than marriage (Hunter, 2010; Pauli, 2019, pp. 227–56; Setume, 2017).

As early as 1996, Borneman criticized that the "empirical neglect of the non-married in anthropology impoverished our ability to theorize human sociality" (cited in Borneman, 2005, p. 31). "Non-married" is a vague category, including, for example, singlehood, cohabitation, or widowhood (Davidson and Hannaford, 2022; Davidson, 2020). Today, an increasing number of ethnographic studies addresses the non-married, further reconfiguring and deepening anthropology's understanding of partnering in global and comparative perspective.

3.3   CONCLUSION

Anthropological theorizing and researching of partnering have moved from a focus on marriage toward one on a greater multiplicity of concepts and contents of intimate relationships. Marriage, however, remains important, albeit differently from the earlier approaches. Today, marriage and partnering in anthropology are seen less as social ordering mechanisms to reproduce societies or create social connections and cohesions between groups, and more as highly politicized and "economicized" fields, including that of the non-married.

It is likely that future anthropological research will continue along this line, focusing on the complex connections and entanglements between the intimate and the political/social and economic. Working toward a better understanding of the complexities that underlie the forming, maintaining, and ending of partnerships, anthropology also profits from the perspectives of neighboring disciplines. The neoliberalization and commodification of intimacy, love, and marriage have, for example, also been noted in sociology and queer studies (e.g., Lo, 2023; Pauli, 2022c; Zelizer, 2005). This emerging interdisciplinary research has a global and comparative scope, asking how ideas and practices of optimizing bodies, selves, and intimate relationships are translated, framed, and practiced in diverse communities and regions of the world. Anthropology's ethnographic and comparative approach offers important insight into similarities and differences of perception and practices of neoliberalized partnering. Further, anthropology's continuous emphasis that all partnering is embedded in a wider social universe of kin and relatedness (Carsten et al., 2021a, p. 7) adds a unique perspective for understanding intimacy as present between more than only spouses or partners.

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