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Remarriage

Frank F. Furstenberg  
*University of Pennsylvania*, fff@ssc.upenn.edu

Harold I. Lief  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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Abstract
An interview with Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr, PhD, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. The interview was conducted by Harold I. Lief, MD, Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia.

Disciplines
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There are various types of remarriage. What type do you intend to discuss?

I'd particularly like to talk about remarriage after divorce, a subject on which I've done much research. While some of the problems are similar to and overlap those encountered with remarriage after death, the differences are significant. In my research, I have therefore concentrated on remarriage after divorce, which is the more common event.

How did you conduct your research?

In a preliminary study, I and my collaborator, Graham Spanier, interviewed some 200 individuals in Central Pennsylvania shortly after their first separation or divorce. About two years after the initial interview, a followup revealed that about half of them were either remarried or cohabiting.

This initial study set the stage for a much larger research project in which I and several collaborators examined the consequences on children of divorce and remarriage. Spanier and I examined the transition from divorce to remarriage, comparing individuals who remarried to those who remained divorced during the interval between the initial interview and the followup. The results of this study are described in our book Recycling the Family: Remarriage After Divorce (Sage, 1984).

In this nationwide study, a representative sample of children was first interviewed when they were between the ages of seven and 11, and reinterviewed five years later when they were adolescents. I also interviewed the custodial parent who in most cases was the mother. Families varied widely and included two-parent families, single-parent families, and families in which the custodial parent was a mother who was generally absent. In this second study, I concentrated on the experiences of the children—being raised by one or both biological parents and possibly by stepparents as well—and experiences of the parents—whether custodial or noncustodial, single, remarried, or cohabiting.

Let's begin with the point you made earlier, that remarriage after divorce is different in many significant ways from remarriage after death. What are those differences?

A major difference is that, historically, remarriage has been an accepted form of family life after the death of a spouse. When mortality rates were higher than they are today, it was quite common for families to be disrupted by death of one parent and for remarriage to follow. Divorce, on the other
hand, was rare until the end of the 19th century and still uncommon well into the 20th century. The rate of divorce has been rising steadily during the past half century. Remarriage after divorce creates quite a different situation than it does after the death of a parent or a partner. There is the addition rather than the replacement of a parent for the child. This raises issues in marriage and parenting arrangements that were unprecedented and unfamiliar until this century. What we’ve really seen is the emergence of a new family form.

Before you discuss that, would you comment on changing social attitudes toward divorce? Society still regards divorce as a kind of defiance, whereas, in fact, about 50% of people who marry today can anticipate divorce at a later date.

Although a significant change has occurred, divorce is still a departure from the norm. One could hardly say, for example, to a group of students today, that lifelong monogamy is the norm without hearing quite a few snickers in the room. But if you ask those same students how many think that they will at some time get divorced, very few hands will be raised. Divorce is an unexpected event and, therefore, individuals never anticipate two or possibly even three marriages. But there is certainly a growing tolerance for the occurrence of divorce, and it obviously no longer carries the stigma it once did. I talk to people who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s who describe themselves as even then being the only child of a divorced family in their community. Divorce was still subject to considerable gossip and attention. That simply doesn’t happen today. Half of all marriages end in divorce, and although it’s still a personal trauma for both the adults who divorce and their children, it’s no longer the questionable moral act in the eyes of society as it was in the past.

Do you believe that societal norms change rather slowly?

Yes, that’s certainly true. Social attitudes are more conservative than social practice. Thus, with regard to divorce, we’re still struggling to learn how to deal with postmarital arrangements. We still have no standard practices for how to handle children of divorce, and no etiquette for how former spouses should treat one another; but we’re working those things out. Another area without recognized or accepted practice is that of kinship relations between remarried former partners and their extended family. “Does my former sister-in-law still consider me a brother-in-law, and does she retain the kinship tie to my children?” She certainly is still the children’s aunt, but her relationship to me remains a gray area.

Let’s consider one of the major aspects of your research. What are the differences—sociologically and psychologically—between remarriage and a first marriage?

The issue of whether people learn from their marital experiences is quite fascinating. Many clinicians believe—but have never been able to substantiate—that people who divorce often have deep-seated neuroses, and will select the same type of marital partner again. No doubt that happens. Even if you were evaluating on the basis of chance, you might expect some similarity and overlap between a first mate and the second because people have only partial knowledge of what their partner is like when they enter a marriage. Nonetheless, success rates of second marriages suggest that there is about the same probability as for a first marriage that a second one will work. That is to say, about 50% of first marriages end in divorce, and the same is true for slightly more than 50% of second marriages. When evaluating success or failure in marriage by the divorce rate, however, we have to remember that some people—for religious or personal reasons—will not terminate an unhappy first marriage, whereas in second marriages, most people already have left a marriage, whether through choice or not. By and large, therefore, we see that many marriages don’t work out, but that second marriages have roughly the same prospects of success as the first. That’s true for level of marital satisfaction as well. There seems to be about the same distribution of marital happiness in second marriages as in first marriages. This suggests that many individuals who don’t succeed in their first union are capable of making a successful marriage the second time around. That’s one way of answering the question of what, if anything, people learn from their first marriage, or what bearing the first experience has on the sec-

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ond. If you ask people directly, "What's the difference between your second marriage and your first," they will say, "There is a world of difference," and they will add something like the following: "The first time I made a horrible mistake"; or "I was subject to social pressure"; or "I married too young"; or "I married for the wrong reasons"; or "I married the wrong person, but this time I've done better." Indeed many people believe they have, and seem to have done better the second time.

If you ask them how the marriage is different, they will say that they communicate better, or that they know how to fight, or maybe that they now have a better division of labor. Everything that marriage is supposed to be is expressed by the distinction they draw between their first marriage and their second. They are really saying that the second time around, they are closer to making a good marriage. They indicate that they've learned from the first marriage, but most often they've learned that they were married to the wrong person.

Something interesting happens when people marry the second time—they go through a very deliberate process of defining that second marriage differently from the first. They now know that marriage can fail and they question why it should succeed the second time, when it didn't the first. They develop a set of rationalizations or a way of defining reality that draws a very sharp distinction between the first and the second marriage.

First five years after remarriage, wouldn't there be comparable self-delusion?

I think there would be, because the overall rate of instability is about the same for the first and second marriages. But second marriers are much more likely to dissolve an unhappy marriage sooner than first marriers. It may be that some second marriers are simply rushing back into marriage on the rebound, perhaps to show the first spouse that they can do it; then they drop out of the new marriage very quickly. Others find that a new relationship isn't working out. They decide "No way am I going to stay in this time. I stuck it out for 13 years last time, and was miserable. This is the second year for this marriage and it's not working, so I'm going to leave." There's a kind of tentativeness, of testing, and this indicates a certain amount of self-delusion on the part of those at the time they remarried.

Is there today more reality testing and less romanticism?

Yes. That isn't to say that second marriers don't fall in love or are not in love when they marry. But they are much more cautious about love. They keep pinching themselves and asking, "Am I deceiving myself?" You see a kind of wariness. Many of these people had vowed that they would never marry again but then change their mind and do.

Despite the feeling of doing better the second time around, how much self-deception remains? For example, if you were to compare a group of first marriers in the first five years of marriage with a group of remarriers in their
Most therapists who are confronted with people who are in the process of separation and divorce advise them not to get involved too quickly in another committed relationship. Some data show that this is even more important for men than for women, and that the moratorium between the old and the new relationship should perhaps be two years for men, but one year for women. In your research were you able to study the differences between those who remarry within a year or two, versus those who delay for three or more years?

I haven't looked at that specifically, although it would be well worth investigating. My speculation is that a rapid return to marriage indicates a high-risk situation. It suggests that these individuals feel that they can't take care of themselves and can't stand on their own. They're returning to marriage as a refuge because they feel wounded or very uncertain about themselves. I did note, however, in many of the interviews that we conducted, that especially women in the process of divorcing often found the discovery that they could hold down a job absolutely exhilarating, since it allowed them to maintain some independence. By the time they remarried, they felt more complete as individuals, and they had a different attitude about themselves. In contrast, many men, particularly older men, have had very little experience living alone and are often quite uncertain about how to manage. If they have custody of the children, they're not terribly adept at maintaining a household for them. They look to marriage as a support system for their day-to-day existence, and therefore are not so willing to endure being single for any length of time. Women—not by choice, but by necessity—are often more willing to do so. I base this statement on the fact that the odds for remarriage are much higher for men than for women at any given age. Women over 30 or 35 have a much more difficult time finding a suitable partner, because of the lower availability of suitable men.

Despite the greater chances for men to remarry, the data are striking in their proof that separation and divorce have more deleterious effects on men than on women. Adversities include mental or physical illness or involvement in homicide, suicide, or fatal accidents. Therefore, on any index used, the effect on men is far greater than that on women. In your study did you evaluate the men who remarried, and did they reveal a history of increased psychological or physical ill effects from the separation or divorce?

We studied the changes that occurred during a two-year period after the divorce in a group of men and women in central Pennsylvania, whether remarried or not. That research revealed some intriguing results, mainly that the initial trauma of divorce is very severe for both men and women, but particularly so for men. The period of recovery is fairly rapid for both sexes. But during the period immediately following separation or divorce, suicidal thoughts, depression, increased levels of drinking, smoking, and gambling were common. There was a great deal of situational pathology that generally subsided within two to four years after the divorce. Individuals who remained stable after divorce seemed to do about as well as those who remarried. This suggests that, in reentering marriage, there are some assets and liabilities that balance each other. For the ones who do very well in the remarriage, there are many benefits, but there may also be a certain amount of stress. The ones who are not doing so well are really in a worse situation than before remarriage. In contrast, many of the people who have not married again have established a set routine and a way of life that has relieved the stressful period they experienced following the divorce.

You said that for many women this is a first experience with living alone and having to take care of themselves, and that for many it involves taking a job for the first time. How many stay in the work force after remarriage?

A great number, because of the great financial burdens in many remarried families. Couples are often supporting two sets of children, sometimes even three: his, hers, and theirs. To help with expenses, many women continue to work and so maintain their newly acquired skills after their second marriage. In many cases work was an issue of conflict in the first
marriage—the husband didn’t want the wife to work. He wanted her to stay at home even though she wanted to work or return to school to start a career. The woman who was forced to stay home during her first marriage is therefore far more likely to continue her career activity after a second marriage. Occasionally, the reverse happens. Some women worked partly because their first marriage wasn’t gratifying, then discover that they’re less interested in working outside of the home after remarriage, and therefore give up their job, if it’s financially feasible.

What do divorced people learn as a result of their marital experiences? Many psychiatrists I know have seen patients who made a mistake in their first marriage and repeated it by choosing a similar spouse in the second marriage. A stereotypic, but exaggerated, case is that of the woman who married an alcoholic, divorced him, married another alcoholic and after she divorced him, married yet a third. How often do people repeat these mistakes?

Many people either improve the chances of marital success by correcting their early mistakes, or they make different mistakes. Some people attempt to correct, but in the process go too far and overcorrect. For example, a person who had a passive, withholding partner may subsequently marry someone who is very active, but perhaps very demanding. There are, to be sure, people who repeat earlier mistakes in a second marriage, but that is true only for a minority.

You make a pertinent point about overcompensatory mistakes and errors in judgment. Can you characterize the type of person who overshoots the mark in the second marriage to overcome the perceived failures of a previous spouse?

It’s generally someone who precipitously entered a second marriage, with fantasies about how to do it better this time—but who used very little reality testing and did not take the time to learn the necessary skills. One can only accomplish that by breaking old habits and making new ones if the new venture is to differ from the first. That takes time, thought, and the willingness to change.

In my practice I have seen newly separated or divorced people choose a partner who is the extreme opposite of the first. For example, a man who had been married to a very sexually inhibited woman subsequently looked for a very sexy, seductive woman. In the process he became frightened of this totally different kind of interaction, and eventually married someone whose sexual desires and demands on him were somewhere between the two extremes.

Some people can accept and are ready for a major change, either because they themselves have changed, or because they’re jolted into being different. Others can shift a little, but not all that much. The case you describe is a fairly familiar pattern, although it is more likely to be played out in the social rather than the sexual arena. For example, a man may have been married to an individual who was a homebody, while he really wanted a more worldly, cosmopolitan wife. But he’ll have to decide to what extent he wants worldliness in his new wife. Here’s a different example: let’s say a man had been married to a very assertive wife, and had himself been very acquiescent. He now marries a partner who is much more compliant. Chances are that he will become more assertive. Some people proceed in this manner partly because they’ve secretly been rehearsing the role that really appeals to them during their first marriage.

People have varied ways of responding to exspouses. Would you discuss some of the ways in which people react to their previous marital partner?

There isn’t a single way of responding to one’s “ex.” There can’t be a single standard of etiquette, because each situation is different. Some spouses virtually never see each other again, and say, “That was an earlier chapter of my life; I have nothing more to do with that person.” The opposite extreme also happens. The exspouses continue a kind of conflict relationship; they simply go on hating each other, and in some sense, this is a retained common bond. Most exspouses probably fit somewhere closer in the middle of the spectrum. They will say, “That person is not significant in my life anymore.” For many divorced people, indeed, that is

continued
true. More rare, and at the other end of the spectrum, are people who retain intimate ties and a close relationship with the former partner but, for a variety of reasons, choose not to be married any more. Most divorced people become indifferent to and have little contact with the former mate. They may retain occasional contact because of children or because they have a long history of living together. A minority, and probably a growing minority, of people who were previously married end the marriage with little acrimony and retain an emotional bond. In such instances, married partners continue to see one another, and occasionally share holidays or other ritual occasions in the company of their children. This probably happens in less than one out of 20 formerly married couples.

Society tends to regard exspouses who maintain an amicable relationship as odd or deviant. Has that been your experience, too?

Yes, definitely. People say about these exspouses “if they can get along now, why didn’t they stay married?” The answer probably is that marriage is a special kind of friendship. It requires not just the ability to get along but a certain fit and the capacity to grow together. There are many people who feel as though their past marriage was frustrating in many respects, even though they still like the expartner, bear no ill will, and indeed, think that he or she is a good person, or a good parent. They therefore don’t see why they should terminate a friendship simply because they no longer want to be married to that individual.

Why do you think that so many people take a dim view of postmarital friendship?

This view reflects the attitude that so long as you can get along with a person, you should stay married, and not end the marriage simply because you’re no longer in love. It is an attitude held especially by those who firmly believe in monogamy. As you are well aware, there are many married couples who stay together but don’t really like each other. They may well reflect the expectations of a society that says, “Many of us are not getting along well, but we stay married. So why don’t you?”

Does divorce and subsequent friendly relations between exspouses constitute a threat to people whose own marriages are somewhat fragile?

Probably yes. On the other hand, as divorce becomes more acceptable, and as joint custody and coparenting become more common, the taboo of being friendly with a former spouse may drop away. Exspouses may eventually even be invited to the same social function. Also, the fact that many divorced people continue to raise children together may encourage them to develop an attitude more conducive to maintaining a positive relationship after divorce.

That would certainly be desirable. What about the tensions, such as rivalry and jealousy, between the new and the exspouse—the ghost in the bedroom feeling?

Some of our interviews revealed that the exspouse often serves a special function in the new marriage—a person who becomes a sort of scapegoat for both partners, to be shared in the new marriage as the common enemy. The new spouse might repeat stories heard about the previous spouse. Derogatory names or epithets may be used: the clown, the bitch, Mr Right, Mr Wrong. On the other hand, quite a few people in the group we studied managed to have cordial, even quite friendly, relations with the former partner. It often depends on how the marriage ended. If the breakup was a mutual decision, both partners realized they’d gone as far as they could go together, and that the divorce was a voluntary act for both. We found in our study that while there were relatively few instances of friendship between former and new spouses, there was a cooperative attitude between the biological and the step-parents in some cases. Reactions ranged from a sympathetic and warm working relationship to rivalry and bitter competition for the child. There is obviously much latitude. We don’t really have any guidelines about how this awkward relationship should be managed. On the one hand, this is a disadvantage, because people don’t have a script to follow. On the other hand, it allows for a good deal of flexibility. Thus, if individuals are well disposed and have a constructive attitude toward each other, and the skills to implement this attitude, they can achieve a cooperative relationship, whether
It's parenting or simply managing the transition from one marriage to the next.

I am currently counseling a remarried couple. When they become angry with each other, each accuses the other of continuing to harbor a strong love relationship with the former spouse. This is one way of getting back at the new partner, but also demanding reassurance. Do you see cases like this?

Yes, that certainly came up in some of the interviews I conducted. Such behavior expresses the myth that your first love is your true and only love, and that any later relationship is merely grafted on. I don't believe that is true. Occasionally a marriage may end because one partner no longer wants it, or feels compelled to leave for some reason. In such cases, there continue to be unresolved, lingering ties. Still, such accusations as you just mentioned are most often simply a sign of insecurity in the new relationship. Even when the current partner seems indifferent to the former spouse, a phone call to that spouse to make arrangements about the children can arouse tremendous jealousy. The same thing can happen in first marriages, when a former love reappears, and unintentionally arouses a good deal of jealousy. I'd say that if there is a good sense of security and trust in a marriage, jealousy poses little threat.

Would you discuss changing patterns as they pertain not only to divorce but to cohabitation prior to marriage?

It has become increasingly common for many couples to spend some time living together before marrying, especially for the second time. In these situations, cohabitation has two effects. One is that it tends to weed out some ill-advised matches, and gives people a chance to explore their capacity for a longer-term commitment. But cohabitation can also be similar to marriage followed by divorce in that people may enter this type of relationship for a while, terminate it, and subsequently try living with someone else. As a general pattern this life-style may actually increase the rate of divorce, because people learn to enter and leave intimate relationships more casually.

What about the difficult problem of parenting when there are children, stepchildren, or perhaps children on both sides?

When a couple have children from each of their former marriages, and have their own children as well, a complex situation exists. In some cases all the children live in the household at the same time, in other families only the children the couple have in common reside there. Life can be very difficult for children and parents alike. There is no simple set of rules to guide the situation. Parenting is an art, and stepparenting may be an even greater art because it calls for a special combination of compassion and detachment difficult to achieve for most individuals. Stepparents have to be able to see the world through the child's eyes, and recognize the dilemmas that children experience when they must choose between, for example, spending Thanksgiving with mother or with father. Feelings of rejection or competition are equally common among step- as well as biological parents. Basic confidence and trust in the relationship are therefore absolutely essential. A stepparent relationship evolves over a long period of time. It cannot happen all at once. Instant stepparenthood is very difficult—it is confusing to both parent and child and can be quite a strain on the couple, because a biological parent may want fervently for a stepparent to feel the same as they do toward the child. Similarly, a stepparent wants the child to have the same feelings for him or her as they do for their biological parent. Occasionally by dint of personality, this happens rather quickly, but most often that process develops only slowly, over time. Both parties are likely to be cautious and tentative with each other. It is inevitably a gradually growing relationship that requires much patience.

It certainly does. I remember one couple—the man had been married before but the woman had not. She was so anxious to be the mother of his children that she tried to move into that role too quickly, and was promptly rejected by the children. Her self-esteem was so diminished that she never fully recovered. As a result, a great deal of antipathy has remained between her and the stepchildren, which has never been resolved.
This situation often occurs when children become, in a sense, the vehicle for the insecurities of the couple entering the second marriage. Effective communication between the new partners and realistic expectations about how much one can expect from a child are essential ingredients for success in these situations. Children often feel controlled by these changes, and may become remote emotionally. Even if they're not emotionally distant, they will conduct their new relationships very tentatively and cautiously.

I recently encountered a couple with seven teenage stepchildren—four on one side and three on the other. Their household was chaos. I always felt as if I were helping these people negotiate rapids in a flimsy canoe. It was a difficult task for me—structure was hard to distinguish at all.

Considering the many difficulties, it is remarkable to see so many couples and children who do very well—in these circumstances. Many children adjust to the new situation and develop friendly relationships and even very strong attachments to the stepparents. It depends partly on the child's age. Younger children have expectations that are different from those of adolescents. The most difficult age is probably somewhere between the two. The preadolescent child can't quite develop the bonding and the attachment that is possible at younger ages, and yet doesn't have the high expectations of adolescents with whom very intimate relation-

ships may be possible.

Based on my findings to date, there is no question that divorce has a very pronounced and initially traumatic impact on children. It also seems clear that most children recover rather well.

Only a relatively small number of children continue to have a very difficult time. Some are vulnerable to begin with, or are in chronically difficult situations that range from a high-conflict marriage to a high-conflict stepfamily; they are tossed out of the frying pan into the fire.

But for many other adults and children, divorce is not only a problem, but a solution to an earlier major problem. If the divorce reduces severe conflicts in the lives of the parents it is likely to have a salutary effect on the children as well. Our research showed that the children of divorce are somewhat different, but not very different from children who live with two biological parents. Generally speaking, it is amazing that divorce doesn't have more of a long-lasting traumatic effect on many children than it seems to have, at least, over the long term.

We've always said that an early, amicable divorce may be less traumatic for children than a long, drawn out, emotional divorce.

We have to bear in mind that there are many different kinds of divorce. A child who sees a close and familiar figure suddenly and inexplicably disappear, suffers immediate trauma and most likely lasting emotional damage. The only possible way to lessen the immediate despair and distress for such youngsters is to ensure continuity of the relationship between the child and the departing parent.