



**A/S Level  
Study  
Pack**



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## **4: The Diversity of Contemporary Family and Household Structures**

### **(4c): Divorce**

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**Key Concepts**

**Decree Nisi:** A legal judgement that a marriage is over, and providing that no legal objection is raised in next 6 weeks then the a **decree absolute** is granted (legally divorced)

**Irretrievable Breakdown of Marriage:** A husband and wife have reached a situation where their relationship is damaged beyond repair – it cannot be fixed!

**Secularisation:** Religion has less impact on the way we live our lives i.e. we no longer believe in ideas such as ‘till death us do part that were taught to us by our religious leaders.

**Ideology of the Market:** A belief that we have the right be individualistic and to demand choice, however, this is not compatible with the need for compromise and the need to make sacrifices in a successful marriage.

**Introduction**

Divorce is thought by many to be the scourge of modern society and it is often linked with the notion of the end of the family. The divorce rate has risen dramatically since 1971 and current trends demonstrate that 4 out of 10 marriages will end in divorce. Unlike other contemporary social problems, divorce affects all sections of society. So why are they so many divorces in Britain? To answer this question we will first examine the affect of changes to divorce legislation (people divorce because they can).

Year	No. Of Divorces
1941	7,500
1951	29,000
1961	20,000
1971	80,000
1981	160,000
1991	180,000
2001	157,000

Law	Provision
1923 Divorce Reform Act	Wife could divorce husband if she could prove adultery
1937 Divorce Reform Act	Allowed divorce on the grounds of desertion, cruelty and insanity in addition to adultery
1969 Divorce Reform Act	Introduced the idea of <i>irretrievable breakdown</i> of the marriage. If both partners agreed divorce would be granted after 2 years, if not after 5 years
1984 *	Allowed couples to divorce after 1 rather than 3 years of marriage
1996 Family Law Act	Allowed couples to divorce without even having to prove that the marriage has irretrievably broken down - ' <i>no-fault divorces!</i> ' Law repealed in 2001

There certainly seems to be a correlation between the ease of divorce and the number of divorces. The most significant piece of legislation was the **1969 Divorce Reform Act** as this allowed the vast numbers of people living in **empty shell marriages** to divorce. However, it is too simplistic to say that legal changes are the only or most significant factor in explaining contemporary divorce. Social and economic changes were also necessary to create the right prevailing conditions to allow people to take advantage of these new laws. So, it is necessary to evaluate more sociological explanations exploring how phenomena such as the rise in the number of dual income families and **secularization** may have impacted upon the divorce rate.

**Key Theorists**

Writer	Structure	Comment
Goode	Divorce	Is caused by secularisation
Fletcher	Divorce	Is caused by high expectations of marriage
Hart	Divorce	Is caused by changes in the modern capitalist system
Gibson	Divorce	Is caused by the <i>ideology of the market</i>

**Summary**

**William Goode (Functionalism):** He contends that the rise in the divorce rate is closely correlated to the breakdown of traditionally held norms and values in society. In the nineteenth century, British people were predominately Christian and, as a product of their religious beliefs, were committed to the institution of marriage. However, during this century, the influence of the Church has declined as our society has become more **secular** (non-religious). Consequently, peoples' attitudes towards the family have changed and the stigma of marital breakdown and illegitimacy no longer has the ideological power to control our behaviour. A new value consensus has emerged that tolerates divorce.



**Ronald Fletcher (Functionalism):** It is perhaps not surprising that, as a functionalist, he interpreted the rise in the divorce rate as an indication of the value placed on marriage by members of society. His main argument is that people have very high expectations of married life and will separate if these standards are not attained.



This is in stark contrast to marriages in previous generations when so-called **empty-shell marriages** were prevalent. Although his research was conducted in the 1960s, his ideas have relevance today. There have been over 100,000 re-marriages in every year since 1980 and there were almost as many 2<sup>nd</sup> marriages as 1<sup>st</sup> marriages and divorces in 1999.

**Nicky Hart (Socialist Feminism):** In previous generations, a husband and wife had **segregated conjugal roles**: the male earned a family wage whilst the female took sole responsibility for domestic duties such as childcare and housework. However, in the 1970's the needs of the bourgeoisie changed. Capitalist enterprises could no longer make sufficient profits, as the majority of families did not have sufficient disposable incomes to buy more than everyday essentials. Therefore, ruling class ideology began to promote the **dual income family**. Since then, women have had to work (**joint conjugal roles**). Their family can then enjoy the **material aspirations** associated with today's consumer-led world (e.g. foreign holidays and mortgages). **Hart** argues that although women have fulfilled their side of the bargain in the new domestic division of labour, many men are reluctant to regard their partner as an equal. This leads to conflict and, ultimately, may result in divorce. Moreover, the fact that they now have greater economic and emotional independence makes it easier for today's women to consider getting a divorce when compared with their mothers.

**Colin Gibson (Postmodern):** His analysis has certain similarities with the conclusions of **Goode** in that he stresses how growing divorce rates may reflect the fact that society is more secular. However, implicit in any functionalist analysis is the belief that a society has a uniform **value consensus**. **Gibson** contends that this does not reflect life in the postmodern age. Instead, the prevailing **ideology of the market** encourages us to emphasise our individuality and to be self-centred. This undermines the possibility for members of society to hold a collective belief - *marriage is for life*. Moreover, because we are so used to being able to be demanding in reference to our life as consumers, we are no longer satisfied with **off-the-shelf** products we want **bespoke** (customised) goods. **Gibson** claims that we take these unrealistic expectations into marital relationships and, inevitably, this leads to more divorces. Ironically, this too echoes the earlier functionalist ideas of **Fletcher!**



## Evaluation

It is a sad fact that many marital relationships will end in divorce. Consequently, divorce has to be recognised as a major contributory factor in contemporary family diversity. In this section, we have examined many different explanations of the divorce rate ranging from the non-sociological changes in the law have made it easy, therefore, people do it to the more sophisticated ideas of **Goode** in reference to secularisation.

The truth, however, is that no one theory can explain such a widespread phenomenon such as divorce. Each of the explanations we have analysed offers some insight but cannot explain all instances of divorce and it is up to the individual to determine which of any of these suggested causes (e.g. ideology of the market) is the most significant factor.

**20 Questions**

1. What is the difference between a *decree nisi* and a *decree absolute*?
2. Explain what is meant by irretrievable breakdown of marriage and state which law introduced this grounds for divorce.
3. Summarise the main divorce trends since 1941
4. According to Goode, what is the key difference between nineteenth and twentieth century British people?
5. Explain what is meant by secularisation
6. What is the difference between the post-war and contemporary value consensus regarding divorce?
7. What does Fletcher claim that the rise in divorce rates tells us about marriage?
8. According to Fletcher why do people divorce?
9. Explain what is meant by empty shell marriage?
10. What contemporary trend lends support to Fletcher's theory?
11. According to Hart, why did couples have segregated conjugal roles in previous generations?
12. Explain what is meant by a dual income family
13. What does a typical woman do in the modern sexual division of labour, what does a typical man do?
14. What effect does a woman's involvement in paid work have on her marital relationship?
15. Applying Hart's ideas, what would have to happen to reduce the number of divorces in society?
16. According to Gibson, what is implicit in Goode's functionalist beliefs about members of a society?
17. Explain what is meant by ideology of the market.
18. What collective belief is undermined by this?
19. According to Gibson, why do couples divorce?
20. Which functionalist sociologist ideas are ironically similar to those of Gibson?



