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Recent Changes in Family Structure

Implications for Children, Adults, and Society

Paul R. Amato
Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Demography
Pennsylvania State University
211 Oswald Tower
University Park, PA 16802
e-mail: pxa6@psu.edu

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TRENDS

Divorce

The divorce rate has been increasing gradually, in general, throughout American history. The rise during the 1970s, however, was particularly dramatic, with the rate doubling in a single decade (Cherlin, 1992). Since reaching a peak in the early 1980s, the divorce rate appears to have declined. The crude divorce rate (defined as the number of divorces per 1,000 population) rose from 2.2 in 1960 to a high of 5.3 in 1981 and then declined to 3.8 in 2003 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006, Table 72). These figures suggest a 28% decline in the divorce rate since 1981. The crude divorce rate, however, can be distorted by age changes in the population and by cohort changes in the timing of marriage and divorce. This statistic captures a “period” effect for a given year. But what most people really want to know is the percentage of marriages that eventually will end in divorce.

Answering this question requires the calculation of a *cohort* rather than a period rate.

Schoen and Canudas-Romo (2006) calculated cohort rates for various birth years and discovered that the probability of marriages ending in divorce increased more or less continuously until 1990 and then stabilized. Their statistical model predicts that between 43% and 46% of current marriages will end in divorce. If one includes separations that do not end in divorce, then the current rate of marital disruption is about 50%—a rate that has *not* declined during the last quarter century. So the widely held view that divorce is decreasing in the U.S. is misleading.

Divorce rates vary substantially across social groups in the U.S. For example, well-educated couples are less likely to see their marriages end in divorce than are poorly-educated couples—a gap that has widened in recent years (Raley and Bumpass, 2003). Differences by race also are apparent. For example, data from the National Survey of Family Growth indicated that after 10 years, 32% of Non-Hispanic white marriages had ended in divorce, compared with 47% of Non-Hispanic black marriages and 20% of Non-Hispanic Asian marriages. The probability of divorce is similar for Non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics (Bramlett and Mosher, 2002).

Nonmarital Births

The share of children born outside of marriage has increased substantially, rising from 11% of all births in 1970 to 36% in 2004 (National Center on Health Statistics, 2006). The percentage of children born to unmarried mothers varies considerably by race and ethnicity. For example, recent data indicate that the percentage of nonmarital births was 16% among Non-Hispanic Asians, 31% among Non-Hispanic whites, 46% among Hispanics, and 69% among Non-Hispanic Blacks (National Center on Health Statistics, 2006). It is likely that economic as well as cultural factors account for these variations.

The Fragile Families Study indicates that nearly half of nonmarital births in cities occur to cohabiting parents (McLanahan et al., 2003). Most of these couples view marriage favorably, and most claim that they are likely to marry. For many unmarried parents, however, maintaining a relationship requires overcoming a variety of obstacles, such as poverty, unemployment, physical and mental health problems, substance

abuse, high male incarceration rates, the complexities of having children from previous relationships, and a lack of trust between partners. For these reasons, these unions tend to be unstable. The Fragile Families study reveals that five years after the child's birth, 29% of cohabiting couples with children had married and 42% had separated. Other studies find that the marriage prospects for women who give birth out of wedlock are dim. According to one set of estimates, less than half will marry within the next ten years, and only one third will be married when their second child is born (Wu, Bumpass, and Musick, 1999).

Nonmarital Cohabitation

Cohabitation among unmarried couples has increased dramatically in the U.S. during the last several decades. The percentage of marriages preceded by cohabitation rose from about 10% for those marrying between 1965 and 1974 to over 50% for those marrying between 1990 and 1994 (Bumpass and Lu 1999). Moreover, the percentage of women in their late 30s who had ever cohabited rose from 30% in 1987 to 48% in 1995—a remarkable increase for such a short time period. Finally, the proportion of all first unions (including both marriages and cohabitations) that begin as cohabitations rose from 46% for unions formed between 1980 and 1984 to almost 60% for those formed between 1990 and 1994 (Bumpass and Lu, 1999).

Individuals who engage in nonmarital cohabitation tend to be of lower socioeconomic status, in terms of educational attainment and income (Bumpass & Lu 1999). In addition, cohabitators, compared with those who avoid nonmarital cohabitation, tend to be more liberal, less religious, and more supportive of egalitarian gender roles and nontraditional family roles (Smock, 2000). Interestingly, there are few racial or ethnic differences in the likelihood of cohabitation these days. Reasons for engaging in nonmarital cohabitation vary

considerably. Some couples view cohabitation as a step in the “courtship” process, falling somewhere between steady dating and marriage. Many of these couples use the period of cohabitation to assess their compatibility for marriage. Other couples see cohabitation as a convenient relationship—a union that provides economic benefits (household economies of scale) combined with the availability of a regular sexual partner. Yet other couples see cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. For these reasons, it is difficult to place all cohabitators into a single category.

About one half of previously married cohabitators and about one third of never-married cohabitators have children living in the household. In most cases, these are the children of only one partner. Hence, these families are structurally similar to stepfamilies (Smock, 2000). Nevertheless, as noted earlier, a substantial proportion of nonmarital births (40 to 50%) occur within cohabiting unions. In these cases, children live with both biological parents. But because these unions tend to be unstable, the majority end in “informal divorces.” Most children born to cohabiting parents will spend time in single-parent families, usually with their mothers.

Cultural Change

Along with the demographic changes described earlier, several major cultural shifts during the second half of the 20th century affected marriage. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, *companionate marriage* was the dominant cultural model. In this form of marriage, husbands and wives were bound together by feelings of love and companionship. Although spouses had complementary roles within the family, the emphasis was on cooperative *teamwork* to meet mutual goals, such as owning a home, being economically secure, and raising children (Mintz and Kellogg, 1988).

Recently, some observers have argued that a new model, *individualistic marriage*, has replaced the earlier companionate model (Cherlin, 2004). During the 1960s and 1970s, American culture shifted toward an ethic of “expressive individualism” (Bellah, Marsden, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985). These ideas were popularized by members of the Human Potential Movement, as reflected in the writings of psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. This ethic assumed that close relationships exist primarily to enhance individual psychological growth. As these ideas grew in popularity, self-development and personal fulfillment came to replace mutual satisfaction and successful team effort as the basis of marriage. In individualistic marriage, love is necessary to form a union, but these unions are successful only to the extent that they meet each partner’s innermost psychological needs.

People with an individualistic perspective toward marriage have high expectations for intimate relationships. Many individuals expect their spouses to be soul mates—partners who will help them to achieve their deepest needs for personal satisfaction, growth, and self-actualization (Bellah et al., 1985). These expectations are so high that many—perhaps most—marriages will fall short. Spouses with an individualistic orientation to marriage believe that if their personal needs are not met, then they are justified in leaving their unions to seek greater happiness with alternative partners, even if their marriages are moderately happy in most respects.

These cultural changes in the meaning of marriage appear to be pervasive across the U.S. population. Recent evidence, however, suggests that well-educated individuals (those with a college degree) have begun to shift away from individualistic marriage and toward a more companionate vision (Amato, in press). This evidence is consistent with the finding

(noted above) that divorce rates appear to be declining among individuals with college degrees.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Children

The trends described earlier have resulted in major changes in the life courses of children. Nearly one million children experience divorce every year, and about 40% of all children with married parents will experience divorce before reaching adulthood. The high rate of marital disruption, combined with the increase in nonmarital births, means that about half of all children will reside at least temporarily in single-parent households, usually with their mothers (Amato, 2005).

Married couples with children enjoy, on average, a higher standard of living and greater economic security than do single-parent families with children. In 2003 the median annual income of married couple households with children was almost three times that of single-parent households—\$67,670 compared with \$24,408 (Amato and Maynard, 2007). Correspondingly, the child poverty rate was more than four times higher in single-parent households than in married-couple households—34 percent compared with 8%. The economic advantages of married couples are apparent across virtually all racial and ethnic groups. But over the past half-century those economic advantages have been denied to a growing share of America’s children.

The research literature is consistent in showing that children who experience divorce, compared with children who grow up with two continuously married parents, have an elevated risk of conduct disorders, psychological problems, low self-esteem, difficulties forming friendships, academic failure, and weak emotional ties to parents, especially fathers (Amato and Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001). As adults, these chil-

dren (on average) obtain less education, experience more symptoms of psychological distress, have more troubled marriages, are more likely to see their own marriages end in disruption, and have poorer physical health (Amato and Booth, 1997).

Despite the findings noted earlier, divorce is not uniformly harmful for children. For example, chronic, overt conflict between married parents is similar to divorce in increasing the risk of a variety of child problems. Indeed, when parents exhibit a long-term pattern of hostile, overt conflict, children tend to be better off if their parents separate rather than remain together. Nevertheless, only a minority of children with divorced parents fall into this category. Most divorces are preceded by relatively little overt conflict (although conflict may emerge around the time of separation), and most children want their parents to remain together. Children thrive under conditions of stability, and children generally value having ready access to both parents. Moreover, following divorce, children are exposed to a variety of stressors, including increased financial hardship; loss of contact with nonresident parents (usually fathers); moving (often to new neighborhoods so children lose contact with friends or classmates); new parental cohabitations, remarriages, and divorces (which means that children experience multiple family transitions); and (in some cases) continuing conflict between parents over custody, access, and child support (Amato, 2000).

Comparable outcomes can be observed among children born outside of marriage. Compared with children born within stable, two-parent families, children born outside of marriage (on average) reach adulthood with less education, earn less income, have lower occupational status, are more likely to have nonmarital births, have more troubled marriages, experience higher rates of divorce, and report more symptoms of depression (McLanahan and Sand-

efur, 1994; Teachman, 1994). The disadvantages of being born outside of marriage are apparent even if children are living with both biological parents. Brown (2004, 2006) found that children living with cohabiting biological parents, compared with children living with continuously married biological parents, had more behavioral problems, more emotional problems, and lower levels of school engagement (that is, caring about school and doing homework). Given these findings, the increase in divorce and nonmarital births has almost certainly lowered the average well-being of children in the United States.

Implications for Adults

A large number of studies indicate that married individuals, on average, have better mental and physical health than do single individuals (e.g., Marks and Lambert, 1998; Schoenborn, 2004; Williams, 2003). A potential problem in interpreting these findings involves “selection.” That is, individuals with good mental and physical health may be especially likely to marry and stay married, thus resulting in a spurious correlation between marriage and health. Evidence for the selection perspective is not strong, however. For example, one methodologically sophisticated study found that men in good health tended to postpone marriage longer than did men in poor health—the opposite of what a selection perspective would predict (Lillard and Panis, 1996). The health advantages associated with marriage appear to be due partly to the social support provided by spouses. In addition married people tend to take better care of themselves than do single people. For example, following marriage, men, in particular, tend to decrease their use of alcohol and drugs.

Of course, some marriages are more protective of health than are others. Many studies show that among married couples, relationship quality is positively related to mental and physical health (Robles

and Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003; Wickrama et al., 2001; Williams, 2003). Overall, happily married adults appear to have higher levels of well-being than do their unhappily married and single counterparts.

Cultural changes, as well as changes in the legal regulation of divorce, have made it easier for individuals in severely troubled marriages to leave their partners and seek happiness with new partners. This change has undoubtedly been beneficial to individuals in abusive or violent marriages. Indeed, spouses in severely dysfunctional marriages tend to report improvements in life happiness and mental health following marital dissolution (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

The same changes, however, have had detrimental consequences for other individuals. A large proportion of divorces occur among couples who are moderately happy with their marriages and rarely experience overt conflict with their spouses. Nevertheless, individuals may feel that their marriages have not lived up to their expectations, especially their need for personal growth. As a result, many of these individuals seek divorce after meeting new partners. Unfortunately, most of these individuals discover, after divorce, that their new partners do not live up to their high expectations, and these relationships turn out to be transitory. Moreover, people tend to underestimate the extent to which divorce is a stressful process. These stresses include a decline in household income for custodial mothers and a loss of time with children for noncustodial fathers. As result, *most* individuals experience a decline in life happiness and mental health following divorce (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

Implications for Society

Changes in family structure have had substantial costs for American society. For example, the decline in married-couple households during the second half of the 20th century was an important factor contribut-

ing to the growth in child poverty in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s (Eggebeen and Lichter, 1991). Teenage childbearing, in particular, cost taxpayers \$7.3 billion in 2004 (Maynard and Hoffman, forthcoming). In a recent and comprehensive study, Scafidi (2008) estimated that (based on conservative assumptions) the total annual costs to taxpayers from divorce and nonmarital births was \$112 billion per year, or over one trillion dollars per decade. These costs are due to increased taxpayer expenditures for antipoverty, criminal justice and school nutrition programs, and to the lower levels of taxes paid by individuals whose adult productivity has been compromised by growing up in poverty caused by family dissolution. Finally, one study indicated that the loss of work days attributed to marital conflict amounted to \$7 billion every year (Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, and Kessler, 1996). Clearly, nonmarital births, divorce, and marital dysfunction are extremely costly for American society.

In summary, changes in American marriage and family structure since the 1960s have decreased the mean level of child well-being in the population, lowered the well-being of many adults, increased child poverty, and placed a large financial burden on our society. For these reasons, attempts to strengthen marriage and increase the percentage of children raised in healthy two-parent families has emerged as an important goal for public policy.

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