

Examine some of the reasons for the changing patterns in marriage and divorce in ...

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



In the last 40 years, there have been some major changes in family and household patterns. Changes in partnerships include fewer first marriages, a higher divorce rate than before, more re-marriages and cohabitation. We first look at divorce because it is one of the most major causes of changes in family patterns and greater diversity. Since the 1960s, there has been a greater increase in divorces in the United Kingdom. Between 1961 and 1969, the divorce rate doubled. Then again, it doubled in 1972. This rise in divorces continued till 1993 which was when it was at its highest at 180, 000.

Since then, numbers have fallen but are still high when compared to divorce rates 100 years ago. This is because over the years, there have been changes in law, declining stigma and changing attitudes, secularisation, rising expectations of marriage and also the changes in the position of women. In the 19th century, divorce was very hard to obtain especially for women. This was due to the fact that it was virtually non-existent and that it could only be obtained by a special and costly Act of Parliament. So only the royal and very rich people could obtain a divorce in 1857.

Men could divorce their unfaithful wives but for women to divorce their unfaithful husbands, they had to prove that he was cheating, or that he broke his matrimonial vows. Then a major change in divorce law occurred in 1921. The law was changed so that the grounds for divorce were equalised for both men and women. After this law change, there was a sharp rise in the number of divorce petition particularly from women. In 1949, legal aid was made available for everyone who allowed more people to be eligible to divorce because now they could afford it.

This law allowed many of the poorer people in unhappy marriages to divorce. A major change in law was the Divorce Law Reform Act. This made 'irretrievable breakdown' of marriage the main reason for couples to divorce. This was only established by proving unreasonable behaviour, adultery, desertion or separation. This suggests that over centuries, women have been unhappy in their marriages but there was nothing they could do about it, and this change in law, amongst others, allowed them to have a chance at leaving unhappy marriages.

Although divorce is the legal termination of marriage, couples could find other ways to live with their unhappy marriages. When one partner leaves the other but they both remain legally married, this is called desertion. Or they could be legally separated, where the court separates the financial and legal affairs of the couple but they remain married and are not free to re-marry. The other option broken couples could have is where they are in an empty shell marriage. This is when the couple live under the same roof, but only remains married in name alone.

However, because divorce has become easier and cheaper to obtain, these options are not preferable. There are other factors that affect divorce rates. Peoples attitude towards divorce also affects it. There has been a decline in stigma. Stigma refers to the negative label a person may receive after divorce, or the social disapproval and shame of that person. In the past, divorce and divorcees have been stigmatised. Churches used to condemn divorce and often refused to hold marriages with people who had once been

married before. Juliet Mitchell and Jack Goody (1997) noticed an important change.

The change they noted was that since the 1960s, there has been a rapid decline in the stigma attached to divorce. As stigma declines, divorce becomes more socially acceptable, and more and more people turn to divorce when their marriage is not working out instead of trying to fix it. In turn, the fact that divorce is so common now, it normalises it and therefore reduces the stigma attached to it. Rather than divorce being seen as shameful, it is now seen as a misfortune. Secularisation refers to the decline in the influence religion has on society.

Many sociologists argue that religious institutions and their ideas are losing their influence and society is becoming more secular. If you look at today's attendance for Christians at their churches, it has declined from 100 years ago where church used to be required in society. But now, church isn't a social gathering anymore and people only go there every now and again. As a result of secularisation, the opposition of church to divorce doesn't matter as much as it used to, and therefore people are less likely to be influenced by religious teachings when it comes to making decisions.

However, many churches have begun to soften their views on divorce and divorcees. This might be due to their fear of losing credibility with the public and its own members. Another reason which is due to the rise in divorce rates is the rising expectations of marriage. The functionalist sociologist, Ronald Fletcher (1966) argues that the higher expectations people place on marriage today is a major cause of rising rates of divorce. Many couples

have high expectation on their marriage and if that marriage fails to fulfil their expectations, some couples refuse to tolerate an unhappy marriage.

This is linked to the ideology that people have, that there is our one true love out there somewhere. Many couples always have this idea in their mind when they marry someone. They believe that he/she is the one. But then when the marriage dies, there is no longer any justification of the marriage, so they divorce so that they can continue their search for “ the one”. In the past, couples were married either by arrangement, or by status. When they got married, it wasn't due to love; it was largely for economic reasons or for duty to their family.

Under these circumstances, these people had lower marriage expectations and were therefore less likely to be dissatisfied with their marriage, than couples now. However, even though there are high divorce rates today, many functionalists like Fletcher take an optimistic view. They say that even though there are many divorces, marriage is still popular and it shows that people haven't given up on the idea of love and marriage. Critics argue that this is too rosy a view.

Feminists argue that oppression of women within the family is the main cause of conflicts within marriage and then divorce, but functionalists ignore this. Although functionalists offer an explanation of rising divorce rates, it does not explain why it is more women than men who file for divorce. Women's increased willingness to seek divorce is due to improvements within their economic position. Women are now less likely to be financially dependent on their husbands and can depend upon themselves.

Because women are now less financially dependent on their husbands, they are freer to end an unsatisfactory marriage. Women are more likely to be paid in work now. The proportion of women working rose from 47% in 1959 to 70% in 2005. Although women are still paid less than men, equal pay and anti-discriminatory laws have helped women move forward. Allan and Crow said that “ marriage is less embedded within the economic system”. They argue that there are less family firms and that the family doesn't have to work as a single family unit or production, so each spouse has their own source of income.