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D. Kutz

Divorce, Sociology of

Among the striking features of family life during the latter part of the twentieth century has been the steep rise in divorce. This worldwide trend reflects the profound changes in relationships between men and women and in the laws that govern family stability. It carries new and still untold implications for the future of the family as a social unit. The obvious benefit of divorce is that it enables persons caught in wretched marriages to escape and to improve their lives either by remaining single or by embarking on a happier second marriage. The tragedy is that, in many countries, it leads to widespread impoverishment of mothers and children. At issue also is the long-term emotional and social impact on children's lives and on traditional family functions such as care of the aged.

The ripple effects of the high divorce rate overflow into many social domains. As reported throughout the industrialized countries, these include the diminishing propensity to marry, the rise in cohabitation, an increase in single-parent and remarried families, the greater presence of mothers of young children in the workplace, and the lowering of expectations for long-term commitment in young people who have yet to establish their own families (Cherlin 1992). Thus the accelerated rise in divorce is a major indicator of social and psychological changes and a powerful agent of

these changes. It reflects not only the shifting life perspectives of men and women; it impacts powerfully on society in ways that were unexpected and probably unintended by those who led the political battles of the twentieth century to loosen the constraints of marriage.

1. Wide Variation in Divorce Laws and Practices Worldwide

It is impossible to compare divorce in different countries, except perhaps among the industrialized countries of Europe and North America. Nor is it prudent to try to delineate common antecedents or consequences of the breakdown in family life, because reports about divorce and postdivorce sequels are sparse or unavailable for much of the world. Legal constraints on divorce vary widely. In some countries divorce does not confer the freedom to remarry. Waiting periods to obtain a divorce can extend from a few months to many years. Even between contiguous countries within Europe there are widely varying restrictions in laws which reflect diverse cultural and religious attitudes (Goode 1993). But overall, there are similarities in the broad social patterns which show that the rise in the divorce rate began gradually, in different countries, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; it mounted rapidly throughout the 1970s, and seems to have reached a plateau by the 1990s. Whether this is a pause before another climb, or represents a real leveling off or downward swing, is not predictable at this time (Cherlin 1992).

The rise in divorce is most pronounced in the industrialized countries of North America and Europe, especially in the USA, Scandinavia, and the UK and remaining countries of the British Commonwealth. The fall of the last important bastion of resistance to divorce in Western Europe occurred in 1997, when Ireland adopted the Family Law Act. But divorce is increasingly evident as well in Central and South America, as it is in Eastern Europe (Everett 1997). In Japan and China, where traditionally divorce was not blocked by law—though it was discouraged by community disapproval and, in the case of China, by a burdensome bureaucracy—the divorce rate is rising (Mason et al. 1998). Family change has taken a much slower course in Muslim countries, where Islamic law has long made marital dissolution readily available to men, but has only fairly recently extended limited access to women. As the power of the traditional family and tribe was weakened by civil laws in sub-Saharan African societies, women were finally allowed to initiate divorce under very restricted circumstances (Aderanti 1997). The Moslem communities of South East Asia, on the other hand, have long institutionalized divorce and remarriage as an acceptable recourse for young women in arranged

marriages (Jones 1997). So that, except in fundamentalist Muslim countries, signs of greater freedom for men and women to free themselves from a bad marriage are apparent throughout the world.

2. Social Factors Underlying Divorce

The sheer number of divorces—especially in the USA and the Scandinavian countries, which lead the world in incidence of divorce—is an inaccurate measure of family life, because divorce statistics reflect only the dissolution of legal marriages, and millions of couples today reject marriage altogether in favor of cohabitation (Wallerstein 1998). Divorce in the West may be profoundly influenced by new and greater demands of relationships between men and women. Roussel (1989) and others have proposed that people today conceptualize marriage primarily as a vehicle for personal happiness and individual fulfillment, rather than as a family obligation and an economic and child-rearing contract. Obviously, marriages based on the participants' search for love and companionship are more fragile than those traditionally buttressed by law, church, family traditions, and social mores.

The rise in the world divorce rate is indeed a product of many complexly interacting social, economic, and psychological factors (Fu and Heaton 1995). Economic development, women's greater labor force participation, women's rising educational levels, and lower fertility rates as a result of improved contraception and the availability of abortion—all correlate positively with a country's divorce rate. Goode (1993) and other scholars have pointed to urbanization and industrialization as leading to the general weakening of the family unit as key provider of economic and social resources. As a result, individuals have greater freedom to define personal goals and to make career and marital choices separate from those laid down by traditions that demand conformity and continuity with the past.

Although it has been suggested that legal changes have spawned many divorces, the evidence is that diminishing legal barriers cause a short-term increase, but that over the long haul laws reflect rather than shape community trends. Women's employability has strongly influenced divorce by reducing women's economic dependence on men; in the USA and Europe, where women's emancipation is greatest, a majority of divorces are sought by women. But changes in the market participation of women are not necessarily accompanied by increased status or power, and certainly not by greater economic protection. Nor is there evidence that feminism as a political movement is a major influence in the worldwide rise in divorce.

The correlation between divorce and social class has varied. In earlier times divorce was the province of the affluent, but in recent decades it has been increasingly

utilized by the lower social classes (Goode 1993). Divorce rose in the USA, Sweden, and other Western countries alongside the achievement of a higher social status for women. This was not true in the former USSR, where the divorce rate was high but there was no feminist movement of any consequence, and where women were consigned to more menial jobs (Everett 1997).

3. Psychological Effects of Divorce on Families

Although easier access to divorce has produced many benefits for adults locked into troubled marriages, it has carried a high cost in suffering for parents and long-term difficulties for millions of children raised in divorced or remarried families. The breakup of a marriage with children is rarely a mutual decision, and the parent who is left behind is often plunged into crisis. Approximately two-thirds of divorces in the USA and Europe involve minor children, often very young children, since typically divorce peaks during the first decade of marriage. There is mounting evidence that children in divorced families suffer with initial and long-term effects that place them at greater risk than their counterparts raised in intact families for problems throughout childhood and into adulthood.

The issue of whether children suffer as a result of divorce or whether they show the effects of the antecedent or continuing conflict in the family has long been disputed. There are now available a range of long-term studies (Amato and Booth 1997, Wallerstein 1998) which show that persons raised in divorced families have greater psychological problems in adult life, a higher divorce rate, a lower marriage rate, and more difficulty managing the interpersonal skills required for a stable marriage. Whether these sequelae can be changed by psychological or educational interventions with the parents or the children has not been demonstrated. Mediation programs which were expected to safeguard children by reducing the acrimony of the court adversarial process have not influenced psychological outcome among children (Wallerstein 1998).

4. Economic Consequences of Divorce

Women and children are economic casualties of divorce except in the Scandinavian countries, whose governments provide child support when the father fails to pay, and offer generous program child allowances and universal health care. They are somewhat protected in countries like Germany, where the father's wages can be garnished for child support. In most other countries, payments for child support are inadequate and poorly collected (Goode 1993). The court-ordered amount usually falls well below the