

# Marriage in America

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## The State of Marriage in America

*Martin King Whyte*

In recent years a wide-ranging debate has erupted about the state of the American family, particularly about the present health and future prospects of the central building block of family life in society, the institution of marriage. Whereas in earlier eras those who saw signs of family decline were countered by other observers who interpreted family trends in neutral, evolutionary terms or even as indicating progress,<sup>1</sup> in the 1980s and 1990s the pessimists have far outnumbered the optimists. High levels of divorce, the rise of premarital cohabitation, declining marriage rates, increased births out of wedlock, and other trends have given rise to increasing fears that marriage might be on its way to becoming simply one of a number of "lifestyle options" in America.<sup>2</sup> Debate has raged about the accuracy of this diagnosis, the causes of the trends involved, and the long-term consequences for America of a weakened institution of marriage. Once again, few analysts can be found who argue that America would be a better place if marriage as an institution becomes still weaker and more brittle.<sup>3</sup> Yet even with a growing consensus that the decline of American marriage constitutes a serious problem, there has been precious little agreement on whether anything can be done to reverse these worrisome trends, and if so what.<sup>4</sup> The chapters that follow represent an attempt to grapple with these troubling questions.

The contributions to this volume share a number of concerns and assumptions. From a reading of the available evidence, some of which will be briefly reviewed here, we assume that marriage is an institution worth supporting and that American society would be better off if marriages were more common, long-lasting, and satisfying. In particular, we accept the basic view that the declining popularity and increasing brittleness of American marriages impose social costs, particularly by endangering the prospects that children will be raised so that they become competent, happy, and productive adults. Thus, it is particularly in terms of the ability to provide a supportive environment in which to raise our children that

we think proposals to provide better support for the institution of marriage in America must be evaluated.

We also do not assume that the forces buffeting American marriages are so powerful that nothing can be done. In other words, we assume that if problems with American marriages exist, there must be things that can be done to help address those problems and create more supportive conditions for satisfying and long-lasting marriages. However, we did not start this initiative with any pet list of new family policies and practices. Rather, the purpose of the 1996 conference mentioned in the preface, and of subsequent efforts to supplement the papers from that conference with other contributions, was to examine in some depth a variety of potential approaches to see whether some seemed more feasible and desirable than others.

One final basic assumption guided this effort. We do not assume that it is either desirable or possible to turn back the clock to recapture the family patterns of the 1950s or earlier, with male breadwinners and dependent housewives once again the norm. Although rising female employment and growing gender equality are arguably among the major causes of worrisome recent family trends, including the rise in the divorce rate,<sup>5</sup> we are seeking ways to strengthen marriages without undermining the recent gains that women have made in society. Thus, we are assuming that what Pepper Schwartz refers to as "peer marriages" do not have to be brittle and unsatisfying marriages. The trick is to find new policies and practices that will help provide a more supportive atmosphere for long-lasting marriages without undermining the chances for wife-husband equality. In pursuing this agenda, we consider a wide range of ideas, as the chapters in this volume will show, although we cannot claim to have exhausted all of the possibilities. Indeed, we see the goal of this volume not as ending the discussion but as stimulating further debate and the consideration of these and other innovative approaches to strengthening American marriage as an institution.

At first glance the timing of the recent debate about the state of American marriage, and about the high divorce rate in particular, may seem odd. Broadly speaking, the American divorce rate has been rising during most periods for roughly a century and a half.<sup>6</sup> However, for much of this time the rise was gradual and irregular, with occasional reversals and lowered rates. Then a much more rapid and dramatic rise in divorce frequency began, starting during the 1960s. For two decades rates of divorce in America climbed rapidly, so that in 1980 there were roughly three times as many divorces as two decades earlier, and the likelihood of newlyweds ending up in divorce court had risen from roughly 25 to 50 percent or even higher. However, since the early 1980s the divorce rate has stabilized and even declined slightly—from 5.2 divorces per thousand population in 1980 to 4.4 per thousand in 1995.<sup>7</sup> Why, if the rate of divorce in America peaked almost two decades ago, has the debate over what to do about the high divorce rate escalated much more recently?

At least three factors contribute to this lag between the peaks of divorce in America and debates about what to do about high divorce rates. The first factor involves the rising influence of conservative religious forces in American politics in the 1980s and 1990s and the social agendas and debates about "family values" that this shift has produced. Whether through Vice President Dan Quayle's attack on the unwed motherhood of TV character Murphy Brown or the calls for marital fidelity championed in revival meetings of the Promise Keepers, these voices have helped focus national attention as never before on trends in American family life.<sup>8</sup> These trends have thrust our high divorce rate to the center of national attention.

The second contributing factor is an increased recognition of the cumulative effect of a sustained high divorce rate, in combination with other trends, even if that rate is no longer climbing year by year. The effect of most relevance here is what this means for America's children. With more than one million divorces occurring in America every year for the past two decades, and with a sharp rise in births out of wedlock, the chances that a child will grow up in a "stable, two-parent family" have declined markedly (and have continued to decline in the 1980s and 1990s, despite the stabilization in the divorce rate). According to one set of estimates, white children born in 1950 had a 19 percent chance of spending some period of time in a single-parent family prior to age seventeen, and for blacks the probability was 48 percent. For a child born in 1980, these probabilities were projected to increase to 70 percent and 94 percent, respectively!<sup>9</sup> Although the size of this shift is not due to brittle marriages alone but increasingly to births to unwed mothers as well, the sheer magnitude of the shift to which the high divorce rate has contributed evokes mounting concern. These sorts of statistics give rise to the conclusion that, even if the divorce rate is no longer climbing annually, divorce in America still qualifies as an "epidemic."<sup>10</sup>

The third and perhaps most significant factor in the recent rise in public concern about divorce in America is the accumulating evidence on the social costs of high divorce, particularly for America's children. Until relatively recently, much of the available scientific evidence discounted the potential costs of divorce in several ways. It is worth reviewing briefly this earlier consensus of research results before discussing how it has been challenged recently.

Critics of divorce generally argue that children whose parents divorce are likely to be harmed in several ways. First, the trauma of divorce itself is likely to cause psychological problems for the child and even lead some children to blame themselves for the breakup of their parents' marriage. Second, after the divorce, most children lack the daily role model and disciplinary influence of their non-custodial parent (most often the father), and their custodial parent will be hard-pressed to guide and supervise them adequately, making disciplinary and motivational problems more likely. Third, divorce often produces downward mobility economically, particularly for a divorced mother who has custody of young chil-

dren, and children newly thrust into poverty are less well equipped to succeed in academic and other competitions than children in better-off, two-parent families.

In the earlier research consensus, several arguments were used to discount these dangers. Most studies showed that the immediate psychological pain of divorce was short-lived for the children, who tended to recover rapidly and showed few long-term emotional scars. Furthermore, if the alternative to divorce was parents who stayed married but constantly argued and fought, most analysts argued that divorce would be less harmful to the children.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the best of all worlds might be to grow up with happily married parents, but if that is not possible, then growing up in a single-parent home is better than in an intact but rancorous or even violent home. Furthermore, rates of remarriage tended to be high (family sociology textbooks often claimed that about three-fourths of husbands and two-thirds of wives remarried within five years), so that most children would not have to remain in a single-parent family into adulthood. Within a few years, a stepparent might appear on the scene to provide an acceptable substitute for the guidance and discipline (not to mention earnings) once provided by the divorced and now absent parent. Finally, in addressing the "economic harm" claim, many analysts pointed out that what harmed children's ability to make their way into successful adulthood was not divorce itself but poverty, and that if you controlled for the effect of income level, children who lived with one parent did just as well in school and in other realms as did children raised by two parents. If divorce led to impoverishment, then the solution was not to limit divorce but to find ways to prevent such impoverishment, such as through fairer child support policies and more effective payment enforcement systems (a major concern in part 3 of this book).

In other words, many analysts until recently argued that the impact of divorce on children was either neutral, harmful but temporary, or even beneficial. With the potential harm of divorce to children thus discounted, the interests and desires of the spouses themselves could be the determining consideration. Given this perspective, rising divorce could be seen benignly as indicating that more and more spouses were getting out of unhappy marriages and trying again, without creating long-term social costs and damage to their children. Indeed, if they succeeded in finding a more satisfactory mate, the result of a higher divorce rate could be interpreted as promoting greater marital happiness, with individuals no longer "stuck" in unsatisfying or even violent marriages. Children would presumably benefit as well by being raised by a parent and stepparent who are happily (re)married.

This "conventional wisdom" regarding the benign nature of divorce has been upset by more recent research that challenges its basic assumptions, and this new research has led to a revival of support for the view that divorce often harms children. Some of this research emphasizes shifts in popular behavior that weaken the claim that divorce causes only temporary problems. For example, the remarriage rate has fallen in recent years, so that one can no longer so readily assume that most children of divorce will end up living with two parents again after an interlude.

However, the most sweeping challenge to the "divorce as benign" view comes from careful research that shows that children who are living with only one parent (whether through divorce or through the parent not marrying in the first place) do more poorly in a wide range of outcomes (e.g., high school grades, graduation rates, college enrollment, employment, teenage pregnancy) than children who live with both parents, even when income, race, and other influences are taken into account. Furthermore, this new research indicates that a stepparent is not an acceptable substitute for an absent parent. Children who live with a parent and stepparent do not fare much better than children who live with a single parent.<sup>12</sup> Children in single-parent homes with moderate and even high incomes do not fare as well as children at the same economic levels who live with both parents. Exactly what social and psychological mechanisms translate single parenthood into multiple deficits for children are not entirely clear in this new research, but it has led to new alarm about the social costs of high divorce rates (as well as high rates of birth out of wedlock).<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, these recent trends have produced a situation in which the apparent leveling off of America's high divorce rate has produced not complacency but heightened concern. If large proportions of children are spending a significant part of their formative years in what used to be called "broken homes," and if the best evidence available now indicates that this experience is not benign but is often harmful to them and their future lives, shouldn't we try to do something about it? And if so, what sorts of things should we do? The chapters in this volume are dedicated to exploring a variety of things that might help produce a more supportive environment for American marriages and reduce the harm to children if the parents do divorce.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. See the informative reviews in Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Mary Jo Bane, *Here to Stay: American Families in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).
2. See the discussion in David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies* (New York: Aldine, 1989). See also David Popenoe, "American Family Decline, 1960-1990: A Review and Appraisal," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55 (1993):527-42; Council on Families in America, *Marriage in America* (New York: Institute for American Values, 1995); David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshstain, and David Blankenhorn, eds., *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).
3. For an iconoclastic exception to this generalization, see Barrington Moore Jr., "Thoughts on the Future of the Family," from his book, *Political Power and Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 160-78.
4. See, for example, the skeptical views presented in Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., "Family Change and the Welfare of Children: What Do We Know and What Can We Do about

It?" in *Gender and Family Change in Industrialized Countries*, ed. Karen Mason and An-Magritt Jensen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

5. See the discussion in Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest*; Andrew Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Steven Ruggles, "The Rise of Divorce and Separation in the United States, 1880-1990," *Demography* 34 (1997): 455-66.

6. See figure 1-5 in Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, p. 21.

7. Furthermore, the leveling off of the divorce rate is not a consequence of the fact that the average age at marriage has increased since the 1960s (given the fact that those who marry young are most likely to divorce). See the evidence presented in Joshua Goldstein, "The Leveling of Divorce in the United States," *Demography* 36 (1999): 409-14.

8. See, for example, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993, 47-84.

9. Sandra Hofferth, "Updating Children's Life Course," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (1985): 93-115. To look at the same trend from the other side, the total time spent by white children born in 1950 living with both parents between ages zero and seventeen was 92 percent; for black children born in the same year, 78 percent. For children born in 1980, these figures were projected to be reduced to 69 percent and 41 percent, respectively. Hofferth more recently commented (personal communication to the author, October 22, 1999) that she thought that her 1985 projections might have been overstated by perhaps 5 to 10 percent for whites but were rather accurate for blacks. It should be noted, however, that children being raised by a single parent in a significant minority of cases have at least one other adult present in the household and presumably helping with the childrearing—most often a cohabiting partner of the parent or a grandparent. One recent study indicates that close to one-third of all children being raised by a single parent in the early 1980s in fact had other adults in the home. See Larry L. Bumpass and R. Kelly Raley, "Redefining Single-Parent Families: Cohabitation and Changing Family Reality," *Demography* 32 (1995): 97-109.

10. In comparative context, the United States has for some time had the highest divorce rate of any modern nation, although Popenoe contends that if we take into account the dissolution of Swedish unions that do not involve formal marriage, Sweden might be number one. See Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest*.

11. See the review in Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*. However, for an alternative view, suggesting that children whose parents divorce suffer longer-term psychological problems, see Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade after Divorce* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989).

12. See, in particular, Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); and the review of evidence presented in David Popenoe, *Life without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

13. The work reported by McLanahan and Sandefur, and several similar recent studies, are mostly the product of demographic analysis, and the data used do not contain clinical observations and other evidence that would enrich our understanding of the underlying mechanisms involved. We also do not yet have good evidence about how adequately grandparents and others who not infrequently assist or even reside with the single parent

can compensate for the absent parent, but given the negative evidence presented about the role of a stepparent, the comfortable assumption that any other adult to help out will do seems unwarranted. Indeed, McLanahan and Sandefur found in their research (*Growing Up*, pp. 74-75) that children growing up in a home with a single mother and a grandmother were just as likely to have a teen birth, and even more likely to drop out of high school, than children living only with a single mother.

14. Arguably the rising proportion of Americans who never marry and the rise in non-marital fertility are as much or more a source of concern than marriages that end in divorce. However, the focus of the present volume is on how to create more supportive conditions for existing marriages and how to minimize the personal and social costs when the marriage breaks up, rather than on initiatives that might make the unmarried more eager to head toward the altar.