All cultures of the Western world, and most of the entire planet, have some provisions for dissolution of marital bonds through divorce (Murdock, 1967). Throughout history, some form of annulment, marital dissolution, or divorce has been available as an option for ending marriage, even in countries with divorce restricting policies. Pinsof (2002) reviews a wide array of literature on marriage and divorce and concludes that, “…divorce or formal marital dissolution has always been part of the human species” (p. 138). Sociologist Paul Amato (2002) notes that:

Of all the changes in family life in the 20th century, perhaps the most dramatic—and the most far-reaching in its implications—was the increase in rate of divorce. Near the middle of the 19th century, only 5% of first marriages ended in divorce (Preston & McDonald, 1979). In contrast, demographers estimate that about half of first marriages initiated in recent years will be voluntarily dissolved (Cherlin, 1992, p. 1269).

Divorce rates in the United States have reflected changes in society since WWII. The number of divorces in 1946 spiked when two out of three marriages formed during the war years ended in divorce. Before that time, the divorce rate had remained stable and consistently no higher than 20% in any given year since 1790 in the U.S. It is common to see current estimates of divorce exceeding 50% of all first marriages. Some authors (c.f., Martin & Bumpass, 1989; White, 1990) predict that two-thirds of all first marriages in the U.S. will end in divorce.

**Interpreting Divorce Statistics**

There are many statistics used to reflect the divorce pattern. These numbers are computed as indicators of rates of divorce, percentages, and actual number of individuals who receive a divorce at a given point in time. Pinsof (2002) describes four types of statistics that can be calculated. The most common statistic frequently quoted is the crude divorce rate, simply a ratio of the number of individuals getting a divorce, and the number of individuals getting married in a given year. A different standard measure of the divorce rate is the number of divorces per 1,000 population. Another measure of the divorce statistic is the median number of years half of all divorces will occur. This statistic reflects an actuarial approximation of the total population, but does not have a method of accounting for longevity effects on the actual chances a given couple will likely experience marital disruption. The typical pattern is for 50% of all divorces to occur within the first seven years of marriage.

A more refined measure that takes marital longevity into account is the cohort divorce statistic that computes the rates for each marital cohort sepa-
rately to more accurately approximate an actuarial estimate of marital survival rates. That means for every year the couple stays together, the greater the odds they will stay together. Pinsof describes this fourth statistic as the life table analysis, which he defined as “the cumulative proportion of marriages disrupted through divorce or formal separation by a specified point in time, typically some number of years” (p. 138). It has been estimated that 54% of all marriages will end either by divorce or separation by the 20th year.

Historically, the social context of when a marriage occurred influenced its survival dramatically in cases involving prolonged separations due to war. Couples married during WWII and the Vietnam War had higher chances of divorce than did couples who married in a less turbulent era (Coltrane & Collins, 2001).

Divorce rates increased and declined over the 20th century, as illustrated by Figure 1. The divorce rate was lowest at 0.7 per 1,000 population in 1900. The rate then rose until it peaked at 4.3 in 1946 after the end of WWII. A steady decline ensued as the population of the U.S. embarked upon a period of economic recession in the 1950s when the divorce rate declined to 2.2 in 1957. With the changing of laws regarding divorce in the 1970s, the rate again began to increase, eventually reaching the highest rate in history at 5.3 in 1979 and 1981. Then the rate began to steadily decline to the current rate of 3.6 in 2005.

Figure 2 demonstrates the changes in the percentage of the population divorced by gender over the last century. The widening of the gap between females and males who are divorced may reflect the higher tendency for men to remarry after divorce (Kreider, 2005).

High rates of divorce have become a normative pattern within the culture of the North American family. Pinsof (2002) proposes the possibility that divorce will become the normative pattern for ending the majority of marriages in Western society:

The lengthening of the human lifespan; the biological, psychological, social, and economic improvements of women’s lives; and the emergence of new relationship or family values and laws within Western civilization in the 20th century have been associated with, and perhaps have driven, a fundamental transformation in pair-bonding. Divorce has replaced death as the primary terminator of marriage. It has become a ‘normal’ marital endpoint. This death-to-divorce transition reveals heretofore obscured aspects or potentials of the human capacity and inclination to pair bond (p. 155).

It is clear in Pinsof’s analysis of the changes in marriage and divorce that both the structural forces of the culture and increased lifespan potential have produced strain on maintaining dyadic relationship commitments in a marriage for life. His lead article in the special issue of Family Process on “Marriage in the 20th Century in Western Civilization” (2002) raises a number of challenging shifts in our thinking about marriage and divorce in contemporary society.

The stir of the proposed paradigm shift shakes the very core of the assumptions social policy and services are organized around. We will have to see if the predictions occur that are currently suggested from the data from the last part of the 20th century in regard to this shift in relating within pair-bonds. We, however, remain somewhat dubious that marriage will disappear as a normative state for interpersonal relating in the foreseeable future, as it remains the ideal for the vast majority of people in North America (Glenn, 1998).

Divorce rates have risen since WWII as a result of societal forces that have shaped family life in the past 60 years. Lynn White (1990) provides an analysis of the determinants of divorce in the U.S. in her review article on divorce in the 1980s. According to White, the shift in the lifetime probability of divorce needs to be examined in the larger context of societal changes in laws, economics and social customs. Paul Amato (2000) notes that changes in divorce patterns have

![Figure 1: Divorce Rate: 1900 to 2005](image1)

![Figure 2: Divorce Status of the Population by Sex: 1900 to 2000](image2)
been attributed by many (c.f., Cherlin, 1992; Furstenberg, 1994) as a function of changes in economic opportunities for men and women in modern societies. For example, the decline in economic opportunities and earning power for blue collar jobs for men and increases in economic independence of women have reduced the economic dependence factor of women on men to stay in marriages.

Another factor is the reduction of the social and legal stigma of divorce in contemporary society throughout North America. Marriage continues to be an ideal relationship for meeting interpersonal needs by the vast majority of persons throughout history. Despite the decline in the percentage of the marriage age population marrying at least once, from a high of 95 out of every 100 to the current trend of 87 out of every 100, the current pattern still suggests that the majority of adults in the U.S. will marry at least once during their lifetime.

**Social Movements and Social Forces Impacting Divorce**

Beginning in the 1960s, the women’s movement increased awareness and consciousness of the human needs for equity in economic and social opportunities. This raised consciousness helped lower some of the structural barriers facing women, but the gap has not been completely narrowed, even though the women of today are no longer as economically or socially dependent upon men as they were in the first half of the 20th century. Pinsof (2002, p. 140) summarizes research on the changes in the economic factors on divorce and cites research by Michael (1988, p. 392) that “the rise in women’s income is a dominate factor affecting the divorce rate.”

A second force within society that shifted value patterns is the increased presence of college students and the role of college students in shaping social discourse on issues related to peace and war and to social justice in the 1960s. One of the byproducts of increased percentages of both men and women receiving a college education is increased opportunity in earning power and standard of living, as well as increased expectations for self-actualization and happiness.

Research clearly demonstrates (Becker, 1981; Michael, 1988) that the widespread diffusion of inexpensive and reliable contraception accounted for approximately half of the rise in divorce rates in the late 1970s. Women have reproductive choices that did not exist before the late 1950s. Economists (Becker; Michael) concluded that having a child reduced the probability of divorce by approximately 30% between the fifth and fifteenth year of marriage. A second child reduced the rate of divorce even further.

The trend to delay age of marriage also has reduced the fertility rate. In the 1970s, people generally married between 20–22 years of age. Today, people marry between the ages of 25–27 (Kreider, 2005). Some couples may choose to live together as a precursor to marriage, or even as an alternative to marriage (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). Over the past few years, cohabitation has become a norm rather than a deviation. This living arrangement is typically defined as “romantically involved couples who live in the same household” (Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p. 270). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 5.5 million unmarried couples were living together in 2000, an increase of 2.3 million couples from the survey in 1990 (Simmons & O’Connell, 2003). It seems probable that the high rate of divorce has resulted in some children of divorce choosing to marry later, cohabitate, and/or not marry at all.

Past research on cohabitation has had mixed results. In general, the impact of cohabitation upon marriage survival has demonstrated two patterns. First, couples who have cohabited with multiple partners before marriage have a higher probability of marital dissolution than do couples who either have no cohabitation experience before marriage or who only cohabited with the person they eventually married (Teachman, 2003). Second, it’s possible that the current leveling off of the escalation of the divorce rate may be related to increased cohabitation rates. Perhaps many of the couples who would have eventually married and subsequently divorced never proceeded to marriage. The research on cohabitation reveals lower levels of relationship commitment than that in marriage so that what formerly may have been divorce may now be the informal ending of cohabiting relationships (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Teachman, 2003).

The family is a microcosmic structure that reflects and shapes the larger society and culture. Furthermore, the forces of social change in the middle and latter parts of the 20th century and continuing on into the 21st century have impacted our views of the permanency of marriage.

**Legal and Custom Changes**

Marriage and divorce customs have changed in many ways. Beginning at the end of the 1960s, laws governing divorce and separation shifted from a fault-based system to a no-fault termination option. By the early 1990s, this pattern had become the law of the land throughout the U.S., and many social commentators challenged the trend as a breaking of the fabric of the family and the sanctity of marriage. Some social scientists, as well as legal scholars, have analyzed this pattern and found it has had long-term impact on divorce trends (e.g., Michael, 1988; Marvell, 1989).

Since the last decade of the 20th century, some states have begun to create laws based on value issues with the intention of returning to social costs and barriers to divorce and adding preventive measures designed to decrease the likelihood of divorce. One of the driving forces behind this movement is the desire by some to counter what is seen as individualism by a return to religious and community values that preserve the sanctity of marriage and stability of the family. Durkheim’s social integration theory notes the importance of marriage in the creation of social cohesion within the family and larger society (Durkheim, Simpson, & Spalding, 1966).

Louisiana led this trend with the introduction of the covenant marriage option in 1997. The data indicate that
only a small percentage of couples elected the covenant marriage option (Williams, 2000). It may be too early to determine what impact this type of tier marriage option will have on divorce and marriage patterns. The limited data available does show patterns of choice being strongly tied to religious commitments and participation. In general, couples choosing covenant marriage are from more traditional backgrounds where the divorce rate is lower to begin with, so the covenant marriage option may not be reaching the intended risk groups identified by the proponents of the law (Williams & Cole, 2002).

**Conclusions**

If the current trends continue, with the divorce rate remaining stable at around 50%, with the majority of those that do end in divorce ending before the couple has been married 20 years, we can expect to see roughly half of the children reared in the U.S., and in the larger Western world, to grow up without intact two-parent families. Remarriage rates remain high, indicating that the majority of individuals who divorce keep trying to find happiness in subsequent marriages. Social policy and marriage and family theory are challenged to rethink the solutions to the challenges of marriages not lasting for a lifetime for the majority of the population.

It is crucial that we as marriage and family therapists address the many unanswered questions so that we can understand the changing landscape of interpersonal relationships in this new millennium. We do not know for sure what influenced the steady rise in the divorce rate to level off at the current rate of approximately 50 percent. Does divorce need to be labeled “good” or “bad”? Will the concern by some about divorce for adults and children. Journal of Marriage and Family, 62, 1269-1287.

**REFERENCES**


