

# Sociology marriage and divorce

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



Most people argue that the family is in 'crisis'. They point to the rapidly increasing divorce rate, cohabitation, illegitimacy and number of single parent families. What is happening to Marriage? Marriage has increased in popularity, reaching a peak in 1971. Since then there has been a significant decline in the number of marriages, from 459000 in 1971 to 250000 in 2001. There is a decline in first marriages where neither partner has been married before.

But there is a growing number of remarriages, in which one or both partners have been divorced; these marriages constitute 15% of all marriages in 1971 and 40% in 1996. The average age at which people first marry has steadily increased in recent decades. Since 1971 it has risen from 24 to 30 for men and from 22 to 28 for women. By 1998 there were relatively few young people who were married. Of those under the age of 24 just 3% of men and 7% of women were married. More than one third of all 18 – 49 year old women are now single.

Is Marriage still the Norm? Despite all the arguments about the decline of marriage, it continues to be the case that most people in Britain grow up and form a nuclear family for part of their adult life. Most couples who get married or have stable cohabitation relationships have children. The family unit is still mainly one in which children are brought up by two 'parents'. The majority (71%) of young people live in families headed by a couple. Just less than a quarter (24%) live in single parent households.

The majority of lone-parent families (90%) are headed by women, and the major reason is separation or divorce from the male partner, although some women are single or widowed. Cohabitation is most likely to be found among

<https://assignbuster.com/sociology-marriage-and-divorce/>

those aged 25 – 34 years. Over one in five (22%) in this age group currently cohabit. The majority (59%) of those who live together subsequently go on to marry that partner. In some respects marriage is more popular because people marry more often. The percentage of remarriage has risen from 14% in 1961 to 40% in 1996. Cohabitation Living together as a couple is no longer seen as 'living in sin'.

Increasingly the idea of cohabiting is being viewed as respectable. Two thirds (67%) of the British public now regard cohabitation as acceptable, even when the couple have no intention in getting married. The idea that people should get married if they have children is also fading away. In 1989, 7 in 10 people held this view. By 2001 the proportion had fallen to just over half (54%). Nor is there much support these days for the belief that married couples make better parents – only 1 in 4 (27%) think this is the case.

#### Marriage Patterns for African-Caribbean's and Asians

Research carried out at Essex University in 2000 indicates that only 39% of British-born African-Caribbean adults under the age of 60 are in a formal marriage compared with 60% of white adults. Moreover this group is more likely than any other group to inter-marry. The number of mixed-race partnerships means that very few African-Caribbean men and women are married to each other. Only one quarter of Caribbean children live with two black parents. There is also a tradition of women living independently from their children's father in the African-Caribbean community.

This could be partly explained historically, from the days of slavery, when husbands and wives were sold to separate plantations. But Wilson (1987) argues that a black woman may be reluctant to marry (or live with) a man

whose chances of getting / keeping a job are low and make him an unreliable source of income for themselves and their children. Consequently half of Caribbean families with children are now single parents. Marriage in Asian families whether Muslim, Hindu or Sikh is mainly arranged and consequently there is little inter-marriage with other religions or cultures.

Relationships between Asian parents and their children are also very different, Asian children tend to respect religious and cultural traditions and they feel a strong sense of duty to their families and especially their elders. Taken as a whole young British Asians have more choice and say than previous generations. Their current situation is probably not dramatically different from that of young no-Asian adults who, while choosing their marital partners on the basis of romantic love, often marry people very similar to themselves in terms of background factors such as social class and educational qualifications.

Parental influence may be less direct than in an arranged marriage, but parents can show disapproval on 'inappropriate' boyfriends or girlfriends. What are the Patterns in Divorce? From 1971 to 1996 the number of divorces has more than doubled. In 1991 there were 350000 marriages but 171000 divorces meaning that there were nearly half as many divorces as marriages. The proportion of marriages, which are remarriages, has also been rising, for example 15% of all marriages in 1961 were re-marriages for one or both partners; by 1991 this figure has risen to 36%.

Britain has the highest divorce rate in Europe according to official EU statistics (Eurostat, June 2001). Each year, 2.7 people per thousand of the population get divorced in Britain compared with the EU average of 1.8 per

<https://assignbuster.com/sociology-marriage-and-divorce/>

thousand. Who Divorces? Young spouses and young marriages are most at risk. A person's age at marriage is strongly associated with the likelihood of divorce. Generally speaking, the older people are when they marry, the less chance they have of divorcing. Couples who marry in their teens are almost twice as likely to divorce as those who marry between the ages of 20 and 24.

The divorce rate also varies by the amount of time the marriage has lasted. For example, in 1979 nearly half of all divorces occurred within the first 10 years. One investigation (Thornes and Collard, 1979) found that of all marital separations (rather than legal divorces), 60% occurred before the 10th year of marriage. Social class is also closely related to the incidence of divorce. The divorce rate for unskilled husbands is more than four times that for professionals and for the unemployed, almost five times that for the professionals.

## **Patterns in Marriage and Divorce**

Feminist sociologists see the trends as a sign of the lack of satisfaction provided by traditional patriarchal marriage, with individuals seeking alternative types of relationships and living arrangements. New Right thinkers have seen the trends as a sign of the breakdown of the family and have argued for a return to 'traditional values'. They suggest that because of the easy availability of divorce, people are no longer as committed to the family as they were in the past.

Changes in legislation which have made divorce easier but also social changes in which the law reflect are seen as the main causes of the increase in divorce rates. Have Women Broken up the Family? The position of women

has changed in a number of ways, such as the wife does not have to put up with an unsatisfactory marriage; they are not expected to be socially subservient to their husbands. Women now have more independence and are in a better financial position if they were to want a divorce; they are no longer totally reliant on their husbands.

It was stated that women in general are less satisfied with their marriages than men. In the 1990's women initiated the majority of divorces. Growing Secularisation Secularisation refers to the declining influence of religious beliefs and institutions. Goode and Gibson argued that secularisation has resulted in marriage becoming less of a sacred, spiritual union and more a personal and practical commitment. Evidence that supports this is that 60% of marriages today do not involve a religious ceremony.

## **Changing Social Attitudes**

Divorce has become more socially acceptable and there is less social disapproval and stigma attached to divorces. It no longer hinders careers through a public sense of scandal and outrage. As a result of this people are less afraid of the consequences of divorce and are more likely to end an unhappy marriage. Functionalists such as Talcott Parsons and Renoald Fletcher argue that the increased value of marriage may have caused a rise in marital breakdown. As people expect and demand more from a marriage and expect it to be perfect.

Fletcher argues that a relatively high divorce rate may be indicative not of lower but of higher standards of marriage in society. Privatized Marriages Allan argues that the family has become increasingly defined as a private

institution. The wider family, and society at large, do not have the right to interfere in family life and therefore the family unit is not supported by its integration into a wider social network, which means family problems cannot be so easily shared. Love and Marriage - Why are Arranged Marriages Stronger? Within an arranged marriage people have more realistic expectations than those who marry for love.

People who support arranged marriages suggest that love is something that develops overtime, where as romantic love is likely to change into something less exciting, or disappear altogether. Sociology- Family Unit – Births and The Ageing Population Births One of the strongest trends has been the rise in illegitimacy. Illegitimacy rates are rising, as more people have children without being married. Some of the stigma associated with illegitimacy no longer exists. This is countered by the New Right's assault on unmarried mothers, who have been the scapegoat to a certain extent by the media who blame them for the modern failings of society.

Unmarried mothers may not be that different to nuclear families as some of these children born outside of a marriage are born to a couple who cohabit or are in a stable relationship, so will therefore have the same advantages / life as a nuclear family child. It is just that the mother and father / couple are not legally married. More and more women are deciding not to have children, as they'd rather focus on / have a career. Having a career may also be the reason for women having children later on in their lives.

## **The Ageing Population**

The population as a whole are getting older as people are now living longer. This could be seen as a negative or a positive thing. According to the negative view this gives a greater dependence ratio whereby the working population have a greater burden to take care of those not working. Increased pressure on hospitals, social services and pensions will lead to a greater tax burden. On the positive side, it can be argued that since older people are now more likely to stay fit and healthy they may become an important part of our families (childcare for grandchildren) and as part of the voluntary workforce.

Ginn and Arber found that the level to which older people could maintain their independence and play a constructive part in society depended to a large extent on their social class, gender and ethnicity. The notion of ageing itself is a socially constructed concept that varies from culture to culture. The retirement age itself has moved several times and still varies between men and women reinforce the notion that old age is in itself a social construction.