

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Are we all in arranged marriages?

Featuring Usha Tummala-Narra with Stanton Wortham (host) and Becca Lowenhaupt (commentator)

Original Air Date: April 19, 2021

Stanton Wortham 01:40

Welcome to this episode of Pulled Up Short. We're very happy to have you with us today. This time, we're pleased to have as our guest Usha Tummala-Narra, who's a professor of Counseling, Developmental and Educational Psychology in the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College. We're also pleased to have with us as a panelist, Becca Lowenhaupt, who's a Professor of Educational Leadership, also at the Lynch School at Boston College. Welcome to both of you. Usha, we're very excited to have you with us today to talk about the topic of arranged marriage, which I know has been a particular interest to people in the West, because of this show, "Indian Matchmaking" that's been such a hit on Netflix. So please give us a sense of what you'd have to say about arranged marriage.

Usha Tummala-Narra 02:29

Sure. Thank you for having me on today, Stanton. I really appreciate it. So today, I'll be talking about arranged marriage in the contemporary sense. To get started, I want to begin with this interesting show that you mentioned on Netflix, that premiered this past summer. It's called "Indian Matchmaking," and it's a documentary series on Netflix that came out in the summer of 2020. The show involves a matchmaker who's located in Mumbai, India. Her name is Seema Taparia. This matchmaker meets with single people both in India and in the United States and meets with them individually and with their families with the hope of helping them find someone to meet and eventually marry. The show itself involved about six months of filming, and they followed eight single people. They followed them through their first dates and meetings with their family members as well. Seema, this matchmaker travels between Mumbai and various cities in the United States where the young single people live, and she consults with life coaches, astrologers, even a Face Reader at one point in one episode, to see who might match well with each other. She uses all of these different sources of information to come up with potential matches. The show itself has caught the attention of a global audience and drew a lot of controversy, as it revealed some harsh realities and complexities about arranged marriage and also about dating in the modern South Asian and specifically, Indian diaspora. There's both a fascination with the show and a critique of the attention to issues like caste and skin color in the matchmaking process in and across the Indian diaspora.

Just to provide a little bit of backdrop, the concept of arranged marriage dates back at least back to the biblical times and beyond. Arranged marriages were common across the world - I would say probably until the 18th century and maybe even later than that. This form of marriage is still prevalent in several parts of the world today. Early on, arranged marriages took place in various regions of the world, including Europe, Africa, Middle East and Asia. They were common among royalty and noble classes, where the idea was to develop or consolidate alliances across kingdoms, nations, and such. For example, in the Roman Empire, giving daughters in marriage was a form of currency for establishing these alliances. You look at a different region of the world in Japan, for example, where in

16th century, the samurai class introduced arranged marriages to Japanese society to form military alliances. Over time, the tradition of arranged marriages moved towards people of other social and economic classes and all of these different societies.

I also want to make a distinction between arranged marriages and forced marriages. This distinction is really important because in some cases, young people, including children and young adolescents have historically been betrothed to each other by their families for a number of different reasons, sometimes, even before they were born. These alliances between families have often superseded the wishes of the young couple. In many instances, they are forced to marry either due to a promise made by families or because of poverty or other economic circumstances and that persists to some extent today.

However, most arranged marriages today are not forced, even if there might be pressure from family members to proceed with marrying a particular person. But in most contemporary arranged marriages, two people are introduced to each other by their parents or their grandparents or other elder members of a family, sometimes siblings. They're also introduced by people within their religious or cultural community and even by matchmakers, like we see in the show. There's a belief in the system that the older people in the family will be able to guide the younger people in choosing the right person to marry. There are a lot of different considerations like family background, culture, religion, sometimes wealth, caste, the young person's profession, sometimes even by temperament as described by family members or friends, by physical beauty interests, and just day to day habits. So, if we consider the wide range of arranged marriages that happened today, in South Asia and beyond, these arrangements take different forms with different customs. They vary with regard to how much someone might date before they get married or agreed to be married. They also take different forms and the ways that people have introduced each other. When members of a family or friends arrange for a couple to meet, they're considering factors outside of romantic or sexual attraction. In arranged marriages, it's assumed that the framework of family and the support that comes from an extended system allows a couple to feel more secure in their relationship. So, in this view, romantic love develops over the course of time with these other aspects in place first, and this of course, is in contrast with the Western Euro-American perspective on romantic love, which is thought to be more of a preexisting condition for a marital relationship.

Going back to Indian matchmaking, one example is Nadia. She's an event planner who lives in New Jersey. She has had a lot of trouble in the past meeting men, Indian American men, specifically because her family is from Guyana. She's of Indian descent, her family is Guyanese, and they emigrated to the United States. She ends up meeting a couple of different Indian American men who are not Guyanese immigrants or children of Guyanese immigrants. So there's some interesting kind of dialogue around what makes you an Indian American and what the authenticity around "being Indian" in the context of meeting somebody.

Stanton Wortham 09:40

That's great. It's a really interesting topic. I'd love to hear more about these examples and why the people are making the choices they're making. But before you get into that, this show was extremely popular in the US and not just among people of Indian descent. As you accurately point out, the vast majority of us, certainly middle class to upper middle-class Americans, are not engaging in arranged marriage and we don't know anyone who ever has. So it's something of an alien practice to us. But why were we so taken by it? What was so fascinating? Why were people so drawn to it, do you think?

Usha Tummala-Narra 10:19

It's such a great question. I've been really intrigued by how many people have tuned in to this show in the United States. It made me think about what is the draw, particularly since I am an Indian American person. It's fascinating to see how many people have been interested in a system that's very familiar to me and to my family. So, what I have taken from this is that I think the show brings up a broader human question around what love is, how we find our partners, and how to find love in a romantic relationship that's sustaining.

I've often wondered about some of the struggles that we have, I think, in the United States around love and intimacy in an era where I think there's even more growing isolation. The show comes out also in the midst of the pandemic, where there's even more isolation than we might typically feel in a society that tends to be largely, individually focused much of the time. So, I wondered about the timing of when we're actually seeing the show and the importance of connecting to broader society, perhaps families and loved ones. Even the idea of dating, which has, I think, in over the last decade or so, really moved into a digital, electronic realm in terms of how people meet, and how people spend their time with each other. So here's a show that presents questions around "what is intimacy?" and "how do you find love and connection in a sustaining way?", which seems more and more important in the United States, certainly, and perhaps more globally, as well.

I also think that we can relate. Anyone who's not Indian or Indian American can relate to arranged marriages because we actually need support from other people in our lives. Even when we find romantic love, perhaps in the more typical Western way, and we're dating somebody, we still want to have the approval of our loved ones. We still want to have the connections that we have with our friends and family members and have that sustain, even while we're dating somebody that we've fallen in love with. So, to me, the show is fascinating and interesting from those perspectives.

I also think that there's something about the 'otherness' of an arranged marriage that's at play. It's such an interesting and foreign idea to so many people in the United States that are not from a South Asian background. So while there's an interest in connections as I've mentioned, there's also some type of exoticizing about arranged marriage. I think this show sort of deconstructs that a little bit and brings it to the contemporary stage, which I think people find interesting as well.

Stanton Wortham 13:38

So this is particularly interesting to me, because one of the things you seem to be arguing provides me at least with a pulled up short moment. You seem to be saying that there are anxieties and needs that mainstream Americans feel around finding love, dating, and marriage, and the system we have does not fully meet those needs. There's something about these practices of arranged marriage that speak to something that we need too. So our initial reactions, speaking for a mainstream American, is going to be: "Arranged marriage. Yep. That's some sort of prehistoric practice. Who would do that? That's not fair to those people." But it seems as if you're saying that this show reveals that there are aspects of arranged marriage that make perfect sense. These are perfectly reasonable ways of trying to navigate the process of having people get married and have successful lives together. Even us, even people in the West who find this an alien idea, have some needs that would be met by this, so we can kind of feel it when we see it. Could you tell me a little more about how it is that this practice is actually a perfectly reasonable adaptation, that even people in the West who find it alien can feel is reasonable?

Usha Tummala-Narra 14:56

Yeah, I think what you say is absolute right in that it's a surprise. It's a pulled up short moment, because we don't expect to see arranged marriage as something that we would want, but rather as something of the past, something that

we're trying to move away from. Yet there are aspects of wanting to find someone who fits into our world - our psycho-psychological world, and not just a physical matching. Part of bringing someone into our psychological world and entering theirs is finding some kind of compatibility with the rest of our world, and not just in the context of that particular relationship. We might want for that partner to be someone who fits in, blends in with our family, with our friends, with our larger networks, with our worldviews. All of these things are parallels to what we might find in a more typical or mainstream American dating system. If we think about setting somebody up on a blind date, for example, we might say, "Well, what are some of the criteria that we consider?" When we're trying to set somebody up on a blind date, we might think of very similar things that a family member might consider in an arranged marriage in the contemporary sense. For example, we might think about their interests, their habits, whether they're looking for a more committed relationship or if they're more interested in a casual dating situation. Even our online dating sites reveal things like interests and professions. Profiles include pictures and photos that reveal something about what someone or who someone might be attracted to physically. So, beauty and attractiveness are a part of the profiles that we see. In fact, the dating profiles that we see on websites are similar to matrimonial ads you will find in newspapers that are in various different communities where arranged marriage is common practice. I remember growing up with a newspaper that's still in circulation called "India Abroad." It was meant for Indian immigrants in the U.S. and elsewhere in the Indian diaspora. There was a section of that newspaper for matrimonial ads. If you read these ads, they read very similar to what you might find on a profile in a dating website. So, it's interesting to see these parallels and maybe not to see them necessarily as so foreign or different. But they are a different permutation of what we're all seeking as human beings in intimate relationships, including wider family networks, as well as a part of those intimate relationships rather than as separate.

Stanton Wortham 18:08

Yeah, that makes sense to me. Part of what you're arguing here is that there's something quite reasonable about these alternative practices of arranged marriage. I once had someone explain to me that, "Why on earth would you leave the crucial decision of who someone is going to marry who up to these young people who are inexperienced and blinded by passion, when other people see much more clearly than they do? What's going to sustain a relationship over the long term?" That makes it seem a lot more sensible than what we've got. Tell me a little bit about the implications once we recognize there is this alternative way of setting up marriages through arranged marriage. Once we see that it is quite reasonable in its own term - in some ways, it does better than the systems we have - how do we think about that? What can we learn for our own life?

Usha Tummala-Narra 19:02

One of the things to keep in mind in terms of an implication of this idea of arranged marriage and exploring a different system, I would say in everyday life, it has a great deal to do with how we think about people from cultures other than our own, cultures that we're less familiar with. Rather than assuming that these systems are less evolved, I think we first have to educate and inform ourselves about the contemporary way that the system works, and the diversity and heterogeneity that exists within any particular system of marriage. Just as we can't assume that all Western marriages or mainstream American marriages happened in one way, or that the quality of those marriages are all the same, we can't assume that about arranged marriages either. There is this common stereotype of arranged marriages as not involving love, as if these are just practical contracts. That's not always the case. In fact, in most cases, the idea is that there's this larger framework that sets the stage for a couple falling in love over the course of time. So, you see all kinds of variations: you will see happy marriages and unhappy marriages in either system. We tend to romanticize love, and any system that appears to make it secondary seems either foreign or even primitive to us. We have to think about the ways in which this system is stereotyped.

I think about that as one implication, but bringing it to the world of psychology, which is my professional world, I can share with you an example of a situation that came up when I was supervising a clinical case. I had been supervising and provided a consultation to a colleague of mine who was a therapist to this Indian American woman. When I consulted with my colleague (she's a white European American woman), she was working with this young, second-generation Indian American woman: someone who was born and raised in the United States. This woman had expressed feeling anxious about getting married, particularly after her parents had introduced her to several men, with the hope that this client would choose one of these men as her spouse. My colleague, in our consultation, expressed her feelings of helplessness in working with this client. She felt that the client was being oppressed by her parents. She said, "These are just outdated views. I just feel so much pressure from my parents." These are the kinds of things that she would share with my colleague, her therapist.

At this point, I kind of wondered with her about how much she understood about arranged marriages in the contemporary sense. I asked her if the client experienced any ambivalence about her parents' involvement, or did she only experience negative feelings about meeting these potential partners through her parents? My colleague then responded by telling me that she couldn't imagine that her client felt anything except anger and frustration, since the idea of arranged marriage was oppressive and outdated. She had a very strong opinion about this, but when I brought it up to her that maybe she ought to explore whether the client might have mixed or ambivalent feelings about arranged marriage since she grew up in a bicultural context, my colleague did, in a following session, ask her client if she ever felt ambivalent about arranged marriage. The client, in fact, told her that there was indeed a part of her that liked meeting someone that her parents introduced to her, and that she felt, at the same time, kind of embarrassed to share these feelings with a non-Indian person. My colleague was surprised and confused by what the client disclosed to her. To me, this is an example of my colleague being pulled up short, you could say - of feeling confused and upset with herself for not exploring this other part of this client's life. When you think about implications, our views about intimacy and love have very significant implications for what we might actually be doing in clinical practice or when we're trying to help someone or listen to someone's struggles.

Stanton Wortham 24:27

That's a great example. we might have a tendency to judge others, claiming that their practices are unreasonable or even oppressive and unjust. We don't recognize that in doing that, we're refusing to listen to other people's sense of what's reasonable. We're being ethnocentric in an immoral sort of way. I really appreciate you raising this topic. It's been great the way you've explained it to us, and now I'd like to give Becca Lowenhaupt a chance to enter the conversation. Becca, would you come in and ask a couple of questions?

Becca Lowenhaupt 25:04

Sure. Thank you for the invitation. Wow, this is so fascinating. Thank you, Usha, for sharing your insights. I've been having a lot of moments of tension, because I think I have always thought about arranged marriage in terms of a feminist framework around choice. To me, the way that I've always perceived of arranged marriage has had to do with the choice of the young woman in the context of the of the pairing. In fact, I just watched another Netflix show *Unorthodox*, which is about an arranged marriage gone wrong for a young woman growing up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, as a part of the Hasidic community. So I have been thinking a lot about this topic. But I love that your perspective gives me a different lens or way of thinking, particularly that point that you made about how finding a partner through the framework of community can potentially be less disruptive to a young adult's life in terms of pressures to change or fit in a different way. That was really resonant and a new idea for me. I had not thought about it that way. One question I had for you has to do with this idea of growing up in a bicultural context and thinking about the children of arranged marriages or children who are part of this context, who are also facing the duality of

the way we think about romance and love in our Western, Americanized way and then how that intersects with this tradition. Maybe you could just speak a little bit about that tension.

Usha Tummala-Narra 27:04

Sure. Thank you for your comments. And Becca, I will get to your question, but I really want to chime in about *Unorthodox*. I watched that documentary too, and it's just an excellent, important documentary. Absolutely, this issue of choice becomes central to any system of meeting someone and how a community can help with that or actually impede that choice. How personal choice sits with a broader group's choice often lies at the tension of the question you're raising around bicultural context, because for many people who are children of immigrants, they are making difficult, sometimes impossible choices around what they *actually* identify with. It's not always a conscious level choice. Often, it's not just like, "Okay, I will choose to be more American now or more Indian today." It's not quite like that. There's so much that goes into the complexity of cultural identifications when you're bicultural. As much as a person might like to locate one's personal wishes in their parents or their family members or their community, the complication comes when unconsciously, that's also your own wish and not only the wish of someone else. It could be both in some cases. In some cases, it could be that I have a personal wish that really does contrast with those of my parents or someone else's in my family. These tensions are often invisible, and they're not spoken about. They're not processed. One of the things I loved about *Indian Matchmaking*... though I completely see all the complexities and the criticisms. I align with those criticisms. But at the same time, I can appreciate some of the things that it offers. One of the things I do appreciate has to do with the fact that it exposes these dilemmas and questions; it brings it right to the foreground, so people can start talking about them. It is a reality versus keeping it away from the public, away from each other and the possibility to have these conversations. When we're thinking about a bicultural context, bicultural dilemmas are often invisible, pushed aside, and not understood well. I think that we need to have more conversations about it, because there's a lot of diversity when we think about the bicultural context. It's not a homogenous kind of experience by any means.

Becca Lowenhaupt 29:59

I was thinking about that too, in terms of just the different types of relationships. One thing that we haven't touched on yet is about how this frame of arranged marriage that we've been discussing is really heteronormative. In our context here in the West, where queer relationships have become more and more recognized out in the open and supported, I am just curious about how you think about that in terms of this arranged marriage practice?

Usha Tummala-Narra 30:32

Certainly the arranged marriage practice has certain parameters that are very heterosexist. They reify problems that we have regarding other issues like colorism, casteism, and other forms of discrimination like economic marginalization, particularly directed towards women and girls, but I would say also towards men and boys. I think that there are these parameters that are restrictive and that we don't have a good understanding of how the extent of marginalization of people who don't identify as straight or heterosexual. This system really doesn't address that at all, in any formal sense. I will say though, that in any relationship, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, there are parallels to how people seek partners, what they're looking for, and love and intimacy. Even in that sense, I would say that there's something that we can draw from the system about human beings and their quest for being in intimate relationships. I think that there is an aspect of that that can cut across sexual identity and gender identity as well.

Becca Lowenhaupt 31:59

Well, I really appreciated your remarks in relation to how this practice has evolved and how there's a contemporary version that might be really different from its historical roots. I'm just thinking about our own institution of marriage

in the U.S. and how just only recently has it evolved to include be more inclusive of gay marriage, for example. So that gives me hope that this practice could also evolve in that way, to become more inclusive of a wider range and maybe be able to help push against some of those stereotypes and biases that you're saying is currently part of that practice.

Usha Tummala-Narra 32:41

Yeah, I think certainly in India and the Indian diaspora, there's a long way to go in terms of openly discussing issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. Yet at the same time, I do remain hopeful about the growing awareness. We do see among the South Asian community, particularly with the younger generations and children of immigrants, a real wrestling with tradition and more contemporary, modern ways of thinking about relationships. So that's really where some of the tensions still lie today. It doesn't mean though, that we don't still have tensions within the United States, where we might have marriage equality in terms of policy, but in terms of people's hearts and minds, there's a lot of diversity with how much acceptance there is around same sex marriage or same sex relationships more broadly. I think that there's something to this show around Indian matchmaking and thinking about arranged marriage that might help us think about not only what's happening out there in another country or in another culture, but what's happening within our own culture and the divisions that we face within the United States.

Stanton Wortham 34:11

That's great. So I think we're going to wrap it up there. I think this is a wonderful example of being pulled up short. We would tend to think that arranged marriage as either some primitive practice or an oppressive practice. But you've helped us see that actually, it makes sense in context. It serves many functions that we ourselves have needs in, and it's something that should cause us to think a little more in our judgments about how people navigate these sorts of crucial institutions, like finding a life partner. Thanks very much to Usha Tummala-Narra and Rebecca Lowenhaupt for bringing us this great conversation. We hope to see you back again in the future.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Pulled Up Short. We hope it's provided an opportunity to reflect on unexamined assumptions and consider alternative ways of thinking about and being in the world. Hope to have you with us next time.