

Encyclopedia of Gender and Society

Divorce

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Divorce represents the official end or dissolution of a legally recognized marriage. It is widely cited that 50 percent of present marriages will eventually end in divorce and that the chances of a second marriage ending in divorce are even more likely. During World War II, divorce rates were elevated, but stabilized during the 1950s and early 1960s. Divorce rates increased through the late 1960s and 1970s in the United States and cross-culturally. In the United States, divorce reached its all-time high in 1980. The rate has leveled off since that time but remains high compared with the 1950s. The divorce rate in the United States is high in [p. 208 ↓] historical terms and is significantly higher than in other industrialized countries such as Mexico, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Although the divorce rate is high for married couples, the rate at which other romantic relationships dissolve, such as those who cohabit, is even greater. This is likely the result of the less committed nature of cohabitation. This entry describes predictors, research on outcomes, and the influence on children of divorce.

Several social factors within the United States account for the high divorce rate. One of the primary changes has been in the economics of marriage. Traditional households in the 1950s used a division of labor such that the husband was the primary breadwinner, while the wife stayed at home to manage the house and children. During the past several decades, women have increasingly pursued careers of their own, and as a result, many households now rely on salaries from both partners. This shift has influenced divorce rates, especially from the perspective of women. In the past, traditional division of labor forced women to be financially dependent on their husbands, resulting in a barrier to divorce. Stacy Rogers examined the impact of wives' financial contributions on divorce in a 2004 study that used data from a 17-year longitudinal study. Wives' financial contributions were measured by dollars contributed, as well as by percentage of family income. Results indicated a positive correlation between wives' dollars earned and divorce such that as income increased, likelihood of divorce increased. However, when percentage of the wife's contribution was examined, an inverted U pattern emerged such that divorce was most likely when the husband and wife each contributed approximately 50 percent of the family income. According to Rogers, this situation represents equal economic dependence in which neither partner depends on the marriage for financial stability. Rogers also reports that women, and to a lesser extent men, are more likely to initiate divorce under these circumstances.

Perhaps as a result of less financial dependence, expectations have increased concerning the qualities a good marriage and good marriage partner should provide. Some of the increased expectations are the result of a more transient lifestyle. That is, people move more frequently and are less likely to become engaged in their community. As a result, social support structures are not as strong and lead people to rely more on their marriage for support. Marriage is also viewed as more of a choice than a requirement. For this reason, people expect more than minimal effort from their partners. Whereas in the past it may have been sufficient for the husband to provide financial security, expectations now include emotional support and an equal sharing of household responsibilities. According to a 2003 study based on national survey data from Paul Amato and colleagues, wives' increasing job demands and hours of work were associated with decreased marital quality, whereas nontraditional gender attitudes and increased economic resources increased marital quality. Further, sharing in household tasks increased wives' marital quality, but decreased husbands' marital quality. As partners' expectations in these areas increase, marital quality is ultimately affected. These shifts in marital quality inevitably influence the likelihood of divorce. As a result of these factors, the range of possible reasons for divorce has been greatly expanded. Thus, the stigma that had been formerly attached to divorce and divorcees has faded substantially. The decrease in negative attitudes toward divorce, paired with streamlined legal procedures, has made divorce an easier remedy to an undesirable marriage.

Predictors

Most previous research on divorce focused on identifying factors within a marriage that help determine the marriages that are likely to end in divorce. The range of possible predictors is vast, but generally falls into two main categories: preexisting factors and relationship factors. Preexisting factors include such things as social conditions and previous experiences. Terri Orbuch, Joseph Veroff, and colleagues examined several factors that lead to divorce as part of a large-scale longitudinal study called the Early Years of Marriage Project. In a 2002 study, they focused specifically on identifying who would divorce during a 14-year period. Their results show that two key social factors, race and education, predicted divorce such that African American couples and those

with less education were more likely to divorce. Income does not significantly predict divorce when controlling for other variables such as race and education. Interestingly, other research finds that socioeconomic status does not predict who will divorce, but does relate to the reasons divorcees give for the divorce. Those with a lower socioeconomic status mention substance abuse and concerns about money, whereas those with a higher socioeconomic status mention incompatibility and problems with the relationship. Other preexisting [p. 209 ↓] conditions such as previous experiences are predictive of divorce as well. Each of the following have been identified as predictors of divorce in previous research: having a previous marriage, having divorced parents, having a child before marriage, cohabitating before marriage, having low religiosity, and getting married before age 25.

Not surprisingly, dynamics within the relationship itself can also predict divorce. At the most basic level, the likelihood of divorce increases as the length of the relationship increases. However, a longitudinal study by Ted Huston and colleagues known as the Processes of Adaptation in Intimate Relationships (PAIR) project shows that the first few years are crucial. By following more than 150 couples since 1981, Huston and colleagues were able to look at three competing models for why marriages ended. Models included enduring dynamics (i.e., problems that couples bring with them to the marriage), emergent distress (i.e., stresses and strains the couple experiences while married), and disillusionment (i.e., couples start out idealizing marriage, but realize it is not as perfect as they thought). The data show that disillusionment predicted divorce best. Couples who experienced the greatest declines in satisfaction, love, and affection over the first year were more likely to divorce.

Other research has identified several additional relationship factors that predict divorce. Each of the following has been identified as a predictor of divorce in previous research: having low relationship satisfaction, having low sexual satisfaction, having dissimilar attitudes, having negative interactions, spending little amounts of time together, having high amounts of conflict, and using negative communication strategies. Also, research shows that divorce is more likely if one partner has high levels of neuroticism, or is uncomfortable with intimacy.

Because of the large number of divorce predictors, it is useful to have an overarching framework to help understand how the various factors relate to each other. In 1995,

Benjamin Karney and Thomas Bradbury proposed the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model to account for many of the factors that predict divorce. In this model, marital stability is determined by marital quality, which is the result of the interaction of several factors. First, the model states that people bring preexisting factors to their marriage (e.g., demographic variables, previous experiences, personality), known as enduring vulnerabilities. The second factor involves the experiences the couple has together (e.g., unemployment, loss of a family member, parenting, health problems), known as stressful events. Enduring vulnerabilities and stressful events influence how couples cope with issues (e.g., how problems are assessed, quality of communication, quality of support) known as adaptive processes. If the adaptive processes are sufficient, the impact of stressful events and enduring vulnerabilities are minimized and result in marital quality and stability. However, if adaptive processes are insufficient, marital quality suffers and divorce is more likely.

Outcomes

Research on divorce outcomes has largely focused on the negative consequences of divorce. Compared with married individuals, those who experience divorce have lower well-being, more health problems, greater mortality risk, smaller social networks, and lower standards of living. Women, however, are worse off economically, whereas men's economic condition improves slightly. Despite the disadvantaged financial state, women generally experience better adjustment to divorce compared with men. Women's successful adjustment is the result of their more developed social support networks and to their propensity for initiating the divorce. Because women are aware of the relationship problems and can begin thinking about divorce earlier, they are better prepared for life after divorce. In contrast, men are less prepared and more likely to cope ineffectively (e.g., engage in substance abuse) upon divorce. Finally, because of the typical unfair distribution of labor in households, divorce brings new desirable roles to women (e.g., head of household) and less desirable roles to men (e.g., household chores).

Influence on Children

Divorce influences children as well as the former spouses. In a 2000 review of thousands of divorce studies conducted in the 1990s, Amato identified the main ways divorce influences children. Generally, divorce has a small negative effect on children such that children of divorce have worse school performance, more behavioral problems, and lower well-being. Some positives, such as increased closeness between mother and daughter, have also been noted. Some research also notes that divorce is a more desirable alternative to a child experiencing a high conflict [p. 210 ↓] intact marriage. High levels of conflict pre- or post-divorce have been associated with children's poor school performance, poor relationships with peers, aggression, and emotional insecurity. Divorce may also influence children's subsequent romantic relationships. Compared with children from intact marriages, children of divorce are more wary about commitment, more likely to view divorce as a viable option, more emotionally involved in their romantic relationships, more likely to have earlier sexual experiences, and have less idealistic views of marriage.

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See also

Further Readings

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