

Divorce is a major cause of changing family patterns and greater family diversity. For example most re-marriages involve a divorce and a divorce creates both lone-parent families and one-person households.

Since the 1960's, there has been a greater increase in the number of divorces in the United Kingdom. The number of divorces doubled between 1961 and 1969, and doubled again by 1972. The upward trend continued and peaking in 1993 at 180,000. Since then numbers have fallen somewhat, but still stood at 157,00 in 2001 and six times higher than in 1961. This rate means that about 40% of all marriages will end in divorce.

About 7 out of every 10 petitions for divorce now come from women. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in the past. For example in 1946 only 37% of petitions came from women which are barely half today's figure. The commonest reason for a woman to be granted a divorce is the unreasonable behaviour of her husband. Some couples are more likely than others to divorce. It is said that couples whose marriages are at greatest risk include those who marry young, have a child before they marry or cohabit before marriage and those where one or both partners have been married before.

There are five main sociological explanations on why there is a higher increase on divorce since world war two.

Number one is, Changes in law. Divorce was very difficult to obtain in 19th century Britain, especially for women. Gradually, changes in the law have made divorce easier. There have been three kinds of change in the law

- Equalising the grounds (the legal reasons) for divorce between the sexes.
- Widening the grounds for divorce
- Making divorce cheaper

When the grounds were equalised for men and women in 1923 this was followed by a sharp rise in the number of divorce petitions from women. Similarly, the widening of the grounds in 1971 to 'irretrievable breakdown' made divorce easier to obtain and produced a doubling of the divorce rate almost overnight. The introduction of legal aid for divorce cases in 1949 lowered the cost of divorcing. Divorce rates have risen with each change in the law.

Although divorce is the legal termination of a marriage, couples can and do find other solutions to the problem of an unhappy marriage. These include

- Desertion, where one partner leaves the other but the couple remain legally married
- Legal Separation, where a court separates the financial and legal affairs of the couple but where they remain married and are not free to re-marry.
- Empty Shell marriage where the couple continue to live under the same roof but remain married in name only.

Reason number two is Secularisation. This refers to the decline in the influence of religion in society. Many sociologists argue that religious initiations and ideas are losing their influence and society is becoming more secular. For example church attendance rates continue to decline. As a result of secularisation the traditional opposition of the churches to divorce carries less weight in society and people are less

likely to be influenced by religious teachings when making decisions. For example according to 2001 Census data, 43% of young people with no religion were cohabiting as against only 34% of Christians, 17% of Muslims, 11% of Hindus and 10% of Sikhs. At the same time many churches have also begun to soften their views on divorce and divorcees, perhaps because they fear losing credibility with large sections of the public and with their own members.

The third reason for the increase of divorce is the rising expectations of marriage. Functionalist sociologists such as Ronald Fletcher argue that the higher expectations people place on marriage today is a major cause of rising divorce rates. Higher expectations make couples nowadays less willing to tolerate and unhappy marriage. This is linked to the ideology of romantic love. This is an idea that has become dominant over the last couple of centuries. This is the belief that marriage should be based solely on love and that for each individual there is a soul mate for them. It follows that if love dies there is no longer any justification for remaining married and every reason to divorce so as to be able to renew the search for ones true love. In the past by contrast, individuals often had little choice in whom they married and at a time when the family was also a unit of production, marriages were often contracted largely for economic reasons or out of duty to ones family.

My forth reason is Changes in the Position of women. One reason for women's increased willingness to seek divorce is that improvements in their economic position have made them less financially dependent on their husband and therefore freer to end an unsatisfactory marriage. Women today are much more likely to be in paid work. The proportion of women working rose from 47% in 1959 to 70% in 2005. Although women generally still earn less than men, equal pay and anti discrimination laws have helped to narrow the pay gap. Girl's greater success in education now helps them achieve better paid jobs than pervious generations. And the availability of welfare benefits means that women no longer have to remain financially dependent on their husbands. These developments mean that women are more likely to be able to support themselves in the event of a divorce.

My fifth and finally reason for a higher divorce rate is Demographic changes. Changes in the population also help explain a higher divorce rate. In the past marriages were later and life expectancy was lower. This meant there were shorter marriages. Remarriages due to death of the spouse were common. Higher divorce rates simply reflect the potentially longer duration of marriage. Lower fertility rates also have a big impact for example today there are more children being born with a disability.

I believe that we cannot choose a certain reason to explain why the divorce rate is increasing. It isn't just the one problem that we can identity to be more significant than the others. As I believe that they are all interrelated. They all connect so that it is together they add up to become the reason why divorce is increasing since world war two.

Explaining divorce rate is very complex and there are many factors to consider when explaining the increase divorce rate. But as D.H Morgan states 'we have no idea how many people would have availed themselves of divorce in the past had it economically more accessible. Divorce like foreign holidays may simply

be something that is now available to increasable large numbers of the population rather than confine to an elite.