A Sample from Harvard University

**What are some of the causes of the divorce in the Western Families ?**



A major change that has occurred in the Western family is an increased incidence in divorce. Whereas in the past, divorce was a relatively rare occurrence, in recent times it has become quite commonplace. This change is borne out clearly in census figures. Thirty years ago in Australia, only one marriage in ten ended in divorce; nowadays the figure is more than one in three (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996: p.45). A consequence of this change has been a substantial increase in the number of single parent families and the attendant problems that this brings (Kilmartin, 1997).An important issue for sociologists, and indeed for all of society, is why these changes in marital patterns have occurred. I best believe that the best explanations are to be found within a broad socio-economic framework.( Thesis)

One type of explanation for rising divorce has focused on changes in laws relating to marriage. For example, Bilton, Bonnett and Jones (1987) argue that increased rates of divorce do not necessarily indicate that families are now more unstable. It is possible, they claim, that there has always been a degree of marital instability. They suggest that changes in the law have been significant, because they have provided unhappily married couples with 'access to a legal solution to pre-existent marital problems' (p.301). Bilton et al. therefore believe that changes in divorce rates can be best explained in terms of changes in the legal system.

Another type of explanation is one that focuses precisely on these broad societal changes. For example, Nicky Hart (cited in Haralambos, 1995) argues that increases in divorce and marital breakdown are the result of economic changes that have affected the family. One example of these changes is the raised material aspirations of families, which Hart suggests has put pressure on both spouses to become wage earners. Women as a result have been forced to become both homemakers and economic providers. According to Hart, the contradiction of these two roles has lead to conflict and this is the main cause of marital breakdown.

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It is difficult to offer a comprehensive explanation for the growing trend of marital breakdown; and it is even more difficult to find solutions that might ameliorate the problems created by it. Clearly though, as I have argued in this essay, the most useful answers are to be found not within a narrow legal framework, but within a broader socio-economic one.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that, whilst we may appear to be living in a time of increased family instability, research suggests that historically, instability may have been the norm rather than the exception. This situation suggests that in studying the modern family, one needs to employ a historical perspective, including the possibility of looking to the past in searching for ways of dealing with problems in the present.

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