



## WHERE IS THE FAMILY GOING?

*by George Levinger*

Imagine, for a moment, two contrasting models of society. In Society X, all marriages last for a lifetime. In Society Y, no marriages are allowed to continue beyond the partners' fourth wedding anniversary. In the first society, the barrier against family breakup is very strong; in the second, there is no barrier.

Society X assumes a stability which has not been uncommon in the history of the Western family; even today, it remains the ideal in much of America and in many regions of the world. The marital vow is here considered sacred; it represents a contract not only on earth, but also in heaven. The vow creates a bond between man and wife; it also ties together irrevocably two families and their communities. In Society X, one's marriage is as important as one's birth and death. The spouse becomes, in all likelihood, the mother or father of all one's children; only in widowhood does one continue living without the partner.

Family relationships in Society X are remarkably stable. Once allied through the nuptial bond, kinship lines are unbroken unless death comes before there are children; the couple is part of a larger clan—of parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and nephews. The adventurous may find such social stability excessively static; they may feel oppressed by the pressures of family and community.

Now consider a society where family relations are founded on instability. Society Y emphasizes the individual's mobility and readiness to cut ties of intimacy, and the exploration of many successive personal relationships. In Society Y, all marriages by law are temporary; if and when they attain the statutory four-year limit, their warranty expires and they become officially null. One's marriage is like a four-year college course or a stint in the army.

The recurrent dissolution of intimate relationships in Society

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Y makes its citizens more dependent on larger institutions—government, corporations, unions. It encourages job changes and geographical shifts. The care of children, their financial support, and their assimilation into adult society become to a large extent the responsibility of the state. So do the care and comfort of aging parents or ex-spouses. Neighborhood and family ties fade.

While citizens of Society Y believe that this system enables them to “maximize self-growth” and “fulfill personal happiness,” the total society is also affected. Adults are so busy with the formation, maintenance, and termination of personal relationships that they pay little heed to the workings of the larger community; left in charge is a managerial elite.

While Societies X and Y present almost polar opposites, they do share one common property. Both illustrate the effect of the rigid application of rules that may fit reality under some conditions but become sources of strain or even social pathology under other conditions.

A flat ban on divorce may make sense in a tightly knit society where there is little geographic movement, great homogeneity among eligible partners, and little change in people's tastes or opportunities over the course of their lives. But if the same injunction remains intact in a culture of instability and impersonality—such as modern Western urban culture—the prohibition itself may become a source of marital strain. Despite formal adherence to the marriage contract, the frequency of informal violations—infidelity, desertion, separation—goes up. For example, in Catholic Italy, before divorce was legalized, some observers estimated that 40,000 de facto divorces occurred annually in the 1950s.

Similarly, Society Y's prescription of regular breakup—which some contemporary writers appear almost to advocate—is also likely to be intolerable. It may fit a kind of Brave New World where all adults move to new locations every four years, where childbirth is highly restricted and child-rearing is an impersonal function. But where such conditions do not prevail, a ban on

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permanent marriage would be oppressive.

In short, marriage and family—which involve our most personal relationships—are inseparable from the nature of the society in which they exist. High divorce rates in the America of the 1970s reflect far more than the aggregate of individual choices and actions or fluctuations in social mores. They also reflect broad changes in economic conditions, social mobility, and technology.

But the interplay of these forces is extremely difficult to disentangle. We have demographic and economic data; we have polls showing changes in attitudes toward marriage; we have statistics on church attendance, divorce decrees, welfare rolls; we have studies of divorcées in Boston; we have national studies of “happiness” by researchers in Michigan and analyses underway elsewhere of the effects of new “no-fault” divorce laws. But such studies vary greatly in their scope, method, and conclusions.

We don't have answers to some basic questions. Are the increases in divorce rates due mostly to (1) a lowering of barriers around the marital relationship, (2) a lowering of the attractiveness of staying married, or (3) a rise in the attractiveness of alternatives outside of marriage?\*

### **The Eroding Barriers**

We know that American divorce laws have been liberalized over the past half-century and that attitudes toward marriage have changed. According to a 1974 Roper Survey, some 60 per cent of all Americans believe in divorce as “a way out of a marriage that isn't working.” No good media research studies seem to be available, but analyses of trends in news coverage, popular fiction, and television dramas would probably show a large increase in sympathetic or neutral portrayals of divorce over the last three decades. We also know that divorced American politicians are no longer disqualified in the eyes of voters from seeking election or reelection.

It is likely that, today, spouses' feelings of obligation toward marriage are lower than those of previous generations. For some people, this decline may be related to their own experience of

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\*My own social-psychological approach to divorce and separation assumes that people stay in marriages because (a) they are attracted to them and/or (b) they are barred from leaving them by law, custom, or economic penalties. Furthermore, I assume that, consciously or not, men and women compare a current relationship with alternative ones. If the internal attractions and the barriers surrounding the present relationship become distinctly weaker than those of a promising alternative, the result is apt to be breakup. This theoretical perspective translates the effects of cultural trends, social pressures, or economic shocks into psychological forces experienced by individuals or couples.

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divorce. Others' attitudes may be shaped by a history of divorce in their parents' marriage. Indeed, an increasing proportion of American children whose parents have been separated are growing up—children who are therefore less likely to expect a permanent marriage in their own future. In a 1976 analysis of national survey data, two Iowa sociologists, Hallowell Pope and Charles W. Mueller, found that children from homes broken by divorce were slightly more likely to go through divorce in their own marriages than were those who grew up in intact homes or in homes broken by a parent's death. This "intergenerational transmission effect" of divorce rates is not yet well understood; obviously, if this effect were found to be stronger, the impact over time on American society could be considerable.

### The Ties That Bind

Another past "barrier" to family breakup has been the spouses' religious beliefs. Practicing Catholics, Jews, and conservative Protestants have tended to have far lower divorce rates than non-church attenders, according to reputable data. As religious orthodoxy weakens, so does the churches' overall influence in holding marriages together.

If barriers to divorce have grown weaker, have marriages also become less attractive? Who knows? There are few good data to answer that question. The more extreme representatives of the women's liberation movement, as well as certain popular male writers, argue variously that conventional marriage is repressive for women and inhibiting for men. Nevertheless, judging by the polls, the average American views "getting married" as less important to a successful life than was the case decades or centuries ago. Almost all young people today still aspire to get married *eventually*, and most divorced people try to get remarried (although more men than women succeed). Most Americans—men and women alike—expect their spouses to continue being in love, to remain sexually compatible, to enjoy similar interests and activities, and to resolve all conflicts through honest communication. However, research on "happiness" suggests that the early peak experiences are eventually followed by a slide toward a more prosaic routine which does not match earlier expectations.

If Americans in the 1970s tend to demand more of a "good" marriage, they may also be quicker to rate a marriage as "bad." In the 1974 Roper Survey, for example, about half of all respondents said that a *sufficient reason* for considering divorce is "no longer being in love"; agreeing with that statement were 59 per

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cent among 18-29-year-olds, and 45 per cent among 50-59-year-olds. While younger people revealed somewhat higher expectations than older people, all segments of our society placed high demands on marriage, demands that are often hard to meet in the real world of jobs, children, and installment payments.

On a more concrete level, census and other survey data show clear evidence that a husband's low income and low employment stability are associated with marital instability. For example, Phillips Cutright, in a 1971 analysis of 1960 U.S. census data, found that a husband's income was a far clearer clue to intact marriage than either his occupation or his education. In a more recent analysis, sociologist Andrew Cherlin found a husband's job stability to be even more important than his income. So did Heather Ross and Isabel Sawhill in their 1975 analysis of data from the University of Michigan's *Panel Study of Income Dynamics*. They concluded that layoffs, discrimination, and marginal employment help explain high marital breakup rates among low-income blacks.

### What Makes the Grass Greener?

Even if a marriage seems unattractive and the costs of terminating it are low, it will not be broken unless some alternative becomes more attractive, unless the grass looks greener elsewhere. What, then, are the social forces that have enhanced alternative attractions?

Oddly enough, researchers have only recently recognized that the husband's income and employment are only one part of the divorce picture. As women's own income-earning opportunities have risen, as their aspirations to independence have climbed, they have become able to consider divorces that earlier seemed financially impossible.\* Other research indicated that a wife's independent income at all economic levels is correlated with a propensity toward divorce; my own research at a divorce court in Cleveland, Ohio, indicated that female divorce applicants who earned wages were significantly less likely to dismiss their divorce suits than were those who did not. Hence, the rising participation of married women in the labor force, especially in the professions, seems likely to have future impact on family stability. Again, no one knows what offsetting effects might also occur.

Because state or federal programs of aid to dependent children subsidize low-income, one-parent families, but not low-

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\*According to survey data analyzed by Cherlin in 1976 and other data reported by Ross and Sawhill in 1975.

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income, two-parent families, another potential economic incentive is provided for marital breakup. But Oliver C. Moles's analysis of 1960-1970 welfare programs suggests that any link between divorce and the level of welfare payments is tenuous at best. Others, notably Ross and Sawhill, have suggested that rather than promoting marital breakups, such payments may tend to deter already-separated welfare mothers from seeking remarriage to the available men whose low incomes may not match government support to single mothers.

At all income levels, the divorced or separated woman no longer suffers the social stigma of two decades ago. If we believe evidence that divorce rates rise with the social acceptability of divorcées, then this shift signals another important weakening of barriers to divorce.

The ethic of "self-actualization" is important, too. Not only in the literature of the women's movement, but in Western cultures generally, we have witnessed a rising desire to pursue individual happiness, variously defined. The achievement of "self-growth" in career or in romance often seems to conflict with continued obligations to those others who are near and dear. Like Hollywood stars, American middle-class spouses may seek out external opportunities or pursue the paradox of an "open marriage," and thereby fatally neglect their existing obligations.

### Curbing Breakups

Let us now look at the other side of the issue. What social policies act to keep down the rate of marital breakup? While easier divorce and separation may provide American society with necessary escape valves, their benefits may eventually become lower than their costs—costs to children, to family and friends, to the social fabric, and especially to the ex-partners themselves. And these costs, variously perceived, have already elicited public declarations from politicians, church leaders, and academics in favor of "preserving the family."

If increasing legal permissiveness (such as "no-fault" divorce) over the past decade has tended to erode the barriers against divorce, a reversal would tend to raise them. In some totalitarian societies—such as the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China—reversals of policy have indeed occurred. After an early post-revolutionary period of official permissiveness, government policy changed to make divorce difficult and unlikely.\*

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\*Soviet policy shifted again; the Russians now have a "Western" divorce rate.

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American social policy lacks coherence; it is, instead, a contradictory patchwork attempting to satisfy competing interests. If divorce is tolerated, or even tacitly encouraged, by local social custom in Beverly Hills, on Park Avenue, or in Watts, there are many communities where more traditional views prevail. Few Americans, it may be assumed, are in favor of going all the way back to something like Society X. But if divorce trends continue, some reaction in social and legal policy may indeed occur during the next decade, if only to ward off the spectre of something like Society Y.

Perhaps the most palatable device for increasing the seriousness of marital commitments would be to make it more difficult for people to get married in the first place. Increasing the obstacles to "quickie" marriage may merit some social experimentation—raising the legal age for marriage or requiring lengthy engagements, for example. Making it harder to marry might force men and women to consider marriage more carefully and enable them to predict better what their marriage would be like.

An obvious major contributor to disruption of American families is economic instability, as we have seen. Subsidies that would support two-parent families (as distinguished from one-parent families headed by the mother) might help increase the attractiveness of remaining married for low-income people with children. Such a policy might be part of a federal program of reducing extreme financial distress in general—notably by increasing low incomes. We do not know if money alone would lessen the high breakup rate in poor families; we only know that the poor divorce more than the non-poor.

### A Hazy Picture

Finally, a "psychological" note. The current hazy picture of personal and social dissatisfaction suggests that many Americans' "interpersonal expectations" have risen faster than the ability to meet them. Is it possible to foresee political leadership that will, among other goals, seek to encourage American men and women to become more realistic in their expectations, and hence lower the risk of disillusionment?

One doubts it. The United States is still a country heavily committed to optimism, personal enhancement, and change for the better. Moreover, the constant thrust of political rhetoric and consumer advertising, of themes in women's magazines and television drama, is to stir great expectations, to create confidence in quick remedies ("fast, fast, *fast* relief"), and to evoke visions of

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a richer life for all. Such visions, indeed, are implicit in much of the "advocacy" research dealing with marriage, divorce, and the changing socioeconomic role of men and women. We may be in for continuing tumult.

Already, conflicting views of the family and its future are reflected (and often distorted) in the current debates over abortion laws, the Equal Rights Amendment, "no-fault" divorce legislation, day-care programs, and welfare reform. But as I have indicated in this essay, serious gaps still exist in scholarly knowledge of the social causes and effects of family disruption. We know some important statistics. We know America is somewhere between Society X and Society Y; but exactly where we are headed, and why, remains largely conjectural. In any case, when a national debate on family policy begins, as it surely will if present divorce trends persist, none of us should overestimate the efficacy of policy-makers in hastening or reversing changes in the role and structure of the American family.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Listed below are specialized studies cited in this essay or otherwise worthy of note:

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"Differentials in Marital Instability: 1970" by L. L. Bumpass and J. A. Sweet, in *American Sociological Review* (no. 37, 1972).

"Social and Economic Determinants of Marital Separation" by Andrew Cherlin, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles (1976).

"Income and Family Events: Marital Stability" by P. Cutright, in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (no. 33, 1971).

"Marital Satisfaction and Instability: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Divorce Rates" by W. J. Goode, in *International Social Science Journal* (no. 14, 1962).

"Boys in Fatherless Families" by E. Herzog and C. E. Sudia, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Children's Bureau (U.S. Government Printing Office: no. 72-33, 1971).

"The Aftermath of Divorce" by Mavis Hetherington, paper presented at the 1976 meeting of the American Psychological Association.

"The Intergenerational Transmission of Marital Instability: Comparisons by Race and Sex" by Hollowell Pope and Charles W. Mueller, in *Journal of Social Issues* (vol. 32, no. 1, 1976).

"Marital Instability by Race and Income, Based on 1960 Census Data" by J. R. Udry, in *American Journal of Sociology* (no. 6, 1967).

"Effects of Parental Divorce: Experiences of the Child in Early Latency" by J. Wallerstein and J. Kelly, paper presented at the 1975 meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association.

