

Cohabitation

The increase in cohabitation suggests a change from previous patterns, when cohabitation was usually a trial or temporary phase prior to marriage. Today, increased numbers of couples raise children in stable relationships. In Britain and a number of European countries, there is growing evidence that long-term cohabitation is growing in popularity. This is less the case in countries such as Ireland, Italy and Portugal where marriages continue to be popular. Coleman and Salt (1992) suggest considerable erosion of traditional assumptions and attitudes which could be linked to the declining popularity of marriage in Britain. The traditional marriage assumptions include:

- Marriage confers on a woman a secure, settled income and a status and role based on raising children and keeping house; tasks around which most of her life will revolve.
- Marriage lasts for the rest of an increasingly long life.
- Marriage is the setting for almost all childbearing and sexual cohabitation.

Changes have occurred and there are newer ideas, economic roles for women and more reliable forms of birth control. Cohabitation has always been an option and in previous centuries many people did not have a formal wedding because of the cost. Living together was acceptable for many in the lower social classes, with marriage being associated with the higher social classes. The change in the twentieth century from cohabitation being a temporary phases to a long-term choice can be explained in several ways:

- Marriage is becoming less fashionable; cohabiting media role models influence opinion.
- Marriage is expensive, e.g. a wedding dress can cost hundreds of pounds.
- The influence of religion is declining and increasing numbers question the purpose of a religious ceremony when they have no belief in it.
- Growing economic and employment insecurity may make people wary of commitment to long-term relationships. There is evidence of this particularly among young men who have increasing difficulty in finding work - a basis for 'settling down' and marrying.
- Awareness of, or experience of, high divorce rates make people more cautious about marriage.

There is some evidence that cohabiting relationships are less stable than marriages. A 1994 Economic and Social Research Council Report found that couples living together were four times more likely to separate than married couples. However, this study did not distinguish between couples with children and couples without, so a wide range of circumstances could be aggregated together in the results.

For example, young cohabiting couples such as students may well not be committed to a longer-term relationship. Also, the stronger position of women in cohabiting relationships could mean they are less willing to tolerate a male partner who is not participating in the relationship on an equal basis.

Activity 1 - Does marriage 'bind' people together in stronger ways than cohabitation?

Prepare your arguments for and against this view ready for a debate.

Living alone.

If increasing numbers are choosing to cohabit because of increased instability in marriage, another option that is increasing is for people to live alone. In 1996, just over 25 per cent of households were occupied by one person and this proportion is forecast to continue rising. As would be expected, a significant proportion are elderly widowed, usually women, and divorced or separated men and women. However, a rapidly growing proportion are single people of either sex who are opting live alone.

It would seem that increasing numbers of young professionals are opting for independent living. They may have relationships, but they desire to live alone rather than cohabit or marry. Their work can involve long hours and commitment which means that childrearing becomes impossible and in any case they question the necessity of having children in an insecure and uncertain world.

Activity 2 -

a) Why do people have children?

b) What factors may lead to increased questioning of the need to have children in the future?

In an essay in *The Observer*, 11 February 1996, Anthony Giddens suggests that living alone as an option will increase. Rather than seeing single people in a negative light, almost as lonely 'outcasts' subject to pity, he suggests that living alone will become a valued option, offering benefits of choice and independence that are not available in more conventional family settings. He suggests that a person on their own may, in fact, have more contact with a wider network of relations and kin than the conventional married couples, whose 'coupledom' could be a more isolated experience.

Discuss - what are your views on a future where more people may opt to live alone?