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| **Learning Table 3: Divorce and Marriage and Modern Alternative** | | | |
| **Divorce** | | **Marriage** | |
| The number of divorces each year rose from 27,000 in 1961 to a peak of 180,000 in 1993, then fell back to around 130,000 by 2012.  Although divorce rates have been dropping in recent years, this is partly reflects the fact that fewer people are getting married in the first place in 1974 1 in 4 marriages ended in divorce.  Britain still has one of the highest divorce rates in the European Union. Approximately one half of marriages today will end up in divorce.  **Reasons for the increase in divorce rate**  There are two main reasons for an increase in divorce rate: changes in the law and changes in society   1. **Changes in the law** means that divorce is cheaper and easier to get, as well as giving men and women the equal right to divorce. The changes in The Divorce Law Reform Act of 1969 (which came into effect in 1971) was the major change that meant divorces were dealt with appropriately, and that there could be a variety of grounds on which you could now appeal for a divorce. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act of 1984 meant that people could also divorce now within one year of marriage, where before they had to wait three years. In 2011, the government decided that to make the process quicker, disputes over childcare and money but be sorted before the court process begins. 2. **Changes in society** include a variety of reasons, as listed below:  * **Reduced functions of the family** – therefore people won’t stay together just for financial support and will divorce if the love breaks down * **The changing role of women** – women now have more rights than ever to challenge the patriarchal arrangements of the family and so will seek divorce if their needs aren’t met and if they feel oppressed and controlled by their marriage * **Rising expectation of marriage** – we expect more from our marriages today than we have done in the past and so will not remain in the marriage if these expectations aren’t met for both parties involved (these include love, companionship, understanding, sexual compatibility, personal fulfilment) * **Growing secularisation** – religious thinking is becoming less and less prominent in society and so Goode (1971) and Gibson (1994)explained that this is because the sacred and spiritual union that marriage was once viewed as no longer exists and it is now more of a personal and practical commitment which can be abandoned if it fails. * **Changing social attitudes** – Beck and Beck-Gernstein (1995) see rising divorce rates as a product of the growing individualisation and uncertainty of late modern and postmodern societies. We have more of an individual choice and so if a partner doesn’t satisfy your needs you move on and swap partners, exhibiting your choice over the situation until you find the right partner for you (Giddens, 1993) * **The greater availability of, and more effective, contraception** – it is now safer to have sex outside of a marital relationship, and with more than one person during marriage. This weakens traditional constraints on fidelity to a married partner, and potentially exposes relationships to greater instability. * **The growth of the privatised nuclear family** – functionalists explain that because of the nuclear family, and it’s corresponding issues regarding isolation from your next of kin, it is harder to seek refuge and guidance from amongst these external sources if the marriage faces problems. This isolation increases the demands on each partner. With this increased pressure and less control from next of kin advising you to stay in the marriage, the decision whether to divorce or not lies with the married couple alone. * **Increasing life expectancy** – we live longer today than in the early years of the 20th century. The potential number of years a couple has together, until one of them dies, has therefore also increased. This means there is more time for marriages to go wrong and divorces to occur. Some suggest that the divorce courts have taken on the role in finishing unhappy marriages once performed by the undertaker.   **The variations in divorce rates of social groups:**  While divorce affects all groups in the population, there are some groups in which divorce rates are higher than average:   * The highest divorce rate is among men and women in their late 20s * Teenage marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce, and there is a higher incidence of divorce in the first 5-7 years of marriage, and then again after about 10-14 years (when the children are older or have left home) * The working-class have higher divorce rates than the middle-class * Childless couples and partners from different social backgrounds, as do couples whose work separates them for long periods | | In the last 50 years, marriage rates have fallen in England and Wales by around 2/3 – from around 67 men and 51 women marrying per 1,000 unmarried men in 1961, to 22 men and 20 women in 2011.  In 2012 about 67% of marriages were first marriages for both partners, compared to 80% in 1971. So around 1 in 3 marriages nowadays are re-marriages for either one or both partners.  In 2009 there were the lowest number of marriages since 1985, and about 17% fewer than in 1976.  Those people who do marry are putting it off until they are older: between 1972 and 2012 the average age at first marriage increased by about 8 years for both men (32) and women (30).  As marriage rates decline, more couples are cohabiting rather than seeking official recognition of their relationship through marriage.  In 2014 15% of families with dependent children consisted of cohabiting couples, who were neither married nor in a civil partnership.  **Cohabitation can have different meanings for the couples involved:**   * A fairly temporary, informal arrangement: this means the couple spend a lot of time together and sharing accommodation, but within what is seen as a fairly temporary and casual relationship * An alternative/substitute to marriage: no legal commitments or patriarchal dimensions (that feminists identify are associated with marriage) * As a preparation or trial marriage   **Reasons for the decline in marriage and the rise in cohabitation:**   * **The reduced function of the family**: marriage is no longer a practical necessity according to some functionalist writers, and so traditional roles such as housewife and breadwinner have diminished. * **The changing role of women**: growing economic independence has given them more freedom of choice for their relationships. Women now pursue their own careers more willingly as their success in education has overtaken that of males. Women’s expectations of life and marriage has increased, and they now no longer want to fulfil a traditional role of housewife-motherhood. There is now a longer wait for marriage as women no longer need the financial support marriage provides. Cohabitation also avoids the potential complexity and bitterness of legally unravelling finance, housing and other possessions, and disputes over the custody of children, often involved in marriage breakdowns. * **Growing secularisation**: marriage and cohabitation are now more about individual and practical choices than sacred, spiritual unions. Evidence for this lies in the fact that less than a third of marriages today involves a religious ceremony (thought this is partly because many are second marriages arising from divorce, and many churches won’t marry divorced people). * **Changing social attitudes and reduced social stigma**: young people are more likely to cohabit than older people. This may have something to do with the concept of older people more often thinking that ‘living together outside of marriage is always wrong’. The young tend to be more easy-going when it comes to cohabitation. * **The rising divorce rate**: this may deter people from what they see, and they may not want to marry as they risk the marriage not lasting. * **Reducing risk**: Beck (1992) suggests we are living in what he calls a ‘risk society’. Individuals are less controlled by traditional structures and institutions like the family, and there is less loyalty and commitment demanded by the social norms of marriage and family life e.g. a whole range of socially acceptable alternatives to the traditional nuclear family are now available. Individuals face risk as a result because they are constantly forced to reflect on their lives, weigh up choices, and make decisions, such as whether to get married or cohabit or live alone, or what sort of family or other relationship they wish to live in, rather than relying on what was once seen as traditional and socially acceptable. | |
| **Living apart together relationships:** | **Lone Parenthood: The Growth of the Lone Parent Family** | | **Remarriage and the growth of the reconstituted, step- or blended family** |
| Levin (2004) identified these LAT relationships: long-term committed, intimate relationships but without sharing a common home and choose to live in separate households.  The rising number of LATs reflects the growing ways in which the concept of ‘family’ and definitions of family norms are increasingly challenged by a range of personal living arrangements.  Duncan and Phillips (2010) found LATs are increasingly understood and accepted by the wider public as an approved alternative to marriage and cohabitation.  Levin suggest that it may be because of the following:   * With growing individualisation and choice in relationships, and as people live longer and healthier lives, they may become prone to seeking out new partners * Changes in the labour market have meant it is more difficult for partners to find out or retain their existing jobs and incomes in other areas * Modern technology, like video links, mobiles and email, easier and faster travel, mean close contact can be maintained between ‘apartners’ (partners who live apart). The internet can also create LATs as people may form virtual relationships which may turn into long-distance LATs.   Levin suggest that three main reasons for actively choosing LATs over marriage or cohabitation:   * Responsibility and care of other people living at home like older parents or children and so seeking a new relationship could threaten these existing relationships * Practical reasons such as a partner’s working or studying in different places, or not wanting to leave your home for fear of losing memories attached to it   Risk - avoidance of making the same mistake twice | The percentage of lone parent families has tripled since 1971, and Britain has the most in Europe.  Around 1 in 4 of all families with independent children were lone parent families in 2014.  The rapid growth can be explained in the following ways:   * Greater economic independence of women * Improved contraception, changing male attitudes and fewer ‘shotgun weddings’ * Reproductive technology being more widely available to women e.g. IVF or surrogacy * Changing social attitudes: less social stigma attached to lone parenthood today   **Evaluation**   * New Right writers such as Charles Murray (1990) argue that generous welfare benefits encourage women to have children they could not otherwise afford to support. The growth in lone parenthood has been seen by New Right as one of the major signs in the decline of the conventional family life and marriage. * Lone parent families (in particular the lone never-married mothers) have been portrayed by some of the media and Conservative politicians as parasites, blamed for everything from a decline in the importance of family life, and juvenile crime, through to housing shortages, rising drug abuse, educational failure of children and the general breakdown of society. The problems created by lone parent families, particularly boys, are usually explained by a lack of a male role model and therefore suffering from inadequate socialisation.   **Evaluation: Nailing the myths:**   * Never-married lone mothers only account for just over half of all lone parents with dependent children * Only around 16% of births are to parents who are neither married nor cohabiting * It is argued that the absence of the father is not the issue, it is the level of involvement from fathers. There are probably many fathers in two-parent families as well who fail to involve themselves adequately in socialising their child * A home office report found no difference in crime rates between youngsters from lone-parent families and from two-parent families: and the Social Justice Policy Group in 2007 found youth crime was linked to a range of factors, all of which are as likely to be found in two-parent families such as inadequate parenting, child abuse having teenage parents, unstable living conditions and an economic disadvantage. Even if there was a link between crime rates and lone-parent families, it would more than likely be a result of poverty therefore and the lone parenthood. * Feminist sociologists have been highly critical of the New Right and other attacks on lone parents – particularly lone mothers. Silva (1996) argues that media-fuelled public concerns over lone mothers and the welfare of children are little more than an attempt to force women back into the traditional roles of housewife and homemaker, thereby undermining steps towards equality and women’s independence. | | * Around 1/3 of marriages now involve remarriage for one or both partners. A lot more divorced men remarry than divorced women. This is not surprising given the way women have to balance the triple and competing demands of paid employment, domestic labour and childcare, and emotional management of the family. * The same factors that have increased divorce and separation, and that have generated lone parent families have also meant that there is an increasing trend towards serial monogamy (repeatedly forming new monogamous relationships) with different partners. When these individuals getting involved in a series of married or cohabiting relationships are also parents, it creates more reconstituted families (step families or blended families are they are also known). This results in stepparents, stepbrothers, stepsisters and stepchildren arising from a previous relationship. Stepfathers are more common than stepmothers, since most children remain with the mother after parents have broken up. * Official estimates from the Office of National statistics suggests there are around half a million stepfamilies with dependent children in England and Wales – 11% of all couple families with dependent children, and around 1 in 10 dependent children lived in a stepfamily in 2011.   **Life in stepfamilies:**   * Allan et al. (2011) have pointed out that life in stepfamilies can be complex. The sense of unity which may be present in families with 2 natural parents is not necessarily there in stepfamilies e.g. shared family history, commitments and interests etc. * Children may feel a greater loyalty towards their natural parents than to their stepparents * There may also be a division between the two sets of children that now belong to this new step family * Depending on their age, children may be less willing to accept control and discipline, whatever its form, from stepparents than from natural parents. Similarly some natural parents may also have reservations about the degree to which a stepparent should be involved in child discipline and in other aspects of day-to-day childcare |