

“Examine some of the major reasons for changes in the patterns of marriage, divorce & cohabitation”.

It is really, in the last 30yrs of study that the major changes have occurred. There is an ever-growing increase in the divorce rate. Second marriages have increased, as has the number of people cohabitating without being married. This has led to a decrease in the first time marriage rate. Marriage is being seen more and more as a legal contract between two people.

A number of *social changes* in society have been identified that help explain these changes in marriage, divorce and cohabitation. In the past, people born out of wedlock were seen as social outcasts or socially inferior. As *social attitudes* changed, it became more socially acceptable to get divorced, to be a lone parent and to cohabit out of wedlock.

The decline in the importance of religious beliefs and practices has led to *increased secularisation*. Less people believe in god or follow a religion. They feel they do not need their relationship blessed by god. Marriage is less of a spiritual union and more a personal commitment, which can be abandoned if it fails. This has led to a decline in marriage and a rise in the number of people cohabitating.

*Rising expectations of marriage* is another factor for a rise in the divorce rate. People demand and expect more from their marriage than perhaps their parents and grandparents settled for. Unlike the older generation, who had lower expectations of marriage and stayed together through unhappy or empty shell marriages. Nowadays couples will divorce and reform new relationships.

*A woman's role* has changed greatly over the last 30yrs. Today women are increasingly entering the labour force and earning their own wage. This meant they were no longer financially dependant on men. That enables them to resist male power. Marriage has become less of a financial necessity for women. This has made it easier for women to leave unhappy or unfulfilling marriages. Again this has led to an increase in the divorce and second marriage rates.

*The increasing availability and the use of contraception* has made it easier to have sexual relationships outside of marriage, and with more than one person

during marriage. Contraception has given people the opportunity to have numerous sexual partners before marriage. This enables them to find a compatible partner that meets their expectations for marriage.

The last 30yrs has seen a growth from the extended kin family to the *privatised nuclear family*. This has meant that it was no longer as easy to take refuge or get help and support from relatives. Without the support of kin beyond the nuclear family, spouses are increasingly dependant on each other, particularly for emotional support. This increases the demands and expectations of each partner. This leads to more pressure on the marriage. With no extended kin to exert pressure on a couple to remain married, it becomes easier to abandon the marriage and get divorced.

These are some of the main reasons for the changes in the patterns of marriage, divorce and cohabitation. *Postmodernists* say, there are no longer any set norms and values, and people are now free to choose any kind of social living or family arrangement they wish to live in without social stigma. Postmodernists accept the changes and say, it is now socially acceptable for people to live as they wish.

*New right* would also accept the changes, but would argue that the changes are bad for society. They want to see people living in traditional nuclear families. The new right is critical of the increase in lone parent families. Since not many single parents can earn a living and give children the nurturing they need, then society has to support them, and children suffer through lacking one parent and this can lead to crime and delinquency. The only way to break this is to encourage people to live in nuclear families.

A decline in the rates of 1<sup>st</sup> time marriages, an increase in cohabitation outside of marriage and the rise in the divorce rate, all seem to suggest a decline of marriage as an institution in modern Britain.

[Andrea Woolfenden]