

Marriage Breakdown in North America A Psychological Perspective

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A number of social and psychological factors can be identified as antecedents to the recent increase in the incidence of separation and divorce in North America and to the development of alternative family lifestyles. As divorce is a complex social, psychological, legal, economic, and cultural phenomenon,¹⁻² an analysis of the causes of marriage transition require an examination of variables on three levels: macrosocial, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Similarly, the effects of divorce and separation are equally diverse.

The purposes of this paper are threefold: 1) to identify briefly the effects of marital breakdown, 2) to discuss the multidimensional etiology of separation and divorce, and 3) to propose new directions that would enhance marital and family stability.

The Effects of Marital Dissolution

In the past decade, a number of social scientists have begun to identify the patterns of stress and coping associated with marriage dissolution. Research has shown that divorce is one of the most powerful stresses of life, closely similar to the stress resulting from the death of a spouse.³ Furthermore, it has been shown that stresses of this type may contribute to the development of serious medical or psychosocial disorders.⁴

Positive correlations between chronic depression, psychosomatic disorders, delinquent behaviour, alcoholism, suicide, and other major disorders are reported in the literature.⁵ The author, in his experience with groups for separated and divorced individuals, has encountered individuals who have been separated from their spouses for five or more years and who have yet to adjust to the reality of their situation. Separation and divorce require profound changes and present challenges - emotional, cognitive and behavioural challenges that, in many cases, overtax the person's resources to cope.⁶⁻⁸ The stresses can include:

- Deep feelings of loss - not only loss of a spouse and children, but also of a part of oneself.
- Lifestyle readjustment
- Financial burdens
- Required changes in social networks
- Demands of developing new relationships with children, in laws, friends, etc.
- The sudden and shocking arrival of strong feelings of anger, depression, fear, anxiety, and guilt, perhaps for the first time
- Feelings of helplessness as a result of the apparent inescapability of unpleasant feelings and the long period of recovery
- Sudden threats to self-esteem, the realization of strong dependency needs and hidden weaknesses, self-blame
- Feelings of loneliness and fear of the future

In short, separation can precipitate intense crises in identity and social relations. However, studies have also shown that a number of factors can help men and women adjust to divorce: emotional separation from an ex-partner, freedom from financial difficulties, high level of support from relatives, friends and the community, and the establishment of a new intimate relationship.⁹⁻¹²

Research has also begun to establish the factors which mediate the post-divorce adjustment of children. The extent and duration of divorce trauma is associated with variables such as the age and sex of the child, inherent changes in parenting effectiveness, the quality of post-divorce relationship between the ex-spouses and between the noncustodial parent and the child, and the economic and environmental changes in the family lifestyle.¹³⁻²⁵ In general, the less hostile the separation, the greater the continuity of care, love and approval from both parents, the better will be the child's adjustment following the divorce.²⁶⁻²⁷

Finally, the societal effects are significant. The family is the building block of human society, and when the foundation of society is weakened, considerable damage results. Until recently, most individuals entered adulthood with an unquestioning faith in marriage and the family as well as with a conviction regarding the importance of the family for the growth and development of children and the stability of society. The present generation's alarm about the negative trends in these institutions is justified²⁸⁻³⁰ and is reflected in the press, for instance, in "The Family Will be a Loser Relationship" and not for Better, but for Worse," two recent articles in widely read Canadian publications. Such acknowledgments add to people's insecurity, but although marriage and the family are tearing at the edges, are they indeed coming apart?

Recent Statistics on Marriage and the Family

The form and nature of marriage and family life have changed over the past decades and will continue to change. Between 1966 and 1979, the Canadian divorce rate increased from 51.2 to 250.0 per 100,000 population, an increase of 490%. In 1979, there was approximately one divorce for every three marriages. In the same year, the ratio was 1 to 2 in the United States. Although persons with multiple marriages and divorces inflate these figures, the data still indicate that marriage has become less stable. The rates of divorce saw their steepest increases in the decade from 1966 to 1976 when divorce laws became more liberalized. Since then, the rates have leveled off, but the numbers have continued to increase. Table I shows that the divorce rates in Canada and the United States are among the highest in the world. The number of children involved in divorces has also increased dramatically from 347,000 in 1955 to 1,147,000 in 1978 in the U.S.

Consequently, one parent families have increased, now making up over 10% of all Canadian families, and the percentage of single and divorced persons over 18 has increased, while the percentage of married persons has decreased (see Table II).

In *Perspectives Canada III*, Statistics Canada concluded:

In general, it has been shown that most Canadians still choose traditional family forms, and the vast majority of them, the two-parent-and-children nuclear unit. However, there has been a gradual and perceptible transformation in their attitudes and actions respecting its purpose, continuity and permanence. Canadians no longer consider the relationship and the family unit created by first marriage as necessarily life-long and primarily oriented toward childbearing and childrearing.³¹

Etiology of Marriage Breakdown

The reasons for the present state of marriage and the family can be understood from a variety of levels of analysis. From a statistical perspective, the leading causes of divorce decrees in Canada are: adultery, separation of more than three years, mental cruelty, and physical cruelty. But a broader perspective is required to understand the underlying factors which have given rise to these reasons.

The majority of studies on causes of marital dissolution focus on single socioeconomic and external factors such as income,³²⁻³⁶ occupation,³⁷⁻³⁹ status,⁴⁰⁻⁴¹ arrival of children,⁴²⁻⁴⁶ religion,⁴⁷ early marriage,⁴⁸ and inter-generational transmission.⁴⁹ However, many of these studies are three and four decades old and do not explain the rapid rise in divorce during the late sixties and early seventies and the slower increases today.

These studies can be summarized to present the following picture: Marital stability tends to be positively correlated with husband's income, joint home ownership, husband's educational status, husband's occupation rank, and similarity of spouses in race, education, socioeconomic backgrounds, religion, and age. Taking into account the interrelatedness of these factors, husband's income emerges as the single most powerful prediction of marriage stability. The resulting theory suggested that husbands with higher incomes produce a greater attraction for the marriage and that couples with more money are more likely to accept marital disharmony rather than lose their financial resources. Recent changes in family law requiring division of assets, along with a greater financial independence of women and increase in supportive social benefits have likely decreased the importance of income as a prediction of divorce. In addition, the early arrival of children and early marriage have often been cited as indicators of subsequent divorce, although these factors are now offset by the current tendency to delay marriage and the dramatic decrease in the birth rate. Finally, divorce is associated with Low church attendance and having been raised in a disrupted home. However, because there are many intervening variables, the

Two studies on the etiology of divorce have reported the results of in-depth interviews with divorced persons. Palmer (1971) interviewed 291 couples with children who had initiated divorce proceedings in the mid-sixties in Southwestern Ontario.⁵⁰ He found the following to be reported causes for marriage breakdown: marriage at an early age, premarital pregnancy, antisocial tendencies particularly on the part of the male, economic unreadiness, employment of the mother, different economic or educational backgrounds, and the untimely arrival of children.

The second study focussed on the causes of divorce in marriages that had lasted twenty years or longer.⁵¹ Interviews were conducted with 229 late divorced Quebec residents and compared with the response of 198 long-term married individuals. Late divorce tended to occur more often in “traditional” marriages characterized by defined and rigid sex roles, than in “companionship” types of marriage having interchangeable sex role with a greater emphasis on the affective aspects of the relationship. Multiple causes, adultery, and long-term marital unhappiness were the most frequently reported “real” causes for late divorces.⁵²

In today’s society, employment of the wife has become an economic necessity for a large percentage of families. The answer to prevention of separation and divorce is not the denial of women’s employment opportunities or an increase in the minimum age for obtaining a marriage license. Instead, an examination of the emerging personal values and social policies in North American society is required.

Individualism

The rural, agrarian, less-developed society of a century ago functioned through interdependence of family members and a closely interacting community. In the transition toward today’s highly urban and affluent society, work patterns have become more differentiated, reducing the necessity to interact with the community, and more specialized, increasing the individual’s concept of self-reliance. This pattern has given rise to the concept of individualism which emphasizes the needs and desires of the individual in contrast to those of the group. In discussing the rise of individualism, Kuhn wrote:

...individualism was the product of several factors. Protestantism laid great stress on individual worth, individual moral responsibility, and individual rather than corporate relationships with God. Concomitantly, the rise of commercial relationships and capitalism began to break down all the old settled, feudal relationships that rested on inherited, ascribed, and group-sanctioned status, and to build in their stead relationships of a highly individualistic sort resting on personally achieved status. In its turn, the rugged Northern frontier provided a set of social conditions which operated, convergent with Protestantism and capitalism, to heighten the importance of the individual relative to other social categories.⁵³

Modern social scientists have contributed to the emphasis on individualism through the ethic of self-realization or self-actualization. According to Maslow, a leading proponent of this perspective:

Self actualization is defined in various ways but a solid core of agreement is perceptible. All definitions accept or imply, (a) acceptance and expression of the inner core or self, i.e. actualization of these latent capacities, and potentialities, “ full function”, availability of the human and personal essence; (b) they all imply minimal presence of ill health, neurosis, psychosis, or loss or diminution of the basic human and personal capacities....If this essential core (inner nature) of the person is frustrated, denied or suppressed, sickness results, sometimes in obvious forms, sometimes in subtle and devious forms, sometimes immediately, sometimes later.⁵⁴

The psychology of self-actualization also assumes that “the basic inner self is a positive force,” “education must be directed towards both cultivation of controls and cultivation of spontaneity and expression,” that “complete absence of frustration is dangerous,” and that “no psychological health is possible unless this essential core of the person is fundamentally accepted, loved and respected by others and by himself.”⁵⁵ However, these latter points are generally ignored by advocates of self-actualization. The humanistic value system which has emerged from this perspective holds that personal needs and self-actualization are primary; self-satisfaction is central to personal growth; autonomy and rejection of external authority are virtues; and self-gratification is essential.

Many authors propose that the doctrine of individualism and a poorly understood emphasis on self-actualization have led to erosion both of a sense of community and of the importance of interpersonal relationships as significant foundations for personal growth. These changes have, in turn, contributed to the rising divorce rate.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁸

Societal “Systemness”

A second societal explanation for the decline in marital stability is “systemness.”⁵⁹ This concept is a functionalist theory which describes how a society becomes increasingly complex through structural differentiation and specialization. North American society is characterized by a high degree of specialization in terms of employment, education, economics, health care, and transportation. Prior to this specialization, the family served the economic,

educational, recreational, health care, procreative, protection, and affection roles for its members. Gradually, through industrialization, these responsibilities have been taken from the family and institutionalized outside of the home. With the declining birth rate, partially due to economic pressures and the doctrine of individualism, the procreative role in marriage has also been diminished. The main purpose left for the family is affection. Unlike previous generations, marriage today is left with one primary bond—intimacy. As a result, much of the *raison d'être* for the family and marriage has been taken away.

At the same time, the social supports for the affectionate role have been eroded. With increased urbanization, functional specialization, ease of transportation, and employment differentiation, the extended multigenerational family evolved into the two-parent-children nuclear family. Concomitantly, families became less community and neighbourhood oriented. The advent of high density urban areas and high rise multiunit dwellings paradoxically served to isolate families from each other. In addition, familial “systemness” led to a decrease in the interdependence between neighbouring families to provide economic, recreational, and other roles. The natural supports for familial affection and marital intimacy and the outlets for frustration and stress provided by the extended family and the familiar community have all but vanished from today’s society.

Thus, marriage and the family have been weakened in two ways. All but the affection-intimacy role has been taken away, and yet the support systems and stress outlets that might help couples sustain affection and intimacy are being undermined. Marriage has become an isolated structure—the family a ghetto cut off from the community. Divorce has become the only remaining safety valve.

Society has left marriage with one main purpose—love—with little support, little elasticity, and little additional purpose to keep the partners together. Of all the potential purposes of marriage and the family, love is the least stable, particularly in its primary or “romantic” stages. Unless the partners progress into the deeper stages of marital love, marriage is an extremely capricious entity.

Sex Role Expectations

The role expectations of males and females in North American society a generation ago were substantially different from today’s. Generally, these role expectations were not imposed by external factors but were based on widely shared individual perceptions of the way in which optimal personal growth and satisfaction could be achieved. For women, the greatest personal achievement and source of reward was to be married, raise children, and ensure an optimal home and family life. No other life context could provide the same sense of personal worth. For men, self-fulfillment lay in maintaining good employment, marrying the woman of their dreams, and providing financial support for their family. Men and women both had a relatively clear idea of their respective roles: women were responsible for the domestic and affectionate needs, and men provided financial and emotional support.

However, increasing urbanization, institutionalization of familial roles, technological improvements in home care products, and increased affluence reduced the potential of home life to provide stimulation and feelings of worth from satisfactory personal achievements. The “baby boom” led to an even greater imprisonment of women in the home. The demands of the formal economy led men to be more divorced from home life. In addition, the ethos of individualism encouraged both men and women to realize more fully their own potentials.

As the health of the economy began to fail in the late sixties, a second family income became a necessity for most families. The growing economic independence of women led to demands for more egalitarian family norms in the areas of child-rearing, decision-making, finances, recreation, and household tasks. These changes in family norms and role expectations brought increased friction into homes due to the departure from established patterns. As women gained power in the marital relationship, their tolerance for conflictual and unhappy domestic life decreased, and their confidence in supporting themselves strengthened.

In my clinical work, I find that the societal alterations in sex roles has profoundly affected two types of marriages: the older and more established marriages and the recent marriages. In the older marriages, the couple is typically in its forties or fifties and the demands of child raising are either well-established or are gradually decreasing. Out of a necessity to augment family income or out of choice to fill spare time, the wives in these couples have decided to obtain employment outside the home. As noted, the decision to get a job may reflect the woman’s basic need to gain a greater sense of herself as an individual as well as a wife and mother. In some cases, getting a job is a step towards broadening her identity within the family and in other cases, a reaction against the oppression of a restrictive marriage and home life.

The men, in the couples I have seen, are threatened by their wives’ newly acquired independence and self-assurance. They have been socialized to perceive themselves as administrators in the family and may devalue the wife’s abilities. Unless a basis for communication of these needs and reactions is established and fears are mitigated, serious damage to the relationship can occur and separation becomes inevitable.

The younger marriages affected by the changes in sex roles are couples typically in their later twenties and thirties. Women grapple with their desire to have both a career and children, and with the socialized expectation of being primary home and husband caretakers. Men try to balance their careers and the demands to increase their participation in family tasks. In most cases, these men and women consciously accept the new patterns, but some of the expectations derived from early socialization according to traditional family norms still remain to create ambivalence about their roles. Unless these ambivalences are resolved through good communication, conflict and rejection can lead to divorce. Repeatedly, women reject marriage as these ambivalences have not been resolved, and men suddenly realize the importance of their wives and families after a separation has occurred.

Affluence-Materialism

The fourth social explanation for rising divorce rates is affluence-materialism. Through technological improvements, the rate of productivity in North America has increased, and the living standards and the real purchasing power of individuals have been enhanced. The primary effect of this increased affluence on marriage breakdown is that people can better afford the expenses of divorce which include not only legal fees but also the costs of maintaining a second home and added costs of recreation for the children.

A byproduct of enhanced affluence is a materialism ethic and the emergence of a consumer society. Western societies comprise only 20% of the earth's population, yet consume 80% of the planet's production. Only 5% of the world's population resides in Canada and the United States, yet this 5% uses 50% of the world's total petroleum output.

Advertising, the most prominent standard bearer of the quality of life, consistently conjures illusions of the ideal and provides motivation for desiring this illusion. For most, considerable distance lies between the existing and the ideal state. People see themselves as inadequate and unfulfilled as the ever-elusive ideal constantly crises beyond realization. As families see their collective worth and strength in terms of material goods, their energies are devoted to obtaining these goals and are diverted from love and the emotional well-being of the family. The pursuit of arising standard of living has left a path of social and interpersonal dislocation.

Erosion of the Community

One of the most basic causes of marriage breakdown, the disintegration of families, and the devaluation of long-term personal relationships has been the erosion of the community. Industrial advancement and modern society have severely damaged the "human community," the basic condition for human growth and development. As pointedly stated by Dyson:

Thus the real price that the west paid for its modern society—and this fact is coming home to roost—was the destruction and loss of "community." This is so whether we define community as our immediate face to face environment or the extended family and neighbourhood people networks that for millennia had been the solid foundation of all human experience and life. No longer was the natural group important. Under the myth, the individual person was made king and every man's home his castle. The way of life that evolved was oriented to strengthening the individual's capacities - the individual seen now as separated from others—especially those capacities oriented to earning more and more so that he could eat and consume more and more and amass more and more and more. In its crudest yet most prevalent terms, this individualistic way of life is epitomized in the well known phrase... "Screw you Charlie, get off my turf."⁶⁰

In its desperate search for collective security, society has institutionalized the fundamental social strengths and capacities and taken them away from people. We don't rely on each other anymore, we rely on institutions.

Not only has there been a loss of community, but also a loss of our humanity and "wholeness." The mechanistic way of life drives a wedge between us and our environment. We watch television at home more than we drop over to the neighbours for a chat.

In summary, the emergence of individualism, social systemness, egalitarian sex role expectations, affluence and materialism, and the erosion of the community have fundamentally changed the roles of marriage and the family. Expectations of today's marriages centre around the fulfillment of two separate individuals' needs, desires, and capacities. Both partners enter marriage primarily to get something out of it. Like a bank account, it soon goes bankrupt if the withdrawals outnumber the deposits. Yet as the traditional purposes of marriage and the family have disappeared, there are fewer ways for the partners in a marriage to make their contribution, and the less creative input that is applied to a marriage, the less its capacity to be a source of personal fulfillment.

As the family has become isolated from its purposes and from the support networks of extended family and community, the skills of effective communicators and problem solvers are needed to develop an ability to cope with

the increased stresses of life. Modern approaches to marital therapy focus exclusively on the acquisition of these skills: communication, problem solving, and coping. However, a new path is required from a broader perspective which focusses on the prevention of disruption in interpersonal relationships and which is aimed at reinforcing the purposes of the family.

A Developmental Path for the Future of Marriage

From the foregoing discussion of the causes of marriage breakdown, it would seem that we are relegated to a helpless role as we are all products of our society. Remember though, that societies are collections of individuals, and the first target of change is individuals. Change begins in our minds and perceptions and not in our institutions and governmental programs. Only shifts in the former can bring reformulations in the latter. Marriages and families can be participants in bringing about a change in society, and change begins with our perceptions. We need to believe in our capacities to change. As will be noted below, changes have already begun to occur.

First and foremost, the ethic of individualism requires a fundamental review at the personal, regional, and national levels. Humans are social beings, and the more they isolate themselves from those around them, the less human they become. At the same time, humans need to realize their own potentials and capabilities, to be productive and feel fulfilled. A resolution of the human as community and human as self-actualizing is required. Perhaps the aim of individual self-fulfillment should be the nurturance of the individuals and communities around us. Hans Selye sums up this notion in the term “altruistic egotism” and with the maxim “earn thy neighbour’s love.”⁶¹ would add, “earn thy family’s love.”

Secondly, a rebirth of the human community and a rekindling of human interrelationships will enhance our sense of wholeness. The development of and participation in self-help and community groups, like the block parent movement and Big Brothers Association for fatherless children, foster a sense of belongingness and reduce the isolation and seclusion of families from each other. A new simplicity of lifestyle, rather than an impossible return to the past, will enrich the quality of life. Pursuing the human quality rather than the quantity of life will redirect the meaning of life and bring about a shift in goals.

On an individual and collective basis, the meaning of work must be rethought. Employment patterns, work schedules, and duties need to be assigned so that a greater range of human potentials and capabilities are encouraged and liberated. At present, many families are trying to retain their place in a community close to an extended network of kin and friends even if it means forgoing the possible tangible rewards of job transfer to removed locations.

As eloquently stated in a recent paper by Ross, our perceptions of personal and national wealth are restricted to the notions of a formal economy.⁶² The gross national product—the total dollar value of goods and services produced—is considered by far the single most important index of the health of our nations. Yet a great percentage of work that takes place in society rarely enters this figure, as that work is not entirely based on the exchange of money or accumulation of profit.

Community nonprofit organizations, volunteer groups, neighbourhood cooperation, household work, and small self-employed concerns contribute an immense amount to the total well-being of a community and a nation. Since they lie outside the formal economy, they receive less attention and support from governmental policy. The recent revival of small scale family businesses, cooperatives, crafts, and quality of life alternatives is a promising trend.

The desire for an approach to life which encompasses a sense of community, the informal economy and a collaboration with nature is reflected in the unprecedented response by North Americans to *Harrowsmith*, a Canadian magazine devoted to these values. *Harrowsmith* began in a small town five years ago and today has the fourth largest circulation in Canada.

A third aspect of redevelopment of personal perceptions and collective policy is the enhancement of familial roles in terms of education, recreation, and health care. Creative input into these areas will decrease the family’s passive dependence upon external institutions and shift the locus of control to a more personal base. As individual family members feel they can contribute more directly and profoundly to the quality of their lives, greater returns of personal satisfaction can be obtained.

Finally, a greater understanding of the process of love in marriage and the importance of long-term relationships in nourishing personal growth is needed. Danesh has recently examined the developmental nature of marital love as well as examining the crisis points that a stagnation in the process can bring.⁶³ A renewed perception of marriage as a potential for the personal growth of two individuals in a collaborative fashion will help to alter the focus of individual expectations and goals.

The present state of crisis and uncertainty in marriage and the family has led some to predict and accept the inevitable destruction of these forms of living. Undoubtedly, family life has evolved into a variety of forms: the nuclear family, lone parent families, marriage without children, children without marriage, and communal living.

None of these forms guarantees a peaceful life with the current perceptions of life and social organization. But a crisis is an opportunity for either growth or decline. The present state of flux has spurred many into a period of reflection.

TABLE I

Marriage and Divorce Rates for Selected Countries

Data for the Most Recent Year Available

		Marriage Rates per 1,000 Population	Divorce Rates per 1,000 Population	Divorce per per 1,000 Marriages
North America				
Canada	(1979)	7.9	2.5	316.7
United States	(1977)	10.1	5.1	504.1
Mexico	(1976)	6.9	0.3	39.0
Europe				
Belgium	(1978)	6.8	1.4	203.3
France	(1977)	6.9	1.2	169.0
England/Wales	(1976)	7.3	2.6	350.6
Denmark	(1978)	5.6	2.5	450.0
Sweden	(1978)	4.6	2.4	537.2
Switzerland	(1978)	5.9	1.6	265.3
Ireland	(1977)	6.1	0.0	0.0
Czechoslovakia	(1978)	8.9	2.2	247.0
Oceania				
Australia	(1978)	7.2	2.5	316.7
New Zealand	(1977)	7.3	1.7	237.3
Union of Soviet Socialist Republic	(1977)	10.7	3.5	323.5

Source: **United Nations Demographic Year Book**, 1979

TABLE II UNITED STATES: MARITAL STATICS

(% of persons 18 and over)

YEAR	SINGLE	MARRIED	DIVORCED	WIDOWED
1965	14.9	73.2	2.9	9.0
1970	16.2	71.7	3.2	8.9
1975	17.5	69.6	4.6	8.3
1976	18.0	69.0	4.9	8.1
1977	18.5	68.0	5.4	8.0
1978	19.3	67.0	5.7	8.0
1979	20.0	66.2	5.8	8.1

Source: **Current Population Reports**, No. 349, p. 20, U.S. Bureau of Census

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