

Framework for Interpreting Long-Term Trends in Values and Beliefs Concerning Single-Parent Families

One of the most important trends of the last half of the 20th century was the dramatic rise in single-parent families through increases in divorce and nonmarital childbearing. There were also shifts during this period in values and beliefs about divorce and childbearing. Single parenthood was also increasing during the first part of the century, and it is likely that these behavioral changes were accompanied by changes in public opinion. Unfortunately, whereas comparable repeated surveys have permitted changes in values and beliefs to be documented for recent decades, such data resources, to my knowledge, do not exist for the first half of the 20th century. This has left an important gap in our understanding of long-term trends in values and beliefs.

The interesting paper by Margaret Usdansky (2009) provides an important contribution toward filling this gap. The author conducted a content analysis of the American social science and popular literatures of almost the entire 20th century—from 1900 to 1998. The results show a substantial decline in negative depictions of divorce. There was no increase in favorable depictions of divorce but an almost complete disappearance of normative discussion, leading Usdansky to suggest that ambivalence had become the predominant view of Americans toward divorce. However, this trend toward ambivalent acceptance of divorce did not

extend to increased acceptance of nonmarital childbearing. I congratulate Usdansky for her important contributions to our knowledge.

Like much important research, Usdansky's research not only provides valuable answers, but raises important new questions. One question concerns the reasons for the differential trends in depictions of divorce and nonmarital childbearing in the popular and scholarly literature across the 20th century. A second question concerns the trends in values and beliefs concerning divorce and nonmarital childbearing prior to 1900. We know that divorce was increasing during the 19th century, but what about public opinion and public depictions concerning divorce and nonmarital childbearing? A third question asks about the forces behind the trends in public opinion before and after 1900.

In this paper I discuss these interrelated questions, provide some hypotheses, and suggest additional research. I begin with a discussion of family life in Western societies (defined here as Western Europe and its overseas diaspora) several hundred years ago, with an emphasis on marriage, divorce, and childbearing. I then discuss important ideational forces changing values and beliefs concerning these behaviors. Because of the scope of my discussion relative to the allotted space, my discussion must be general and gloss over the details of individual populations. I also provide only limited citations to the literature and invite interested readers to consult my two recent books for additional documentation (Thornton, 2005; Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007).

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Historical Background

In Western societies several hundred years ago families had central roles in structuring people's activities and experiences, and marriage was central in structuring relationships within families (see Thornton et al., 2007). Marriage was an essential element organizing living arrangements; production and consumption; membership in adult society; and access to love, sex, and childbearing. Marriage was seen as a privileged and honorable status, the way from single dependency to independence, and probably the most important event in the life course.

Given the centrality of marriage, it was important not only to individuals but also to families, communities, churches, and governments. The Catholic Church taught that marriage was a sacrament involving God and the couple. Although the Protestant reformers during the 16th century denied that marriage was a sacrament, they taught that it was provided by God. Prior to the 16th century, church doctrine and policies were themselves the law of marriage, and the church presided over marriage disputes. The role of the church in administering marriage subsequently declined and the role of the state increased, but church doctrine continued to influence secular laws and procedures.

The fundamental role of marriage in society meant that union formation had important ramifications for parents and the community, and they were involved in the marital process. This centrality of marriage, however, did not lead to marital decisions resting primarily with parents, with little or no contact between the prospective bride and groom before marriage in Western societies as it did in many other places. Instead, the consent of the prospective spouses was an essential requirement, and young people had extensive freedom in mate selection. Marriage was mostly "participant-run," as opposed to "parent-run." Young people interacted, courted, fell in love, and made the decision to marry. Although this youthful autonomy was marked among the common people, it was frequently absent among the more privileged classes.

This participant-run system of courtship and marriage was buttressed by the beliefs and values of the Catholic Church that endorsed individual consent as the essential element creating a union. The prospective husband and wife themselves administered the sacrament of marriage. This courtship and marriage system included sexual

attraction and the expression of affection and love, but the beliefs and values of the day discouraged nonmarital sexual intercourse, with even stronger prohibitions against nonmarital childbearing. Although the normative restrictions against premarital intercourse were quite effective, there were also exceptions because it was difficult to control a youth-run courtship and marriage system based at least partly on love.

The authority for marriage in the Western past was vested in the prospective husband and wife, rather than in the church, family, community, or state. The act transforming a single man and woman into a married couple was the simple exchange of vows pledging lifetime fidelity to each other. In its most elaborate form it involved four steps occurring across a period of time: betrothal, where the couple pledged their fidelity; publication of banns or announcement of the marriage; the wedding, where vows were repeated, often with a religious officiator; and sexual consummation.

Although the process of betrothal, banns, and a church wedding was the most prestigious route to marriage, there were simpler valid alternatives. The betrothal and its promise of mutual commitment legitimized sexual intercourse, and the two together constituted a valid marriage. Because the contraction of marriage required only the free expression of marital commitment and sexual consummation, it could be simple, private, and without government or religious authority. Furthermore, in many places a man and woman could be married by common law when they lived together as husband and wife and made that presentation to the larger world.

As noted earlier, childbearing outside of the marital process was very strictly condemned. However, because the betrothal gave legitimacy to prewedding sex and pregnancy, the result was a significant number of pregnancies occurring between betrothal and the public wedding. Also, if the wedding was postponed or canceled, a postbetrothal pregnancy could result in a nonmarital birth. Of course, some pregnancies and births occurred independently of betrothal and marriage, but, for the most part, nonmarital pregnancies and births occurred within the marital context (Laslett, 1978).

For centuries prior to the Protestant Reformation, the predominant values prohibited divorce and remarriage. Divorce was accepted by most of the Protestant reformers, but only on very limited grounds. Views of divorce remained very negative, and the experience of divorce was

uncommon. Some did experience discord and voluntary separation, however, and mortality produced many single-parent families.

Ideational Forces Changing Values and Beliefs Concerning Single Parenthood

There were numerous forces, ideational and structural, operating to change values and beliefs concerning divorce and nonmarital childbearing. Although I cannot cover all such forces in this brief paper, I identify three factors that are particularly relevant: changes in religion, efforts to formalize the marriage process, and the Enlightenment and the subsequent emphasis on freedom and equality. I begin with religion.

Changes in Religion

Religion and its role in family life have changed in recent centuries. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century divided Western Christianity into two branches, with more proliferation of religious organizations and doctrines in subsequent centuries. This increased diversity diminished shared morality and expanded acceptable values and beliefs. Nonreligious organizations have also assumed more authority, science has increased its role, and secular messages have been conveyed by the media.

The authority of religious organizations and leaders declined, Americans decreased their identification with religious groups, and the frequency of prayer and the importance of religion declined. Religion has become less punitive toward violations of norms, and a norm of tolerance has emerged (Roof & McKinney, 1987). There, of course, continue to be many people who maintain historically orthodox views about the nature of truth and morality, but these religious trends have probably influenced the trends in values and beliefs concerning divorce that Usdansky documented for the 20th century—and were probably influential earlier as well.

Values and Beliefs Motivating the Formalization of the Marriage Process

There were trends toward the formalization of the marriage process from the 1500s into the early 1900s (Thornton et al., 2007). The long-standing right of couples to form marital unions without registration, witnesses, or officiators produced many disputes over whether a marriage had been

contracted. Many of these disputes resulted in litigation in the ecclesiastical courts, which generated considerable effort for marriage reform. Both Protestant reformers and Catholic leaders advocated the formalization of marriage by requiring significant community oversight in addition to couple consent and the exchange of vows. Many jurisdictions introduced as requirements many of the previously optional steps, including the public announcement of marriage through bans or a marriage license, the presence of a public officiator, witnesses, and marriage registration. These reforms also suggested that the wedding rather than betrothal legitimated sexual intercourse.

Through the middle of the 20th century, these reform efforts increasingly made marriage a formal institution involving the church, the state, or both (Glendon, 1977). The legitimacy of common law marriage also decreased. Betrothal declined in importance as it was slowly transformed into the concept of engagement, or the plan to marry, and lost to marriage much of its power to legitimize sexual union. All of this, of course, was turned upside down during the last half of the 20th century.

The Enlightenment and Values and Beliefs Concerning Freedom and Equality

Another important ideational force for family change in the West was the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, with continuing influence to the present. Within the Enlightenment was a strong developmental framework of progress and a commitment to the values of freedom, consent, and equality, which are part of the internationally influential package of ideas that I have labeled developmental idealism (Thornton, 2005). The values of freedom, consent, and equality were disseminated widely and affected many things, including the American and French revolutions, the growth of democratic governments, the emphasis on individual rights, and the movements for racial and gender equality.

One of the earliest and most influential writers to apply the ideas of freedom, consent, and equality to family matters was John Locke, an important philosopher and political theorist of the 17th century (Locke, 1690/1988). He suggested that marriage required consent both in its initial contracting and continually thereafter, thereby challenging the prohibition against its voluntary dissolution. During subsequent centuries,

numerous authors argued that prohibitions on divorce violated the ideal of freedom, constituted a form of slavery, and restricted love itself (see Thornton, 2005).

The ambivalence toward divorce observed by Usdansky in the popular and scholarly writings of the 20th century existed in the writings of the scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries. One factor producing this ambivalence in those years was the belief that divorce could negatively influence adults and especially children, which caused some, including Hume (1742/1825) and Smith (1776/1762–1763), to oppose divorce even though they recognized the value of removing its prohibition. Also, the conflict between divorce giving the freedom to end an unhappy marriage and causing problems for individuals divided the 19th century women's movement (Phillips, 1988). Such conflicting concerns are probably central in the ambivalence toward divorce identified by Usdansky.

The reform of divorce laws has generally been a slow process extending over centuries. However, the French Revolution of 1789—with its motivations of freedom and equality—led to the brief adoption in 1792 of a no-fault divorce law (Phillips, 1988; Traer, 1980). Smaller but more permanent reforms occurred following the American Revolution, with its emphasis on freedom and equality (Cott, 2000; Phillips). By the late 20th century divorce was very easy to obtain in most jurisdictions.

An important contribution of Usdansky is the documentation that values and beliefs expressed in the popular and scholarly literature concerning divorce became substantially more tolerant during the 20th century. Surveys indicate similar liberalization among the general public during the last four decades of the 20th century (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; van de Kaa, 1987). These data indicate that people increasingly believe that divorce is better than a bad marriage or that the freedom to divorce takes precedence over other considerations, or both. As Usdansky documents, however, there is still considerable ambivalence about divorce.

As I indicated earlier, Western societies historically had strong values prohibiting sex and childbearing outside of marriage. This was a limitation on individual freedom, which one would have expected to be challenged by the scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet there is little evidence that the prohibitions against nonmarital sex and childbearing were fundamentally questioned during this period. This may have been

partially a result of the centuries-long movement to formalize entrance into marriage, which limited the extent to which the principle of freedom could challenge the rules restricting nonmarital sex and childbearing.

However, during the last half of the 20th century prohibitions against nonmarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing have weakened substantially, giving unmarried individuals much more freedom than previously (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In addition, there have been substantial increases in nonmarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing (Thornton et al., 2007). For many, love and consent have replaced marriage as the conditions permitting sex, cohabitation, and childbearing; among others consent has become the only requirement (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994). This has substantially overturned the previous long-term trend toward the formalization of marriage.

Unanswered Puzzles and New Research

This brings me to an important puzzle for the last half of the 20th century. Whereas the data from the popular and scholarly literature presented by Usdansky suggest very limited change in ideas concerning nonmarital childbearing during this period, the behavioral data indicate a substantial increase in nonmarital childbearing, and the survey data indicate a significant decline in opposition to it (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). The question is what makes the recent trends in views of nonmarital childbearing different when examined in general surveys and when examined in popular and scholarly journals.

A related question concerns trends in views of nonmarital sex and cohabitation during the last part of the 20th century. We know that general public opinion became more tolerant of sex and cohabitation among single people. It would be good to know if the same trends occurred in the popular and scholarly literature. It would also be useful to document trends in literature depictions of these same behaviors for the entire 20th century. The historical discussion above suggests contradictory hypotheses during the first half of the 20th century: increasing acceptance of nonmarital sex and cohabitation because of the declining authority of religion and the increased emphasis on individual freedom and decreasing acceptance because of the drive to formalize union formation. How these forces—and others

not discussed—would balance out is difficult to predict.

Finally, it would be useful to replicate for previous centuries the kind of research that Usdansky has reported in her paper. What were the trends in depictions in the popular and scholarly press concerning divorce and nonmarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing during the 1700s and 1800s? My hypothesis is that the trends in acceptance of divorce that Usdansky documents for the 20th century extend back into the 19th century because of the declining influence of religion and the long-term application of the freedom principle to divorce. The contradictory forces operating concerning nonmarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing during this period, however, make it difficult to predict long-term trends on these subjects. Just as I was delighted to see the data reported by Margaret Usdansky for the 20th century, I would be delighted to see these data for earlier periods, whatever they reveal.

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