Sexuality

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Abstract

Sexual reproduction is part of the biological nature of humans, so it may be surprising how much sexuality varies cross-culturally. Indeed, societies vary considerably in the degree to which they encourage, discourage or even appear to fear heterosexual sex at different life stages and in varying circumstances. And societies vary widely in their tolerance and practice of homosexuality. This module explores cross-cultural patterns in sexuality and explanations of why sexual attitudes and practice may vary.

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Sexuality

In humans, just like other sexually reproducing species, sexual behavior is governed in many respects by biology. After all, no society can survive without successful reproduction. But societies vary considerably in the degree to which they encourage, discourage or even appear to fear sex at different life stages and in varying circumstances. And societies vary widely in their tolerance for non-reproductive sex. Given so much variation, it appears that culture influences much of human sexual behavior. This module explores cross-cultural patterns in sexuality and explanations of why sexual attitudes and practice may vary.

Figure 1: Courtship unfolds in the Ndere Cultural Center in Kampala, Uganda.

It is important to understand that societies change over time, sometimes rapidly, so when we talk about an aspect of a particular society, such as degree of tolerance for premarital sex, we need to consider the time frame of reference. In the United States, for example, attitudes towards premarital sex have generally become less restrictive. Because of such changes, cross-cultural studies almost always focus on one specific time period (and usually a specific place) for each society.
General Patterns of Permissiveness or Restrictiveness

Are societies generally consistent in their attitudes and practices? Can they be generally characterized as permissive or restrictive?

- There does appear to be some consistency with respect to heterosexual behavior.
  - Societies that are restrictive about extramarital sex tend to also have restrictive premarital sex norms for girls, restrict talk about sex, and believe that sex is dangerous or too much sex is bad (Broude 1975; Frayser 1985)
  - Condemnation of extramarital sex, a low incidence of both premarital and extramarital sex, and avoidance of sex during menstruation generally co-occur (Broude and Greene 1976).

Why? These findings suggest a general pattern of avoidance and anxiety about heterosexual sex.

- However, heterosexual attitudes do not generally predict homosexual attitudes. For example, restrictiveness about premarital sex does not predict restrictiveness or permissiveness regarding homosexuality. One of the few significant relationships is between the prevalence of male homosexuality and negative attitudes toward male extramarital sex. Thus, societies that are generally permissive about heterosexuality are not necessarily permissive about homosexuality (Broude and Greene 1976).

Premarital Sex

The spectrum of attitudes towards premarital sex is very wide and ranges from restrictive, where premarital sexual intercourse is prohibited and punished, to permissive, where sexual intercourse is tolerated or expected (Murdock 1967; Schlegel and Barry III 1991). Among the most restrictive societies are those that have tests of virginity at marriage; among the most permissive are societies that actively promote it. For example, the Lepcha of India, as described in the 1930s by Gorer (1938, 161), believed that a girl would not
develop to sexual maturity without having prior sexual relationships.

Even though most societies are generally tolerant of premarital sexual relationships (Apostolou 2017a; Schlegel and Barry III 1991), there tends to be a slight double standard—more than 60 percent of societies approve of premarital sex for males, but only about 45 percent approve of it for females (Broude 2004).

- Although societies with greater female independence tend to have more lenient premarital sexual norms for males and females, gender double standards are present in both restrictive and permissive societies (Horne 2004).

- There is an immense pressure for female but not male chastity, particularly in the Circum-Mediterranean region (Bourguignon and Greenbaum 1973; Textor 1967).

Figure 2: Young Trobriand men perform a celebratory dance before a game of cricket on Kitava Island in Papua New Guinea. These dances are known to be especially sexual, and geared towards the female spectators you can see watching just beyond the performers.
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What influences attitudes and practices towards premarital sex?

- Societal complexity—more social complexity generally predicts more restrictiveness.
  - Societies with intensive agriculture, larger communities, class stratification, and state organization tend to prohibit premarital sex and have lower rates of such sex (Murdock 1964; Textor 1967; Broude 1975). A related finding is that when marriages involve wealth transfers, premarital sex is less tolerated (Rosenblatt, Fugita, and McDowell 1969; Schlegel and Barry III 1991).
  - Even amongst hunter-gatherers, societies with greater social complexity tend to be more restrictive (Korotayev and Kazankov 2003).

  Why? In societies with more inequality, parents (particularly more elite parents) may try to minimize the possibility that their adolescents will become interested in people from the wrong “station” in life, or even worse, for a daughter to get pregnant by a mate that is considered unsuitable for marriage (Ember and Ember 2019, 224). Consistent with the idea that premarital restrictiveness is related to parents trying to control sexuality, Apostolou (2017a) finds that rates for premarital sex are much lower in societies that practice arranged marriages.

- Premarital sex regulation tends to be stricter in societies with patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence rather than in societies with matrilineal descent and matrilocal residence (Goethals 1971; Martin and Voorhies 1975; Horne 2004).

  Why? Goethals (1971; see also Horne 2004) suggests that when a society is matrilocal and matrilineal, premarital sex that results in pregnancy is less problematic because a woman would remain with or near her natal family for her lifetime, whereas she would not have such support in a patrilocal/patrilineal society.

- Anxiety about sex or interpersonal relationships in childhood predicts more premarital restrictiveness.
  - Societies that punish young children for lacking modesty, for engaging in sexual play, or for masturbating, are more likely to have
premarital restrictiveness (Textor 1967; Stephens 1972; Broude 1975).

However, this finding begs the question of why parents generally frown on sexual expressivity in the first place.

- Controlling for social complexity and social stratification, societies where babies spend more than half their day in close body contact with a caretaker are much more likely to allow premarital sex (Broude 1975).

  *Why?* Attachment theory suggests that strong attachment to caretakers in infancy promotes greater comfort with intimacy and trust of others later in life (Broude 1975).

- Societies with open houses or those lacking walls are more likely to have permissive sexual norms and higher rates of premarital relationships (Maxwell 1967).

  *Why?* Maxwell (1967) points out that where societies lack privacy for engaging in sexual intercourse, children are likely to observe sexual behavior from an early age; presumably children and later adults become more comfortable with sexual activity because of this exposure.

**Consequences of variation in premarital sex norms**

Societies with more premarital sex are

- More likely to have autonomy in selecting their marital partner (Broude 1983).

- More likely to value romantic love (de Munck and Korotayev 1999).

- More likely to have stable marriages and lower rates of divorce, at least with respect to females, than those who do not engage in premarital sex (Broude 1983; Brown and Lin 2012).

**Extramarital Sex**

A slight majority of societies condemn extramarital sex for both sexes, but a double standard in favor of husbands applies in about 65% of societies—extramarital sex is either allowed for husbands but not wives, or, husbands only
receive mild punishment, whereas wives receive severe punishment. However, that does not mean that extramarital sex is rare for women. In fact estimates of extramarital sexual behavior are considerably out of sync with cultural attitudes. For example, while 88 percent of societies condemn such sex for women, extramarital sex is reported to occur at least occasionally by wives in about 75 percent of societies (Broude and Greene 1976; Broude 2004).

If extramarital sex occurs fairly frequently, it is not surprising that almost all individuals across societies worry about their partner’s sexual activities and actively try to curtail an affair that is conducted without their permission. Rarely is an affair met with indifference (Jankowiak, Nell, and Buckmaster 2002). Males and females have slightly different strategies—women are more apt to use social or physical distancing; men are more apt to use violence (although women commonly resort to violence too). In more complex societies, higher authorities are more often appealed to by men.

While extramarital sex is usually frowned upon in a majority of cultures, there are quite a few (about 40%) that allow extramarital sex for wives. Much of it is institutionalized, such as being allowed during certain ceremonies, or in a common practice known as “wife sharing.” Wife sharing includes a woman having sex with other men in the husband’s clan or age-grade, with specific other men such as a brother-in-law, or as an act of hospitality (Broude
We know relatively little in terms of how women feel about these arrangements.

What predicts attitudes and behavior towards extramarital sex?

- Extramarital sex is more likely to occur in polygynous societies (Wilson 2008).
- Societies with high levels of sexual jealousy are generally opposed to extramarital sex (Hupka and Ryan 1990).

Why? Evolutionary psychologists contend that when relationships are not stable, people will take the necessary means to protect the bond with their partner, such as being explicit of their extramarital sex views and opinions.

- Societies with smaller communities are less likely to have punishment for extramarital sex than those in cities and towns (Textor 1967).
- Societies with less desire for children and low opposition to abortion are more likely to permit extramarital sex (Textor 1967).
- Societies allowing romantic love are more likely to be accepting of extramarital sexual relationships (Textor 1967; de Munck and Korotayev 1999).
- In response to partner infidelity, males tend to resort to physical violence whereas females are more likely to distance themselves from their partners (Jankowiak, Nell, and Buckmaster 2002).

What factors predict a double standard rather than a single standard for husbands and wives?

Cross-cultural research suggests that a double standard is predicted by

- A long post-partum sex taboo (Broude 1980)
- Male insecurity and defensiveness (Broude 1980) indicated by
  - High degrees of male boasting
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- Men’s houses
- Segregation of the sexes in chores
- Low father presence in childhood

Why? To explain these relationships, Broude (1980) discusses two psychological theories. The first is related to the idea that the Oedipus complex will be stronger when a young boy has a lot of contact with the mother early in life and the father stays away because of a long (year or more) prohibition on marital sex after the birth of a child. Presumably a boy experiences considerable distress when the taboo period is over and the child is displaced from the mother when the father returns. Any future threat of loss later in life, such as a wife finding love elsewhere, may also engender considerable distress. Therefore it is argued that to try to prevent such distress, males create strong prohibitions to keep wives from having affairs. But why should males be allowed to have extramarital sex (which creates a double standard)? The second theory suggests that when fathers and other male models are relatively absent in a boy’s upbringing, males will have more concern about their sexual identity, including sexual performance. Hence they will oftentimes engage in hypermasculine or exaggerated masculine behaviors as a defensive mechanism. This may include having affairs to “prove” their virility while at the same time restricting the extramarital sexuality of their wives which could threaten their egos (Broude 1980).

Sex in Heterosexual Marriages

All societies believe in having children, so it is not surprising that most societies think frequent sex during marriage is desirable, but it may be surprising that about 23 percent of societies believe that too much sex is a bad idea. Based on ethnographic reports, customary frequencies of marital sex range from five or six times a day in some societies to two or three times a month. The most common reported frequency is once a day, excluding explicit taboo periods. A majority of societies have some marital sex taboos. These may include the prohibition of sex at certain times of day, in certain locations, during menstruation, before war, hunting or fishing expeditions, or during certain life events such after the birth of a child (Broude 2004).
the menarche sections of the Adolescence module for a discussion of menstrual taboos.

**Sex taboos during pregnancy**

In some societies it is thought best to avoid sex during pregnancy to enhance the health of the fetus (Montgomery 1974). In other societies, such as the Azande of central Africa, it is thought that intercourse during pregnancy helps promote a healthy child (Lagae 1926).

Sex taboos during pregnancy are more likely (and are longer)

- In polygynous, rather than monogamous societies (Ayres 1967).
- In tropical or sub-tropical environments (Textor 1967).

![Figure 4: A man and woman embrace in anticipation of the birth of a child. Cultures vary greatly in the duration of pregnancy sex taboos, if present.](image)

**Sex taboos after childbirth**

Sex between a husband and wife is usually avoided for some time after the wife gives birth, the range of which is typically specified by custom or taboo.
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In many cases the post-partum sex taboo is more than a year, sometimes for several years. For example, traditionally amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria a sex taboo lasted for about three years (Feyisetan 1990). The Yoruba say the purpose of the taboo is to protect the health of the nursing child.

What predicts such long (more than one year) taboos?

- When the staple food or foods in a society are low on protein (Whiting 1964).

  Why? Whiting theorized that the long post-partum sex taboo is an adaptation to tropical environments where adult diets are low in protein. In such environments, toddlers are vulnerable to kwashiorkor, a protein-deficiency disease. However, if a mother could postpone a new pregnancy and nurse a child for a long time, the child has much better survival chances. In the absence of effective contraception, abstinence (a long post-partum sex taboo) is the most effective way of preventing a new pregnancy.

- Societies with long taboos also tend to be polygynous and have unilineal descent (Saucier 1972; Whiting 1964).

- Societies with menstrual taboos tend to have long post-partum sex taboos (Carroll 1982).

Why is sex, even in marriage, considered dangerous?

Broude (2004) estimates that 23 percent of societies believe that too much sex is a bad idea. The number of such societies with these beliefs is perhaps surprising given that heterosexual sex is necessary for a society’s survival. The idea that sex is dangerous is expressed by Meggitt’s (1964, 210) report of Mae Enga (from New Guinea) beliefs: “...every ejaculation depletes his vitality, and over-indulgence must dull his mind and leave his body permanently exhausted and withered.”

Since many societies believe heterosexual sex is problematic during certain times (such as before marriage, during menstruation, or after the birth of a child), researchers who want to study fear of heterosexual sex have concentrated on beliefs regarding marital sex during non-tabooed times.

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Figure 5: Scenes from the Kama Sutra (one of the oldest and most popular guides to the techniques of sex) in a Hindu temple. Here we see a side of sex and sexuality beyond the purely mechanical or taboo.

Relatively little is known about female beliefs regarding sexuality, so most of the research focuses on male beliefs.

Men’s fear of sex with women is predicted by

- Men typically marrying women from “enemy” communities (Ember 1978).

Why? Meggitt (1964), in trying to explain variable beliefs about sex in New Guinea, suggested that there seemed to be a relationship between “marrying enemies” and men’s fear of sex with women. In the Enga area, where Meggitt did his fieldwork, warfare is close to home, often between neighboring communities, and it is these same communities from which men must find marriageable partners. Meggitt (1964, 218) believes this structure sets up an equation of "femininity, sexuality, and peril". The practice of marrying enemies applies to many societies outside New Guinea and more broadly predicts fear of sex with women (Ember 1978).

- Severe food scarcity (Ember 1978).
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Why? Another New Guinea ethnographer, Lindenbaum (1972), suggested that a cultural belief that heterosexual sex is dangerous can act as a population control mechanism and is therefore adaptive in societies that have insufficient resources to support the population. The relationship between food shortage and men’s fear of sex was supported in C. R. Ember’s (1978) worldwide sample.

- Male babies sleeping in closer proximity to their mothers than their fathers (Ember 1978).

Why? Two different psychological theories are used to explain this relationship. The first suggests that any condition that exaggerates a boy’s attraction to his mother and subsequent fear of the father (the Oedipus complex) would increase sexual anxiety generally and more specifically the idea that heterosexual sex is dangerous Stephens (1962). The second theory, “sex identity conflict” theory, postulates that initial closeness between a male baby and his mother sets up initial unconscious feminine identification. If the society is male dominated, a boy gradually will realize that males have more status and power and he will subsequently develop a secondary male identification. This sets up a conflict in sex identity. A common response to this conflict is to defend against the unconscious feminine identification and manifest fear of, and antagonism toward women (Whiting 1965). Both psychological theories received support as men’s fear of sex with women tends to be present in societies where boys sleep closer to their mothers, men’s fear of sex with women tends to be present (Ember 1978).

How do all these factors—marrying enemies, food shortage, and sleeping arrangements fit together? Marrying enemies is thought to be the mechanism that sets up emotional and physical distance between a man and his wife, including sleeping apart, and it is likely that psychological mechanisms lead to men’s fear of sex with women (Ember 1978). Alternatively Kitahara (1981), using the theory of “reciprocal inhibition,” suggests ways that food shortage may be a direct contributor to men’s fear of sex.

- As mentioned earlier, condemnation of extramarital sex, a low incidence of both premarital and extramarital sex, and menstrual taboos generally co-occur (Broude and Greene 1976).
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*Why?* These findings suggest a general pattern of avoidance and anxiety about heterosexual sex.

**Are there norms partners must follow during intercourse?**

- Females have more active roles during intercourse in matrilineal and avunculocal societies whereas they tend to be sexually submissive partners in patrilineal societies (Eckhardt 1971).

  *Why?* According to feminist theory, females face greater oppression in patriarchal societies due to the normative power dynamics that are highly beneficial to males.

- The spectrum regarding privacy during intercourse ranges from having ample privacy in dwellings far from others, to minimal privacy sharing a room with a partition, to no privacy sharing space without a partition (Cozby and Rosenblatt 1971).

  - Societies where two partners have greater romantic love also tend to have more privacy (Cozby and Rosenblatt 1971).

**Homosexuality**

Studying homosexuality cross-culturally is complicated. The first complication is that in Western societies, homosexuality refers to sex between males or sex between females. But this concept of homosexuality depends on the cultural idea that there are only two genders. If a society recognizes three or more genders, the concept of homosexuality might simply mean sex with individuals who share the same gender designation, regardless of their biological sex. The second complication is that engaging in sexual behavior with those of the same biological sex or same gender category does not necessarily imply sexual attraction. Hames, Garfield, and Garfield (2017) use the term “male androphilia” to describe males’ attraction to and arousal by other males. The distinction between attraction and behavior is quite important in discussing male homosexual behavior cross-culturally because quite a few societies have mandated homosexual relationships for some phase of the life cycle, such as during male initiation ceremonies. In such cases, all initiates would be
expected to participate in homosexual behavior, whether or not they were sexually attracted to males.

The third complication is that many scholars suggest the need to distinguish different kinds of homosexuality. Citing a typology suggested over 50 years ago, Cardoso and Werner (2004; referring to Gorer 1966) discuss three broad types of systems for male homosexuality: 1) gender-stratified; 2) age-stratified; and 3) egalitarian. In gender-stratified homosexuality, some men take on a sexually receptive (“pathic”) role, often adopt female dress or roles, and are usually distinguished from other men, even from men who have sex with them. In contrast, those who take the active or insertor role, are not considered different from other men. In age-stratified homosexuality, older men establish sexual relationships with boys, often serving as their mentors. When the “boys” are older they may take on their own younger partners. But these relationships are not incompatible with marrying women and often function as part of a life cycle. For example, the older male may marry a woman when his “boy” partner in the relationship is old enough to take on his own “boy” partner.

Figure 6: Vigeland sculptures capture a variety of human relationships including homosexuality.
In contrast to the age-stratified and gender systems, egalitarian systems do not have important power differences between homosexual partners. Egalitarian systems include homosexual practice amongst adolescents with marriage to women afterwards or forming a “comrade” relationship between men that can last a lifetime even though the men marry. Ironically, the third type of egalitarian homosexuality, the “gay” system, while common in Western societies, is the rarest type of male homosexuality in the ethnographic record. In “gay” homosexuality, individuals gradually recognize their sexual attraction to males and after “coming out,” have sex with other “gay” individuals throughout their lifetimes, sometimes exclusively with one homosexual partner. The “gay” system is the only type of homosexuality largely incompatible with marriage to women.

Homosexual behavior is easier to document than attraction. (Of course, the same distinction between attraction and practice could be said of heterosexual sex; in many societies everyone is expected to marry someone of the opposite sex regardless of sexual orientation and attraction.)

**How common is homosexual behavior and what, if anything, do we know about attraction?**

Country studies based on surveys of individuals suggest that male androphilia occurs in about 2 to 4 percent of the population in almost every country. Hames, Garfield, and Garfield (2017), using ethnographic data, estimate that 58 percent of nonindustrial societies exhibit some male androphilia, although male homosexual behavior occurs in about 90 percent of societies. (Note that the male androphilia figure is likely to be an under-report since cross-cultural research on nonindustrial populations is usually based on ethnographer reports rather than on interviews with individuals.)

Female homosexuality has been less studied cross-culturally, but Blackwood (1984; reported in Blackwood and Wieringa 1999) located 95 societies with female homosexual relationships, many more societies than people expected.
What does cross-cultural research find regarding homosexual behavior?

- Acceptance of homosexuality is associated with greater frequency of the behavior (Minturn, Grosse, and Haider 1969).

- Higher frequencies of male homosexuality will occur in societies that have institutionalized male transvestism (Gray and Ellington 1984). A related finding is that societies more accepting of homosexuality are more likely to have alternative gender roles occupied by transgendered androphilic males (VanderLaan, Ren, and Vasey 2013).

*Why?* Assuming that all societies have some individuals with homosexual inclinations, such sexuality will likely be expressed unless it is suppressed by cultural dictates. Munroe, Whiting, and Hally (1969) found that institutionalized male transvestism was related to the presence of less rigid gender categories. If so, such societies are also more likely to allow expression of homosexual behavior. It is likely that the type of homosexual behavior being predicted is “gender-stratified” homosexuality since Crapo (1995) found that societies with gender-stratified homosexuality had less rigid sex distinctions, while societies with age-stratified homosexuality had more rigid sex distinctions.

- Age-stratified homosexuality is more likely in patrilineal societies, whereas gender-stratified homosexuality is more likely in societies that are not patrilineal (Crapo 1995).

*Why?* Noting that age-stratified homosexuality also goes with the type of polygyny where mostly wealthy men have multiple wives, Crapo (1995) suggests that this type of homosexual system removes young males from the marriage market. They have to wait their turn and prove themselves to be worthy.

- Homosexual practice is more likely in societies of higher social complexity. More specifically, it is more likely
  - In agropastoral societies or agricultural societies rather than amongst hunter-gatherers (Barber 1998 Apostolou (2017b)).

*Why?* The two authors have very different theories. Barber postulates that maternal stress is higher in more complex societies and
also that such stress is associated with more homosexuality. Apostolou argues that more complex societies usually arrange marriages in order to ensure heirs for property inheritance. While arranged marriages may detract from homosexually-inclined individuals being allowed to have homosexual relationships on a permanent basis, Apostolou argues that it actually allows the frequency of homosexual tendencies because those individuals with such tendencies will still reproduce in their marital relationship.

– In more social stratified societies (Barthes, Crochet, and Raymond 2015)

Why? The authors argue that in socially stratified societies a woman’s reproductive success is enhanced by being able to marry into a higher social class. Male homosexuality could be adaptive if a male’s lessened reproductive success enhances a sister’s or another female relative’s reproductive success. In biology, the term “sexually antagonistic” gene is used to indicate a gene that has different effects in different individuals.

**Some childhood experiences predict more male homosexuality**

- Homosexuality is positively associated with low initial sex indulgence in childhood and high severity of sex training (Minturn, Grosse, and Haider 1969).

- Higher frequency of male homosexuality is associated with fewer male childhood companions or more mixed-sex play groups (Werner 1979).

Why? Werner’s theory would suggest that homosexual tendencies or interests are suppressed by the presence of male companions. This would allude to a culture of masculinity that emphasizes heterosexuality and socializes against homosexuality. A mixed play group also suggests more gender equality and perhaps the possibility that males would be allowed to emotionally or physically explore their homosexuality.

- Lower levels of father-infant involvement are associated with both age-stratified and gender-stratified homosexual practice (Crapo 1995).
What We Don’t Know

- Very little is known about female homosexuality. There is not that much descriptive information in ethnography about the subject, so it is not clear if such sexuality is simply not discussed, making it seem less prevalent, or whether it is not as common as male homosexuality. Some research by Murray (2002; cited in Cardoso and Werner 2004) suggests that female gender-stratified homosexuality, like male gender-stratified homosexuality occurs in societies with fewer sex distinctions.

- There is research on what predicts men believing that sex with women is dangerous, but little is known about the attitudes of women. Do they share the same beliefs about themselves? Or are their beliefs different? Similarly, how do women feel about “wife sharing,” which is often arranged by men?

- Most research on male homosexuality did not consider the different types of homosexuality. Would there still be the same predictors?

- Little is known about the quality of the marital relationship. Does any of the variation in societal custom (such as prohibiting premarital sex) affect the quality of the marital relationship?

Exercises Using eHRAF World Cultures

Explore some texts and do some comparisons using the eHRAF World Cultures database. These exercises can be done individually or as part of classroom assignments. See the Teaching eHRAF Exercise on Sexuality for suggestions.

Citation

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Credits

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Glossary

Avunculocal residence a pattern of residence in which a married couple loves with or near the husband’s mother’s brother.

Matrilineal descent the rule of descent that affiliates individuals with kin of both sexes related to them through women; at birth an individual affiliates with their mother’s kin group.

Matrilocal residence a pattern of marital residence in which couples typically live with or near the wife’s parents.

Patrilineal descent the rule of descent that affiliates individuals with kin of both sexes related to them through men; at birth an individual affiliates with their fathers’s kin group.

Patrilocal residence a pattern of marital residence in which couples typically live with or near the husband’s parents.

Post-partum sex taboo a taboo on sexual intercourse between a wife and her husband for a period of time after the birth of a child. The period of abstinence may range from a few days to 4 or 5 years. Cross-cultural studies usually deem a year or more to be a long taboo period.

Unilineal descent groups kin groups formed on the rule of descent, which
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stipulates that an individual’s membership is assigned at birth through
the line of descent of either the mother (matrilineal) or father (patrilin-
eal).

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