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Marriage Today: Exploring the Incongruence Between Americans' Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

This paper provides a literature review of the incongruence between American beliefs and practices regarding marriage. In Western cultures such as the United States, marriage is conceptualized as a monogamous, lifelong partnership. Yet American practices do not support this conceptualization, which is evidenced by infidelity and divorce rates that approximate 25-50 percent. This paper explores this incongruence and examines how sociocultural shifts in marital practices have contributed to higher rates of infidelity and divorce. It concludes with a discussion of future research needed in this area, particularly to examine newlyweds' conceptions of marriage. If newlyweds enter marriage with the expectation of infidelity and/or divorce, the American conceptualization of marriage as a monogamous, lifelong partnership might require redefinition.

Keywords: marital beliefs, marital expectations, infidelity, divorce

Americans marry for love. This statement may not surprise most people, but when placed in a historical context, the idea of marrying for love is unusual (Coontz, 2005). Prior to the mid 1800s, the majority of people married for social, economic, or political reasons (Coontz, 2005; Pinsof, 2002). Marriage partners were not chosen by the individuals getting married but by their family members. After the Industrial Revolution, the basis of marriage began shifting toward love and personal fulfillment, and social and political leaders feared that the institution of marriage was in jeopardy. Indeed, marriages based on love and personal choice are more fragile and unstable than marriages based on social, economic, or political motives. When love fades, infidelity and divorce become viable options. Infidelity and divorce rates reinforce this point. Depending on how infidelity is defined, estimates indicate that 25-65% of men and 15-55% of women will participate in it at some point throughout the course of their marriage (Gass & Nichols, 1988; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), and that 50% of first marriages end in divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; National Center for Health Statistics, 2004).

The shift in the purpose of marriage is not the only factor that has led to high rates of infidelity and divorce. Other changes such as the increasing human lifespan have created longer marriages and greater opportunity for infidelity or divorce to occur. As the human lifespan and length of marriage increased, divorce came to outrank death as the main reason for marital termination (Pinsof, 2002). In 1900, two-thirds of marriages ended with the death of one partner, particularly when women died during childbirth. However, by 1974, divorce outranked death as the most common way to terminate a marriage (Pinsof, 2002). By the end of the 20th century, divorce was considered both a common and culturally acceptable way to terminate marriage.

Cultural norms related to unmarried sex, cohabitation, and childrearing have also changed in recent years (Bachrach, Hindin, & Thomson, 2002; Ingoldsby, 2002; Putnam, 2000;

Stanfield & Stanfield, 1997). Prior to 1960, it was culturally stigmatized to engage in these practices outside of marriage. The 1960s provide a good marker to make comparisons with because although intimate beliefs and practices began changing around the start of the century, the most rapid changes began circa 1960 (Popenoe, 1993). For instance, Americans today are significantly more likely to approve of and practice sex outside the context of marriage (Axxin & Thornton, 2002). Cohabitation was considered inappropriate in 1960 when only 5% of adults took part in such living arrangements. Today, approximately half of all adults will cohabit at some point in their lives and 32% of households in the U.S. currently consist of an unmarried man and woman (Ingoldsby, 2002; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Since 1970, the number of cohabiting Americans has increased by 400 percent. Out-of-wedlock childbearing has also increased tremendously from 1960 when only 5% of babies were born outside of marriage, to today with one-third of all babies being born to unwed mothers (Bachu, 1999; Qian, Lichter, & Mellott, 2005).

Although marriage is more unstable than ever, Americans continue to marry in large numbers. It is expected that 85% of adults in the U.S. will marry at some point in their life (Bachrach et al., 2002; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004) and 94% of Americans expect to marry an ideal partner or their “soul mate” (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). In fact, Americans marry at higher rates than people in all other parts of the world (Rutter & Schwartz, 2000). It is likely that Americans marry with good intentions: they hope to maintain a monogamous, lifelong partnership with the person they love. In other words, they marry “for better or worse, till death do [they] part”. Yet, given the high rates of infidelity and divorce, there appears to be incongruence in the way Americans *conceptualize* marriage (i.e., as a monogamous, lifelong partnership) and how they *behave* in marriage (i.e., infidelity and divorce). This paper presents

what is currently known about Americans' beliefs and practices toward marriage, infidelity, and divorce. The discussion is framed in a sociohistorical context, focusing on how today's patterns are different from the past. The paper concludes with suggestions for research in this area.

Marriage

Although Americans conceptualize marriage as lasting "till death do us part", their practices state otherwise (Pinsof, 2002). In this section, information will be presented to help understand the incongruence between American beliefs and practices related to marriage. The section will first provide a definition of marriage that is common in Western societies. Next, literature about the purpose of marriage and the incongruence between marital beliefs and practices will be reviewed.

Defining Marriage

In the context of this paper, marriage is defined as a "mutual and voluntary commitment to a lifelong, monogamous partnership" (Pinsof, 2002, p. 137). This cultural definition of marriage is most relevant to people in Western societies such as North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. According to this definition, it is assumed that partners love one another and have made a personal choice to enter the marital union (Pinsof, 2002).

Purpose of Marriage

In Western societies, the purpose of marriage is personal fulfillment. Marriage is largely based on love and happiness, and may also involve political, social, and/or economic benefits (Coontz, 2005; Ingoldsby, 2002; Pinsof, 2002). In the past however, partners did not marry for love. From the Colonial period through the mid-1800s when the Industrial Revolution took place, the primary basis for marriage in the U.S. was financial gain (Ingoldsby, 2002). Women were valued for their contributions to their husbands' business and for performing domestic

tasks, including childrearing. They typically did not work outside the home, and were dependent on their husbands for financial security (Pinsof, 2002). Men were valued for their ability to provide financially for their families and benefited economically from marriage because they had a wife to perform domestic duties, which saved them time and money. After the Industrial Revolution, and especially circa 1920 when the automobile became popular, individuals had more freedom to date and spend private time with the opposite sex prior to marriage (Ingoldsby, 2002). This resulted in greater premarital companionship and sexual activity, which led people to select marital partners for romantic love rather than financial gain.

Commitment framework. One way to conceptualize the purpose of marriage is with a theoretical framework developed by Johnson (1999). Johnson proposed that individuals commit to relationships for three distinct reasons: personal, constraint, or moral reasons. Personal commitment means a person is involved in a relationship because they *want* to be and because they find the relationship rewarding. Constraint commitment refers to the idea that people remain in a relationship because they feel they *have* to. Reasons for feeling constrained in a relationship could include financial dependence or social pressure to stay together. Moral commitment involves feeling that one *ought* to persist in a relationship because of promises made to a partner or God. These individuals believe in the sanctity of marriage and view commitment to their partner as a social or religious responsibility. They are likely to stay together, even when satisfaction is low (Johnson, 1999). As Coontz (2005) noted in her historical analysis of marital practices, the majority of Americans today marry for personal commitment, which is one reason for the relative instability of marriage. With satisfaction as the primary basis for marriage, individuals are more likely to commit infidelity or divorce when satisfaction declines. In the past however (i.e. prior to the mid 1800s), the majority of marriages stayed together for constraint

reasons. That is, individuals stayed with their partners because of economic, social, or political pressures (Coontz, 2005).

Summary. Overall then, marriage has shifted from being an institution that benefited families' economic, social, and political positions to an institution based on personal choice and fulfillment. Today, individuals select their own marital partners and they marry for love.

According to Johnson's (1999) commitment framework, this would be considered a shift from social or constraint commitment to personal commitment. Individuals marry and stay married because they *want* to, not because they *have* to. The next section focuses on the incongruence between marital beliefs and practices. Researchers recognize that marital instability is largely due to the emphasis placed on love, but it has also resulted from changes in people's practices (i.e., unmarried sex, cohabitation, and childrearing) over time.

Marital Attitudes

It seems natural to assume that people's attitudes about marriage would match up with their practices. The literature largely supports this view (Axinn & Thornton, 2002). As noted in the introduction, many practices such as unmarried sex, non-marital cohabitation, and childbearing outside marriage have become increasingly common. And indeed, Americans today are significantly more likely to approve of these practices (Axinn & Thornton, 2002; Barich & Bielby, 1996; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Pinsof, 2002). Attitudes toward premarital sex and unmarried childbearing have become more accepting since the mid 1970s (Axinn & Thornton, 2002). Similarly, many young adults believe cohabitation should be used for testing marital compatibility and that unmarried parents are just as effective as married ones (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). It is safe to conclude that Americans' beliefs and practices are

congruent regarding unmarried sex, cohabitation, and childbearing. These practices occur more now than they did in the past and people have become more accepting of these behaviors.

However, there are areas in which Americans' beliefs do not match up with their practices. Axinn and Thornton (2002) used data from large, nationally representative surveys to examine young adults' beliefs about marriage. Their data were drawn from the following sources: Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey, a nationally representative assessment of high school seniors across the United States collected by the University of Michigan; the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of non-institutionalized adults aged 18 and older conducted by the National Opinion and Research Center at the University of Chicago; the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children (IPS), a longitudinal study of white women and their children collected by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan between 1963 and 1993; and the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a survey of non-institutionalized adults aged 18 and older that is nationally representative and conducted by the Institute of Survey Research at Temple University. Axinn and Thornton used these data to conduct a historical analysis about marital attitudes between 1976 and 1994. They concluded that beliefs about marriage remained relatively stable across time. There were no significant changes in Americans' views that married people are happier than single people and that having a high-quality marriage is of utmost importance.

In general, people value marriage; however, individuals with different demographic characteristics perceive marriage in different ways. One study by Tucker (2002) compared the marital conceptions of African, Mexican, and Caucasian Americans. Her study used a telephone sample of 3407 individuals, drawn from regions across the United States to assess marital expectations, values, and perceptions. Tucker found that people from all ethnic groups

emphasized the importance of being married. Mexican American men placed the greatest value on being married, and Mexican American women expressed the lowest desire to be married. Tucker hypothesized this discrepancy was due to the increasing financial earning power of Mexican American women, which was contrasted with the traditional views typically held by men in this ethnic group. Tucker also asked whether respondents felt social pressure to marry. Overall, participants reported little social pressure to marry but women reported more pressure than men, and Mexican women reported feeling the most pressure to marry.

Marital beliefs also vary for people of different religious backgrounds, education levels, political orientations, and ages. People high in religiosity hold more pro-marriage views than less religious people (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). Education is related to marital views in that people with low education levels are more likely to have pessimistic beliefs about marriage. Political orientation is predictive of marital views with Republicans expressing more traditional, pro-marriage attitudes than Democrats (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). For example, eighty-seven percent of Republicans believe couples with children should be married, compared to 68% of Democrats. Age is predictive of marital attitudes in that older individuals are more likely to hold affirmative and traditional views about marriage, whereas younger individuals have more pessimistic and liberal opinions about marriage (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). For example, compared to people older than 35 years, younger people aged 18 to 35 are more likely to believe that marriage is old-fashioned and unnecessary for childrearing. Younger adults are also more likely to believe that spouses “should be allowed to terminate a marriage at any time for any reason” (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005, p. 7).

It is important to note that the findings in the preceding paragraph were reported by the National Fatherhood Initiative, an organization with a goal of keeping fathers involved with

childrearing. As a result of this agenda, some survey questions were asked in a leading manner. For example, as evidenced by the above question, participants were asked whether “either spouse should be allowed to terminate a marriage at any time for any reason”, which could invite even participants who favored divorce to select anti-divorce responses. According to these data, although young adults demonstrated more pessimistic beliefs about marriage and divorce, it is unclear whether these beliefs are guiding decisions about marriage, infidelity, and divorce.

Findings from more objective data sources (i.e., the National Survey of Families and Households, Census reports) (Bernstein, 2004; Raley, 2002) indicate that two-thirds of unmarried young adults aged 20-29 years view marriage as a better alternative to remaining single. However, they recognized that there are pros and cons associated with marriage. Married people were perceived to have more financial and emotional security and to have better sex lives. They were also perceived to have less freedom, independence, and contact with family and friends (cons). In general, single adults who were involved in committed relationships viewed marriage in more positive terms than did adults who were not involved in a steady relationship (Raley, 2002). Correspondingly, Tucker (2002) found that married individuals favored marriage over long term committed relationships.

Summary. The presented literature has shown that behaviors related to unmarried sex, cohabitation, and childrearing have changed over time and that Americans’ attitudes are consistent with these changes. That is, as these practices have become increasingly common, attitudes toward these practices have become more accepting. This section also explored the incongruence in Americans’ conceptualizations of marriage and their practices related to marriage. Even though changing social norms have made it okay to engage in unmarried sex, cohabitation, and childrearing, Americans continue to value marriage and marry in high

numbers. They also vow to maintain monogamous, lifelong marital partnerships. So why do Americans commit infidelity and divorce their partners with such high frequency? The following sections on infidelity and divorce attempt to answer this question.

Infidelity

Approximately 97% of Americans believe infidelity is unacceptable, yet many spouses engage in extramarital sex (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Johnson, Stanley, Glenn, Amato, Nock, & Markman, 2002). Doing so is associated with adverse relationship outcomes such as depression, anger, jealousy, partner violence, spousal homicide, and divorce (Buunk, 1997; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999). Given these negative effects, it is perhaps surprising that infidelity rates are so high. This section reviews what is currently known about intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual predictors of infidelity. Little consensus exists among researchers about how to conceptualize infidelity, so the section begins with a definition of the concept.

Defining Infidelity

Infidelity is hard to define. While most researchers agree that sexual intercourse should be included in definitions of infidelity, some researchers also believe that emotional bonds with another partner should qualify (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon, & Glass, 2005). To resolve this concern, researchers often ask participants about “affairs”, which is an umbrella term that allows for subjective interpretations (Allen et al., 2005). This approach is advantageous because people vary in terms of what they consider to be extramarital behavior. For instance, one couple might classify flirting or participating in online chat sessions as infidelity. Other couples might only define infidelity in terms of sexual intercourse with another partner and may view

flirting or chat sessions to be normal behaviors. Given that little consensus exists about how to define infidelity, the studies reported here used a variety of operational definitions.

Intrapersonal Predictors

People commit infidelity for intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual reasons. In terms of intrapersonal reasons, demographic variables such as gender, age, education, religiosity, political orientation, and race are correlates of infidelity. Men are more likely than women to commit infidelity and middle aged people are the least likely to commit infidelity (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Individuals with a higher education level tend to have more accepting attitudes about extramarital sex but do not necessarily commit infidelity at higher rates (Allen et al., 2005). People who are high on religiosity and who have a conservative political orientation are less likely to commit infidelity (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Atkins et al., 2001; Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, & Fenwick, 2004). Finally, Latin and African Americans are more likely than Caucasian individuals to engage in extramarital sex (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Cochran et al., 2004; Treas & Geisen, 2000).

Other intrapersonal variables such as personality, family of origin characteristics, sexual history, and attitudes about intimate relationships have been examined in connection with infidelity. Individuals who have less conscientious and less agreeable personalities are more likely to commit infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Fernandez & Castro, 2003; Wright & Reise, 1997). People who come from families characterized by divorce or remarriage are also more likely to engage in extramarital sex (Atkins et al., 2001). Individuals who engage in premarital sex, who cohabit prior to marriage, and who participate in first intercourse at a young age are also more inclined toward infidelity (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Finally, individuals with an insecure attachment orientation and those who believe in sexual variety (i.e., who have an

unrestricted sociosexual orientation) are also more likely to commit infidelity (Buunk, 1980; Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991).

Interpersonal Predictors

Researchers have considered a variety of interpersonal correlates of infidelity. They find that individuals who perceive their marriages to be in distress are more likely to have affairs. Distressed marriages include those in which partners report low marital satisfaction, low sexual satisfaction, high conflict, and/or a lack of partner support (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Glass & Wright, 1992). At times, partners report engaging in extramarital sex because they believe their partner has already had an affair (Buunk, 1980). Dissimilarity of spouses is also associated with infidelity. The more dissimilar spouses are in terms of personality and education, the more likely they are to engage in extramarital sex (Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Schmitt, 2004; Wiggins & Lederer, 1984). In addition, spouses who are high in autonomy or who report leading separate lives, report greater incidence of extramarital sex (Treas & Geisen, 2000).

People who believe their needs are not being met by their spouse are more likely to engage in extramarital sex (Prins, Buunk, & VanYperen, 1993). Yet, in terms of equity, partners who believe they are overbenefited (i.e., receiving more outcomes than they deserve) also report higher incidence of extramarital sex. Equitable relationships, in which both partners are receiving the outcomes they deserve, are associated with a reduced likelihood that either partner will engage in extramarital sex. Equity is also linked to power in that people who are less dependent on their partner for rewards (satisfying outcomes) have more power in a relationship and are more inclined toward extramarital sex (Prins et al., 1993).

Contextual Predictors

Contextual correlates of infidelity refer to environmental factors that predispose partners toward extramarital sex. Some studies find that increasing one's social status or making career advances increases the likelihood of infidelity (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Glass & Wright, 1992). Life changes such as these are typically associated with a higher income and increased opportunities for travel, which lead to time away from one's spouse and greater access to alternative partners. The nature of a person's employment is also related to infidelity. People who work in jobs that require touching, personal discussions, and one-on-one time with other individuals are more prone to engage in extramarital sex (Treas & Giesen, 2000).

Spouses' exposure to alternative partners has been studied extensively by researchers who examine contextual reasons for infidelity. Variables such as employment status, geographic region, and sex ratios have been found to correlate with infidelity. Employed people are more likely than stay-at-home spouses to engage in extramarital sex because they have access to larger numbers of alternative partners (Glass, 2003; South, Trent, & Shen, 2001; Wiggins & Lederer, 1984). In the past, men had significantly more opportunity for extramarital sex than women, but today, with the majority of women in the workforce, the rate of infidelity among women is on the rise.

In terms of geographic region, people who live in urban areas (as opposed to rural, less populated regions) are also more likely to engage in extramarital sex (Treas & Giesen, 2000). The reason for this finding is twofold. First, people who live in metropolitan areas generally have more liberal attitudes about extramarital sex. Extramarital sex is more common in these areas and is therefore less stigmatized. In addition, metropolitan areas have larger numbers of people, which creates both an environment of anonymity and an abundance of alternative partners with

whom to commit infidelity. Finally, individuals who live in areas where the sex ratio is imbalanced (i.e., an overabundance of one sex) are more likely to experience infidelity in their marriage (South et al., 2001). Sex ratios also impact divorce rates. When there are more women than men in a given society, the divorce rates are likely to be higher (Barber, 2003). Such is the case in the United States and in most parts of the world, with the sex rate being comparatively lower than it was in 1960 (i.e., women currently outnumber men in the population).

Summary

Researchers have identified a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual predictors of infidelity. Although these factors help researchers understand why people engage in extramarital sex, there is still a lingering question about the incongruence between beliefs and practices. Americans overwhelmingly disapprove of extramarital sex, and believe married individuals should not have sex with partners other than their spouse. Yet, many Americans practice extramarital sex. Given that most people disapprove of infidelity and considering the disastrous effects of infidelity for individuals, couples, and families (i.e., psychological distress, partner violence, divorce, etc.), why do so many Americans engage in extramarital sex? Is it possible that attitudes toward infidelity are more accepting than survey results suggest? These questions need to be explored in future research. The following section will identify a second area in which American beliefs do not match up with their practices: divorce.

Divorce

Recent estimates indicate that approximately fifty percent of marriages beginning today will end in divorce and that 20% are terminated within the first five years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; National Center for Health Statistics, 2004). Reasons for the rise in divorce are plentiful and include high expectations placed on spouses and the marital relationship, an increase in the

number of women in the workforce, and the implementation of no-fault divorce laws. Each of these predictors is reviewed in this section. The section concludes with a discussion of how Americans perceive divorce and whether they consider it to be a possibility in their own marital relationships.

High Expectations

Young people today have higher expectations for marriage than they did in the past. While people in the past married for reasons other than love, the majority of Americans today choose partners for satisfaction and fulfillment (Sprecher, Aron, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994; Coontz, 2005). They seek passionate, exciting marriages. These romantic ideals, typical of individualistic cultures are problematic because passion and satisfaction fade after marriage (Houston & Houts, 1998). The increasingly individualistic nature of American culture is also causing people to spend less time with family and friends and to rely more on their spouses for friendship and emotional support (Putnam, 2000). These demanding expectations on the marital relationship are difficult to fulfill and often lead to dissatisfaction (Attridge & Berscheid, 1994; McNulty & Karney, 2004). In fact, the percentage of people who report being happy in their marriage has declined by 20% in the past 25 years (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004), while the amount of reported problems and conflicts has increased (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). One national survey found that only 33% of intact marriages were happy (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). Taken together, these high expectations and demands on the marital relationship have led to lower satisfaction, greater instability, and an increased likelihood of divorce.

Women in the Workforce

High divorce rates are partly due to the greater financial independence of women that has resulted from their participation in paid employment. Women no longer need marriage for economic reasons as they did in the past, which enables them to terminate an unhappy marriage (Fitch & Ruggles, 2000; Rogers, 2004). Using Johnson's (1999) commitment framework (presented above), women now commit to marriage because they *want* to (personal reasons), not because they *have* to (constraint reasons). Their presence in the workforce has also provided women with access to more alternative partners, which increases their likelihood of infidelity and divorce (South et al., 2001). In 1960, over 80% of women stayed home (i.e., had no part or full time job) to care for children preschool age or younger. Today, fewer than 50% of women remain unemployed during this time period (Teachman, Polonko, & Scanzoni, 1999). Forty-two percent of homes consisted of a sole male breadwinner in the 1960s, compared to 15% by 1988 (Popenoe, 1993). This transition of women into the work force created strains on marriage that were less common in the past. For instance, spouses now experience more stress spillover between work and home (Rogers & May, 2003), which negatively impacts marital satisfaction and stability (Amato et al., 2003). When both partners are employed, tasks such as coordinating schedules, meals, and childcare take time and energy away from the marital relationship. These tasks, combined with work related stress put pressure on the relationship and increase the likelihood of divorce (Amato et al., 2003).

No-Fault Divorce Laws

The no-fault divorce laws played a central role in the rise of divorce (Pinsof, 2002). These laws took hold in the 1970s and allowed spouses to cite "irreconcilable differences" as their reason for marital termination. Divorce became easier to attain, more culturally acceptable,

and less psychologically distressing (Pinsof, 2002). As attitudes toward divorce became more relaxed, the likelihood of obtaining a divorce increased even further (Amato & Rogers, 1999). That is, the easier divorce is to obtain, the more likely divorce will be considered an option when individuals experience a decline in marital satisfaction. Children who come from divorced families are also more likely to get divorced, which is another indirect and cyclical effect resulting from the recent cultural shifts toward divorce (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Tallman, Rotolo, & Gray, 2001).

Demographic Predictors

Numerous demographic characteristics are correlated with the likelihood of divorce. As mentioned, children who come from divorced families are more accepting of divorce and are more likely to divorce (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Tallman et al., 2001). When neither spouse is religious or when only one spouse is religious, the chances of divorce are higher (Call & Heaton; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). It is worthwhile to note that although religious people are more likely to remain married, they are not necessarily happier in their marriages (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). Education is correlated with divorce in that individuals who have little education are more likely to divorce, especially compared to college graduates who tend to have the most happy and stable marriages (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004). There are also regional variations in divorce rates with people who live in the south and west being most likely to divorce (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). The reason for high divorce rates in the south is likely due to the younger than average age of marriage, typical of individuals in this region. Marrying at a young age, particularly before the age of 25, increases the chance of divorce (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004). People who live in the west are more likely to divorce because they hold more liberal attitudes about marriage and divorce

(National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). Finally, cohabiting with a partner prior to marriage increases the likelihood of divorce, unless partners are engaged when they begin cohabiting (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004).

Beliefs about Divorce

The preceding paragraphs identified reasons for the rise in divorce. Given that divorce is more common now than it was in the past, it is important to address whether individuals are more likely to expect divorce in their own relationships. As mentioned in the marital literature section, Axinn and Thornton (2002) used data from the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey, the General Social Survey (GSS), the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children (IPS), and the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to assess American attitudes about marriage and divorce between 1976 and 1994. They found that the percentage of respondents who thought it was “very likely” they would stay married once they married changed little across time. In the mid 1970s, 65.8% of women thought they would stay married compared to 62.6% in the mid 1990s. The percentage of men believing they would stay married was identical in the mid 1970s and 90s at 56.7%. Similarly, the idea that marriage is a lifelong commitment did not significantly change over time. In the mid 1980s, 72.1% of women agreed with this statement, compared to 73.2% in the mid 1990s. Men too experienced little change in this attitude with 77.9% agreeing in the mid 1980s and 78.4% agreeing in the mid 1990s.

Unfortunately, these data came from the National Survey of Families and Households, which was first enacted in 1987-1988. Data are not available for the decades in which divorce was less common (i.e., prior to 1970). It is also important to note that the survey participants were drawn from the general population (aged 18 and over) making it impossible to distinguish the attitudes of single versus married participants. However, based on these findings, it is safe to

conclude that despite the increasing divorce rate, individuals do not expect divorce in their own relationships.

Summary

This section outlined reasons for the increase in divorce since the 1960s. These reasons included higher demands being placed on the marital relationship, greater economic independence of women, more relaxed laws for obtaining divorce, and various demographic characteristics (i.e., having divorced parents, being less religious, having less education, residing in the south or west, and premarital cohabitation). Although divorce is a much more common practice today than it was in 1960, Americans are no more likely to expect divorce in their own relationships (Axinn & Thornton, 2002). This discrepancy between beliefs and practices underscores the importance of examining newlyweds' conceptions of marriage, particularly their expectations of infidelity or divorce as they enter their own marriage.

Conclusions

As this review has demonstrated, cultural norms related to marriage and divorce have changed considerably since 1960 (Pinsof, 2002; Popenoe, 1993). Patterns such as cohabitation, premarital sex, out-of-wedlock childbearing, infidelity, and divorce have increased exponentially (Bachrach et al., 2002; Raley, 2002). One reason for the high rates of infidelity and divorce is that Americans base their marital decisions on personal fulfillment; whereas in the past, they married more for economic, political, and social reasons (Coontz, 2005; Pinsof, 2002). The purpose of marriage has therefore shifted from being a social obligation to a personal, voluntary option.

With personal fulfillment as the basis for marriage, infidelity and divorce are considered viable options when spouses experience periods of low satisfaction. This cultural shift has led to

a divergence between social conceptualizations of marriage (i.e., as a monogamous, lifelong partnership) and social practices related to marriage (i.e., infidelity and divorce). Given these cultural changes, it becomes crucial to understand how newlyweds are conceptualizing marriage. By identifying the processes involved in newlyweds' decisions to marry and by understanding their opinions about marriage, infidelity, and divorce, researchers will gain insight into whether newlyweds enter marriage with the expectation of a monogamous, lifelong partnership. If they enter marriage believing infidelity and divorce are probable, Americans may need to revise their conceptualizations of marriage. Clearly, exciting avenues remain to be explored on this topic.

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