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2. *One Hundred Years of Change in the American Family*

Introduction

The United States has always been more accepting of divorce than other countries with advanced economies, even though similar trends in marital disruption have recently occurred in Europe (Roussel and Festy, 1979). Divorce became prevalent in the United States earlier than in Europe or Canada and in wake of the baby boom, United States rates climbed to unparalleled levels, unmatched by any other country in the West (Carter and Glick, 1976). Comparing nations that presumably share a common cultural heritage, divorce is two to four times higher in the United States than in England, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia. The latter nations have recently experienced a sharp rise in divorce, but their rates are still below the levels reached in the United States a generation ago before divorce was considered to be a major social problem.

It is not obvious why divorce took root in America so early or why American marriages are so much more susceptible to dissolution. America has had a tradition of early marriage, which itself may be linked to a high risk of divorce. Although the United States legal system generally refused to sanction divorce until the 1960s, it was more accommodating, particularly in certain states, than in many European countries where resistance to divorce remained strong until quite recently. American public attitudes were perhaps more tolerant of divorce compared to those of other countries. (For historical accounts of social and legal changes in divorce laws, see O'Neill, 1973; Halem, 1980; Weitzman, 1985).

None of these potential explanations is adequate, though each suggests a more fundamental reason for the cross-national differences. The highly individualistic marriage system which evolved in the United States is compatible with both early marriage and easier divorce. As historian Edward Shorter has written, the American family was "born modern." American

youth have always been permitted a high degree of discretion in marriage timing because nuptial decisions, like so many other features of the family, were governed largely by personal sentiment. The strong sentimental basis for marriage, which some sociologists have described as the "cultural complex of romantic love," is implicated in the evolution of a conditional commitment to matrimony.

Compared to the custom in most other Western nations, Americans embraced love as a standard for marriage, providing young people with a license to enter matrimony with relatively little parental control. Marriage in America was a contract less between families than between individuals. Emotional considerations therefore weighed heavily in mate selection and as a standard of marital contentment. Both professional and popular literature suggest that Americans have been almost obsessed with the elusive goal of marital happiness (Tufte and Myerhoff, 1979). Gradually, Americans shifted from a marriage system which required individuals to remain married even if they were no longer in love, to a system which virtually required them to dissolve their relationship if they were no longer strongly emotionally involved.

This new standard permitted—practically encouraged—divorce, even though Americans continued to pay lip service to the value of life-long monogamy. Thus, divorce has always been regarded as an anomalous event, violating cherished beliefs about the permanence of marriage. Yet, divorce, in fact, has become an intrinsic part of the American marriage system. Other Western nations appear to be following a similar course, though it is too soon to tell whether the American pattern will be adopted wholesale.

By saying that divorce is intrinsic to the American marriage system, I am referring to the fact that divorce has become institutionalized. New norms are emerging that make divorce acceptable, even imperative, under certain conditions, and new guidelines have been invented for divorced families. Since divorce is usually followed by remarriage, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the shift in the marriage system has taken us from a pattern of permanent monogamy to a pattern of *conjugal succession*.

In the United States, it is estimated that at least half of all marriages contracted in the 1970s and early 1980s will end in divorce (Preston and McDonald, 1979; Weed, 1980; Glick, 1984). It is a rare individual, therefore, who will not encounter divorce and remarriage in his or her family of origin or family of procreation. As Cherlin and I (1986) have written:

> It will not be uncommon for children born in the 1980s to follow this sequence of living arrangements: live with both parents for several years, live with their mother after their parents divorce, then live with their stepfather, live alone for a time when in their early twenties, live with someone of the opposite sex without marrying, get married, get divorced, live alone again, get remarried, and end up living alone once more following the death of their spouse.

This pervasive experience with divorce and remarriage is profoundly altering American kinship arrangements. In this essay, I shall briefly summarize some observations about how American kinship has been transformed by the pattern of conjugal succession. These observations are discussed more fully in research reports of studies which a number of my collaborators and I have conducted during the past decade, and in studies conducted by other investigators who have traced the consequences of divorce and remarriage on marriage, parenthood, and extended family relations (Furstenberg, 1979; 1982; 1987; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984).

Marriage

Until the middle of the twentieth century marriage was embedded in a tightly sequenced series of status transitions—the initiation of sexual activity, the inception of parenthood, the departure from the family of origin, and the establishment of an independent residence. Marriage was, in effect, the keystone to the passage to adulthood. Today, marriage is usually a discrete transition removed from other events which make up the process of family and household formation. It is no coincidence that as marriage has been stripped of some of its importance as a ceremonial marker of adulthood, the pattern of conjugal succession has also become more widespread.

As divorce has become more common, the cultural value placed on marriage has eroded. Not only has it become more acceptable to exit from marriage, it is now acceptable *not* to enter marriage. Some demographers have estimated that at present as many as one-fifth of all Americans will never marry—a sharp rise from a generation ago when only about five percent of the population never entered matrimony (Norton, 1986).

These changes do not necessarily imply that Americans have come to expect less of marriage. Indeed, as marriage has become less binding and inviolable, standards of what constitutes a satisfactory marriage have been

elevated. The increased value placed on marital happiness ultimately means that individuals judge their relations with a more discerning eye, and are accordingly more willing to dissolve a marriage that is adequate but emotionally unrewarding (Swidler, 1983).

When viewed in this light, divorce can be seen as an intrinsic part of a cultural system that cherishes individual discretion and emotional gratification. Divorce is a social mechanism for promoting conformity to these cultural ideals. In this sense, as some observers have pointed out, divorce is not a sign that marriage is devalued, but an indication of a strong commitment to a marital style that is difficult to maintain. The quest for marital contentment often leads to a conjugal career in which, like an occupational career, individuals attempt to upgrade their situation.

In the course of moving from one marriage to the next, the formerly married encounter a series of culturally uncharted social situations. The process of remarriage ultimately involves "rethinking" marriage, as individuals are forced to deconstruct the marital subworld of their first union, and recreate a new belief system based on their current relationship (see also Vaughan, 1986). A study of this process reveals that second marriages are reinvented in a more contemporary form. Remarried individuals are more wary of failure and pay greater attention to monitoring their emotional well-being. This sensitivity only heightens the value placed on emotional gratification which may contribute to the vulnerability of second marriages.

Typically, divorced individuals attempt to shed the legacy of failure from their initial marriage by distancing themselves as much as possible from their first spouse. In studies of the transition from divorce to remarriage, informants often describe their first marriage as an earlier chapter in their lives, a mistake that they were able to correct through personal growth and development. Divorce is viewed as a process of personal transformation in which an old self as well as a biography of failure is shed. Most divorced persons have as little contact as possible with their former spouses, maintaining what amounts to a ritual taboo. There are, of course, exceptions—ex-partners who remain friendly or even friends—but the majority of formerly married couples have little to do with each other. Repudiating a former spouse helps to build solidarity in a new relationship, thus reducing the potential for jealousy. This disassociation serves to reenforce the new relationship, but also creates special problems for individuals who continue to share parental responsibilities. (Further discussion of the process of divorce and remarriage is presented in Furstenberg and Spanier,

1984. For other accounts, see Goode, 1956; Bernard, 1956; Goetting, 1982; Keshet, 1980; Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman, 1984.)

Parenting Apart

The majority of couples who divorce have young children and are therefore obliged to work out some sort of postmarital childcare arrangement. The social guidelines for doing so, which have never been entirely clear, are currently in flux as custody and child support laws are being revised (Cherlin, 1978; Weitzman, 1985). Now, more than ever before, formerly married couples must devise feasible and collaborative childcare arrangements when they often have not been able to get along in married life. Further complicating this task, most divorced persons, as just noted, have a strong desire to avoid contact with their former partner. Not surprisingly, then, studies of childcare after divorce reveal little active co-parenting.

Close to half of all children in the United States will spend part of their childhood in a single-parent family. Most of these children will have little or no contact with their non-residential parent and most will receive little or no economic support from that parent (Bumpass, 1984). A recent national study of children in maritally disrupted families revealed that about half had not seen their father living outside the home in the preceding twelve months and another one-sixth had seen him only a few times. Fewer than two-fifths of the fathers were providing regular child support according to government statistics (Furstenberg et al., 1983).

Longitudinal research shows that most fathers curtail contact soon after the remarriage occurs, reflecting the desire of formerly married couples to sever their ties. Geographical movement and remarriage further erode parental bonds. The pattern of conjugal succession has the effect of creating a child swapping system, whereby residential or sociological fathers replace biological fathers. Of course the system is not that neat. Many biological parents living outside the home maintain regular contact and strong emotional ties to their child or children. Extended kin, as will be described later, often serve to reinforce these bonds. Moreover stepparents, when they assume parental responsibilities, often find themselves in an anomalous role, exercising neither full rights nor responsibilities over the child (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985).

Several studies have demonstrated that both stepparents and stepchildren have problems according full legitimacy to their relationship

(White and Booth, 1985). Their kinship connection, based on in-law rather than blood relationships, makes the linkage more tenuous. Stepparents often report that their stepchildren do not think of them as "real parents" and, indeed, 31 percent of the children currently living in households with stepparents neglect to mention them as a member of their family (Furstenberg, 1987).

Evidence is mounting that the presence of stepchildren complicates marital ties, straining new marriages over and above the tensions introduced by childrearing in nuclear families. A recent study discovered that a substantial proportion of stepparents wished their stepchildren did not live in the home, suggesting that cross-cutting loyalties divide families that are unable to establish the principle of sociological parenthood (White and Booth, 1985). For relations between stepparents and their children to become "real," they must be accorded legitimacy in the kinship system. Stepparents are granted partial legitimacy, contingent on the development of personal ties and loyalties. This discretionary license resembles the treatment of all in-laws in the American kinship system (Furstenberg, 1987).

Whether the acceptance of stepparents in particular family situations is promoted by an attenuation or relinquishment of relations with the biological parent remains an open question. Preliminary information from one study indicates that children who maintain ties with their biological parents are not any less likely to accord legitimacy to their stepparents (Furstenberg, 1987). In short, children in the United States may be able to engage in a practice unthinkable to many adults—acknowledging multiple fathers or mothers. Foreign as this notion may be, the changing imagery and language of kinship signals the possibility that the pattern of conjugal succession is being integrated into the American kinship system.

In studies of remarried families, language was often a battleground over which parents fought to maintain their position within the family. Terms of address were often contested. Remarried persons, especially those with younger children, often attempted to persuade their children to refer to a new mate as "mom" or "dad." More than a few biological parents vigorously protested when they overheard their children referring to stepparents by these terms of address, feeling that their parental legitimacy was under attack.

Just as parents minimize contact with their former spouses, children with more than two parents learn to segregate the separate spheres of family life. They are constrained not to discuss what goes on inside the home of the biological parent when talking to their stepparents, and parents out-

side the home and vice versa. In effect, children are the common link between two separate clans.

However, relations across households can be quite variable. In a small fraction of the divorced population, parents maintain a high degree of continuity. In most instances, contact between residential and nonresidential parents is minimal. Despite the considerable attention in the media given to joint custody and co-parenting arrangements, most formerly married parents have little to do with one another, especially if their children are no longer young. Usually, they rely on the children to make arrangements for visitation, communicate messages, and even to discuss important parental decisions.

One study of co-parenting found that two-thirds of all custodial parents of adolescent children reported that they rarely or never discussed matters concerning the child with the noncustodial parent (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985). Even among those whose children had frequent contact with their nonresidential parent, close to half stated that they rarely if ever talked to their former spouse about their children. Indeed, these families were particularly inclined to say that they often or sometimes relied on the child to communicate with their former spouse.

In summary, childcare patterns after divorce are rarely collaborative or jointly coordinated. When the nonresidential father maintains contact at all, which only occurs in a minority of families, he usually does so with minimal contact with his former spouse, the child's mother. Children, or sometimes even stepparents, are called upon to serve as intermediaries, thereby avoiding direct confrontations. This childcare pattern is often described as co-parenting. A more apt term for depicting it, however, is "parallel parenting."

In effect, then, patterns of parenting in the United States have undergone a profound change in the past half century as divorce and remarriage have become a pervasive pattern. American children are likely to experience a variety of childcare systems, and many children will experience more than one system during the course of childhood. Considerable ambiguity exists as to which parents will be the salient figures, the precise nature of parental rights and responsibilities, and the rules for coordinating the activities of various parent figures. Children are likely to play a central part in determining how the childcare system operates, as they are the central link between parental figures who typically operate autonomously and with little reference to one another.

Despite a rash of recent studies, relatively little is known about the con-

sequences of this childcare system for the development and well-being of children or for their prospects in life (Esses and Campbell, 1984; Coleman and Ganong, 1984). I shall make no attempt to describe the complex and contradictory findings of existing studies on the outcome of divorce and remarriage on the socialization process. However, the emerging consensus among both psychologists and sociologists who have explored this topic is that there are no simple or uniform results which apply to all or even most children (Rutter, 1971; Herzog and Sudia, 1973; Hess and Camera, 1979; Hetherington and Camera, 1984; Emery, Hetherington, and Dilalla, 1985; Furstenberg and Seltzer, 1986).

Many investigators believe that children of divorce do not fare as well as children from stably married households, but the general effects of marital disruption are nonetheless rather modest. Existing research has not been able to distinguish the particular effects of conflict in the family prior to dissolution, the separation process, and the economic and psychological aftermath of divorce. Most children react adversely to divorce, but most recover in time. Yet, given the ambiguities of parenting and childcare described above, to which most children are exposed, it seems remarkable that the adverse impact of divorce is not more pervasive and persistent. Little attention has been given to how children manage to operate in a changing family system and what features of that system are detrimental to or supportive of the child's well-being (Furstenberg and Allison, 1985; see also Cherlin, 1981; Thornton and Freedman, 1982; Ross and Sawhill, 1975; Lamb, 1978; and Emery, Hetherington, and Dilalla, 1985).

Remarriage and Extended Family Relations

A growing body of research indicates that one source of support comes from the extended family. Following a divorce, grandparents, particularly on the side of the custodial parent, frequently become more active in childcare and sometimes are called upon to lend economic assistance. Research is more equivocal in the role of the noncustodial parent's extended kin. When the father (or mother, when she is the nonresidential parent) remains involved in childrearing, his (or her) activities parallel the custodial grandparents'. The withdrawal of the father from childcare—which occurs more typically—generally attentuates relations with the noncustodial grandparents.

Evidence from a large-scale study of grandparents indicates the strong

possibility of a matrilineal tilt in the American kinship system resulting from rising rates of divorce and a pronounced pattern of paternal absence (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986). In a less extreme form, the American kinship system resembles the subcultural pattern of black Americans where matrilinearity has become almost the rule. Fathers and their families are only loosely connected to the child who may claim them as kin, but often do not enjoy the full benefits of their sponsorship and aid (Stack, 1974).

Blacks represent an extreme case because the vast majority of formerly married women never reenter matrimony. This is much less true of whites in the United States whose marriages dissolve (Norton and Glick, 1976; Glick, 1984). Close to three-fourths of white divorced women and four-fifths of white divorced men eventually remarry. Little is known about the operation of stepfamilies beyond the boundaries of the nuclear unit. From scattered small-scale investigations, however, it appears that step-relations are often relatively quickly assimilated, on the principle that in-laws become instant relatives. However, this depends on the age of the children at the time of remarriage.

The parents of remarried children may experience some pressure to treat their children's stepchildren as equivalent to their biological grandchildren in order to preserve and reenforce relations with the middle generation. Newly married parents are quick to pick up differences in the treatment of biological and stepchildren by grandparents, and children also are sensitive to unequal attention. Consequently, children readily adopt primary kinship terms when referring to grandparents, uncles, and aunts. The flexibility of the American kinship system permits a good deal of discretion, allowing individuals to ignore step-distinctions if they wish (Schneider, 1980). It is easier to accept the fact that children have six grandparents than to accept that they have three parents.

Conjugal succession expands the child's kinship network exponentially. The succession of marriages creates a chain of relations which are potential sources of assistance. Adults are loosely linked across this "marriage chain" through former and current marriages. Thus, children may speak of the person who helped them get a summer job—their stepfather's sister's first husband, for instance. How important this chain of kinship will be to the child in life is not yet known, but clearly divorce and remarriage generally enlarges the universe of potential kin (Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984; Spanier and Furstenberg, 1986).

From the perspective of adults, conjugal succession implies greater fluidity and uncertainty in kinship relations. Cultivating family ties may

become more important as less can be taken for granted about the obligations of particular kin to one another. It is interesting to note that while formerly married persons may frequently observe a form of ritual isolation from one another, their parents may have reason to maintain ties with their former in-laws, either because of sentiment or, more practically, to preserve ties with their grandchildren. However, they may have limited control in preserving kinship bonds.

One survey discovered that the vast majority of recently divorced individuals did not regard their former in-laws as relatives even though they continued to recognize their rights as the children's grandparents (Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984). This anomalous situation has given rise to legal demands for protecting the rights of grandparents after divorce; a large number of states have enacted statutes ensuring grandparents' visitation privileges. This legislation testifies to the inherent ambiguity in the kinship system, for it is difficult to believe that such guarantees are more than of symbolic importance. If parents do not wish their children to see their grandparents, they will find a means of limiting contact.

On balance, the net effect of conjugal succession is to widen, rather than contract, the boundaries of kinship. This potential will be accentuated as the number of children relative to the number of adults declines. The fertility drop in the face of increasing longevity means that a smaller number of children will be shared by a larger pool of adults. Adults may have to give more resources to children if they wish to maintain their allegiance and obligations in later life.

It will be extraordinarily interesting to see the relative strength of consanguineal and affinal bonds within families whose members have been multiplied by successive marriages. How will grandparents divide their inheritance among biological grandchildren whom they barely know, stepgrandchildren acquired early in life, or stepgrandchildren acquired from their own second marriage who have helped to nurse them later in life? Do biological fathers have more obligation to send their biological children, who have been raised by a stepfather, to college or their own stepchildren whom they have raised?

Of course, there are no easy answers to such questions. Conjugal succession is increasing the fluidity of our kinship system which already emphasizes discretion rather than obligation. The voluntaristic basis of family relations is bound to grow as individuals are encouraged to cultivate contacts from what Matilda Riley has called a "matrix of latent relationships." More than ever before, family and kinship will be constructed by individu-

als, which in turn will promote the highly individualistic nature of the American kinship system.

Will this more voluntary system of kinship weaken the bonds between generations and foster a view that family relations are disposable commodities? The greater substitutability of family members may well reduce family loyalty and commitment to kin. The extension of kinship through marriage may, in effect, cheapen the currency of family. Alternatively, blood relations may become even more salient than they are currently as individuals come to distrust the permanency of certain kinship bonds.

To address these issues more attention must be given to how kinship is enacted in everyday life. Divorce and remarriage have exposed the limitations of our understanding of the workings of our kinship system. Tracing the effects of conjugal succession on marriage, parenthood, and extended family relations historically and cross-culturally provides an unusual vantage point from which to study the process of how different kinship systems react to demographic, social, and economic change.

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